Abstract

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