

Caring Leadership Applied In The Classroom To Embrace The Needs Of Students

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ABSTRACT

On a daily basis, teachers make important decisions that impact the learning and growth process of student development. One of many important decisions that teachers make pertains to the methods used to impart knowledge to students while maintaining discipline and order in a caring manner. Using literature and secondary sources, the author provides a view of caring leadership from a human intelligence perspective as a viable approach to classroom management. The paper concludes by offering a discussion on caring leadership skills and classroom management applications, as well as benefits of caring leadership to students, schools, and the community at large. The content can be used to help current and future educators become more effective leaders as they seek to enhance student learning by fostering an enriching and caring classroom experience.

Keywords: Caring Leadership; Human Intelligences; Classroom Management

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have been conducted on leadership and human intelligences. One of the common characteristics that surfaces when both topics are discussed is the significance of caring (Wilson, 2005; Clawson, 2009). Contemporary literature indicates that caring leaders are respectful of self and others. Caring leaders are an asset to their organizations, as they have a work ethic that demonstrates a passion for people and their craft. “There are two aspects of caring leadership: 1) the commitment to the task and 2) equally important is concern for people” (Manning and Curtis, 2012, p. 10). However, what remains questionable is an understanding of the implications caring leadership has on embracing the needs of students when demonstrated in the classroom environment.

HUMAN INTELLIGENCES AND CARING LEADERSHIP

Human intelligences are present and different for every individual as this uniqueness is linked to their learning, problem-solving and decision-making skills (Wilson, 2004). “We each are a unique blend, however, and we differ in the degree to which we prefer and have competence to use each of the intelligences” (Manning and Curtis, 2012, p.46). Howard Gardner is considered a pioneer for exploring the sources of evidence regarding a list of human intelligences and repudiated a single kind of intelligence (Clawson, 2009; Phillips & Gully, 2012). Gardner’s (1999) extensive years of research on human intelligence indicates that “leaders demonstrate a generous degree of linguistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, and intrapersonal intelligence” (p. 128). Teachers are considered leaders as they make decisions that impact followers, which include their students. Effective teachers apply their human intelligence skills; namely, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and linguistic intelligences, for decisions related and unrelated to classroom management.

Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand and make distinctions among the feelings, beliefs, intentions, motivations, and desires of others and, ultimately, to effectively communicate and work well with others. Listening intently to and addressing students’ concerns is a great way to show that you care and one of many ways

interpersonal human intelligence skills may be demonstrated in the classroom. According to Gardner (1999), “sales people, teachers, clinicians, religious leaders, political leaders, and actors all need acute interpersonal intelligence” (p.43).

Intrapersonal intelligence refers to the understanding of one’s mental model of self to include the effective handling of one’s own abilities, fears, and desires to guide one’s life. For example, sharpening your skills by learning a new concept that can be shared in the classroom is a great way to enhance your own abilities and indicates that you care about self and your craft. What a great way to put your intrapersonal human intelligence skills into practice by modeling a “caring” behavior that you want your students to emulate. Interestingly, while both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences have a different focus, both human intelligences reinforce the significance of caring. Simply put, intrapersonal intelligence involves understanding and caring about oneself, as intrapersonal intelligence extends the importance of caring about self to others.

Linguistic intelligence entails being sensitive to spoken and written language, coupled with learning languages and the ability to use language to attain goals or objectives. A genuine compliment, a kind word, or providing timely feedback are all powerful ways to show students that you care. Using such linguistic human intelligence approaches are great ways to enhance a caring relationship with students.

