



## Latino and White Students' Perceptions of Teacher Behaviors That Convey Caring: Do Gender and Ethnicity Matter?

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### **Citation**

Garza, R., Ovando, M.N., & Seymour, C.E. (2010). Latino and White Students' Perceptions of Teacher Behaviors That Convey Caring: Do Gender and Ethnicity Matter? *Current Issues in Education*, 13(1). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/>

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**Current Issues in Education**

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Although caring has been identified as an important attribute of quality teaching (Rodriguez, 2008; Burrell & Ovando, 2008), student perceptions of teachers' behaviors that convey a caring attitude tend to vary, according to students' experiences and expectations. For instance, a study of teaching practices in segregated and desegregated schools (Burrell & Ovando, 2008) found that teachers exhibited caring regardless of the context, but their actual display of caring varied. The study revealed that when teachers moved from one context to the other, "they needed to change how they demonstrated caring but not their philosophy of care itself" (2008, p. 279). As the context may require that teachers modify their approach to caring, students' perceptions may also vary depending on their own needs, values, and expectations. When there is a difference between teachers' own personal lens or practice and their students' perspectives, classroom interactions may result in un-intended consequences for the students. Thus, it is imperative to closely examine students' perceptions of caring.

Previous research on caring suggests that students tend to value teacher behaviors that demonstrate caring. For instance, some (Alder, 2002; Garza, 2007; Hayes, Ryan, & Zsellar, 1994; Nelson & Bauch, 1997; Nelson, Lott, & Glenn, 1997; Wentzel, 1997) have suggested that empathic listening is a form of caring. Students also agree that a caring teacher is one who provides encouragement and cultivates a climate of trust by treating students with respect (Garza, 2009; Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 1997). Further, "it is critical to remember that when you treat students with respect, they tend to appreciate and like you" (Boynton & Boynton, 2005, p. 6). As Ridnour (2006) suggests, "putting your care for your student first creates a learning community that inspires them to be their best selves, both in school and out in the world" (p. 3). Therefore, conveying a positive tone through teacher disposition is an approach to convey caring for

students, but more importantly, to preserve student dignity (Alder, 2002; Garza, 2009; Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 1997; Valverde, 2006).

On the other hand, behaviors that may impede meaningful relationships (Pang, 2005; Pizarro, 2005) may be counterproductive to student success. Furthermore, negative incidents can result in instructional disengagement because “students know who they can and can’t learn from” (Ridnour, 2006, p. 4). Compounding the issue of unsuccessful teacher-student interactions, students who lack self-esteem generally struggle academically and lack appropriate social skills in the school environment. In addition, factors such as “academic deficits, limited intellectual ability, an unhealthy home environment, language processing, perceptual abilities, or social status” (Pierangelo & Giuliani, 2000, p. 2-9) may also exacerbate struggling students’ educational experiences. Therefore, knowing how to improve educational experiences and classroom interactions between teacher and student through the construct of caring, may be one way to provide better learning experiences for students, especially those who are often marginalized, disenfranchised, and disconnected from the learning environment. This paper reports on the findings from a study conducted to measure Latino and White high school students’ perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring and the influence of students’ gender and ethnicity on those perceptions.

### **Perspectives on Caring**

While researchers (Blustein, 1991; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 2005) agree that the ethic of caring involves a relationship between someone who cares for another, not all agree on a single definition of caring. According to Noddings (1984; 2005), caring is reciprocal. The person cared for must acknowledge the act of being cared for in order to form a relationship. Unlike Noddings (2005) who believes caring must be reciprocal in nature, Mayeroff

(1971) asserts that caring is not always a mutual act. Similarly, Bluestein (1991) recognizes that a relationship consists of certain roles that may not include reciprocal behaviors. For instance, a teacher-student relationship can be described in terms of a role where the teacher is expected to care for students as part of his or her professional job responsibility. Still, Deiro (2003) contends that “caring in and of itself, implies a relationship, but appropriate caring in teacher-student relationships is demonstrated differently from caring in other types of relationships” (p. 60). A caring ethic “requires commitment and the continual expression of caring behaviors develops the trusting relationships in which growth can occur” (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995, p. 674). What makes this endeavor challenging is the interpretation of caring. Caring is viewed as a reciprocal interaction (Noddings, 1984), behavior that is influenced by context and perspective (Bluestein, 1991); a synergetic relationship between someone who cares for another but context dictates whether or not caring is reciprocal (Mayeroff, 1971).

