

Volume 30
Spring 2017

WISCONSIN COUNSELING JOURNAL

Official Publication of the Wisconsin Counseling Association
wisconsincounselingassociation.com

ISSN 2380-3061

The Wisconsin Counseling Journal is the official publication of the Wisconsin Counseling Association (WCA), a branch of the American Counseling Association.

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NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Melissa Kraemer Smothers

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Note from the Editor

It is an interesting time in our state and in our country. The counseling profession seems more important than ever, both in assisting clients at the individual level, as well as the systems that impact the individual. A mandate within our profession is advocacy, which requires us to look beyond the four walls of our offices and examine the world in which our clients live. The American Counseling Association published the ACA Advocacy Competencies in 2003, but these are just as relevant now as they were at its inception. Advocacy can take many forms, and often much of the work we do may go unnoticed as advocacy. Yet, might we do more? What would it be like for us to expand our ideas related to advocacy and become more involved in our state and national organizations in order to assist change happening at a different level?

My faculty colleagues and I have been discussing the topics of advocacy and social justice often throughout the past academic year, in part as a result of the rhetoric that occurred during the presidential election (and which continues). We are very open about our commitment to social justice as counselor educators and instilling this professional value within our students. However, there are times in which I come across individuals in the field (either students or professionals) that take offense to the ideas related to social justice and the necessity for us to look both inward and outward to live this value as counselors.

In my last editorial note, I raised some questions about how our own belief systems intersect with the values of the profession. Here, I ask for us to continue in the process of self-reflection and inquiry that can lead to greater self-awareness. How does our personal history impact who we are as a counselor? How does our gender, sexual orientation, ability status, race, ethnicity, age, religion afford (or not) certain privileges in our society? What does it mean when the rights of one group are violated, even if we don't identify with that particular group? What does it mean for us to truly examine who we are as individuals and how these impact us as professionals?

In this edition of the Wisconsin Counseling Journal (WCJ), it is my hope that we can examine a number of counseling topics that may expose us to new ideas related to clinical relationships and treatment, the self as the counselor, supervision, and meaning-making. These articles may be a means for further conversation with colleagues, engagement with interesting topics or perhaps lead to further self-reflection.

The authors of the first article examined the role of self-disclosure within a supervisor and supervisee dyad. Sweeney and Woodside conducted a collective case study to explore the impact of supervisor self-disclosure on a school counseling internship supervisee. In the second article, Auger and Jeffrey utilized focus group discussions to better understand the factors that impact student-teacher relationships. This study will be of interest to individuals working as school counselors or with school counselors. The third article is by Cavazos, Lu, Savage and Ortega. In it, the authors conducted a study in which they examined the various humanistic, cultural and familial ties that impact Latina/o college students self-reported life satisfaction. In the fourth article, Grande, Lightfoot, Davis and Adair conducted a study in which they collected outcome data from a treatment center in order to add to the literature on effective treatment of childhood sexual abuse. In the final article, Paul and Paul surveyed counselors' self-perceptions on their effectiveness in working with sexual abuse survivors, given their own history. This article raises some interesting questions, including our ability to rate our own effectiveness in working with clients.

I continually appreciate the contributions and hard work of the individuals who volunteer their time to serve on the editorial board. Their commitment to review numerous manuscripts ensures the quality and standards of the Journal. I wish to personally thank Andrew Felton for joining the editorial board last year; he played a significant role in the reviews of the articles in this edition. I also wish to thank Sadie Millen, who served as my editorial assistant this past academic year. She was a tremendous help in coordinating communication between authors and the editorial board. I appreciate her time and commitment to the Journal, as well as all of her hard work.

I hope you find this volume to inspire curiosity and self-reflection in your own counseling practice. If you are interested in submitting a manuscript for consideration, please see the Author Guidelines at the end of this volume or visit the Wisconsin Counseling Association's webpage (wisconsincounselingassociation.com).

Sincerely,
Melissa Kraemer Smothers, Ph.D., Editor

Fostering Caring Relationships Between High School Students and Teachers: A Role for School Counselors

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Abstract

Consultation with teachers is an important role for school counselors, and knowing more about the nature of caring student-teacher relationships can help them in that role. This article describes a study in which 14 high school students and five high school teachers discussed factors that impact student-teacher relationships in separate focus group discussions. Both factors that foster and impede the development of student-teacher relationships were explored. Open and axial coding of data indicated that students valued teacher characteristics including fairness, authenticity, and quality teaching. Teachers reported experiencing their own vulnerabilities and constraints. Implications for school counselors are presented.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships, high school, adolescence

Fostering Caring Relationships Between High School Students and Teachers: A Role for School Counselors

Consultation with parents, teachers, and other professionals is one way school counselors can foster student achievement, promote equity among all students, and advocate for student needs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012; Wright, 2012). In particular, school counselors can consult with teachers to discuss strategies to promote student achievement and share information to better serve students (ASCA, 2012, Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). School counseling consultation with teachers has been linked to a number of positive outcomes, ranging from improved student-teacher relationships (Warren, 2013) to improved homework completion among elementary students (Margolis, McCabe, & Alber, 2004). School counselors can use consultation to assist teachers with learning new skills and approaches to assist students. According to Clemens (2007), consultation with teachers can provide the dual benefits of (a) reducing the numbers of referrals to school counselors for individual counseling to a more manageable level, and (b) serve a preventative function by introducing skills that teachers can use to prevent problems from occurring in the future.

