

# Students Caring For Each Other: Outdoor Education and Learning Through Peer Relationships

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## Abstract

Caring is an action oriented value that can provide a way forward beyond the dualism prevalent between the concepts of individual and community. This investigation focused on school students' understandings of and experiences of caring. It comprised a comparison of Year Nine students' perceptions of outdoor education and their other classes at an Australian secondary school with respect to their experiences of caring. In order to achieve this it was first necessary to determine a student derived understanding of the meaning of caring, a very broad term. A survey instrument was constructed following analysis of the interview data which enabled this comparison to be made. The results indicated that caring between students was more likely to be experienced in the outdoor education context than in the school classroom context.

## Introduction

School promotional material consistently espouses caring as an important value within schools. From an educational perspective the question can then be asked, "How well is this value (caring) enacted within schools?". This study approached this question via a comparison of students' experiences of caring at school with their experiences of caring in outdoor education, which while a part of school, is conducted outside many of the institutional constraints of the school (Brookes, 1989). This comparison also involved distinguishing between the caring experienced with close friends and that experienced with other students who were not close friends.

The aim of this study was to determine whether there was any difference between students' experiences of caring situations in outdoor education and in their other classes at school. Very specifically, this caring was *between students* and did not include experiences of caring that existed as part of the teacher-student relationship or that were influenced via direct exhortation by the teacher. This was "caring in the peer group".

It was hypothesized that: (1) caring for close friends in outdoor education would not be the same as caring for close friends in other classes at school; and (2) caring for other people (other students) in outdoor education would not be the same as caring for other people (other students) in other classes at school.

## Caring

Being human involves finding a balance between one's need to belong, to be a part of something larger than oneself, and also one's need to be recognized as an individual (e.g., Becker, 1973; Fuller, 1992; Maslow, 1970). Forces of modernity have complicated the relationship between these two needs, stretching the boundaries of the self and our understandings of community beyond what were once very local domains, so that "for the first time in human history, 'self' and 'society' are interrelated in a global milieu" (Giddens, 1991, p. 32). The task of finding appropriate balance points in our lives continues to increase in difficulty with fundamental questions being raised regarding the way in which contemporary society affects our ability to do so (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan,

Swidler & Tipton, 1996; Mackay, 1993; Putnam, 1995).

For most young Australians a major part of this tension is played out in an institutionalised context: the school. The hegemonic character of most schools with respect to the relation between teachers and students makes the task of resolving this tension even more complex for the young person. Whilst searching for that larger "something" with which to connect themselves, to belong, beyond the family, they also need to be respected as individuals with rights as well as responsibilities. The ability of the school to engage young people in this task has been questioned (e.g., Jackson, 1968/1990; McLaren, 1998) and some have pursued the improvement of the sense of community within schools as a priority (e.g., Calderwood, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994). This quest seems to run parallel to that of the call for more democracy in schools, which urges a more inclusive participatory framework allowing students to be more fully involved in the institutional decision making processes, both collectively and individually (e.g., Apple, 1995; McLaren, 1998; Pearl & Knight, 1999). In working to engender this stronger sense of community and democracy within the school, caring becomes an important factor, as it encompasses "obligations that emerge from a commitment to shared community values" (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 146). Caring, as a way of being and acting, makes visible and develops the dialectical relationship between individuality and community:

Care directs the skills of agency or effective action in ways that enhance, rather than dissolve, mutuality. It actuates growth or fulfillment in the self even as it establishes the self in a wider and more nurturant "network of mutual influences".

(Fuller, 1992, p. 38)

Caring provides a strategy for meeting our need for recognition as individuals as well as our need to belong within a community. Caring asks us to view each in the service of the other: to act as individuals in ways that strengthen community and to create communities which allow us to meet our needs for individuality. It provides a foundation for a way of acting which strengthens community, although to

accomplish this in a holistic way, caring needs to be conceived as a *relation* in which a carer and a cared-for are required:

In order for the relation to be properly called caring, both parties must contribute to it in characteristic ways. A failure on the part of either the carer or the cared-for blocks completion of caring and, although there may still be a relation – that is, an encounter or connection in which each party feels something towards the other – it is not a *caring* relation.

(Noddings, 1992, p. 15)

Caring also supports each individual member of the community in the growth which comes through caring and in meeting his or her fundamental need for belonging. Community and individuality are thus not opposites but are intimately related through the synthesis of caring action.

### Peer relationships

Peer relationships provide a milieu in which students can explore and learn about relationships in general, about morality, about caring, about community, about what it means to be interdependent with others in a context in which one has relatively more autonomy than in the generic classroom. The importance of the relationship an individual has with his or her peers to the context for learning and development is supported by Piaget (1932/1997) and Vygotsky (1981). Piaget contrasted the adult-child and the child-child relationship in his study of the child's moral reasoning. The child-child relationship provides an arena within which the power aspects of the adult-child relationship are not so evident. This allows for the development of cooperative relation, as opposed to what can be authoritarian relation, thus enabling the unfolding of moral reasoning:

It is cooperation which leads to the primacy of intentionality, by forcing the individual to be constantly occupied with the point of view of other people so as to compare it with his own.

