

**Conceptualizations and challenges to care:  
A case study of primary teachers' experience of  
caring towards students in an inner city school**

**by**

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# Approval

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## Ethics Statement



The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

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- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

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## Abstract

This qualitative study investigates how primary teachers at an inner-city elementary school conceptualize and enact care towards their students. This study uses a case-study methodology, based at one school site in British Columbia, and employs both focus group discussions and interview strategies. The school is designated inner-city since it serves a substantial number of students living in poverty (23%). The four teachers involved in the study stressed the importance of developing strong and attentive relationships with their students; this included dialogue with students and listening attentively to their needs, interests and experiences. The study also showed that teachers enact care through modeling caring relationships to their students. The teachers identified a number of challenges to care: these included cultural, socio-economic and language differences between the teachers and their students, the transient nature of the student population, the lack of support and funding from the school district for the diverse learning needs of the students, and opposition and suspicion from many of the parents who either did not value education or who had had negative school experiences of their own in the past. While each of the teachers considered caring to be central to their teaching and engagement with their students, they did not see the caring relationship extending to caring for the parent population. The teachers' conceptualization of care aligned partially with Noddings' view about care as relationships and the importance of fostering care through dialogue and modeling. Less attention, however, was given to Noddings' focus on practice and on confirming care in others. Each of the teachers noted that while care towards primary-aged children in inner-city settings was challenging, there were also many rewards, including deep and emotional connections made with the students in their care and an understanding that their care was making a positive difference in their lives.

**Keywords:** Care; inner-city school; primary teachers; challenges to care; vulnerable students

## Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to a very caring primary teacher, Chrystal Morris (Mrs. Severs).*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Caring relationships is a critical area of study as caring is one of the few concepts that universally bonds humanity. Nel Noddings (2005b) states that “the desire to be cared for is almost certainly a universal human characteristic” (p. 17), although there is a variety of ways that care is understood and provided, for example, when looking at practices of care through a cultural lens. To thrive in infancy, one must be cared for by a caregiver. Care theorists believe that care is not only necessary for survival, it is also something that we desire to give and receive (Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993; Mayeroff, 1971). In the domain of schools, care can be seen as a basic responsibility of educators (Noddings, 2005b; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993).

Dr. Wanda Cassidy introduced me to the ethic of care in a graduate class at Simon Fraser University. Upon hearing that we were going to be discussing care, I first thought, “of course I care, I am a teacher”, but it was not until reading “The Language of Care Ethics” by Nel Noddings (2012) that I reflected on how care manifests itself in schools, classrooms, and between teachers and students. Reading Noddings’ article made me more of a reflexive educator for the improvement of my practice. I knew that care ethics was about looking for, and feeling acknowledgement, from students after I responded to their needs. Other areas of care, such as listening and dialogue, I regularly participated in because I genuinely wanted to know my students, but now this time spent with students had a name and a purpose.

Although studies on the ethic of care in school settings have been undertaken, and typically discuss the common attributes of caring teachers, (for example, McDowell, 2011; Alvarez, 2008; Cassidy & Bates, 2005), my aim was to create a study that would explore the experiences of primary-level teachers who have caring relationships with students at an inner-city school, as I believe the inner-city context provides unique challenges and opportunities. I believe that many students attending inner-city schools

face a number of barriers to education, which may include access to resources and necessities as basic as nutritious food, housing, adequate clothing, and sleep. When the school site, at the primary age, becomes a place of safety and consistency, the relationship between the teacher and student has the potential to become quite powerful, given that it is built upon much more than academics.

My objectives in this study were to uncover primary teachers' conceptualization of care and their experiences of caring towards students, so that I might reveal some of the challenges and successes in developing caring relationships. To achieve these ends, I sought out four primary school teacher colleagues to respond to interview questions and participate in focus group discussions, in order to uncover their insights into the meaning of care, their stories of caring for students, and the barriers to caring that they experienced.

This objective is underpinned by the possibility that the teachers' experiences of caring in this setting may reveal some unique characteristics.

I wish to answer the general question: what are the experiences of enacting caring in an inner-city elementary school as reported by participating primary school teachers? My specific research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do the teacher participants conceptualize and enact caring for children in an inner-city primary school classroom?
2. What are the particular challenges of caring for this population in this setting?

## **Background and Influence**

Schools are challenging places when we consider that they are filled with individuals who arrive with multifaceted needs, experiences, and backgrounds. The needs of the students and their families are complex and co-occurring, especially in impoverished neighbourhoods where a school, such as Riverview Elementary (name changed to protect anonymity of teachers and students), acts as a hub for resources as basic as free clothing and meal programs, and connections with social workers and counsellors.

As teachers we remember stories of our students and colleagues, perhaps particularly successful projects, or a profound statement made by a student. Students, however, may remember how they felt in a classroom much more than what they learned during their primary years. Every school has its repertoire of stories gathered from its members. It is these stories and experiences that are remembered and passed down and form a school's history. My attempt, in this research, is to capture the experiences and stories from four teachers, in order to shed light on the complexities that exist in the primary inner-city classroom as teachers and students navigate their relationships.

I have been a teacher for just over seven years in two regions of British Columbia and in the United Arab Emirates. Unlike many primary teachers, I had no idea that I had an interest in teaching until my second year of university. At first I planned to be a pharmacist, until I took my first level science course. After feeling a little directionless I remember discussing the possibility of becoming a plumber with my mother, and she said: "Think of when you were at your happiest, do that."

I was happiest in my grade three classroom. Mrs. Severs was my teacher and she made me feel like I was the only special person in the room. I do not know how to describe that feeling other than that, she saw me, and she understood who I was. I also remember that year becoming very aware that my parents were divorced, and that my father was unlike any other. He was different in a way that makes you lose friends, not gain them. I also became more aware of things like money, and that we had very little.

I also remember having to start speech therapy classes in a small dark room once a week with two boys. Each week the speech therapist came to my Grade three portable, and a student would answer the door. The speech therapist would ask the student to "tell Julia her friend is here", but everyone knew that it was preposterous for an eight-year old girl to be friends with a woman in her mid-thirties. My classmates would giggle as I walked out of the classroom. In the small, dark room, the same 's' cards would come out every week, and every week we all still had a lisp. I remember at one point the therapist getting very angry and looking at the two boys in my group and quite

crossly asked, “How long will we keep doing this? You have been here for two years! How much longer? When will you get it?”

I became very aware that she and I were not friends as she had announced on the portable’s doorstep. She and I were different, and in more ways than an interdental lisp.

I remember gaining this awareness of difference and suddenly it changed things from feeling like most kids, aloof, to painful. I knew how I wanted to be cared for, and my mother did the best that she could, but Mrs. Severs filled a gap that was getting larger each day. Looking back, I think that Mrs. Severs saw my discomfort, and gave me the positive attention many students crave from their elementary teacher. She made me feel smart, and creative, and I was happy to clean the chalkboard erasers in exchange.

Remembering how Mrs. Severs saw me and how I felt every day walking into her classroom made me want to recreate that feeling for other students.

“Mom, I think I want to be a teacher”.

Coming from this background, I am personally invested in care. I have experienced how a single relationship can transform a place that defines and accentuates difference based on socio-economic status, into a place where I, as a young girl, felt at my best and contributed with value.

As a primary teacher, I have always held onto giving other students that particular feeling of care and value: to listen, to watch, and to let them know that I am invested in who they are and who they will become. After teaching at an inner-city school, I believe that working with vulnerable children has taught me about the importance of embedding an ethic of care into my practice, since the relationship teachers have with a child may be the only consistently positive one that child is experiencing at that time. I also believe that when the school is a place where the child comes to have their basic needs met, such as a breakfast and lunch program, clothing, and community services such as translators and counselling, the relationship between student and teacher hinges on much more than purely academic motivation. I believe

that these services to support students at the most basic level of survival makes us become a family, and therefore, the relationship can become much more involved and intense.

Chapter One explained my experiences to provide the reader with a background as to how my interest in researching care in the elementary context developed. In Chapter Two, the literature review contextualizes care in its contemporary conceptualizations by examining the work of Nel Noddings, Joan Tronto, and Diana Mendley Rauner. I balance the conceptualizations of care with the enactments of care by highlighting research of care in schools as communicated by Kel McDowell, Karen Alvarez, Wanda Cassidy and Anita Bates. I also review literature in connection to vulnerable youth, given that this area coincides with the findings from researching within an inner-city school. In Chapter Three, I discuss the research method and an overview of the participants involved in the study. This chapter also points to the use of the case-study approach and its suitability for this particular qualitative study.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The literature reviewed in this chapter will first examine the ethic of care as understood by Nel Noddings, Joan Tronto, and Diana Mendley Rauner. Next, the chapter will review several studies that focused on an ethic of care in educational settings. The third section discusses vulnerable youth within the school context to provide a foundation for understanding the complexities children are facing during their educational careers. My main purpose in highlighting inner-city schools is to explore the ways in which this particular environment is unique, often erecting barriers to education that students and educators face on an ongoing basis. It is my hope that reviewing these three areas will help provide a foundation for understanding the results of my research with teachers in an inner-city school setting.

### **What is an Ethic of Care?**

Caring is a term used ambiguously in elementary school settings. Milton Mayeroff (1971) describes the difference between the general sense of caring and an ethic of care when he states, “We sometimes speak as if caring did not require knowledge, as if caring for someone, for example, were simply a matter of good intention or warm regard” (p. 19).

An ethic of care has been described by Nel Noddings (1984, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2012) as relational caring that grounds itself in caring morally for another. This means that care can only be defined by the practices within the relationship. Care involves the caregiver, or as Noddings (1984) says, “carer” or “one-caring”, and the “cared-for”. The carer positions himself/herself in an approach that is “rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” in order to “meet the other morally” and enter into a caring relation (p. 2-4). Several experiences are integral for the carer to participate in to fulfill their role; these include engrossment--a state by which the caregiver is completely attentive to the cared-for, and; motivational displacement--a time

when the caregiver puts aside his/her own projects to attend to the cared-for. These experiences lead to the carer being able to ultimately respond positively to the needs of the cared-for (Noddings 1984, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2012).

The response by the cared-for, for the care provided, is critical. The response from the cared-for informs the carer what the needs and interests are, and therefore, *how* to care for that individual (Noddings, 2012, p. 53). If care is not received by the cared-for then the care is 'incomplete' as defined by Noddings. Care must be understood by the carer as received by the cared-for in order for care to be complete.

In addition to the experiences involved in caring, Noddings (2005a) describes an ethic of care as a relationship that is needs-based, given that the carer is required to be attentive and responsive to the actual needs of the cared-for when the resources are available to do so. In the article, "Identifying and Responding to Needs in Education," Noddings (2005a) pays careful attention to differentiating between actual needs and the perceived needs of the cared-for, stating that "an expressed need comes from the cared-for; an inferred need comes from the one trying to care" (p. 148). She recommends that teachers explicitly ask students what they need rather than trying to infer students needs, since we have seen how working from inference of student needs has failed in the past; namely, the imposition of irrelevant curricula (p. 149). Noddings (2005a) argues that, at times, the needs of students are hidden not only from educators, but also from the students themselves, and these "hidden needs are expressed in ways that require skilful and sensitive interpretation" (p. 151).

When Noddings (2005b) discusses care in her book, *The Challenge to Care in Schools*, she takes a critical look at the current model of many North American public schools. Noddings discusses the deficits in care within the current model and explains her framework for embedding an ethic of care within educational systems. She claims that schools should be obligated and focused on being responsive to their students. One of the core roles of educators is to listen carefully and respond positively to students to help facilitate their educational endeavours. Throughout the book, Noddings makes suggestions regarding the American school system, which has many connections to its Canadian counterpart, as to how and why educators should implement moral education

through an ethic of care lens. Noddings (2005b) states that moral education in schools should not follow steps or procedures; rather, it should incorporate “four major components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation” to support relational caring and for students to develop moral reasoning. Noddings argues that modeling is vital in caring in order to “show how to care in our own relations with cared-fors” (p. 22). The framework for dialogue should be open-ended and genuine. Dialogue is also key to moral education given that discussion embodies the process of engrossment. Dialogue and engrossment exist in relation to one another since the carer must put aside their own agenda “in order to receive the other” (p. 16). This practice entails being available to “really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey” (p. 16). The role of the teacher, as carer, is one whom is available to listen to his/her student to be able to “to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts” (1984, p. 19). The practice component should allow time for students to experience and gain skills in relational caring. Lastly, confirmation is a process where teachers encourage the best in their students to enhance development of the individual. To develop relationships of trust, Noddings says, teachers and students ideally should work together for three consecutive years. This approach would also involve a paradigm shift in curriculum, away from the traditional approach, which prescribes the skills and knowledge all students need to acquire.

Noddings’ (2002) book, *Educating Moral People*, critically examines character education and argues schools need to step-back from that approach and focus instead on the development of a relational ethic of care. Noddings divides her book into three parts to build her case for schools to operate from an ethic of care. The three sections discuss moral education and the ethics of care, philosophical and historical issues (Noddings’ discussion in this section concentrates on the work of John Dewey), and lastly, curriculum and moral education. Noddings effectively terminates the grounds on which traditional values education is built when she asks the reader to consider whose values are being reinforced in the public school system? Noddings highlights the idea that any one ‘set’ of values has not only the intent, but purposefully neglects another set and is thus exclusionary at the outset. Noddings warns readers that by enforcing pre-selected sets of virtues, “We risk silencing divergent and creative voices. We also risk allowing a core of powerful authorities to establish a fixed set of approved virtues and values” (p. 23). On the other hand, the desire to care and be cared for in relation to one



another is, as Noddings claims, universal. Noddings also suggests that schools should take a step away from their focus on academic training through prescribed subject areas that educate students on skills that will most likely be irrelevant or out-dated in adulthood. She argues for an educational reform grounded in the ethics of care as a way to begin to address larger social issues such as poverty and gender inequality.

Joan Tronto (1993) understands an ethic of care to have purpose in the political arena and as “both a practice and a disposition” (p.104). Tronto (1993) believes that much more recognition needs to be paid to care if society is to stop devaluing care work and conceptualizing care as merely something that exists in private and in relation to emotion. She states that an ethic of care is developed through the elements of attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. To expand on each area in more detail, care-givers must be attentive to understand the needs of those they care for and understand their responsibility to care for others. Care must also be performed with competence to meet the needs of others with accuracy, and, lastly, care must be responsive to vulnerability and inequality (Tronto, 1993).

Tronto’s later works, including “Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose” (2010), illuminates the notion that “those who are perceived as needing care are marginalized” (p. 163). She also makes an argument for the recognition of needs throughout an individual’s lifetime when she calls for “[a] perspective that recognizes humans throughout the life cycle and with many different capacities and needs” (p. 163). Tronto’s vision of care provides an understanding of the status of children’s rights as a public concern.

In her book, *The Role of Caring in Youth Development and Community Life*, Diana Mendley Rauner (2000) continues the discourse of care in both the public and private spheres. She makes the connection from the private to the public sphere when she states that the world of care “has often been trivialized, and thus marginalized, in the important business of considering interpersonal relationships and larger systems of social interaction” (p. 4). She also believes that by modeling and engaging in caring relationships between youth and adults, we are building capacities that young people will bring into their public lives as adults and reminds readers of the importance of care for

children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who are increasingly being raised by organized care, due to the demand for dual incomes in families. She states that care, in its most basic conceptualization, is preparing young people to be able to handle the responsibilities and tasks that their culture entails.

## Care in Educational Settings

Several studies have been undertaken that have focused on student and teacher perceptions of a caring teacher, and the impact a caring environment has on students' learning and success in school. Cassidy and Bates (2005) investigated a school that embraced students who had been "pushed out" or "dropped out" of other schools, reinforcing Noddings' claim that: "young people suffer when schools become less caring places" (p. 66). Caring teachers, in this and other studies, are described as demonstrating helpfulness, respect, belonging, flexibility, listening behaviour, humour, as well as providing success for students and participating in extra curricular activities (Alvarez, 2008; Bates, 2005; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; McDowell, 2011).

