

# How Will They Know You Care? Advice for Preservice Teachers Based on Children's Perceptions of Caring and Respect

**Jamia M. Thomas-Richmond** Coastal Carolina University

**M. Caroline O'Quinn**

Texas A &M University-San Antonio

For several years, the authors were involved as volunteer literacy tutors in a low-income housing development with predominantly African American residents. In this volunteer role, the authors were troubled by the ways in which the youth and their families were misunderstood and not well served by the schools. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the perceptions and the voices of children, ages 11-16, as it relates to the research question: In a school system focused on closing the achievement gap, what qualities and characteristics do children from low income backgrounds identify in teachers that demonstrate care and respect?

For several years, the authors were involved in three simultaneous endeavors devoted to providing more equitable educational opportunities in a small Southern city. As teacher educators, we taught and designed courses for undergraduate and graduate students. We also attended monthly meetings initiated by the local school district to address the "Achievement Gap" in our county. Additionally, we served as weekly volunteer literacy tutors at a Section 8, low-income housing development, where the residents are predominantly African American. There we encountered resiliency, strong families, parents who deeply care about education and students who genuinely desire to succeed in school. It was troubling to discover the ways in which the children and families were misunderstood and not well served by the schools.

We agree with Nieto (2008) that "regardless of our individual personalities, we are all situated within a racially unequal structure that we often unwittingly perpetuate" (p.28). Understanding that the children we tutored were not well served by the schools because of systemic,

institutionalized racial inequities, we also realized that many of the students felt slighted and hurt by interactions with individual teachers. As Milner (2017) reminds us, "Racism and racially tinged acts can and do occur both with intentionality and unintentionality, and the effects can be devastating in either case" (p. 86).

We could also see that the children's academic progress was greatly hindered by low expectations. Hawley and Nieto (2010) point out what they call an "inconvenient truth" about teacher expectations. Race and ethnicity, they say, "influence teachers' assumptions about how students learn and how much students are capable of learning" (p. 66).

Corbett and Wilson (2002) interviewed urban middle school students over a period of three years. They note that students who were often perceived as unmotivated actually preferred teachers who challenged and supported them academically. They report, "These urban students admitted that their default response to most assignments was to ignore them, which understandably gave the impression that they cared little about learning. Nevertheless,

students liked teachers who successfully combated this habit” (p. 20).

We wanted to find the best way to train teachers to truly care for their students, and we decided to ask the children how they would define care and respect. We chose to interview middle/high school students because the children had already encountered a number of teachers and because they were mature enough to express what they had experienced.

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to emphasize the perceptions and the voice of a group of African American children, and to discover how they describe a caring, respectful teacher. The research question was: In a school system focused on closing the achievement gap, what qualities and characteristics do children from low income backgrounds identify in teachers that demonstrate care and respect?

### Procedures

Minority students, ages 11-16 were recruited from an afterschool literacy program in a local Section 8 housing development. The researchers served as volunteers in this community as literacy tutors, thus giving them access to a large pool of students for the study. Parents of children in the program were given a letter describing the study and asking for willing participants. From the pool of parental consent forms, students who fit the age criteria were approached and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. The researchers interviewed eight African American children, in grades 4-9. All names reported are pseudonyms to assure confidentiality. See Table 1 for participant information.

Table 1

*Student Demographic Data*

<b>Student Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Grade</b>
<b>Doug</b>	M	7
<b>Kianna</b>	F	6
<b>Ja'meer</b>	M	4
<b>Tyquan</b>	M	7
<b>Marcus</b>	M	7
<b>Amori</b>	F	9
<b>Sasha</b>	F	5
<b>Candy</b>	F	4

The researchers met with the children and their parents in their homes, described the interview process, allowed children and/or parents to ask questions, and obtained informed consent forms. After informed consent was obtained from parents, each child participated in one interview that lasted approximately 15 minutes. A structured, topical interview was utilized as the primary method of data collection. The children were asked to respond to four questions:

- Have you had teachers who cared about you? How do you know? Can you give us some examples?
- Have you had teachers who did not care about you? How do you know? Can you give us some examples?
- Have you had teachers who respected you and your family? How do you know? Can you give us some examples?
- Have you had teachers who did not respect you and your family? How do you know? Can you give us some examples?

The questions were designed to capture the perceptions of the children, and to discover how they describe a caring, respectful teacher. Follow-up questions were asked as needed to further clarify their responses. Conversely, variability existed in the posing of additional questions to clarify a point or

comment made by the participant.

To analyze the data, the researchers transcribed the interviews and gathered notes based on observations during the interview. Through examination of the data, the researchers categorized participants' responses, according to interview questions. Then the researchers examined each response in comparison to the others to note emerging themes across participants' responses. After identifying the themes, the researchers reexamined the data set for additional evidence to support or challenge them.

