

# **UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPECTATIONS OF CARE IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research has shown clear benefits to students when they believe teachers care about them. Moreover, as students get older, fewer of them believe their teachers care, and fewer of their parents believe teachers care about their children. Semi-structured interviews were used in this qualitative study to examine students', teachers', and parents' beliefs about care in one school in south-western British Columbia. More specifically, teacher-student and parent-teacher relationships were examined. Findings indicated that students', parents', and teachers' current beliefs related to care were largely shaped by their past experiences of care in school. Parents who attended schools in other areas of the world tended to emphasize different attributes of care, than parents who attended schools in British Columbia. The importance of uncovering our own beliefs, getting to know students as individuals and having open dialogue with parents was emphasized.

*This work is dedicated to the teachers who have cared for me and the students I have tried to care for.*

*It is also for the students, parents and teachers who shared both their painful and poignant memories of care and allowed me to glimpse inside their hearts and minds. Thank you for teaching me.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Approval .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Dedication .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Purpose .....	1
Background and Rationale .....	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....</b>	<b>6</b>
The Role of Emotions and Relationships in Learning .....	6
Research Findings – The Importance of Care for Students, Teachers, and Parents .....	8
Nel Noddings: What is Care? .....	12
Research Findings -- What is a Caring Teacher? .....	14
<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHOD.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Research Design .....	21
Participants.....	22
School .....	22
Teachers .....	23
Students .....	24
Parents .....	28
Data Collection .....	31
Data Analysis.....	36
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Teacher-Student Relationship: Student Beliefs .....	40
Importance of Care.....	40
Reciprocal Relationships.....	43
What is a Caring Teacher?.....	45
Relationships.....	45
Classroom Environment.....	51
Academics.....	54
Summary.....	56
Teacher-Student Relationship: Adult Beliefs .....	57



Connections to the Past .....	57
Teacher Beliefs: What is a Caring Teacher? .....	58
Cross-Case Summary .....	80
Parent Beliefs: What is a Caring Teacher? .....	82
Cross-Case Summary and Cross Group Comparison .....	98
Parent-Teacher Relationships .....	105
Teacher Views .....	106
Nick Masters .....	107
Lisa Walters .....	110
Jean Elda .....	115
Christine Grettal .....	118
Jas Kaur .....	122
Elizabeth Smith .....	125
Teacher Cross-Case Summary .....	129
Parent Views .....	132
Mr. Gill .....	132
Mrs. Beck .....	134
Mrs. Sandy .....	136
Mr. Singh .....	138
Mrs. Miller .....	141
Cross-Case Summary .....	144
Difficulties in Forming Relationships with Parents .....	147
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>153</b>
The Teacher-Student Relationship: .....	154
Teachers Should Know Students as Individuals .....	154
The Influence of Past Experiences on Current Beliefs .....	158
Parent-Teacher Relationships .....	164
The Importance of Communication .....	168
The Importance of Our Beliefs .....	170
Educational Implications: Overcoming Barriers to Care .....	172
Final Thoughts .....	179
Study Limitations and Areas for Further Research .....	180
<b>References .....</b>	<b>183</b>
<b>APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT BY PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH STUDY .....</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>APPENDIX 2: STUDY INFORMATION DOCUMENT .....</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>APPENDIX 3: PERMISSION TO APPROACH MINORS FOR RESEARCH .....</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>APPENDIX 4: INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS .....</b>	<b>196</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	B.C. Satisfaction Survey 2004/05: Do Teachers Care? .....	3
Table 2	Summary of Teacher Participants.....	24
Table 3	Summary of Student Participants:.....	27
Table 4	Summary of Parent Participants: .....	30
Table 5	Interview Questions for Teachers: .....	32
Table 6	Interview Questions for Students: .....	32
Table 7	Interview Questions for Parents:.....	33

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to examine students', parents', and teachers' experiences, understandings and expectations of care within an educational context. I believed there may be a discrepancy between the beliefs held by these three groups, which would benefit from closer examination to reach common understanding in order for the benefits of care to be realized in schools.

### **Background and Rationale**

It seems reasonable to assume that teachers should care about the students with whom they work. Indeed, many teachers enter the teaching profession because they care about students and want to make a positive difference in their lives (McLaughlin, 1994). Without a doubt, the teacher-student relationship can be an important and memorable one. Ask an adult about a teacher they had and they will often emotionally recall either a deeply positive experience or an intensively negative one. Therefore, the connections made in the classroom must be made with care and attention. In fact, Noddings (2005) argues that caring for students is the school's most important job.

In its Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia (May, 2004), the B.C. College of Teachers also emphasizes the importance of caring for students. The Standards state that

“professional educators value and care for all children, acting at all times in the best interests of children” and “valuing and caring for all children is an essential prerequisite in the development of a professional educator” (p. 1).

However, in order for the circle of care to be complete, students must recognize and receive a teacher’s caring acts (Noddings, 2005). In a 1989 Girl Scouts of America survey (cited in Noddings), only one-third of the students thought their teachers cared about them, and only seven percent reported that they would ask their teachers for advice. This lack of connection can have a negative effect on students’ engagement, school satisfaction, and school success. For example, students who drop out of school often report feeling disconnected from teachers and the school environment (Fine, 1991). Teacher-student relationships can be important in helping to create a sense of belonging and connection for students in school (Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

According to the results of the 2004-05 British Columbia Ministry of Education’s Satisfaction Survey (see Table 1), there is a clear discrepancy between what teachers, students and parents in B.C. consider “caring” teacher behaviour.

**Table 1 B.C. Satisfaction Survey 2004/05: Do Teachers Care?**

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>At No Time</b>	<b>Few Times</b>	<b>Some-times</b>	<b>Many Times</b>	<b>All of the Time</b>	<b>Many Times/ All of the Time Combined</b>
Grade 3, 4 students	1%	2%	6%	18%	73%	91%
Grade 7 students	4%	5%	15%	32%	43%	76%
Grade 10 students	8%	13%	34%	32%	12%	44%
Grade 12 students	6%	11%	34%	36%	14%	49%
Elementary parents	1%	2%	11%	38%	48%	86%
Secondary parents	2%	7%	25%	44%	22%	66%
Staff	0%	0%	3%	32%	63%	96%

In this survey, students were asked, “Do your teachers care about you?” Parents were asked, “Do teachers care about your child?” The question staff answered was, “Do staff members care about students’ well-being and academic success?”

As students progress through the B.C. school system, fewer of them believe teachers care about them. Similarly, as their children continue through school, fewer parents believe teachers care about their children, with 86% of parents expressing the belief that teachers care about their children in elementary school, and only 66% of parents in high school sharing this belief. Most staff, on the other hand, claim they care about students, with approximately two-thirds saying that they care all of the time and 95% saying they care either many times or all of the time. These discrepancies can certainly have an impact on the kinds of relationships formed between teachers and students and teachers and parents. They might also help explain why some students become

disengaged from educational institutions (Wentzel, 1997) while some teachers become “burned out by the constant outward flow of energy that is not replenished by the response of the cared-for” (Noddings, 2005, p. 17).

Most research on caring relationships has focused on students’ and, occasionally, teachers’ perspectives (for a sample of studies focusing on students’ perspectives, see, for example, Baker, 1999; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Hayes, Ryan & Zsellar, 1994; Howard, 2002; Wentzel, 1997, 1998. Alder, (2002), Cassidy & Bates (2005) and Cothran & Ennis (2000) are three examples of studies that included the opinions of teachers). However, parents are demanding more say in their children’s educational experiences and the B.C. government is increasingly emphasizing the need to include parents’ voices in education, as evidenced by information posted on their website<sup>1</sup>. As well, the B.C. College of Teachers emphasizes that “education in a democratic society is a shared responsibility of the family and the state” (Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia, 2004, p. 1) and professional educators must “support collaborative partnerships with parents...” (p. 3). Further, research suggests that parental involvement and support are important factors in the success of their children’s school experience (see, for example, Hill et al., 2004; Wentzel, 1998).

Epstein (1995) points out the need for teachers and parents to recognize their *shared* responsibility for children and to work together to create caring communities of support. However, according to Tatar & Horenczyk (2000),

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca>, visited January 12, 2008.

collaboration between parents and teachers “cannot be fully accomplished without a mutual knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and expectations that each of the parties holds of one another” (p. 494). This requires open dialogue because, as Lasky (2000) suggests, teachers’ expectations often reflect “standards and ethical norms ... for middle class mothers in two parent homes” (p. 853) instead of reflecting an increasingly diverse population, such as the one represented at the school in this study. For all of these reasons, it was prudent to include parents’ voices in this research, not only to uncover their beliefs about caring teacher-student relationships, but also to explore their experiences and expectations as parents in caring relations with teachers. The dynamics of both relationships are of interest if we truly hope, as Epstein suggests, to create caring communities of support.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

There are those who would argue that the sole purpose of schools is the intellectual development of children, and relationships and emotions play no part in that pursuit. In this section I will address the role that relationships and emotions play in our intellectual development and will explain why care in education is important for students, parents, and teachers. However, the term “care” is used by different people in different contexts to mean different things. Noddings (1992, 2003, 2005) uses the term in a more precise way than the colloquial use often ascribed to it. I will outline her definition of care and then review research that examined perceptions of care among students in different settings.

### **The Role of Emotions and Relationships in Learning**

Students come to school to learn, and philosophers and educators have argued at length about the best way to accomplish effective teaching so meaningful learning can occur. For instance, Plato saw school as a “place apart from society: a place dedicated to knowledge, skills, and activities that are of ‘persisting value,’ transcending the requirements of current social life” (Egan, 1999, p. 101). Other theorists, like John Dewey, recognized the importance of social life in learning. He believed we become human only through social



relationships with others and that the “individual mind must be understood as a creative development of social life” (Glassman, 2001, p. 5).

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that “all the higher [cognitive] functions originate as actual relations between human individuals” (p. 57). In fact, “the lack of recognition among educators of this social process ... limits the intellectual development of many students; their capabilities are viewed as biologically determined rather than socially facilitated” (John-Steiner and Soubberman, in Vygotsky, 1978, p. 126). Miller (2003) concurred when she pointed out that “teaching in the ZPD [zone of proximal development]<sup>2</sup> requires personal-emotional relations with students, not simply cognitive attention” (p. 312).

Noddings (1992) affirmed the importance of relationships in learning, arguing that “who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life” (p. xiii). She also points out that “schools cannot achieve [their] academic goals without providing caring and continuity for students” (2005, p. 14).

The role of relationships in learning goes hand in hand with emotions. While Plato stressed rationality and, by implication, dismissed the role of emotions, Vygotsky insisted that emotion and cognition are inseparable:

Thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotions. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought. Only here do we find the answer to the final ‘why’ in the analysis of thinking. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 282, cited in Mahn and John-Steiner, 2002, p. 47)

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<sup>2</sup> The zone of proximal development is “the distance between the [child’s] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Vygotsky, Dewey, and Noddings are clear about the impossibility of separating the social, emotional, and cognitive aspects of learning. Our hearts and minds are not separate entities; to improve intellectual development we must also attend to the emotional heart of the learner.

### **Research Findings – The Importance of Care for Students, Teachers, and Parents**

Recent research is clear about the positive influence that relationships with caring teachers can have on students at all grade levels. Positive effects include improved academic effort (Wentzel, 1997), behaviour, performance, school-related interest (Wentzel, 1998; 2002), perceived value of school subjects (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989), school adjustment (Ryan, Stiller & Lynch, 1994), school satisfaction (Baker, 1999), and engagement (Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Theorists also suggest caring is essential for critical thinking (Thayer-Bacon, 1993) and the moral development of “competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (Noddings, 1992, p. xiv).

At the same time, the absence of caring relationships has a detrimental effect on students. For example, Cothran & Ennis (2000) found that students were quite clear about their reluctance to engage in classes with teachers they did not respect and had not formed a relationship with. Students want to know that teachers care for them, and when asked to describe how they know, the majority tend to discuss social, not academic, reasons (Baker, 1999).

Noddings (1988; 2005) explains that every caring act is given by the carer and received by the cared-for and in order for the circle of care to be completed,

the caring act must be interpreted as such and appropriately responded to by the receiver. Because of the reciprocal nature of caring relations, benefits and problems also arise for the carers – in this case teachers. Job satisfaction increases when teachers are part of “caring pedagogical relationships” (Goldstein & Lake, 2000, p. 862). On the other hand, Van Horn, Schaufeli, & Enzmann (1999) found that the level of burnout among teachers increased with the absence of student responses to their caring.

Hargreaves (2000) notes that teaching is an emotional job and “this use of emotion can be helpful or harmful, raising classroom standards or lowering them; building collegiality and parent partnerships or putting other adults at a distance” (p. 824). He also found that connection with students provides emotional rewards, while a frequent source of negative emotion for teachers is lack of connection to students. It is logical that teachers who are emotionally burned out will not be equipped to provide the care required to form relationships with students and parents.

One of the challenges in forming and maintaining relationships is the reciprocal nature of the teacher-student relationship. People respond to each other in relationships. Furrer & Skinner (2003) found that when students felt appreciated by teachers they expressed more interest in classroom activities and had higher levels of engagement. On the other hand, if students felt ignored by teachers they expressed boredom, anger, and unhappiness with classroom activities. If students respond to their perceptions of teacher behaviours in this way, it is reasonable to accept that teachers may also respond to their

perceptions of student behaviours. If a student appears engaged and interested and they appear to appreciate teacher efforts, teachers are more likely to continue those efforts. If, on the other hand, students appear bored and angry, teachers may respond to that by providing less support; thus perpetuating the cycle of responses. Therefore, the “rich get richer” with respect to engagement and connection, and the “poor” become more disengaged and disconnected as a result of teacher responses. These reciprocal effects highlight the importance of caring teacher behaviour to break the cycle.

Another difficulty can arise because of relationships students have with their parents. Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch (1994) hypothesized that students who reported support and security in relationships with parents tended to have more positive relationships with teachers. Not all students come equipped with a supportive background, ready to easily form relationships with other adults. It is often marginalized students without the support of nurturing families who most need the support of caring teachers, yet those students are often the hardest for teachers to reach (see Cassidy & Bates, 2005).

Teachers and students are not the only ones who play a role in the school experience. Parental influence also affects teacher-student relations as well as student behaviour, achievement, and aspirations (Hill et al. 2004). An administrator in a study conducted by Cassidy & Bates (2005) articulated the importance of teacher-parent relations when he explained that “we can’t successfully work with kids unless we’re working with their families, because whatever’s going on at home is affecting what’s happening here” (p. 11). This

echoes Epstein's (1999) belief that "the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (p. 422).

Again, because of the reciprocal nature of relationships, parents' actions and responses affect the dynamic of caring relationships with teachers. Van Horn et al. (1994) found that student responses as well as organizational (school level) responses affected the level of teacher burnout. It is reasonable then to hypothesize that parents, as members of the educational partnership, can also affect teachers' emotions which, in turn, affect the teacher's ability to form relationships with both parents and students.

Parents also benefit from positive, caring relationships with teachers and schools. The benefits to parents include participation and leadership in educational decision-making, increased self-confidence about parenting, and more useful communications about school work with their children (Epstein, 1995).

The benefits of care for students, teachers, and parents are clear. However, in order for students and parents to receive and respond to care, teachers' behaviours must be interpreted as caring. Otherwise, despite the teacher's best intentions, the student's or parent's perception is that the teacher does not care. Unfortunately, as shown by the 2004-05 B.C. Satisfaction Surveys, there is a disconnect between what teachers, students, and parents in British Columbia believe is caring teacher behaviour.

## **Nel Noddings: What is Care?**

The familiar use of the term “care” often reflects a notion of warmth and affection, and it is this use of the term which makes it possible to dismiss care in education as mere sentimentality. However, Noddings (2003) outlines a more comprehensive explanation of caring teacher-student relations. She describes caring in relational terms, as opposed to a virtue or personal characteristic. A caring relation includes the carer (in this case the teacher) and the cared-for (student) and both must contribute to the relationship in certain ways in order for it to be considered caring.

The actions of the carer are characterized by engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment is an “open, nonselective receptivity to the cared-for” (Noddings, 2005, p. 15) and reflects the ability to be receptive, to “really hear, see or feel what the other tries to convey” (p. 16). Engrossment, or attentiveness, may be brief, but it is necessary in caring encounters. Motivational displacement reflects a “commitment to act in behalf of the cared-for” (Noddings, 2003, p. 16). Thus, engrossment and motivational displacement reflect the ability to be attentive to the needs of others and to act on behalf of those needs.

Noddings is careful to point out, however, that despite the presence of certain qualities or principles, caring is relational and cannot be reduced to a recipe.

Caring cannot be achieved by formula. It requires address and response; it requires different behaviors from situation to situation and person to person. It sometimes calls for toughness, sometimes tenderness.... Some situations require only a few minutes of attentive care; others require continuous effort over long periods of time. (Noddings, 1992, p. xii)

Care will look different from person to person and situation to situation, so the ability to be attentive to each person (engrossment) is a necessary ingredient in choosing the appropriate action (motivational displacement) for each situation. In fact, Noddings (2003) explains that “variation is to be expected if the one claiming to care really cares...” (p. 24) because

caring involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s. When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. (p. 24)

The cared-for also plays a significant role in the caring relation. He or she must recognize, receive or respond to the acts of the carer. Without such responses, “the teacher’s caring quite predictably deteriorates to ‘cares and burdens’” (Noddings, 2003, p. 181) and teachers can become burned out. She goes on to ask, “Where is the teacher to get the strength to go on giving except from the student?” (p. 181).

The cared-for is essential to the relation. What the cared-for contributes to the relation is a responsiveness that completes the caring. This responsiveness need not take the form of gratitude or even of direct acknowledgement. Rather, the cared-for shows either in direct response to the one-caring or in spontaneous delight and happy growth before her eyes that the caring has been received. The caring is completed when the cared-for receives the caring. He may respond by free, vigorous, and happy immersion in his own projects ... and the one-caring, seeing this knows that the relation has been completed in the cared-for. (p. 181)

Thus, the teacher-student relationship is a reciprocal one where both parties play a role. If the cared-for does not perceive the teacher’s acts as caring, despite the best intentions of the teacher, the “relationship cannot be characterized as one of caring. This result does not necessarily signify a negligence on [the teacher’s] part.... There may be no way for [the teacher’s] caring to reach him. But, then,

caring has been only partly actualized” (2003, p. 68). More specifically, she explains that “...we cannot justify ourselves as carers by claiming ‘we care.’ If the recipients of our care insist that ‘nobody cares,’ [then] caring relations do not exist” (p. xiv). This highlights the importance of a common understanding of caring in schools. Otherwise, despite teachers’ best efforts, students claim that teachers do not care (as many did in B.C.’s satisfaction surveys, 2004-05).

### **Research Findings -- What is a Caring Teacher?**

As Noddings (2005) points out, there is no recipe for caring. Each student perceives the classroom environment differently (Baker, 1999; Wentzel, 1989) and what works with one child, might not work with another; what works at one time may not be effective another time. Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint a set of behaviours that all students will receive and interpret as caring. Caring is context specific (Kendrick, 1994) and must address the needs of specific individuals within particular contexts.

Nora Alder (2002) found that students in two American urban middle schools wanted teachers to take the time to get to “know students well, provide personalized leadership for ... students, teach to understanding and [be] academically helpful, and hold high expectations for behavior and achievement” (p. 241). They respected teachers who were strict and did not let students “slide.” In fact, one student even stated that her teacher would yell if they were not listening “‘cause they care about us” (p. 251). Students also appreciated teachers who told them they cared; too often we assume the receiver understands our feelings, when in fact they sometimes need to be told. Of



interest is the fact that students interpreted teachers' calls home to parents about disruptive behaviour or missed homework as caring. Teachers also agreed that involving parents was essential to reaching students.

In Cassidy & Bates's (2005) study of an alternative school for marginalized youth, students, teachers, and administrators articulated their beliefs about care. A recurring theme was the importance of getting to know and understand students individually. Like the teachers in Alder's (2002) study, administrators stressed the importance of working with families. Teachers emphasized "creating the right environment; building relationships; showing respect; adapting the curriculum; being empathetic and non-reactive; and working in the youth's (not their own) best interest" (p. 15). Seeing students as individuals and putting them at the centre reflects Noddings's (2003) description of "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, [and] is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring" (p. 16). Despite the fact that students came from diverse backgrounds, their opinions about care were similar. They valued "feeling welcome; being acknowledged and understood; feeling respected; getting needed help; [and] being a friend" (p. 20). Although some differences exist between these students' needs and beliefs and those in Alder's (2002) study, they are similar in their expectation of respectful and helpful teachers. While the students in Alder's study valued being pushed, the opposite was true for the students in Cassidy and Bates's study. This reflects the importance of teachers understanding the needs of the students they work with.

When Ferreira & Bosworth (2001) asked middle school students for their definition of care, they found that student responses could be summarized within two themes: relationships and teaching. Within the first theme, students identified treating them as individuals, getting to know them personally, being a good listener, and treating students with respect as exemplifying care. Within the theme of teaching, students identified teacher behaviours that included “helping with work, explaining work, checking for understanding, encouraging, maintaining an orderly classroom atmosphere and providing fun activities” (p. 26). When describing an “orderly classroom atmosphere” students echoed the views expressed in Alder’s (2002) study. They appreciated a teacher who is “on your back a lot [and] tells you what to do” and “sometimes ... can be a little rough or angry with us when trying to look out for our well-being” (p. 27). As noted from the views expressed in Cassidy & Bates (2005), this strictness is not seen as caring by all students and again points to the need to know your students well. Another parallel with Alder and Cassidy & Bates is the fact that communication with parents was seen as caring.

Hayes, Ryan, & Zsella (1994) found differences in students’ beliefs about care based on ethnicity and gender. While most students valued the same kinds of behaviours, their interpretations of those behaviours and the weight they placed on them varied. For example, students believed that caring teachers “responded to the individual..., helped with academic work..., encouraged success and positive feelings..., provided fun and humor..., provided good subject content..., counseled the student..., was interested in all students/fair...,

avoided harshness..., listened..., [and] managed the class well” (p. 9-10). However, girls ranked “avoided harshness” higher than “managed class well,” which is the opposite of the boys’ ranking. Similarly, African-American students placed “helped with academic work,” “encouraged success and positive feelings” and “responded to the individual student” as the most important caring attributes, while European-American students valued “responded to the individual”, “provided fun and humor” and “provided good subject content” as the most valuable. The authors cited a study conducted by Baldwin and Hopkins (1990), which looked at cultural differences between African-Americans and European-Americans. Baldwin et al. found that the African-American culture placed higher value on community and cooperation while European-Americans placed more value on competitiveness and individualism. Hayes et al. believed their study supported this finding. Despite the problematic nature of suggesting there is a singular view within any given culture, their research does imply the importance of teachers understanding the cultural reality of students and how this may affect their perceptions of classroom life. It also points to the importance of possible gender differences in students’ interpretations of care.

Howard (2002) conducted a study of African-American elementary and secondary students to determine what they considered to be the attributes of effective teachers. Issues of care emerged in their descriptions. For example, students valued teachers who got to know them personally and built relationships with them. They also appreciated it when teachers made the classroom seem like home, including interaction styles they were familiar with. As noted in other

studies (Alder, 2002; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001), these students identified “stern and strict methods of interaction” (p. 433) and high expectations as important to motivate them to do their best. However, students were clear that when they understood the purpose of yelling or firmness, they appreciated it; when it had no purpose or was overly negative, they resented it. Further, there were students for whom this style of interaction did not work, again providing weight to the assertion that it is important to know individual students well. As found in the Hayes et al. (1994) study, teachers must understand their students’ cultural reality in order to effectively meet their needs.

Ladson-Billings (1994) also stresses the importance of knowing students well. The teachers in her study also got to know parents and sought opportunities to see students in the community outside of school. This is because, in order to engage in what Ladson-Billings refers to as “culturally relevant teaching”, teachers must understand their students’ cultural backgrounds.

One of the rare studies to explore beliefs of teachers, students, and parents, found that although each group (administrators, teachers, teaching assistants, parents) claimed to care, their actions were not always interpreted as caring by each other or by students because of the absence of dialogue to reach understanding (Webb, Wilson, Corbett, & Mordecai, 1993). Further, cultural biases tended to create a barrier to common understanding.

Despite some cultural and situational differences in the interpretations of care by students, some recurring themes do emerge. Students want teachers to

respect them and get to know them as individuals (Alder, 2002; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Hayes et al., 1994; Howard, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994). They want teachers to help them and encourage them (Alder; Cassidy & Bates; Ferreira et al.; Hayes et al.) and they want to feel safe in the classroom environment. Some students discuss safety in terms of classroom management (Hayes et al.; Alder; Ferreira & Bosworth) or interpersonal relations (Cassidy & Bates). However, there are some differences in different contexts and among different genders and cultural groups (Hayes et al., 1994) that teachers need to be aware of when seeking to form caring relations in classrooms. Delpit (1995) points out that teachers cannot create a model for care “without taking issues of culture and community context into account” (p. 37).

Care has been defined in various ways by researchers and theorists. In this study, care will be defined by the participants themselves. The results of the B.C. Satisfaction Survey (2004-05) suggest that teachers, parents, and students disagree on whether teachers care about students. In this study I sought to uncover what members from these three groups meant when they said that teachers either care or do not care. The specific question addressed with this research was: How do participants from three stakeholder groups (teachers, parents, and students) in one school understand care in an educational context? I explored their understandings of care with respect to the teacher-student relationship as well as the parent-teacher relationship because I believed that if parent voices were relevant to issues of care in school (as outlined at the

beginning of this thesis), then perceptions of care within parent-teacher relationships were also relevant in order to help to create the caring communities of support referred to by Epstein (1995).

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

In this section I describe the research design, participants, and the methods of data collection and analysis.

### Research Design

The purpose of this study was to uncover teachers', parents', and students' beliefs about care in school. I chose to use semi-structured interviews to collect the data because it is through narrative, prompted by open-ended questions, that the picture of caring relationships can emerge. I looked for categories and themes from within their stories, instead of imposing them from outside. I did so as I was concerned that pre-imposed categories of care might limit the expression of individuals. As well, what is at issue here is not "objective reality" but rather the individual's *perceived* reality.

The perspective on events and actions held by the people involved in them is not simply their account of these events and actions, to be assessed in terms of its truth or falsity; it is *part* of the reality that you are trying to understand. (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17)

As Maxwell (1996) pointed out, one of the strengths of qualitative research is that it seeks to understand how participants make sense of their realities. It is our *interpretations* of events, not the events themselves, which influence us.

I did not conduct classroom observations because the issue being explored was the *beliefs* of these three groups, not my interpretations of their *behaviour*. As Noddings (2003) points out, if the student and, in this case,

parent, do not perceive and interpret the teacher's action as caring, it is not caring. Therefore, observing to see if the teacher's behaviour matched stated beliefs would have been redundant. The more important question deals with the way the parents and students interpret the teacher's actions.

Information was gathered from a broad spectrum of individuals within each group to enhance the richness of the data.

## **Participants**

### **School**

Participants in this study were from Bayview<sup>3</sup>, an inner city elementary school located within one of the largest and most diverse districts in British Columbia's lower mainland. At the time of the study, approximately 83% of the students attending the school spoke English as a second language. Punjabi was the most common first language, followed by Hindi and approximately 14 other languages, including Spanish. This school was chosen because of the possibility of uncovering potential differences among the opinions of the diverse cultural groups (identified by language, religion such as Sikh or Hindu, or ethnicity). Given that previous research has found cultural and gender differences in interpretations of care (see, for example, Hayes et al., 1994 and Howard, 1992), I used purposeful sampling to choose students, parents and teachers from each gender group and from different cultural groups represented at the school.