Alvarez' (2008) thesis focused on the ethic of care in connection to cultural understandings of care. She employed a triangulation model of teacher, student, and parent perspectives in investigating teacher care and the expectations of one another's roles. Her study examined how each group perceived and interpreted teacher care, while taking into consideration ethnic background as a possible lens for such understanding. Alvarez used interviews and surveys and then coded her data to find themes. She found that she could not attribute understandings of care to ethnic background given her small sample size, but did find that each group of adults related their understandings of care to their experiences of school as a student. Alvarez' study is useful in developing an understanding of the importance of relationships between parents, teachers, and students; her themes focused on answering the general question 'what makes for a caring teacher?' She found that students perceived teachers as caring individuals when they went above and beyond caring for a student's academic achievement. In general, students commented that teachers who "checked-in" and asked about the wellbeing of students were caring teachers. Checking-in with students also connects to the second theme: that teachers who wanted to get to know students

as individuals were also perceived as caring. Getting to know students as individuals is reflected in what Noddings terms “engrossment” (2005b, p. 15). Engrossment is a critical part of the caring process and involves getting to know students and the experiences that they bring with them to the classroom. Actively listening to students was a third theme found in Alvarez’ interviews with students and was part of getting to know students as individuals (p. 47).

McDowell’s (2011) doctoral dissertation, entitled *Who Cares and Who Doesn’t: An Exploration of Perceptions of Care Based on Experiences of Secondary School Students from Different Economic Groups* was conducted in three British Columbia secondary schools that drew students from differing socio-economic areas. His study used grounded theory with a constructivist lens to interview twelve students ranging from grades eight to twelve. To create triangulation, he also collected field notes in addition to a personal reflective journal of observations over the course of his research. McDowell found that students from “the low end of the economic spectrum felt less cared for” (p. 206). However, there was a great deal of consistency in how all twelve students described a caring teacher: helping behaviour, feeling supported, being listened to and encouraged. Caring teachers were also described as loving, empathetic, genuine, flexible, and funny. Students in the upper and middle socio-economic groups could name at least one teacher who cared for them. Students in the lowest socio-economic group did not necessarily have this experience, with several describing teachers who were uncaring towards them (McDowell, 2011).

Cassidy and Bates (2005) investigated how the ethic of care is understood and enacted at Whytecliff Education Centre, a school that engages vulnerable, marginalized youth who had been excluded from mainstream schools. Many of the students had been designated as having “severe behaviour disorder”, learning disabilities, mental health issues, and most had issues with substance abuse. Cassidy and Bates found that the administrators valued creating a culture of care, building relationships, and looking at the ‘whole child’, that is, looking at the experiences the child brings with them to school each day. From the teachers’ perspective, it was found that creating a safe and nurturing environment, the role of relationships, showing respect for students, adapting the curriculum for student success, being empathetic and calm, and creating goals in the

child's best interest, were all themes that teachers discussed when asked about their conception of care. From the perspective of the students at Whytecliff, it was found that feeling cared-for was the result of students feeling welcome, being acknowledged and understood, and receiving the help they needed (especially with schoolwork). The impact of creating a caring environment included students changing their attitude toward their education and school, emotional stability, improved perception of adults, and an improved respect for students taking care of themselves.

Bates' (2005) thesis titled "Voices from the Margins: Teenagers at a School Informed by the Ethic of Care," examines the practices at Blue Mountain Educational Centre (a pseudonym was used to protect the confidentiality of students and teachers), an alternative education centre that focuses on student strengths and development through understanding the whole child. Bates' study looked at how the marginalized youth are negatively targeted by the practices within the public school system producing further inequalities. Bates found that smaller class sizes were key in order for teachers to develop caring relationships with their students. A part of developing strong relationships with students was listening and responding to the needs of students. Students felt as though they were supported by the staff and administration and could speak to how the staff at Blue Mountain went above and beyond to help accomplish tasks outside of school. Smaller class sizes also allowed for teachers to support students' educational needs by helping students for a length of time and individualize learning resources to suit student interest.

Establishing a sense of belonging for students was another significant finding in Bates' study. The students attending Blue Mountain felt unwelcome in their past school experiences. Bates comments that this was due to students experiencing unequal power in relationships with teachers, administrators and peers due to the "non-mainstream identities" of marginalized youth (p. 83).

## **Vulnerable Youth**

Students attending inner-city schools tend to be at a disadvantage in the areas of academics, social-emotional support, and access to resources as basic as food and

clothing and adequate housing (Turney, 1978). At the school site where I conducted my research, 30% of students are deemed vulnerable and inadequately prepared to learn when they come to school (EDI). Literature on low socio-economic status, inner-city students found that students face multiple barriers to academic achievement, and that the challenges faced by minority students are largely ignored (Roberts, 2010; Payne, 1996; Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

In her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne (1996) highlights several case studies that examine families experiencing a shortage of resources such as money, health, education, and emotional wellbeing. An important aspect of her work is that she discusses the vulnerability of children living in poverty. Payne states that inner-city children living in poverty are seven times more likely to experience child abuse and neglect when compared to students of high socio-economic status. This statistic demonstrates that vulnerability presents itself in many forms for children from underprivileged inner-city settings and could have a profound affect on an individual's academic achievement and wellbeing.

Students who attend inner-city schools tend to be more vulnerable than their higher socio-economic counterparts (Peirce, 1994; Payne, 1996; Turney, 1978; Renchler, 1993). Pierce's (1994) study, "Importance of Classroom Climate for At-Risk Learners," describes the challenges faced by at-risk youth in connection to their self-esteem and societal issues. She describes poverty as an issue that creates social problems. These social problems include inadequate diet, dysfunction within the home, and poor medical care. In addition to the social issues, academics are also at risk since students tend to lack the "cognitive schemata" required in the classroom setting (p. 37). Pierce claims that high school classrooms, for vulnerable students, can be a place of alienation given that students may lack background knowledge, ability to keep up with peers, and management of unacceptable social behaviour. To overcome these challenges, Pierce discusses findings from a study that focused on the classroom environment as a means of diminishing "the risk factors involved in learning" (p. 37). She asserts that at-risk youth tend to think of themselves in a deficit mind-set, focusing on past failures, have low self-esteem, and feel incapable. It was found that a classroom environment that supported self-respect, respect for others, and student-created rules

correlated with higher academic achievement. The classroom teacher also encouraged students with praise and allotted time for active dialogue with students. Pierce found that these steps developed a place of belonging and students who were more prepared to learn by feeling safe and secure in their classroom setting.

In addition to social problems in relation to poverty, medical problems are also prominent for children living in poverty. Renchler (1993) notes that children from low socio-economic inner-city backgrounds are much more likely to face serious medical conditions that may most have a direct effect on education levels. The medical dangers include prenatal exposure to drugs and AIDS, poor nutrition, lead exposure, and low birth rate. In connection to inner-city schools, health concerns associated with youth living in poverty are further impacted by Renchler's (1993) finding that lower socio-economic students are generally grouped in schools that are considerably underfunded when compared to the per-student funding in for higher SES students. Although per-student funding is allocated provincially in Canada, Renchler's argument is valid when comparing funds available on a school-to-school basis given the fundraising done by school groups such as Parent Advisory Councils (PACs). The funds raised by PACs are available funds for individual schools to spend as the council sees fit. Given the availability of money to draw from within areas of higher socio-economic status for such activities and access to highly connected PAC members, school-based fundraising continues to create gaps between 'have' and 'have-not' schools. In addition, disparities in per-student funding exist within Canada given that British Columbia's education system funds students approximately \$1000 less (annually) when compared to other Canadian provinces (BCTF, 2013). This lack of funds puts BC's vulnerable students further behind other Canadian students due to a lack of funding for support roles within schools.

In 2010 the BC Teachers' Federation conducted a study that using focus groups to explore the perceptions of 29 classroom and specialist teachers as to how poverty affects student participation and success at school. The themes that came from their analysis of the findings were wide learning gaps due to low self-esteem upon entering Kindergarten, language barriers, and low attendance due to lack of transportation, older students being childcare providers for younger students, and students working to help

support their families (2012, p. 5). Not all of the findings from the study were negative. One of the major themes that emerged was that, for some students living in poverty, the school becomes a “safe-haven”. In addition, the teachers also stated that students living in poverty are better able to articulate their needs and develop resiliency from setbacks. One of the major challenges the teachers faced in school involved handling unmet health needs, which included poor nutrition. Due to cutbacks, these health concerns are further impacted by the lack of support available to vulnerable students such as education assistants, youth workers, and learning specialist teachers (2012, p. 6). These findings are congruent with the previously mentioned research.

Understanding the needs of low socio-economic students creates an awareness of the various barriers to education faced by this particular group of children. The experiences of care as perceived by primary classroom teachers would allow elementary schools to better support students as an investment in developing strong roots for academic success and social-emotional wellbeing for students at the beginning of their school experiences.

My study addresses a gap in the literature by examining the relationship between the conceptualization and enactment of care for children in inner-city primary school classrooms. This area of research is important so that school districts, administrators, and teachers can better target their attention and resources to provide care to this particular group of students. Through a close examination of the experiences of primary classroom teachers in inner-city schools, I hope to show that there are unique factors that enhance and limit care for these students. By studying the teachers’ perspectives regarding their experiences as ‘carers’, I hope to provide an understanding of the complexities in the teacher-student relationship and target specific areas of need in the inner-city school context.

## Chapter Three: Method

In this chapter I begin by discussing the research design and the use of a qualitative and case study approach. Next, I review the methods of data collection and analysis, and finally, I discuss the school and the research participants.

My study employs a qualitative research design that uses a case study approach to create an in-depth understanding of how primary teachers (kindergarten to Grade three) conceptualize and enact care in an inner-city elementary school, Riverview Elementary (a pseudonym), situated in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. I embraced a case study approach since it assumes there will be complexities that need to be emphasized to gain understanding (Yin, 2003). To make such an assumption about the context of Riverview Elementary is fitting given my knowledge and first-hand experience of some of the difficult situations directly involving poverty that the school faces on a daily basis. Yin (2012) affirms this when he states that within a case study, “examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case(s) being studied are integral to understanding the case(s)” (p. 4). Riverview Elementary, and the needs it attempts to satisfy as an inner-city school, fulfills the important component of context in case study.

Creswell (2008) describes the case study methodology as one that supports research within various boundaries. These boundaries may be presented in a study as a system, a particular span of time, or a place. The application of this case study suits Creswell’s understanding given that it is a case study of the experiences of care by primary teachers participants in one particular school, which satisfies the criteria of studying a phenomenon within a set boundary. The four teachers in this study have taught at the school from three to twelve years (3, 8, 10, and 12 years) and share an understanding of student needs at this particular location. Creswell (2008) refers to the shared understanding between teachers at a particular school as a “culture-sharing



group” (p. 462). Creating a case study based upon a common experience or “culture” allowed me to gain deeper insights into the personalized experiences that have common themes when cross-examined.

The school, Riverview Elementary, is a critical component of the case-study method given that it provides the real-world context for the case study. Riverview Elementary and its students, like many elementary schools, is a complex place that faces multiple challenges as an inner-city school. The school site and students are emphasized in this case-study approach given that “case-study research assumes that examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case(s) being studied are integral to understanding the case(s)” (Yin, 2012, p. 4).

## **Data Collection**

In order to collect data at a public school within the province of British Columbia, I needed to gain approval from the school board after gaining approval from the Research Ethics Board at Simon Fraser University. I collected data for this study using two methods: focus groups and interviews. There were two focus group sessions that included four primary teacher participants (the same group of four teachers met twice). All four teachers were provided with a consent letter to sign before our first focus group session with a document outlining the purpose of the study.

The first focus group meeting took place at the end of January 2015 and the second discussion took place in March 2015. Both focus group discussions were held at Riverview Elementary. Prior to the first meeting, I asked each participant to select a pseudonym for themselves as well as for the students they wanted to discuss. I asked permission to record our session using a digital recorder. Both members of my thesis committee reviewed the draft questions and provided me with feedback, which was incorporated into the final version.

During the first meeting we read and discussed an article by Nel Noddings (2012) “The Language of Care Ethics” to provide teachers with an introduction to the ethic of care as well as commonly used terminology in care ethics. “The Language of Care

Ethics” can provide teachers with some understanding as to the relational nature of the ethic of care and the idea that care must be received by the ‘cared-for’ in order for care to have taken place. I wanted to include open dialogue about care in this first meeting, since dialogue discussion can support an ethic of care. Noddings (2002) explains dialogue to be:

The most fundamental component of the care model. True dialogue, as Paulo Freire (1970) wrote, is open-ended. The participants do not know at the outset what the conclusions will be. Both speak; both listen. Dialogue is not just conversation. There must be a topic, but the topic may shift, and either party in a dialogue may divert attention from the original topic to one more crucial, or less sensitive, or more fundamental (p. 16).

In addition to reading Noddings’ article, I also asked the teachers 10 questions, which were discussed in the small four-person focus group. I hoped that the dialogue would flow naturally among participants and would extend and deepen the responses to the 10 semi-structured questions. The same four primary teachers participated in the second focus group in March 2015. For this meeting, a second set of questions was formed based on questions I still had about their understandings of care from the first focus group and our one-on-one interviews, which took place in between the two focus group sessions. Some of the questions in the second focus group included:

- Does student response to your care a factor that keeps you motivated in your career?
- Do you believe that teachers create the bond with a student, or is it a meeting in the middle? Are both people responsible for the connection? And;
- Does the response to your care keep you pursuing the connection?

A full set of the questions asked in the interviews and focus groups can be found in the Appendix section of this study.

Although the questions in the focus groups were pre-planned, the session was conducted in a more conversational manner in order to maintain an informal tone. Our

first focus group lasted for approximately 100 minutes, and our second focus group for about 60 minutes, and both focus groups were audio-recorded. During both meetings I attempted to take a neutral stance by recording notes, which were used later in my analysis. My attempt to be neutral was short sighted as I was incorporated into some of the stories shared by the participants during the focus groups. Holloway and Biley (2011) shed light on their understanding of the role of the researcher in qualitative studies when they assert that, “the self is always present in fieldwork” (p. 971). The participants’ stories of care incorporated me as a colleague or a particular student in my classroom, highlighted the fact that my positionality in the study was as a colleague and as a researcher concurrently. I acknowledge that being in the position of both researcher and colleague, and thus a quasi-participant, played a significant role in my understanding and analysis of the data collected. As Bourke (2014) notes, “research represents a shared space” given that “the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process” (p. 1). Holloway and Biley (2011) comment on researchers and participants having common understandings of a particular topic, allowing the researcher to “share the language of the participants and add data from their own experience to those other participants” (p. 971). This understanding of the “shared space” and “shared language” of research was of benefit to my data collection given that the participants and I shared a common understanding of the school where the data was collected and experiences with particular students and families. Our relationship as colleagues, however, may have created limitations in the data collection and analysis in that “identities come into play via our perceptions, not only as others, but the ways in which we expect others to perceive us” (Bourke, 2014, p. 1).

Being in the position of both colleague and researcher offered positives and negatives, given that, at times, I was privy to an open and honest conversation from the teachers. On the other hand, perhaps the participants’ true feelings and experiences of caring (or not caring) for primary students were left unsaid since they were cognizant of the fact that we would remain colleagues after the study was completed. I found that having background knowledge of the students discussed in the interviews and focus groups was beneficial; yet I had to be careful not to include my own assumptions or interpretations of the situations that were shared with me. Finally, as a researcher

conducting the study, taking a critical perspective of what was shared by the teacher participants proved to be difficult given our close relationships and work trajectory.