CARING LEADERSHIP AND CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Studies seem to indicate that although effective teaching involves efficient classroom management methods, such as delivering new and value-added course materials, adhering to school policies and procedures, and demonstrating proficiency with computer technologies, as equally significant is providing caring leadership to embrace the needs of students (Seyfarth, 2008). “As a group, teachers are more satisfied with their jobs than people in most other occupations; but the conditions of their work, including the number of disruptive students in their classes, directly affect how they feel about their jobs” (Seyfarth, 2008, p.94). Negative student attitudes and disruptive classroom behavior certainly has an impact on student learning and presents an opportunity to enhance classroom management. “A teacher who understands students’ [behavioral] cues, but lacks a strategy to address the needs expressed thereby, has limited success as does the teacher with a broad knowledge of teaching strategies who is not able to tell when a particular strategy is called for” (Seyfarth, 2008, p. 104).

Implementing effective classroom management strategies that foster student learning is imperative. “Teachers set a tone in their classrooms that may either add to or detract from student learning. A tone that encourages and demonstrates respect for other people’s views creates a classroom climate that welcomes students’ success” (Seyfarth, 2008, p. 104). Thus, creating a caring classroom environment is one of many viable strategies that may address classroom management issues and invite student success. “Only when the leader cares will others care. Only when the leader cares will there be a focus and energy for the work to be done” (Manning and Curtis, 2012, p. 10). A caring attitude demonstrated by teachers fosters a level of commitment from students that drives motivation, discipline, and respect as these are necessary criteria for an effective classroom environment.

APPLYING CARING LEADERSHIP FROM A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Based on years of experience as a teacher, caring leadership has involved a continuous assessment of the author’s emotional preparedness coupled with becoming more cognizant of the feelings of others. “When we can see what others feel and when we care about those feelings, we experience a major opportunity to influence and to be influenced” (Clawson, 2009, p. 179). Demonstrating caring leadership in the classroom is one of the prerequisites for being a bonafide teacher as this approach allows for a deeper trust and learning experience for both the teacher and the student. “If you see the emotions of others, if you care about that emotional reality for them, and if you have the skills that allow you to help them manage their emotions, you will have the opportunity to influence others. It is a powerful form of leadership” (Clawson, p. 179).

The author’s approach to caring leadership is demonstrated well in advance of meeting students enrolled in the course during the first day of instruction. Students receive the course syllabus for their review along with a point of contact number, which encourages further dialogue prior to the first day of class, if needed. Many students

respond to the offer and dialogue with the teacher regarding the course syllabus and their partnership to ensure that their learning outcomes and success would be realized during the course. This initial classroom management foundation is continuously reinforced during and subsequent to the first day of instruction by demonstrating caring leadership approaches. Examples of caring leadership and classroom management approaches which have solidified a trusting relationship between teacher and students include, but are not limited to:

1. conferring after class regarding written assignments and oral presentations to enhance communication skills
2. giving sincere praise during class participation dialogue to reinforce positive behavior
3. meeting during the week and on weekends for team assignment review to develop critical thinking skills
4. providing insight on career and community service opportunities to enhance their learning experience
5. listening to concerns regarding balancing school, family, and community service obligations to suggest recommendations for effective time management resolutions
6. teaming with student and/or guidance services staff to further their insight on university service opportunities

Consider this example of a student (named William for sake of anonymity) enrolled in a course taught by the author at the university level. William was one of many students that dialogued subsequent to receiving the course syllabus and other course-related materials days prior to the beginning of the course. The course syllabus and other course-related materials were reviewed (to include the course learning outcomes) and partnership contributions to exceed his course expectations and course success were discussed. Several weeks after the course began; it was evident that William was intelligent, conscientious, and energetic. This was indicative due to his high level of participation in class, excellent written assignments submitted, and observed positive attitude embodied by William during course team assignment interactions with other student colleagues.