### **Emerging Themes**

Included here are the themes that emerged from the data. The participants identified and described attributes of what they perceived as caring, respectful teachers and also attributes of teachers perceived as uncaring and disrespectful.

### **Attributes of Caring, Respectful Teachers**

**They notice their students, and want to know them.** Nieto (2012) has written, "students instinctively know whether a teacher cares for them or not. A look, a gesture, a word: All of these can speak volumes about a teacher's perceptions concerning students, their identities, abilities, families, and the community in which they live" (p. 29). When asked how they know when teachers care, the students expressed this in a variety of ways:

"They look at you."

"They speak to you."

"They listen to you."

Caring teachers, "treat others the same as they treat me."

They "care about how you feel."

All of the children interviewed emphasized the importance of a teacher's ability to establish personal relationships: looking at students in the eyes, speaking calmly instead of yelling, caring about how

someone is, getting to know the students, asking what they want to become. They don't ignore you when you need help, have a question, or need to go to the bathroom. Candy expressed the sense of belonging and purpose she feels when noticed by her teacher, "Feel like everyone cares about you, feel happy, and feel excited, and feel like you want to be in the class and you want to learn something."

### **They provide academic support.**

Caring teachers believe students want to learn, and they teach them. Delpit (2012) asserts that the first step necessary to serve the children who have typically been underserved by our schools is "to become convinced of these children's inherent intellectual capability, humanity, physical ability, and spiritual character" (p.30). "Warm demanders" is what Delpit calls effective teachers, who support their students while expecting high levels of student effort (p. 77). Ferguson (2008) calls for "high perfectionism" combined with "high help," with an important caveat about high expectations. In the absence of sufficient academic support, insistence on "right" answers only causes students to believe they cannot succeed (p. 79).

It was obvious that the children interviewed not only wanted academic support, they felt slighted when they didn't receive it. They told us that caring teachers teach students things they want to learn. When students ask for help, the teachers don't just "go to someone else." When students ask questions, they "respond back nice." Caring teachers give their students the opportunity to help other students. They give students "extra work." When students make a bad grade, they give the opportunity to redo the work. Caring teachers sit down with students and "tell them how they are doing in class." As an example of a caring teacher, Sasha told us about the teacher who explained to her that her grades were really

low, and required her to re-read books when she couldn't answer questions about them. Rather than balking at the extra work, Sasha credited her teacher with the improvement in her grades.

**They only discipline students in order to support learning, listening carefully to both sides of a story.** Noguera (2008) reminds us, "Throughout the United States, schools tend disproportionately to punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs" (p. 132). Three of the boys and two of the girls interviewed mentioned the importance of teachers listening to both sides of a story before meting out punishment and not merely disciplining the same students repeatedly.

**They show respect for students and their families.** The students described respectful teachers who develop personal, non-judgmental relationships. The best teachers speak truthfully and respectfully to students and to their families. Several students indicated that it made them feel comfortable when a teacher already knew their relatives, particularly if the relationship was a good one. Taking the time to explain student progress and to thoughtfully answer a parent's questions was an important indication of respect. Doug explained what respectful teachers do if they need to report misbehavior to a parent: "they won't say it with attitude, they'll just say it without getting smart." Making home visits stood out as a way to care about students and show respect for their families. Marques was pleased that his teacher came to his house when his mother wasn't able to attend conferences at the school. Ja'meer said he knew a teacher respected him and his family because "they came by the house to say good things. Talking about how good people is." Candy told us that when a teacher who respects you looks at you, "it shows an affection" that makes students feel welcome

in the classroom and makes them want to learn.

**They care about families' financial situations and notice their students' needs.** As Nieto (2008) explains, "Racism involves the systemic failure of people and institutions to care for students of color on an ongoing basis" (p. 28). Because of systemic inequities, some families cannot always meet the additional expenses that schools require for school supplies, field trip fees, or specialized clothing. Several of the children interviewed mentioned teachers who had supplied their needs. Kianna, for example, told us that teachers who care ask about what you need; for example, "a pencil or paper or, if it's cold, a coat." While the researchers do not believe that individual teachers should have to provide for their students out of their own meager salaries, they realize that loving teachers sometimes do what needs to be done, and the children obviously saw this as an example of caring. Tyquan told us about his current teacher, who always helps his family when his mother doesn't have what is needed. For example, when he didn't have money for a field trip, "she paid for mine one year, and if I didn't have no Nike socks on, like, for field day or something, she would give me something. And that's like putting clothes on my back."

### **Attributes of Uncaring, Disrespectful Teachers**

**They often ignore students' questions and requests for academic support.** They call on others, they help others first, they don't stop what they are doing to help a student who doesn't understand a question or assignment. Almost all the students talked about the experience of raising their hands and not being called on. As Candy told us, they "just ignore."