The second method of collecting data involved one-on-one interviews with each of the four primary teachers from the focus groups. All of the interviews took place during February 2015. The four participants in this study were asked to select a pseudonym for themselves (each teacher chose to use the same pseudonym they selected for the focus group sessions) as well as a pseudonym for the students they discussed.

I asked and gained permission to use an audio-recorder to record our interviews. Each participant viewed all interview questions prior to the interview in order to have time to consider their responses. I hoped that providing participating teachers with the questions in advance would encourage longer and richer replies, which, in turn, would provide more accurate and meaningful data. All interview questions were reviewed by my thesis committee members for feedback, which were incorporated into the final version. Ambiguous replies were interrogated by asking clarifying questions; therefore, it was possible to obtain both planned and unplanned responses that helped to gather meaningful data. Each interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes. Some of the interview questions asked the teachers how long they had been in their teaching career, why they chose to become a teacher, and the challenges they faced to caring for students in an inner-city setting. Additional questions included “how is your care acknowledged by students?” and “how do you know a child is in need of your care?” I also asked participants to share a memory of caring for a particular student.

The purpose of setting up the data collection in this manner (first focus group, individual interviews, second focus group) was to allow the language within the framework of care theory to be explored and discussed as a small group prior to the interviews. In addition, I wanted the first focus group to provide time for teachers to reflect upon their practice and interactions with students within an ethic of care framework prior to their interview. The final focus group was held largely to debrief their understandings of care after creating an awareness of this element in their teaching practice. Some of the questions in the second focus group included “how important is

care in your teaching career and why?” and “does the student response to care keep you motivated in your teaching? How so?”

At the conclusion of the interviews and focus groups, each of the participants received a written transcript of each dialogue and were invited to make any changes they deemed to be necessary. Although our conversations were shared amongst one another during the focus group, I still felt it was necessary to provide each participant with the transcription of our dialogues to allow for changes.

I was the only individual collecting data, transcribing, and coding the data. I transcribed the first focus group discussion and the one-to-one interviews within a week of the meetings, which helped me to write the final questions for the second focus group. Listening to the focus groups while transcribing as well as coding the data allowed me to reflect and analyze the data at the same time. My follow up questions in the second focus group largely stemmed from statements made by participants that left me wanting to understand additional details to paint the fuller picture of a caring relationship or the dynamics of care. I was responsible for the personal information and protected it on a password secured laptop. All information collected was coded and all teachers used a pseudonym for the focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews. The paper transcriptions were stored on a password-protected laptop as required by Simon Fraser University ethics.

## **Data Analysis**

In this study it was important to employ a data analysis method that would highlight the individual voices and memories of care from the teacher participants. I wanted the thought processes intact as much as possible to capture the way each participant described their experiences of care in the school. The themes and codes were not preselected, but rather came from the data after reading, re-reading and analyzing the transcripts. This is a common process described by Lichtman (2012) when she states that: “most take the position that the codes emerge from the data via a process of reading and thinking about the text material” (p. 248). Pulling topics that could then be discussed as broader themes was an important process to highlighting key thinking

about the conceptualization and enactment of the ethic of care at Riverview Elementary; however, the addition of in-depth teacher stories of caring for a particular student was planned to provide a fuller picture of care that may have been neglected by my interview questions and their responses.

## **Participants**

**School.** The teachers and students discussed in this case study are from Riverview Elementary, which is located in a designated inner-city area in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. There are approximately 370 students at Riverview Elementary and 45 teaching, non-enrolling, and paraprofessionals (43 of which are female and two are male). The school includes students from grades kindergarten to grade seven. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a helpful tool for providing background information when discussing the vulnerability of students in a given region. According to the EDI, from 2011-13 approximately 30% of students in the region of Riverview were “vulnerable on one or more scales” in the areas of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills ([earlylearning.ubc.ca/edi/](http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/edi/) 2015).

The school site is one of school district’s designated 32 inner-city schools, out of 124 schools and learning centres in total. In addition, 62% of the school’s students speak a language other than English at home. The diversity of language within the school district is compelling, with 172 different languages are spoken at home (Sereda, 2014, p. 4). At Riverview Elementary, students face additional challenges given that 52% of families have moved into or out of the neighbourhood in the past five years, 23% of families are defined as low-income, 25% of families are single-parent families ([adoptaschool.indigo.ca](http://adoptaschool.indigo.ca)), and approximately 20% of students were chronically absent from school in 2011. Chronic absenteeism has been reduced over the past four years from 20% to 10% of students with the implementation of two childcare workers and the introduction of the Attendance Matters Program (L. Layton, personal communication, June 6, 2015). Students with behaviour designations account for nearly 6% of the

school's population, although this number is significantly higher in reality given the time required to document and process such designations.

**Teachers.** I have been employed at Riverview for three years as a primary teacher. I asked four of my primary teachers colleagues to participate in the study. The four teachers who agreed to participate range in ages from mid-20s to late-50s, and have varying degrees of teaching experience ranging from four years to nearly 40 years. These ranges provided for varied viewpoints and experiences. Three of the teachers are Caucasian, and one teacher is Aboriginal. All four teachers reported that they are from a middle to upper-middle socio-economic backgrounds. At the time of this study, one teacher taught Kindergarten, two participants taught in separate Grade two classrooms, and the fourth participant taught Grade three.

**Participant 1.** May has been teaching for a total of 10 years, four of which were in the role of a district Aboriginal teacher, and six years at Riverview Elementary as a classroom teacher. The year of the study she was a Grade two teacher. She was born in Northern British Columbia, and was adopted at three weeks old. She was raised in a neighbouring suburb to the school and identifies with being raised in an upper-middle class socio-economic environment. During our one-on-one interview, May told me that she wanted to become a teacher after having her son. As a single parent it was important to her to have adequate time at home with her son and felt that teaching would be a smart career choice.

When I asked May about her knowledge of Riverview Elementary being an inner-city school, she said that she was aware of the designation given her previous experience at the school as an itinerate Aboriginal teacher.

May reported that her teaching philosophy grounds itself in teaching to the whole child, especially when dealing with barriers to education. She said that for her, teaching the whole child is important because "we're not just the curriculum".

**Participant 2.** Rose is the youngest teacher in the group and has been teaching for four years, three of which were spent teaching at the primary level at

Riverview Elementary. During the year of the study, Rose taught a Grade 2 class and was also an Early Literacy Teacher in several classrooms. Rose grew up in city close to Vancouver, in a community she describes as rapidly changing, so much that “I don’t even like to go back there because it doesn’t even feel the same anymore. It’s not the place I grew up. It’s hoity-toity and no community.” Rose stated that she became a teacher because she felt as though she “had no other choice.”

Rose’s teaching career began as a Kindergarten teacher in a small town in British Columbia. She said that taking on this position challenged many of the biases she had towards the efficacy of Aboriginal groups. She was then hired as a Teacher-On-Call in a suburb of Vancouver, and then as a full-time teacher at Riverview. Rose stated that she was unaware that Riverview Elementary was an inner-city school when she accepted her position at the school.

**Participant 3.** Bea is the oldest participant in the study and also has the most years of experience as a teacher. Bea is in her late 50s and has been teaching for 37 years with eight of those years at Riverview Elementary. Bea grew up in a city on Vancouver Island and lived there until she moved to the Greater Vancouver area approximately 20 years ago. She stated that she became a teacher because she “knew that’s what she had to be” from the age of eight years old. She went into a teaching program at the University of Victoria that specified in teaching in rural settings. Bea’s teaching career started off in remote areas on Vancouver Island.

In my interview with Bea she said that she could not remember if Riverview Elementary was an inner-city school when she applied for her position, but found that the lifestyles of the students and families at Riverview are very similar to the students she taught in a small town on Vancouver Island when it was a fishing and logging village. She said that coming to teach at Riverview felt as though she was going back to her roots as a teacher in a rural setting.

**Participant 4.** Lynne is the second oldest participant in the study and is in her early 50s. She has been an elementary educator for 28 years with the past 12 teaching



primary at Riverview Elementary. During the year of this study she was a Grade three teacher, although she has taught Grades one through three at Riverview Elementary.

Lynne grew up in a suburb of Vancouver and started teaching full day Kindergarten for students who were designated as English Language Learners. When I asked Lynne why she decided to become a teacher, her answer was much like Bea and Rose's, stating "because there was no other option for me." She also said that it is the place where she feels the most comfortable.

In our interview, Lynne reported that she was aware that Riverview Elementary was an inner-city school when she applied for her position --- a fact that she appreciated since she noted that parents in inner-city settings tended to be more open and honest when their child was struggling in school. Lynne also said that, "there's a different vibe at inner-city schools."

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings from the data collected in the focus groups and interviews. The findings were articulated after coding the data and analyzing major themes that emerged from data. The findings chapter also includes narrative sections from the primary teachers, as sharing the stories of relationships with students lead to longer replies. At times, teacher narratives needed to be kept intact to illustrate the development of conceptualizations and experiences of care.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### Finding 1: Building Relationships – Conceptualizing and Enacting Care

Building relationships with students is the most prominent finding from this study, both in terms of teachers' conceptualization of care as well as how they describe enacting care with their students. At times, these processes were so intertwined and co-constructed that it was difficult to separate the understanding from the action. For this reason, I have linked them together under the main finding of "Building Relationships", which includes the following sub-themes: the importance of building relationships (relationality); the depth of student teacher relationships; students viewed as 'our students'; how teachers developed relationships (students who needed additional time, dialogue, and listening to); and modeling of caring relationships.

**The importance of building relationships.** All of the teachers interviewed for this study discussed the importance of building relationships with their students. A common theme that transpired from the interviews and the focus groups was that relationship building was a foundational step to teaching effectively; more specifically, that relationships allowed teaching to occur at a meaningful level. In one of the focus groups, Lynne stated that, "if they don't think you care, they are never going to learn." Rose explained that, "teaching is a relationship, that's what it is."

Rose went on to state that the relationship she has with students is the most important part of her teaching: "I don't think there's any teaching that goes on before you have a solid relationship with those kids." She explained that the relationship she develops with her students goes beyond encouraging and ability level, but also looks at "the day you're having, the family life [and] the experiences you've had." Rose also suggested that by developing a relationship with one of the struggling students in her

class that student developed a sense of calmness and care. She conceptualized the caring relationship as being responsible for:

Moments of the day [...] his only sense of calm is with you. Or his only sense of love, appreciation, or feeling smart on certain days are only with you, whereas there are other students, I really do love all my students, I really do, but for some of them, I don't need to be anything else other than a high five or someone to read to once a day. They don't need that because they got it constantly through their life. They know what loved, calm, caring feels like.

Similar to Rose, Bea answered the question, "what does being a caring teacher mean to you?" by stating that the relationships with students are necessary:

We're not in some kind of factory where we're putting in facts and having them spew out afterwards. So these are living, breathing, little beings that come with a background and come with parents and come with relatives and come with siblings.

Bea suggested that teachers who treat students as outcomes undermine the teaching relationships when she explained that, "if you try to treat them as, um, statistics, then you can't teach the child." To Bea, it was important that she get to know her students on a personal level as opposed to a purely academic understanding. She was teary eyed during our second focus group session when she shared with the group that:

I think often it's those students that need our care in the midst of something else, so we learn to pause and get rid of the agenda cause I think the things we do outside the agenda are often more important than the actual curriculum.

Bea highlighted the importance of relationships by contrasting her current experiences as a classroom teacher with her former experiences as a Teacher-on-Call, where it was difficult to make connections with students: "You step into a room of strangers, and you can't meet all their needs properly in such a short time. It's so frustrating."

Similarly, May reported that her focus was to make students “feel comfortable with who they are” before she attempts to teach academic content to students. She shared with the group during our first meeting that taking time to develop appreciation for students supersedes teaching the curriculum. Although May did not specifically use the term “relationship”, she described the feeling that she wanted her students to feel in order to later engage in learning activities with confidence.

Lynne saw creating relationships with students as a stepping-stone to teaching; during our first group meeting, she posed the question, “How are you going to be able to teach that child if you don’t really know them? The child that sits in the back and is quiet and doesn’t participate in anything has a reason.” Lynne mentioned that her relationship with the students determines her response to her students. In the first focus group Lynne stated:

And you think of how you are the first month of school. You get all of these kids and you know nothing about them. And how do you treat them versus that last month, or even a couple of months in, because even right now I’m thinking, yeah, I’m treating the kids differently now than I did in September; and I respond to them differently now and it’s because I know them better which means I care for them more because I’ve made that bond and that connection. So when you’ve got those connections, yeah, you do start to care more, but when you don’t have that connection with them, then it’s really hard to do your job.

In the interview with Lynne, I asked her what her teaching philosophy is, to which she responded that her “connection with the kids is the most important thing,” since “if you don’t have a connection with the kids in your class, then you will find that you can’t get them to do anything.”

**Depth of student teacher relationships.** Over the course of two focus group sessions, the participants ended up sharing at least one story or example that reflected their notion of the depth of their caring relationships with students. Further stories were told in the interviews. Each example either told of the trajectory of the caring

relationship, or how the caring relationship affected the lives of students outside of the classroom.

May, Rose, and Bea all shared stories of past students visiting them when they were older, in high-school or even as adults, which, they said, was indicative of the depth of the relationships developed with students during their primary education either at Riverview Elementary, or, in Bea's case, while teaching in other areas of British Columbia. Rose, being the youngest and having the least amount of teaching experience, did not yet have students who had left the elementary education years. Instead, Rose shared examples of what parents said to her about the depth of the caring she gave to her students during the three years she had been at the school.

Rose told the group about one student she worked with for two years whose care for Rose ran so deep that she decided to name her cat after her. Rose shared another story during her interview about a student in the Social Development Program who was very reluctant to respond to her invitations to come into the classroom and preferred to sit in the hallway. She felt a void in their connection even after repeated attempts to involve him in activities outside of Gym. During a meeting for the student's Individual Education Program (IEP), Rose recalled his mother turning to her and saying, "Bobby\* just loves you, you know." Rose commented: "I just didn't realize he knew who I was [...] and she said he comes home and talks all about Ms. Rose."

Bea shared a story about running into a student years later in the mall. She recalled hearing "somebody yelling my name at me and I was like, what's this? And there's a young man pushing a buggy...running up to me." The young man told her, "look, look! I have a baby!" Bea said that at the time that she taught him, he was one of her "problem kids" and was a "serious challenge." Seeing him as an adult made her see that "he was this gushy young man with his adorable baby girl, and it mattered to him that he catch me, so that's neat."

May's past student from ten years prior came to visit her just as our first focus group session was beginning. He stopped by to show her his new truck and to tell her that he had recently proposed to his girlfriend. During his time at Riverview Elementary, she supported him as an Aboriginal Teacher during his time in the Social Development

Program after being expelled from other similar programs at other schools in the district. During the focus group's discussion about visits from past students, May shared with the group that, "He's 21 years old and he shows up in his pimped out car for a little visit. And I love him. Every time he gets a new tattoo, he has to show me."

Lynne also had experiences of seeing students who have now graduated from high school. She shared that at a reunion she saw some of her students who were old enough to be parents. She was in awe of the fact that they remembered her and "were excited to share their stories." Later on in the conversation, Lynne shared some of her feelings of frustration and joy in teaching and compared it to being a parent to her own children, stating that:

There are people who have empathy for others, but I think this goes on a deeper level when you're a teacher. Because we give so much of ourselves and we don't necessarily get back what you give. You think of those days you walk out of here and you think 'I'm just exhausted' and it's not that you're physically exhausted, it's just that you gave so much to your class or your group that day, or a specific student. And then you think of those disappointments when those students that you do care for let you down. It's almost like your own children. I'm always saying I have 24 children.