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<sup>3</sup> All names in this document are pseudonyms.



Because care seems to be culture and context specific (Kendrick, 1994), I decided to concentrate on one location, rather than interviewing subjects from various schools.

I was employed as a teacher at the school for 1.5 years and therefore, I was known, at least by reputation, to most participants in the study. The collegial relationships I have with the teacher participants helped to facilitate openness during the teacher interviews. By the time I conducted the interviews, I was no longer employed at the school, which I believe helped to increase the possibility that all participants would feel more comfortable answering questions openly because I did not hold any authority over them.

## **Teachers**

Each teacher I approached agreed to participate in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to include teachers from both genders, different cultural or ethnic backgrounds, and differing levels of experience. Although teachers from one site were interviewed, it was unlikely they would speak with a “unified voice” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999, p. 307) and I wanted to gain information from as wide a sampling as possible. The spread of ethnicity and gender reflects that of the school itself. At the time of the study, the teaching staff was predominantly Caucasian, with one Aboriginal teacher, two Sikh teachers, one Hindu teacher (on maternity leave at the time of the study), and one Chinese teacher from a staff of 24 teachers. When the interviews were conducted there was only one full-time male teacher on staff. I chose six participants because it allowed me to

include a mix of gender and ethnicity, while allowing for more in-depth study than a larger number would have afforded me.

**Table 2** Summary of Teacher Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Cultural Background</b>	<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>
Nick Masters	Caucasian	Vice principal, Grade 6	13 years 2 <sup>nd</sup> year as administrator
Christine Grettal	Caucasian	Grade 7	20+ years
Jean Elda	Aboriginal	Grade 4	11 years
Jas Kaur	Sikh	Grade 4	8 years
Lisa Walters	Caucasian	Learner Support	7 years
Elizabeth Smith	Caucasian	Grade 5	2 years

All adult participants in the study were given a consent letter to sign before we began the interviews (Informed Consent by Participants in a Research Study; see Appendix 1) together with a “Study Information Document” outlining the purpose and benefits of the study (Appendix 2).

### **Students**

Six students took part in the study; four in grade six and two in grade seven. Despite the fact that some authors have found that younger students can begin to articulate ideas about engaging teachers (Baker, 1999), younger students were not included in this study because I felt that the grade 6 and 7

students' cumulative years of experience in the school system would provide them with a richer background of knowledge to draw upon when articulating their beliefs about care. I was not looking for a judgment about whether their current teacher was caring, but rather a description of their global understanding and interpretation of caring in schools. As well, the B.C. Satisfaction Surveys (2004-05) revealed that older students are less inclined to believe that teachers care about them and therefore a greater need for common understanding exists as students advance through school.

Student participants were chosen in consultation with the vice principal, who was able to assist me in choosing students who would fit specific criteria. As Johnston & Nicholls (1995) point out, girls and boys are part of different conversations and therefore tell different stories. Therefore, both genders were represented in the research (three female, three male). Another criterion was cultural background because, as Kendrick (1994) points out, care is "grounded not only in each person's but every culture's own contextual experience of [a] relationship" (p. 19). This school did not reflect a white, middle-class population and I wanted the student participants to reflect the general population of the school. Therefore, I included Caucasian, Sikh, Hindu, and Latino students in the study.

The final criterion was the students' comfort level with me because shy or nervous students would be less likely to openly disclose their beliefs. I taught four of the students in this study, and while there was a small possibility they would try to describe my behaviours in order to please me, I felt this was unlikely

for two reasons: they had been with another teacher for almost two years (for two students) and almost one year (for the other two students), and I was no longer employed at the school so I had no authority over them. As well, I felt the small possibility of that limitation was outweighed by the importance of their comfort level which would allow them to be open during the interviews.

I was not looking into the question of ability or behaviour in relation to perceptions of care, so ability level and behaviour were not criterion for choosing specific students. However, this group of students did not represent a homogeneous group. They were not all academically gifted nor were they all considered well-behaved (as described by the vice-principal and in my own experience working with some of them). They represented a range from high to low academic ability. Some got involved in school-wide activities (such as sports or clubs); some did not.

**Table 3 Summary of Student Participants:**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Cultural Background</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Relationship to Researcher</b>
Sammy	Hindu	7	I taught him in grade 5 (for 1/2 year)
Jasmine	Hindu	7	I taught her in grade 5 (for 1/2 year)
Rosa	Latina	6	Some contact when her grade 5 teacher and I occasionally team taught lessons
Bobby	Sikh	6	I taught him in grade 5 (for 1 year)
Sandra	Sikh	6	I taught her in grade 5 (for 1 year)
Steve	Caucasian	6	No relationship; he was new at the school. The VP felt that because he was outgoing he would be open with me during interviews. As a new student at the school I thought he might have a different perspective to offer.

The vice principal made the initial contact with the students and gave them an information letter to take home to their parents. That letter outlined the purpose of the study and asked permission for me to approach the student (Appendix 3). When that letter was returned signed, I met briefly with the student to explain the purpose of the research, the types of questions I would be asking, and the place and approximate length of the interview. If they agreed to participate, I gave them a second consent form for participation, to be signed by their parents before the interviews were conducted (Appendix 4). In both letters, as well as in person, I explained that they were under no obligation to participate in the study and could change their mind about participation at any time. Only one student did not return the original form and another student was easily found to replace her.

## Parents

I attempted to interview six parents, which I chose in consultation with the vice-principal. He was in a unique position of knowing most parents, and was able to assist me in choosing and approaching those who would fit my criterion (based on culture/ethnicity, knowledge of English, and gender) and be most likely to provide the richest information. When discussing parents to approach for interviews, I was careful to stress the importance of including parents who represented a range of views, experiences, and levels of involvement in the school. While there was a possibility the vice-principal could unwittingly provide me with names of parents who would be more likely to express positive views of the school, this study was not looking into whether or not this particular school was a caring place. It was looking at the parents' beliefs about caring teachers, both in their own experiences as students and their children's experiences as students. In any event, from my experience working at the school, I knew that some of the parents included in this study did not fully support all school views.

It was important to "develop effective interview rapport" (Gall et al., 1994, p. 307), particularly with parents who may not be as familiar with the school system or feel comfortable being interviewed by an English speaking researcher. Therefore, one of the criteria was the parents' ability to speak English because that is the language I speak. While a multicultural worker could be used for translation, some meanings could be lost and the language barrier might affect the level of ease with which parents answer questions.

I wanted to include parents from the three main cultural/ethnic groups in the school, which are Sikh, Hindu and Caucasian. I also ensured that some

parents did not attend school in Canada in order to more closely reflect the general population of the school and highlight similarities and differences in cultural expectations.

Tatar and Horenczyk (2000) found that fathers and mothers had different expectations of teachers, and their expectations differed depending on whether they had sons or daughters. Therefore, I was careful to include mothers *and* fathers in order to uncover as much information as possible.

I did not interview parents and students from the same family because the purpose of this research was to find out if there is common ground or disagreement among the three *groups* of stakeholders within the school, not among the views of certain families.

Parents who had a more informed relationship with the school, such as PAC members, parents who volunteered at the school (i.e., by helping in the classroom, assisting with fundraisers, or helping on fieldtrips) or parents who were in contact with classroom teachers or administrators, were the most willing to participate. However, I was careful to choose parents who were not necessarily supportive of every program because I wanted to increase the breadth of views expressed.

All teachers who were approached agreed to participate, and only one student declined. In contrast, it was more difficult to find parents who would agree to be interviewed. The vice principal made the first contact so they would know who I was and what I was asking for. At that time, one parent refused and another declined because of health issues. I arranged interviews with six

parents, but two cancelled the evening prior to their scheduled interview time, one because of a family crisis and the other because of family visitors (both declined to reschedule at a later date). I found replacements for them, but the last parent scheduled to be interviewed did not arrive at our pre-determined time and place (her home), and did not return subsequent phone calls. As a result, only five parents were interviewed. I did not replace the final participant with another parent because the data I had gathered provided me with rich material to work with, and because the “missing” parent is symbolic of the difficulties that are present in the parent-teacher relationship (explained in detail in the results section).

**Table 4 Summary of Parent Participants:**

<b>Names</b>	<b>Ethnicity/ Cultural Background</b>	<b>Where they attended school</b>	<b>Children</b>
Mrs. Miller	Caucasian	B.C.	2 daughters
Mrs. Sandy	Caucasian	B.C., Alberta, and Ontario	2 sons
Mrs. Beck	Hindu	India	1 daughter, 1 son
Mr. Gill	Sikh	India	1 daughter, 1 son
Mr. Singh	Sikh	India	2 sons



## **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted over a six week period in the spring of 2006. Participants were asked open-ended questions in a semi-structured format to allow for the exploration of emerging ideas or themes. Adults were asked about their understandings of care from their perspectives as former students and as parents or teachers. The following tables outline the pre-determined questions that were asked of each group of participants.

**Table 5 Interview Questions for Teachers:**

<b>Teachers</b>	<p><u>Background Questions:</u></p> <p>*Where were you born?</p> <p>*Where did you go to school?</p> <p>*How many years have you been teaching?</p> <p>*Briefly describe your teaching experience (i.e., grades, subjects).</p> <p><u>Interview Questions:</u></p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed cared about you. What did he or she do that made you believe they cared?</p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed did not care. What did he or she do to make you think they did not care?</p> <p>*Tell me about a student you have cared for. How did you demonstrate that care?</p> <p>*Was this care acknowledged in some way by the student? In other words, did you feel like they understood you cared about them? If so, how?</p> <p>*Does the way you demonstrate care differ from student to student?</p> <p>*Tell me about a student relationship you found particularly challenging. What have you done to try to reach that student? Do you feel you were successful in reaching him/her?</p> <p>*As an elementary teacher, what do you think teachers can or should do to promote caring relationships with students (a sort of wish list)?</p> <p>*As a teacher, what do you see as your responsibility with respect to care towards parents?</p> <p>*What do you believe is the parent's role with respect to the teacher-parent relationship?</p> <p>*How do parents demonstrate care towards you?</p> <p>*What, if any, restrictions do you feel there are to developing caring relationships with students or parents?</p> <p>*Overall, what is your understanding of a caring teacher?</p> <p>*In summary, what are 3 or 4 words or phrases you would use to describe a caring teacher?</p> <p>*Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your views of caring and/or uncaring teachers?</p>
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**Table 6 Interview Questions for Students:**

<b>Students</b>	<p><u>Background Questions:</u></p> <p>*Where were you born? (How long have you lived in Canada?)</p> <p>*Where were your parents born?</p> <p>*How old are you?</p> <p>*How long have you been at this school? (What other schools did you go to?)</p> <p><u>Interview Questions:</u></p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed cared about you. Without mentioning any names, what did he or she do that made you believe they cared?</p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed didn't care. Without</p>
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	<p>mentioning names, what did he or she do to make you think they didn't care?</p> <p>*How would you describe a caring teacher?</p> <p>*How important is it for teachers to show that they care?</p> <p>*What advice would you give to teachers to help them care about students?</p> <p>*How do students show they care about teachers?</p> <p>*In summary, what are 3 or 4 words or phrases you would use to describe a caring teacher?</p> <p>*Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your views of caring and/or uncaring teachers?</p>
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**Table 7 Interview Questions for Parents:**

<b>Parents</b>	<p><u>Background Questions:</u></p> <p>*Where were you born?</p> <p>*Where did you go to school?</p> <p>*How many children do you have?</p> <p>*How old are your children? What grades are they in?</p> <p>*Have they attended other schools besides this one? If so, which ones?</p> <p><u>Interview Questions:</u></p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed cared about you. What did he or she do that made you believe they cared?</p> <p>*Think about a teacher you had that you believed did not care. What did he or she do to make you think they did not care?</p> <p>*What kinds of teacher behaviours do you consider caring towards your children?</p> <p>*What would you consider uncaring teacher behaviour towards your child?</p> <p>*As a parent what do you think teachers can or should do to promote caring relationships with students (a sort of wish list)?</p> <p>*What advice would you give to teachers to help them demonstrate care towards students?</p> <p>*In summary, what are 3 or 4 words or phrases you would use to describe a caring teacher?</p> <p>*What expectations or hopes do you have for the parent-teacher relationship?</p> <p>*What would you consider caring teacher behaviour towards you as a parent?</p> <p>*As a parent, what do you see as the teacher's responsibility with respect to care towards parents?</p> <p>*What do you believe is the parent's role with respect to a caring parent-teacher relationship?</p> <p>*What advice would you give to teachers to help them demonstrate care towards parents?</p> <p>*Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your views of caring and/or uncaring teachers?</p>
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I maintained a neutral stance in response to replies in order to avoid giving the impression that there were right or wrong answers. However, “all interviews are interactional” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997, p. 113), and “the interview is not merely a neutral conduit” (p. 114) for producing objective information. Interviews are “unavoidably collaborative” (p. 114) enterprises and, as such, the interviews had some resemblance to conversations, where there is a mutual give and take. As Holstein and Gubrium point out,

meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation, so to speak – as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. (p. 114)

While the interviewer “does not tell respondents what to say” (p. 125), “the interviewer must establish a climate for *mutual* disclosure.... This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings” (p. 119).

Adult participants were asked where they preferred to be interviewed. All teachers chose to be interviewed at the school. The two Caucasian parents were also interviewed at the school, while the Sikh and Hindu parents chose to be interviewed in their homes. The student interviews took place at school in a private, quiet location during school hours. Their interviews were not scheduled after school to avoid the appearance of extra work for the students.

The student interviews took approximately 20 – 30 minutes, while the adult interviews ranged from 45 minutes to approximately two hours, depending on the amount of information they gave.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by me, in most cases within a day or two of the interview. I provided initial coding in the margin of the transcription, highlighting themes I saw emerging. The transcribed notes were then either dropped off or emailed (their choice) to the adult participants for member checking to ensure descriptive validity (Maxwell, 2002). They received their transcripts within a week of the interview to make sure our discussion was still fresh in their minds. They were asked to review the notes for accuracy and were given the opportunity to make any changes or clarify their thoughts. Three teachers added or clarified information in the transcripts, and one parent clarified an answer. In a few instances, follow up questions were asked by email (for teachers) or in person (for students). I did not find it necessary to ask any parents follow up questions. The questions were simply to ask for clarification of something that was said in the interview.

I also created a short summary of the ideas I believed were most important from the interview, and that summary was also sent to the participant to enhance interpretative validity (Maxwell, 2002). At first I did this in two stages. I provided the transcript and after they confirmed the descriptive validity, I gave them a summary of my interpretations. However, I found that it was easier for them to review everything together, so after the first three I provided the summary of my interpretation with the transcript.

Students were also given a copy of the transcript and summary for their review and were given an opportunity to make changes. Afterwards, I followed up with a short meeting to confirm the interpretive and descriptive validity as well

as to ask any follow up questions. One student had difficulty reading the material, so I read the summary to him and gave him a chance to make changes to it.

Finally, the order of interviews depended on the schedule of the participants. It was not necessary to interview each group before beginning interviews with the next group (i.e., first all teachers, then all students, then all parents). Occasionally, themes that emerged during interviews were addressed in subsequent interviews. For example, two parents and the vice principal mentioned the importance of extra curricular activities, so when I interviewed students I asked them about the importance of those opportunities. I did this because I was curious about the fact that it did not come up in their discussions. As well, the issue of being strict was described as caring by some parents, but not others. I specifically raised it for those who did not mention it because it was such a central issue for one group of parents. However, for the most part, I did not ask subsequent interviewees about material that emerged in a previous interview for two reasons. First, it would require ongoing back-tracking to address issues that arose in each interview. Second, I wanted to be very careful to try not to lead by the questions I asked. It is precisely my desire to hear the participants' stories, as opposed to their agreement or disagreement of my suggestions or categories of care, that I chose to conduct a qualitative study.

## **Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed and read for the purpose of coding within a day or two of being collected so information was fresh and emerging themes

could be addressed in subsequent interviews if necessary. Heinrich's (1984) rationale for ongoing analysis (cited in Maxwell, 1996) is that it allows you to understand your progress and react to changes as you go to avoid having to backtrack later on.

In this section I will outline the ways that I organized and made sense of the data I collected.

The coding process involved the following general steps:

1. Coding

The first step involved a careful reading of the transcripts and placing short descriptions of specific items, such as teacher behaviours, in the margin. These initial codes often emerged from the participants' own language or were generated by me to describe a phenomenon. For example, some initial codes were: "recognize strengths and weaknesses," "recognizes students' personal lives," and "understand home situation." These codes appeared on the transcript when I sent it to the participant for member checking. From these codes I generated a short summary of the main ideas in the interview, which was also sent to the participant for checking.

2. Generic Categories and Themes

After initial coding was complete, I re-read the transcripts and summaries and created a table for each participant. I created these tables in order to more easily read and explore the data, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994, cited in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The first step in creating these tables was to organize information into "wide, generic categories ... [to] facilitate the retrieval of

different segments of data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 35). This was helpful because related ideas were not necessarily found together within the transcript. An example of such generic categories in this study are “caring” and “uncaring”.

Next, I placed the codes within broader themes and recorded a quote from the transcript to support the theme and code. For example, the codes mentioned above were placed in the theme of “gets to know students as individuals”.

After each table was complete, I re-read the summary and compared it to the themes and codes I used in the table to ensure that I stayed consistent with the intent of their original statements and that the themes that were identified in the transcript summary were evident in the table that followed. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) caution researchers against simply leaving the data after it has been coded. They suggest we must “move beyond the codes, categories, and data bits back to what the ‘whole’ picture is or may be” (p. 46) so that information taken out of context does not lose its meaning.

#### 4. Compare and Contrast

I compared and contrasted data from each interview with findings in other interviews, both while the interviews were being conducted and after the interviews were completed. After the first tables were created for each individual, I created cross-reference tables for each group so I could more easily see where similarities and differences occurred. However, I found that these cross-reference tables for the adults were too lengthy to be useful (the teachers’ cross-reference table was 24 pages long). So I re-read the entire transcript for each person and for the adults I identified the dominant themes within each general



topic (i.e., their beliefs as students, their beliefs as parents or teachers, their beliefs about the parent-teacher relationship). Themes that were discussed at length or that were raised more than once were considered to be dominant themes.

The students' data was less detailed so instead of creating a chart of dominant themes, I simply reorganized their cross-reference chart so it was easier to use. I divided it into two broad categories: caring and uncaring. Within the caring section I grouped their codes within three sub-categories: relationships, classroom environment, and academics.

From the recursive exercise of reading, re-reading, coding, and cross-referencing, I became intimately familiar with the material and patterns and dominant themes became evident, such as the relationship between past experience and current beliefs for the adults. Throughout the process I repeatedly asked myself if there was any evidence in their stories that disputed the theme or code I was attributing to them. I also kept track of my own thoughts and questions in electronic journal so that I could address questions in subsequent interviews and see patterns emerge as the process unfolded.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS**

In this chapter I discuss the results of the interviews. I begin with the students' perceptions of caring teacher-student relationships, followed by the teachers', then each of the parents' beliefs. At the conclusion of that section I highlight important similarities and differences among the three groups' beliefs. In the next part of this chapter I report on the teachers' and parents' beliefs about the parent-teacher relationship. Finally, at the end is a summary of the major findings.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship: Student Beliefs**

In this section I outline the results from the student interviews. I begin with their understanding of the importance of care, then discuss their understanding of the reciprocal nature of the teacher-student relationship. I conclude with their beliefs about what a caring teacher is.

#### **Importance of Care**

As previously described, the research is clear about the benefits of care in schools. However, I was interested in the perceptions of care of the students in this study and whether they thought care was important for their education. After all, if they do not perceive caring teachers to be important to their school experience then there was little point to the study. Further, if effort and energy is to be expended in the formation of these relationships, the stakeholders should

have some agreement about the significance of it. If it is not important to students, teachers might better spend their energy in other areas that are deemed to make more of a difference.

I asked each student if they thought it was important for teachers to show care towards students and all strongly expressed their belief that caring teachers make a significant positive difference in their school experience. For example, all students explained that they work harder when they know that teachers care for them. Jasmine noted that if teachers care, students work harder “because [we] wouldn’t want to lose that person’s hope or trust for us.” She went on to explain that if teachers “show that they care, then we basically have more respect for ourselves.” In other words, it changes the way you see yourself. On the other hand, she stated that if teachers do not care, “then why should I do this homework and stuff. Like it makes people more rebellious.... [and] you’re going to feel bad about yourself probably.”

Rosa and Sandra echoed Jasmine’s belief that students work harder when they believe the teacher cares. Rosa believed that caring teachers make you want to be at school and you work harder for them because they make you understand why school is important. Sandra explained that,

if I know a teacher doesn’t really care ... about how my work is, then I don’t really put a lot of effort into the work, because if they don’t care they might not even look at it. But if a teacher cares and they really take time to read what I write or something, then I put a lot of effort into it.

She went even further in suggesting that if teachers are uncaring, “people might just change schools ... if they don’t feel like coming to school because they’re afraid.”

Sammy and Steve agreed that students work harder if the teacher cares. Steve believed that caring teachers help increase a student’s confidence because “then they believe someone does care.” Both thought they would remember caring teachers and what they learned from them. As Steve pointed out, caring teachers are “more helpful for life.” The students believed that students do not do as well in classrooms where teachers are not perceived as caring. In fact, Sammy suggested that “when the teacher’s mean to you, you wouldn’t want to learn from her. She’ll basically in a way be telling the kid, I don’t want to teach you.”

Bobby described caring teachers as giving students a head start. His description of the importance of caring highlighted the effect that modelling has on students. He said that students work harder for caring teachers, because “if the teacher works hard, all these kids are going to work hard.” He went on to note that if teachers are unfocussed (identified as an uncaring attribute by him), then students become unfocussed. This suggested that if students perceive that teachers do not care, they might not care. Teachers need to model the importance of school.

On the other hand, according to Jasmine, it is possible for teachers to show “too much care” towards students. She found it irritating when teachers paid too much attention to her:

Well, like the teacher, they're constantly asking me how was your day, and stuff like that. Like that's not bad, right, but ... then there's some students that they don't really do that to, so it's sort of like, just leave me alone. And I like to have my own personal bubble, but some teachers they sort of just go in that bubble and they just show too much care....

While students were unanimous about the importance of caring teachers, teachers need to be aware of how their actions are perceived. Too much attention can be counter-productive, at least according to one student.

In keeping with previous research findings, every student in this study expressed the belief that when they felt a teacher cared for them, their school experience improved. They explained that they work harder when they believe teachers care and some students believed they would remember more of what they learn from caring teachers. Some students explained that caring teachers can help to increase their confidence and self-respect. On the other hand, when they believed teachers did not care, their effort decreased and there was a chance students would become more rebellious.

### **Reciprocal Relationships**

Noddings (2005) explains that relationships are reciprocal and each party contributes to them in specific ways. When teachers, parents and students have different expectations for and interpretations of care, it means the teacher, or carer, can become "burned out by the constant outward flow of energy that is not replenished by the response of the cared-for" (Noddings, p. 17). Thus, teachers are significantly affected by their relationships with students, just as students are affected by their relationships with teachers. For example, van Horn et al. (1999)

found that low levels of reciprocity from students led to higher levels of burnout among teaching staff and Goldstein & Lake (2000) summarize the benefits that “caring pedagogical relationships” (p. 862) can have for teachers.

Of interest was the fact that, without being asked about it, three of the students I interviewed recognized the reciprocal nature of relationships and articulated their understanding of the impact of students’ responses on teacher behaviours, as well as that of teachers’ responses on students’ behaviours.

Bobby explained that when students like the teacher, they will help out more, even if it is something small. “Even like the teacher might not notice at that moment, but sort of as the little details build up, they make a huge thing so the teacher at the end might say oh yeah, these kids are nice, and helped me out a lot so they cared about me. And then that makes the teacher want to care about the child.” He suggested that “if you give some, you get some. What goes around comes around.”

Sammy echoed this view when he stated that “if your teacher is not nice to you, then you don’t want to be nice to her, which would make you want to be disruptive in class.”

Jasmine explained that teachers are more likely to show care for students who are well-behaved and do well in school “because I guess if you’re well-behaved then you’re like, okay this person’s going to give me an easy time, not a hard time, and I can be relaxed then.” She went on to explain that when students do not respond to a teacher, the teacher will stop caring:

To [some students] they don’t really like school and they probably have family problems, so they don’t like that and the teachers get crabby, like

very angry with them just because of the way they're behaving constantly so they will just like, stop caring. ...You're trying really hard to make that person do better but that person doesn't really care so I don't really think there's no point in showing more care.

All six students were asked how they show teachers they care. These included being respectful (including listening to the teacher), being friendly and talking to the teacher (including talking about personal problems), being helpful, following classroom rules, working hard, and being concerned for the teacher when he or she is away.

### **What is a Caring Teacher?**

The students in this study believed that having a caring teacher is integral to a positive school experience. But what did they consider to be caring behaviours? Students' responses are categorized under three sections: relationships, classroom environment, and academics.

#### **Relationships**

Students identified caring teachers as those who are concerned about them beyond academics. Sammy explained that one teacher "was really concerned when I didn't come to school [and asked] how I felt." In contrast, an uncaring teacher, "instead of asking how you are, they'd start yelling at you and saying how come you weren't at school, you missed so much. Go catch up." As well, "if a kid gets hurt or hurts his feelings, the teacher will make him feel better." Bobby found it "hard to explain, but you can see when teachers care about you. When they actually, if you're hurt in some way, they ask are you okay, are you

alright? You know, basic, small little details, it's hard to describe, but those sort of show a teacher cares about you." Rosa knew a teacher cared because "if you're crying ... the teacher she hugs me and she would ask me if I'm okay, do you want to call your mom or something." Sammy went on to explain that caring teachers treat students like family. They should "love the kid and treat them like your own. Instead of like some stranger that you've never seen before."

One way to demonstrate care is for teachers to get to know students as individuals. This allows teachers to really help students. Bobby explained that "if you're having problems at home they talk about it" because "I mean, what if you needed help, you needed counseling, teachers should know about what's happening at home." Sammy agreed that teachers should know about students' family issues, "because if you don't know the child's family issues, they come to school and if they have some certain problem at home you can never get to figure out and that will make the child fail more." Sandra believed that "if you're having a really big problem then you can talk to your teacher because the teacher is always there for you, [or at least] they should be."

On the other hand, uncaring teachers are too busy to talk with students. "Like if you want to talk, they'd be like oh, I'm busy right now and they don't really even tell you, how about a different time, they'd just be like bye. They don't chat with you or nothing. They just do their job and then that's it. That's all." When teachers do not take the time to talk with students and really listen to them, they will not understand why students are struggling. Jasmine explained that

if the student has a problem, they act really rebellious, like if their parents divorce. I've noticed some teachers, they don't even try to find out how



come they're acting like this, they're just automatically like, okay that person's rebellious. Okay I know that so now I'm going to be really strict on her, but they don't find out the problem, right?

From her perspective, caring teachers took the time to get to know students as individuals and understand their home circumstances.

In order to get to know students, teachers need to actively listen to them. In fact, Steve identified the ability to listen as the most important attribute of a caring teacher. He explained that "they show they care by listening to you. And if they care they pay attention. They know what you're saying." On the other hand, according to Bobby, uncaring teachers are "in their own world; they're not focused, not personally with you."

Caring teachers get to know students, but they also allow students to get to know them. They interact with students and share personal experiences "because experiences that you've had, we might face them, so that helps." Jasmine appreciated it when teachers "just tell you about their own experiences without really having to be asked about it."