As an example of a teacher who didn't care, Doug told a significant story

about a day when he needed help with a math problem. He didn't understand how to follow the instructions, so he was unable to get started. He sat with his hand raised in the air for quite a long time. At first, the teacher was helping other students, and then she began doing some kind of work on her own computer, still ignoring his raised hand. Finally, he put his head down on his desk in frustration and closed his eyes. At that point, the teacher sent him to the office, and he spent the rest of the day in In-school Suspension for being "disrespectful."

**They yell at students.** Amori mentioned a teacher who yelled and hit his desk. Kianna said, "They yell, they point, and they get in your bubble." Tyquan explained that, in his opinion, there was no point in explaining a conflict to one of his teachers, because all she did was yell at him.

**They mete out punishment without listening to both sides of a disagreement.** According to the students, teachers who care "take both sides of a story." When teachers seem to automatically take another child's side, without listening first, they are perceived as being uncaring. Tyquan said that, after a disagreement between students at recess, all his teacher did was "yell and scream at us." Doug extended that perception to principals who don't believe a student's version of a story. "She doesn't know what happened," he said, "and she'll take the teacher's side."

**They speak disrespectfully to parents.** The students also seemed to be well aware that some of their teachers and administrators "have an attitude" when talking to parents. In speaking about the school's relationship with her mother and grandmother, Amori even declared, "all of 'em used to have problems with us."

### **Implications for Teacher Education**

The researchers see the following crucial pedagogies as central to the

recruitment and development of future teachers; we recommend that teacher educators emphasize these ideas in their work with in-service teachers. All of these pedagogies involve not just the attitudes and skills of the developing teachers themselves, but also systematic, societal changes.

**Teach with your whole heart and mind.** What could be simpler? Look at your students, talk to them, and provide them with academic support. Not only is this your job, it is the only kind, humane option. Just sitting at your desk, on your computer, ignoring your students, is not acceptable. We need to use every bit of energy, optimism, and good will that we possess in order to reach and teach the children in our charge.

**Provide for equitable participation in learning.** Milner (2017) explains, "Students may experience racial micro-aggressions inside or outside of school, but either way, the experiences can affect their mental outlook as students" (p. 86). He also asserts that students can become exhausted by consistently experiencing such micro-aggressions, and ultimately withdraw from classroom interactions.

The voices of the students interviewed were united and clear on one essential point: not being "called on" when you have raised your hand to volunteer an answer or to request assistance indicates that the teacher does not care about you. To be overlooked is frustrating and discouraging. Ignoring students, failing to make eye contact, passing over them to call on someone else, can all be considered micro-aggressions that communicate hostility and disrespect. No child should feel invisible or expendable in their own classroom.

In the mad scramble for higher test scores, particularly in "low performing" schools, teachers feel pressured to rush through the content. They rely heavily on their "go to" students to give back the scripted, acceptable answer so that they can

plow through the curriculum. Teachers have to consider the long-term effects of being continually passed over in favor of someone who is considered to be smarter. Aarela, Maatta, & Uusiautti (2016), Finnish researchers who interviewed young prisoners about their previous experiences with schools, summed it up well by asserting that students “should not feel themselves inferior in a place where they have to go every day” (p.17).

**Provide engaging, relevant and interactive learning experiences for all students.** When Delpit (2012) has asked students, primarily African American, to describe good teachers, they mentioned, among other attributes, that “a good teacher makes sure you understand.” A good teacher, they told her, is “ready to teach if you are ready to learn.” A good teacher is also “willing to learn about you and about new things” (p.77).

Researchers interviewed 29 young prisoners from two prisons in Finland (Aarela, et.al., 2016) The Finnish prisoners were asked to describe their school memories and experiences. Abilities to notice all students and to use a variety of teaching methods were mentioned as characteristics of good teachers. As one person said, “You have to teach all of your students, not just the good ones” (p. 13).

**Examine your own attitudes and perceptions, searching for the biases teachers unwittingly carry into classrooms.** Staats (2015) defines implicit bias as “the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (p.29). Implicit bias can create barriers to effective teaching when teachers have preconceived ideas about the motivation of their students. Effective teachers must first believe that their students want to learn. In emphasizing the importance of “warm demander pedagogy” in successful culturally responsive teaching, Bonner

(2014) wrote, “These teachers are often characterized by their deep-seated positive beliefs about students and culturally connected ways of communicating” (p. 395).

**Respect all children and all families.** Nieto (2012) writes about the importance of getting to know the community our students live in by attending community celebrations, the children’s sports events, church activities, etc. Getting to know our students and their families away from the school setting builds a stronger foundation for mutual respect. It’s more difficult to accept the pernicious stereotypes of deficit thinking when one has experienced first-hand the warmth and strength of the community.