### **Students at Riverview Elementary are viewed as 'our students'.**

When I asked the participants a question about the difference between teaching at an inner-city school compared to a non inner-city school, all of the teachers mentioned a family feeling at Riverview Elementary. All of the teachers in the study mentioned the connection they have to all the students in the school as opposed to being responsible for only the students in their classes. In addition, two of the teachers discussed their comfort with caring for students other than those in their own classrooms without judgment from the other teachers.

Rose agreed with Lynne when she stated that, "you are a part of what's going on in school." Rose stated that there's a shared understanding that we all care for one another's students:

If you walk into May's classroom she knows you're there because there's someone to care for her students as well. Like, you're here. I know when I walk into Julia's classroom, I feel as if you feel that I care for your students [...] it's like, why wouldn't you welcome them in?

Bea stated that at Riverview Elementary "you're part of the family." Bea also commented on how excited teachers are for students in other classrooms. Bea credits this to the teachers' connection to one another. She shared that "the breakthroughs [with students] are partly due to our connection with our colleagues because when that happens, we are not quiet about it." Bea continued on to explain that:

It's like 'do you know what so and so said to me?' Or 'do you know what happened after all this time? [...] So and so said thank you to me' [...] I think that's our reinforcement as colleagues too. It doesn't have to be your child. It could be something somebody else's child did.

May was the least vocal about the idea of "our children" at Riverview Elementary, but made a contribution to the discussion during our first focus group session. May discussed the Ministry of Education's Satisfaction Survey ([www2.gov.bc.ca](http://www2.gov.bc.ca)) and a question concerning student connection to adults within their particular school. She shared with the group that "I know my kids would be comfortable going a number of places with adults in this school. It's just sort of a part of our little community and our little culture here is that we are caring for all of our kids."

Lynne described being part of the larger school community as a feature of inner-city school culture. She shared to the group that she feels "that we are more part of the whole school not just your own individual classroom." She described a situation of a past colleague who was told not to discuss problem behaviour with students who were not in her class. Lynne said that the teacher who was accustomed to the family feel of Riverview Elementary felt surprised by the comment. Lynne also discussed how teachers walk freely into other classrooms without being asked, "Can I help you?" by the classroom teachers. Lynne also shared her feeling of pride and satisfaction when teachers share stories of student success with her. She explained her thinking as, "You think yeah, I taught them. That was me."

**How teachers developed relationships.** The fourth area of conceptualizing and enactment of care was how caring relationships developed. Although overlap between the teachers was evident, each teacher relied on somewhat different methods to further caring relationships.

Rose was the first teacher to mention the process, or the 'how', of building caring relationships, although at first, she struggled to articulate her thoughts. She described the building aspect of care not only as "a process" that "doesn't happen overnight," but also as a type of relationship that is transformative. She said that the relationships that develop slowly are "the ones that have affected who I was as a teacher and taken me out of my own lens." Rose also mentioned the factor of time in creating caring relationships when discussing a challenging student in the Social Development Program named Kiran\*, with whom she worked for two years. She explained that when working with Kiran she had to be patient in his response to her care:

It was me initiating it and keeping that going until, probably two months, maybe six weeks until I starting seeing the responses. Now I see that we were in a caring relationship, it wasn't just me caring about him, it was reciprocal. That took a long time. But I see with a lot of kids, this boy in my class and he just goes, "I miss you," when I walked into the class and he doesn't always show that. So that's him making that caring, okay, so that's someone I'm going to read with today. I think most of the time it's meeting in the middle, and other times I've had it being student initiated and myself initiating.

When Rose talked about her relationship with Kiran developing into a caring one, she again mentioned the concept of flexibility and change, but with this example, how she believes teachers need to be flexible in order to create spaces for students with challenges, rather than students adapting to fit the teacher. She explained this as:

It was interesting because whether it was the listening or the time I took or seeing those behaviours as being a bad child, or a child that wasn't ready for school. I get not being ready for reading, and I get not being ready for your times tables, but to be ready for school, it needs to be a place where school is ready for that



child. I think that, I get not being ready to read because there's a lot of other things before you open a book and decide to read it, but, being ready for school is just like, maybe you need to be ready to change. I think I was ready for Kiran and he was ready to be himself, and I was ready to be there with him.

After I asked the focus group, "How are we meeting the needs of our students?" Rose responded by first giving examples of how she goes about creating a learning environment where students see themselves. She explained her teaching environment as a place where students see their names and pictures around the classroom; she employs play-based learning. She discussed how this allows her to show that "you care about who they are." Rose then discussed the importance of dialogue either as one-to-one conversation or whole group discussions. She explained the connection between play-based learning as "absolutely a necessity and that's where you get to know your kids." Engaging with students during play allowed her to ask "lots of questions and the families start to trust you which is a huge part of these kids lives." The factor of time in building caring relationships was specifically discussed in Rose's interview:

For other students where I had success it was exactly what I said, but in a successful way and where that connection was made very closely. I sometimes find that with the kids with the most challenges, they're coming in late, or maybe picked up late, or maybe there the ones that need the playtime the most. They crave the outdoor play. And so really creating those times and spaces and use those moments, not letting those moments go to waste. For the one student, Kiran, who I will talk about later, it was like, those were the moments that the caring relationship completely solidified on. Like there was no one else around, and that was a time I think he explicitly knew that I cared for him. Those were the times I saw him care for me back because sometimes when they're in the class with 23 other kids, there's no need to check in with me. Maybe I am talking to him about some sort of misbehaviour. At those moments, this child was often picked up late, it was taking advantage of all those moments and not letting it go to waste, to build and get to know and care for that child. Those were definitely ways I go about it.

Rose also raised the idea in the first focus group that students want to be cared for in different ways, and that she is aware of those differences and her response to students differs:

Maybe it's as many students as we have is as many ways that they show they need care because it could go back to *The Languages of Love* that came out a few years ago, but basically it's the theory that everybody has a way that they express love and some are through affection, some are through time, some are through presents and gifts. If you don't address that, if you don't give love the way they need it, then they are never going to feel that comfort with you. And I think that with some of our kids it's that hug all the time. There are so many kids it's a hug, for others it's time, others it's talking, others it's just playing with, others it's getting to do a preferred activity with them. Like I think it's as many ways as there are kids that they show how they need it.

Bea's thoughts on how to develop caring relationships focused on changing her teaching practice to adapt to the needs of students, acceptance from parents, and one-to-one dialogue. She discussed changing her teaching practice as a way of developing relationships with students who "are just different, they have stronger personalities, those challenge the way we thought it through so we have to think a bit more creatively and thoughtfully." She also described a situation in the first focus group when she felt as though her glasses embellished with gems were inappropriate at Riverview Elementary. She shared with the group that:

I felt uncomfortable wearing them to this school. I would get these funny little comments from people and sometimes the parents would be looking. I felt self-conscious. I didn't want to be the 'rich teacher' flaunting her wealth and the glasses added to the whole thing. So when I was able to get new glasses and they didn't have that. It made me feel so much better. We don't have to not be who we are, but we also have to be respectful of the situation a lot of our students and parents are in because the parents are self-conscious too when they come to talk to us.

Bea also discussed adapting her practice to be able to readily respond to the needs of students and reflected on this situation in the second focus group. She explained to the group that the needs of students, at times, take priority over curricular tasks. She told the group that her students:

Teach us to pause too, cause, I'm going to be the first one to cry now, I think often it's those students that need our care in the midst of something else, so we learn to pause and get rid of the agenda 'cause I think the things we do outside the agenda are often more important than the actual curriculum [...] especially for the age we teach. I think often it's you don't realize until afterwards that that's what just happened and you respond and you do what you need to do, and it's like, oh yeah, we didn't need to finish that worksheet, or, do that task. Like we just did, writing that letter, that was not anywhere in the curriculum, but I thought, wow, that's probably one of the most valuable things we did all day.

Bea described connecting to a challenging student through listening and dialogue. She described Theo\* as the student who she cared for most significantly over the duration of her teaching career. Bea retold specific conversations that she had with Theo and how she helped him to mail away for a t-shirt on the back of a cereal box. Bea's retelling of their dialogue was specific. She explained that over time, Theo began to tell her about his life in Africa. Bea stated that:

The other thing about him that made him so endearing is he started talking about Africa and he started to tell stories. And he'd say, "Do you know my dad?" and I would say, "Well, no I don't." "My dad died you know." And I asked him once, "Where did he die?," and he said, "Where lions live." He missed his dad he said. He said he had a "twins brother." And I didn't know if he had a "twins brother," I hadn't heard that story. But, I found out he did and that child died and he had all sorts of stories of things that happened in Africa. It was fascinating. These little bits would come through. They would pop out at the funniest times, mostly when he was supposed to be doing work. We just hung onto them.

Bea also mentioned Theo's ability to clearly communicate his needs in response to the question, "How did you know Theo needed your care?" She explained that, "He

voiced when he was unsure of something or he didn't have something or felt he needed something then it wasn't as difficult to figure out what he needed." Bea also stated that she felt that his ability to articulate "his actual needs and wants. He was really clear about what he felt they were," and this helped her to easily develop a caring relationship with Theo.

Similar to Bea, May discussed changing her outward appearance in order for students to connect with her. She explained that when she first started teaching "I had a picture of what a teacher should look like and dress like," but found that "the kids [were] really standoffish with me." After she started dressing more casually, she began to develop a connection with her students. She explained this to the group as:

I thought wow, who dresses up in their world? And it's not general, I'm sure some of these families go to church and dress up, but for a lot of them it's social workers who come in to investigate the family dressed up and it's people who are not good in their little worlds. Like people they are trying to shy away from, like social workers, and people who might try and take them away from their parents. Once I toned it down, like down to where I am now, the kids really connected with me more then when they did in those first few weeks when I dressed right up and looking pretty smart.

May also expressed how prior knowledge of a recent tragedy caused her to adapt her response to a particular student's challenging behaviour. She told the focus group that she had learned of the recent loss of his mother the week school began "and responded to that." She stated that Peter's\* response to her care was a factor in the development of their caring relationship and shared that, "I think at that time he reached out a little more than he would have than at a different time in his life." In addition to the loss of his mother, Peter also experienced behaviour challenges at school. In her interview, May explained that:

We really developed a very close relationship. I knew his needs were going to be different than his classmates. He was a bit of a rambunctious boy himself. He did his fair share of rolling around and not listening to me. I felt like I needed to deal

with him a little but differently than the other students, like I had to be a little more gentle with him.

May also told the story of working with another student who was in the Social Development Program when she met him. At the time she worked with him, he had been expelled from several other programs in the same district. May mentioned one-to-one time and focusing on his positives as factors in developing a relationship with Andy\*. May shared with the group during our second focus group that:

He was really rambunctious and I think a lot of our relationship was built when I wouldn't focus on that part of him. I was lucky because of my position at the time I could actually have one-on-one time with him so the audience was gone. And I think it was the lack of me pointing out all his deficiencies that most people in his life were pointing out when our relationship really started to grow. We were just focusing on other stuff besides how bad he was basically, which was what everyone else focused on.

Lynne's discussion as to how she formed caring relationships with students centered on giving students praise and dialoguing with challenging students to get to know their interests. She described some examples in the first focus group:

We celebrate their successes. And they may not be getting those sorts of things at home. And it doesn't matter how small that success is. It could be, "Oh yes, you put your name in your paper! That's the only thing you did today. Yes!" But we celebrate. We try and look at the positives whereas a lot of these kids when they come to us all they heard was negative. They've heard "you're no good. You're worthless and you're never going to amount to anything" and when they come here it's, "We're so glad you're here. Welcome. Good to see you today. Come on in."

Lynne's discussion of her of persistence in supporting students continued in her interview when she explained that she encourages students to continue their education into post-secondary. Lynne also explained in her interview how she developed a caring relationship with a vulnerable student who experienced challenging behaviour. Michelle\*

came to Riverview Elementary while in foster care. Lynne explained how Michelle was “shut down completely and didn’t want a relationship with anyone because she was trying to protect her own feelings.” Lynne connected to Michelle by suggesting writing to her Grade one teacher. Lynne recalled that the letter writing “was probably the first time we actually had an interaction [...] so, sometimes she just drew her a picture, and so I took it and I actually was in courses with her grade one teacher so that’s how I was able to give it to her.” Eventually Michelle began to talk to Lynne and share her experiences within her family life.

**Teachers enact care through modeling caring relationships.** All four teachers in the focus group discussion raised the importance of enacting care through modeling care with other teachers, parents, and students. Rose mentioned modeling care when she discussed creating connections with her students. She said that one way of doing this was letting students know that she cares when they are absent from school. She described that when she does this, other students in her class follow suit:

I hear my kids say, “Oh, you’re back! Are you feeling better?” and it’s totally modeled by what you said leading up to that point. Taking the attendance and you say, “Oh I really hope they come in soon”, or “I hope they’re back tomorrow, hope they’re feeling better”. Making those comments, I think that helps build the relationship too.

Bea discussed modeling care in connection to students and parents. She sees her impact in both direct and indirect ways; for example:

The children learn a lot more from us from the things we don’t say, than the things we do say. So a lot of that caring behaviour they perceive on their own so that’s doing things or saying things. A child can pick up that you care about them even if you aren’t actually actively doing things with them too.

Bea also highlighted the idea that families, even beyond immediate members, are impacted by the care she models for their children. She described her surprise that arose from parent responses to her care when a student was changing schools. She

shared with the teachers how “the grandmother threw her arms around me and cried and gave me this big hug and said, ‘I’m so sad he’s leaving. I want him to stay.’” Bea commented: “I hadn’t realized that it made that big of a difference that he was in our class. I think there’s a lot we don’t notice that we do.”

May gave an example of a volunteer in her classroom modeling “lack of care.” She discussed how the volunteer’s “poor communication” and inability to “feel the needs of other people” was lacking: “It was being about to feel me, the students, the other adults in the building. It wasn’t that she didn’t care, it was that she didn’t have the capacity in a teacher-student way.”

When I asked the focus group if teachers care differently at inner-city schools, Lynne explained that students are often surprised by the friendships teachers model with each other at Riverview Elementary. She explained:

The kids are going, “you’re friends? Like, real friends?” They don’t get that. So when they see us doing that I think that we’re showing them through our behaviours, that they will hopefully pick up on those kinds of things. You know, showing that we care and that we take the time to stop.

Similar to Rose, Lynne also discussed acknowledging when students are away to let them know that she cares about their absence. She called this acknowledgement a “psychological upping” by welcoming students directly when they return to school and letting them know “We really missed you yesterday’ whether you did or not.”

## **Finding 2: Teachers’ Articulation of Care Changed Somewhat Between Focus Group and Interview**

In the first focus group session, as well as in each one-to-one interview, I asked each teacher participant, “What does being a caring teacher mean to you?” To some extent, each teacher modified their responses from focus group to interview, perhaps due to the additional time they had to reflect upon the question, or because of the different setting (group versus one-on-one). May’s conceptualization of being a caring teacher changed

the least between the focus group and the interview, while Lynne's responses changed the most. In the focus group, it was evident that the idea of learning about, and relating to, the whole child was influential in the participants' conceptualization.

Rose was the first to respond to the initial focus group question "what does being a caring teacher mean to you?" For her, being a caring teacher meant getting to know the whole child by "looking beyond your idea of curriculum" and instead, "looking into what the child is coming with and how you are going to relate or be responsive." When I asked Rose to elaborate on "what they are coming with," she responded that "they live in a world and you need to know about it, you need to learn about, you need to try to understand, you need to take that in with you." During Rose's interview, she added the concept of acceptance and space to her conceptualization of care:

I think that being a caring teacher is accepting, is taking on a child for everything that they are and finding a place for them in your heart, in your classroom, in your program. A caring teacher is more about what that child brings with them, more than what that child can do. I think it's a much more holistic approach, that these people are coming into your classroom, all 24 of them, and a caring teacher cares to get to know the day you're having, the family life, the experiences you've had, and all of that. I think that that's what being a caring teacher is. Going past, 'you can't do this' and looking into the family, the background, the thoughts, the fears.

