Caring Teachers' Ten Dos

"For the teacher, they might be just small things, but for the student, they mean the world."
Tanja Äärelä, Kaarina Määttä, & Satu Uusiautti
University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

[Abstract] The school should represent an institution promoting every student's learning and well-being. Some students still drop out of school. In this article, caring teacherhood is analyzed by giving voice to young people who have faced exclusion from society and ended up in prison. How do they perceive school and good teachers? What are the dos and don'ts of teachers wishing to prevent exclusion and to promote students' positive learning experiences at school? Based on interviews of 29 young Finnish prisoners (aged 17–21 years), we formed ten dos of caring teacherhood that can make school work more appreciative toward various students.

Introduction

The role of education has been pictured as a double-edged sword. On one hand, education increases those students' cultural capital who are able to benefit from education in any case. On the other hand, education feeds the exclusion of those students with weaker social backgrounds (Whitty, 2001). This study contributes to the discussion by focusing on experiences of school dropouts who became young prisoners.

According to research (e.g., Dunne & Gazeley, 2008; Wardle, Robb, & Johnson, 2002; Gazeley & Dunne, 2007), equal education opportunities do not guarantee equality or equal treatment for all at school. Based on this viewpoint, school activities support those who represent the middle-class. Students with middle-class or upper-class backgrounds receive the positive benefits of schooling, while students with lower social statuses are left in the wilderness. They rarely succeed and receive no appreciation from others, and therefore, they develop subcultures to compensate for their feelings of inferiority and to gain experiences of success. One of the young prisoners interviewed in this study explained it as follows:

> We had our own group to hang out. It consisted of all dudes [in the small group teaching] because we were those tough guys there, and no one else wanted to do anything with us, nor do they want even today…So, we enjoyed our own group; what can you do?

These kinds of sub-cultures opposing the school can manifest themselves as disturbing behaviors, ignorance of school tasks, isolation, absence, and, later on, as dropouts (e.g., Chen, Voisin, & Jacobson, 2016; Hong et al., 2014; Tapia, 2011). One extreme consequence of exclusion from school can be criminal behavior and, finally, imprisonment, which has been called "the final destination of exclusion." Longitudinal studies have showed, for example, that children whose parents have committed criminal acts are at   risk of committing criminal acts, as well (Farrington, 2005; Gault-Sherman, 2011; Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2003; Jaggers et al., 2015; Lelekov & Kosheleva, 2008).

From, this perspective, teachers' work is extremely challenging. They should be able to support students' strengths, trust in their abilities to learn, and notice the seeds of students' capabilities even when the students themselves do not seem to recognize their talents. Teachers should support every student individually (e.g., Milner, 2013). However, teachers with limited resources and with overflowing number of students in classrooms have to struggle to meet all expectations forced on them (see Chang, 2009). More often than not, teachers tend to focus on just some students or on just some learning areas. This means that, basically, teachers can provide students with remarkable good promises—or they can leave long-lasting, negative marks on them. If a student succeeds or does not succeed, it is not solely due to the teacher's actions, but the teacher's role is still important (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012).

> That school is my weakest link, you know. I just fucked it up so badly when I think about it. It didn't have anything particularly bad or so. I guess I just didn't know how to be there, or something. It was just constant fighting and yelling. This is how I remember it.

The role of teachers will be discussed in this article from the perspective of those students who have become excluded from school, tumbled into criminal life, and been imprisoned. The purpose is to provide new viewpoints for today's teaching and teacherhood and link them to the idea of caring teacherhood (see also Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). This study pursues answers to the following research question: *How do young prisoners describe good teachers in the light of their school experiences?* It is not only interesting, but also relevant to know how these students talk about teachers and how they describe good teacherhood from their special perspectives. Assumedly, the young prisoners have plenty of negative school memories, but they also have opinions on and thoughts about teacherhood that supports students and encourages them to learn and do school work (see also Äärelä, 2012; Äärelä, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2014).