(Piaget, 1997, pp. 189-190)

Vygotsky (1981) claimed that higher mental functions in the individual have their origins in social processes and social relations. Social relationships between students, which for Year Nine students especially are of heightened importance (Santrock, 1990), play a crucial role in learning and development. There is a strong link between Noddings' caring pedagogy and Vygotsky's notions of learning and development (Tappan, 1998). Peer relationships have the potential to form the basis for practical learning about moral issues (Youniss, 1980) and also for learning which involves higher mental functions such as concept formation.

### The school and outdoor education

Where outdoor education is offered in the middle or junior secondary school, it is often experienced by Australian students as a camp, with a small group of peers and teachers, of about a week's length. In this context there emerges a growing awareness of the common sense imperative for each individual to appropriately balance caring for him or herself, other people, and the environment in toto so that the experience can be positive for all; relationships are strengthened. The importance of students caring for each other, beyond the caring relation that exists between teacher and student, is thus emphasized in this form of outdoor education and was a focus of this study.

The study was conducted within a large, coeducational, non-government school near Melbourne in Victoria, Australia; a school at which one of the authors was employed as an outdoor education teacher. At this school caring had been identified by the school administration as a core value, one of five value positions of key importance to the school. Investigations were focused on Year Nine, with fourteen to fifteen year olds, as it is at this year level that the importance to students of peer relationships is especially strong, stronger than at other year levels (Santrock, 1990). The issue of caring for and being cared for by their peers would thus be of importance to them and provide relevance to the study questions.

The students in this school participated in a five day bushwalk as the major component of their outdoor education subject. Within this school

outdoor education is a compulsory subject at Year Nine and thus a core part of the school's curriculum, rather than being an educational experience which occurred in a voluntary or co-curricular capacity outside the formal curriculum. It is assessed in a self-reporting, formative manner that results in the construction of a report and grade which is presented to parents alongside other subject grades. This process is a central part of this outdoor education program with students being involved in self assessment of their performance and progress against criteria which they have been involved in determining in a collective manner. The reporting and grade are the culmination of their efforts which they perceive to be their reward for effort in much the same way as for other subjects at school (Kvale, 1996).

The focus of this particular outdoor education curriculum was for students to gain experiential understandings about caring. The students were provided with opportunities to take on responsibilities for the needs of others, needs of which they became progressively aware during their bushwalk. This required an experiential pedagogy which enabled students to engage as members of the group in the task of creating a successful experience for *all*. The responsibility for this task, which in most school classes rests directly with the teacher, was overtly shared between teacher and students. Whilst ultimate responsibility rested with the teacher, however in a practical sense, students were conscious of their important practical role in its achievement and the consequences of failure. Students were encouraged to 'own' *their* (meant in both a collective and an individual way) bushwalk. The exact structure of this curriculum and pedagogy is of obvious relevance here but is not the focus of this paper.

The class group was divided into two for the trip, a process which the teacher directed because of its politically charged nature due to the importance of peer relationships. Each group started their five day bushwalk at opposite ends of the selected section of track. The campsites and the route in general were predetermined by the teachers. During the hike the students were involved in as many aspects of group management deemed possible by the teachers. Many students struggled with this

shift in their role at first, coming from a classroom context where this was not normal practice, but most soon found their voices and engaged proactively in the task required.

## Method

There were two stages utilized in the data collection phase of this study. The first involved interviews which were used to access the manifold active interpretations of the meaning of the term 'caring' from the Year Nine student perspective. The second incorporated these meanings into surveys which were then completed by other Year Nine students not involved in the interviews.

### *Determining appropriate meanings*

In the first stage a series of practical, applied statements which exemplified 'caring' was sought from the students to overcome difficulties caused by the term's very broad meaning (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995). The method used was that of a psychological phenomenology as explicated by Amedeo Giorgi (1985, chap. 1). This method values the students' descriptions of their experiences as relevant, interpretable data by way of which meanings can be determined (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Six students chosen randomly from those in the Year Nine cohort who had volunteered to take part in the study, three male and three female, were asked to describe situations in which they had cared for a fellow classmate, or had been cared for by a fellow classmate, in a setting associated with school. These two "sides" of caring were used so as to take into account the understanding developed by Noddings (1992) that caring is a relation based on interdependence, rather than a one way expression of feeling via action: a carer and a cared-for are required.

The six students were interviewed individually regarding the caring experiences which they had decided to share. The aim of each interview was to access a basic student description of a personal experience which that student perceived as caring. Each student had been presented with the initial question to be asked in the interview a few days beforehand, in order to give him or her time to recall a relevant situation. The second part of each interview involved the student describing a

situation in which he or she had been cared for by another student. Following is an excerpt from one of the interviews:

Interviewer: Robert please describe for me as fully as possible one situation where you cared for another student in Year 9. This situation should be related to school.