In order to be most helpful when consulting with teachers about student and classroom issues, we believe that school counselors could benefit from a better understanding of the nature of student-teacher relationships. In particular, understanding the factors that impact and foster caring student-teacher relationships can help school counselors be more effective when consulting with teachers. In this article, we present a qualitative study that examined the perceptions of both high school students and high school teachers related to caring student-teacher relationships, and discuss what the findings imply for school counselors.

Since the seminal work of Noddings (1984; 1992) on the ethics of care, and caring as an alternative approach to education in schools, a substantial amount of literature has examined various aspects of this issue in K-12 schools in the United States. Researchers have found that caring in schools has been related to academic success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jennings, 2003), increased school participation (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005), decreased high risk health behaviors (McNeely & Falci, 2004), decreased student suspensions (Decker, Dona, & Christenson, 2007; Furrer & Skinner, 2003), and future social and emotional development (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp, & McHatton, 2009). It seems evident that a host of benefits ensue from teachers establishing meaningful, caring relationships with students.

Student Perceptions of Caring

A number of studies have sought to identify characteristics and behaviors demonstrated by caring high school teachers. Some findings indicate that students believe caring is demonstrated by teachers who provide encouragement, hold high expectations, listen to students, engage in student centered learning, and foster reciprocal relationships (Grimm, 2009). Another study (Garza, 2009) found that scaffolding in lessons, reflecting a kind disposition through actions, availability to students, showing interest in the student in and out of the classroom, and the provision of affective support in academic settings indicated caring to students. Students have also reported that caring can take forms such as academic support, verbal encouragement, setting high expectations, taking a personal interest in students, talking daily with students, and valuing students' input (Cothran, Kulinna, & Garrahy, 2003; Nelson & Bauch, 1997). On a broader level, caring has been identified as not just occurring in personal relationships, but also being influenced by the environment of a school (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

Literature on minority students' perceptions of caring presents conflicting findings. Some studies found no difference in perceptions of caring across racial and ethnic groups (Friend & Caruthers, 2012; Garza, Ovando, & Seymour, 2010), while other findings indicate that caring may take on different meaning based on one's racial or ethnic identification (Schlute, Slate, & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Illustrating the latter point, one study found different racial groups varied in their ranked importance of caring, though caring was found to be meaningful across all racial groups (Schlute et al., 2008). This seems to indicate that caring is important to many students, but it may have different significance depending on one's ethnicity. Differences in the perceptions of caring between racial/ethnic groups may also be influenced by socioeconomic status, as research has found that people of color have reported feeling that school counselors paid more attention to students from wealthy families (Vela-Gute et al., 2009).

Teacher Perceptions on Caring

Less research is available regarding teachers' perspectives on caring with students, and current literature is particularly sparse regarding the perspectives of high school teachers. Teachers have reported caring behaviors to include building meaningful relationships with students, providing opportunities for students to develop a positive sense of themselves, creating a positive classroom experience for both students and teacher, negotiating, and being flexible (Thompson, 2010). Pre-service teachers perceived caring to be demonstrated in offering help to learners, taking time to get to know and show interest in students, listening to students, and being compassionate (McBee, 2007).

The influence of culture on perceptions of caring was examined by Roberts (2010), who interviewed eight African American teachers to assess their perspectives on the interplay between culture and care. The teachers' responses indicated that African American students need a different kind of care, one that overtly addresses elements of racial inequities. The results conflict with a color-blind definition of care that is often perpetuated in the literature and highlight the need for what Roberts (2010) called "culturally relevant critical teacher care" (p. 454). This type of care deals directly with the racial and cultural realities that students face and overtly addresses the color-blind, equal opportunity myth that may be conveyed in care that is demonstrated to their European American counterparts.

On a more general level in working with culturally diverse students, empathy was found to be a key component to building caring relationships (McAllister & Irvine, 2002). In a study of 34 practicing teachers who had participated in a multicultural professional development program, McAllister and Irvine (2002) found that as teachers were exposed to a variety of cultural experiences, their teaching and relationships with students changed. Experiences such as cultural immersion trips, cross-cultural simulations, and reflection on one's own minority identity provided opportunities for these teachers to foster and practice empathy, which translated to increased connection with culturally diverse students.

Current Study Framework

Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman (1999) developed a conceptual model of teacher-student relationships based on a systemic perspective. This model took into account individual demographics and perceptions of the teacher-student relationship, the means of information exchange, and external influences on the relationship. Pianta et al. (1999) highlighted the bidirectional, mutually-influencing nature of teacher-student relationships and noted that those relationships can be influenced by a myriad of factors related to the individual students and teachers (e.g., gender, temperament, self-esteem) as well as external factors such as class size and the climate of the school.

In addition to eliciting perspectives from students and teachers about the nature of caring in their relationships, we also compared those perspectives to the Pianta, Hamre, and Stuhlman (1999) model. We interviewed high school students and teachers in the United States with the intent to answer the questions of whether they believe caring is important in schools and what meaningful caring looks like. Our goal was to understand the perceptions of teacher-student caring in high school due to the unique developmental stage of the students, and to explore the ways in which school counselors can enhance caring relationships between students and teachers. We believed that because high school is a time of intense personal and interpersonal growth, and because students are often developing independence in interacting with many societal systems (e.g., obtaining jobs, applying

for college, participating in service learning) that the desire and need for care would be important to students. Further, by obtaining ideas about caring from teachers and students from the same school, we were able to ascertain how teachers view the unique needs of their students, and if those resonate with student reports. In addition to identifying rich themes of the nuances of care in teacher-student relationships, our data highlight important contextual factors that have been neglected in studies on care. Knowledge of these factors can be helpful for school counselors as they consult with teachers about classroom and student issues.