Approaching mid-point of the semester, William's attitude and performance had taken a turn for the worse and his behavior had a negative impact on the classroom environment. William began missing classes, late assignments were prevalent and poorly written, and he was disruptive, nervous, and disheveled during classes, when present. Based on the teacher's observation, his non-verbal cues revealed what appeared to be a disability which needed immediate action and a "heavier dose" of caring leadership. The observation of Williams' perceived disability was validated when the teacher requested a meeting with him. During that meeting, William thanked the teacher for caring about his well-being, including his learning experience, he explained his medical issue due to missed doses of prescribed medication, and he admitted to being ashamed and remiss for not disclosing his disability to the university. The teacher was elated, but not surprised, that he confided in and gave her the opportunity to assist him to get back on track and succeed in the course. Why was the teacher not surprised? William knew that she cared, as that mattered to him. Reaching out to William in a genuine and caring manner, coupled with establishing classroom management standards prior to and during class instruction, fostered open communication between them and solidified a trusting partnership toward his successful goal attainment.

Subsequently, additional steps were taken to ensure William's success in the course while adhering to the university's policies and procedures, such as:

1. Pertinent university staff were advised of William's medical situation.
2. Due to his medical condition, a note from William's physician was requested and received for his approval to continue the course.
3. With William's input, an individual educational plan was developed to assist him with achieving a successful course outcome. The plan consisted of assignments and due dates that were tailored to meet the course learning outcomes while considering William's medical circumstance.

The mission was accomplished as William received approval from his physician and the university to continue the course of instruction. Partnering was continued to ensure that his course expectations and learning outcomes were met, and he completed the course successfully and in a timely manner. The experience with William is an example of how teachers may assist students by demonstrating caring leadership and effective classroom management.

BENEFITS OF CARING LEADERSHIP

The benefits of demonstrating caring leadership are far-reaching beyond the classroom. “Good teachers help students learn while they are in their classrooms, but the benefits of good teaching continue after the students have moved on” (Seyfarth, 2008, p. 2). The following describes how caring leadership benefit students, schools, and the community at large.

Benefits to Students

When responsive teachers deliver effective curriculum, caring student relationships are nurtured, resonant classroom environment conducive to learning is created, then students are more: (a) receptive to communicate openly; (b) attentive to what is being taught and heighten their learning experience; and (d) respectful of others in the classroom (“A Quality Teacher Is a Caring Teacher,” 2002-2012). Managing the classroom in this manner requires that teachers care about the emotional state of others, “sense student’s confusion and boredom, and make [course] adjustments in their instruction to recapture attention or increase students’ understanding” (Seyfarth, 2008, p.102). Students benefit greatly by caring leadership which reinforces life-long learning skills, develops positive habits, and enhances their self- efficacy.

Benefits to Schools

In a quest to uphold their mission and resolve organizational challenges, schools benefit from caring leadership practices. Although U.S. public schools were founded with a mission focusing on teaching literacy, over the years the schools’ mission has broadened. Today, the mission of U.S. public schools focuses on teaching 1) literacy, 2) numeracy, 3) foundations for healthy living, 4) ways to earn a living, and 5) the importance of self-respect and respect for others (Seyfarth, 2008). Thus, demonstrating caring leadership is an approach that aligns with the mission of many U.S. schools and contributes to student-centered learning and development. Caring leadership practices reinforce positive student behavior and creates a climate that helps students construct meaning.

Many occupations face organizational challenges, such as attrition problems, including the teaching profession. “It is estimated that about 13 percent of all teachers change jobs or leave the profession every year. About one-half of new teachers within urban schools leave within five years” (Seyfarth, 2008, p. 96; “The Conditions of Education”, 2011). The turnover rate in the teaching profession is attributed to several factors, such as stress, working conditions, low salaries, lack of success in the classroom, or reasons unrelated to work (Seyfarth, 2008). “There are certainly costs to turnover, such as costs of hiring and training replacement employees. In addition, turnover often causes disruptions for existing members of an organization” (George & Jones, 2012, p. 86).