Students also recognized immediately if teachers were not being genuine and they resented it. Sammy wanted teachers to "be nice, but if you're going to be nice, then be nice like you mean it." Sandra articulated it most strongly. She believed that teachers should "just be what [they] think is right" and not "try to be really cool [or]... be your best friend." They should "not try to be someone else that they're not.... Teachers shouldn't cover their identity." She resented it when teachers try to be cool or please the cool kids. "Like if you want a way to teach and maybe a couple of kids that everyone likes, like a certain group in the class

doesn't like that, you should still teach it" and not change to please one group of students. For her, caring teachers were genuine and true to themselves. They did not hide their identity or try to change to please others.

Trustworthiness was another attribute identified by students. Steve explained that if a teacher is trustworthy, "I know I can trust them and I can tell them my secrets and stuff." However, two students talked about incidents where the trust was shattered. Bobby explained that "some teachers tend to talk behind the back of kids ... and some teachers talk about other teachers." Steve shared a specific incident where a teacher's indiscretion caused hurt for a child:

Well, this is about my sister, because she can't read well. At our old school one of the teachers said that out loud and most of the kids in her class started telling rumours about it, saying my sister can't read. ...She was writing her report cards and [my sister] said she usually says them out loud, and some kid was behind her and he heard. That really hurt her.

Teachers who do not respect the privacy of students were not considered caring.

Fairness is another attribute these students felt strongly about, although it looked differently to different students. Rosa talked about the need to treat all students the same. She explained that when students need help, an uncaring teacher "would only help the other one, she wouldn't help you." Caring teachers helped everyone.

Others described fairness as not treating everyone the same; care is based on student need. Steve explained that students should be treated the same in general, but some students would need extra help. He did not believe that everyone should do the same amount of work, but that should be based on

ability, not teacher preference. Sandra, on the other hand, saw fairness as an issue of inclusion. Sometimes teachers put students on “a certain team, but if you’re slow or like you’re not really fast, they put you on another team with other really slow people and maybe you don’t want to be on that team. So they exclude you just because you’re different.” This issue also arose when she talked about extra curricular sports teams. When a friend of hers was cut from the team, she saw that as unfair exclusion. She believed “that didn’t really show [the teacher] cared, but she cared for the people who actually were stronger.”

Jasmine saw fairness as understanding what students need. She believed that some students need more of the teacher’s attention, and teachers should be aware that need.

Me and my friends, we’ve both experienced when we had teachers that want to show so much care, but we know that they already cared about us, and it’s like they should show more concern or care for the students who don’t think that the teacher cares about them. Like I have this one friend who doesn’t think the teacher cares about her, but the teacher cared, but she just didn’t show it enough. But then if you show it too much, then it’s like leave me alone.

Fairness was important to these students, and teachers need to be aware of how their actions are being perceived.

Another issue the students raised in relation to fairness was discipline. This was one of the most passionately discussed and frequently raised issues during the student interviews. Students were clear that they understood that teachers need to have rules and be firm, but they resented it when teachers were too strict. Being too strict created a barrier to caring relationships. The students

preferred teachers who were patient and did not yell. For example, Bobby explained that he thought “being strict is pretty good. Teachers should be strict if the kids do something bad, but if they’re not doing something bad, you know I don’t think they should be as strict.” Steve concurred because teachers need to be “kind of strict because sometimes you do something serious and they’ll need to be serious about that.” Jasmine thought that “if we do something wrong, instead of being all mean about it, like really, really strict and stuff, [well] you have to be strict of course, but then they’d also have a little bit of sympathy.”

Teachers were considered uncaring if they yell or get mad at everyone for something one person did. As Sammy explained, “if [students] screw up on something, stay calm and don’t start yelling. Most important, don’t take your anger out on others.... [Teachers are mean] when they get mad at somebody else for some reason, then they’d get mad at the whole class.” Bobby noticed that some teachers get mad “over small little details, their mind blows up and they go why did you do this? Why did you do it? They keep asking the same question while you’re just trying to explain to them.”

Jasmine described an incident with a teacher who stayed calm when students misbehaved and asked for their input in solving the problem.

We had a substitute and we usually line up in the same order, but then we all like went to sit with our friends.... And then she actually came up to us and talked to us about the problem. She didn’t just yell at us immediately, she started talking to us. She was like, why do you think this happened? What’s your input and things like that.

Including the students in problem-solving was appreciated, and they reciprocated by showing her more respect for the rest of the day. They even wrote an apology letter for their misbehaviour.

Sandra believed that teachers should be strict when students are disruptive, but not when students are making choices that do not affect others.

She explained that

...if people are fooling around too much in class, like they're misbehaving, then you should be strict because you should tell them specific rules and people will follow them. But if it's like something, like you're reading or something and you just feel like not reading, ... then the teacher shouldn't be stern because it's what you think or you feel, like not reading.

She also resented it when teachers yelled because you did not understand something or because the teacher disagreed with you. A teacher is uncaring "if they yell at you, if they tell you something is wrong and it's your own idea. If they exclude your opinions."

These students appreciated teachers who are concerned about them. They believed caring teachers get to know students as individuals and understand their home situations. They interact with students and really listen to them. Caring teachers are genuine and allow students to get to know them. They are trustworthy and fair. Uncaring teachers yell and are too strict.

### **Classroom Environment**

Safety was a key factor for some students. Jasmine talked about safety in terms of being comfortable to share ideas in class. In this student's opinion, one

way teachers encourage sharing of ideas is to be clear that students are entitled to their opinions. For example,

when they teach us something, they also start by giving their own input on it and then they let the students give their own input on it and they won't be like oh no, that's wrong. They'll just be like, that's your opinion, but my opinion is this, like they don't say you're wrong.

On the other hand, uncaring teachers "tell you something is wrong and it's your own idea. They exclude your opinions."

Jasmine also believed that caring teachers make the classroom a safe place for student interactions. They helped with small incidents to facilitate this. For example,

Say someone asks another kid if they could have their chips or something, and the person isn't really feeling that comfortable with giving it, but they don't want to be put down, so the teacher would normally just stop it. She'd say it's not nice to do that or whatever. Like they'd always try and make sure that you're always feeling happy, trying not to put you in an uncomfortable position with other students if they see that.

For Bobby, physical safety was very important. He raised it as an issue, perhaps because of a recent incident that was fresh in his mind. He described an event where there was a fight off school grounds, and the teachers found out what happened and got involved.

There were some incidents that we had that some kid in grade 7 beat up a kid in grade 6, punched him in the eye. He had a scar and stuff and the teacher somehow notices it and none of the kids told, but they somehow got this information that this happened with these kids from our school and it happened at Dairy Queen. And so they dealt with it.

He appreciated that they took action. "That's what I think a caring teacher would be. They know what's happening around you."

Bobby also discussed the importance of organization because it affects how the classroom runs. "Organization, that's what I think is a key term, in what I would think of a caring teacher. Because being organized gives out a lot of like how you are." On the other hand, he thought "of a not caring teacher as being not responsible. I mean some teachers are not organized. They have their stuff everywhere [and they're] scattered. One minute they're focused on their work, then they're daydreaming, and then when some kids are asking questions, they're gazing off and stuff like that." This was a problem because "if they're not focused, the kids are just going to say yeah well, he or she's doing it, well I should do it too. It really doesn't matter, I don't care about school. If she doesn't care, why should I care? That sort of affects us."

Another important aspect was the physical space. Jasmine talked about caring teachers as being those who "like their job and what they're doing. And teachers who have lots of posters and stuff in the classroom, like it's full and not really dead looking. It has lots of excitement and things like that in it."

Thus, for some students, the school or classroom environment was important. They described caring teachers as those who decorate the classroom, create an emotionally and physically safe atmosphere, and get involved when issues arise. As well, Bobby described caring teachers as being organized, which he saw as showing responsibility.

**Academics**

It was particularly important to students that teachers be concerned about their learning and help them when they need it, without getting angry. Sandra explained that caring teachers were understanding. "Like, if you get something wrong or something they don't yell at you, they actually try to help you with the right answers." This seems obvious, but the students' perceptions were that teachers sometimes get angry when they did not understand the work.

Sammy explained that caring teachers are "always concerned about your work, how good it is." They encourage students and show them how to improve. He thought teachers should review information step by step and "go through every member of the class, are you learning, are you understanding, go on the overhead and show step by step twice or something." He resented it when teachers did not check for understanding and did not give clear explanations, and then got upset when he asked for help. "She'd say how come you don't understand it? I just taught the class, were you not listening?" Steve did not expect teachers to "tell you the answer but [if they care] they describe how to do it better if you ask for help."

Having a helpful teacher was also important to Rosa. For example, a caring teacher would help you catch up if you were away and they help you understand the work. "They make you want to go to school more because they don't just say this is the homework and then go. They actually help you with it."

As well, Sandra pointed out that teachers should not just move on to the next topic when students have not grasped current information. "Usually teachers review stuff, but some teachers that don't care they just let it go and just



put in on your report card. They don't review it or anything. [Caring teachers] help you review it and make you understand. They put it in words you can understand." Thus, caring teachers are not just willing to help; they are able to help.

According to Rosa, caring teachers also made learning relevant. "They say you have a goal to reach and they explain how you have to go to college and they make it sound really important in your life."

The students interviewed for this study did not mind working hard and recognized that caring teachers give them more work so they learn. Bobby explained that a caring teacher is

a challenging teacher because from a challenging teacher you learn something. Not like well, here's the work, look it over and here's the test. You don't learn anything. You might already know that because it's pretty easy. ...Even though we think, us kids, we think that when they give us work, we think it's torture. But I think a caring teacher would actually give us work, explain it properly, but you know, level it out – not too little and not too much.

These participants wanted to be challenged and helped, but they also wanted learning to be fun. "Don't just give papers and then just read out of the textbook and have a test."

Learning was important to these students, and they believed that caring teachers are concerned about their progress, help them with work without getting angry, and explain concepts clearly. They also make learning relevant, challenging, and fun.

## Summary

The students who participated in this research believed caring relationships were important to a positive school experience and some of them recognized that their actions had an impact on those relationships because relationships are reciprocal. Their perceptions of caring teachers were divided into three categories: relationships, environment, and academics. They wanted teachers to be concerned about them and get to know them as individuals. In order to get to know them, the students believed that teachers needed to really listen to them and be present when they were with them. They believed teachers should know about their home situations so they can better understand their needs and be willing to help them with personal problems. In order to establish a caring relationship, students wanted to be able to trust their teachers. For them, part of building that trust involved being careful about what was said about students. Participants recognized that teachers needed to be strict, but they reported disliking it when they were unfairly strict. In their eyes, fairness was important to building a caring relationship.

The students also believed that a major component of a caring environment was safety. They believed that caring teachers made it safe for them to share ideas and express opinions, and they also get involved in making it safe for them to interact with peers. Bobby, for example, appreciated it when teachers knew what was going on and got involved in unsafe situations to make school safer for everyone.

Organization was also important to Bobby because it modeled responsible behaviour and made the class run more smoothly. It also showed the teacher

cared about his or her job. Finally, Jasmine thought caring teachers made sure the physical environment was welcoming and decorated nicely. It looked like a place they would want to be.

For participating students, care was not only about relationships or environment. Caring about academics was very important to them and they talked at length about the importance of teachers helping them when they did not understand. They strongly voiced their dismay at teachers who appeared to be angry when they asked for help with work. They believed caring teachers were helpful and able to explain concepts clearly. They made sure everyone understood, and they did not simply leave it when students were struggling. These students wanted to learn and be challenged, and it helped when teachers made work relevant.

### **Teacher-Student Relationship: Adult Beliefs**

In this section I outline the results from the adult interviews. I start by describing the teachers' beliefs of the teacher-student relationship, and then outline the parents' views. At the end of the section, I summarize the similarities and differences among all participants.

### **Connections to the Past**

One of the most interesting aspects of the adult interviews was the clear connection between past experiences and current beliefs. All the adults were students at one time and had their own experiences with what they perceived to be caring or uncaring teachers. Therefore, I began each interview with a

question asking teachers or parents to describe a teacher or teachers they believed cared about them in school. I also asked them to talk about a teacher they believed did not care. The memories were vivid for most and I was struck by how closely their currently expressed beliefs and expectations were aligned with the stories they told about their past.

Rather than simply listing each belief that was stated by the adult participants, I report on their beliefs within the context of their past experiences. The past plays an important role in the formation of current beliefs, which in turn impacts relationships in school. First I explore the teacher-student relationship through the eyes of teachers, then parents.

#### **Teacher Beliefs: What is a Caring Teacher?**

The teachers described in detail those teachers who had cared for them, and they recalled, in some cases emotionally, the ones they believed did not care. When I went on to ask about the ways they show care towards their own students, the parallels were striking, and yet most had never made the connection.

#### **Jas Kaur: Female Sikh teacher, born in India, school in India and B.C.**

The only teacher to have any schooling outside of Canada was Jas, who completed one year in India, and the rest of her education in Canada. Her descriptions of caring teachers revolved around those who publicly recognized her abilities and gave her special jobs because of her talents. For example, she was good in math, and her teacher would allow her to demonstrate her knowledge by doing problems on the board for other students. As well, when

she was in high school, “the teachers knew I was a fast typist. They would get me to type some of their work for them, so ... because they were asking me to do something for them, I guess that would show that they cared.” Being recognized for her skill was the way that teachers showed they cared for her.

Achievement and recognition also played a large role in her current beliefs about care. She emphasized that caring teachers have high expectations, are concerned about student learning, provide extra help and recognize achievement. She reported doing

a lot of recognizing in the classroom, so if I have students who have excelled I recognize them. I try and make them proud of themselves. Particularly the kids who don't often excel, you know I really like to bring them up and say okay, you've done a wonderful job in doing this.... I think that really boosts their self esteem.

She went on to explain that if “we have faith in these kids then I think they will prosper. If we don't have any of that, then I think it's very hard for a child to succeed.” Her own memories of success and having that success recognized were the ones she spoke about when describing caring teachers, and as a teacher, she strove to do the same for her own students.

It was interesting to note that one of the parents I interviewed (Mrs. Miller) had a child in Jas's class and she expressed concern about public recognition of achievement. She worried about the effect of having her daughter publicly recognized in front of her peers because

...she's had a few daggers looking her way ... I don't know if that's a good idea that they announce a lot of this. If she does get the top math mark in a test or something every time and her name is mentioned, I don't know if

it's good for her or good for the other kids.... But the teacher said the kids look forward to it... I don't know, I don't know. That's the only part that I kind of wonder about. I just warn [her] that you're not necessarily going to be at the top all the time..., but she pushes herself so much, I don't want her let down.

Jas's past experience seemed to dictate her current practices; those who were the recipients of that practice may or may not have interpreted her actions in the same way.

Jas believed that recognition was important because "building a positive self concept and promoting self identity builds a positive classroom community and therefore caring relations." Some other forms of recognition she used included acknowledging student birthdays, having students compliment each other, and posting student photos because she "think[s] that sort of recognize[s] who they are and things that they like to do ... [and] sort of develops a kind of community."

For Jas, teachers who did not care were ones who were uninteresting ("I don't remember doing a whole lot in her classroom") and had rigid rules without regard for individual circumstances or understanding the *person* the rules were supposed to apply to. One example of this was a teacher who "wouldn't let me use the phone [to ask for a ride home], and I mean this was bizarre and I think I would have only been in grade 4 or something like that.... She didn't care that it was dark outside and didn't care about my circumstances." This teacher did not take the time to listen and did not understand personal needs and circumstances of the individual student. A rule was a rule.

As a teacher, Jas tried to communicate with students and know them as individuals. For example, she believed it was important to listen to students and understand their individual circumstances, unlike her teacher who refused her access to the phone, despite the late hour. She explained that she encourages students to

speaking up, rather than having a one way discussion.... I think it would be caring if you actually listen to a student and listen to their side of a story too.... If there is something that I'm not understanding or if I'm upset about something that they've done then I need to hear – help me to understand why this happened this way.

As well, she believed in the importance of understanding family context in order to understand students. For example,

I had a lot of problems with this one Caucasian boy and I understand that he comes from a rough background, right, because his mom is a single mom.... So I try to understand where they're coming from and that will help you to understand the child. ...So almost I can accept because this is the kind of family that he was brought up in ... [and] it helps me to understand his behaviour in school.

Jas's current beliefs seem to be rooted in her past experiences. She had an uncaring teacher who did not listen to her or understand her circumstances and now she makes an effort to listen to students and understand them as individuals. Her positive experience of public recognition was also evident in her current beliefs. She believed it was important to make sure students learn academics and are publicly recognized for their achievements. She used peer recognition activities to promote a sense of community.

**Jean Eida: Female Aboriginal Teacher, born in Canada, school in B.C., including Residential School.**

When recounting her experiences as a student, I was struck by the fact that, in contrast to Jas's student experiences, Jean never mentioned achievement or academics directly. Interestingly, they both attended school for a time on Northern Vancouver Island but their experiences of care were quite different. In fact, what she appreciated about the caring teacher she remembered is that he went *beyond* academics to teach them things about life and about themselves. He saw her potential, and through his belief in her, she learned to believe in herself because "he just really pulled out a lot of positive things that we thought we didn't, well for me, I thought I didn't have." He also opened her eyes to new possibilities. She never believed she was smart, but she remembered being on an extended fieldtrip with him, and visiting UBC for the first time and she "thought, man I'd like to come to this university." Many years later, she did.

She had fond memories of him teaching them how to golf and appreciated that it was "extra, over and above kind of thing that he did with us, other than the academics." Over and over she talked about things he did beyond the normal teaching-learning routine one expects from school. For example, he took them on an extended fieldtrip to Vancouver (from their school on northern Vancouver Island). She explained that "we did this during spring break and it was his time. He didn't have to do this, but he did. It was just so cool like, here is somebody who has given up his time to be with us." She was also touched that he introduced them to his wife and extended family. While on the fieldtrip, "they



brought us to his in-laws' place. It was a posh doctor's place, their huge estate, and we swam there, we had a barbecue ..., they fed us really, really good there."

This teacher also became involved in the community beyond school, which most teachers did not do.

He participated in the community, like growing up in an aboriginal community and non-aboriginals coming you think, well they're only going to stay a short while, don't get too close to them. But that didn't happen. They stayed in our community for four years. [He and his wife] participated in the potlatches that happened in the village. They were invited and they went....

Jean's teacher got to know his students and they got to know him. He spent time with them beyond regular school hours and introduced them to his own family. When she began weaving the story of her current beliefs, the similarities were striking.

For example, like her former teacher, she allowed students to get to know her and her family. While she did not believe she could be their friend, she could be friendly and wanted to be a real person to her students.

I share a lot about who I am, not just who I am as an aboriginal woman, but I share about my family and that. They've met my daughter and they want to know when my son's going to come and visit now. And then we had an aboriginal group come and perform and they were my relatives. So I really try to share who I am. My husband came one night and listened to some of them share their speeches.... So they've met him.

Part of being genuine was sharing her feelings with them. She explained that:

We have our hurts too. I'm not saying pour our hearts out to them, but ... let them know that sometimes we have bad days too. Or sad situations

happen in our families too. See that human, caring side of who we are.... Like I'm not afraid to show my hurt feelings by shedding tears in front of my students. I mean that's who I am. When I'm hurt, I cry.

Her teacher spent time building relationships, getting to know his students and allowing them to get to know him and that is what Jean tried to do with her students.

Part of knowing her students as individuals was adjusting expectations to fit their needs. One example of this was one student who had recently moved to Canada:

There's a young fella I have in here who sometimes just zones out. I know where he's at, he's in his country. He doesn't want to be here ... physically. So while I try not to let him get away with not doing any of the work, I try to understand that ... he doesn't like being here, he doesn't want to be here. How am I going to work at having him get his education stuff done?

Further, for Jean, care of students did not end with the school year. She still kept in contact with the previous teacher she described as caring, and many of her students were still in contact with her. In fact, one former student was suicidal and sent her an email from another province. Because Jean knew her so well, she was able to read between the lines and contacted the police in that province. They arrived in time to save her life. That would not have been possible if Jean did not believe in getting to know students as individuals and did not believe that care continued beyond the limits of the school year.

When asked to describe a teacher she believed did not care for her, Jean emotionally recalled one teacher, who

...had flaming, flaming red hair and really cold green eyes and her lips were red and she had red, red cheeks, rouge. I remember coming in one morning and handing my math homework in and when she checked it she called me up to her desk and, um, every single answer, except for one was wrong. And um, she called me stupid. She called me stupid little Indian, I would never amount to anything.... So after that incident, I felt like I had been shrunk. And I became a lot more quiet than usual. It wasn't until grade 10 that I started to think more positively about myself.

As a teacher, she believed it was important to raise children up, not cut them down. She tried to "recognize the gifts that children have. Every single one of them have gifts inside of them, and rather than seeing ... the negative inside them, is to pull those gifts out.... Often I hear kids say oh, I'm not an artist. And I say sure you are. Yes, you're an artist. So, like crunching that negativity out of them."

Another negative experience she had was when she moved to the mainland and attended a large urban high school. At that school, "the population was the population of the town that I came from.... It was huge, it was just overwhelming. I was just a face in the crowd in the school [so] I didn't stay. I ended up quitting [school]." These experiences of being valued by her grade 10 teacher, being de-valued by her earlier teacher, and being lost in the crowd of a large urban high school, are consistent with her current beliefs about the importance of safety, community, and a sense of belonging. She wanted her classroom to be "a safe place for them to be. It's that sense of belonging. They want to, I hope, I think, they want to be here. Or it's not going to work."

Respect was also a dominant theme in her story. Both the teacher who demonstrated a lack of respect by calling her a “stupid Indian” who would never amount to anything, and the teacher who made her believe in herself again, may have influenced her in this regard. It is not only about teachers and students being respectful of one another, but also encouraging students to respect each other. She tried to

...instill in them that we do need to be respectful of each other. We might not be able to agree with everything that everybody says or does, but we do need to be respectful because for 10 months we're in this room together and ... we need to be able to get along. And there's a saying.... The hurt of one is the hurt of all, and the honour of one is the honour of all. So when you hurt a person, you're hurting not just that person, but other people too.

The themes that were uncovered through Jean's experiences as a student, and those described in her current teaching practice were parallel. Respect, seeing potential, getting to know students as individuals and allowing them to get to know her (and her family), building community, and continuity of care, all have their roots in her past.

**Elizabeth Smith: Caucasian teacher, born in Canada, school in B.C.**

Safety was a dominant theme in Elizabeth's narrative. Like Jean, Elizabeth was made to feel vulnerable by a teacher she perceived as uncaring. “He liked to provide humour in the class but it wasn't in a way that was very comfortable.... Always blond jokes, and of course I was a blond.” She did not feel safe going to him for help. He was someone she “would definitely not have gone to see ... especially I think I would not have gone to see him after school. I

think there was a sense [that] ... I wouldn't be safe" because he was "just very negative and I think because I was shyer and quieter, I don't know if that was the reason but I often felt like I was picked on."

On the other hand, the caring teacher she described was someone who spent extra time with her and was always willing to help. He was also someone she felt safe with. She explained that,

I felt comfortable to ask questions, and I was a very shy person, very easily intimidated, insecure, and I felt like I could go and ask questions that maybe in another place I would feel like maybe I shouldn't ask that because it might be a stupid question. So I just felt comfortable and at ease with him.

As a teacher, she valued being available to help students with their academic work and personal problems or issues. Students "know that [she's] available in the morning by a certain time. They know that they can come after school" to speak with her. She was proud of the fact that students approached her to tell her things and she took the time to listen to them. "Often many of them come and show me things that they've read in a book or they come and tell me about something that's happened."

Elizabeth wanted her students to feel safe with her, and to encourage that level of comfort she felt it was important for her students to see her as a real human being, which echoed Jean's attempts to show her students who she was as a person.

I think I try to make myself human to the kids, because I think so often teachers are kind of in this little glass box and students don't always realize that they have a life, and that they're people and have emotions

and all of those things. And I think that's important, and I mean in order to have a relationship, kids need to know that you're human to some extent.

Elizabeth believed that to create a caring relationship with students they must see their teachers as humans, but teachers must also see their students as individuals. She believed it was important for somebody to "notice things about you. So you're not just another face in the crowd. I know specific things about you, so recognizes your strengths and weaknesses."

Her own teacher's ability to see her strengths and encourage her to grow was what Elizabeth remembered from her school experience. For example,

I was insecure, and so I kind of fed off affirmation.... I think I felt comfortable because I felt like, by different things that he did, he made me feel like I was a good student, I was capable.... He tried to encourage me and I think that made me feel comfortable going and talking to him.

As a teacher, she also tried to be positive and encourage students. "Noticing positive behaviour in the class ... and trying to find something with everybody" helped to create a caring atmosphere.

Being a good student and having a teacher who encouraged her to take on leadership opportunities, paralleled Elizabeth's current beliefs about the importance of encouraging students but also having high expectations and standards for them. For example, when she was a student, "I think I did fairly well in the class, and so I think that he recognized that and was trying to provide other opportunities for me.... I got to take more of a leadership role in helping ... to plan some of the things that we did." As a teacher, she was "constantly setting high expectations for the kids. I think [that] can communicate I care about you,

I'm not going to let you hand in this kind of work when I know you can do better, or you know that behaviour's not acceptable here because I know that you have it in you to be a respectful person."

Parallels between her own experiences as a student and her current beliefs about caring for students were clear: providing help, being approachable (safety factor), and encouraging students to meet high standards were dominant in both narratives.

**Lisa Walters: Caucasian teacher, German background, born in Canada, school in B.C.**

Lisa's stories about caring teachers started with an explanation of the teacher who understood her home situation and was flexible and supportive in response to her needs.

My family was going through a rough time and she recognized that things were stressful for me and she'd make these little allowances, and yet still challenge me to get everything done and do everything that she knew I could do.... I just know that it was a hard year for me and that she was the one that was making things easier.

In contrast, she had another teacher who she described as uncaring because she

was just so stern and cranky all the time. It was probably a huge class and she would punish children for just having forgotten something or ... I remember getting into trouble for something that I didn't do. We were playing tag and I tagged someone and then the girl tripped right after that and it seemed like I had pushed her and she just wouldn't believe me. Yeah, she didn't care very much. She was mean.

Not surprisingly, one of the dominant themes in her current beliefs about care was consistent with these past experiences. She talked about the importance of care being based on student need. In order for this to happen, teachers need to understand students and their background and needs, just as her elementary teacher understood and accommodated her needs so many years ago. She spent time “trying to understand their backgrounds and having more communication, really positive communication with the parents so that we know what those needs are, because we spend a lot of time just finding out what they are.” One way for her to care about students was to communicate with their parents in order to understand their context.

The importance of having high standards was another major theme in her story. She had a teacher who “would make us come up a notch in the discussions we were having. He wasn’t just settling for [the usual], and he would give us a C+, meaning well, you’re slightly above average. And he would explain that an A means you are far above.... So he expected a lot and he made things interesting. So he was really challenging.” Even the previous teacher who made allowances for her home situation, still challenged her to get everything done. Having high expectations for her was something Lisa valued.

When describing her current beliefs, Lisa emphasized the importance of having high expectations, knowing student ability, encouraging them *honestly* and providing extra help. She explained that she tries

to be persistent and let them know that they can do better. So even though I might seem a little bit stern I want them to go up one step and I don’t want them falling back.... I let them know that sometimes what



they're doing isn't as good as they can do it and I expect them to do better.... I think that's not caring very much if you're always saying that's great, that's great, and they know they haven't done anything. You're not being truthful to them.

This echoed her high school teacher who set high standards, challenged students to meet them, and gave honest feedback.