Whereas the construct of caring has been delineated, studies have identified behaviors that demonstrate caring. For example, Nelson and Bauch (1997) interviewed 88 African-American high school seniors and reported that teachers, who set high expectations, gave verbal encouragement, orchestrated demanding learning tasks, provided assistance, and built relationships with students, were perceived as teacher behaviors that convey caring. A study (Garrett, Barr, & Forsbach-Rothman, 2007) conducted in a large diverse urban setting, asked 24 African-American, 13 White, and 23 Latino sixth grade students, and 22 African-American, 27 White, and 46 Latino ninth grade students to comment on how teachers demonstrated care. Their findings suggested that Latino and African American students perceived providing academic support as critical in demonstrating care, more so than White students. Even though teacher personality and taking a personal interest in students were identified as other aspects of

demonstrating care, White students mentioned them more often than Latino and African-American students did. In summary, their findings suggested ethnicity did not significantly influence student's perceptions of caring behaviors.

Previous research has focused on student perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring (Garrett, Barr, & Forsbach-Rothman, 2007; Garza, 2007; Garza, 2009), student perceptions of the learning environment (Byrne, Hattie, & Fraser, 1986), the link between caring and motivation (Wentzel, 1997), teacher conceptions of caring (Weinstein, 1998), school climate (Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996), sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993), and teacher-student relationships (Osterman & Freese, 2000), to name a few. "In caring classrooms where all children are represented," (Antón-Oldenburg, 2000, p. 46) students are more apt to be actively engaged in their education, "especially for culturally diverse students who may be at risk of failing or who may be disengaged from schooling" (Perez, 2000).

### **Gender and Ethnicity as Influential Factors**

While administrators, school personnel, and classroom educators cope with mounting pressures to meet district, state and national standards, the uniqueness of diverse classrooms cannot be ignored, especially gender as an influential factor in the educational environment. "While there have been a large number of explanations of the origins of gender differences in educational achievement, few studies have examined the extent to which these differences are mediated by biological, sociocultural or school factors" (Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2008, p. 65). According to Patchen (2006), "Gender studies, although varied, tend to swing from the acutely personal (how one perceives of oneself) to the obtusely general (how the force of a masculine or feminine nature determines one's identity or role)" (p. 2056.) However, past research in education has examined gender differences with regard to achievement (Clark, Lee,

Goodman, & Yacco, 2008; Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2008; Mulholland, Hansen, & Kaminski, 2004; Robinson & Gillibrand, 2004). Some studies have examined the influence of gender on the interpersonal behavior between teacher and student (Fisher, Fraser, & Rickards, 1997; Levy, den Brock, Wubbels, & Breckelmans, 2003), classroom participation (Patchen, 2006), teacher-student relationships (Koepke & Harkins, 2008), course-taking (Crosnoe, Riegel-Crumb, & Muller, 2007; Kloosterman, Tassell, Ponniah, & Essex, 2008; Riegle-Crumb, Farkas, & Muller, 2006), school-related attitudes (Van de gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2006) and motivation and achievement (Marsh, Martin, & Cheng, 2008; Sokal & Katz, 2008). Still, other studies have examined students' perceptions with regards to teachers' instructional communication behaviors (Mottet et al., 2008), teachers' interpersonal behavior (den Brock, Brekelmans, Wubbels, 2004), power relationships in the classroom (Cothron & Ennis, 1997), use of computers (Johnson, 2006), and school experiences (Pomeroy, 1999).

In addition to gender, other studies have documented how ethnicity and gender may influence high school students' perceptions of teacher caring. Garza (2007) examined 49 Latino and 44 White high school students' perceptions of teacher caring. The students were asked to identify ways teachers cared for them. The results suggested five dominant themes that included the following: (a) provide scaffolding during a teaching episode, (b) reflect a kind disposition through actions, (c) are always available to the student, (d) show a personal interest in the student's well being inside and outside the classroom, (e) and provide affective academic support in the classroom setting. Both ethnic groups valued the same five themes but ranking in order of importance for each of the specific behaviors was different. Ding and Hall (2007) used a survey (Health Behavior of School-aged Children) to examine more than 14,000 middle and high school students' perceptions of teacher caring. The demographic groups included White (70%), African