Method

As the intent of this study was to ascertain the perspectives of students and teachers on their views of caring, we concluded that the best method of acquiring nuanced accounts of caring would be to employ a qualitative methodology, while being mindful of the Pianta et al. (1999) systemic framework. Our data for developing rich, detailed views of caring were obtained through focus groups with faculty and students in a high school. There were several reasons for selecting focus groups over individual interviews. Focus groups, as compared to individual interviews, can better elicit the nuances and complexities of the participants' feelings and experiences regarding the topic area by allowing participants to build upon each other's comments (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013). Focus groups better approximate natural interactions between participants, which was our wish when interviewing both the student and teacher participants in this study.

Participants

A convenience sample of 14 high school students was recruited through the help of an assistant principal at a midwestern high school located in a city of approximately 36,000 people in the United States. Of the 14 student participants, seven were male and seven were female. Eleven students identified as European American, one identified as African American, one identified as Hispanic, and one identified as both Middle Eastern and Muslim. All students were juniors or seniors. Teachers were also recruited using a convenience sample selected by the assistant principal, based on her sense of who might be interested in this study. The teacher group was comprised of five teachers, three male and two female. The teachers represented teaching areas such as social studies, English, and Spanish. All teachers identified as European American.

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the assistant principal extended invitations to students to participate in the study based on her knowledge of those most likely to participate, their class schedule, and the perceived probability of receiving consent forms back from parents in a timely manner. Invitations were also extended to teachers in the high school that the assistant principal thought might be interested in the study.

Three focus groups of students and one focus group of teachers were organized based on our convenience sample of those who responded to invitations. One student focus group consisted solely of three students of color. We intentionally organized the one group to include minority students to be sure sufficient focus and attention was devoted to hearing their experiences, since the literature suggests that ethnic and racial issues can play a factor in perceptions of caring (Roberts, 2010; Schlute et al., 2008), and because the high school had a predominantly European American student population. The other two student focus

groups consisted of six and five students respectively.

Focus Groups

The process of each focus group was similar. We co-facilitated each group in a private room on the high school campus and started by discussing the purpose of the study and the process of the focus group. We conducted audio-recorded, semi-structured focus groups starting from a base of questions pertaining to general perceptions of caring in the school and personal experiences of caring. Focus group questions included: How important is it for teachers to care about students? What are some examples of things teachers do to show they care? What do you do in your classrooms to show students you care?¹ Additional follow-up questions were asked for clarification and elaboration. Participation from all students and teachers was elicited and encouraged. Each group lasted approximately 60 minutes and participants were thanked for their time. During and after the focus groups, we wrote down key themes or ideas that might contribute to later data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the transcription of audio recordings from each group. The first author and several graduate research assistants conducted the transcriptions. The transcribed data were then read through multiple times by each author to identify general themes in teacher and student responses. Methods for data analysis were taken from grounded theory, as focus group methodology does not have its own coding method, and we were interested in identifying recurrent statements and distilling themes from those statements. The data were first analyzed using open coding, a process in which responses “are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). During this phase, both teacher and student responses were coded for general themes and significant ideas. We then engaged in axial coding, in which we compared student and teacher responses and developed themes based on their shared findings. Each author separately engaged in axial coding and then came together to discuss findings and identify categories. This process served as triangulation of the data, a method for establishing trustworthiness of data findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the midst of coding for various themes, we noticed an overall idea of the influence of various contextual factors (e.g., societal, school, classroom). After delineating general themes from the responses, we developed two broad categories pertaining to contextual variables and then identified subthemes. Findings from students and teachers in this article are intermingled in each of the themes to highlight similarities or dissimilarities in perspectives.

Findings

Eight major themes characterizing the relationships between the high school teachers and students emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts. These themes were *fairness*, *vulnerability*, *boundaries*, *authenticity*, *seeking to be understood*, *good teaching feels like caring*, *context of students' lives*, and *context of the school environment*. The latter two themes also included several subthemes. The themes, with illustrative quotes, are described below.

Fairness

A theme of *fairness* permeated the student focus group discussions, particularly how relationships between students and teachers were impacted by perceived unfairness. The students perceived that some teachers expected students to display a level of behavior that the teachers did not personally uphold. Students gave examples of times that teachers excused their own failure to get papers graded because they had family commitments, but still expected students to get homework done on time. As one student put it, “...*they don't get papers graded or your tests done or anything and they're like, 'oh, I was at my daughter's swim meet last night.' It's like, I did my homework last night after I got home, why can't you have our stuff ready?*” Four students applied the construct of fairness more broadly, expressing the belief that the school as a whole had unfairly become more restrictive and rule-bound in response to inappropriate student behavior in past years: “...*we get punished for things other grades have done.*”