As a teacher, Lisa believed that caring did not mean being sweet or nice; having high expectations for learning was much more important. Her first caring teacher "was huge in her stature. Everyone ... totally respected her. She just had that strength. And yet she wasn't all mushy, she was just very insightful, it's like what you needed." Along that same vein was her description of what she currently believed was caring: "As much as I believe in the true care, I believe that it doesn't mean that you have to be all, you know, touchy feely all the time. It means that you have to really care about them getting their education and making that clear to them that this is what I can do for you."

When her family was going through a difficult time the teacher made allowances, without trying to fix her problems, and still challenged her to do the work. She believed that,

We try to do everything for children at school that we think they might be missing at home and then we're sending home school work they might be missing at school (laughs). You know I think that's a problem. We have to know what we're doing here. You know, we're not going to be able to solve all their problems. A lot of schools that have tried to solve every psychological problem, have found out that if they really try to leave some of those problems at the door and make this a safe haven for learning, and just spent the time learning. That's still the best we can do. We're

never going to solve the big psychological problems with kids. We have to just be aware. And if we leave them out of here with the reading and writing, at least they've got something to work with.

As a child, Lisa's caring teachers understood her circumstances and needs, yet challenged her to do better. As a teacher, she believed we should focus on academics and helping students to improve, while being aware of individual circumstances. According to Lisa, care is based on student need, but is not a warm and fuzzy concept; it is having high standards, giving honest feedback, and helping students to improve.

**Nick Masters: Caucasian teacher/administrator, born in Canada, school in B.C.**

One of the themes that surfaced during Nick's interview was the importance of involving parents in learning. He remembered a grade 3 teacher who "called my mom in three or four times within the first month that I was there, saying [I needed] to learn my times tables and you need to help him because we're beyond that in class.... And it also involved my parents in my learning, which I think was very effective." As a teacher and administrator, he spoke at length about the importance of involving parents and working with them to solve problems. For example, when working with a child who was struggling, "the most significant thing that I did was I actually had his dad come every Friday for about three months and talk to me at the end of the week to make sure he had all his homework done and completed and since that input and time given by dad, he has turned around."

The other major theme in his experience as a student was the importance of having high expectations. The two years he flourished as a student, he had

teachers who expected more than he had been used to getting away with. In particular, he had a high school math teacher who was very tough on him:

I would arrive in class not as prepared and I guess I just sort of soared through school until grade 11 ... without much studying or any work habits really whatsoever, just kind of getting by on my smarts. When I got to [his class] he wouldn't accept that students would come to class without homework completed.... But for me it was a significant change in the way that I had been taught. The expectations were very real and there was no slipping under the radar like there was in [previous classes].

In his own teaching practice he believed that

the biggest thing is, you can care about a kid, but if the kid doesn't know where you're coming from, it's really difficult so you really need to be structured in the sense that they know exactly what the ... expectations for them [are], and there's no way to slip through holes.... Kids seem to respond well to clear expectations and a teacher who doesn't let up.

The similarity between his past experience and present belief was clear.

Another theme in Nick's interview was the need to try different approaches with students, because one size does not fit all. Having one set of expectations does students a disservice. An indication of this as a student became evident when he told the story of the same math teacher who took the time to write a note to the principal to make sure Nick received an A, even though his percentage would not have warranted it:

He was tough on me, but you could tell he cared and in the end that was proven because he was concerned even though he was leaving the school, probably for the last time [due to cancer]. He was concerned about where I was going and what I was doing, how I fared in his course,

[so] he left a note before he left the school saying that even though my grades probably averaged out to a B, he wanted me to have an A because he said I became a student. And it's the letter that made the difference.... When I got my letter grade he had died already. So for me that was very powerful and I think part of the reason why I became a teacher.

He believed teachers need to make exceptions for students when that is warranted, just as his previous teacher did for him. For example, he had a child who had difficulty sitting still in class, so he visited the child's home and realized that the

child never sat down at home and couldn't sit still at home, but was very brilliant. Didn't use a chair all year after that, after I figured it out. I couldn't make him sit. He was always doing something with his hands at his desk and I never thought he was listening, but he said well you just ask me any question that you possibly can about whatever you were talking about and I'll be able to answer it. I won't even look at you. And sure enough, he could answer any question that I said.... As long as he wasn't engaging other kids in what he was doing, he would be fine. So he would stand at his desk, he would be fiddling with something, but totally engrossed in the conversation at the same time. And I had to make some adjustments in how I taught and what I allowed to happen in the classroom.

Perhaps having a teacher who did not expect the same results from every student in order for them to be successful allowed Nick to develop his own belief that not all students needed to sit still in order to listen. One size does not fit all.

The teacher Nick thought did not care was someone who did not get to know him, did not interact in any meaningful way with him, and did not make learning interesting. This teacher "taught the class, but she didn't teach the kids."

She was also punitive, and the only thing he really remembered about that year was “her grabbing me by the ear and pulling me up to the front of the class at one point when there was a problem, and it was because I had been beaten up at recess, so then she dealt with it appropriately, however the initial embarrassment was tough on me.” His own beliefs about how to be a caring teacher were in stark contrast to what he did not like about his experience with her. For example, when dealing with misbehaviour he emphasized the importance of “looking behind the behaviours to see ... what the reasons for those behaviours are.” He also recognized that “often there are circumstances beyond their control as children and sometimes they’re embarrassing. And so I don’t ask them in front of other kids, but I say there is an opportunity for them to come and talk to me and give me an update as to what’s going on in the home or in their lives.” He wanted to continue to “be there for kids if they misbehave, you know keeping the same persistence from me that we’re going to deal with the behaviour, it’s not the child that’s wrong; it’s the behaviour that’s wrong.” It is hard to know if he would have had the same beliefs had he not had the negative experience with this teacher as a child, but the fact that his own beliefs were in such opposition to what appeared to be hers, was interesting to note.

The teachers Nick described as caring involved his parents in his learning, had high expectations of him, and recognized him as an individual. His math teacher did not treat him as one of the crowd, but based his actions on the needs and abilities of the individual student. His uncaring teacher did not see him as an individual and did not make a connection with him. As a teacher, Nick

endeavored to have clear, high expectations for students; involved parents in student learning; and looked beyond behaviour to the individual student. He believed one size does not fit all; care should be based on student need.

**Christine Grettal: Caucasian teacher, born in Canada, school in Saskatchewan.**

Christine had a unique experience among the teachers I interviewed, because she did not attend public school; she was taught by nuns in a convent school. Also unique, was her explanation that she could not remember a teacher who did not care for her. Everyone else had vivid and emotional recollections of teachers they believed did not care. Christine remembered being embarrassed by one of the nuns, but did not see that as uncaring. When one of my teachers deeply embarrassed me, it had a profound impact on my feeling of safety and competence in school. It was interesting to me that she was able to separate the two, even though, when she described the incident, she was still embarrassed decades later:

Another thing I remember forever, we were doing this church thing and the nuns had said you take one step back, I still remember this so clearly. You take one step back, we were all sort of walking around the church.... I can remember doing that and all of a sudden somebody grabbed me and pulled me back. My steps weren't big enough so there was this big gap and to this day I still remember that pull. But that was embarrassment and I'm still embarrassed today thinking about that.... [But] that was embarrassment, which is different.... No, I don't remember being not cared for.

She mused aloud whether she would do the same thing: "Now would I do that today if we were doing something ... like a musical? I think I would go pull the

kid back too.” Being embarrassed did not represent a lack of caring for her, so it was not something she would expect to be interpreted as uncaring by her own students.

While Christine did not remember uncaring teachers, she only recalled one nun who stood out as being particularly caring. This nun helped her to believe in herself and was able to motivate her to do her best.

I had a nun, it was about grade 10. She was a young nun, because I'd been taught with old nuns.... And she was a young nun, and she was a fabulous teacher in the sense that she could motivate us in writing. I remember her writing classes were just fabulous. And she made me feel that I could write. And she would compliment me a lot. She's the one person I remember.

This nun motivated her to do her best and made her want to learn. Christine tried to instill a love of learning in her own students as well. For example, she provided them with opportunities to work through their fear by doing a lot of public speaking in her class. “I think that's another aspect of caring, because they work through their scaredness and they're now more ready to speak.” She also wanted them to understand that learning extends beyond the curriculum.

I often tell them I have a 90 year old mother who's still learning, and you know I'm still learning.... Everyday we come to learn. And I do that thing sometimes when they walk out of the room, what did you learn today? And it might be I was nice to ... who was sitting beside me. You learned something today. Like it doesn't have to be education; it's just a love of learning.

Christine went on to describe one of that nun's teaching practices that she had adopted in her own class:

She would compliment us and I can remember that ... when we'd do a writing exercise, she'd pick up all the writing and she wouldn't say names, and *I do this today. I want to share with you some fabulous things, and I'd read this sentence. And she'd read this sentence.* And you'd just sit there waiting for her to read one of your sentences. And I remember I wanted to write better so that she would read my paragraph rather than my sentence. And I still remember to this day, I wrote this thing on butter. And she finally read the whole stupid paragraph, the whole thing. But all of my 12 years I think that's what I remember the most. So it was being complimented, that I could do it, and then, not that she said my name, but that she was saying that that's good writing.

She complimented students by reading their work aloud just as her teacher did, but she was adamant that praise must be honest. When I asked if she eventually reads a sample from everyone, she explained that "probably in a year I do. Probably, but I mean I read stuff that is good. I try not to compliment people just because they've never been complimented. I don't give false praise."

While she did not explicitly mention honesty as a caring attribute of her own teachers, one can surmise that honesty was a characteristic valued by the nuns who taught her and was certainly one she aspired to as a teacher. She spoke repeatedly about not wanting to be phony or give false praise. For example, she explained that she explicitly told students she cared for them, but only if she really did:

I tell them I care for them. I tell them all the time. One to one I tell them I care for them, and I tell them I like them. I tell them it hurts if they do



something that hurts me.... I think I get written notes [of apology] because I verbally tell. Not all the kids. I would never tell a kid I didn't like I cared for them. That's phony. That would be phony. And I don't think I would show it.... I cannot give false praise. I do say to them, I don't like you right now. It's very difficult to like you when you're acting this way, or whatever. I feel I tell them honestly how I feel.

However, in almost three decades of teaching, there has only been one child she did not like. "Maybe I got that from the nuns, and maybe that's religious in a way. But there's always something you can like in kids."

Throughout our conversation, Christine began to see the parallels between her own education and her current beliefs and teaching practice. She admitted that she had "never connected my own education to what I do today, but I guess it's there." For example, she explained the importance of respect for self, respect for others, respect for work, and respect for property, and how she explicitly teaches each of those aspects to her students. This echoed her own education:

You know what, when I think about it, being in a convent, like you had to walk down one line, well I had a uniform my whole life, for 12 years I had a uniform on. And I insist that they ... come to school, you comb your hair, you brush your teeth. You come, this is a job. And that's caring, teaching them to care for themselves, isn't it? You don't just roll out of bed and come looking all disheveled, you know, go brush your teeth. You come here for this job and I guess that's my education from when I was young and you respect people and you look people in the eye. Yep, that's my education.

She was strict (“like the nuns were strict, right”) about how to enter the classroom, how to sit down, how to unpack your belongings, how to treat others. In fact, she spent time modelling and explaining how to do those things at the beginning of the year, which is consistent with Noddings’ (2005) description of the importance of modelling when teaching students to care.

I walk in the door of the classroom and I say when you walk from the outside world to the inside world, this is how you behave. I model it. You walk in and you’re not going to run or shove, because we respect each other here. You say good morning, and you unpack your stuff.... You teach them to care. You teach them to care about their books and I show them, you have to be proud of your social studies binder. So I teach them to be proud of everything they write. The binders, you can’t doodle.... If you went in the room right now, I could show you any book and it’s the best they can do. There’s no writing on it, so you teach them to care for their books.

Christine’s current beliefs clearly reflected her own educational experiences. She believed that caring teachers motivate students to do their best, try to instill a love of learning, are honest, and teach respect (for self, each other, work, and objects). Her teachers were strict and caring, just as she was strict with her expectations.

### **Cross-Case Summary**

The fact that all the teachers attended school in Canada provided a framework for some shared experience and there were certainly similarities among many of the themes that emerged, such as knowing students as individuals. However, their individual histories had an impact on their current

views and therefore they did not hold identical beliefs about care; indeed there were some clear differences. For example, most talked about high expectations being an important aspect of caring for their students, but it should be noted that those who mentioned it had been successful in school. Jean did not experience success in the traditional sense. She dropped out of high school and one of her burning negative memories was being told she was a “stupid little Indian” who would “never amount to anything.” She spoke passionately about the need to have belief in students and recognize that each of them has gifts already inside them, as opposed to the need to have her own high expectations of them. Academics were not foremost for her; relationships and encouragement were.

This is not to suggest that academics did not matter to Jean nor that relationships are not important to the other teachers. Most of them spoke about knowing individual students, basing their care on student needs, and encouraging students. The difference here was in emphasis.

As teachers we should not assume that we all agree about what is best for children; it is possible our assumptions are based more on our own previous experiences as opposed to the specific needs of students at our school. In other words, our experiences of care in the past play a powerful role in determining the experiences of care we create with our own students in the present. As noted earlier, our experiences are not necessarily shared with others entering through the doors of the same school.

Noddings (2005) identifies modelling as one of four aspects of care (modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation). She explains that we “have to

show how to care in our own relations with cared-fors” because the “capacity to care may be dependent on adequate experience in being cared for” (p. 22).

These findings point to the very powerful effect of modelling – we do what has been done to us. These teachers developed their own framework for care based on their past lived experiences in caring relations.

### **Parent Beliefs: What is a Caring Teacher?**

Like the teachers, there was a direct link between parents’ past experiences and current beliefs. Three of the parents did not attend school in Canada, and therefore their school experiences were not necessarily reflected in the school experiences of their children. They had a different framework with which to construct their current beliefs about care.

#### **Mr. Gill: Sikh father, educated in India.**

The teachers Mr. Gill described as being caring were those who challenged and pushed him to learn. His caring teachers were good role models, while uncaring teachers were lazy. For example, he explained that “some of the teachers were not very hardworking. They’d come to class and just spend their time talking or ... ask the students to sing a song or something like that.”

Interestingly, “hardworking” was the first word he used to describe those teachers he perceived as caring for his children and he believed teachers should encourage students to work hard as well. He also wanted teachers to challenge students. Caring teachers “should push them a little bit.”

Because Mr. Gill was in the same class until grade 5, his teacher really got to know him and his parents. Similarly, he explained that caring teachers for his

children interacted with them and got to know them as individuals. He believed it was important to “know about their circumstances, about what they do, what are their interests.” They should also speak kindly and politely to students.

His teachers sometimes used physical punishment to make students work harder or behave and while he did not like it, he recognized that “they didn’t want to punish the kids but they want them to work hard” so they had no choice. He did not see physical punishment as uncaring unless it was too severe. He had one teacher, “Oh, all the time he had a stick in his hand and he was very cruel to the students. I didn’t like him.” Not surprisingly, for Mr. Gill, discipline was very important; uncaring teachers lacked discipline in the classroom. He described caring teachers for his own children as being strict, but not too severe. He believed that “teachers should be friendly and strict too, both things. Not that strict like we talked about with the stick, but they should be strict because if the teacher is not strict, the kids don’t listen.”

Thus, according to Mr. Gill, caring teachers were hardworking, challenged and pushed students, got to know students as individuals, and maintained discipline. Those are the same characteristics he found caring in his own teachers.

**Mr. Singh: Sikh father, educated in India.**

Like Mr. Gill, Mr. Singh spoke about the importance of discipline. He explained that when he went to school “class management was more strict” and “the teacher had more control on the class.” However, in Canadian schools teachers have difficulty knowing “where is that line they can draw, that I have the

responsibility and ... the right to discipline this child, to what extent. And that ... grey area, has widened in ... our Canadian culture.... Back in my school time that area was clear.” This was a problem because

there’s always a few kids who don’t care.... And we had those kind of students in our class and I see the same kind of students here too, which really pollute the ... learning atmosphere ... and it’s becoming harder for teachers here to control the atmosphere.

He was concerned that students have too much freedom and as a result they are “spending more time focusing on how they look outside, whereas they don’t care how they look inside and how they’re going to develop.” This concerned him because

they have that freedom and that freedom is misused by students because their first responsibility is to study, to develop themselves and rather than doing that, they think because we are free to do anything, rather than studying we would like to, you know, spend more time outwardly.

While Mr. Singh valued discipline, he resented his own teachers who punished inappropriately. He had a teacher in kindergarten who was uncaring because she was too strict and punitive:

I had an experience in the very first class when I was in kindergarten, the very first day, I still remember. I was kicked by her for nothing.... I do remember that I didn’t want to go to school.... So then I started dropping out in my very first kindergarten class.

When describing caring teachers for his children, he emphasized discipline and control over the class but did not appreciate it when they were punished unfairly.

He was upset that his son “has been punished ... [and] has to stay after class” for reasons that were not made known to him.

Another theme that Mr. Singh identified was that of attitude. He described his teacher as caring because she had a good attitude and was positive towards him. “I think the biggest thing is whenever I did something good, she always acknowledged it.” When describing caring teachers for his children, he also valued a positive attitude and explained the importance of a teacher having a balanced life in order to be fully present and positive with students. He explained that “if a teacher is very balanced in a sense: happy family, very well-organized and in a positive time frame” it will be much easier to care for children because “during class time she’s not preoccupied by something else ... sitting in a class, but thinking about having problems with family crisis or her own complex from past [or] about his or her own life, at the same time.”

Using positive reinforcement and encouragement when helping students, as his teacher did, was important for his children. He wanted a teacher to be “willing to help a child to learn better, to reinforce the child’s strengths and at the same time helping in a very positive way to help him to overcome his weaknesses.” This echoed his experience when he had a teacher who was helpful, “and whenever I had some opportunity to learn to improve, she was there and made me aware of the problems and helped out to get things done and that’s most important.”

Like Mr. Gill, he had the same teacher for most of elementary school. “It was like a parent, and she knew everything, my strengths, my drawbacks and we

grew together. So kind of you have a long-lasting relation and I think that's important." While that kind of long-term relationship was not possible in his children's school, he still believed that the teacher-student relationship was similar to a parent-child relationship. He "would consider teachers are also second parents ... because most time they spend is with teachers, more time than parents." He wanted his children's teachers to know them as individuals and recognize their strengths and weaknesses.

Fair assessment was one area that he talked about as caring toward his children but did not surface during his discussion of his own education. He had negative experiences with each of his children, where he thought they were assessed unfairly and that the assessment was inconsistent from year to year. Therefore, he explained the importance of caring teachers "really spending some time in the beginning to go through all the reports from the previous year to understand and she or he should jot it down, what are the strengths, what are the weaknesses of that child." The fact that he had the same teacher for many years would have removed this as an issue when he was in school.

Apart from assessment, the themes of care Mr. Singh described from his own experience mirrored the ones he expected of his children's teachers. He valued fair discipline, a positive attitude (attained through a balanced life), knowing students' strengths and weaknesses, and helping them to improve by being encouraging. He believed that teachers are like second parents and described his own caring teacher in those terms.



**Mrs. Beck: Hindu mother, educated in India.**

Although Mrs. Beck also attended school in India, her experience was different from Mr. Gill's and Mr. Singh's. While they had the same teacher for most of their elementary years, Mrs. Beck had different teachers for different subjects, so she did not get to know her teachers as well. When asked to describe the teachers she thought cared about her, Mrs. Beck described the high standards that teachers had. Her schooling was very competitive and she appreciated knowing where she ranked in her class. High achievement was what led to a better relationship with the teacher because "if you are good in studies then you can say that you are in the good books of your teacher, then your teacher knows you. But otherwise, it's not always with everybody."

When describing caring teachers for her own children, she discussed the importance of challenging students. Uncaring teachers provided work that was too easy. In order to challenge everyone, "more one to one attention [should be] given" so students at the top do not coast through. She worried that her children would coast through school; even if they were doing well, they "should know that there is a level to improve." Therefore, she believed that "maybe [they] should give more tests to the kids so that we can also know their standing in the class." She also believed that having more competition would be a motivating factor because it "will encourage a child to study harder." Her emphasis on competition, performance, and standing in the class clearly paralleled her own educational experience.

One topic she discussed for her own children, but did not mention in her past experience was the importance of communication and teachers being

available to speak with students. For example, when her daughter was upset at not being chosen as the winner of a competition, it was important for the teacher to be approachable to explain her reasons.

Whenever they have problems, teachers are there to solve it. Sometimes she has stress and says something is not fair to me, and then I will say to her that you go and ask your teacher. If the student has any kind of problem, any time they can say it to the teacher. There should be no communication problems.

While the importance of being available for communication was not mentioned in her experiences as a student, it still referred back to the importance of performance and competition. The need for communication emerged only when that competition was unsuccessful.

One exchange highlighted for me the depth of Mrs. Beck's belief in the importance of performance and competition. I explained another teacher's practice of sending home a list of the scores obtained on a unit test and circling their child's mark so they could see where their child fit in the class. I asked her if that would be preferable for her. She replied,

Yes. Because we were brought up in India and we were like, you are the first position; you are the second position, so we know where we stand in our class. Our parents know where we stand in our class. So I always say to [my child] that you should make friends with who is very intelligent. Like when you know what grades your friends have, you know where they stand in the class. So we always say you should make good friends, not the friends who don't want to study and work. So she knows she got 10 out of 10, but she doesn't know who else got 10 out of 10 or 8 out of 10, how does she know about other students?

Mrs. Beck's current beliefs were clearly rooted in past experience. She believed that caring teachers have high standards and challenge students. She would like to see more tests so that parents know how their child ranks against the other children in the class. Competition was a motivating factor to help students improve. She also believed that students should be able to communicate with their teacher if there was a problem.

**Mrs. Sandy: Caucasian mother, educated in Canada.**

I was struck by the difference in emphasis between the three parents discussed above, and Mrs. Sandy, who attended school in Canada. The caring attributes she described did not include competition, performance or discipline. Like the others, Mrs. Sandy's beliefs about what constitutes care towards her own children, mirrored the actions of those teachers she considered caring towards her.

Mrs. Sandy spoke about teachers who cared as being those who spent time with students and were concerned about their academic and personal well-being. They helped students with their school work as well as their social problems. When asked about teachers she thought cared for her, she immediately replied that "they took time. Whether it's something that you needed help with, or whether it's something that you wanted to advance in.... I can remember crying to a teacher and her taking the time to make me feel better." She "just knew that they would be there if needed, whether academically, whether it was a personality problem that, you know when you're in grade four and five, girls have."

Similar to Jean Elda, Mrs. Sandy spoke of the continuity of care. She remembered “running into the same teachers I had in high school at the store, and stopping to talk to you. Not just oh, there’s another student, and run off. You know they stopped to take their time and so continue on after education finished.”

When describing her current beliefs about care for her children, she described a teacher who spent time, showed concern, and was helpful when her son was in grade one and she was ill for an extended period. Those attributes echoed those of the teachers she considered caring while she was in school.

And just the caring that she showed to [my son] and asking me about my health. But she watched [him] because I couldn’t do homework, I was in bed. And even though it’s grade one, she always had homework for the kids and I felt bad. And she made sure that [he] wasn’t being left behind because he wasn’t necessarily getting the help at home because I was too sick and [my husband] was too busy.

Like her teachers who demonstrated continuity of care, this teacher also continued the care outside of the school day and showed concern for the entire family.

Inherent in her descriptions of her own caring teachers, was the need for them to know her as an individual in order to help her with personal problems and be interested in her beyond her school years. Mrs. Sandy also wanted teachers to spend time with her children, talk with them and listen to them, and get to know them as individuals. She believed that the way a teacher showed

care towards a student would depend on the particular student, so it was important to know them well.

[Care] differs from child to child just in the way that each child is different, they have different personalities. One may be more confident than the other in certain areas, whether it's public speaking or math or gym. And I think the caring teachers do see that. With uncaring ones I find they just lump you in a group and don't care.

Part of knowing students as individuals included noticing and remembering things about them. For example, "asking them how their sick sister is, you know when they say oh, my sister is sick, or my gerbil hurt himself, or something. Remembering the little things."

Whereas some of the other parents talked about the importance of challenging and pushing their children, Mrs. Sandy did not bring it up when describing caring teachers (either her own or her children's). However, when asked specifically if caring teachers would push her children, she explained that it "depends on the child. Some do need a push to excel and to do their best and then exceed, to go beyond," but again, her view was predicated on the assumption that the teacher had spent time getting to know the child, and understanding what they needed.

Unlike Mr. Gill and Mr. Singh, Mrs. Sandy did not mention being strict as a caring attribute. When asked whether she thought that was important, she explained that teachers should be "strict without being a my way or the highway kind of thing. I mean you've got to maintain some order in the classroom, ... but strict but flexible." This reflected her own experience with teachers she

described as uncaring. They were “too strict, too quick to assume a student’s guilt, when they clearly don’t know who” did something wrong. “There were some teachers that I’ve had that looked, no matter who you were, like you were up to no good. Just that look that’s assumed before you can prove otherwise or prove them right.”

Finally, Mrs. Sandy described her caring teachers as also spending time helping with extra curricular activities. She explained that “you can tell [they care] by the extra curricular activities they took on, whether badminton after school or wrestling team, things like that.” Even though her own children were “not as sports minded as I was” extra curricular activities were still important because

it’s another way to get to know the teachers, but it also teaches the kids something else to do. School is just not the three Rs, you know you can learn to have a wicked volleyball serve or slam dunk, and that’s all part of the social interaction as well, team sports especially. And that’s important.

Thus, Mrs. Sandy believed that caring teachers spent time with students, helped them with academics and personal problems, and got to know them as individuals. Care should be based on student need, and some students need to be pushed to do well; others do not. This lies in contrast to Mr. Gill and Mrs. Beck who emphasized performance and the need to push students. In fact, Mrs. Sandy valued extra curricular activities because school should be about more than just academics. She also believed that teachers need to maintain control in the classroom, but should not be too strict. Again, this differed from Mr. Gill and Mr. Singh, for whom discipline was a caring attribute.

**Mrs. Miller: Caucasian mother, educated in B.C.**

Mrs. Miller was reluctant to discuss her own educational experiences. She ignored my initial questions about her caring teachers and instead spoke, from prepared notes, about incidents of care that her children had experienced. As well, at first she was hesitant to answer my question about what would be uncaring behaviour towards her children. When she became more comfortable, she eventually opened up and her interview elicited a great deal of information about perceived lack of care towards her and her children (this will be pursued in more depth when I discuss parent-teacher relationships). Because of her reluctance to go into detail about her own experiences, it was initially difficult to draw immediate parallels between those experiences and her current beliefs. However, similarities did become apparent.

The first story she revealed about her child's experience was with a teacher who saw her daughter as an individual and knew her well enough to know when something was wrong. The teacher also took the time to try and help her:

My daughter was really upset about something and the teacher took her and went for a walk and tried to get it out of her and it ended up that I was away that weekend, so she was really upset that I had gone away, so she was feeling left out. So the teacher talked to her for quite awhile and then told me about it later.... It was really nice that she took the time to see what was wrong with her. She doesn't normally have these breakdowns in classrooms, so ... that was one time where I thought that she went above and beyond for that.

A parallel can be drawn with the first story she told about a caring teacher she had. At first she couldn't recall any incidents she would identify as particularly caring, then she described a teacher who invited the students to her wedding and remembered Mrs. Miller years later:

Actually thinking back there was a teacher I actually went to her wedding. She invited her kids to the ceremony. So I remember going to her wedding and I think I was in grade 2. And actually my brother ran into her. He was working at a school one day and started talking to this woman and she said where she worked and he said my sister went there, and she remembered who I was.

It was important to her that she was remembered, which was consistent with her desire for her children's teachers to see her daughters and know them as individuals.