Method

The research participants were 29 young Finnish prisoners (aged 17–21 years) from two prisons located in the North-Finland. Most of the prisoners who participated in the study were men, but there were, also, two women. Most of them were convicted of a severe violent offence or homicide. A narrative research approach was employed in the study. The young prisoners were interviewed with a dialogue-based interview method. In the interviews, they were asked to describe their childhood and school memories and experiences (see also Lundahl, Kunz, Brownell, Tollefson, & Burke, 2010). The narrative research approach made is possible to reach the research participants' authentic voices (Abbott, 2008; Chase, 2005). The narratives were analyzed through qualitative content analysis and the narrative research approach applying Polkinghorne's (1995) and Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) analyzing models. The data were categorized into various themes that finally formed the important characteristics of a caring teacher.

When reporting the findings, excerpts from interviews are added in the results section. They are kept totally anonymous, and even the gender of the participant is withdrawn. However, the quotations are important, as they give voice to the prisoners and show the reader how the researcher has interpreted the narratives. When translating the interview quotations, we have tried to be as literal as possible to the language the young prisoners used. However, it was not possible to include the dialects the prisoners used— still, the excerpts include profanities and other expressions typical of their language.

Ten Dos of Caring Teacherhood

The young prisoners' descriptions could be categorized into ten themes that illustrate caring teacherhood. Here, they are referred as ten dos. Based on the findings, it seems crucial that as soon as children start school, they should feel themselves accepted and appreciated. In some cases, this happened when they were actually cared for, minded for the first time, and taught how to behave in an appropriate manner. The following data excerpt from an 18-year-old prisoner's interview will be a good introduction to the dos of caring teacherhood:

> It is, you know, hard to say but you can say whether the teacher cares or conceives the student as a valuable person. I think it is important that the teacher shows that the child is important… I wouldn't claim that I cussed at the teachers intentionally at school, I would tell that. There was a reason, and I didn't cuss at all of them… I'm not a so-called good student who would always do what they want or how you should…I knew how to behave there but just didn't feel like it. Well, not intentionally, but I guess I just didn't know how or have the will; there was no reason why to do it. Except for those teachers who were nice. You didn't want to cuss at them because you sensed that they liked you.

No. 1: Be Present

During their first years at school, the young prisoners had sought their teachers' acceptance and positive attention. Experiences of teachers who care and help had made them work harder at school. However, it was quite common that these students had stuck out from the other students in the class by their negative behavior. Teachers had mainly tried to influence their behavior with punishments instead of trying to find out what was wrong:

> In my opinion, the teacher should just take care of his or her students like a mother cares for her child. Or so that it would be better for the child if the teacher cared in a motherly manner instead of distantly bossing around, which was my experience… They should be warm or something to show that they care for the child and want him or her to do well… The more they gave commands and yelled, the less I believed them. This is how it goes.

The young prisoners' teacher descriptions were clearly black-and-white: teachers were nice and good or from hell, but nothing in between. They accepted bad sides in good teachers, but bad teachers were purely bad without any good features. The prisoners did not present any neutral descriptions of teachers. Good teachers were also referred to with their real names, whereas the bad ones had the most descriptive nicknames. Good teachers had cared and minded about the students.

No. 2: Listen

Initially, most of the young prisoners would have wanted to follow the rules at school. However according to their descriptions, the situations they faced often had led to confrontations with teachers. These students had not adjusted to the restrictions and rules at school, as they had not followed or even had them at home, either. When difficult situations reached their culmination points, the students did not have means to prevent the confrontation. It was worrying to hear that neither did adults always. Students who showed their malaise by their behavior had also quite limited social skills (e.g., Stage & Quiroz, 1997), but, as the following excerpt from a prisoner's interview shows, they did not understand that at the time.

> It was strange; it must've been about some chemistry. Poisoned chemistry or so. I remember it so clearly that often when I had decided that I won't do this and that, or that I'll start behaving so that I won't bother anyone or disturb. Fuck, the first setback or a problem comes, and guess who is yelling at the top of one's voice in chorus with the teacher! [long silence] Yes, it was me. I just think that it was quite those couple of teachers with whom I would always lose my nerves.   They probably saw themselves as super-good people, you know, those chickenshit teachers, disgusting creatures, I say. I can't stand them, and they can't stand me.