American (19%), Latino (10%), Asian (.05%), Native American (.03%), and Other (2%). The findings suggested grade, gender, and ethnicity influenced student perceptions of teacher caring. “African American male and female students from all grades reported a high degree of negative school environment and male students of all grades, races, and ethnicities tended to report lower degrees of teacher caring than females” (p. 168). Similarly, Akos & Galassi (2004) examined race and gender as factors that influence student perceptions of “difficulty of transition and connectedness to school” (p. 102). Participants included 173 sixth-grade students with 57% White, 20% African American, 9% Asian American, 8% Latino, 4% multiracial and unspecified 2%. The demographics of the 320 freshman high school students included 76% White, 10% African American, 6% Asian American, 3% Latino, 2% multiracial, and 2% unspecified. The results suggested that race and gender were factors that influenced student perceptions. While middle school girls felt more connected to school than middle school boys did, this perspective was the opposite in high school. Although race was not a significant factor in school connectedness, there was significance in the person who was most helpful in their transition to high school. Latino high school students reported the counselors as more helpful during their transition than white students.

Whereas previous research suggests that students’ perceptions may vary according to their ethnicity and gender, it is also evident that teachers care about their students in both tangible and intangible ways, but the way they actually demonstrate care might vary according to the school context, and student composition (Burrell & Ovando, 2008). As a result, students may have different perceptions of teacher caring behaviors that align with their personal philosophy. Given that “past learning environment studies have shown the importance of perceptions of interpersonal behavior in determining student learning outcomes” (Fisher, Fraser, & Rickards,



1997, p. 12) we were motivated to explore gender and ethnicity as factors that influence high school adolescents' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. In addition, "As educators, we all care for our students, but the potential of caring is influenced by our own experiences and espoused pedagogical beliefs. While we may perceive our actions and dispositions as caring" (Garza, 2006, p.15) student perspectives may be incongruent with teaching and schooling practices considered the norm. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to measure high school students' perceptions of caring reflected through teacher behavior and the influence of students' gender and ethnicity on those perceptions.

This research is instrumental to those in the educational field who want to improve classroom environments and foster positive learning and social outcomes of all students.

### **Methodological Considerations**

While previous studies (Byrne, Hattie, & Fraser, 1986; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996; Weinstein, 1998; Wentzel, 1997) have examined student conceptions of caring, our study further advances research by illuminating high school students' voices that seem to be limited in the literature. Research also suggests that additional studies that focus on diverse students' perceptions may add information to the understanding of caring as an important component of quality teaching (Rodriguez, 2008). In addition, we consider students' gender and ethnicity as an influential factor that may shape their conceptions of teachers' caring in a classroom environment. This study advanced the following hypotheses:

H1. High School students' ethnicity influences their perceptions of teacher caring behaviors.

H2. High School students' gender influences their perceptions of teacher caring behaviors.

### *Participants*

Participants included 799 high school students, majority representing low- to-middle-income socioeconomic status, from a large suburban high school in the southern part of the United States. This one high school was selected because it was conducive to obtaining a rich, diverse, and substantive amount of information about the context of study. Since the first author is a field-based instructor at the high school where the study was conducted, access to the study site was uncomplicated. Although the research site was limited to one school district, the study focused on the adolescents' perspectives about teacher behaviors that convey caring. In addition, the familiarity with the school faculty and administrators helped to establish credibility for the investigation. This convenience coupled with the high school principal's suggestion to survey all students, helped to facilitate the study. Purposeful and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996) were used to identify the participants. This means that the inquirer "purposefully selects individual participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question" (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). Although the total number of students surveyed included various ethnic groups, representing various ethnic backgrounds, grade levels, and ages, we focus only on Latino (349) and White (450) high school students in this study. This investigation was part of a larger study.