Like Mrs. Sandy, Mrs. Miller did not mention discipline as a caring attribute. In fact, the teachers she remembered fondly were those who were fun. While she recognized that teachers needed to maintain control, she resented it when they were too strict and inflexible about rules. One example was the rule that students should not be in the hallway during breaks or after school:

I think that some of those [rules] are a bit much because quite often the kids were going after school one day or maybe it was lunch, but they had a meeting or they had basketball or something and they were caught in the hall because they were to go to one of the other teacher's classrooms. And these kids walked around the whole school again, on the outside because somebody told them they weren't allowed inside. And I just ... felt that was not necessary. You can see they have their school uniform



on, they're going somewhere, you know, just don't waste their time ... it's upsetting to the kids.

As a student, Mrs. Miller appreciated special occasions or extra curricular activities that increased school spirit, such as sports day, Centennial Day celebrations, team sports, or fieldtrips. For example, she "thought sports day was a really big thing. If you think about elementary school that was probably one of the highlights.... It was just a fun day. Your parents were there." A sense of belonging was important to her, and these events lent themselves to that: "I think it makes you feel like one of the ... group."

In contrast, she recalled an incident where her small school was merged with another, and she felt like an outsider:

And they had taken those kids that were at the annex and put them in separate classrooms from the rest of the school when we got to the main school. So that was a bit of a nightmare because... we felt kind of like we were the ... dumb kids or something like that.

Not surprisingly, one theme that emerged as uncaring for her children, was a lack of school community and a sense of belonging.

I think at this particular school my kids don't feel like they are part of anything like that [sports day, team sports], and that's what I wanted for them.... [My daughter] doesn't feel like there's anybody here, she said she doesn't have any friends... so that's really tough, and I think a lot of it's the cultural thing, because they focus on that one culture, I feel, all the time. There doesn't seem to be trying to get everybody to fit in, it's sort of let's keep the one culture happy.

A sense of belonging and school community were important to Mrs. Miller when she was a student. For her, a caring teacher was one who fostered school spirit by participating in extra curricular activities and school-wide events.

Another major theme that emerged during our discussion was her dissatisfaction with the academic aspect of her school experience. She described her school as an open area school,

and that was a bit of a nightmare, as far as the learning because we were pretty keen to learn and it was all just, you picked yourself what you wanted to do for the day... but there wasn't a lot of teacher [input], I just remember working on my own a lot.

She appreciated structure for her own children because "you know what to expect, you know when the tests are, you know that the test, if they say it's going to be Friday, it's going to be Friday and what the kids should study and things like that."

Consistent with the theme of learning, Mrs. Miller outlined her frustration at a lack of challenge for her daughter.

I think what happened ... was she just wasn't being challenged cause it was pretty much what she did [the previous year].... It was identical to what she did and it was far too easy for her so there was a struggle all year long, she just was not happy.... Even all the projects and things that they did were completely the same as the year before which ... shouldn't have happened.

For Mrs. Miller, caring teachers care about "their [students'] education, their learning, or make it interesting for them."

While Mrs. Miller identified challenging students as a caring act, it should be noted that her description differed from that of Mrs. Beck, who emphasized competition. In fact, Mrs. Miller was concerned about the perception of competition in her daughter's class, because she was worried it would harm relationships with peers. Her daughter has felt as though students were giving her angry looks when her name was announced for receiving the top scores.

I don't know if that's maybe a good idea that they announce a lot of this. I mean [if it's a] contest I can understand that, but with just regular marks.... If she does get the top math mark in a test or something every time and her name is mentioned, I don't know if it's good for her or good for the other kids.

Mrs. Beck, on the other hand, wanted her daughter's relationships to be formed with those who fared well in the competition. She was not worried about others resenting her children for doing well.

Although initially reluctant to discuss her own experiences, the need for a sense of belonging and school spirit and knowing her children as individuals were evident in the brief stories she shared of her past experiences. She also resented the lack of learning she experienced in school and believed that caring teachers provide structure, challenge students, and make learning interesting. While she wanted her children to be challenged, she did not value competition. Like Mrs. Sandy, Mrs. Miller valued extra curricular activities and believed that teachers should not be too strict.

### **Cross-Case Summary and Cross Group Comparison**

In this section I compare parents' views while linking them with the dominant themes expressed by teachers and students.

Like the teachers, the current beliefs held by these parents had strong roots in their past experiences. In every case, the adult narratives pointed to the potent effects of modelling. Each adult interviewee painted a picture of their current beliefs that began in their past experiences of caring relations with their own teachers, providing support for Noddings' (2005) assertion that "the capacity to care may be dependent on adequate experience in being cared for" (p. 22). One of the students, Bobby, also illustrated the importance of modelling when he explained that when teachers are organized they're showing students how to be. If they're not organized it shows that they don't really care and "if they're not focussed, the kids are just going to say yeah well, he or she's doing it, well I should do it too.... If she doesn't care, why should I care?"

Because three of the parents went to school in India and the other two in Canada, there were clear differences in their prior school experiences and the modelling they received. When articulating current beliefs about care, their beliefs or emphases on certain beliefs differed. The parents who went to school in India tended to emphasize achievement and discipline, while those who were educated in Canada placed more importance on the teacher knowing their children and helping them. That is not to say that parents from India who were interviewed did not also value those things, nor that the Canadian parents did not value achievement; it was a question of emphasis.

**Discipline.**

One of the more noticeable differences centred around discipline. Being strict and controlling student behaviour was a theme that Mr. Singh and Mr. Gill emphasized immediately, while Mrs. Beck talked about academic discipline. On the other hand, Mrs. Sandy and Mrs. Miller, while they understood the need to maintain control in the classroom, spoke more about the importance of *not* being too strict. They resented teachers who did not listen to children, who assumed guilt, or who were not flexible about rules.

Mrs. Sandy and Mrs. Miller's views were more closely aligned with those expressed by all the students, regardless of their cultural background. In fact, their narratives were almost the same in some instances. For example, Bobby complained that "some teachers I know ... over small little details, their mind blows up and they go, why did you do this? Why did you do it? [They] keep asking the same question while you're just trying to explain to them." Mrs. Miller also expressed frustration when "teachers will ask ... what are you doing here, or why are you here, but they don't wait for the answer." She was similarly disturbed when her daughter was punished for something someone else had done. She explained that "her class this year is a bit disruptive and so a lot of times she suffers for it because they're not allowed to have gym or they're not allowed to have this, and I know darn well she hasn't said peep." Sammy also became annoyed when teachers "get mad at somebody else for some reason, [then] they'd get mad at the whole class." Everyone recognized the need to maintain control in the class, but students and these two parents did not want

teachers to be too strict. It should also be noted that while Mr. Singh valued discipline, he wanted teachers to discipline fairly.

Christine was the only teacher to mention being strict in the context of caring and in doing so, drew a parallel between her current practice and the nuns who taught her. Some of the other teachers discussed discipline in terms of the importance of having clear expectations and high standards. Jas and Nick talked about the need to understand the reasons behind the behaviour, which was also emphasized by some students.

**Know students as individuals.**

All parents wanted teachers to know their children as individuals, but this manifested differently in each case. For example, it was shown by fair assessment of the individual and knowing their strengths and weaknesses for Mr. Singh, understanding their circumstances and interests for Mr. Gill, knowing their strengths and pushing them to excel for Mrs. Beck, spending time with them, helping them, and understanding their home circumstances for Mrs. Sandy, and making sure children were not bored, helping them when they were upset, and getting to know what students did outside of school for Mrs. Miller.

All teachers, with the exception of Christine, specifically talked about knowing students as individuals as an important aspect of care. (Although Christine did not specifically list knowing students as individuals as an aspect of caring, she did describe ways she gets to know students and connects with each one every day.) As well, students also talked about wanting teachers to get to

know them and to understand their home circumstances. They wanted teachers to listen to them and be present when they are together.

**Academic achievement.**

All parents talked about academics in some way when describing caring teachers. However, the degree to which they emphasized achievement differed. At one end of the spectrum was Mrs. Beck's view that competition and ranking were important. Mr. Gill wanted teachers to challenge his children and push them to do well. Mr. Singh talked about knowing a student's strengths and weaknesses, assessing them fairly, and helping them to improve, which was similar to Mrs. Sandy's view that teachers should help students with academic difficulties. However, she clearly differed from Mrs. Beck and Mr. Gill in her belief that not all students should be pushed. Teachers needed to know students well and recognize when to push and when not to. Mrs. Miller believed that teachers needed to challenge students and make learning interesting, but unlike Mrs. Beck, she did not see competition as an important aspect of challenge.

Students agreed that academics were important and they wanted to learn at school. Of significant importance to them was that teachers should be helpful and patient when they do not understand something. Similar to Mrs. Miller, they wanted to be challenged and they wanted schoolwork to be interesting and relevant. Bobby explained that "from a challenging teacher you learn something. Not like well, here's the work, look it over and here's the test." None of the students talked about competition as an aspect of care or as a way of challenging them. As well, Mr. Gill mentioned that caring teachers push students

to work hard but students talked about *wanting* to work hard when they know the teacher cares for them.

Teachers also talked about academics as an important aspect of care. But again, what they emphasized differs. Jas talked about not giving up on students who do not understand and encouraging them by publicly recognizing their achievements. Competition was inherent in the public recognition. Her view was most closely aligned with Mrs. Beck's. Elizabeth, Lisa, Christine, and Nick talked about having high expectations, and Lisa and Christine were adamant that feedback must be honest so students know how they are doing. That view was similar to Mr. Singh's, who talked about fair assessment of his children. Jean emphasized encouragement and seeing potential in every student, but she did not talk about having high expectations as an aspect of care. Jas, Jean, Elizabeth and Lisa all talked about being available to help students either before or after school, and Nick talked about circulating to help during class time, all of which aligned with students' beliefs that teachers should be helpful.

**Extra curricular.**

While extra curricular activity was not a topic emphasized by most people, it is an area which highlighted differences in expectations and for that reason, I have included it here. Mrs. Sandy, Mrs. Miller, and Nick were the only ones to initially raise extra curricular as an area of care. Nick explained that it was caring to become involved outside of the classroom:

Another one would be a teacher who doesn't take an active role outside of the classroom involving the students or being involved in some of the



extra curricular activities. I know that's a tough one for teachers to hear but, being involved in some way. You know, even if it means just cheering them on from the sidelines if they're playing a sport or they're at a speech fest or something like that. But being present and showing that they care that way.

Interestingly, extra curricular activity was not on the radar of any of the teachers when asked about care, and the other parents did not raise it as an issue. They were more focused on what happens in the classroom; Mrs. Sandy and Mrs. Miller wanted their children to have opportunities to learn things outside of the classroom and provide an opportunity for teachers and parents to get to know one another in a different setting.

None of the students initially raised extra curricular either, so I specifically asked them if they felt it was important. Bobby explained that "I guess it's nice, but ... it's not the most important thing." Sandra thought it was important because it gives students a chance to meet new friends and try new things, but she had previously mentioned that cutting students from teams was an uncaring act. Jasmine thought "extra curricular is important, especially if they add extra credit on for marks." As well, it helped students learn to organize their time because they were busier. On the other hand, Sammy believed that "teachers should do extra activities because that would make the child more happy and they'd want to come to school. But ... don't do it so much that you're ... [making] the child ... want to do activities every day, and less focus on their work." In other words, extra curricular activities should not detract from school work. Like

Bobby, Sammy believed that what happened in the classroom was more important.

Organized extra curricular activities are a large time commitment for teachers. If they are going to give their energy to providing them, it would be useful to know how it is perceived by the community. The two parents who attended school in Canada thought it was important; those who attended school in India did not raise it. The differences in opinion may reflect cultural differences or may simply reflect individual interests and the interests and needs of their own children.

#### **Environment.**

This was an area that was not raised by parents, but one that many students felt strongly about, perhaps because it is more immediate for them. They wanted teachers to make it safe for them to share ideas and opinions and to create an atmosphere of safety among peers. Bobby appreciated it when teachers knew what was happening outside the school and intervened to make students safer.

Teachers did not specifically discuss safety in the same way that the students did, but Christine talked about the many ways she teaches students to be respectful in the classroom. Jean also explained that she tries to “instil in them that we do need to be respectful of each other” and spent time building community. She wanted the classroom to be “a safe place for them to be.” Safety was an important factor for Elizabeth because she did not feel safe with all her teachers. She wanted students to feel comfortable approaching her for help.

Other teachers also talked about building a sense of community with their students, which implied a sense of safety and belonging as being important.

Finally, Bobby talked about being organized and Jasmine discussed creating a welcoming physical environment as showing care, but these items were not raised by parents or teachers.

It is clear that among this group of interviewees there were many areas of agreement about what constitutes care in the teacher-student relationship. However, we need to be careful not to overlook the areas where views about care diverge because they affect how a teacher's actions are interpreted and therefore how those actions are responded to. The teacher-student relationship is not the only one that is important to the school experience. In the next section I will explore the dynamics of the parent-teacher relationship.

## **Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Epstein (1999) explains that “the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about children's families” (p. 422). Therefore, creating caring relations with parents is beneficial to the caring relations developed with children. Further, in creating the caring communities of support described by Epstein (1995), it is necessary for parents and teachers to collaborate. This, according to Tatar & Horenczyk (2000) “cannot be fully accomplished without a mutual knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and expectations that each of the parties holds of one another” (p. 494).

The dynamics between parents and teachers was one of the most interesting and complex areas of this research. The interviews about caring

relations between students and teachers were fairly straightforward in the sense that everyone expressed their beliefs openly; sometimes they overlapped and sometimes there were differences. However, when I began asking about the parent-teacher relationship the answers proved more complex because of an undertone of resentment, hurt, mistrust, and anger that was present in some of the discussions. In this section I explore teachers' and parents' beliefs about the parent-teacher relationship and look into some of the expectations and assumptions they hold of each other.

### **Teacher Views**

When asked, all teachers agreed that parent involvement was very important to the success of children and therefore they believed the parent-teacher relationship is very important. However, the form of that involvement and the structure of the relationship were different for each teacher. It was interesting to note that there were differences between the views held by those who spoke of their own parents' involvement in their education and those who did not mention their parents as being involved. (Because I was not researching parent involvement in schools per se, none of the teachers were specifically asked about their parents' involvement in their schooling, but for some it surfaced during their discussion of care in schools.) Perhaps modelling experienced in their own childhood may have created the space for their current experiences with parents. However, while similarities and differences between the two groups are interesting to note, caution should be taken when drawing conclusions

because of the fact that participants were not asked directly. I start with the three teachers who mentioned their parents in relation to their school experience.

### **Nick Masters**

Nick was the only teacher to speak of his own teachers showing care by involving his parents in his education. His teacher “called my mom in 3 or 4 times within the first month that I was there.... It ... involved my parents in my learning, which I think was very effective.” Similarly, as a teacher, he identified communication with parents as an important aspect of caring for students and meeting their needs:

I think the biggest thing is to involve parents. I know that sometimes teachers and administrators are afraid of dealing with certain parents but being consistent, having good communication skills, being prepared for interviews, and preparing the child as well so that they're not embarrassed and left out of the whole communication triangle, is probably the most powerful way of helping kids succeed.... So the key is to involve the parents and to be really open ... and between the two of you, you can usually pull a kid together.

He went on to explain that teachers need to be flexible and that listening to parents talk about their children can help teachers make changes to their teaching in order to more effectively reach students. For example,

if the child's a real visual learner and the teacher is all verbal, for example, then the parent might know that about their child.... That's how they teach things at home ... and [this child] is really successful at home. And maybe because it's all verbal in the classroom, their child's not getting it. So maybe they can help out with that.

Thus, he believed that in partnership with parents he can teach more effectively.

Nick explained how his views have evolved over the years:

As a teacher I saw it much differently than I do as an administrator. As a teacher I was much more focused on the child. Although I tried to involve parents in helping their child be successful, I didn't really see how invested a lot of parents are and still feel left out, even though we have brief conversations here and there.

He went on to explain how his interactions with parents on behalf of other teachers have helped him to gain a better understanding of the need for listening:

I think it's helped me as a teacher because I think it's made me listen more first and hear where the parent's coming from so that I have better idea where I have to go in my conversation to help them understand. And the communication obviously is the key to understanding each other and I think teachers are often too busy trying to tell what the problem is at school to get help, when they're not hearing what's going on at home and how the parent's struggling as well with some things.

Thus, he believed that communication with parents is a two-way, equal interaction that requires active listening to understand each other.

**Parent's role.**

His expectations for parents were that they participate in the two way dialogue and get involved in their child's education. It was important that parents

...come in and they see what's going on and that there's a two-way kind of communication set up, that they will have that dialogue with you about their child and they will share personal things that are going on at home, letting you know that maybe their child will be upset and that they will trust that you will handle it well.... And if the child is staying up until midnight for example, and falling asleep in class or really sluggish through the first

part of the morning, then that's an example of something that the parent needs to work on.

Therefore, he believed that a parent shows care by participating in a two-way dialogue with the teacher, by sharing personal stories about home so the teacher can gain a better understanding of the child, and by trusting the teacher. They also need to do their part at home to make sure the student can be successful at school.

Nick also believed that parents have a responsibility to be actively involved in their child's education, including sometimes questioning the teacher. He explained that

I think parents have to be very active. I think that they know their children better than we do and I think in this neighbourhood, very ESL, very Punjabi background, there's a real respect and honour for the teacher. Teacher's always right, don't question what's going on and I think sometimes that can be positive, and that can sometimes be negative because I think that kids' stories aren't heard sometimes. And I think parents need to be more involved, ... especially if there's a behaviour problem in the classroom, come and sit and watch what's going on in the classroom to make that complete clear connection as to what is going on, rather than just words. If the child's doing really well, parents probably don't need to be in the classroom as much, but they still need to have conversations about, you know, every child has areas of improvement and maybe some of those things could be at home.

He believed parents have a right and responsibility to spend time in the classroom to observe their children. They need to know what is going on at school so they can participate more fully in their child's education.

In summary, Nick had positive experiences with his own parents' involvement in his education, and now works to involve parents in the education of his students. His ability to communicate with parents and his understanding of the need to do so in a more open manner has evolved over the years. As an administrator, he has gained a greater understanding of the need to listen to parents, as opposed to simply telling them what he believed they needed to hear. The parents' role is to participate in that dialogue. He believed parents should be actively involved in their child's learning. That means that they should spend time in the classroom if there are problems, they should listen to their child, and they should sometimes question the teacher.

### **Lisa Walters**

Lisa spoke passionately about the importance of listening to parents and treating them with respect. Again, the roots of this belief can be found in her own experiences as a student. Her parents emigrated from Germany and struggled with English. Because of this, she was embarrassed to have them meet the teacher in case they said something wrong.

One of the things a teacher said to me once, this was after my parents had been in for an interview -- because my parents were different, they spoke with thick accents -- you know your parents are very interesting. They have a really different perspective. I remember thinking you know my parents went in and they were actually accepted, and the teacher recognized them. And before that I thought my parents should stay home. They might say something, or they might not know how to say a word.... And just hearing that from the teacher, oh your parents are very



interesting and had interesting things to say.... They may talk with an accent; they don't think with an accent.

This experience was consistent with her current belief that teachers need to get to know parents and really listen to them. It is important to

...build those bridges with the parents; that we really understand what those parents [have] experienced with school and let them know what their children really are experiencing in school and what we expect so that they can support them. [We need to] have that mutual respect for each other because a lot of the parents respect the teachers and a lot of the teachers sometimes forget that these parents have a great deal of knowledge about their children. They know what they're doing and to share the knowledge between the two. It doesn't have to be lots and lots of meetings, but to really try to understand how they see their children.

Lisa believed that it is important to share positives with parents and make "it clear that they can phone and ask about things or write letters back." For her, communication went beyond simply keeping parents informed. Like Nick, she viewed education as a partnership where teachers can learn from parents as well. Her own parents did not attend school in Canada and English was not their first language, yet they knew a great deal about their children and their perspective was valued by her teacher. She saw similarities in the circumstances of many of the parents in this school:

A huge percentage of our parents are immigrant families and my mom was an immigrant mom. And she knew when she was being talked down to. And she knew what her children were doing and she read to her children every day. And if we were having a bit of a struggle with reading because we were just learning how to speak English, she didn't need to

be told to read to her child every day. You know, there is this way of talking to parents in a condescending way. And even parents that are maybe not even literate, they do know a lot about their kids. And they may be just hanging on to life in a way that we just can't even understand. And just to push things back and say, support from home means you're going to sit down with them and do this, this, and this.... We need to be careful how we preach to them, because these are people that come from other countries that know how to improve their lives. They're here for good reasons and they have a lot of plans for their children. Find out what those plans are. It might not be to read poetry for a boy in grade six. It might be other things, and we can still help them with those or at least understand them.

Lisa believed that we need to make the effort to understand their perspective, particularly when they do not share similar backgrounds. For example, she explained that

...here I'm dealing with a lot of parents that are from different cultures so I'm trying to find out why they would think certain things about children, like trying to find out what their background is ... and understanding what they're wanting their children to learn.

In keeping with the need to stop preaching at parents, Lisa explained how we should be flexible in meeting students' needs, in partnership with parents:

Asking the parents for advice, you know, is there a way, do you have an idea how we could have this child read, instead of always just preaching to them because you know, maybe this child is never going to read at home for 15 minutes everyday. It may never happen, so maybe we can do that at school, or maybe they can come in a bit early. Do you mind dropping them off early; I'll let my room be open. It has to be kind of genuine, not

lots more notes home and sticker programs but truly listening to those people when they come in.

**Parent's role.**

Lisa believed the parent's responsibility is to communicate with the teacher on an ongoing basis, not just when a problem arises. She hoped "they come to see me [and] that they don't just come in when there's a problem, but [they] are able to come in and knock on the window and have something real to say about what their child is doing...." She believed it showed a parent cared about her as a teacher when they knew what she was doing with their child.

Like any specific acknowledgement I consider then that's demonstrating care towards the teacher. Like any time they say, you know, they enjoyed that fieldtrip, or my child really learned something from this or that, then I know that they know that I care, and they know that their child's making progress.... And you can tell by the way that they come to interviews. I mean you meet them all at some point and the ones that will talk to you and mention specific things, that's when you know that they have talked about what's going on and they care enough about it to mention something specific and they can mention something and not just be on the periphery.

Thus, according to Lisa, parents show care by being knowledgeable about what goes on in the classroom.

As well, while she believed that teachers need to respect parents, she expected the same from parents. "I think the parent has to start off with the assumption that the teacher is to be respected and support the academics of the classroom no matter what." She would also like parents to understand that teachers are humans with their own faults; they should "treat [teachers] like

human beings, that they're going to have their bad days and support [their children] with respecting the whole classroom environment."

While some teachers talked about the importance of parents showing care by being involved in classroom or fieldtrip activities, Lisa was wary of this.

I don't know, I think involvement in school is kind of interesting because I think that parents need to be really aware of what's going on in school and it's nice to volunteer, and it should be a community place where parents feel they can come, but I think there has to be a huge amount of respect for what goes on in a classroom, and that the teacher is the responsible person for what's going on in the classroom. And find ways of supporting it and not just wanting to ... hang around and watch your child all day or ... not feeling like you just want to get in there with your own agenda. I think that's a real problem, and being proactive and being involved and supportive is really different from getting involved because you have your own agenda.

Thus, Lisa believed mutual respect was extremely important. Teachers and parents need to respect and support each other in their separate, but complementary roles.

One way that parents could be involved in the classroom is by sharing their knowledge with students,

coming and showing what they do for a living, showing how a parent might help us solve a problem in the classroom, like tell us about a certain part of the social studies curriculum they've actually lived through. Those things are really supportive things, and are really, really valuable to show the parents as human beings that have a contribution, that have an intelligence, that we're trying to make you like your parents. So that they can, you know, be proud of their parents and identify with their parents.

This echoed her own experience when her teacher's comments made her see her own parents in a different light.

To summarize, Lisa's parents faced many of the same cultural and language barriers that some parents in this school faced. She believed that teachers need to communicate openly with parents – listening more and preaching less. Mutual respect and understanding were important in order to gain a greater awareness of parents' expectations and hopes for their children. Parents should participate in open dialogue with teachers so the two parties can gain a better understanding of one another in order to meet the needs of students. However, she was concerned about parent volunteers in the classroom because they might have their own agenda. It is the teacher who has full responsibility for what goes on in the classroom and parents demonstrate care towards the teacher when they know what the teacher is doing and comment on it.

### **Jean Eida**

Interestingly, Jean was the only one to specifically talk about her parents *not* being involved in her education. She described the incident where a teacher called her a "stupid little Indian [who] would never amount to anything." Then went on to ask,

Where was my mother to defend me in this situation? I felt like she didn't really fully understand the value of having an academic education because she ... went to school for three days and then her parents pulled her out of school to look after her siblings because she was the eldest in

the family.... I remember going to the bank with her sometimes when she'd cash her cheque, and she'd just write her first name and put X because she didn't know how to write her last name.

It is understandable that school would have been an intimidating place for her mother, particularly if she needed to stand up to the teacher to defend her daughter.

As a result, as a teacher, she tried to be as welcoming as possible. "I welcome them in; they're welcome in here anytime. I don't mind their presence in the classroom at all." She wanted them to feel safe with her. "I just hope that when they see me greeting their child that they know that I am an okay person and a safe person to come to."

While her mother might have felt intimidated to approach the teacher, Jean saw parents and teachers as equal partners. "It's like I'm not higher than them and they're not higher than me, we're at that same level." She went on to explain that "I think what it comes to is that the teachings from my mom and my grandmother, is that we are all related. We might not be related by blood, but we're related to each other because we're human beings and we need to treat each other with kindness." Thus, for Jean it was important that parents felt welcomed and safe with her; a caring relationship with parents was important to her.

She saw the responsibility of both parties as providing mutual support for one another. She thought "we need to be there to support each other when certain concerns arise." For example,

If I have concerns I'm hoping that I could go to a parent and say this is what I see happening with your child. I need your help. So if your child's not doing the homework, then could you please make sure that there's time set aside for your child to do the homework that's been assigned because if not, then if he can't do it at home, then I'm happy for your child to stay longer after school so they could work on it here just so they don't get behind.... So they don't fall through the cracks, type of thing.

Thus, in order to help students, teachers need to be flexible in finding solutions.

Jean also tries to be flexible with scheduling. When students were performing speeches, she held an evening performance. "I took into consideration parents who work so I said I would stay from 6:00 until 7:00. We had good turnouts."

#### **Parent's role.**

Besides providing mutual support and helping teachers solve problems, Jean believed parents contribute to the relationship and demonstrate care by volunteering in the classroom or by providing positive feedback to teachers. Jean appreciated it when a mother told her how much her daughter enjoyed her class. On the first interim report card, the parent wrote back that "the sign of a good teacher is [when] ... your child comes home and is enthused about learning. And that's what you do with my daughter.... And I was just like, oh, my God.... So I photocopied that one and put it in my scrapbook." Positive feedback from parents was meaningful.

In summary, Jean's mother did not participate in her children's education, and now that she is a teacher, Jean emphasized the importance of making parents feel welcome and safe with her. Equality was important; teachers and

parents are equally important to a child's education. Jean believed it was important for parents and teachers to provide mutual support and solve problems together. She tried to be flexible when solving problems, as opposed to telling parents how *they* should solve the problem. She believed it was also important, when possible, to be flexible with scheduling to accommodate parents who work during the day. Another aspect of the parent's role is to volunteer in the classroom when needed. She appreciated it when parents provided positive feedback.

The following three teachers did not mention their parents when discussing their own experiences with caring and uncaring teachers. There are some differences between these three teachers' views of the parent's role and the previous three teachers' views.