Many young prisoners pondered how adults should have solved these problematic situations in a manner that would have led to a more positive outcome. As their experience was that there were not any mature ways out of these situations, some of the prisoners cynically mentioned, without analyzing too much, that nothing at school would have made them live by the book: "the place was just so fucked." However, even these students emphasized positive interaction with teachers like, for example, talking with them instead of yelling at them.

No. 3: Thank

As mentioned, the young prisoners' inappropriate behaviors were responded to with punishments. In all, their descriptions included methods that teachers used and that the students themselves considered merely provocative, boosting opposition, and increasing difficulties. The young prisoners explained that they would have tolerated controlling if it had been educative and fundamentally positive caring.

Indeed, school should ignite the desire to learn in those students, too, whose homes have not been able to do it. The very first step is to accept students as they are and to support them and reward them for doing the right things. The young prisoners had such rough backgrounds that they would have wanted to have

less demands or that their overall situation had been better realized: in other words, they would have benefitted if their efforts could have been more easily noticed. Every student does not aim at the highest grades, but still many students try to study and learn as well as they can. These efforts often remain unnoticed if compared to high-achievers (cf. e.g., Salmela, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2015).

> I did the homework usually. Not always that well, but that's not too dangerous. It's just me who doesn't learn so great those things then… I even did notebook tasks, although they were super-annoying. I hated them the most. But I still did them. I couldn't help it when it started to bug me when the math teacher would start nagging about some margins in the math notebook. How horrible, my notebook is missing the fucking margins. Three squares, it is three squares [in a cross-ruled paper]. There's nothing you can do; it just pisses you off. Or if you don't have that ruler there, and you do the margin with a free hand, however as straight as possible, and this is a problem. No, it is impossible, why they have to stick to those things and always nag? … So, I didn't attend those lessons… I understood that I am the one who suffers from it the most but there wasn't anything else I could've done…. Fuck, I had something else to think about than squares in margins and lines made with a ruler. I had bigger problems, but I guess teachers didn't, uh?

No. 4: Collaborate with Homes

Teacherhood has changed, and the current ideology of inclusive school for all necessitates more and more basic upbringing work in addition to teaching. In order to give individualized teaching, teachers have to know not only students' cognitive and learning abilities but also their backgrounds and to understand and respect students. The young prisoners' common experience was that they had been misunderstood and unfairly treated by teachers. Their narratives included many descriptions of the inferiority they felt in relation to their peers. More often than not, they had also been ranked by teachers based on various grounds, of which the social status of their families was one of the most used ones.

> Imagine that your student is your own or your loved one's child, how to treat him or her? I don't think they would call these children names and so on, but if they are just some strangers' children, they don't care. Some riff-raffs, or so they think, poor and alcoholics… So yes, those teachers choose how they talk to certain people, even though they always say that they treat everyone the same way, fuck they don't.

However, despite their problems, the young prisoners did not want to get any special treatment at school. They just wished that the teachers would have noticed the entity of each children's lives, including their background, so that they would know the children, not only by names, but personally, and understand their situations.

No. 5: Teach Everyone

Learning is not always easy for everyone, and still, school work can become more like compulsion, useless, or overwhelming obligation for some students. Abilities to use various teaching methods and to notice all students were mentioned as significant measurement of a teacher's pedagogical skills among the young prisoners. Not that they could wish for different kinds of teaching methods per se but they merely criticized the boredom of school and tedious lessons, repeating themselves one after another—about which we researchers can only make interpretations. A teacher's skill of teaching all students means that the teacher can notice students' individual features:

> You have to teach all of your students, not just the good ones. It's easy to teach them because they can do it anyway. The teacher should focus on those students, too, who aren't interested in studying. Try to get them along, too… The teacher should speak well of them and like them, too. We are, anyway, good guys, even if we didn't like school… They should consider

us good as well; there is something good in us, too.