One aspect of fairness (or, more accurately, lack of fairness) commented upon by students was the tendency of adults in school to favor some students over others. In the students' view, teachers chose favorites for a variety of reasons, including the favorites being juniors or seniors, being high achieving, and being athletes (particularly big-name athletes). As one student put it, “*I've especially noticed male teachers...care more about the boys who are in sports. Or the girls who are really good in sports.*” The consensus of the student focus groups was that teachers did not favor students based on race or gender, though there was some nuance to this issue expressed in the comments of the group of diverse students. Several participants strongly believed that teachers categorize students as either “good kids” or “bad kids,” and favor the good kids. One student captured this perception well: “*All teachers care about the students that choose to do good. It doesn't matter if you're a sports star, or White, or Black, as long as you want to do good they will help you.*” In contrast, some members of the teacher focus group talked about favoring--and sometimes relating best to--the students who did not fit the “good kid” mold. As one teacher put it: “*I kind of like the rascals, I like the kind of unlikeable kids sometimes. And the oddballs.*”

Vulnerability

Both students and teachers described a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness regarding aspects of the teacher-student relationship. From the students' side came the perception that some teachers assume that students with low grades are not trying hard enough, while the reality may be that some of those students simply do not understand the work. Further, some students perceived that teachers valued high-achieving students more than low-achieving students (“*I had 100% in Global last semester and now I have a D- and she's treating me differently*”). Another point of vulnerability for students was their belief that teachers are prone to making negative judgments about students based on a first impression or hearsay. Some students also expressed fear of being “called out” in front of the class for behavioral reasons. All of these specific examples reflect a broader sense of students' perceived powerlessness regarding important aspects of the teacher-student relationship, including lacking the power to control how teachers view them and treat them.

Feelings of vulnerability also were evident in the teachers' comments, though in different aspects of the teacher-student relationship. One point of vulnerability was being unsure whether students understood and appreciated teachers' efforts to reach out to them;

in other words, taking the risk of reaching out to students without being sure how that overture would be received. As one teacher stated, “...we hope they know that we care. They may think that we’re just bugging them.” Teachers also discussed the vulnerability of investing considerable time and emotional energy in a student’s welfare, only to risk having that student fail or get moved to a more restrictive setting.

Boundaries

The construct of *boundaries*--in other words, the degree to which teachers share personal information about themselves in the classroom and the amount of personal information students wish to reveal to teachers--was a theme that was woven into the student focus groups’ comments. The consensus was that the students enjoyed knowing personal things about their teachers. However, the type of information seemed important. Students tended not to be interested in everyday, mundane details about their teachers (“a lot of time people just don’t care”), but did enjoy funny childhood stories or stories that illustrated a point (“I like funny, interesting stories”). The group of diverse students discussed how it was helpful for them to know their teachers well because it helped them better understand how teachers view their behavior and therefore provided them with guidance regarding how to behave in class. This may reflect the perception among students of color that they are more closely scrutinized by teachers and need to be more aware of the behavioral expectations of individual teachers.

The students also agreed that they like their teachers to know some--but not too much--personal information about them. One student noted that it is helpful for teachers to know if a student has a long drive to school, since that can help teachers understand why the student might be late for school when the weather and driving is poor. Other students, though, emphasized that they did not want teachers to know too much about them. As one student stated, “I’m not going to tell them my life story.” A student in the diverse group also clearly indicated that he did not like it when teachers assumed they understand how he feels: “There’s no way that she can understand how I feel.” In sum, the discussion in the student focus groups revealed both the importance and the complexity of the personal boundaries between teachers and students, with students wanting both personal connections with teachers but also wanting to have major parts of their personal lives remain private.

Authenticity

Both students and teachers discussed the importance of authenticity in the teacher-student relationship. Students stressed that they could tell the difference between authentic and inauthentic teachers (“There are some teachers that you can tell look fake”), and preferred teachers with an authentic, down to earth style (“I would rather have them be real and upfront with me”). Teachers also spoke of the value of developing authentic relationships with students. Several students commented that it was the veteran teachers who seemed to have a more authentic interaction style with students; newer teachers were viewed as being easily irritated with student misbehavior. One student, referring to veteran teachers, stated, “They’re not getting upset, screaming at everybody. Like if something happens, they’ll just talk about it or do something to solve it.”

A component of authenticity that was evident in both the student and teacher responses was *fun*. Many students noted that they like teachers with a sense of humor, and several teachers stated that they find humor a good vehicle with which to build relationships

with students. Some students went as far as describing fun as virtually a prerequisite to learning. In the words of one student, *“If you’re not going to make my class, like, fun and interesting, then I’m not going to pay attention.”*

Seeking to be Understood

Many students communicated a desire to be understood by teachers, wanting teachers to see them as more than a name in a gradebook. While students tended to not want teachers to know intimate details of their lives, neither did they wish to be anonymous in the eyes of their teachers. When asked what teachers could do to strengthen student-teacher relationships, one student expressed a desire for teachers to get to know him personally, then stated, *“it should be...more like a family.”* The desire to be understood seemed especially important when things were not going well. For example, a student expressed a wish that if someone in class appeared to be in a bad mood, the teacher would ask the person how he or she was doing. Another student described a difficult time during which it was particularly important for teachers to understand: *“...my friend was just recently taken off life support and she died, and I can’t focus in class. And that’s, like, hard to deal with. And you can’t have a teacher hustling your butt to get something done. It’s like, ‘dude, back off.’”*

While students wanted teachers to understand when they needed special consideration, they also did not want teachers to enable bad behavior. Students liked teachers who could differentiate genuine reasons for not completing classroom assignments from making excuses.