In the focus group session Bea was also concerned about relating to the whole child as "living little beings."

We're not in some kind of factory where we're putting in facts and having them spew out afterwards. So these are living, breathing, little beings that come with a background and come with parents and come with relatives and come with siblings and all those things.

In her interview, Bea added the qualities of being consistent and trustworthy, providing clear expectations and listening to and honouring their stories:



I think it means being consistent, because a lot of these kids don't have consistency. It means being trustworthy; they know what the rules are and doing what I say I will do. And giving them clear expectations so that they can weigh in and balance what they are about to do and they'll know what will happen. I think it's important to listen to them because their stories are different from anything I know. I find that frustrating because we don't have as much time to sit and listen. These kids, this school is so neat because they come from so many different places and so many different cultures and faith backgrounds and everything that I think it's really neat to honour that and teach the whole child not just the academic.

While May did not use the term "whole child", when describing the caring teacher in the focus group, she showed an appreciation of the holistic needs of the child through her comments about the importance of making students feel appreciated, confident, and accepted. Later, when I asked May the same question in an interview, she clarified these comments by stating:

I think that being a caring teacher is guiding them in the right direction and highlighting their strengths for areas where they shine. And sometimes even having to search for those areas to find things that you really like about them and making them know that you see that part of them, that really positive part. I think that's really the basis of my relationships with my students. I do tend to do well with the more difficult boys especially, that have had trouble in their other classes. We tend to really click and part of that is I really try to find those strengths and to let these children know that I see them so they feel good about themselves. I don't know if like them is the right word, but that I see the good in them.

Lynne's response to the caring teacher question changed the most from the focus group discussion to the interview response. During the focus group, Lynne agreed with Rose's response about attending to the needs of the whole child:

I agree with you because with children, I've always felt it's really important to get to know the whole child. To get to know their background, their personality, what

excites them, what makes them upset. All those kinds of things because to me how are you going to be able to teach that child if you don't really know them? The child that sits in the back and is quiet and doesn't participate in anything has a reason.

In the same conversation about what being a caring teacher means, Lynne added a comment about reciprocity of care when she posed the question: "if you don't care, why should they?" Later, in the interview, however, Lynne's attention moved away focusing on the whole child and their needs, to her own role as a teacher who intervenes in their lives and who demonstrates patience and perseverance. The metaphors were of "battling" the children, herself as a "saviour" and "martyr."

How many times do you go home and go, "Oh my god, today was not a good day"? And the frustration is there, but it means I'm going to come back the next day and I'm going to deal with it. When I have children who are struggling with following rules or their social skills are non-existent, and I know I'm going to have to battle them the next day, it doesn't mean that I'm giving up on them. You've got those kids, who are, somebody out there has given up on them, but I don't want to. Because as far as I'm concerned, you're in this cycle of poverty being at an inner city school and there's no future career for you, I'm going to tell you you're still good. I'm going to tell you you're capable of doing that. I'll tell these kids, "You're capable of going to university, getting yourself a degree, and getting yourself a good job. Not just sitting around on welfare and going to 7-11 to get a pack of smokes," because that's what you do. It's that matter of treating each child like they're important and letting them know that I feel they're important. No matter how much they struggle and how much they're going to battle the system and it's the...to me I know I'm a caring teacher because I wouldn't be agonizing at night thinking, "How am I going to get a child to do this. How am I going to support that child? How am I going to get him subtracting? How many weeks is it going to take me? If I didn't care, I would say, 'Yeah, whatever, he can't do it,' check it off the mark. Can't do it and let it go. But as much as I say I'm not going to do that, I'm not going to focus on that, I'm not going to kill myself over these

kids, I still do. Every single year. I always say it took me five years to figure out that I can't save them all, but I'm sure as hell going to try.

### **Finding 3: Challenges to Care: Lack of Understanding Cultural Backgrounds of Students and Families**

Three out of the four teacher participants (Bea, Rose, May) were concerned about language and culture in relation to their ability to care for students and their families. Both language and culture were raised as barriers to caring for students and parents; affecting the fluidity of rapport between teacher and parent, requiring additional time for student learning and connections, and a source of stress for students.

**Breakdown in communication due to language barriers.** Bea spoke the most in-depth about the language barriers between her and her students as well as their families.

We have so many languages in this school. I love teaching at this school because it is so multicultural. It's incredibly rich, but it's a lot. I had a mother come to me today and say, "So what are the black eyes he needed to bring?" I said, "Black eyes?" and then she saw the snowmen jugs and she said "those are the black eyes!" and I said "what black eyes?" and she said, "My son said he needed to bring black eyes," and we opened up his book and it said, "Take time to notice sounds in your home." Or something like that, "What sounds do you hear in your home?" It had nothing to do with any of those words. She was ELL and she couldn't figure it out, and that was the best she was doing, and so we are facing that all the time.

In her interview, Bea added, "With the language differences it means the rapport between parents and teacher isn't always as fluid as you would like it to be." She also explained the stress that students experience in the classroom due to language differences. She said that at times, students "just don't understand what's going on and it's scary, so for them, that's difficult." She also discussed the lack of services such as Speech and Language supports which could help to eliminate some of the challenges

when working with students who are English Language Learners facing speech issues. She stated that, “We only get the speech therapist once a week now, if that.” She explained that this is an issue “because sometimes what you think is a language issue is a speech issue and if she was here more regularly, she could help to figure that out.”

May discussed English Language Learner students in response to the question “What educational barriers do your students face?” She stated that:

A lot of our students at our school are English Language Learners to a certain degree. Some more so than others and that’s another huge barrier to their education. There’s so much more involved in teaching a child who doesn’t have English as their first language. The other barriers, not so much with my little guys, but when I taught the older grades, like just having that support at home if you were to send, like sometimes it’s hard to even get a permission slip signed so to get, you know, assistance at home with their homework or anything that’s sent home.

May’s response reflected the factor of time in creating caring relationships and that the restriction of time to provide for student needs.

Rose discussed the challenges of working with a language barrier briefly in her interview in her response to the question, “Do you feel as though you are able to provide all that you want for your students?” After discussing the challenges that her students have for getting their basic needs met such as nutritious food and sleep, she mentioned the language challenge: “I think it can be language, ELL, it can definitely be a challenge.”

Lynne, on the other hand, did not refer to language as a challenge to care or in her conceptualization of a caring teacher.

**The challenge of cultural differences.** Two out of the four teachers, Bea and Rose, raised the issue of cultural differences as a challenge to care, and/or felt challenged to understand care in the homes of their students. Bea and Rose discussed their perceptions of life at home for their students. Both teachers were engaged in a

conversation about care and cultural understanding in the first focus group and discussed culture again in their separate interviews. Rose first mentioned cultural difference when she explained a situation where she had to convince a student to learn how to read. Her student, Kiran, believed that he did not have to learn how to read. During this discussion, Rose also shared her lack of knowledge of the family background in connection to their value for education.

Rose: With Kiran, he would often say to me, "I don't have to learn to read," and when I said, "Why" he said, "Because you don't need to read in Africa".

Bea: Interesting.

Rose: Yeah, and so I asked him, "How are you going to get to Africa?" He goes, "Well, my uncle would book me a flight" and I'm like "Well, you're going to need money to get on that flight. And you're going to need a job. You're going to have to learn to need a job." It really was a process. There was no purpose. He saw no purpose. Maybe his mother can't read, maybe many people in his family can't, he doesn't know very many of them, but that was quite an honest answer from a 6 year old. But it really took me back to like, there's nobody in his life that had to use reading as a way to get something they want. So I thought that was really taking it back a step. And, okay, "Why do you need to learn to read Kiran?"

In her interview, Rose again discussed her confusion and challenge to understand Kiran's background and touched upon the seeming lack of care within his home. She explained how she researched Kiran's name to see if it matched a story he told her about being named after an African president. Rose explained this finding in her interview and stated that:

Word for word, he's actually named after the president. It just shook every... I just had a completely different understanding of where he came from. The thing that made me feel a little bit better, because there were always worries about what was going on at home and the challenges there, but this particular president was a rebel for the good side and he, he was a hero, he was an idol, and to know his mom named him after a hero for her, it made me feel better. Maybe by our

Canadian values I didn't see him as being as cared for as I would have cared for him, but definitely in their own culture, she cared. That helped relieve some of the sadness.

Similar to Rose, Bea discussed a lack of care from within the home when she discussed her student named Theo, who was a refugee from Somalia. She first described Theo as a little "waif." She said that his clothes "hadn't been changed in a week or two" and that his socks were "stiff with dirt" and knew that he needed her care. Bea's understanding of Theo's mother illustrated empathy when she stated that:

We knew, we knew that he wasn't getting as much mothering and caring at home as one would expect for a North American family. I think in her experience, she was doing the best she possibly could in a strange country with strange language and customs. She didn't know what to do in school here either. Her and I had a really good rapport. She joked and teased with me quite a bit with the limited language she had. She hugged me every time she saw me. So he knew that she and I had a good relationship too and I think that made bridging for him a lot easier too.

Bea also discussed how Theo had a difficult time adjusting to living in Canada and felt ashamed of the colour of his skin. She explained a situation when Theo was trying to scratch his skin off and told her that, "I need to get it off. It has to come off." And I said, "What's come off?" and he said, "All this black. I don't want to be black. Black is bad." She described this situation to be "tragic." She explained how her response to Theo's shame was "buying every single book I could find that had children with different ethnicities on it and we talked about colours and how beautiful our skin was and how lovely we all looked." After several months, Theo stopped scratching his skin.

#### **Finding 4: The Challenge of Engaging and Collaborating with Parents**

The fourth finding in this study discusses a disconnect between the goals and values of the teacher participants and that of their students' parents. This created an "us versus

them” dynamic between teachers and parents. Although May noted in the first focus group that there are “those parents who want to partner to raise a child,” the teachers generally felt that there they were at odds with the parents.

Bea had the most to discuss on the topic of parents and a lack of connection towards their child’s education. When I asked the focus group how teaching at an inner-city school was different from a non inner-city school, she responded that less parental input meant that she could put her focus “more on the child.” She explained that at non inner-city schools, “the parents tend to be a bit more in your face” which was a drawback considering “your energies are divided between what the parent wants and what you want.” Bea later recalled when she was asked in her interview for a teaching position at Riverview Elementary if she was “comfortable with the language of poverty.” She explained this to be:

The children and the parents are going to come with different language than what a child in a middle class family would need. So the police are going to be cops and there are going to be other things too, and there’s going to be that kind of language, a little bit rougher around the edges terminology used for some things and it’s important to be respectful of the parents and not be judgmental, but also give the children expectations of something else when they are here. They will speak another language when they are here. They will speak school language here, but to be very aware that you don’t put the parents down too when they come and speak to you. You are understanding when they talk.

Bea shared a story with the focus group about a parent who did not support his child attending school. When Bea confronted the father about his daughter’s absence he told her that, “she needs to know how to spell her name and add one and one! I’ll take care of the rest.” Bea told the group that several years after he passed away and that “she was a teenager without her father to look after her. So his whole premise that she doesn’t need education because I’ll make sure she gets taken care of was totally swept away.” During her interview, she also stated that some of her students can be a challenge if “home is super negative and the adults in their lives are negative and scary

so they just assume I'm going to be as well and the parents assume those things as well so they come with fear rather than any confidence."

May shared a similar idea of the divide between teachers and parents, but offered an explanation for the distancing. When I asked the group, "What barriers to education do our students face?," May responded that when the group was talking about parents who have an "I hate school. I hate teachers" attitude could be due to historical events. She stated that:

I know I have studied a lot about the history of education in Canada, especially with an Aboriginal lens, and that's generational fear of schools, because we had the residential schools and all the horrors that happened there, and they've been passed on. So a lot of these kids, who really have no reason to hate school, just hate school because it's a terrifying place because they've heard that from their parents and grandparents. It's just been passed on generationally. So I think a big barrier is just changing those attitudes and those ideas. There's an "us and them" that I get from a lot of parents here, "oh, you do this, I do this. If you're so smart why don't you do this?" and that sort of thing, instead of seeing us as a team raising the same child. I think that's a huge one. Those attitudes that come from the home.

In May's interview, she referred back to her thoughts on parents with negative experiences of school, and stated that she is challenged by parents who are "anticipating the negative" in their relationship. May said that she has to work towards creating school as a safe environment for her students "when parents are indicating otherwise."

Rose had fewer thoughts on the topic of parents, but shared in her interview that a barrier to education for her students was having "sufficient role models", alluding to parents. She explained that many of her students also are not on schedules or have routines such as a bedtime when they are at home. Many of her students do not see a reason for getting an education since "their family, who they love and care about, they don't have an education. They're in this world and they see them as being happy and they didn't need it. That can be a bit of a stumbling block for some kids."



Lynne shared similar experiences and perceptions of parents as the other members of the teacher group. She shared her experience with one parent during the first focus group. She described the parent as not wanting “to have anything to do with us.” She explained the parent’s reluctance to be on school property was due to “the whole fear of that professional thing.” Lynne continued to say that, “There was always that negative...she said ‘I hate teachers, I hate schools, they were always just so stuffy.’ So obviously her background was that.”

## **Finding 5: Teachers Need to Feel Cared for in Order to Care**

The fifth finding of this study was the need for teachers to feel cared for themselves in order to care for others. Two teacher participants, Rose and Lynne, discussed this topic during the first and second focus groups. Although all teacher participants discussed care in connection to their conceptualization of what it means to be a caring teacher, Rose and Lynne made a connection between feeling care from others in order to care for their students.

Rose was the first teacher to discuss connection and success. She told the group that when she thought of the times in her life when she was successful and found joy, it was in a “situation when I felt cared for.” She explained that she experienced this need for care as a student in university or when making connections with other teachers at Riverview Elementary. Rose found that when she was an itinerant teacher in the past, making connections with other adults at Riverview was challenging. She shared with the group that she felt less cared for in her work environment when working half time at Riverview Elementary. Her schedule at the time meant travelling to another school site on her lunch break. She also shared with the group that she understands how much she relies “on relationships for my happiness, so I feel that it comes right back into your classroom and teaching who you are.” In her interview, when Rose discussed the sources of challenges within teaching, she mentioned specifically not feeling cared for or supported by the school system and how this affects her care for her students. She stated that:

When I don't feel cared for in a community, then that's where I start to see the system falling apart for me. If I don't feel cared for, then I don't feel that I can care for my students in a way that I know that they need. It's hard to stay strong.

Lynne agreed with Rose's thoughts on feeling cared-for as a teacher. Lynne stated that when there is no connection to others in her work environment, she felt like a "cog in a wheel" she does not "put out the effort that somebody else might put out."

## **Finding 6: Challenges to Provide for Student Needs due to Issues Within the Education System**

Each of the teachers mentioned the "school system" as a source of challenge for caring for students. The "school system" was discussed as a generalized term, which included the policies and procedures teachers must adhere to either at the provincial and/or district level. Rose stated that, "The school system is set up for failure for a lot of these kids" and that she felt "beat down by the system." Rose also shared that she thought her challenges to teach and provide for students were all caused by the school system as opposed to the students or Riverview Elementary. May said that between the school system and the school itself, "the shortcomings are definitely there as far as staffing and that sort of funding." In her interview, Lynne bluntly stated, "The school system sucks," although the challenges she faced came from a combination of sources.

Three themes emerged regarding the challenges posed by the school system: student designations, lack of student support, and lack of funding for classroom materials.

**Student assessments and designations.** Three of the four teachers discussed the challenges associated with assessments and designations for students in order to gain educational supports. The designations are determined by the Ministry of Education and include learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, intensive behaviour, and intellectual disability to name some (www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/special\_ed\_policy\_manual.pdf). Although the discussion around student assessment and designations was closely linked to student

support, the two differed slightly in that there were specific frustrations with the accuracy of student assessments and the process of obtaining designations for students.