### **Christine Grettal**

When discussing educational relationships, Christine talked about a triangle. "I talk about this triangle all the time. They have to be as involved as me and as their kid. It has to be the three of us. I think the parents, as I've taught for so many years, [are] the key to success." She went on to explain that

I finally realized that ... if I do my job and the student does the job, but if that parent is not there, hooked into it all, then no matter what you do, it's not going to be a triangle. And in many cases those difficult kids, like you can work with the kid, and you can do wonderful things, but unless that parent is hooked in and does something at home to keep them involved or



whatever, it's impossible. So most of the kids I've had a problem with, it's the parents more so than the kid.

Christine believed that parent involvement was integral to the success of their children, even more so than the teacher's involvement. "And that's why with really good kids, I ... tend to leave them be because they have that strong parent at home, they don't need me." The form that involvement should take and the kind of relationship formed with parents again appear to have their roots in her own past experience.

Christine's parents were well known to the nuns who taught her – "the nuns knew me, knew my family.... Yes, it was one big happy church." However, she did not talk about communication with parents as an aspect of care, nor did she mention parent involvement in her schooling. Christine attended a convent, which was an arm of the church her family belonged to. It is possible to imagine that perhaps the Catholic Church 40 years ago would not have been a body that encouraged two-way dialogue and mutual understanding. They would teach; members would listen. This does not preclude the possibility of parent involvement in the church or the school; it simply points to the possibility of limited two-way dialogue and equality that emerge as possible issues in her relationships with the parents of her own students.

As a teacher, Christine did not mention two-way dialogue as an important component of the parent-teacher relationship. She talked about ways that she keeps parents informed. For example, she lets them know how their child is doing

by phoning them, inviting them to the school. I write in their planner. I keep in contact with homework. I have homework cards in my room, and every assignment ... I check. Every assignment the parents are informed, every time.... Another thing for parents is they have to sign their tests, and I ask for a comment always, not just a signature. I want a comment. That keeps them involved.... When I have a test, I'll put all the marks on a paper, with no names, from the top mark to the bottom mark. I think it's nice for parents to know where their kid fits in.

Christine believed her role in the relationship is to keep parents informed of their child's progress and to educate them about the classroom expectations and ways they can help their child. For example, she always insisted that students bring their parents to the first open house to meet her and at that time she talked to them about the importance of education. She found that helped because "some of these parents want to do better, but they don't know how to do it." She offered suggestions for them to help their children. For example, "I often tell them they should have a homework hour to do their homework. Everything is off. The whole family stops. I tell them that. So that shows they care, if they take some of the things that you suggest to them that work."

She found it very frustrating when she offered suggestions or information and parents "will come and sing a nice song but then nothing happens." For example, Christine and another teacher, together with the RCMP, sent a letter home warning of the dangers of a computer site that students were using.

So we sent home this letter that we mailed to the parents with a contract. It came from the RCMP and from us. You know, you have to monitor your kids. They cannot be on [this website]. Never, ever. It's worse than MSN.... The RCMP say it's where they all talk and run each other down

and whatever else. Horrible. But so the parents sign a contract saying yes I will monitor my child. The computer will be only on when I'm in the room. They don't follow through.... We sent that out about January. They're all on [the website].... I'm disappointed in the parents. So that's the breakdown.

**Parent's role.**

Christine saw the parents' responsibility as following through on school or teacher suggestions and becoming involved by monitoring homework, offering assistance in the classroom, and supporting the school and classroom. Parents should also continue the education at home.

When my daughter would do astronomy I'd bring her to the library that night and we'd get out everything in the library and books would be on the coffee table. So you know, she had it at school, but she had it at home. And I would bring her to the space centre. You know, you just continued the education. Parents never do that.

She has become frustrated by the apparent lack of parental support in recent years. "We used to have these parents around the school that used to come to my door and say, okay, what do you need help in" but that doesn't seem to happen any more. She also noticed fewer parents attending functions. For example, she held monthly awards ceremonies during school hours to recognize students for things like attendance and hard work, and in previous years, she "used to have crowds of everybody" but more recently very few parents attend.

Christine also believed that parents can show care by providing feedback to teachers, and it was disappointing when she doesn't receive any because "when I used to work with gifted kids, you'd get parents writing, you know you get

feedback. Yeah, I love the feedback. You don't get much from here. Say five families out of a class, you get feedback, good feedback.”

To summarize, Christine believed that parents are integral to the success of their children. She saw her role as keeping them informed, educating them about the classroom and school, and giving them information about how to help their children. She believed the parents' role was to become involved by monitoring homework, offering to help with classroom events, following through on teacher suggestions, and continuing the education at home. She has become frustrated by what she sees as a lack of support from parents, particularly in recent years. She did not mention dialogue with parents as a factor in getting to know students better.

### **Jas Kaur**

Jas did not mention her parents' involvement in her schooling. When discussing her beliefs about parent-teacher relationships, she talked about the importance of communication, although she did not emphasize two-way dialogue to the same extent that Nick and Lisa did. She explained that, “I like to leave the lines of communication open and I always start in the beginning of the year, if there are any concerns or whatever, feel free to approach me.” As well, “when there is a concern I'm on the phone to the parent to let them know that this is what's happening and we need to have a chat.” Thus, Jas was willing to listen to parents' concerns and kept them informed when she had concerns.

She did not mention the importance of teacher flexibility in solving problems, nor did she discuss getting to know and understand parents. She did

discuss allowing parents to get to know her. For example, "I like to invite the parents into my classroom, particularly in the beginning of the year just to see where their child is going to school and who I am, I know we have to do that anyways, but I encourage that."

**Parent's role.**

One aspect of the parent's role was to volunteer to help in the classroom. She believed that "a caring parent is more often around to talk to and offer assistance in the classroom as warranted [such as for] fieldtrips or [to] do other chores that may be necessary."

She also believed that it was a parent's responsibility to monitor homework and she expressed frustration about the lack of follow through by some parents in this regard. For example,

it would be nice if when the kids have something in their planner, that they monitor that it actually gets done and that doesn't always happen. I mean the kids write in their planner, they put it under the parents' nose and they sign it, but I don't think they actually read what needs to be done, so it would be nice if they could be supportive in that way.... You always have a few kids that never get their homework done, and their planners are signed, well obviously they're not supporting me in that way, right?

Jas also believed that parents should show initiative in coming to meet with her. She has found that parents would come to parent-teacher interviews if she specifically asked them, but very few signed up on their own.

But when I have parent-teacher interviews, I don't get parents coming in for that, unless I specifically request that I need to see them, then they'll

come in. But they will not just ... come in.... It would be nice if they could ... sign up for appointments.

She explained that it was easier to form relationships with some parents because they were more accessible.

I think I was able to talk to them more readily or maybe they were at the door more often, it was easy to communicate with them.... They were visible. They're around.... A lot of the parents aren't around, I mean they're just out the door and they're gone.

Like Jean and Christine, Jas mentioned how important feedback from parents was. She was very touched by a parent who went out of her way to make sure her daughter would be in her classroom. "She really liked me as a teacher and when ... they moved away ... she wanted to bring her second daughter to this school to be in my classroom for a half day [kindergarten]. She didn't want to move the kids out because she wanted me as a teacher."

Another parent was "always buying me gifts.... So I guess that's a way that she shows that she really appreciates me as a teacher." Cards were also meaningful. She received "these beautiful cards [from a parent, saying] how she really appreciated me and all the wonderful things that I did and it was just a very, I don't know, such nice cards.... And I've still got them somewhere."

In summary, Jas believed communication with parents was important. For her, that meant keeping parents informed of her concerns, and letting them know they can approach her with their concerns. As well, she encouraged them to attend the open house at the beginning of the year so they could meet her. She did not discuss the need to get to know and understand parents, nor did she

emphasize the two-way dialogue Nick and Lisa spoke of. She also did not discuss flexibility in solving problems with parents.

Jas saw the parent's role as volunteering to help in the classroom or on fieldtrips, monitoring student homework and attending parent teacher meetings without being asked. She got frustrated when parents did not follow through by reading student planners and checking homework before signing the planner. It was easier to form relationships with parents when they were visible. Positive feedback from parents was a particularly meaningful way for them to extend care towards her.

### **Elizabeth Smith**

Elizabeth did not mention her parents during her discussion of her school experience either. It was interesting because her stated beliefs had parallels with both groups of teachers, yet her descriptions of her actions were more closely aligned with Christine and Jas. Perhaps this was because she was a new teacher (two years of experience) and was still forming her beliefs and working to implement them in practice.

She talked about her lack of experience as being a source of anxiety for her when communicating with parents and it influenced her ability to form relationships with them and to carry out her beliefs. For example, she had many ideas of ways to reach out to parents (such as holding a curriculum night where she would explain what she does in the class, or inviting parents into the classroom during school), but

honestly, I haven't done that because I think I feel a little bit insecure at times. But I think that's what I believe, that the parents should be involved in the classroom and should be able to come into the classroom and participate or volunteer, see what's going on.

Like Christine, she spoke of a triangle, "that it's not just me and the student, it's not just the student, it's all three of us working together." Therefore, she believed that it was important for teachers to reach out to parents and "let them know that I want to be in communication with them, that they are involved even though they're not in the classroom, that they are part of their student's learning." While she would like for parents to "see themselves as being ... a part of this too," even though they are not in the room, she also admitted that was an ideal that she has not yet reached. "But do I do all of those things? Definitely not. But I just say to myself, well I'm just learning."

One way she believed teachers could reach out to parents was to become more involved in their community and attend evening functions that teachers were invited to (such as the school's yearly Vaisakhi celebration).

Because I think in order for parents to care, you know in some communities, in order for parents to feel like they are part of the classroom, I think it's not only us encouraging them to come in, because I don't think they always will, I think sometimes us going out to them, right? Involved in some of their things. But that said, I don't know how that could happen [because of time].

She believed communication was important and she

often contacts parents when there is a struggle in the classroom. I want them involved in the conversation to support me and to support the



student in, whether it's completing homework, how can we make sure that you're on track with listening, or whatever the case may be.

She also recognized that contact about concerns was not enough. She would love to be the teacher that doesn't only [contact parents with concerns], but I think even better would be to let parents know when their kids are doing great and give them the whole kind of perspective of who their kids are, at the best of times and at the not so best of times.

Elizabeth talked about keeping parents informed of concerns and letting them know what was going well for their child, but she did not discuss the need to hear and understand the parents' perspective.

**Parent's role.**

Elizabeth's beliefs more closely align with Jas and Christine when discussing the parents' role. She believed parents should reciprocate the teacher's efforts. For example,

I do think that it's important that they reciprocate my efforts and the kids' efforts if ... I try to keep in contact with the kids' parents through planners and I do expect the parents to respond back or sign their planners, write notes to me if there's a concern.

Further, Christine talked about the importance of parents taking the teacher's advice, and Elizabeth echoed that sentiment.

...when I do meet with students and parents, I think that definitely there's parents that when we're meeting, I feel as though the parents have cared when they take what I have said or other teachers or staff have said, and I can tell that it's been taken to heart and they respond and they either are encouraging their kids to do what they've been asked to do.... So I guess

I see that as not only just caring for their own children, but also that they value what I've said and that they do care in some ways.

Thus, parents can show care towards teachers by acting on the teacher's advice.

As well, like Jas, she would like parents to show initiative. "I think too that if the parents do have a concern or something that they're not sure about, that it's important for them to take initiative."

Elizabeth echoed the importance of positive feedback from parents that was expressed by Jean, Christine, and Jas. When parents buy meaningful gifts for the teacher, "you know that parent has been involved ... and that kind of shows, hey that we want to get something meaningful for the teacher." Parents have also shown care by expressing their wish that their children be in her class. "They say, ... I hope you're going to be back next year. Or I've got a child in a younger grade; oh I hope they have you next year." Although it does not often happen, Elizabeth explained that "I think it would be great to have thank yous from parents. You know, thanks for what you've done for my child this year.... It would sustain, just that one parent. That would carry me for awhile for sure."

To summarize, Elizabeth, as a new teacher, candidly admitted that she did not do everything she would like to in forming relationships with parents, because of a lack of confidence. She would like parents to feel like they are part of what is going on in the classroom, but she did not invite them in because she feels insecure. She believed it was important for teachers to open the door of communication with parents and tell them about their child's successes and struggles. When discussing communication, she did not mention the need to

listen to parents' input to help her gain a greater understanding of the child, nor did she discuss the importance of problem-solving together. However, she did mention trying to keep them informed so they could support her and their child.

Parents show they care by responding to notes and feedback and valuing the teacher's input. They should also show initiative by talking with the teacher about their concerns. Positive feedback from parents was very important and appreciated. They have provided this by expressing the wish that their other children be in her class, or by giving gifts. Thank yous were rare, but valued.

### **Teacher Cross-Case Summary**

All teachers expressed the belief that the parent-teacher relationship is an important one. Not only did they believe that parent involvement was important for the success of children, but when they interpreted parents' actions as caring towards teachers, they felt supported and valued. This would also help to sustain teachers in their work with both children and parents.

However, teachers' beliefs about what this relationship should look like differed. Those teachers who talked about the involvement or specifically mentioned the lack of involvement of their own parents in their education, were open to more active participation by parents in their own classrooms and saw parents as partners in the education of their children. They also spoke about communication differently. Nick and Lisa discussed the need to really listen to parents and understand their beliefs and expectations. They emphasized two-way dialogue to reach a common understanding because one-way communication from the teacher to the parent was not sufficient to build a

relationship. Without two-way dialogue it is not possible to “apprehend... the other’s reality” (Noddings, 2003, p. 16), a necessary ingredient in forming caring relations.

Jean also emphasized the mutual support that parents and teachers can offer one another and spoke about the need to solve problems together. Nick, Lisa and Jean believed that teachers need to be flexible in solving problems *with* parents.

Christine, Jas and Elizabeth did not mention their parents’ involvement in their schooling when discussing their own caring teachers. This does not mean their parents were not involved; simply that they did not raise it as an issue of care. Interestingly, their current beliefs had many similarities. When they talked about communication it resembled more of a one-way interaction as opposed to a two-way dialogue. While Jas and Elizabeth talked about keeping the lines of communication open, all three teachers emphasized ways they keep parents informed, as opposed to ways parents can provide information for them. Elizabeth’s desire to “give [parents] the whole kind of perspective of who their kids are, at the best of times and at the not so best of times” can be contrasted with Nick’s belief that “communication between parent and teacher can help to fully round that child out as a learner, not just in the classroom, but in life as well.” There was a clear distinction between communication as a two-way dialogue to reach mutual understanding (as described by Noddings, 2005), and communication as informing.

The approach to solving problems also differed between the two groups. While Nick, Lisa, and Jean emphasized solving problems *with* parents and needing to be flexible in finding solutions, Christine, Jas, and Elizabeth talked more about wanting to keep parents informed so they could support the teacher's suggestions. For example, Lisa and Jean talked about working with parents to try to find ways to help students complete their homework. They recognized that perhaps the student could not complete it at home, so maybe it would be better to allow students to do it before or after school if they made their classrooms available. In contrast, Christine was frustrated when she told parents to set aside time for homework and many of them did not.

Christine, Jas, and Elizabeth's descriptions suggested the teacher and student were the main players in the triad; parents played a supportive role. Nick, Lisa, and Jean saw parent involvement as being active and equal. Parents have insights and ideas to share; support means participation. Therefore the parent's role was not a passive or peripheral one.

Christine, Jas, and Elizabeth expressed frustration with the perceived lack of support and follow through by some parents. Some of the frustrations they described included parents not monitoring homework, not responding to notes, not following through on teacher suggestions, or not volunteering to help in the classroom.

It should be noted that not all teachers want parents to volunteer in the classroom. Lisa worried that they might come with their own agenda or just want to watch their children. Nick did not mention parents as volunteers (although he

believed they should observe their children when there were problems). Although Elizabeth believed it would be good to have parents in the classroom, she found it intimidating. For the most part, though, teachers believed volunteering was an important aspect of the parents' role and a way to care for and support the teacher.

Positive feedback as a form of care was extremely meaningful for and appreciated by teachers. Parents provided this through gifts, cards, and verbal recognition. Elizabeth and Jas explained that thank yous were rare, but one thank you could go a long way in providing energy to continue caring for students and their parents.

### **Parent Views**

All parents felt very strongly that relationships with teachers were important. By far the most important theme that was echoed throughout every parent's interview was the importance of open communication. They wanted to be kept informed, but they also wanted to be heard. They wanted teachers to be honest and they wanted to be part of decision-making. I discuss each parent's views and then summarize them with reference to the teachers' beliefs.

### **Mr. Gill**

Mr. Gill explained that when he was in elementary school he had the same teacher until grade five, so his teacher got to know his parents very well and knew all about his family. As a parent, he believes that

the relationship between teachers and parents is very important because if the relationship between the teacher and the parents is very good and

they talk to each other, they share if there's any problem in the class or at home, they talk about those problems, then they can work better.

When he was a student, his teacher knew about his family, and now he believed that parents should inform the teacher about any problems at home. He also wanted to be involved in finding solutions to problems his children are having at school. For example, when his son was getting into trouble for wandering and talking, "the teacher, she called me and she talked to me and then we sat down and we talked and now he's doing very good."

Mr. Gill also believed that mutual respect was important in forming a caring parent-teacher relationship.

**Parent's role.**

Parents should be "involved more in the schools, to do some volunteer work and to go with teachers for the fieldtrips." Volunteer work in the classroom was particularly important because "when you go to the class and volunteer there then you know more about the kids." Parents should communicate with the teacher because "then it's better for the kids ... [and] easier for the teachers too."

In summary, Mr. Gill believed that communication was very important in the parent-teacher relationship. Teachers should tell parents about any problems their child has at school, and parents also need to let teachers know if there are problems at home. He wanted to be involved in finding solutions to problems because he believed that if the teacher and parent worked together, it would be better for the child. Mutual respect was important. Parents should also volunteer in the classroom and on fieldtrips.

**Mrs. Beck**

Mrs. Beck also emphasized the importance of communication between teachers and parents. She did not speak about her own parents' involvement in her schooling, except to mention that they were well informed about her standing in the class. As a parent, she also wanted to know how her children were doing, "like if they're doing good they should tell us or they should write that in the report card.... If there are any concerns they should tell parents." It was better if teachers took the initiative to tell parents, because it was harder to visit the teacher as her child got older.

In lower classes you can go more frequently to the teacher and you can ask more about how they're doing, but if they are in high school or in higher classes, it's not very good.... Like if I go to [my daughter's] class every day and ask [the teacher] how she is doing, [my daughter] might not be very good that my mother is coming and asking. But for my son [who is younger] it's okay, he doesn't mind if I go there. So teachers should tell us if there is a problem with my kid.

When problems did arise, she wanted to be involved in helping to solve them. "I feel that if teachers think that she is having some kind of problems and if we work together then we can help her with that problem."

She expressed frustration at instances when she has not been kept informed. For example, she would prefer to know how her children are doing in relation to the rest of the class. She also wanted to be told honestly about the criteria for assessment and for making decisions. She was frustrated by the school's decision to place her son in a split class and when she spoke with the principal about it,



she said we have selected specially five students whom we thought are very good in studies... But when I went there ... I saw that students are totally different from my son, totally different level, they can't even read the words.... I don't know how they've selected those people because it's totally different.

She also felt parents were not informed about what their children were doing or were expected to do in school.

Maybe there should be some kind of syllabus, like you are supposed to do this in grade 1 and this in grade 2, maybe some sort of textbook so that parents should know what their children are doing in the school.... At the end of the year they brought things, like we have done this in the year, but we don't know what they are doing in the school. I go there, so I know what level he is doing, but otherwise I don't know what they are doing.... We should know that ... when they are reaching grade two, they should know by that time this thing.

She also considered it uncaring when teachers were not welcoming. For example,

some people have experiences, like if your child got a project and you go there and you ask the teacher, what are we supposed to do in the project, what is my kid supposed to do ... and the teacher said he already told your son or daughter what they are supposed to do. Why are you here to ask that? It should not be like that.... So there should be more friendly relations between parents and teachers.... When parents come to ask questions to the teacher they should be more polite. They should listen to parents more patiently.

**Parent's role.**

Mrs. Beck believed that parents should volunteer in the classroom so they have a better understanding of how their child is doing, they should be willing to

work with their children at home if they are having difficulty, and they should only go to the teacher if it is important. "Parents should not go ... if you have no questions. Then you are going there and you are bothering the teacher. So when it's very, very necessary you have to go."

To summarize, Mrs. Beck believed that communication between teachers and parents was very important. She was frustrated when she felt like she was not being kept informed, either about her child's progress in relation to the rest of the class, the criteria for assessment, the curriculum expectations, or reasons for decisions that are made about her children. She wanted to be involved in solving problems because "if we work together then we can help her with that problem." Older children were uncomfortable with their parents visiting the teacher, so teachers should keep the parents informed. Parents should not bother the teacher unless it is necessary, but when they do visit and ask questions, the teacher should be patient and polite. Parents should volunteer in the classroom to learn what happens there and help their children at home if they are having difficulty.

### **Mrs. Sandy**

Mrs. Sandy valued the opportunity to get to know her children's teachers and because she was able to spend more time at the school, "I got to know the teachers and got to know them on a first name basis, share jokes with them. And that's important" because "it's a 50-50 thing. It's a triangle, student, parent, teacher. And you've got to keep it all together or else if it starts to fall apart, it's the child that loses."

Communication was at the top of Mrs. Sandy's list when asked what she would consider caring in the parent-teacher relationship.

The expectation that they will call me if they have a concern. And just like I expect to hear from them with a positive. You know your son did great on the speech fest, or got number one. You know, just when I'm coming to pick the kids up after school.... Taking the time to tell me ... he did well.... That I like to hear, nice feedback."

As well, she valued honesty and initiative because "if the child has a problem, the parent should know, instead of sugar-coating it or hoping it will go away or waiting until the next year for the next year's teacher to deal with."

She believed that communication should be two-way. Teachers should listen to parents about what is happening at home because "something might be going on at home that the teacher isn't aware of, that is affecting a child's progress or happiness level." She talked about an incident when her son was young that she described as particularly caring. She became ill when her son was in grade one "and we didn't know what was wrong with me and I called [the teacher] ... at the beginning of the year, and let her know that I was ill.... And just the caring that she showed to [my son] and asking me about my health." This teacher accommodated the needs of the family by providing extra help to her son because Mrs. Sandy was unable to do it herself. When teachers are aware of family situations it helps them meet the needs of students.

Mrs. Sandy felt it was important for parents to be included in decision-making because "one, you don't want to have your child set himself up to fail.... And I like to know what my child's doing in school. And I like to know how well

he's doing it. And if he's liking or disliking, and the reasons why. That's all important....”

**Parent's role.**

Parents need to participate in the communication with teachers by informing them of family situations. She also believed it was important to volunteer in the classroom or on fieldtrips if possible. She explained that, “I've always enjoyed going on fieldtrips with the class. Driving. And I expect to be asked. I've told them I'm available when they need me and 9 times out of 10 I get the call.” She also takes the time to get to know her children's teachers.

To summarize, Mrs. Sandy believed it was important to get to know her children's teachers because parents, teachers and students need to work together and if the parent-teacher relationship is not a caring one, the child suffers. Parents should be included in the decision-making process. She valued open communication and wanted to know concerns as well as positives. She wanted teachers to be honest and pro-active in helping to solve problems and appreciated one teacher's flexibility in accommodating the special needs of her family one year. She volunteered in the classroom and on fieldtrips whenever possible.

**Mr. Singh**

Mr. Singh emphasized the importance of a caring parent-teacher relationship and explained that “teachers should have that relation with parents, one to one.” He believed that “if teachers feel they are not being cared for by the government or the parents, she doesn't have interaction with the parents, it's less

chance she will be attached to students.” Therefore, when parents care for teachers, teachers are better able to care for students. Without a caring parent-teacher relationship, students will suffer.

However, he noted breakdowns in the parent-teacher relationship. One reason for that was a strike and contract negotiations that he felt teachers did not adequately inform parents about. This lack of communication led to misunderstanding and resentment.

I found when last time there was a strike ... it would have been better if teachers would have talked to parents about their intentions and if they would have let them know about these issues, that would have really helped, because if parents understand, they can go out and target the government.... Now when teacher is just saying, without talking to parents, that we care about your child, we need smaller class, to me looks like joke. Oh, what do you care? You care about your own raise. If you really cared about my child, talk to me first.

This communication gap extended to the classroom. “Parents [are] having challenges and they sometimes blame it on teachers and teachers blame on parents, whereas parents and teachers should be on the same page” because “if teacher is doing something and the parents are doing totally opposite, it’s not going to help.”

Mr. Singh spoke at length about the importance of open dialogue between parents and teachers where they exchange views, as opposed to where teachers simply inform. This will help teachers gain a better understanding of the student and parents. For example, even though the teacher is responsible for assessing the child, “parents also do make assessments of their children.... They know

where their child is attitude wise and how they're feeling about school, how they're feeling about their group, about their friends" and therefore parents have information to contribute that teachers should listen to. "If parents ... meet with the teachers and exchange their views ... that also gives a better idea to teachers."

It was essential for teachers to get to know and understand parents. This was particularly important when parents came from different cultures because the parenting style and schooling style may ... be ... different if they are not coming from European countries.... People coming from different schooling systems, it is hard for them to understand and ... teachers think that those parents understand, but they do not understand because expectations are totally different in their mind.

It was a teacher's role to try and bridge that gap. He understood that "we can't really say that teacher has to do everything. But at the same time, because teacher is there at the centre ... she or he should try to do their best." When teachers do not communicate their expectations of parents it leads to misunderstanding and a breakdown in relations.

He admitted that some parents were reluctant to meet with teachers "because at this moment parents think it's not their job. The job at school [is] to make a child educated; it's the teacher's job."

But if teachers are willing, to show that willingness that we want to talk to you, just because we want to understand better your child so that we can help them.... If that message goes out, every parent will come out. Oh yeah, that the interview is necessary because I want to tell something about my child.

**Parent's role.**

Parents should meet with teachers and share information about their child. He believed that parents “should also try their best. It’s a two-way street” and “parents also have to understand that teachers are also humans, they can make mistakes.” As well, when possible, parents should volunteer in classrooms.

To summarize, Mr. Singh placed high value on a caring parent-teacher relationship and believed there should be ongoing, open dialogue so teachers and parents could understand one another (particularly when parents are from another culture) and teachers could gain a better understanding of students. When the parent-teacher relationship breaks down, students suffer because teachers are less likely to care for students when they do not feel cared for by the students’ parents.

**Mrs. Miller**

For Mrs. Miller, communication was the key factor in the parent-teacher relationship. She appreciated being told about incidents that occurred at school as well as problems her children were having, in a timely fashion.

I had notes come home that specified different things that one of them needed to work on and I’d never had that before. Usually you don’t find out until it’s either too late or the report card time or whatever and it was something saying she needed to work on multiplication or something like that and to come talk to her, and so that I really appreciated.

Like the other parents, she appreciated hearing praise about her children as well. Not receiving information about her children was a source of significant

frustration. “In one case on the flip side, was that I didn’t find out until a year later that there were problems with something.”

She also believed it is important for teachers to be welcoming and let parents know they are available and willing to help. “Just encouraging [parents] to come in and take a look at the kids’ work, or even to say that I am here if you need help with the homework or whatever, ... that sort of stuff would be helpful.”

Initially, Mrs. Miller was full of praise for her children’s teachers and talked about ways they have shown care in their relationships with her and her children. However, after some time she began to really open up, and revealed a great deal of hurt and disappointment in the breakdown of trust in some teachers. She believed parents are partners, but at times she felt excluded when decisions were being made about her children. She felt that sometimes “there’s an us and them” instead of both groups working together as partners. It was also a testament to the breakdown in relations that she was very nervous about teachers finding out what she had said, even though she was only asked to state her beliefs.

