

Translating “Caring” in School Contexts

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More than ever, educators worldwide find themselves groping for solutions to behavioural and performance challenges presented by primary and secondary school students. The social systems that are evolving internationally necessitate an understanding of new perspectives of life and living. Thus, generational interpretations of norms, standards, and propriety now have to be revisited from different philosophical standpoints in order to come to terms with situations that arise out of life experiences different to our own. More importantly, when horrors are borne out of a particular kind of social system, it is the moral imperative for that very system to cure the ills that foster those horrors.

It is the view of many that schools as social systems have a key role to play in creating a solid base on which healthy living can thrive. If schools are viewed as systems, then sub-systems will logically form their underlying framework. What philosophy, then, can guide the establishment of these sub-systems in order that schools do play the pivotal role expected of them?

I have observed that successful institutions are the ones that translate “caring” into their general and specific “modus operandi.” Not only do they care about people but they also care about tasks, both large and small. Thus, if a society waves the “education for all” flag, this motto must be translated into caring for all sufficiently to put sub-systems in place to ensure that all are educated. It must care enough to understand the meaning of “education” before embarking on implementation plans.

Schools that care create environments that promote desired educational outcomes to enable the creation of a healthy society. Learning spaces in such a scenario will respect the physical and psychological needs of learners and teachers, and will insist on practices that support this philosophy. The same can be said for learning materials that are employed in learning spaces—they should demonstrate a regard for students’ needs in their diversity.

If schools are to function as communities, and even as families, the caring element is more likely to be realised if the student population is kept to a size that can be managed as a family—where everyone gets the opportunity to applaud and be applauded, to receive and to give, to speak and to listen, to make mistakes and learn from them, to share confidences, and to recognise that there is always someone to turn to in times of need.

If we were to use the analogy of hunger, we would recognise that the hungry person often yearns for a favourite dish, when something basic would actually provide the necessary sustenance. So, too, the student who experiences sustained simple caring in a multitude of ways is not easily threatened, or does not resort to hostility in reaction to a negative situation.

This has significant implications for the implicit curriculum and the professional development for educators. For our messages to students begin with the decisions and choices we make when we build schools, design curricula, employ teachers, select administrators—in short, when we draft policy. Where does the buck stop then? Is it with policy makers? Professional development programmes globally refer to teachers as decision makers. Micropolitical theory will show that anyone in an organisation has some type of influence or power.

School administrators and classroom teachers, therefore, are the ones who, through creativity and innovation, must shape policies which ensure that the current generation of students learn the responsibility and caring required of them as future parents and citizens. As leaders in education, principals must lead by example and demonstrate a caring for teaching and non-teaching staff. Such caring, also applicable to teachers, translates into proper planning, constructive use of time, respect for school and other's property, integrity in communication and decision making, valuing of others' views, and recognition of one's weaknesses, to highlight only some of the areas that make a positive difference to educational leadership and school climate.

Many professionals mistakenly translate caring as values education, or the softer side of teaching. This micro view of caring impedes us from "making a statement" and a difference in our capacity of educators. Caring must determine decision making with regard to macro issues. When values such as caring determine policy, it is advisable to include a variety of voices in discussions that affect the quality of life of our nation's youth and, consequently, to ensure that caring becomes a norm in all our social systems.

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