As Gorski (2013) reminds us, “What we believe, including our biases and prejudices, about people in poverty, informs how we teach and relate to people in poverty” (p. 27). The students interviewed certainly reminded us that students notice every look, gesture and word directed to them and their families. Sasha said it well when she was asked what the researchers should tell future teachers. “Remember that they always gotta have respect for their children; ‘cause us children, we do watch ya’ll grownups...So watch what you say and watch your movement and your respect.”

**Disrupt inequitable patterns of discipline.** Doug’s story of being sent to ISS for putting his head down on his desk is a stark reminder that the schools play a critical role in the mass incarceration of people of color in the United States. Noguera (2008) carefully lays out the evidence that black boys are the students most likely to be punished in our schools. “In many schools, it is common for the neediest students to be disciplined and for the needs driving their misbehavior to be ignored” (p.132). Noguera also explains that young boys who are humiliated and isolated because of relatively

minor misbehaviors often move on to more serious offenses in adolescence.

Staats (2015) reminds us that behavioral expectations are often subjective, and that implicit bias can play a role in determining which behaviors deserve discipline. “Thus, in disciplinary situations that are a bit ambiguous (What qualifies as disrespect? How loud is too loud?) educators should be aware that their implicit associations may be contributing to their decisions without their conscious awareness or consent” (p. 31).

As professors of teacher education in the nearby university, we have visited the schools which these children attend. We have been told, by two teachers in the elementary school, that it is necessary to yell at “these children” to get their attention. “I hated to do it at first,” one teacher said, “but it’s all these kids know.” What passes for cultural competence in too many circles is the acceptance of stereotypes of people living in poverty. This so-called “understanding” then becomes an excuse for unkind, uncaring treatment. Would anyone want their own child to attend a school where the children are routinely yelled at? Where a young boy can be isolated and denied a day of instruction because he was so discouraged that he put his head down? Noguera (2008) admonishes us, “We must recognize that the children of the poor and children of color are no less deserving than the children of the affluent to be educated in a nurturing and supportive environment. Perhaps what is needed even more than a shift in disciplinary tactics is recruitment of educators who question the tendency to punish through exclusion and humiliation” (p. 137).

**Advocate for equitable educational opportunities for all students.** Noguera (2008) also reveals to us that “Black males in the U.S. are more likely than any other group to be punished, excluded, labeled, put into Special Education classes, and experience

academic failure” (p. xvii). Tyquan’s honest explanation of the humiliation he feels because of his Special Education placement and his placement in the lowest reading group is an excellent example. He told us, more than once, that it makes him feel “slow,” even though he knows he isn’t. He added that is makes him “feel like I’m not a usual child.” Every hour that such a child is isolated from the regular curriculum makes him fall farther behind his classmates.

Within each classroom, there are multiple ways to provide for equitable opportunities to speak in class, equitable opportunities to be in class (rather than in ISS), and the right for students to make some choices about what and how to learn. Caring teachers can work first on their own classroom environment and then advocate across the faculty for equitable opportunities for all students. Working to lessen the amount of time that poor students and students of color spend in ISS would be a good place to start.

**Advocate for teachers.** They need time to prepare engaging, relevant learning experiences, and they need common planning time within their buildings. They need greater autonomy within their classrooms, so they aren’t continually pressured to keep pace with a scripted program, even when they know their students need more individualized instruction. In order to reach the goal of equitable educational opportunities for all students, teachers may also need further professional development. Many young teachers have never experienced the kinds of creative, engaging learning activities that would be best for their students; testing and standardization have always been at the center of their own education.

## Conclusion

The strongest conclusion we have reached from this study is that the students

themselves can tell us what we need to know in order to teach them well. Everything these students told us has been written about by theorists and substantiated by research. As Freire (1998) writes, “It is in listening to the student that I learn to speak with him or her” (p. 106). He adds that neither listening nor understanding can take place without accepting and respecting differences. Since true teaching involves equipping a student to become an independent learner, we must listen in order to discern the next step in that process. Noddings (2005) defines caring as a state of complete receptivity in which one truly understands what another is trying to convey, not as a procedure that can be written down in steps. “When we understand that everyone wants to be cared for and that there is no recipe for caring, we see how important engrossment (or attention) is” (p. 17). As the children interviewed expressed so many times, the key is to look at the students, listen to them, and give them your full attention. Don’t pass them by.

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**Dr. Jamia Thomas-Richmond** is Assistant Professor at Coastal Carolina University. Her areas of research are diverse exceptional students and their families and preparing teacher candidates for diversity in schools.

**Dr. M. Caroline O'Quinn** is Assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University – San Antonio, with a doctorate in Literacy from University of Minnesota. Her scholarship involves equitable education for all students.