### *Procedures*

In order to collect the robust data efficiently, we decided to ask students to complete a survey scan form during their English class. This meant that the English teachers would be trained in data collection procedures for our study. The author and trained research assistants (high school English teachers) administered the 36 item Likert survey instrument to high school students during their English classes. The participants were given a packet that included a scan

form and the scale with directions that explained the study's purpose, provided an example of how to respond to each item, and provided the labels for the Likert scale. The research assistants adhered to a written script to explain the instructions to the students. After reading the directions aloud and explaining how to fill in the scan form, used to collect demographic information and item responses, the participants were asked to complete the scale. Students were expected to rate the statements about caring using a 4 point Likert scale with 1=not important and 4=very important. The Perceptions of Teacher Caring (PTC) took about 10-15 minutes to complete and the students were thanked for participating. Upon completion of the scale, the scan forms were collected and scanned. The resulting raw data file was converted to SPSS and SAS data files.

### *Measures*

The PTC was developed by the author and reported in a previous paper (Garza, Ryser, & Lee, submitted manuscript). The scale was developed in two primary phases. The first phase involved qualitatively identifying teacher behaviors that were thematically categorized. An instrument consisting of 42 items was then developed during the second phase. To reduce the number of items on the PTC and to assure the instrument had internal consistency, we conducted an item analysis. Based on the results of the item analysis and a subsequent content analysis, the scale was reduced from 42 items to 36 items. All but one of the discrimination coefficients of the remaining items were moderate to high ranging from .27 to .73. The exception had a discrimination coefficient of .27. While this is low, the item was important qualitatively and was retained in the scale. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the internal consistency of the scale and was .94 for all students, .92 for the Latino students, and .94 for the White students. An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring was also conducted to provide evidence of the instrument's validity. We extracted factors based on two considerations.

First, we identified how many factors had eigenvalues greater than one. Second, we examined the *scree* plot, which is plot of successive eigenvalues. Using this method one determines how many eigenvalues lie above the elbow of the plot. In our case, we found that three factors were optimal. These results, coupled with the PTC scores' high internal consistency and strong factor loadings, supported using the PTC with a large sample of high school students.

### **Data Analysis and Results**

The purpose of our study was to measure Latino and White high school students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring and whether students' ethnicity and gender influenced their perceptions. First, we generated a new random variable using a Bernoulli distribution to select approximately 50 percent of the sample to use in an oblique (i.e., correlated factors) exploratory factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation. We used the results of the exploratory factor analysis and the first author's previous qualitative analyses to ascertain which items loaded on each latent construct.

Results of the factor analysis revealed that the three factor model best fit the data. Based on the factor loadings we eliminated eight additional items that were not correlated with any of the three factors. The resulting 28 items (Appendix A) loaded as follows: factor 1 (Validating Student Worth) consisted of 15 items, factor 2 (Individualizing Academic Success) consisted of 6 items, and factor 3 (Fostering Positive Engagement) consisted of 7 items. An examination of the items by factor suggested that the PTC was comprised of the following three subscales: Validating Student Worth, Individualizing Academic Success, and Fostering Positive Engagement. The factor pattern loadings for factor 1 ranged from .330 to .765, factor 2 ranged from .365 to .871, and factor 3 ranged from .334 to .810.

*Ethnicity Influence*

We created a summative total using the 28 items and compared the Latino and White students' mean total scores using an *F*-test for all three scales, Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**One-way ANOVA – Ethnicity**

Subscale and Source	<u>df</u>	<u>SS</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>
Validating Student Worth				
Between Groups	1	.233	.233	.040
Within Groups	990	56374.00	56.944	
Individualizing Academic Success				
Between Groups	1	.210	.210	.015
Within Groups	1018	14422.036	14.167	
Fostering Positive Engagement				
Between Groups	1	1.989	1.989	.174
Within Groups	1027	11763.249	11.454	

H1. Ethnicity influences high school students' perceptions of teacher caring behaviors, was not supported. In this study, ethnicity was not an overall significant factor which further supports results by Garrett, Barr, and Forsbach-Rothman (2007), who suggested that ethnicity is not an influential factor. While, Hayes, Ryan, and Zseller (1994) indicate gender and ethnicity as factors that influence student perceptions at the item level, our findings do not support other studies (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Ding & Hall, 2006) that suggest ethnicity as a significant variable in shaping students' perceptions.

*Gender Influence*

We next compared the mean total scores for males and females using an *F*-test for all three subscales. The results were statistically significant and are reported in Table 2. The survey

items describe ways teacher can demonstrate caring for students. Females were more likely than males to perceive the survey items as more important in each subscale. Since the subscales differed for males and females, this finding is in concert with previous work (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Ding & Hall, 2007). In contrast, Hayes, Ryan and Zsella, (1994) reported no statistical significance at the item level. We examined differences in response patterns between them by constructing cross tabulation tables and computing a chi-square statistic for each item. Because multiple tests were run on the same data, we used the Bonferroni procedure to adjust for Type I error and set  $p < .001$  to determine statistical significance.