One theme that emerged was that the student assessments do not clearly represent the behaviours and learning challenges observed by teachers. Bea stated in the first focus group her feelings of sadness in connection to labeling students in order to acquire additional support for them. She also stated that:

I hate the fact that we have to work hard to create a label for a child that we really feel needs the help, when all we need is another adult in the room to help them when they're getting frustrated. They don't need to have a whole bunch of reports written on them. I think the other thing we struggle with is even the reports we write on them are not fair. The questions that we have to ask and answer about these children are not valid for the situations and they don't really talk to the problems.

Rose shared similar feelings and said that student assessments were challenging for her because they also fail to look at "the positive." Rose continued on to say that, "I don't think it captures the child in any way." Rose shared that when attempting to obtain support for students through the designation process she felt as though there was a "disconnect with the ministry, the schools, and the process, like when you do make reports, or trying to get help for a student, they don't necessarily look at all the same things we look at."

Lynne explained her frustration with the assessment process in terms of the length of time it takes to acquire psycho-educational testing. She said that even though a problem may occur in September, "we're now in February, and they're saying, okay, you're up next." Lynne also commented that teaching in an area with high transiency adds to the wait for students to receive testing. She said that students, "can bounce from school to school, so then we have to start again. It takes a while."

**Lack of student support.** Obtaining the appropriate support for students was an area that teachers described as a challenge. Rose expressed her frustration in

the focus group that students with issues such as anxiety and sensitivity miss out on their educational needs because they do not qualify for extra teacher support:

The hardest part in my class, is, I don't think you would call it mental illness, it's not like that, but the mental wellness, and that doesn't get any support. Whether it's the anxiety, the over-sensitivity, the constant need for teacher support. That's what I find is just... it's...and if that's what that child needs to feel cared for, is that extra person to sit there...and with that they can do it, but then what happens to the six or seven others while I'm there with that one? That becomes the most challenging part. I can deal with the kids in my class that are super frustrated. I can deal with that. It's the tears, the anxiety, the over-sensitivity that I find very challenging.

In her interview, Rose discussed the confusion around the administrative side of obtaining student support and attempting to connect with itinerant professionals who work at Riverview Elementary. She felt as though she struggles to provide for her students because she was unsure of formalities such as paperwork. She explained this as "what form do I fill out, and who am I talking to? Who's speech and language? They show up once a month, if that." She found the process of knowing who to contact and when "very overwhelming." She also stated that she "didn't realize how much paperwork there was. It's almost like you need to know which questions to ask before you ask them."

In her interview, Bea's perspective of the source of challenges focused more on funding for prenatal care, parenting, and early years as a proactive approach for student success and to raise the confidence of parents. Bea thought that the school system should provide more funding when "the problems are still there, then I think the school systems should be piling lots of help into Kindergarten, grade one, two, and three." She also shared that funding during the primary grades should be provided given that "I don't think they would need it as much in the older grades if they were really, really helped." During the focus group, Bea's discussion of student support was much more directed towards gaining support for students with designated and undesignated needs, as well as support in the form of speech therapy and counselling. She stated that

schools “should have a counsellor, every inner-city school should have two. It’s crazy, we have kids that have problems and they need someone to talk to that’s not us.”

May’s thoughts on student support focused on the loss of non-enrolling staff, which she described as “cut-back drastically” and “restructured in ways that might not be as effective as it was before.” She found this a challenge given that, “Fulfilling my student needs has become more difficult with the lack of non-teaching staff being available to me. Issues in the past where I may have had someone to support me on just isn’t there.”

Lynne expressed numerous problems regarding the lack of student support. These included working with students with undesignated needs, restrictions to acquiring student designations that provide extra support, integration of students with special needs into the mainstream classroom, teacher exhaustion due to a lack of support, and loss of student support. Lynne stated that the school system is continually, “taking away our support. There’s no support there.” Lynne expressed a self-contradictory viewpoint on the issue of student failure. At first, she discussed a lack of student support as the cause of students dropping out of school. Later in the discussion, she suggested that failure was the fault of the student and was caused by a lack of responsibility. In her interview, Lynne stated that students who are not receiving necessary supports are “falling further and further behind academically” and are simply “shoved into the next grade.” She explained that these students “stumble through school” only to end up dropping out of high school. She continued to state that:

They are going to be able to amount to anything because nobody helped them way back when. There’s no accountability, that’s the word I’m looking for. And I think that’s made a big difference too, and the funding. Money. But there is no accountability anymore. I can’t say to a child anymore, ‘This is your learning, you need to work. This is your job. You need to know how to do this,’ because of the fact that it’s, “Oh well, shove them on to the next grade.” There’s no fear of failure.

**Lack of funding for classroom materials.** The third challenge within the education system was the cost to teachers for classroom materials. Surprisingly, only one of the teachers, Rose, mentioned lack of funding for classroom materials as a barrier to providing for student needs.

Rose expressed conflicting thoughts on the notion of spending her personal money for classroom materials. During her interview, she stated that “children learn best through hands-on play” however, Rose found this to be problematic given that it takes her time and her money to purchase materials to create experiential learning for students. Rose stated that, “Developmentally appropriate practices from K to [Grade] two cost a lot of money and that’s a huge barrier because there’s no extra funding for that.” Rose explained that she felt conflicted about spending money on her classroom resources because, at times, she felt guilty purchasing items that she should not be responsible for. At the same time, she found that purchasing items allowed her to feel “happy” and for her “kids to be happy.” Rose explained that hands-on learning uses materials that change, are engaging, and creates the right “learning environment,” however, she needs to “put the money out there” in order for the environment to come together the way she sees fit.

## **Finding 7: Unintended Findings**

Two unintended findings emerged from the data: that of the “hero” in caring relationships, and differential purposes for creating caring relationships. These themes emerged even though specific questions were not asked in relation to these issues.

**The role of “the hero” in caring relationships.** The term “hero” was discussed by three teachers throughout the study. Rose, May, and Lynne all conceptualized their role with students, in some capacity, as “hero” or “non-hero.” The understandings of the hero role varied greatly from teacher to teacher, including wanting to be remembered as a hero, letting go of trying to be a hero, and observations of the hero mindset in caring relationships.

The term “hero” was first used by May in her interview when she described the mindset of some teachers who desire to be recognized for their work with underprivileged children. When I asked May about finding resources for her students aside from herself she stated that:

It’s nice to be able to give of yourself, but, I’m just going to say it, for some teachers it’s really about ego. And the giving is about, “Oh, look at me, I just saved the situation and I’m going to save the next.” For me I like to believe that was never a motivation. But just maybe it’s not really about you. There’s other places these children can have these needs met.

May discussed the idea of the “hero” again in the focus group. She agreed with Rose’s conceptualization that the role of the “hero” in caring relationships is a connection to the individual’s ego more than helping a student in need. May described how her caring relationship with Peter “snuck up” on her and explained to the group that “it was never about [her].” May continued on to give an example to the focus group:

I have heard stories like, “Oh I did this and I did that and I saved this child and pulled him out of the gutter...” I’ve actually had a woman at my college who claimed that about me, but I’ve also seen that at this level where it is about that child’s needs and not the perceived needs of the adult. That to me is true care, and it’s not necessarily the stories that you share with your colleagues, it’s something a little deeper and more real than that. And it’s always nice to share your stories and successes, but yeah, your ego needs to be out of it to be truly caring for that child.

Rose viewed the role of the hero in caring relationships as selfish when she described her awareness of wanting to be a hero for her student Kiran. She described the desire to be a hero also as wanting to have a connection to him, but realized that her motivation for connection was selfish. Rose shared with the focus group that she:

Wanted to come in and save him. I wanted to be the hero for him. I wanted him to learn how to read. I wanted this life-long memory and it was all about me. He really taught me it’s not about you. Get out of that headspace.

She explained that, in her caring relationship with Kiran, she realized that it could not be about her conceptualization of care that would create the relationship, but rather, his idea of caring. She explained this realization as:

I was perceiving Kiran to need something different than what he was telling me, so he really showed me how to step out of that headspace and act my philosophy out a little bit more. I'm not a hero. Who am I? I'm just someone who wants to care and do what I can for him in what he needs, so that's what he taught me.

Lynne responded to Rose's insights by stating that she would "become a hero" to Kiran, "because you'll become a hero in the way he perceives you." Lynne also stated that teachers become significant figures for their students "whether you mean to or not." Lynne also stated in her interview that she does attempt to "save" her students, although she "can't save them all." Lynne, on the other hand (as discussed earlier in the second finding) did see herself as somewhat of a martyr and a saviour to the students at Riverview. These metaphors are akin to the role of the hero, as the teacher (Lynne) is attempting to save the students from their life of poverty, low paying jobs, or depending on income assistance.

**Differential purposes of caring.** All of the teachers in this study discussed their conceptualized purposes of care although it was not a direct question asked at any point during the data collection. All of the teachers inadvertently mentioned a purpose for their care when they discussed what it means to be a caring teacher or when they described their guiding principles as an educator. Three of the teachers (Rose, Bea, May) wanted to care in order to support the individual student. The fourth teacher (Lynne) viewed cohesion and compliance within the class as a major purpose for creating a caring relationship with students.

Rose's understanding of being a caring teacher directly supported learning and being invested in the individual child. She stated that her conceptualization of a caring teacher involves learning about "more than what the child can do" and is focused on the individual. She explained that a caring teacher wants to get to know "the family, the



background, the thoughts, the fears.” Rose also stated that caring was about “listening and being present” for her students in order to make connections. She also discussed the need for her students to find belonging in the classroom.

Similar to Rose, Bea explained her understanding of being a caring teacher in a way that supported getting to know and appreciate the individual child. She stated that a caring teacher listens because “their stories are different from anything I know. I find that frustrating because we don’t have as much time to sit and listen.” She explained that the lack of time to listen to her students’ stories was an area of frustration and a barrier to getting to know her students.

Many of May’s comments focused on highlighting the positives in her students. May’s experience with creating caring relationships with her students focused on praising students to develop their self-esteem and “feelings of security in the classroom, especially feelings of belonging in the classroom community.”

In the focus group, Lynne built on the comments of the others who stressed the importance of connecting and getting to know students. In the interview, however, she noted that the motivation behind getting to know her students was so they will complete their work for her.

If you don’t have a connection with the kids in your class then you will find that you can’t get them to do anything. I don’t know if that makes sense to you, but you find that the more they like you, or that you like them, if that feeling is reciprocated they are more than willing to bend over backwards and do things for you.

During the focus group, Lynne also stated that caring for a class meant that, “it’s a matter of trying to become a cohesive group.” She expressed her frustration when the cohesion of the class is disrupted by a student with challenges, “especially if you have created that cohesive group and then somebody comes in and it changes [...] all of a sudden that one little thorn that comes out and you’re trying to get them into the rest of the group.”

## **Finding 8: Big Picture Findings**

**Teachers' understanding of the ethic of care.** Although all four teachers were able to quickly articulate their conception of what it meant to be a caring teacher, only one, Rose, was familiar with the ethic of care in schools and the work of Noddings and other scholars who write in this field. While Rose drew on Noddings' theories and writings when articulating her understanding of care and how she enacted it with her students, Bea, May and Lynne relied on their experiences as a classroom teacher in their conceptualization and articulation of care.

Each teacher responded quickly to the question, "What does being a caring teacher mean to you?" when asked in the focus group and in the interviews. May noted "Wow, that's a big question"; however, each teacher was able to quickly articulate a response.

Rose's knowledge of care ethics allowed her to branch the conversation into new areas during the focus group. At one point during the second focus group, Rose specifically mentioned an article by Noddings concerning the expressed and perceived needs of students. She stated that:

I was printing off an article for school here, and Julia saw me printing it off and this course has been really interesting because it's been an ethics of care course and it's funny to be doing this alongside, and Julia's like, "I want a copy of that," and of course we came back together to talk about the article, because that's fun for us [laughs] and the article was all based on perceived needs versus actual needs. And I thought, "So true," and I have an even deeper understanding, of course Nel Noddings, but I was perceiving Kiran to need something different than what he was telling me.

Rose's noted that her participation in this study acted as a reflective process, helping her to connect her previous knowledge of care ethics with her role as a primary teacher.

**Teachers' emotional connection to students.** The teacher participants were emotional when explaining their stories of caring for a student. Each

demonstrated an emotional connectedness to their students' lives. All of the teachers in the study, at some point, used the term "mother" to describe their role either as a teacher or in their stories of caring when discussing how the student perceived them. Each teacher was forewarned that I would be asking her to share a story about significantly caring for a student as a part of her interview. Three out the four teachers got teary-eyed or cried, and immediately knew the student they wanted to discuss. During the interviews, two of the teachers cried when telling their stories about caring significantly for a student.

When May described her relationship with Peter in her interview, she explained that his mother had recently passed away. She told, in detail, his experience when Mother's Day came up the next year. Although May had discussed Mother's Day beforehand with Peter in private, she observed his discomfort making a Mother's Day gift. May stated:

One thing that was really hard, and I will never forget it, and I hate Mother's Day to this day for this reason, was in that first year we make presents for our mothers on Mother's Day and it was just so hard watching him go through that process.

May then described Mother's Day one year later when she went to check in on him. She said:

I approached him about a week before Mother's Day and I said, "Hey man, like, Mother's Day is coming up," and before I could ask him if he even wanted to do the activity or didn't want to, he just looked at me and said, "Yeah, and you're a mother," and I just knew that he thought of me and things like that. It was just really endearing.

Bea also described being a mother as an attribute of teaching, and that this was part of what drew her into the teaching profession. During her interview, I asked Bea about her teaching philosophy. Bea explained how she enjoys "teaching primary, so I do a fair amount of mothering. Even before I had kids, I did a fair amount of mothering." Bea cried throughout sharing her story of caring for a student named Theo, and during our

focus group sessions. She shared that, to calm Theo, who was experiencing difficulties settling down in the classroom, she would “scoop him up and put him on my lap, and I would read the story to everyone else with him on my lap and he would be still for a while because he could see the book and just be calm for a while.”

The motherly connection was how Lynne also described her connection to her student, Michelle. In her interview, Lynne shared her story of caring for Michelle, which, at times, brought her to tears. She said that during her first year of being Michelle’s teacher, she “became the mother she never had.” She also explained how:

It was so hard sometimes for me to hold that straight face and keep that professionalism when she would crawl into my lap and say, “I wish you were my mom,” because I knew her foster mom was incredible but she didn’t have the type of connection that I had created.

Lynne also shared that she thought about adopting Michelle and her sister when they were in foster care. After Lynne found out that Michelle and her sister had been adopted, she said, “One of the hardest things in the world was to let her go.” She continued to explain how that the last day of school was the hardest for her: “I’ve never cried so much in my life for a child as I did that last day of school. Her parents came to get her. Cause I know I’m emotional, but I outright sobbed as I held her because they don’t live here. I knew I would never see her again.”

It is clear from the findings that the primary teachers in this study had not only a deep emotional connection to their some of their neediest students, but that they perceived teaching as mothering the children in their classrooms. The teachers described their connection to one, or all, of their students using the term “mother,” although surprisingly, none of the teachers directly connected being motherly to their description of being a caring teacher.

## Conclusion

A significant theme in this study is that most of the teachers' conceptualizations and acts of care align with several of the processes involved in the ethic of care. More specifically, the teachers thought of care as being in relation with their students. In addition, care is enacted through dialogue and listening to gain an understanding of the lives of students. The teachers read a short article by Noddings (2012), called "The Language of Care Ethics," during the first focus group, which helped to develop a common understanding of the term "care". The shared experiences of enacting care demonstrated how the teachers perceive connection to students as an essential step to teaching and delivering curriculum in a meaningful manner. The teachers also stated or suggested that a holistic approach to understanding students also allowed them to respond appropriately to their students' needs. These examples of enacting care alleviated my concern that the teachers may simply be restating what they read in Noddings' article. The teachers in this study may not have directly linked their actions and thoughts regarding caring relationships to the ethic of care, however, it was easy to make these connections when analyzing the data. The findings also point to the idea that the processes involved in ethical caring are often simultaneous and depend upon the individual needs of students.