A perceived lack of honesty was considered very uncaring and was damaging to her relationship with some teachers. There was an incident where she felt the teachers and administrator were not completely honest about their criteria for making a decision about whether to move her daughter ahead a grade mid-year, and she “ended up ... really, really upset over the situation” because the teacher “agreed with me at first ... and then I think they had a teacher meeting; some other teachers may have got involved and changed her mind.



There was some not telling the truth. There was a big problem actually.”

Another source of stress was the meeting where she was informed of the decision because “they met with me and they had two administration and about three or four teachers in a meeting to tell me ... no.... And I felt it was a bit of a gang up on me.”

The disagreement and perceived lack of honesty led to a concern about the way that her children would be treated. She “was a bit worried [because] ... I didn’t know if the teachers would be bitter over it.” She “didn’t want [her daughter] to suffer because ... [she] was pushy or whatever.”

In the end, the decision was reversed and they moved her daughter ahead, but again, Mrs. Miller did not feel part of the process. “At the end of the year, they just came and said this is what we’ve decided to do. And then of course I wasn’t sure that that was the right thing then, to skip a whole year like that.” It would have been useful to openly talk the situation through and from Mrs. Miller’s perspective that did not happen.

#### **Parent’s role.**

Mrs. Miller believed it was important for parents to advocate for their children. She “had to fight and fight and fight” to make sure her daughter was challenged and without her advocacy “it wouldn’t have happened. Definitely wouldn’t have happened. Cause I know I was just a thorn in their side.”

On the other hand, it was important to show care by thanking teachers. When her daughter’s teacher told her about an incident at school, she “did go

and thank her for that because I felt that that was something that really helped me and it helped [my daughter] as well.”

Finally, parents need to work with their children at home. She explained that she was “actually surprised at all the amount that we do do outside of the class because I think ... teachers can only cover so much with all those kids at one time.... But I feel that I’m a big part of it, of teaching because sometimes they don’t get it and there’s not enough time in the classroom maybe.”

In summary, Mrs. Miller’s story painted a picture of the damage that can be done when there is a breakdown in care between parents and teachers. She believed she was a partner in the education of her children, and wanted to be involved in decisions that affected them, as opposed to simply being informed of decisions that have already been made. She also believed open, honest, and on-going communication was extremely important. Parents should be told about positives and concerns in a timely fashion and teachers should listen to parents as well. It would be helpful if teachers were welcoming and invited parents in to see student work or to ask questions. Teachers should make it clear that they are willing to help. Parents need to advocate for their children, thank teachers, and work with their children at home.

### **Cross-Case Summary**

In this section I review the main ideas presented by parents and compare them with those expressed by teachers. Afterwards, I discuss some of the barriers to forming relationships between teachers and parents, which the participants identified.

All parents believed a caring parent-teacher relationship was important to the success of their children. The most important aspect they identified as caring was open communication. They appreciated teachers who kept them informed and listened to their input. They felt they had information about their children that teachers need in order to understand how to help them as students. In fact, both Nick and Mrs. Miller talked about parents needing to be advocates for their children. While some teachers talked about the importance of listening to parents to learn their perspective and gain a greater understanding of the child, other teachers talked about communication in terms of the way they inform parents about their child.

Parents wanted to be involved in decision-making and problem-solving; they did not want to simply be informed of decisions. Frustration was clear when they did not feel included or when they felt the decision-making process was not transparent. These parents saw themselves as active participants in their children's education, not as passive recipients of teacher advice and information. Thus, their views of the parent-teacher relationship and their role in the education of their children were more closely aligned with the beliefs expressed by Nick, Lisa and Jean. As Jean explained, parents and teachers are equal and need to work *together* for the benefit of students.

Nick pointed out that his views of communication with parents have evolved. Now that he is an administrator he realized how often parents felt left out, even though, as a teacher he "tried to involve parents in helping their child be successful, [but he] didn't really see how invested a lot of parents are and still

feel left out, even though we have brief conversations here and there.” When communication breaks down it causes a rift in the relationship and mistrust can develop. As Mrs. Miller pointed out, it sometimes feels like “us versus them” instead of “us”. When that happens, children suffer. Mr. Singh explained that if teachers do not feel cared for by parents (and employers) they are less likely to spend time caring for children.

One item that was an important aspect of care for teachers was receiving feedback from parents. It was a way of being “fed back” for their efforts. All teachers spoke about some form of feedback. For Nick, parents showed care when they told him about problems at home, “letting [him] know that maybe their child will be upset and that they trust [he] will handle it well.” Lisa felt cared for when parents knew about and commented upon what she was doing with their children. Jean, Christine, Jas, and Elizabeth spoke about specific feedback such as notes from parents. Gifts and cards were treasured and thank you, although rare, had the ability to sustain them for long periods of time. Among parents, only Mrs. Miller talked about thanking teachers. Mr. Singh did not mention thanking teachers, but did acknowledge the importance of recognizing that “teachers are also humans; they can make mistakes.”

All parents mentioned the importance of doing volunteer work in the classroom and helping on fieldtrips, which most teachers identified as an aspect of the parent’s role in a caring parent-teacher relationship. However, Lisa was concerned about parents’ agendas. She believed that parents should not come in the classroom just to watch their children all day. On the other hand, Nick

believed parents should spend time in classrooms to find out what is happening with their children, but did not mention parents as volunteers. The other teachers tended to see volunteer work as a way of supporting the teacher and helping them to complete jobs in the classroom. Parents tended to see it as a way of becoming informed about what was going on in the classroom and what their children were learning, as Nick suggested (and Lisa was concerned about).

### **Difficulties in Forming Relationships with Parents**

While both parents and teachers agreed that the parent-teacher relationship was important to the success of students, both groups identified barriers to forming that relationship. Miscommunication appeared to be the cause of most of those difficulties and led to assumptions and misunderstandings which lay the foundation for broken relationships. This parallels the findings in Webb et al. (1993) where, because of the absence of dialogue, adults did not interpret each other's actions as caring. This breakdown in relations is a problem because, as pointed out in Cassidy & Bates (2005), "we can't successfully work with kids unless we're working with their families" (p. 11). Tatar & Horenczyk (2000) explain that parents and teachers cannot successfully collaborate without a "mutual knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and expectations that each of the parties holds of the other" (p. 494).

Nick described how teachers and parents do not always listen to one another:

I think teachers are often too busy trying to tell what the problem is at school to get help, when they're not hearing what's going on at home and

how the parent's struggling as well with some things.... I think that when you're sitting and watching a teacher and a parent talk, often it's just miscommunication. They don't see what the parents are struggling with as well and can't help them get past it or [parents] can't help the teachers because they're not hearing what the child needs in the classroom.

Another aspect of the miscommunication problem between teachers and parents was language differences. It can be hard to communicate with parents who do not speak English. Christine found that although she sent things home, parents "can't read English. The kids will go oh, just sign here."

The language barrier can be addressed, in part, by using translators. Elizabeth sent a letter home to introduce herself, and asked for comments from parents. She only received one response, "and I don't know if that's maybe a language barrier, so I just thought of something, I mean maybe in the future I can have it translated."

Even when everyone speaks the same language, communication takes time, and availability of parents was an important factor in the teacher's ability to form relationships with them. Jas explained that it was easier to develop relationships with parents who spend time at the school because they were accessible. It was difficult for some parents and teachers to get to know each other simply because many parents work or have other commitments and are unable to be at the school.

Some teachers also identified their own lack of time as a problem. For example, Elizabeth believed it was important for teachers to be part of the larger community, but

I think that most teachers don't because it's like one other thing that they have to do, and where is the time for me and my own life. But I ... do think it is important. But I don't know how you would do that and do it in a way that is still palatable for teachers, where they would want to do it, in a way that is gracious towards them.

Lisa also explained that "just our workload and what we're trying to do is not a natural thing." Handling the teaching workload and forming relationships with students requires time and the parent-teacher relationship appeared to add another layer of demands on a teacher's limited time.

In addition to time constraints, some parents did not spend time in school because they did not feel welcome or did not believe it was their role. As Mr. Singh pointed out, if teachers let parents know that "we want to talk to you, because we want to understand ... your child so that we can help them ... every parent will come out." Otherwise, he believed that some parents thought it was the school's job to educate their children and they should not need to be there.

Mrs. Sandy explained that some parents might not come to the school because they feel uncomfortable. They assume teachers would ask if they needed help or wanted to see them. Mrs. Miller echoed this when she commented that teachers "should encourage you to help out more in the classroom itself, because ... if my teacher asked me, is there a day that you can come in and help me, I'd probably take a day off work to do that" but "you don't want to step on toes or you don't want to push your way into the classroom if you're not wanted" so "if [we] are wanted then let us know." Mrs. Miller went to school in Canada; if she felt uncertain about whether parents were welcome it

can be understood how parents who attended school in another country might feel uncomfortable, particularly if, in their experience, parents did not spend time in schools. This misunderstanding might explain why Christine has noticed that parents are no longer at her door offering to help (as the school population has changed to include more immigrant families).

The need to be invited also referred back to Jas's frustration, because it exemplified the difference in expectations. Parents would meet with her if she invited them, but they did not show initiative in making an appointment themselves. Perhaps they believed the teacher would invite them if they were supposed to come because, as Mrs. Beck worried, parents should only go there if it was important because otherwise "you are bothering the teacher."

It was interesting how the same situation was viewed differently by parents and teachers. When parents were not in the school, Christine, Jas, and Elizabeth believed parents were not interested and did not want to be involved. It was seen as apathy. Parents, on the other hand, talked about not feeling welcome, not wanting to step on toes or bother the teacher, or not believing that was their role.

Another barrier to making parents feel welcome was identified by Elizabeth. She explained that the physical space in most schools was not welcoming or inclusive. It would be nice to have the space for a parent room because there was no place for parents to gather and feel welcome in the building unless they were working in a classroom.



Finally, many teachers and parents identified cultural differences as a barrier to forming caring relationships. These differences caused misunderstanding due to unexpressed assumptions and expectations. Mr. Singh articulated this problem clearly:

50% of Canadian community is immigrant community and the parenting style and schooling style... is different if they are not coming from European countries.... So how are we going to help those parents to understand what is the class atmosphere, what is the teacher's expectation and how is the teacher going to communicate with those parents.... The parents who have grown up here, they understand the school system, the culture. When teacher is talking to them, they are on the same page. They can understand each other and even if not, with some more explanation they can make each other understand. But people coming from different cultures and different schooling systems, it is hard for them to understand and a lot of time teachers think that those parents understand, but they do not understand because expectations are totally different in their mind, where a teacher has totally different expectations. So how are you going to match those?

In order to address this cultural barrier, Mr. Singh suggested that parents who understand the school system could help others. It is not necessarily something teachers can directly address.

I think that ... if teachers want to play a role they can help parents who understand what's going on and how things are going on, to encourage those parents to help other parents. Parents can help parents; teachers can help teachers. Once teachers want to help parents then it's again extra time, they will be over-burdened and parents may think we know everything. Why are teachers going to tell us what to do, how we're going to do our parenting?

His suggestion that parents might be offended if teachers appeared to tell them how to parent, provided a useful lens to view Christine's frustration when she provided advice and parents "sing a nice song and dance" but then do not follow through on what she told them. In her school experience the nuns may have had authority over parents and their advice would have been welcomed and followed; in this school, with parents from many different backgrounds, her advice may not be welcome or even fully understood.

Thus, all participants believed the parent-teacher relationship was important and communication was the central factor in facilitating a caring relationship. However, not everyone agreed on the form of the relationship or the content of the communication. All parents and some teachers believed that parents and teachers were equal partners who should work together to solve problems, and that communication should be a two-way dialogue. Other teachers saw communication as informing, and did not emphasize listening to or getting to know parents as essential. Everyone identified difficulties in forming relationships, which included time constraints, miscommunication, and language and cultural differences.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS/DISCUSSION

The original question I set out to answer in this study was “How do participants from three stakeholder groups (teachers, parents, and students) in one school understand care in an educational context?” The B.C. Satisfaction Surveys (2004-05) suggested there was a discrepancy between the views of these three groups and I wanted to look deeper into one school to see if there was a common understanding of care within that context.

So what is a caring teacher? Well, it depends. As Noddings (1992) points out, there is no recipe for care. “It requires different behaviors from situation to situation and person to person” (p. xi). The comparison of beliefs expressed by students, parents and teachers in this study highlights this fact. Although there were similarities, different people had different expectations and interpretations of care. As Baker (1999) and Wentzel (1989) explain, students perceive classroom environments differently. Therefore it stands to reason they would interpret teacher behaviours differently and any attempt to list examples of caring behaviours would not be definitive. Nevertheless, general themes do emerge and suggest a general pathway to forming caring relations.

There are four findings from this research that are particularly significant to understanding caring relations in schools and I explore those findings in this section. First, I summarize the four findings and relate them to previous research. Then I review the importance of uncovering our beliefs. Next I discuss

the educational implications of the findings and suggest some possible ways to address them. Finally, I present limitations of the research and suggest future directions for further research in this area.

The four findings to be explored are:

- Participants felt that caring teachers were important to the success of students. Although no recipe for creating caring relationships with students emerged, participants agreed that teachers need to know students as individuals.
- There were striking parallels between participants' past experiences and their current beliefs about care in school contexts.
- The parent-teacher relationship was considered important by parents and teachers. However, the assumptions and expectations each party held of the other made this a complex and, at times, problematic relationship.
- Communication was the most important element identified in the parent-teacher relationship.

## **The Teacher-Student Relationship:**

### **Teachers Should Know Students as Individuals**

All participants agreed that the teacher-student relationship is integral to the success of students. Further, the benefits students reported experiencing with caring teachers are similar to those described in previous research findings. For example, students in this study explained that when teachers are perceived as caring, students want to work harder (see Wentzel, 1997), their behaviour improves, their interest in school increases (see Wentzel, 1998, 2002), their

school satisfaction increases (see Baker, 1999), and they are more engaged (see Cothran & Ennis, 2000, and Furrer & Skinner, 2003). One student even stated that caring teachers can change the way students see themselves because it increases their self-confidence when someone else believes in them. It is clear they perceived care to be important. But the ways they defined care were unique to each person's individual needs and expectations.

Knowing students as individuals was an over-arching theme that emerged in this study, and is consistent with findings from previous research (see, for example, Alder, 2002; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and suggested by the work of Nel Noddings (2005). She explains that caring is characterized by engrossment and motivational displacement. Engrossment involves being open to the needs of the cared-for, being able to "really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (p. 16) and motivational displacement is placing the needs of the other before our own. Therefore, to demonstrate care, decisions must be based on the needs of the individual student, not on the desires or needs of the teacher. Demonstrating "care" based on our own framework does not take into consideration the needs of the other. Hargreaves (1994, paraphrased in Lasky, 2000) explains that "caring in teaching is not always an altruistic or virtuous act [because] teachers can care only on their terms, which can be inseparable from control" (p. 851).

Students in this study were adamant that caring teachers should know students as individuals. They described the importance of teachers knowing their home circumstances and being willing to help with personal problems. They

wanted teachers to talk with them and really listen to them. The issue of fairness also came up and most students recognized that being fair did not mean treating everyone the same. Being fair to students meant meeting their individual needs. In other words, care should be based on student need.

Parents in this study also wanted teachers to know their children as individuals and not just “lump them in a group,” as Mrs. Sandy pointed out. For different parents, knowing their child might be shown by knowing their strengths and weaknesses, understanding their circumstances and interests, helping them with personal and academic problems, and knowing about their lives outside of school. This is in line with the findings of Tatar & Horenczyk (2000), who questioned parents about their expectations of teachers. They found that parents rated “help” questions higher than competence and fairness questions. “Help” included items such as “I would like the teacher to be interested in his or her problems” (p. 478), which reflects knowing students as individuals. You cannot help with their problems without getting to know them as individuals in order to find out what those problems may be (either academic or social).

Five of the six teachers interviewed also talked about needing to know students as individuals. That was either described in terms of knowing their strengths and weaknesses or understanding their individual circumstances (such as home life). These five teachers also talked about care being based on student need, which was highlighted in Cassidy & Bates’s (2005) study of marginalized youth. Those teachers recognized that “...building relationships... and working in the youth’s (not their own) best interest” (p. 15) was essential in

reaching their students. Similarly, Nick talked about adjusting expectations based on individual needs and circumstances, and Jean and Lisa talked about flexibility in solving problems based on the child's circumstances. Jas mentioned that knowing the student's individual circumstances helped her to understand problems they might be experiencing. Elizabeth discussed the importance of noticing things about each student. All these examples point to the need to know individual students.

Having high expectations was a theme in some previous studies (Alder, 2002; Howard, 2002) and was also a dominant theme for five of the six teachers in this study. While these teachers regarded high expectations as seeing students' potential, the findings of this study suggest that care must be taken that those expectations be based on individual student need and ability, as opposed to teacher desires (which is consistent with Cassidy & Bates, 2005). None of the students in this study identified high expectations as an aspect of care, although some did talk about wanting work to be challenging and interesting. While some parents agreed with the importance of pushing students (Mrs. Beck and Mr. Gill in particular), Mrs. Sandy highlighted the importance of understanding the individual student before pushing them or having blanket expectations. She explained that it "depends on the child. Some do need a push to excel and to do their best and then exceed, to go beyond" but others do not. (It should also be noted that Mrs. Beck's expectation that teachers push her children to achieve more can be understood as a desire for teachers to know her children as individuals. She did not want blanket low expectations applied to them.)

Noddings (1988) reiterates the importance of knowing students well before setting expectations for them because

if, without knowing a student – what he loves, strives for, fears, hopes – I merely expect him to do uniformly well in everything I present to him, I treat him like an unreflective animal. A high expectation can be a mark of respect, but so can a relatively low one. (p. 224)

Further, she believes that “simply to have high expectations for our students in general ... is just another form of product control” (Noddings, 2003, p. 196).

Having high expectations is an area of some disagreement among participants in this study, which could possibly have a detrimental effect on relations. It highlights the importance of knowing students, and their parents, as individuals and adjusting expectations and behaviours accordingly.

Students, parents and teachers in this study recognized the importance of knowing students as individuals, which is consistent with findings from previous research (Alder, 2002; Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Hayes et al., 1994; Howard, 2002). The findings of this study suggest that having high expectations for students should be reflected in an awareness of students' individual interests and capabilities, rather than being based on a teacher's own framework.

### **The Influence of Past Experiences on Current Beliefs**

Kendrick (1994) explains that care is culture and context specific. Based on this argument, I chose to interview participants from one school because that would provide a common context for their experiences, despite the fact that the participants did not share a common cultural background. It quickly became



apparent to me that the context of the school is not enough to form the beliefs of the people inhabiting it, despite the fact that in my personal experience as a teacher there has been an assumption among colleagues that we share similar beliefs about what is best for students. This assumption is readily made in the absence of meaningful dialogue among teachers. However, every time a teacher, student or parent walks through the school door, their past experiences are walking in right behind them. As Noddings (1992) points out, “who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life” (p. xiii). In other words, how we interpret and respond to moments of care within school depends largely on our personal context outside of school.

Part of that personal context is formed by our past experiences which, of course, include cultural experiences. Some researchers have found cultural and gender differences in understandings of care (see, for example, Hayes et al., 1994). However, attributing differences to culture quickly became problematic in this study. For example, there were no discernible differences among the views of the students based on gender or culture. Further, among the adults in this study, it was not possible to definitively state that different understandings of care could be attributed to culture. While at times it appeared that culture played a role in influencing current beliefs, each individual’s past experiences (which of course includes one’s cultural experience) appeared to play a more significant role. In any event, caution must be taken when describing cultural differences within a small sample such as the one used in this study. Maxwell (1996) notes

that within cultural groups there is significant diversity and the views of one or a small number of them cannot be representative of the group as a whole.

Each adult interview began with a question about their own experiences as students, then moved on to their current beliefs and expectations. Consistent among each adult participant was the connection between their past and their current beliefs about care, which in turn influenced the way they perceived and interpreted what happened at school. Teachers and parents recalled vivid memories of those teachers they believed cared about them and those they perceived as uncaring. When they described their current beliefs the parallels were striking. The teachers' experiences with "caring" and "uncaring" teachers provided the framework with which they developed their own teaching practice, despite the fact they had not consciously made the connection between their past and present. The modelling they experienced in the past helped to shape their own practice in the present. Christine, for example, admitted that "I've never connected my own education to what I do today, but I guess it's there." At the same time, the parents' descriptions of their "caring" and "uncaring" teachers were almost exactly the same as the expectations they held of their children's teachers. For example, when describing her own caring teachers, Mrs. Sandy explained that "you can tell by the extra curricular activities they took on..." When discussing her own children's teachers, she also talked about the importance of them participating in extra curricular activities because "it's another way to get to know the teachers, but it also teaches the kids something else to do" despite the fact that "for my kids, they're not as sports minded as I was." Of

interest is the fact that her current expectation had less to do with her children's needs or desires, than with her own experiences. Thus, current practice and expectations appeared rooted in past experience.

Noddings (2005) describes the importance of modelling in learning to care. She explains that "the capacity to care may be dependent on adequate experience in being cared for" (p. 22) and the ways in which these teachers received care in the past appears to have laid the foundation for the ways they create caring relations with their own students. Similarly, parents' expectations of care for their children appear rooted in the caring relations they experienced with their own teachers.

The issue of discipline helps to exemplify the difficulty in ascribing differences in views to cultural background as opposed to past experiences more generally. Students stressed that teachers should maintain control in the classroom, but should not be too strict. Their view was exactly the same as that expressed by the two Caucasian mothers (who were educated in Canada). On the other hand, parents from India emphasized discipline and believed teachers need to be strict to keep control. The South Asian students and Caucasian mothers do not share a cultural or ethnic background, but they do share a common experience: attendance at Canadian schools. Further evidence of the inability to attribute beliefs only to cultural background is provided by Jas, who was the only Sikh teacher in this study. While the South Asian parents emphasized discipline, Jas discussed the need to listen to students and be aware of their individual circumstances in order to understand the reasons for

their behaviour. She shared a cultural background with the parents from India, but she received most of her education in Canada. Thus, in this case, Jas's past experiences, as opposed to cultural beliefs, appear to have influenced current practice with regard to this issue.

Further, Christine, a Caucasian teacher, had beliefs about discipline that were more in line with the parents from India. While she attended school in Canada, her education took place in a convent where discipline was valued. It was part of her past experience. Thus, on the issue of discipline we cannot say that there are clear cultural differences. Rather, there are differences based on the participants' past experiences.

However, it should be noted that one divergence among the teachers' views of care offers some support for the possibility that there could be cultural differences in understandings of care. Jean was the only teacher not to discuss the importance of high expectations for students and her views could be attributed to her past experience because she was not successful in school, and had a traumatic experience with a teacher calling her stupid and telling her she would never amount to anything. She talked about how she "shrunk" after that comment. However, her culture may have also influenced her beliefs in this regard. She expressed the view that teachers need to "recognize the gifts that children have. They're every single one of them have gifts inside of them, and rather than seeing ... the negative inside them, is to pull those gifts out." I was reminded of a passage from Lisa Delpit (1995) where she discussed differences in the ways various cultures value children.

Along with valuing context, Native Alaskan communities value children in ways that many of us would find hard to fathom. We non-Natives tend to think of children as unformed future adults. We hear about the birth of a child and ask questions like, 'What did she have?' 'How much did it weigh?' and 'Does it have any hair?' The Athabaskan Indians hear of a birth and ask, 'Who came?' From the beginning, there is a respect for the newborn as a full person. (p. 100)

As an aboriginal woman, Jean's beliefs appear more closely aligned with the Native Alaskan view described here. In this worldview, my expectations for a child would be irrelevant. Truly caring for them would be to help them uncover their own possibilities for themselves. It is possible that as subtly different as Jean's explanation appears to be from the other teachers, it represents a large cultural difference in worldview, one that we need to recognize if we hope to reach students and parents who have cultural understandings of the world and their place in it that are different from our own. It highlights the need to be attentive, to listen, and to observe rather than impose and assume. Delpit (1995) goes on to

...propose that those of us responsible for teaching [children of immigrant families] realize that they bring different kinds of understandings about the world than those whose home lives are more similar to the worldview underlying Western schooling. I have found that if I want to learn how best to teach children who may be different from me, then I must seek the advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students. (p. 102)

Delpit's view echoes Mr. Singh's – that parents who understand the school system should help other parents learn of the expectations and assumptions inherent within it. As Mr. Singh pointed out, we cannot assume that we are all on the same page when discussing educational issues. Whether those misunderstandings are based on culture or past experience in general, we need

to recognize that the beliefs of others are not necessarily in line with our own and therefore their interpretations of our behaviours may not be in line with our intent.

## **Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Another area of significance in this research was the parent-teacher relationship. While students in Alder's (2002) study mentioned that calls home to parents showed that teachers cared, the students in this study did not raise a teacher's relationship with parents when describing care. However, they did talk about the need for teachers to understand their home situations. They clearly did not see home and school as separate entities, but recognized the impact that their home lives have on school experiences. Therefore, it is incumbent upon teachers to also recognize the role a student's home life plays in their school experience. To gain a more complete understanding, teachers need to get to know and listen to students' parents.

Epstein (1995) believes that parents and teachers have a shared responsibility for children and should work in partnership to create caring communities of support and an administrator in Cassidy and Bates's (2005) study concurred that we cannot effectively reach students unless we also "work with their families, because whatever's going on at home is affecting what's happening here" (p. 11). Epstein (1999) also states that "the way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families" (p. 422).

All teachers and parents in this study believed the parent-teacher relationship is an important one because parent involvement is important to the

success of their children. This was also found to be the case in Hill et al. (2004) and Wentzel (1998). However, “parent involvement” looked different among different adult participants in this study. So, what does the parent-teacher relationship look like? Unfortunately, in some cases it was not a smooth one and this is largely due to differing beliefs, unexpressed expectations, and unexamined assumptions.

Again, past experience appeared to influence current beliefs about the parent-teacher relationship. Teachers who discussed the role their own parents played in their education (and in two cases had positive parent-teacher relations modelled for them in a way that made those memories present in their narratives) talked about parents as equal partners who participate in problem-solving and engage in open dialogue about their children. Those teachers believed they needed to really listen to parents and share information about the child. Both parties can learn from the other. Teachers who did not mention their parents when discussing care in their own education described the parent’s role as more of a supportive and peripheral one. They saw their own responsibility as keeping parents informed and offering suggestions for helping their child. They believed that parents should volunteer in the classroom to help the teacher with jobs, monitor homework, and follow through on teacher suggestions.

On the other hand, all the parents in this study wanted to be equal partners and saw their role as an active, integral one. They wanted to be involved in decision-making and wanted to participate in dialogue about their children. They did not want to simply be informed of decisions. While they

agreed volunteering in the classroom was important, their purpose in doing so was often to gain a better understanding of how their children were doing, which was not in keeping with the teachers' views of the role of parent volunteers. Nick was the only teacher to express the opinion that parents should spend time in the classroom to see how their children were doing while Lisa specifically worried about parents who volunteer in the classroom because they "want to hang around and watch [their] child all day."

Thus, there was a clear discrepancy between the way some members of each group viewed the parent-teacher relationship, which led to frustration when parents felt excluded or marginalized in the relationship and teachers felt disregarded and unappreciated.

The second difficulty arose from the expectations each group held of the other and the way they interpreted the actions (or inactions) of the other. For example, the issue of parent involvement in school was an interesting one. Parents explained they sometimes did not volunteer or visit teachers because they did not want to bother them; they believed teachers would ask if they needed help or wanted to see them, or they did not believe it was their role. Some teachers, on the other hand, were frustrated at the apparent apathy on the part of parents who either did not offer to help or did not sign up for appointments to meet with the teacher. The same incident viewed through two very different lenses led to misunderstanding.