**Table 2**  
**One-way ANOVA – Gender**

Subscale and Source	df	SS	MS	F
Validating Student Worth				
Between Groups	1	1013.77	1013.77	18.71***
Within Groups	980	54676.00	55.79	
Individualizing Academic Success				
Between Groups	1	121.438	121.438	8.63**
Within Groups	1009	14202.065	14.075	
Fostering Positive Engagement				
Between Groups	1	214.764	214.764	19.19***
Within Groups	1017	11382.793	11.193	

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Statistically significant differences were found among gender groups at the item level for 17 of the 28 items. Table 3 shows the percentage of students by gender who rated the item as important or very important.

**Table 3**  
**Frequency Item Analysis of Perceived Caring Behaviors by Gender**

Survey Items	Male		Female	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
1 Encourages me in class. **	327	66	376	70
2 Gives me examples on how to improve.	393	80	434	82
3 Is available whenever I need help on something. **	401	82	465	88
4 Prepares me for tests. ***	421	85	497	93
5 Responds with a positive tone when I ask for help. ***	399	81	478	89
6 Is very nice to me.	350	71	393	74
7 Suggests I come to tutorials whenever I fail something. **	288	58	355	67
8 Gives additional time to turn in any kind of work.	334	68	340	64
9 Talks to me whenever my grades are poor. **	362	73	422	79
10 Believes in me. ***	332	67	406	76
11 Tells me I can achieve my goals. **	276	56	342	64
12 Will stay before or after school to tutor me. ***	338	68	427	80
13 Makes learning fun.	415	84	453	86
14 Answers my questions with respect. ***	413	84	476	89
15 Allows any effort I give. **	310	63	372	70
16 Offers to help whenever convenient for me.	345	70	381	72
17 Shows an attitude that makes me feel comfortable in class. ***	381	77	452	85
18 Calls me by my name. ***	367	75	438	83
19 Listens to me whenever I talk. ***	401	82	479	90
20 Talks to me in class.	268	54	318	60
21 Works with me on an individual basis.	294	60	292	55
22 Jokes with me. **	299	61	280	53
23 Likes helping me when I do not understand something. ***	392	80	442	84
24 Returns my papers on time.	321	65	354	67
25 Reminds me about important things more than once.	388	79	424	80
26 Is willing to help me when I need it. **	414	84	463	87
27 Asks for my opinions.	307	62	333	63
28 Pays attention to my opinions.	338	73	367	76

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

N= 799

Male students were more likely to perceive *Jokes with me* as more important than female students. Female students were more likely to perceive *Encourages me in class*, *Is available whenever I need help on something*, *Prepares me for tests*, *Responds with a positive tone when I ask for help*, *Suggests I come in for tutorials when I fail something*, *Talks to me whenever my grades are poor*, *Believes in me*, *Tells me I can achieve my goals*, *Will stay before or after school to tutor me*, *Answers my questions with respect*, *Allows any effort I give*, *Shows an attitude that*

*makes me comfortable in class, Calls me by my name, Listens to me whenever I talk, Likes helping me when I do not understand something, and Is willing to help me when I need it, as more important than male students.*

## **Discussion**

The purpose of our study was to measure high school students' perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. Specifically, the PTC measured Latino and White high school students' perceptions and whether ethnicity and gender influenced perceptions of caring. Although ethnicity was not a significant factor in influencing adolescents' perceptions of teacher caring behaviors, the significance at the item level merits further research and may provide some important insights about caring. This section begins with an overview of the three subscales (see Appendix A), as reported in a previous manuscript, followed by the descriptive statistics at the item level with regards to gender, since ethnicity was not a statistical factor. The PTC included 28 items grouped into three subscales: *Validating Student Worth*, *Individualizing Academic Success*, and *Fostering Positive Engagement*.