A number of comments from the diverse student group reflected the desire to be understood. Some of the participants stated that some teachers have stereotypes of racially or ethnically diverse groups, and expressed a wish that teachers would come to know them as individuals (*“I wish teachers knew more about me, and what I am”*). The existence of stereotypes was attributed to a lack of multicultural experience on the part of some teachers. Some teachers were viewed as being sheltered and having learned about culture from a book, rather than by actually experiencing an array of cultures. In addition to recommending that teachers learn more about diverse cultures, one student saw the opportunity for mutual learning: *“Talk to us...teachers and diverse students can learn from each other.”*

Good Teaching Feels Like Caring

One of the most pervasive themes evident in the student focus group discussions was that students perceived good, active teaching practices to be a direct way in which teachers expressed caring for students. One student captured the relationship between good teaching and caring with this statement: *“If they really teach good, and if they actually try to explain it to you, then that’s what caring is too.”* Students were equally vocal in sharing examples of what they viewed as substandard teaching practices that felt like a lack of caring. For instance, not taking the time to read and check students’ written work was provided as an example of uncaring teacher behavior: *“I could write down random numbers and he would just look through and go ‘yeah, you’ve got everything there.’ I could write down two plus two equals cow and he wouldn’t pay attention.”*

Students also discussed the importance of teachers feeling passionately about class material. Teachers who showed through voice tone and body language that they were interested in the class were lauded, and students talked about being very aware of which

teachers are and are not passionate about teaching. Students believed they learn more in classrooms taught by teachers who care about the subject matter.

Context of Students' Lives

The complexity and difficulties of students' lives was a frequent target of comments in both the student groups and the teacher group. Students commented on both the overly scheduled nature of their lives and how much they appreciate it when teachers are aware of that. For many students, the issue of busy lives included the belief that school is not their top priority: "...some people, like, don't understand that besides school we have other priorities that maybe are more important." Students mentioned a number of commitments and factors outside of school that impacted the amount of time and energy they have to devote to school, including work, vacations, sports, sickness, death of family or friends, family obligations, and having to commute a long distance to school.

Students were grateful for teachers who understood how busy they were, and who were willing to be flexible with class demands in cases where students were immersed with commitments outside of school. Students were also grateful for teachers who provided a caring presence when life outside of school was not going well: "*It's nice knowing that [teachers] care and they actually, like, think about you.*" However, some students stated that some teachers make unwarranted and negative assumptions about students based on a lack of understanding of students' lives. One student expressed it in this way: "*A lot of the teachers should feel more of an understanding and get to know their students a little better.*" In general, the students felt as if teachers can be a caring and supportive adult presence in the face of busy and sometimes challenging student lives, and there was a sense of disappointment in cases where that did not happen.

Participants in the teacher focus group also spoke of the importance of understanding the context of students' lives. The teachers seemed keenly aware of the emotional life of students: "*I'll watch kids, I watch for patterns in behavior, and if a kid comes in and is acting different than normal, and I think it's because of something negative that's going on in their life, I'll say, you know, 'You doing alright?' or 'How are things?'*" At the same time, several teachers noted that they are not trained to talk therapeutically to students about personal issues, and so do not want to cross that line. In the words of one participant, "*I don't want to know too much. More than I'm trained to handle. Then I just kind of say, 'Oh, have you talked to your counselor about this?'*" While the teachers did not want to probe for the details of students' problems, they did want to know when personal issues were interfering with school.

Racial and cultural issues were another dimension of students' lives that was addressed to a greater or lesser degree by all the student groups. Not surprisingly, there was a different flavor to the conversation about race and culture in the diverse student group as compared to the two groups of European American students. Issues of race and culture were not a major component of the comments of the non-diverse groups, and when asked directly whether teachers cared more or less about students based on race, the members of the non-diverse student group responded with confidence that the answer was no (e.g., "*I don't really think race is an issue*").

In contrast, issues of race and culture saturated the conversation in the diverse student group. The participants in this group expressed a number of opinions, foremost of which was that students of color do not want preferential treatment (e.g., "*I would rather*

them be real and upfront with me, and just treat me as a student"). The students also wanted to be treated as individuals and not as the embodiment of a racial stereotype ("*I don't think teachers should put all African-Americans in the same boat*"). The students observed that some teachers overgeneralize from limited experiences with different cultures, tending to overestimate how much they know about the specific experiences of students of color in the school. One participant shared the example of a teacher who lived for a time in a predominantly Black country, and now presumes to understand the Black experience for students in the school. In the view of the participants, it came across as pity rather than genuine understanding when teachers with limited cultural and racial experiences said they understood what life is like for a student of color. In describing an incident where a teacher approached him and said she understood what he was going through, one student remarked, "*I felt like she was giving me the pity card. There's no way that she can understand how I feel.*" More broadly, the students in the diverse group felt as if teachers make strong efforts to help all students, but tend to be culturally encapsulated. As one participant put it, "*I think the only way that teachers don't go out of their way for students is learning about different cultures.*" Many teachers were viewed as having only learned about different cultures from books or movies, rather than having actually experienced cultures outside their own. Students suggested that teachers travel and directly experience other cultures. In addition, the diverse students viewed themselves as being a resource for cultural learning if teachers were interested ("*Talk to usask us how it is*").