No. 6: Enjoy Your Work

The teacher's attitude toward his or her work and students forms the basis of positive school work. If the teacher enjoys his or her work, the joy is reflected on students and their work, too, enhancing the joy of learning. At its best, the teacher's joy is a student's joy of learning (see Rantala & Määttä, 2011). But if the teacher does not enjoy his or her work, it will show even more certainly in students:

> It's pretty much the look on the teacher's face, when he or she teaches. If the teacher looks really bored, it influences everyone. But if the teacher has a joyful personality, the class will follow; at least, it has an influence on me… The work should be joyful, you can't do it otherwise. It's pretty much the look on the teacher's face. So, it determined the whole thing, whether you got pissed off or not.

Substance knowledge and teaching skills have traditionally been considered the core of a teacher's work. The changing teacherhood is now described as the combination of expertise and knowledge of human nature—a definition that was supported by the young prisoners, as well.

No. 7: Forgive

When analyzing the young prisoners' narratives, the disturbance during lessons seemed to be straightly related to their opinion on a certain teacher. Some teachers had been able to create a positive atmosphere and peace. When the same group of pupils went to another classroom to be taught by another teacher, the situation could become impossible. In addition to misunderstanding and unfairness, teachers tended to scapegoat these students. The young prisoners had been blamed for various faults, but not always for reason. Many of them emphasized that when they had been unfairly blamed, no one had apologized when finding out they were not guilty. Some of the young prisoners felt still embittered:

> It's bullshit. They teach that you should apologize, and I was apologizing this and that a hundred times. The teacher stands next to you and watches that everything goes by the book, so that we shake hands and look in the eyes, and what else. We are sooo sorry. Then they cannot fucking say sorry when they should've apologized. Isn't that at variance? Is it so that the teachers say you to do as they say, not as they do! I guess, they should be the role models?... I have feelings, too. No wonder it pisses you off if all the negative is targeted at you.   I never was a dream student, but I started to fuck them intentionally when I had nothing to lose. They would blame me anyway and couldn't see anything good in me… And eventually, I just didn't attend school any longer. Who wants to be the bad guy all the time?

Teachers should be forgiving toward students. But they should also be able to apologize misjudgments. Teachers, who can maintain their belief in students' learning and development, give students new chances. No one is perfect, and both students and teachers make mistakes. Each lesson should be a new chance to a student, and stamping students is forbidden.

No. 8: Welcome the Student to School

From the viewpoint of exclusion, each time a student comes to school is a victory. As long as a student arrives at school—even for a part of the day—some societal institution takes part in his or her life. Some young prisoners had attended only a few lessons after elementary school. These lessons were the ones taught by teachers the students liked and appreciated:

> Although the school subject, like religion, was not interesting, you always wanted to attend the lessons because the teacher was so nice. And if you didn't sometimes, the teacher would always ask why I wasn't attending last time. The teacher kind of cared… The teacher had

said to my parents once that the boy won't probably become a priest but otherwise he is a nice boy… The teacher surely knows what businesses I have had, and still the teacher says hello to me, wants to hear how I'm doing. This is something that teachers should be like…Even when I was late, the teacher would just say "Alright, come on then, take your seat." Nothing else; that was it. I would always go to this teacher's lessons whenever possible.

Eventually, preventing students from dropping out of school is a matter of small, intentional, and timely acts. And even if they were not always timely, they should be positive and accepting the child as he or she is, not as he or she should become (see also Peter & Dalbert, 2010; Smith & Gorard, 2012).