As schools are challenged to compete with other organizations to attract and retain top-notch teachers, adopting and extending caring leadership practices from within to beyond the classroom may be a viable answer to this attrition dilemma. “ Research on the relationship of mentoring to teacher attrition rates shows that teachers in schools with mentoring programs are less likely to leave their jobs, as compared with teachers in schools without such programs” (Seyfarth, 2008, p. 107) For example, mentors - also known as support teachers - assist teachers with enhancing their classroom management skills and caring leadership approaches with students. “Among the qualities that teachers look for in mentors are teaching experience, sensitivity, approachability, and a positive outlook” (Seyfarth, 2008, p107). Ironically, the qualities that teachers expect from their mentors are similar to students’ expectations of teachers.

Benefits to the Community

Caring leadership not only benefits students and schools; communities benefit as well. Community is defined by Manning and Curtis (2012) as “a group of people” and as “a way of being”, thus “community is formed by bringing people together in place and time” (p.85). Caring leadership demonstrated in schools benefits the community in many ways, as the social, economic, and cultural perspectives will be addressed.

Socially speaking, each of us has the need to be a part of and contribute to something greater than what we could accomplish alone (Manning & Curtis, 2012). Demonstrating caring leadership nurtures the development of students to become a part of something greater than self - a good citizen. Through caring leadership practices, students are exposed to the foundation to “develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes that support the continuation of the community’s value and purpose” (Manning & Curtis, 2012, p. 86).

From a cultural perspective, communities benefit when fragmentation and divisiveness is mitigated and value of diversity is respected. Demonstrating caring leadership fosters a greater understanding of others; that is, “shared norms of behavior and core values to live by” (Manning & Curtis, 2012, p. 86). In doing so, students are exposed to cultivating a sense of facing and resolving differences as a fact of life. Furthermore, in a caring environment, students heighten their awareness of how to interface with others humanely with respect and integrity.

Economically, the greatest return on the investment fostered by caring leadership is encouraging students to look within and enhancing their sense of self-awareness (George, Sims, McLean and Mayer, 2011). In the caring environment, an individual’s beliefs, convictions, and values are continuously tested, as they will be in the community. However, a solid foundation of values that have been tested allows for effective decision-making and value-added contributions to the community for years to come.

CONCLUSION

Studies indicate that there are varied approaches that may be applied in the classroom to embrace the needs of students. One of the most effective approaches to enhance the classroom experience is to demonstrate caring leadership. The caring manner exemplified in the classroom should be demonstrated by the teacher, a leader in the classroom that sets the climate for an enjoyable yet challenging learning experience. In this positive classroom environment, students are more receptive to learning, which elevates their motivation and commitment to succeed.

Furthermore, this paper provides a review of the domains of human intelligences with a focus on leadership that is needed for effective classroom management. The fact remains that all people possess human intelligences and leaders personify an abundance of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and linguistic intelligences (Gardner, 1999). Regardless of an individual’s level of intelligence, through leadership and classroom management training, teachers can become more effective in their demonstration of caring leadership in the classroom (Wilson, 2012). Becoming a caring leader requires respecting self and others, understanding and tolerating differences, and having a genuine passion for one’s craft.

Teachers have the power and choice to enhance their classroom management approaches which have an impact on the students, school, and community. This paper addresses several benefits of demonstrating caring leadership, which extends far beyond the classroom, and a personal example of how caring leadership has been demonstrated effectively in the classroom. When teachers genuinely commit to apply caring leadership in the classroom, they are creating a foundation to embrace the needs of students to achieve their life-long aspirations.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Dr. Stefanie Denise Wilson is an associate professor of Business Administration at the University of Hawaii-West O’ahu. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Business Management from Hampton University, Master’s degree in Business Administration with specializations in International Business and Marketing from the University of Miami, and Doctor of Management degree in Organizational Leadership from the University of Phoenix. In addition to teaching, Wilson has always been fascinated with human intelligences, organizational dynamics, and leadership. Her research and publication efforts expand on Howard Gardner’s “Theory of Multiple Intelligences” by providing new ways to think about leadership. E-mail: sdwilson@hawaii.edu

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