Context of the School Environment

A number of discussion threads in both the student and teacher focus groups related to contextual factors in the school environment. These factors include the role demands of teachers, the relative invisibility of average-achieving students, the impact of large class sizes, perceived changes in the amount of freedom offered students, and other adults in the school besides teachers who impacted the global atmosphere of caring. All of these factors seemed to affect the ability of teachers to build and maintain caring relationships with students.

Role demands. The members of the teacher focus group were acutely aware of the role they needed to play as teachers, particularly as it related to trying to build caring relationship with students while also having the responsibility for ensuring both academic learning and discipline in the classroom. The teachers spoke of the challenge of effectively addressing behavior problems while at the same time fostering student learning and maintaining caring relationships with students. Moreover, teachers stated that the emotional toll of dealing with a single student with challenging behavior can color relationships with every student in class: "*I find myself interacting with the entire class differently because of this individual. That's hard because I don't want that, just one of 32 to affect the relationship I have with the other 31.*" The teachers reported feeling a welcome decrease in the need to serve as an authority figure with junior and senior students due to the developmental growth of students over the high school years. Students also recognized this phenomenon: "*They like juniors and seniors better because we, like, we're more, like, responsible or apt of getting stuff done, asking questions, and all that.*" Some teachers talked about needing to step out of the prescribed teacher role at times and just talk with students. Students also valued times when teachers were able to step out the teacher role. Several students mentioned how they enjoyed the more informal interactions they had with

teachers when they ran into the teachers outside the classroom. For example, in this school teachers serve as front door greeters on a rotating basis, and several students mentioned how they enjoyed the more informal interactions they had with teachers who were greeters (*"They are different down there...because there are not all these other students around where they have to worry about stuff"*).

Students in the middle. There was perceptive discussion in the teacher focus group about students who are neither struggling nor stellar. One teacher noted, *"If they're really good students you can connect, if they're really bad students you're forced to connect. For me I struggle with the B and C students who I don't have anything to really relate to them with obviously or easily. Sometimes I kind of forget about them cause they're okay."* Another teacher added, *"...there are those students that you haven't made the connection with and they just, they're there and they're doing okay and there's no big flags and you go, look, I don't really know that student."* While these comments suggest that C range students run the risk of becoming invisible in the classroom, other student comments suggest that in the behavioral realm it is best to be in the middle. A participant in the diverse student group observed that teachers do not like students who are overly loud, but if students are too quiet then teachers never get to know them. According to this student, *"You've got to find a zone in the middle."*

Class size. Class size was another contextual factor discussed in the teachers' focus group. Several teachers lamented the large sizes of classes: *"When you have 35 kids in the class it's tough. It's just tough....you do lose those middle kids. You just don't simply have the time to do it."* Teachers noted that the problems created by large classes are compounded by the number of sections teachers have (*"I have 150 relationships each semester"*). The challenge of establishing caring relationships with such a large number of students was evident throughout the teachers' comments.

Changes in the school environment. The student participants talked at length about the way the school environment seemed more restrictive than in past years. Some representative comments included *"Here it seems like we're locked down like ball and chain"* and *"It's just not fun anymore."* Students were not oblivious to the need for rules, but felt things had gone too far: *"There are just way too many rules and regulations at the moment."* One student verbalized the understanding that the school's emphasis on rules and high achievement was linked to changes nationally and globally: *"...because we're in a changing world, and there is more crime, that there has to be more rules, and that, that homework thing, it's competitive, in other countries...they study for, like, three hours a night, and so they're getting ahead of us."*

Others who care. While the majority of the focus group discussions were centered on the ways teachers care about students, some discussion was also devoted to other caring adults in the school. The principal, assistant principal, and the counselors were all described in very positive terms. Referring to the principal, one of the students in the diverse group stated, *"I'll just go in his office, and I sit down and he says 'hey' and stops everything he's doing and we just talk."* Several students also noted other caring support staff, including secretaries in the counseling office and in the media center. What was most striking, though, when students were asked about other adults in the building who cared was how immediately and consistently the groups of students mentioned one of the building custodians, with several students noting that he knows the names and birthdays of all the students. It was clear that all the students had warm feelings toward this custodian,

and that they felt personally valued by him.

Discussion

The student and teacher focus group discussions presented student-teacher relationships as being highly complex, and revealed that students' phenomenological sense of being cared for in school was impacted by a rich, dynamic array of factors. Whether the students felt cared for at school appeared to be influenced by everything from the manner in which teachers graded papers to the way the students were treated by the school's custodial staff. The narratives from the students and teachers also suggested that the phenomenological experience of students in school, particularly in the classroom, could not be divorced from the phenomenological experience of teachers. Virtually every aspect of the human environment comprising the school, to a greater or lesser degree, seemed to influence the way students felt at school and in the classroom. This is consistent with previous research indicating that care is a part of personal relationships between teachers and students, as well as being part of the organizational structure and environment of a school (Schussler & Collins, 2006).