### **Validating Student Worth**

*Validating Student Worth*, the first subscale of the instrument, refers to actions or behaviors, verbal and non-verbal, which demonstrate respectful interactions and communicate a sincere level of regard for students as individuals and interest for the student's welfare. Consistent with previous studies (Coburn & Nelson, 1989; Coley, 1995; Geary, 1988; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Kitano & Lewis, 2005; Knesting, 2008), similar behaviors regarded as most important by the participants in this study (see Appendix A) are linked to this subscale, suggesting the critical nature of caring and regard for students. The language and actions convey a perception of students as human beings rather than physical bodies in the classroom (Valverde,



2006). The manner in which a teacher responds or interacts with students is self-regulated, therefore, instrumental in the manner with which the verbal or non-verbal interaction is interpreted by a student. These behaviors engender a sense of belonging and respect for students that may increase student interest and motivation which drive learning. As Kottler and Zehm (2000) state “A sense of humor and playfulness are among the most powerful tools available to teachers to help accomplish this mission (p. 15). When students feel valued (Kitano & Lewis, 2008) and encounter positive experiences (McMillan & Reed, 1994) coupled with a teacher’s pleasant manner, a sense of belonging (Coley, 1995; Hansen & Toso, 2007) may occur, instrumental in maintaining students’ interest in school. When teacher behavior reflects an attitude that is inviting, rather than discouraging, students are more apt to attend class and participate in the learning process because they want to be there.

It is interesting to note that 9 of 15 items in this subscale were significant at the item level. The following table shows the statistical significance at the item level by gender.

**Table 4**  
**Individualizing Academic Success**  
**Influence on Perceived Caring Behaviors by Gender**

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Survey Items

- 
- Suggests I come to tutorials whenever I fail something. \*\*
  - Is available whenever I need help on something. \*\*
  - Shows an attitude that makes me feel comfortable in class. \*\*\*
  - Jokes with me. \*\*
  - Is willing to help me when I need it. \*\*
  - Believes in me. \*\*\*
  - Listens to me whenever I talk. \*\*\*
  - Calls me by my name. \*\*\*
  - Responds with a positive tone when I ask for help. \*\*\*

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\*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

N= 799

The next subscale, *Individualizing Academic Success*, refers to student perceptions of a teacher’s responsiveness or scaffolding that provides both cognitive and affective instructional support and assistance to students (Garza, 2006). These actions help to engender successful and positive classroom experiences for all students. While scaffolding may be viewed as the process of providing the cognitive input to support new learning (Monzó & Rueda, 2001), scaffolding in this study was reflected also by concrete actions that supported academic gains (Ferreira & Bosworth, 2001; Nelson & Bauch, 1997). These responsive actions are motivated by teacher ethic, context, and moral obligation (Bluestein, 1991; Noddings, 2005). When students encounter positive experiences in the classroom (Epstein, 1992; Hansen & Toso, 2007; Haynes, 1996) and caring teachers (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Reis, Colbert, & Hébert, 2005) they are more likely to remain in school.

In this subscale, all items were significant at the item level. The following table shows the statistical significance at the item level by gender.

**Table 5**  
**Individualizing Academic Success**  
**Influence on Perceived Caring Behaviors by Gender**

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Survey Items

- 
- Prepares me for tests. \*\*\*
  - Talks to me whenever my grades are poor. \*\*
  - Likes helping me when I do not understand something. \*\*\*
  - Allows any effort I give. \*\*
  - Returns my papers on time. \*\*
  - Pays attention to my opinions. \*\*

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\*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

N= 79

### **Fostering Positive Engagement**

*Fostering Positive Engagement*, the third subscale, describes behaviors that encourage self-esteem in students to promote active participation in the classroom. When this occurs, students feel cared for (Hansen & Toso, 2007). Mendes (2003) agrees that “Positive responses create an emotional bank account that can absorb relational difficulties that occur along the way” (p. 59). These behaviors reflect how the teacher invests the time necessary to create positive experiences for students rather than discounting them or labeling them as unmotivated whenever challenges occur for the learner. In other words, students believe the teacher cares about their learning and success or in Irvine’s (2003) words, “Effective teachers love and care about the students whom they teach, and they also love and are excited about the subject that they teach” (p. 47). Additionally, Brown (2007) affirms “A positive or negative response could affect the self-esteem and academic success of students” (p. 57). If students perceive the teacher to be unresponsive to their needs, disengagement may occur, which in turn may lead to underachievement or dropping out of school (Kitano & Lewis, 2005). Valverde (2006) emphasizes that students’ “interest in learning will continue if they find success” (p. 37).