No. 9: Dare to Intervene

Bullying is a big problem in school life. Each young prisoner interviewed in this study also had experiences of bullying or being bullied. Typical to the phenomenon, many students were first bullied and then became bullies themselves. Their experiences on how adults intervened in bullying were somewhat one-sided, as they had not tried to stop bullying or had not even noticed it. Those youngsters, who had not started to defend themselves aggressively, had suffered from bullying year after year at school. Bullying should be intervened always and for so long that the one being bullied feels that bullying has stopped:

They should have intervened in it more. Even if they seemed like small issues from the teacher's or bystander's perspective, the younger person can experience them extremely strongly, even if it was calling names or something… I didn't know how to defend myself, I didn't want to hurt anyone, I just suffered. That's the worst thing that has happened to me. I think it would be easier just to get beaten. Those inner wounds, including your shattered self-esteem, and that you are afraid of everything and don't believe in yourself, but consider yourself a loser…. I feel such a strong hatred toward those bullies. They ruined my life… Why didn't the teachers intervene ever? I don't think that they didn't notice it, they had to. They just didn't dare; it was easier for them not to intervene. It's pretty pathetic.

Teachers as caring adults have—again—a central role in supporting the youngsters' basic sense of security at school. It is possible to cut off bullying with systematic interventions.

No. 10: Take Care of Yourself

Teachers' work has been listed as one of the most stressful occupations because of its emotional strain (Johnson et al., 2005; Spilt et al., 2011). Teaching work is all-encompassing and has to be done genuinely with one's personality. Therefore, teachers should take care of themselves, too, to cope well in the job. The young prisoners criticized quite openly those teachers who did not seem to take care of themselves or pay attention to their own well-being:

We guys would always shout at the teacher because it seemed that the teacher would not even wash herself and looked dirty. The teacher was a little fat and really angry, and we would say that "get a life" or "do something to yourself." This can't be your whole life. If it is, you're doing badly.

Caring teachers take care of themselves and their students. It does not matter if the teacher was a woman or a man because the young prisoners' stories included descriptions of good and bad teachers representing equally both genders.

A woman can have balls, too. You know what I mean. To put the crowd in order. I don't think it matters whether you are a man or a woman… You don't have to be a man; I mean, a woman can be even better than a man, or it is not dependent on the gender. There are those codgers who could wear a skirt and don't have no sense in their doing, I can say so, and they act like bitches.

In all, good teaching consists of interaction, caring, and the ability to build interactive relationships with different kinds of students. In order to care for their students, the teachers have to care for themselves. A good teacher knows the limits of his or her abilities and chances (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Furthermore, it is important to find joy in relationships with various students and colleagues.

Summary

In the young prisoners' narratives, dropping out of basic education appeared a process during which difficulties increased and grew bigger throughout school years. Some young prisoners had had trouble already in elementary school, but mainly their difficulties accumulated as they went to middle school. The young prisoners hoped that teachers would show holistic caring and acceptance, and would develop the school more in this direction. They brought out how knowing students' overall life situation (including problems at home) would be important. Teachers should be more humane, even erring, adults, who watch that rules are followed justly and systematically and who help, especially those students whose social skills are weaker, to cope with the demanding social life at school.

The main point is that school can become a learning environment that offers positive experiences for students whose homes lack these supportive elements (Greenberg et al., 2003). The question is, then, whether schools are accepting and participatory or exclusive. We adults and educators can choose from various choices when we decide how we act, whereas the youngsters' choices can often be somewhat black-and-white. Actually, due to their ongoing, age-related developmental tasks, they have the right to be uncompromising. According to this study, the more "suitable" teachers to students in danger of exclusion are caring and safe adults who can confront the children's anger without hesitation. The students can trust in these kinds of adults. When they cannot safely test their limits at home, they are likely to do it at school. At their best, caring teachers realize this and acts accordingly in the classroom. For example, van Manen (1991) used the word "tact" to describe this kind of caring action by the teacher.

In all, the young prisoners' thoughts about their school years and teachers were awakening. However, a qualitative, narrative research like this one does not aim at generalizable truth but, instead, reveals authentic perspectives on important phenomena under study (see also Winter, 2002). The viewpoints presented here show the multi-faceted nature of school reality. Here, the young prisoners were considered the experts of questions related to exclusion processes among the youth (cf., O'Connor, Hodkinson, Burton, & Torstensson, 2011).