Several layers of factors appeared to impact the emotional experience of the students and teachers and affected, for better or worse, their relationships with each other. Some of these factors were unique to either the students or the teachers; other factors influenced both groups. Factors that appeared to strongly influence students, but not necessarily teachers, were the perceptions of being treated fairly or unfairly, the desire to be understood, the importance of teachers being good at teaching, and the impact of students' life outside of school. Although teachers' abilities to teach well has previously been identified in the research as an indicator of caring (Garza, 2009; Grimm, 2009), this sample of students presented some detailed nuances of what good teaching looks like to them, as well as the complexities of fairness and being understood.

Fairness was critical to students, and they were acutely aware of perceived displays of unfairness either from individual teachers or from broad school policies. In addition to a pervasive theme of fairness, the students' comments reflected a strong desire to be understood by teachers. Yet this desire seemed to be in a tug-of-war with a desire to retain a sense of privacy. This puts teachers in the difficult position of walking a fine line between showing sufficient interest in students as to show personal interest and concern, while not asking for too much personal detail.

A noteworthy finding from the focus groups, which supports previous research on caring (Garza, 2009; Grimm, 2009), was that students clearly viewed good teaching as a sign of teachers' caring. Indeed, high-quality, committed, passionate teaching was valued by students and seemed to serve as a proxy for caring in the minds of many students. Teachers were not necessarily aware of this student perception. When thinking about how to best communicate caring to students, teachers may focus on emotional qualities such as warmth and responsiveness, while not seeing that time spent constructing thoughtful lessons and completing grading in a timely manner also are viewed by students as markers of caring.

The students in this study expressed a desire to develop authentic relationships with teachers, which previous research suggests can lead to higher levels of engagement in school (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005). However, when it came to relationships with teachers, students sought a balance between connection and privacy. They wanted teachers

to know them, but not too well, and they wanted teachers to share personal stories, but not too many.

A final component of caring evident in the students' responses was the importance of teachers understanding the realities of students' lives outside of school. The students in the focus groups expressed a yearning to have teachers understand how much they have going on in their lives, and understand that they may be managing heavy work hours, family obligations, and life trauma. The yearning seemed largely to reflect a basic desire to have a caring adult know about their struggles and challenges. For their part, the teachers reported being very aware of the commitments and stresses students deal with outside of school, but some felt limited in their ability to provide support due to a lack of time and training.

One of the most compelling findings of this study was the sense of vulnerability experienced by both students and teachers. Both spoke of feeling powerless and vulnerable in the classroom. Students felt they were vulnerable in regard to teachers' ability to "call them out" in class and to categorize them as "good" or "bad" depending on their status as a high achieving or low achieving student. Teachers felt vulnerable for several reasons, including extending themselves emotionally to students without any assurance that the students would appreciate or respect that.

The focus group discussions also illuminated forces outside the classroom that impinged on the student-teacher relationship. Large class sizes made it more difficult for teachers to develop relationships with all students, particularly students who had neither demanding problems nor noteworthy achievement. The remaining students in the middle were often invisible to teachers, a fact the teachers recognized and lamented. Teachers also spoke of the challenge of balancing the role of classroom academic leader with that of being the authoritarian in the classroom, and how difficult it was to build caring relationships with students while simultaneously having to discipline them. But not all the out-of-class forces were negative. Indeed, the students raved about a school custodian who made a point of learning all the students' names and performing thoughtful acts of kindness for students. It was clear that when students reflected upon their overall sense of being recognized and cared for in school their experiences with this custodian and with other caring adults outside the classroom had a substantial positive effect.

A final issue that was addressed by the focus groups was the way in which students and teachers deal with racial and cultural differences in the student population. This was an area where there was substantial difference between the three student groups. Predictably, the two student focus groups populated by racial/ethnic majority participants did not report differential treatment of racial minority or culturally different students. In contrast, the focus group consisting of students of color was acutely aware of ways in which teachers and other students viewed them in stereotypical ways and sometimes treated them in a patronizing manner. This highlights the continued need for teachers to have training experiences which foster empathy for and connection with students from diverse cultures (McAllister & Irvine, 2002), as well as the need to cultivate more teachers of color. From the perspective of this group of students of color, the teaching staff was well intentioned but often culturally encapsulated and lacking in the breadth of cultural experiences that would lead to deep understanding of culturally different students. This supports Roberts' (2010) notion of the need for culturally relevant critical teacher care in which students' racial and ethnic culture is a meaningful part of how care is demonstrated.

Comparisons with the Pianta et al. (1999) Model

The results of this study provide broad support for Pianta et al.'s (1999) theoretical model of teacher-student relationships. Pianta et al. proposed that students and teachers are influenced by their respective representations of the other party in the student-teacher relationship. Our study supported this; both students and teachers had perceptions of their counterpart that influenced the manner in which they perceived the relationship. For example, in our study the students tended to believe that teachers only liked high achieving, compliant students, while several teachers noted that they often most enjoy the "rascals." The Pianta et al. model indicates that the nature of the interaction between students and teachers (termed "information exchange process" by Pianta et al., 1999, p. 206) is an important influence on the student-teacher relationship, and our data are consistent with this contention. The importance of these interactions was clearly evident in the comments of the students of color. Depending on the specific interactions, the students of color reported feeling either stereotyped and misunderstood or supported and empowered. Our study also clearly and strongly supports Pianta et al.'s contention that the student-teacher relationship is embedded in external systems that exert significant influence on the relationship. Among the numerous external influences that were apparent in our study were the structure of the school (e.g., class size) and the work demands affecting students.