This subscale included 6 of 7 items significant at the item level. Ethnicity was an influential factor for two of these items; gender was an influential variable for four of the items; and both ethnicity and gender were influential factors on two of the items. The following table shows the statistical significance at the item level by gender and ethnicity.

**Table 6**  
**Fostering Positive Engagement**  
**Influence on Perceived Caring Behaviors by Gender**

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Survey Items

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Encourages me in class. \*\*

Tells me I can achieve my goals. \*\*

Answers my questions with respect. \*\*\*

Will stay before or after school to tutor me. \*\*\*

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\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

N= 799

### Implications

Students are key players in the teaching and learning process and consequently have direct knowledge of what takes place in the classroom (Stronge & Ostrander, 2006). Students, therefore, are in the best position to provide an authentic account about student-teacher interactions in the classroom, and their perceptions about teacher behaviors that convey caring can add an important perspective to caring. Obtaining their feedback is a viable means for improving educational practices that may unconsciously be ineffective and impede student success. Understanding secondary students' conceptions of caring behaviors may be influential in breaking down unresponsive institutional and systemic barriers that prevent students from learning, staying in school, or having positive experiences. We need to examine further students' perspectives to learn how to care for them in a manner that is culturally responsive to better address their needs. As Garza (2009) explains, "Once students step into the context of the classroom, educators may perceive their unique assets as problems, complex challenges, or differences that are misinterpreted. As a result, educators often label students as unmotivated, withdrawn, or academically incapable" (p. 1). While some educators may ignore struggling or

reluctant students and some continue to invest their time to scaffold and encourage them to succeed, a further examination of the dynamics of caring is important.

Additionally, the findings may be used as a springboard to examine teacher practice to determine the extent of culturally responsive caring (Garrett, Barr & Forsbach-Rothman, 2007). Classroom demographics have changed; in some areas, the Latino population is the majority. Therefore, school administrators could use the PTC survey in their respective schools to identify teacher caring behaviors congruent with their students' conceptions. Consequently, educators might benefit from knowing how to best care for their students, since their disposition and interaction with students may not be congruent with student perceptions (den Brok, Brekelmans, Wubbels, 2004; Rickards & Fisher, 1999; Thompson, 2007). The results of our study may assist teachers who wish to convey a more responsive caring approach in teaching a diverse population. Similarly to what Garza (2009) suggests, our findings "are especially helpful for teachers who are ethnically unique to their students and whose background and experiences may obstruct caring in ways appropriate for their students" (p. 22).

Having knowledge about gender differences in student perceptions about caring behaviors might serve as a means for educators to improve relationships with students, specifically with male students. Researchers (Ding & Hall, 2007) have suggested that male students, in all grade levels and ethnicity groups, are more likely to perceive teachers as uncaring. The culture for learning has to be perceived as non-threatening and teachers must be perceived as caring adults if students are to reach their potential. For example, male students were more likely to perceive *Jokes with me* as more important than female students, suggesting males need to perceive teachers as having a sense of humor. Perceiving a teacher to have a sense of humor as a form of caring has been linked to student success in school (Rodriguez, 2008;

Geary, 1988). Previous research supports this notion (Van de gaer, Pustgens, & Van Damme, & De Munter, 2006) indicating males are more likely to achieve less when attitudes toward school or the teacher-student relationship are negative. Some have suggested that student perceptions are influenced by teacher gender. For example, Levy, Den Brock, Wubbels, and Brekelmans (2003), reported “male students thought their male teachers were more helpful, friendly, and understanding than their female teachers” (p. 27). Future research might examine student’s perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring with regard to teacher gender since teachers’ conceptions of caring may not be the students’ reality (Thompson, 2007). Furthermore, based on this knowledge, teachers could assess their own actions and disposition towards students to improve educational experiences for all students. Equal opportunity for learning in the least restrictive environment is essential for learning to occur. “When students’ needs, values, and interests are excluded from the curriculum, perhaps it is only logical that they in turn, exclude themselves from engaging in knowledge for which they see little value or recognition of their personal worth” (Cothron & Ennis, 1997, p. 553).