Discussion

Peer-relationships at school are important to every student (Higgins, Piquero, & Piquero, 2011). However, from the point of view of this study, relationships with teachers are even more crucial (e.g., McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2013). The young prisoners had understood that they should take school seriously, but they would have needed more personal support in social situations and learning. In many situations, they did not know how to act and behave. First, they lacked the skills, and, later on, they also lacked willingness to pursue the goals defined by school and teachers. All being and learning at school should be based on acceptance, support, and encouragement that pay attention to each and every one's personal abilities and skills. Teachers are responsible for building the spirit in their classrooms (Milner & Tenore, 2010). They should get everyone participate and become a member of the community (see e.g., Bennett, 2009; Crooks et al., 2011; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2010; Swearer et al., 2010.)

Mostly, prevention of exclusion is about maintaining participation. Thus, to prevent students from dropping out of school, we need to support their participation in their own classrooms and school communities. From the point of view of participation, it is much more important to know and respect the students' backgrounds and living environments than to know their learning and intellectual abilities. Moreover, while many schools are able to successfully cater to children with physical disabilities, they may not understand the needs of students with emotional difficulties (Burton, Bartlett, & Anderson de Cuevas, 2009; Shearman, 2003; see also Burgess, 2012).

People may often consider inappropriate behaviors as intentional disobedience and indiscipline, and, thus, as the child's nastiness. Therefore, the child is mainly encountered negatively and punished. Still, behavioral problems are usually resulting from weak social skills, as the child is unable to act otherwise (Jones, Dohrn, & Dunn, 2004; Kauffman & Landrum, 2009). This means that, at school, children should be told and guided how to act appropriately. Regardless of motives, we can gain more with positive reinforcement (Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005; Lopez et al., 2015; Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2012). All students benefit from it and not just those who show their malaise through unwanted behaviors.

It is worth remembering that the young prisoners had faced many kinds of bad or non-existing parenting (see e.g., Aunola & Nurmi, 2005; Wolfradt, Hempel, & Miles, 2003). They should not feel themselves inferior in a place where they have to go every day due to learning obligation. Teachers can show with their acts that they accept every student, including those who are the most difficult cases from the basic teaching work point of view. One of the prisoners reminded us about the old proverb of "what comes around, goes around." If a student feels that he or she does not have anything to lose at school, he or she can, for example, make up a goal of getting a teacher to cry in each of the teacher's lessons. The young prisoners had become good at that.

Another important notion from this study was that, in order to secure the continuation of school going, it is crucial to provide considerable support during the first years at school for example by creating a positive and reciprocal relationship between home and school (Sheridan & Burt, 2009). When teachers start cooperating with parents as early as possible in a spirit with an emphasis on successes, the cooperation is likely to continue positively during the school years. In Finland, home-school cooperation has become the most central tool in the prevention of exclusion. Students have to get relevant multi-professional support and help if we want to prevent dropping out. When it comes to children in danger of exclusion, teachers have to understand what their families' social and interactional skills are. Otherwise, the cooperation will not be successful.

Except for one, the young prisoners in this study were dropouts. Those, who do not go to school and stay home, are the most difficult to get back into society and to raise into active, productive citizenship (see e.g., Bridgeland, DiIulio Jr., & Wulsin, 2008; van Steden, van Caem, & Boutellier, 2011). Dropouts are more likely to commit criminal acts, and their imprisonment will make it more difficult for them to integrate into society after serving their sentence (see also Kasen, Cohen, & Brook, 1998). Exclusion seems to be inherited cross-generationally, and, therefore, it would be necessary to stop the exclusion process as early during the school years as possible. One of the most efficient means is to keep the student at school.

The comprehensive school must present a chance to every child (e.g., Reay, 2001; 2006). Caring teachers enhance every student's well-being at school and promote the realization of more equal schooling. Some of the children and youth need more attention than others. Equality does not necessarily mean that everyone gets the same, but that everyone gets what they need. Based on this study, if a student who has neglected school and behaved inappropriately would be taken at school at least in a neutral manner and not negatively (see also Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997), the student might have spent many more days at school. As long as children come to school—even if they are late, even if they challenge the teacher with their behavior, and even if they have not done their homework—they are not dropouts.

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