## Chapter Five: Discussion of the Findings

The original questions I aimed to uncover in this study were, “How do primary teachers conceptualize and enact caring relationships at an inner-city elementary school?” and “What are the challenges teachers face when caring for this population?” I was intrigued to pursue these questions after working at an inner-city school for three years.

From the findings that surfaced from this study, I found that the ways in which teachers conceptualized caring differed from the enactment of their care that was shared through their experiences. When I asked teachers what being a caring teacher means to each of them, the answers from the participants were mainly concerned with their role as a teacher who aims to know and understand the background of their students. Rose was the only teacher to mention the terms “relate” and “responsive” in her definition of being a caring teacher. The teachers in the study enacted care through listening to their students, engaging in dialogue, and adapting their practice to suit student needs. The teacher participants shared a sense of frustration when they faced challenges to engage in one-to-one time with all of their students due to barriers presented within the school system. Many of these barriers connected to cutbacks within the system such as reduced hours for education assistants, counsellors, and Learning Support Teachers.

Nel Noddings (2005a) states that an ethic of care is “relational” as well as “needs based.” Noddings’ conceptualization of caring relationships provided a framework for unpacking the dynamics of care in the school selected for my study. This study helped to develop an understanding of how primary teachers understand and experience caring relationships with their students as well as the barriers teachers face when attempting to meet students’ needs in at an inner-city school setting. While the results from this study cannot be generalized to the wider population of all primary teachers who work in inner-city settings, the findings do provide some insight into how some teachers of young children conceptualize and enact care and the special challenges they face in working

with students who face issues of poverty, displacement, language and culture differences, and marginalization.

Although the teacher participants used somewhat different vocabulary to describe caring, their understandings of what it meant to be a caring teacher were similar. All four of the teachers believed that demonstrating care to students was integral to their practice. They also felt that developing caring relationships with students was an essential process that preceded curriculum delivery. Each teacher also discussed how they developed caring relationships with their students, with the most detailed descriptions coming through the stories they told of their interactions and experiences with particular students. Some of the key ideas they shared related to the issues of time, dialogue, listening, flexibility in teaching practices, and adapting work attire.

The teacher participants generally conceptualized and enacted care in accordance with the literature. Noddings (1984, 2002, 2005a, 2005b, 2012) discusses extensively the importance of dialogue as being at the core of caring relationships, as well as listening to, and responding to, the expressed needs of individuals. Each of the teachers talked about care as honouring individual students. They also mentioned the importance of understanding the whole child. This meant gaining insight into the experiences and home lives of the students, or what one participant stated as “taking on a child for everything that they are.”

I have selected four findings to discuss further in relation to my research questions and the wider literature:

- The importance of building relationships with students.
- How teachers developed relationships.
- The challenge of engaging and collaborating with parents.
- Challenges in providing for student needs due to issues from within the school system.

## The Importance of Building Relationships With Students

All of the participants stated that developing caring relationships was foundational to entering into a teaching relationship with their students; indeed the importance of building relationships was the most prominent finding. This conceptualization supports Noddings' (2005b) view of caring "being in relation" (p. 17). More specifically, Noddings (1984) states that, "Caring is largely responsive and receptive" (p. 19).

All four teachers felt that delivering the curriculum came second to establishing relationships of trust, knowing the background of students, and/or building the confidence of their students. The teachers' understanding of care was discussed in terms of their connection to their students and not the curriculum, or "who" they teach as opposed to "what" they teach. Noddings (1984) addresses this topic when she states that, "The student is infinitely more important than the subject" (p. 20). This is not to say that the teachers did not feel pressure to cover the curriculum within the time constraints of the school year; however, they explained how developing relationships with students was a foundation for academic learning to follow in a meaningful manner. Noddings (2005b) also suggests that gaining an understanding of students is by no means considered "anti-intellectual," since "part of what we receive from others is a sense of their interests, including intellectual passions" (p. 19).

In the first focus group, the teachers discussed the hypothetical problems associated with removing caring relationships from learning. Lynne explained that, "If they don't think you care, they are never going to learn," providing a clear example of this interconnectedness between responding to the needs of children and their learning within the primary classroom. Rose also stated that, "I don't think there's any teaching that goes on before you have a relationship with those kids." Noddings (2005b) asserts that children "listen to people who matter to them and to whom they matter" (p. 36). Therefore, for educators to be able to teach their students, a level of trust needs to be established first and foremost.

Although May did not specifically use the term "relationship" to describe her intent during the beginning of the school year, she did discuss building the confidence of her students. May also reported that she aimed to make students "feel comfortable with



who they are” before moving onto curricular areas. Both of these motivations in working with new students could be understood as creating a relationship of trust. Bea pointed out in the first focus group that there is “a coldness” in separating caring from learning. She drew a comparison with teachers who stress students learning facts and repeating these back, like they would in a “factory.” She felt that the things that she does outside of the agenda are often more valuable than sticking to the curriculum and that teaching is working with “living, breathing” people who have complexities in their lives and cannot be treated as “statistics.” Noddings (2005b) also comments on this particular idea when she states that students “do not want to be treated ‘like numbers’” (p. 17).

All of the teachers in this study discussed the significance of the time they give, especially at the beginning of the school year, to developing relationships with their students. The findings suggest that the time devoted to developing these relationships is a critical step to educating primary children in the inner-city setting.

## **How Teachers Developed Relationships**

Noddings (2005b) asserts that “there is no recipe for caring” and that teachers cannot become carers by following “a set of specific behaviours” (p. 17), since teachers “listen and respond differentially to their students” (p. 19). There are, however, approaches to developing an ethic of care which include “modeling, dialogue, practice and confirmation” at the heart of caring relationships (p. 22). Many of the practices that the four teachers discussed throughout the focus groups and interviews represented each of these four dimensions of the ethic of care. The purpose of dialogue can be understood as gaining an understanding of who students are. Mayeroff (1971), states: “To care for someone, I must know many things. I must know, for example, who the other is” (p. 19).

Rose discussed her notion of being a caring teacher as understanding and practising flexibility. She explained how she needed to get to know her students through dialogue and to adapt the learning environment and her approaches to teaching. This involved structuring daily playtime to allow her to have time to visit with each student. She specifically mentioned asking, “lots of questions and [then] the families start to trust you which is a huge part of these kids lives.” Bea also commented that she got to know

one of her student's tragic past by listening to his stories. He revealed to her in a conversation that his father died "where the lions live." May also pointed out that in her one-to-one time with a very challenging student was when the student was the most open, because "the audience was gone."

These examples of dialogue surfaced either in response to the question, "What does being a caring teacher mean to you?" or when the teachers were providing a story about a specific student. Noddings (2005b) states that dialogue is an essential component to the ethic of care given that it is a pathway to connecting with students (p. 23). Dialogue also allows teachers to "respond most effectively as carers when we understand what the other needs and the history of this need" (p. 23). Certainly having this dialogue with students allowed the teachers to get to know their students in a deeper way, to build trust, to but also to listen for their needs, so that they could respond to these needs more effectively.

Dialogue also allowed the teachers to better understand their students' interests, background, and family life. This involved getting to know "the whole child," not just the child they saw at school. May spoke about her relationship with a student called Peter, and how the recent loss of his mother altered the way she interacted with him. Rose discussed how she got to know her students during conversations at playtime:

So I sit with the kids and ask, 'What are you making?' I want to be a part of it, so I would play with them. There's this one kid in my class who's always building airplanes. And um 'Have you ever been on an airplane?' 'No' 'Why are you so interested in airplanes?' Long story short, it turns out that his mom left him when he was very young and she flew on an airplane to a new country and he doesn't know where she is, but he knew she flew on an airplane...he has this infatuation.

The importance teachers placed on engaging in meaningful dialogue to understand their students aligns with the findings of Alvarez' (2008) study. One of Alvarez' main findings highlighted that teachers who were perceived as caring (by students) wanted to get to know and understand their students as individuals. More specifically, the students in Alvarez' study thought that teachers should know "their home circumstances and being willing to help with personal problems. They wanted teachers

to talk with them and really listen to them” (p. 155-156). Although the primary teachers in my study used the term “whole child” when they discussed the importance of knowing their students, as opposed to “individuals,” the practices on behalf of teachers, were consistent.

Setting aside personal interests and desires, to engage with the purpose of understanding the other, is what Noddings (1984, 2002, 2005b, 2012) calls engrossment. Noddings (1984) states that “all caring involves engrossment” (p. 17) and the degree of engrossment, on behalf of the carer, can vary. The teachers demonstrated their attentiveness to their students through their ability to recall details in one-to-one conversations. This became more evident when the teachers told me about the student they cared for the most significantly over the duration of their teaching career. In each story of care, the teachers discussed specific conversations they had with their student. The conversations that were retold in the interview revealed how the students felt comfortable sharing experiences of pain in connection to parental death or absence, or how the child felt negatively perceived by the parent.

Modeling care to students was a key component to caring for students. All four teachers discussed care in either the focus groups or during their interview. I found it compelling that modeling care was not the focus of any of the questions in the interviews or focus group, but it was pointed out by all of the teachers in the study. Each teacher had her own conceptualization of how she modeled care, which differed from one another.

Rose specifically used the term “modeling” to describe how she spoke caringly of students in their absence. However, Rose was the only participant in the study who had some exposure to the work of Noddings prior to the study, and was familiar with the terminology found in the ethic of care. Bea also spoke of modeling care, but interestingly perceived that the students picked up on care as actions more than what she says to students. Similar to Bea, May also discussed care as a way of “feeling the needs of other people” (teachers and students). She believed that this was one of her volunteer’s areas of weakness, and was the reason she was not successful in developing relationships with students. Lynne discussed the friendships the teachers at

Riverview Elementary have with one another as modeling care for students. She believes that the friendships and openness with one another provide a positive role model of care that students have observed.

Noddings states the teacher must model care to students by “show[ing] them herself as one-caring” (1984, p. 178) and that teachers have a “responsibility to help their students to develop the capacity to care” (2005b, p. 18). She continues to suggest that modeling care “nurtures the ethical ideal” in students (p. 179). Noddings also discusses the need for teachers to develop the ethical ideal in light of the whole child, or “risk producing a monster” (p. 179). It is evident that the teachers’ practice of modeling care and taking time to develop caring relationships with students aligns with Noddings’ conceptualization of modeling to foster the development of caring individuals.

In addition to dialogue and modeling, two other areas of fostering care described by Noddings (1984, 2002, 2005b) are practice and confirmation. The teachers suggested that they tried to practice care in all their interactions with students. If this was not possible, the teachers discussed the challenges that interfered with the development of connections to students. Confirmation of care in connection to educators is described by Noddings (1984) when she states that: “Teachers, also, need confirmation in order to nurture their own ethical ideals. [...] The response of students remains at the heart of confirmation for teachers” (p. 196).

One question from the second focus group connected to the confirmation of teachers: “Do you think that student response to your care is a factor that keeps you going in your career?” Rose answered by sharing with the group that when students respond positively to her efforts to care, “it gives you that validation that what you did mattered.” Bea and Lynne also discussed how they share student accomplishments and breakthroughs (both emotional and academic) with colleagues. Bea said that this sharing of student accomplishments is “our reinforcement as colleagues too.” Lynne also discussed the positivity she received from sharing student stories of success with other teachers at Riverview Elementary.

## **The Challenge of Engaging and Collaborating With Parents**

All of the teachers mentioned, at some point, the challenge to collaborate and engage with parents. At times, the teachers felt that they were at odds with parents. In connection to caring relationships, the implications of this perception meant that teachers felt comfortable establishing caring relationships only with their students, but faced challenges in developing relationships with parents, or saw families as an obstacle to providing for the students' care and/or educational needs. This is not to say that the teachers did not experience any positive relationships with parents; however, the negative aspects of parents were what was mostly discussed during the focus groups and interviews. Although the teachers recognize that the needs of the children are interconnected with their home lives, the teachers did not see their caring relationship extending to caring for the parents of the children they taught. Rather, parents were generally viewed as an obstacle or a challenge to caring for the children.

To discuss engagement with parents at Riverview Elementary, I must at this point, call upon my past and present experiences. I have found that a majority of parents are not a barrier to education, however, the difficulty that a few parents present can take over the potential relationships and interactions with others. In addition, several negative interactions over the course of a school year may be what teachers remember the most, since these situations can be difficult to handle, rather than the smaller caring acts that occur each day. Two questions that come to mind when I think about the circle of care encapsulating only students, and not parents, grounds itself in teacher burn-out at inner-city schools: are teachers too far stretched to develop caring relationships with reluctant parents? As well as: do teachers have the tools to develop relationships with parents who present challenges? In this sense, care can be understood as a resource that has its own set of limits. Noddings (1984) discusses this point when she states, "Many of our schools are in what might be called a crisis of caring," due to the fact that "Many urban teachers are suffering symptoms of battle fatigue and 'burn-out'" (p. 181).

Bea mentioned that she felt at odds with the way some parents perceived her due to her appearance and language skills, although she provided a couple of examples,

such as adapting attire at work, to gain parent approval. May discussed parents' lack of trust in schools as well as an attitude that she described as "anticipating the negative." Rose mentioned how some families do not value education and the basic routines that contribute to learning, and this creates a barrier to education for some of her students. Lynne stated that she has faced challenging situations with parents due to their fear of schools and professionals.

Three of the teachers (Rose, Bea, and Lynne) also mentioned their conceptualizations of the home lives of their students, although none of them visited the homes they were discussing. All of the ideas around the home life were in connection to perceived uncaring behaviours on the part of the parents. I found this discussion intriguing because it demonstrated that teachers imagine, but do not really know, the lives of their students outside of the classroom and of possible unmet needs at home. In her interview, Rose said, "There were always worries about what was going on at home and the challenges there." Bea also noted in her interview that:

We knew that he wasn't getting as much mothering and caring at home as one would expect for a North American family. I think, in her experience, she was doing the best she possibly could in a strange country with strange language and customs.

Although Noddings does not directly address caring relationships between teachers and parents, she does discuss care for those with whom we engage. Noddings would suggest that it is the role of teachers, as carers, to promote caring relationships with parents, since, the caring of their children connects each individual. Noddings (1984) explains that, "The one-caring has one great aim: to preserve and enhance caring in herself and in those whom she comes in contact" (p. 172). She also points out that it is not always the fault of the carer if care is not received by the care-for. Noddings (2005b) states:

If, for whatever reason, the cared-for denies that she or he is cared for, there is no caring relation. When that happens, it is not necessarily the fault of either the carer or the cared-for. The situation in which carer and cared-for meet may make difficult to establish caring relations" (xv).

It was evident, in some cases, that certain parents may have lost their trust in schools and that this mistrust thwarted a possible caring relationship. May discussed in the focus group a generational fear of schools due to the experiences of some parents and grandparents in residential schools. She stated that some students “hate school because it’s a terrifying place because they’ve heard that from their parents and grandparents. It’s just been passed on generationally.” May’s insights provided a clear example of how connecting to the institution of school is understandably problematic for some families. It may be more problematic when teachers do not reach out to understand or express care towards those parents.

Perhaps the teachers’ experience of caring that is aimed at only the students inside the classroom walls aligns with what Noddings (2002) discusses as an obstacle for carers in her book *Starting at Home*, when she states that, at times, caring can be viewed as “something intrusive, something fussy, something for children and dependents” (p. 11). Although the teachers discussed caring for the “whole child” as a conceptualization of their care, and that this included trying to understand the family life and past experiences, enacting care with the family was not viewed as part of their role as carers. Teachers also expressed that there were only a few parents who wanted to partner with teachers to raise students, but did not offer suggestions to change this frame of mind. Parental views of schooling and education were viewed more as an obstacle for teachers to overcome, rather than for teachers to reach out to, as they did with students.