### **Methodological Limitations**

The main focus of this study was on high school students’ perceptions with gender and ethnicity as influential factors. This study is limited by the gathering of data at one large high school. Students in other content areas might have different expectations and needs associated with the subject matter and as a result, their perceptions might be different from those reported here. Therefore, analysis and comparisons by subject matter or teachers were beyond the scope of this study. Further research should be conducted to examine students’ perceptions in different parts of the country. The selection of participants is also a contextual limitation. Examining a more geographically and ethnically diverse sample of participants might provide different

results, especially since this study was limited to Latino and White students. In addition, inquiring about teachers' ethnicity and gender as influential factors on student perceptions is a possible research initiative. Furthermore, other researchers might label the three subscales differently based on the findings of this research investigation. Caution should be taken when generalizing the conclusions from this study to similar demographic groups in diverse high school settings in other parts of the United States. Additional research is needed to further test ethnicity as an influential factor in student perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring.

### **Final Remarks**

The results of our study suggest that gender significantly influences student perceptions of teacher behaviors that convey caring. Although ethnicity was not statistically significant, we must not ignore the fact that there was some significance at the item level. These findings further expand on previous studies (Ding & Hall, 2007; Garrett, Barr, & Forsbach-Rothman, 2007; Garza, 2009; Hayes, Ryan, & Zsellar, 1994) and support the need to research ethnicity as an influential variable on secondary students' perceptions about caring in the school environment. Our study also adds to the current research on student perceptions by illuminating high school student voices that seem limited in the literature. In addition, the results of this study were obtained through an instrument developed solely to measure students' perceptions about teacher behaviors that convey caring.

Whereas a significant body of work supports the importance of a caring teacher in the classroom (Bruce & Stellern, 2005; Collinson, Killeavy, & Stephenson, 1998; Garza, 2009; Gay, 2000; Letts, 1997; Noddings, 2005; Pang, Rivera, Mora, 1999; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1996), undoubtedly, a teacher's ability to demonstrate genuine caring is linked to student success. Collinson, et al. (1998) acknowledge that only "...cursory attention (is given) to the role

of an ethic of care in effective teaching” (p.22). This implies that caring teachers must purposefully know their students well and establish relationships with them because without establishing caring, school reforms “are not likely to strengthen teaching or improve student learning significantly as long as the focus on teacher competence overshadows the role of an ethic of care in exemplary teaching” (Collinson, et al., 1998, p.23). This is especially critical for students of color (Burrell & Ovando, 2008).

Although caring is instrumental in motivating and academically engaging students (Capps, 2004; Osterman & Freese, 2000; Patchen, 2006), engendering relationships (Garza, 2007; Letts, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 2000), establishing a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993), creating a productive culture for learning (Weinstein, 1998), and establishing a cooperative learning community (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997), high school students’ perspectives about how to best care for them are limited in the extant research. Validating student worth, individualizing academic success, and fostering positive engagement were important notions to the high school students in this study. Therefore, knowing what students think is an avenue administrators, counselors, and educators can embrace to improve schooling experiences for all students.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Perceptions of Teacher Caring**

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#### **Validating Student Worth**

1. Suggests I come to tutorials whenever I fail something.
2. Works with me on an individual basis.
3. Offers to help whenever convenient for me.
4. Is available whenever I need help on something.
5. Reminds me about important things more than once.
6. Is very nice to me.
7. Shows an attitude that makes me feel comfortable in class.
8. Talks to me in class.
9. Jokes with me.
10. Is willing to help me when I need it.
11. Believes in me.
12. Asks for my opinions.
13. Listens to me whenever I talk.
14. Calls me by my name.
15. Responds with a positive tone when I ask for help.

#### **Individualizing Academic Success**

1. Prepares me for tests.
2. Talks to me whenever my grades are poor.
3. Likes helping me when I do not understand something.
4. Allows any effort I give.
5. Returns my papers on time.
6. Pays attention to my opinions.

#### **Fostering Positive Engagement**

1. Encourages me in class.
2. Gives me examples on how to improve.
3. Gives additional time to turn in any kind of work.
4. Makes learning fun.
5. Tells me I can achieve my goals.
6. Answers my questions with respect.
7. Will stay before or after school to tutor me.



Current Issues in Education



<http://cie.asu.edu>

Volume 13, Number 1

ISSN 1099-839X

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