In addition to generally supporting the model proposed by Pianta et al. (1999), the data from our focus groups advances the literature by providing a more detailed picture of some factors that comprise the broad levels of influence outlined by the Pianta et al. model. Most specifically, the breadth of external influences that impact students' perceptions of the school environment was expanded by the examination of the focus group dialogues. Factors such as school-wide rules and policies, class size, and even the friendliness of the custodial staff all impacted students' perceptions of the school as being either a caring or a cold place to be.

Implications

Findings from this study lead to some practical implications for high school counselors. Part of school counselors' role is to serve as a consultant to teachers (ASCA, 2012). School counselors are particularly well suited to consult with teachers about issues impacting students and student-teacher relationships. School counselors are able to informally observe the relationships between students and teachers and have the type of casual conversations about students that demonstrates genuine interest (Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). Furthermore, school counselors can talk to teachers in the context of a safe and trusting relationship that has developed over years of working together (Wright, 2012). Consulting with teachers may have the added benefit of helping reduce the number of referrals to the counselor's office by addressing issues directly in the classroom (Clemens, 2007; Wright, 2012).

Within the context of a consulting relationship, school counselors may find it helpful to share with teachers that students tend to be acutely attuned to perceived unfairness when teachers seemingly expect certain behaviors from students that they do not uphold themselves (such as when a teacher expects homework to be returned promptly, but does not complete grading in a timely manner). With this knowledge, teachers can work to model the behavior they want their students to engage in, including being punctual and thorough in grading, demonstrating positive emotional self-management, being cautious of categorizing

students based on academic success or participation in a certain activity, and exemplifying in teaching the passion they wish their students to have for learning. By employing the type of good listening and problem-solving skills that are a prerequisite for a strong consulting relationship (Wright, 2012), school counselors can also help teachers navigate the fuzzy line between trying to get to know students as individuals without appearing to be prying. In addition, school counselors can reassure teachers that good teaching practices are viewed by students as evidence of caring. School counselors can also inform administrators that it may be helpful to involve students in discussions around school policy and rules so that students can feel some ownership of the process and outcome rather than feeling imposed upon by authority figures. Additionally, school counselors can provide information and education for teachers regarding diversity awareness and sensitivity, which may help foster caring relationships with students by removing roadblocks to cultural understanding. More pointedly, school counselors can urge teachers and administrators to seek cross-cultural experiences to help move them beyond what is learned in a textbook or seen in popular media (and of course school counselors can seek such experiences for themselves as well).

Limitations

The process of this study included some limitations that may have influenced the findings. First, the pool of participants being selected by the assistant principal may have introduced bias into the sample. The students we interviewed may have been students who were especially engaged and well-known to the assistant principal, either from positive or negative experiences. This may have left out students in the middle who, as this study pointed out, often go unnoticed. Second, due to the nature of focus groups, some of the students' responses may have been inhibited or emphasized based on group dynamics. Third, placing the students of color into a separate focus group may have had the effect of making issues of race and ethnicity less salient in the groups of racial majority students, thereby underestimating the impact of race and ethnicity on student-teacher relationships in this school. Lastly, the specific student demographics and the location of the study may make transferability of the nuances of these findings to other settings less applicable. The underlying notions and complexity of care, however, appear to have broad-based application to teacher-student relationships for a variety of contexts, and can provide school counselors with important information to weave into their consultations with teachers.

Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of students' and teachers' views of caring in their relationships as a means to support school counselors in their roles as consultants. With this understanding of care, future researchers may want to explore the nuanced relationship between students and school counselors to assess if care is manifested or desired differently. Additionally, research could be conducted by school counselors upon implementation of "care initiatives" based on the findings of this study. For example, they may encourage teachers to share appropriate personal stories in class, incorporate more time in class to get to know about students, or engage caring adults at various levels in the school to provide wrap around care for students in trouble and assess outcomes for teachers and students. Finally, researchers could further explore the perceptions of students from underrepresented groups regarding the quality and nature of caring relationships with teachers, particularly in schools with predominately majority

teaching staffs, with the intent of better understanding how schools can foster stronger relationships between teachers and students from underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

When consulting with teachers, school counselors are wise to be aware of the importance of caring student-teacher relationships. Strong, caring relationships between students and teachers have been linked to higher academic performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jennings, 2003), greater student engagement in the school (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005), and other desirable outcomes (Decker et al., 2007; Mihalas et al., 2009). The focus group interviews with high school students and teachers described in this article provided further insight into factors both inside and outside the school culture that may either hinder or facilitate positive relationships between students and teachers. The students indicated that teachers with whom they most associate a caring and positive classroom climate are fair, authentic, respect student privacy, are excellent and passionate teachers, and understand and appreciate the students' lives outside the classroom.

The results of this study also reinforce the contention of Pianta et al. (1999) that the student-teacher relationship is embedded in the fabric of broader systemic factors, ranging from class size to students' perception of overall school policies. Additional research is needed to further explore the variables that impact caring relationships between high school students and teachers. In particular, future research could focus on ways in which teachers, administrators, and support staff can address barriers such as diversity blind spots and excessive class sizes that hinder the development of positive student-teacher relationships. The voices of the students and teachers in this study demonstrate both the power and the complexity of the student-teacher relationship, and finding ways to improve that relationship is an important goal for researchers.

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¹ The full set of focus group questions is available from the first author.

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