Lasky (2000) explains that teachers' expectations are often set "by the same standards and ethical norms that are held for middle class mothers in two-



parent homes” (p. 853), and that is no longer the dominant demographic represented in many schools. This expectation was apparent in one teacher’s frustration at the lack of involvement by some parents, who do not work with their children at home. She acknowledged that “they’re too busy. They’re too busy.” However, she goes on to express her frustration at the fact that

parents of successful kids find the time. Like you could look in some of those schools where you’ve got doctors and lawyers, right? They’re busy, they might be busier than these people here, but they do find the time. They’ll have a home library ... these people don’t do that. And it’s to the detriment of their kids.

There was no acknowledgement of the possible financial inability to provide a home library. Thus, our expectations are often based on our own frame of reference instead of the lived reality of the parents we work with.

Misunderstanding between teachers and parents has a negative effect on both parties. Van Horn et al. (1994) found that school level responses affected the level of teacher burnout. Mr. Singh also articulated this problem and went further to suggest that if teachers do not feel cared for by parents they are not as likely to spend time caring for students. This is in line with the teachers’ descriptions of the importance of feedback from parents and how one “thank you” could sustain them for quite some time. Most parents, however, did not discuss feedback for teachers as an important component of the relationship.

Thus, while everyone agreed that the parent-teacher relationship is important, they did not necessarily agree about what it should look like and what the roles of each party should be. The findings in this study suggest that the

expectations and assumptions we hold of each other create a barrier to common understanding and mutual support.

### **The Importance of Communication**

Tatar & Horenczyk (2000) suggest that partnership between parents and teachers “cannot be fully accomplished without a mutual knowledge and understanding of the attitudes and expectations that each of the parties holds of one another” (p. 494). This becomes particularly important in an increasingly diverse society, where parents and teachers do not necessarily share common educational experiences. Mr. Singh explained that a large portion of the “Canadian community is immigrant community and the parenting style and schooling style may ... be different if they are not coming from European countries.” Therefore, it is often difficult for these parents to understand the teacher’s expectations, whereas he believed that parents who went to school here “understand the school system, the culture. When teacher is talking to them, they are on the same page.”

A common understanding is essential if we are going to work together, as Noddings (2003) suggests we should. She explains that we need to “attempt to establish teachers and parents as cooperative educators” (p. 186) and “in order to engage in true dialogue with our students, we educators will first have to engage in true dialogue with their parents. We will need trust and cooperation in a genuine attempt to educate” (p. 184). She explains that true dialogue is not a one-sided conversation. In her view, dialogue is

open-ended; that is, in a genuine dialogue, neither party knows at the outset what the outcome or decision will be.... Dialogue is a common search for understanding, empathy, or appreciation [and] ... is always a genuine quest for something undetermined at the beginning. (2005, p. 23)

This definition is at odds with some of the discussions described by teachers and parents in this study. For example, Mrs. Miller was frustrated at being informed of decisions about her child, and feeling like she was being ganged up on in the process.

Another example is Christine's explanation that she "often tell[s] [parents] they should have a homework hour to do their homework. Everything is off. The whole family stops. I tell them that" but she becomes exasperated when they do not follow through. She also described a contract she sent home for parents to sign, where they agreed to monitor their children on the Internet and again they did not follow through on her suggestion. She was "disappointed in the parents. So that's the breakdown." These exchanges, while well-intentioned, do not represent the give and take of two-way dialogue described by Noddings.

Further, Lasky (2000) notes that

communication barriers can be created between parents and teachers when teachers hold a notion of 'teacher-as-expert'. Likewise, more flexible or open notions of teacher professionalism can facilitate communication and mutual understanding. (p. 856)

Nick also believed the breakdown in parent-teacher relations occurs in the communication between teachers and parents. "Teachers are often too busy trying to tell what the problem is at school ... [and] they don't see what the parents are struggling with as well and can't help them get past it" and parents are not hearing what is needed in the classroom. This is in line with the findings

in Webb et al.'s (1993) study. They found that although parents and staff claimed to care, their actions were not always interpreted as caring by the other parties because of the absence of open dialogue.

Accepting Lisa's suggestion that teachers need to recognize that parents know a great deal about their children and that teachers should listen to parents and stop preaching at them, as well as Mr. Singh's and Mrs. Sandy's views that parents should take the time to talk to teachers, would go a long way towards repairing some of the discomfort and distrust some members of each group seem to have towards the other. Thus, it is clear that open dialogue is required to reach a mutual understanding of each other. Otherwise, teachers and parents will continue to be frustrated, hurt, and confused by the actions of the other.

### **The Importance of Our Beliefs**

The purpose of this study was to uncover beliefs about care. The results indicate that our beliefs are significantly influenced by our past experiences, which can make teaching in an increasingly diverse school system somewhat problematic. A teacher's past experiences are less and less likely to be a reflection of the experiences of his or her students and their parents, which increases the possibility of actions being misinterpreted, and decreases the likelihood of the circle of care being completed. Therefore, it is important for us as teachers to first uncover our own beliefs and be open to the worldviews of those we purport to care for, in order to create a space for caring relations to flourish.

Parker Palmer (1998) claims that we teach who we are and “the more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching – and living – becomes” (p. 5). “Everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world. By putting on new lenses, we can see things that would otherwise remain invisible” (p. 26). Uncovering our beliefs allows us to be aware of the lenses through which we see the other in caring relations. By looking through different lenses, perhaps we can see new possibilities and gain greater understandings. As well, by attempting to apprehend the reality of the other, as Noddings (2003) suggests, instead of merely seeing the other through the lens of our own experiences, our attempts at care will more likely be interpreted as such by our students and their parents.

Delpit (1995) explains the significance of our beliefs and the difficulties we have in setting them aside:

We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment – and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are, and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. It is not easy, but it is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue. (pp. 46-47)

Until we as teachers are willing to engage in self-reflection and open dialogue, parents and students may continue to claim that teachers do not care. As long as that happens, students will not realize the benefits of care in their school experience, and teachers will continue to be burned out by the lack of response by the cared-for (Van Horn et al., 1999), simply because the cared-for will not realize they are being cared for. After all, as Noddings (2003) points out,

Where is the teacher to get the strength to go on giving except from the student? In situations where the student rarely responds, is negative, denies the effort at caring, the teacher's caring quite predictably deteriorates to 'cares and burdens.' (p. 181)

### **Educational Implications: Overcoming Barriers to Care**

In this section I outline some of the barriers to forming caring relations that were identified by participants in this research. I also look at possible ways of addressing those obstacles.

All parties in this research agreed that a caring teacher-student relationship is important for students' success in schools. As well, the adults agreed on the importance of caring parent-teacher relationships. While all parties contribute to the success of relationships, the teacher plays a central role. Mr. Singh explained that "we can't really say that teacher has to do everything. But at the same time, because teacher is there at the centre, so she or he should try to do their best." Noddings (2003) concurs when she asserts that "we know that teachers are, with students, the heart of the educational process" (p. 197). Thus, the teacher has a central role to play in developing relationships with students and parents in order to ensure greater success for students. However, while teachers in this study recognized the importance of caring relationships, they also identified barriers to creating those relationships.

One such barrier is lack of time. Jas explained that it is so much easier to form relationships with parents who are visible and easily accessible. However, many parents work or have other children and cannot be at the school on a regular basis. Mr. Singh explained that "when I was free, I had plenty of time so I

was spending a lot of time [at the school]. And now all of a sudden I'm busy now; I'm working. I have no time. I want to, but I can't." As well, for teachers it can be difficult to find the time to meet with parents or participate in school-wide events outside of class hours. Elizabeth explained that it can be

hard because we work a full day ... we've got families ... and so I think that's really hard just because we do pour out so much of our energy so many other times with the kids and marking.... And where's the time for me and my life?

The structure of our current education system increases the difficulty in finding time. Noddings (1988) explains that

teachers need a setting different from those we place them in today.... [They] need more time with students than we currently allow them. If we cared deeply about fostering growth and shaping both acceptable and caring people, we could surely find ways to extend contact between teachers and students. There is no good reason why teachers should not stay with one group of students for three years rather than one in the elementary years, and this arrangement can be adapted to high school as well. (pp. 224-225)

Having the luxury of more time to spend with students would help to alleviate the concerns expressed by Lisa. She explained that

...just our workload and what we're trying to do is not a natural thing. Having children learn all the things we expect them to learn is not easy, so you're always, the foremost thing in your mind is not always how everyone's going to be happy. So having to deal with huge challenges, just academic and personal challenges that come up. Those are all restrictions [and you can] come up against a brick wall.

She went on to explain the importance of class size and composition because "you can [only] have the average sized classroom if you have all the average

children.” Thus, time restraints and demands on teachers create barriers to forming caring relationships in schools.

Support from administrators can play a role in helping teachers meet the demands of classroom life. Noddings (2005) describes the detrimental effect that uncaring administrators can have on teachers:

...School administrators cannot be sarcastic and dictatorial with teachers in the hope that coercion will make them care for students. I have heard administrators use this excuse for ‘being tough’ with teachers – ‘because I care about the kids of this state’ – but, of course, the likely outcome is that teachers will then turn attention protectively to themselves rather than lovingly to their students. (p. 22)

Both Mr. Singh and Mrs. Sandy noted the important role that employers, namely the school board and administrators, play in providing a context where caring relationships can flourish. When teachers feel cared for and supported by the administration, they are better equipped to care for others. For example, Mrs. Sandy explained that

...part of having a caring teacher also depends on the principal as well. The principal is very important in the teachers’ morale. You know, just like anywhere, if you don’t like your boss then you’re not going to be having as much fun in your job. And with the teacher you’ve got other little ones to look after; it’s not like it’s just one boss and that’s it, there’s nobody underneath.

As well, Mr. Singh recognized the need for balance in a teacher’s life and support from schools in order to be able to give care to students. He explained that

a balanced teacher I think, who is well-connected with the school system and well-connected with parents, well-connected with her own life, his own life, is going to spend more and better time with students.



As a new teacher, Elizabeth was overwhelmed with responsibilities and while she had many ideas about ways to include parents, she did not implement them. “Do I do all those things? Definitely not” because she lacked the experience and confidence to do so.

Nick explained that his own views of parent involvement had evolved over the years and now that he is an administrator he has a greater understanding of the need to listen to parents and a greater awareness of the importance of doing so. I believe that he and other administrators could play a central role in sharing their own experiences and supporting new teachers like Elizabeth. Dialogue, sharing of ideas, and emotional support could go a long way in assisting new teachers to live their beliefs in practice. After all, if open dialogue can help to improve caring relations between teachers and parents and teachers and students, the same could be true for relations between administrators and teachers.

Language was another barrier identified by participants, and one which presents a significant hurdle in open communication. Elizabeth came up against this difficulty when she reached out to parents at the beginning of the school year. She sent home a letter of introduction and asked parents to respond. Only one parent responded, “and I don’t know if that’s maybe a language barrier.... I just thought of something, I mean maybe in the future I can have it translated.” Again, collaboration is a necessity when communicating with others who do not share a common language. Teachers can utilize the services of colleagues who possess the language skills necessary to open the lines of communication with

parents. Jas, for example, explained that she often had South Asian parents come to her with questions or concerns about their children in other classrooms. As well, multicultural workers are available to assist with meetings between teachers and parents.

Cultural differences were another barrier that was recognized by many parents and teachers. As explained by Lasky (2000), teachers' expectations often reflect "standards and ethical norms ... for middle class mothers in two parent homes" (p. 853) instead of reflecting an understanding of the diverse populations found in many lower mainland schools. At the same time, parents' and teachers' expectations and understandings are also a product of their past. As Mr. Singh explained,

People coming from different cultures and different schooling systems, it is hard for them to understand and a lot of time teachers think that those parents understand, but they do not ... because expectations are totally different in their mind.... So how are you going to match those?

In contrast, parents who grew up here or at least grew up in western cultures, understand the school system, the culture. When teacher is talking to them, they are on the same page. They can understand each other and even if not, with some more explanation they can make each other understand.

One way of overcoming this barrier includes the willingness to engage in open dialogue, as described by Lisa. She explained that "there is a way of talking to parents in a condescending way. And even parents that are maybe not even literate, they do know a lot about their kids." Lisa believes that we "need to

be careful how we preach to them, because ... these are people that come from other countries that know how to improve their lives. They're here for good reasons and they have a lot of plans for their children."

Whether these difficulties are based on culture, as identified by parents and teachers in this study, or differing past experiences in general as the findings indicate, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) articulation of the difficulties inherent in parent-teacher relationships and teacher efforts in initiating dialogue is apt. A deeper understanding of these challenges can help to create a shared compassion between the two parties, and help to resolve some of the conflict and misunderstanding that was apparent in some of the interviews in this study. Some of the challenges identified by Lawrence-Lightfoot are that

...parents and teachers come together haunted by the ghosts of their early family and school experiences; they are engaged in passionate struggles over boundaries, rights, and issues of responsibility and accountability; and their ritual meetings are richer and more productive when they are focused on the child, grounded in evidence, and express a mutual appreciation of each other's perspectives and wisdom. But despite all of these shared experiences across social and cultural contexts, there are also striking differences in parent-teacher encounters, reflecting inequalities of status and station, of access and opportunity, of resources and entitlements.

At one end of the spectrum are privileged parents who bring the power of their money, their status, and their influence to school with their children. Their expectations are high, their demands rigorous, and their sense of entitlement assumed. At the other end are poor parents, often parents of color or newly arrived immigrants [such as some of the parents in this study], who feel uncomfortable coming to school or approaching their child's teacher, who have no idea how to negotiate the institutional bureaucracy, and who tend to see the teacher as the ultimate authority and rarely question her judgment. Affluent parents' behavior toward teachers is characterized by frequent aggressive encounters and a fierce, determined advocacy; by contrast, poor parents appear withdrawn, uncomfortable, and passive.

Even though rich and poor children have vastly different odds and opportunities that are rarely undone by their schooling, I believe that *all*

parents hold big expectations for the role that schools will play in the life chances of their children. They all harbor a large wish list of dreams and aspirations for their youngsters. All families care deeply about their children's education and hope that their progeny will be happier, more productive, and more successful than they have been in their lives. Each generation asks for more.... Despite what I regard as the universal yearning of all parents – whatever their educational or vocational background – there are striking differences in the expectations, aspirations, and demands that parents make on schools, and in the ways in which they advocate for their children. These parental aspirations shape the quality, intensity, and scope of their encounters with teachers. (pp. 109-110)

Noddings (2003) asserts that in order to care we must try to “apprehend ... the other's reality” (p. 16). Delpit (1995) offers one way to gain a greater understanding of the reality of students and parents. She has “found that if I want to learn how best to teach children who may be different from me, then I must seek the advice of adults – teachers and parents – who are from the same culture as my students” (p. 102). Therefore, dialogue and collaboration with others is one way to move toward greater mutual understanding. Again, this requires demands on limited amounts of time. By structuring our school system so teachers spend longer with students, this can start to be alleviated.

Further, administrators and school boards that recognize the importance of dialogue and are willing to provide support for teachers help to create atmospheres where care can develop. After all, if we want teachers to care, we must care for them. Noddings (2005) explains that “we do not tell our students to care; we show them how to care by creating caring relations with them” (p. 22). The same is true for teachers. Simply telling teachers to care is insufficient; administrators can show teachers how to care by creating caring relations with them. Modelling is a powerful teaching tool, and one of the four components of

care identified by Noddings (2005). Certainly, the adults in this study exemplified the importance of their past caring relations in shaping their present expectations, interpretations, and understandings of care.

## **Final Thoughts**

While the results I have obtained in my research are consistent with the general tenor of the research quoted in the literature review, the specific focus of this research (one school, with participants from various backgrounds) has permitted me to reach some new possibilities. For example, while some research found differences in interpretations of care based on culture (Hayes et al. 1994), I found that experience is perhaps more important than culture because within cultural groups there were different points of view, depending on people's lived experiences. This research suggests that experience could be just as important, if not more so, than cultural background in influencing one's interpretations of care.

Knowing students as individuals was a theme generated in previous research, and highlighted in this study. Having high expectations of students was also considered caring by many of the teachers and some parents in this study, and was also mentioned in previous research. However, this study showed the importance of setting those expectations based on an individual student's needs and abilities rather than the teacher's expectations. Further it should be noted that high expectations was not identified as an aspect of care by all teachers in the study. Therefore, it should not be assumed that colleagues necessarily agree on what is best for the children in their care.

Finally, while there are many obstacles and challenges for teachers to implement care, it is incumbent upon administrators and the school system to treat teachers with the same degree of care we expect them to show students and parents.

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

In this section I outline possible limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research with regard to each limitation.

The small sample used in this study precludes the ability to ascribe differences in beliefs to culture, and while it appears that past experience plays a large role in the formation of current beliefs, it would be beneficial to research that question with a larger group in different settings and formats. As described by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), parents from different socio-economic groups have different interactions with teachers and place different demands upon them. The group of parents in this study came from different backgrounds, but did not represent a range of economic levels. None of the parent participants in this study are upper middle class or have professional backgrounds. Further research should include members from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The connections between past experience and current beliefs were clear in every adult interview. However, it is possible that this finding could be somewhat limited by the order of the questions asked. Each adult interview began with questions about their past experiences with caring and uncaring teachers to uncover their perspectives as students. I then moved to questions about the present to find out about their perspectives as parents or teachers.

However, the order of the questions may have lent itself to making connections between past experiences and current beliefs. I believe it is likely that asking about the present and then the past may have garnered the same results, because the memories expressed may have been those that surfaced because of the descriptions of their current beliefs. As well, Mrs. Miller initially ignored my questions about her past and only answered them after talking about her children's teachers, yet there were still connections between her experiences and her current beliefs. In any event, further research with a different format would help to uncover any anomalies in this area.

Adult participants in this study were not asked about their own parents' involvement in their education, but three of the teachers raised it when talking about caring and uncaring teachers they had, while three did not. It was interesting to note the similarities in current views that members of each group had. However, while the possibility of a link between their own parents' involvement and their current relationships with parents is hinted at by this study, it is not possible to definitively draw this conclusion. This would be an interesting area to pursue in further research.

The purpose of this research was to uncover beliefs, so I did not observe in classrooms to see if those beliefs were lived in reality. A natural extension would be to observe to see if lived practice matches stated beliefs and then to compare the views of groups in the same classroom. Two areas that hinted at the importance of this include Elizabeth's expression of beliefs and her admission that she is unable to live all her stated beliefs because of lack of experience and

confidence. The other is Mrs. Miller's concerns about Jas's practice of announcing top scorers, which was a practice Jas felt was caring because it celebrated student achievement. Mrs. Miller was worried it harmed peer relations and set students up for unrealistic expectations of themselves.

Finally, Mrs. Sandy and Mr. Singh talked about the important role that school boards and administrators play in supporting teachers so they can more easily engage in caring relations with students. An interesting avenue to pursue would be to identify ways that teachers feel supported or hindered by administrators and school boards.



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## **APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT BY PARTICIPANTS IN A RESEARCH STUDY**

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

### **Form 2 – Informed Consent By Participants in a Research Study**

The University and those conducting this research study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort, and safety of participants. This research is being conducted under permission of the Simon Fraser Research Ethics Board. The chief concern of the Board is for the health, safety and psychological well-being of research participants.

Should you wish to obtain information about your rights as a participant in research, or about the responsibilities of researchers, or if you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the manner in which you were treated in this study, please contact the Director, Office of Research Ethics by email at [hweinber@sfu.ca](mailto:hweinber@sfu.ca) or phone at 604-268-6593.

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the documents describing the study, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in the study.

Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by the law. Knowledge of your identity is not required. You will not be required to write your name or any other identifying information on research materials. Materials will be maintained in a secure location.

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Title: **Understandings and Expectations of Care in an Elementary School**

Investigator Name: **Karen Alvarez**

Investigator Department: **Education**

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Having been asked to participate in the research study named above, I certify that I have read the procedures specified in the Study Information Document describing the study. I understand the procedures to be used in this study and the personal risks to me in taking part in the study as described below:

Risks to participant, third parties or society:

**There is no risk to participants.**

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:

**This research will be an important step in opening up dialogue to reach a possible common understanding of care so the benefits of care can be realized in school. It may also improve relationships in school if a common understanding can be reached. This research also considers the views of parents, who are important members in educational relationships. Their voices are often left out of research investigating interpretations of care.**

Procedures:

**Participants will take part in an interview, with possible follow up questions. They will also be asked to review transcripts and summaries of their interviews for accuracy.**

I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that I may register any complaint with the Director of the Office of Research Ethics or the researcher named above or with the Chair, Director or Dean of the Department, School or Faculty as shown below.

Department, School or Faculty:

**Faculty of Education**

8888 University Way

Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting:  
**Karen Alvarez**

I have been informed that the research will be confidential.

I understand that my supervisor or employer may require me to obtain his or her permission prior to my participation in a study of this kind.



I understand the risks and contributions of my participation in this study and agree to participate:

Participant Last Name:

Participant First Name

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Contact Information:

Participant Signature:

Witness (if required by the Office of Research Ethics)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Date (use format MM/DD/YYYY):

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX 2: STUDY INFORMATION DOCUMENT

### Form 5: Study Information Document

Research study title: **Understandings and Expectations of Care in an Elementary School**

Place:

Who are the participants (subjects) in this study?

**1 administrator, 3-5 teachers, 4-6 parents, and 4-6 grade 6 or 7 students.**

What will the participants be required to do?

**Participants will take part in an interview with possible follow up questions. They will also be asked to review transcripts and summaries of their interviews for accuracy.**

How are the participants recruited?

**The teachers are former colleagues of the researcher's. They were chosen to cover a range of levels of experience and cultural backgrounds. The parents will be chosen in consultation with the administrator and will include members from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds at the school. The students will be chosen in consultation with grade 6 and 7 teachers and will also include members from different cultural/ethnic backgrounds.**

Overall Goals of Study:

**The purpose of this study is to examine students' parents', and teachers' understandings and expectations of care in school. Based on the B.C. Satisfaction Surveys (2004-05), there seems to be a discrepancy between the beliefs held by these three groups, which requires closer examination to reach common understanding in order for the benefits of care to be realized in school.**

Risks to the participant, third parties or society:

**There is no risk to participants.**

Benefits of study to the development of new knowledge:

**This research will be an important step in opening up dialogue to reach a possible common understanding of care so the benefits of care can be realized in school. It may also improve relationships in school if a common understanding can be reached. This research also considers the voices of parents, who are important members in educational relationships. Their voices are often left out of the research investigating interpretations of care.**

How confidentiality and anonymity will be assured if applicable:

**Pseudonyms will be assigned to the school and to all participants.**

Approvals that may be required from agencies, communities or employers:

**Approval is required from the school district.**

Persons and contact information that participants can contact to discuss concerns:

**Karen Alvarez**

## APPENDIX 3: PERMISSION TO APPROACH MINORS FOR RESEARCH

Dear Parents:

### **Re: Permission to Approach Minors for Research**

My name is Karen Alvarez and I am a former teacher at ... Elementary. I am currently working on my Masters degree at Simon Fraser University and for my thesis I will be interviewing some parents, students, and teachers at .... The purpose of this research is to find out about the experiences and beliefs these three groups of people have about care in the classroom.

Research has shown considerable benefits for students when they form relationships with teachers they believe care about them. Some of the benefits include improved academic effort, behaviour, performance, school-related interest, school satisfaction, and engagement. However, in order for students to benefit from these relationships, they must believe that teachers care. The Ministry of Education's Satisfaction Surveys for 2004-05 show that as students get older, fewer of them believe that teachers care, and fewer parents believe teachers care about their children. Most teachers, on the other hand, believe they do care. Not everyone interprets care in the same way, and without common understanding, students and parents will think teachers don't care, and students will not benefit from caring relationships with teachers. I am interested in seeing if students, parents, and teachers at ... share similar beliefs about care in the classroom.

I am writing to request permission to discuss this research with your child. If he or she is interested, I would like to interview them about this topic. The interview would take approximately 15-30 minutes and would be conducted at school during a time that will be least disruptive to their work. The types of questions I will be asking are:

- Think about a teacher you had that you believed cared about you. Without mentioning any names, what did he or she do that made you believe they cared?
- Think about a teacher you had that you believed didn't care. Without mentioning any names, what did he or she do to make you think they didn't care?

- How would you describe a caring teacher?
- How important is it for teachers to show that they care?
- What advice would you give to teachers to help them care about students?
- How do students show they care about teachers?

I will tape and transcribe the interviews, then summarize the student's answers. I will discuss that summary with your child to make sure it accurately reflects what they wanted to say. As well, there is a possibility that I will ask them follow-up questions, to clarify points that came up during interviews.

All information will only be used for research purposes, and students' names will not be used in the final thesis. I want to make it clear that you and your child are under no obligation to agree to this, and if you do agree, you or your child can withdraw participation at any time. This research will not have any effect on your child's grades or evaluation in the class, in any way.

Please fill in the bottom portion of this letter and return it to your child's classroom teacher. Thank you for considering my request.

Yours truly,

Karen Alvarez

.....  
 I agree to allow my child, \_\_\_\_\_ to be interviewed by Karen Alvarez to discuss their beliefs about caring teachers. I understand that I, or my child, can withdraw participation at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent Telephone Number

## **APPENDIX 4: INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS**

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Form 3: INFORMED CONSENT FOR MINORS or CAPTIVE AND DEPENDENT  
POPULATIONS

CONSENT BY PARENT, GUARDIAN TO ALLOW PARTICIPATION IN A  
RESEARCH STUDY

Titled: **Understandings and Expectations of Care in an Elementary School**

Investigator Name: **Karen Alvarez**

Investigator Department: **Education**

The University and those conducting this study subscribe to the ethical conduct of research and to the protection at all times of the interests, comfort and safety of participants. This form and the information it contains are given to you for your own protection and to ensure your full understanding of the procedures, risks, and benefits described below.

Risks to the participant, third parties or society:

**There is no risk to participants.**

Benefits of the study to the development of new knowledge:

**This research will be an important step in opening up dialogue to reach a possible common understanding of care so the benefits of care can be realized in school. It may also improve relationships in school if a common understanding can be reached. This research also considers the views of parents, who are important members in educational relationships. Their voices are often left out of research investigating interpretations of care.**

Procedures:

**Participants will take part in an interview, with possible follow up questions. They will also be asked to review transcripts and summaries of their interviews for accuracy.**

Your signature on this form will signify that you have received a document which describes the procedures, possible risks, and benefits of this research study, that you have received an adequate opportunity to consider the information in the document, and that you voluntarily agree to allow the minor named below to participate in the study.

Name, Parent, Guardian or other: (PRINT): \_\_\_\_\_

who is the (relationship to minor) (PRINT): \_\_\_\_\_ of

First name of minor (PRINT): \_\_\_\_\_

Last name of minor (PRINT): \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I understand the procedures to be used and have fully explained them to:

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ and the participant knows that myself, or he or she has the right to withdraw from the study at any time, and that any complaints about the study may be brought to the chief researcher named above or to:

Faculty of Education

Simon Fraser University

8888 University Way

Burnaby, British Columbia, V5A 1S6, Canada

I may obtain copies of the results of this study, upon its completion by contacting the researcher named above.

I certify that I understand the procedures to be used and that I understand the Study Information Document, and that I have been able to receive clarification of any aspects of this study about which I have had questions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Last Name Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
First Name Parent or Guardian

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness if required

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (use MM/DD/YYYY)