## **Challenges to Provide for Student Needs due to Issues From Within the School System**

The challenge to provide for student needs was a common theme throughout the study. Many of the frustrations came from the shortcomings and misunderstandings of the school system itself, at both the local and provincial levels. The main concerns were with student assessments and designations, the lack of student support, and funding for classrooms materials.

Rose's statement that "the school system is set up for failure for a lot of these kids" highlights the vulnerability and further marginalization of inner-city students. The teachers talked about resources incessantly spread too thinly, especially at inner-city school sites, and that they are in need of additional counsellors, Learning Support Teachers, educational assistants, and child-care workers to meet the needs of their students and families. These resources, currently, are primarily provided to schools based on student population as opposed to the needs of individual students.

These findings of shortcomings at Riverview Elementary schools are congruent with the findings in McDowell's (2011) study. The main finding from McDowell's research that connects to this particular study is that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds "felt less cared for" (p. 206). Although students were not interviewed in this study, it is easy to speculate how some of the neediest students at Riverview may have answered their feelings of being cared for, given that the findings from this study pointed to a lack of student support and insufficient time for teachers to adequately engage with, and, support their students. I asked the teachers in the first focus group, "In what ways are we not meeting the needs of students?" Rose immediately answered "Time. It's always time." As supports are continuously reduced, teachers are burdened with handling an increasing number of needs within their classrooms, in isolation. A recent report from the British Columbia Teachers Federation supports this statement:

The BC School Trustees' Association surveyed districts about the programs and services that will be affected by budget cutbacks in 2015-16. In the BCSTA survey, school districts identified a wide-range of cost-cutting measures that will impact students [...] Ways in which classrooms will be impacted directly by these cuts include increased class sizes, reduced support services for students, including fewer Education Assistant hours, [and] reduced school supply budgets affecting the classroom directly (BCTF, 2016, p. 2).

I was surprised that only one teacher discussed the financial burden of providing for classroom materials, given that the yearly allotment for each classroom per year is in the \$20-\$30 range at Riverview Elementary. Only Rose talked about personally buying



supplies for her students, so that she would have hands-on classroom materials that were developmentally appropriate. The other teachers also paid for resources out of their own pocket, but did not see the need to mention this in the focus groups or interview. Perhaps they did not see this as a barrier to care, but rather a way to enhance their caring towards students.

School resources, in terms of the cost to run classrooms and the necessary adults to support student learning, is an issue that Noddings seldom discusses in her conceptualization of the ethic of care. Noddings (2005b) critiques curricula and its continual changes for honouring “privileged knowledge,” and argues that students need to “have opportunities to develop and demonstrate their own strengths” (p. 33). Students living in poverty and issues concerning underfunding in schools, are critical areas that need to be addressed in order for teachers to be able to develop caring relationships. One area that all of the teachers discussed was a lack of time to work with the students who need their help the most, as well as sufficient time to listen to their students. This was largely due to a lack of extra support for students with learning and behavioural challenges. The findings from this study demonstrate a need for students to be listened to and engage in meaningful dialogue with teachers in order for students to feel cared for.

## **Teaching in Inner-city Schools**

Although the findings from this study suggested that there are many challenges for teachers to develop caring relationships, the rewards for teaching at Riverview Elementary were also evident. The rewards for working with this population of students at this particular school were clearly connected to the deep emotional relationships that teachers developed. It is also important to mention that the teachers who participated in this study also choose to teach at this particular inner-city school in spite of its challenges, which speaks to their commitment to caring for vulnerable youth. Perhaps the teachers in the study had a similar mindset to the teachers involved in a study completed by the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) when one of the main findings showed that, “for some students living in poverty, the school becomes a ‘safe-haven’” (BCTF, 2012). Funding for student support in inner-city schools was another

finding from the study that aligned with one of the main challenges expressed by the teachers in this study. The study stated that: “due to cutbacks, these health concerns are further impacted by the lack of support available to vulnerable students such as education assistants, youth workers, and learning specialist teachers” (p. 6). Although the health concerns were not specified, Rose mentioned her thoughts on students with mental-health needs who are often left unsupported.

## **Meta Findings**

This study presented its own larger issues, or meta issues, after its completion. Some of the larger findings in this study include the teachers’ conceptualizations of virtue caring as well as the aspect of “mothering” that each participant discussed when explaining their connections or role to their primary students.

Some of the teachers’ conceptualizations of care were indicative of virtue caring as opposed to what Noddings calls ethical caring. It is important to differentiate the two types of caring, since, caring as an individual attribute is understood by Noddings (2005b) as virtue caring, whereas ethical caring is a responsive and relational experience. Noddings provides a common example of virtue caring by stating that people often speak of care as “ ‘He is such a caring person’ ” which demonstrates “our broad notion of care” (2005b, p. 17). Rose was the only teacher participant to mention that a caring teacher is “responsive” and has an ability to “relate” to students. All of the participants discussed getting to know the background of their students to have a deeper understanding of whom they are. The teachers also discussed virtues that they wanted their students to recognize within themselves or instil within the student. This understanding of care is quite different than ethical caring since it only concerns the individual.

Another meta-finding from this study is the connection between mothering and teaching. All four participants used the term “mother” or “mothering” when describing their connection to a particular student or to describe their role as a primary teacher. One of the reasons I wanted to conduct a study that only incorporated primary participants was because I have experienced of the needs of students during these early

years in school such as tying shoelaces, zipping up jackets, and comforting a child when they are crying. I was surprised that the teacher participants used the term “mother” not to describe these tasks that they complete for students, but instead to describe their connection to their students. Noddings (1984) states “Mothering is not a role but a relationship” (p. 128). When I discussed the emotional connections teachers have with their students, I chose to discuss the common use of the term “mother” on behalf of all of the teacher participants at some point during the data collection process. In hindsight, I believe this choice echoes back to Noddings’ understanding of the term “mother” as indicative of the emotionally intense relationships teachers can have with their students.

## **Study Limitations and Areas for Further Research**

The teachers in this study were, and continue to be, my coworkers, which produced its own set of limitations. On one hand, the teachers may have felt more comfortable discussing their honest thoughts and opinions since we know one another well, and had been working together for three years. I understood the school environment and culture and was able to tailor questions based on my knowledge of Riverview Elementary. On the other hand, the teachers may have felt less comfortable sharing their true thoughts and experiences given that we would continue to be coworkers after the study was completed.

Despite the complexities involved in this type of research, this study was beneficial because it provided time for primary teachers as a group, and as individuals, to reflect upon the ways in which they respond to students, and share their common understandings. Perhaps complexities within the workplace points to the thoughts of Bourke (2014) when he states that: “the identities of both researcher and participants have the potential to impact the research process” (p. 1). I would also add that the research process may also impact the relationships among its participants. In terms of connecting research to the participants, Bourke (2014) suggests that part of our identity comes from within our self-perception, but also “the ways in which we expect others will perceive us” (p. 1). Bourke’s understanding of identity may shed light on the reasons why the teachers would feel the need to hold back information from myself and from one another. Although the teacher participants were seemingly honest about their

experiences and thoughts on caring relationships, I was conscious that the teacher participants were aware of the impact shared information can have on continuing to work collaboratively as professionals.

Another limitation is that only four teachers participated and all four are female primary teachers. To gain a broader understanding of how care is conceptualized and enacted, it would have been beneficial to include male primary teachers and their perspectives on care, to determine if gender is a factor in how care is conceptualized and/or enacted. When Noddings (1984) discusses men and women in the role of parents, she suggests that, “men bring their best human and masculine qualities to the experience of parenting” (p. 129). Although Noddings is discussing parenting in this quote, parallels to men in roles as educators can easily be drawn. In addition, Noddings (1984) recognizes that “relation” is understood as “human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence” (p. 4). Although this study focused on the conceptualizations and enactments of care from the perspective of four female primary teachers, this study remains applicable to male educators as well, since, connection to students and the relationships that develop between teachers and students is neither male or female.

An area of future research would be to interview school administrators, given that they could provide some key information about the caring vision of schools and how this vision is communicated and understood by the teachers at the school. Student participation in the study would also be key to confirm whether the teachers were engaged in caring relationships and would allow students to express if the care provided from teachers was received.

After completing this study, several questions still linger from the findings. One of questions I continue to wonder about is: are teachers more aware of their response to students while engaged in reflective practice about caring relationships? While this question may fall into the category of action research as opposed to case-study, I wondered if the teachers gained some additional insights and/or made changes to their practice while participating in the study. A second question that remains is: how is care

conceptualized and enacted by primary teachers at a non inner-city elementary school or in an area of high socio-economic status?

The findings from this study have benefitted my own practice and awareness of my response to students and their parents. I also have an increased awareness that care includes making repeated effort to connect to parents if I am to truly understand the lives of students outside of the classroom. Moving forward from this study, I plan to present the findings to elementary teachers in workshops at the district level to continue to gain understandings and complexities of caring relationships in other school contexts.

## **Implications and Impact**

In this section I will discuss some of the larger implications that came from this study. A couple of these topics include issues surrounding poverty and the possible misconceptions of the students' lives within their homes. There was also misrecognition that can come from the differing socio-economic backgrounds and racial differences between teachers and students at Riverview Elementary.

At times, the teachers stated what they believed parents were experiencing, or what was said to their students within the home, without knowing the dialogue and experiences of parents in reality. These assumptions and conceptualizations were associated with the idea that less care was provided within the home. This provided the teacher participants with a reason for providing additional attention and care. Lynne provided an example of assumptions of home-life dialogue and lack of care when she stated that, "We try and look at the positives whereas a lot of these kids when they come to us all they heard was negative. They've heard 'you're no good. You're worthless and you're never going to amount to anything.'" This example demonstrates how some teachers may generalize the home life of all students based on the experience of one due to a lack of understanding. Most of the teachers in the study also struggled to understand the issues that surround poverty aside from the needs that are dealt with directly by the school. Some of these issues involve chronic absenteeism, aggression, and lack of behaviour regulation to name a few. Two of the teacher participants were also unsure of what care looked like inside the homes of two families who had emigrated

from Africa. Bea commented that Theo's mother was doing the best she could, but it was not the same as the care he would receive from a "North American family." This comment suggests that Theo's mother's care is substandard to Canadian expectations, however, Bea did not truly have a way of knowing how his mother cared for him other than what was presented at school. These misconceptions of life within the home of our students illustrate the need for school staff to continue to develop a deeper understanding of poverty.

After completing this study, I believe that two major areas are in need of development at Riverview Elementary. I plan to attempt to improve the relationships between teachers and parents by encouraging a change in the tone of school events. I wish to change our parent/ teacher events to a more casual tone to allow for dialogue to flow more naturally between both groups. I will also encourage the development of school values that incorporates the ideas of teachers, parents, and students. I would hope that one of these values will focus on the importance of relationships. In addition, I plan to share this study with the local school board in hopes that administrators will have a better understanding of the needs of schools, teachers, and students as well as the multifaceted nature and complexities of inner-city schools.

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# APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT BY PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH STUDY



FACULTY OF EDUCATION

January 2015  
Study # 2014s0656  
Julia Thompson  
XXX-XXX-XXXX  
XXXX@sfu.ca

## **RE: Primary teachers' experiences of care in an inner-city school setting**

Although you already know me as a colleague, I am also a Master of Arts student at Simon Fraser University studying care as experienced by primary teachers at our school. That is, I am interested not only in looking at the challenges to care in an inner-city school, but also the successes when caring for children in a diverse and complex setting.

I plan to investigate in our school site. The goal of this study is to help schools develop an understanding of the complexities, challenges, and unique opportunities that present when caring for students at the primary level.

I am asking for your participation in two focus group sessions. Each focus group, which will last about 60 minutes, will consist of four primary teachers from our school and will take place in January 2015 and in March 2015. At this meeting I would like you to discuss your understanding and experience of care as a primary teacher at our school. Please note that I cannot guarantee your confidentiality from our focus group discussion given that I cannot control what other participants may do with the information shared at the focus group.

In addition to two focus groups, I also wish to interview teachers to determine

their understanding and experiences of care within our school setting. I wish to interview you for approximately one hour at our school at a time convenient to you. The interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed. You would have an opportunity to review the transcript and change any of your responses if desired. Since I am careful about maintaining your confidentiality, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym. In addition, I plan to incorporate some direct quotes for the purposes of this study. Your real name and the name of your school will not be used. I will provide you with the interview questions one week in advance to allow you to reflect upon your potential replies.

All interview and focus group data completed by you will be kept under lock and key at my home. All audio recordings will be stored on my personal computer that is password protected and will be destroyed after two years. I will be the only individual who will have access to the recordings. At any time you may withdraw from the study. You may also request a copy of the results after the analysis of the data is complete, which should be at the end of 2015. I also anticipate sharing my results in conferences and with the Surrey School Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics at XXXXX@sfu.ca or XXX-XXX-XXXX.

We welcome your input into this important topic. If you agree to participate in this study, please review and sign the attached form. Thank you.

## INFORMED CONSENT

This is to state that I agree to participate in the above-described study on primary teachers' experiences of care.

- I understand the purpose of this study and wish to be interviewed for approximately 45 – 60 minutes.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time from the study without any penalty or prejudice.
- I understand that this research will not affect the evaluation of my work.
- I understand how anonymity will be maintained during this research project.
- I understand the anticipated uses of the data, especially with respect to publication, communication and dissemination of results.

**I have read the above and I understand all of the conditions. I freely and voluntarily consent to participating in this study.**

Name of teacher (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date (yyyy/mm/dd): \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP 1 QUESTIONS**

- 1) What does being a caring teacher mean to you?
- 2) How does being a teacher at an inner-city school relate to care?
- 3) Is our care unique at an inner-city school?
- 4) What awareness or understanding does an inner-city teacher need?
- 5) Do you think that inner-city teachers, people skills play a more prominent role in our teaching, more so than if you were a teacher at another school?
- 6) In what ways are we meeting the needs of our students?
- 7) In what ways are we not meeting the needs of our students?
- 8) What barriers to care do we face?
- 9) What barriers to education do our students face?
- 10) Do students have a way of letting you know that they want your care, and if so, how do they communicate this?

## **APPENDIX C: FOCUS GROUP 2 QUESTIONS**

- 1) On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being least important and 10 being most important, how important is care for you in your teaching career and why?
- 2) Does student response to your care a factor that keeps you motivated in your career?
- 3) Do you believe that teachers create the bond with a student, or is it a meeting in the middle? Are both people responsible for the connection?
- 4) Does the response to your care keep you pursuing the connection?
- 5) Sometimes teachers will say that they knew a particular child needed more care than others based on a feeling. Can you describe what that feeling is?

## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

- 1) How many years have you been teaching?
- 2) How many years have you been teaching at XXXX school?
- 3) What is your first language?
- 4) Where did you grow up?
- 5) Why did you become a teacher?
- 6) How did your teaching career begin?
- 7) What are your guiding principles?
- 8) How did you get into teaching at an inner-city school? Did you know that this was an inner-city school when you applied for your teaching position?
- 9) What does being a 'caring teacher' mean to you?
- 10) What barriers to education do your students face?
- 11) Do you feel as though you are able to provide all that you want for your students?
- 12) What barriers do you face to fulfilling the needs of your students?
- 13) Can you think of a situation where you tried to care for a student and it wasn't received?
- 14) How do you go about caring for a student with challenges?
- 15) Where do the challenges lie? Is it the school system, the school, or the kids?
- 16) Tell me about a memory of caring for a student that is significant to you.
- 17) What makes that experience of care stronger than others?
- 18) How was your care acknowledged by the student?
- 19) How did you know that child needed your care?