Student: This one is PE. I've thought about it. I was in PE and there were groups and there was one person left over because everyone was in two's and Michael didn't have a group. Me and Andrew asked him to join our group so that he was included. It was a group of three and we played the sport together.

Interviewer: So basically you are saying that you saw that Michael was going to be left out?

Student: Yes. And he joined in with us.

Interviewer: So who did you say it to? Did you say it to Michael?

Student: Me and Andrew both said it to Michael. The teacher said: 'Michael you go...' And we said 'No, you can come with us'.

Interviewer: So what was the teacher going to say?

Student: He was going to say go with someone else.

Interviewer: So he was going to force him into another group whereas you opened your group up and included him?

Student: Yes.

Interviewer: And how did Michael feel?

Student: He said: 'Thanks'.

The interviews were transcribed, smoothing the vagaries of everyday speech in order to provide a readable text (Kvale, 1996) and then analyzed. Analysis involved the determination

of 'meaning units' from within the text of each interview which were specifically related to the caring focus. As Giorgi describes this process: "the meaning units that emerge as a consequence of the analysis are spontaneously perceived discriminations within the subject's description arrived at when the researcher assumes a psychological attitude towards the concrete description" (1985, p. 11). The psychological attitude of the researcher incorporates the focus of the subject's description, which in this case is caring. As an example, the meaning unit which emerged for the interview passage above was "caring is including someone so that they don't feel left out".

Interpretations of these sentences and paragraphs in the interviews as text revealed specific meanings of the term caring related to specific instances of caring. The interpretations transformed the situational, descriptive language of the student into what could be classified as psychological language, though this language was deliberately stated at a level of complexity which students could easily comprehend. The interpretative process involved reflection and imaginative variation, a phenomenological technique which requires the researcher to explore the manifold relevant and possible interpretations of the meaning units in order to arrive at a conclusion which yields what is personally considered to be the most adequate description (Giorgi, 1985; Moran, 2000, p. 154-155). The meaning unit interpretations were then presented to the student from whom the text had originated for validation purposes (Creswell, 1998). Students were given the opportunity to clarify the meaning of their statements and to comment on the interpretations made. This phase of the interpretive process aimed at reaching an apodictic conclusion.

Developing a synthesized statement of the meaning of caring is the next task in the psychological phenomenological method outlined by Giorgi, (1985, p. 19). However, as the next stage in the data collection was the construction and administration of survey instruments, it was decided that the meaning unit interpretations would be the most appropriate for this purpose. A concise statement of the meaning of caring from the

perspective of Year Nine students was thus not developed in this study.

Thematic results attained by Tarlow (1996) provide insight into a further synthesized description of caring which may have emerged from the meaning units described in this study. Tarlow, through eighty-four in-depth interviews, identified eight caring themes, using the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which she claimed constituted overlapping phases of the caring process. She synthesized these eight different themes into a descriptive statement:

To begin caring, there must be people present, time to do the tasks of caring and a vehicle for facilitating the process, talking. Next the actual work of caring begins. The caring person has to attend to and be sensitive to the needs of the other, act in the best interest of the other, be emotionally invested, and most important, do helpful things for the person cared for. The caring process then confronts the person cared for, calling out to him or her to reciprocate. The person cared for must respond in a way that perpetuates the caring process. (Tarlow, 1996, pp. 80-81)

Approaching Year Nine students with more generic and universal aspects of the concept of caring, as identified by Tarlow, would have presented a more difficult task for students. This is especially so when asking them to compare the two experiential contexts utilizing these aspects in a survey format. This was envisaged as justification for utilizing the meaning unit interpretations themselves in the survey.

#### *Comparing outdoor education and school*

The second stage of the data collection was the administration of a survey instrument. This survey instrument was constructed so as to enable a comparison to be made between students' experiences of caring within an *outdoor education* setting, and their experiences of caring in their *other classes at school*. The classification "other classes" was used to represent any aspect of life back at

school which occurred in a classroom, be it in the gymnasium in physical education, on the stage in drama, in the laboratory in science or on the oval in sport. This was made clear to students in the administration of the survey. Also taken into account was the influence of the level of friendship between students on the caring experienced in that relationship (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). The survey was thus divided into sections with questions aimed at *close friends*, and questions aimed at *other people*, the latter defined as people (other students) who "are not amongst your close friends".

It was hypothesized that: (1) the mean of caring for close friends in outdoor education would not be the same as the mean of caring for close friends in other classes at school; and (2) the mean of caring for other people in outdoor education would not be the same as the mean of caring for other people in other classes at school.

The survey was administered to 42 volunteer Year Nine students, none of whom was interviewed in the first step in this study. Of the 42 surveys collected, 5 were not included in the determination of results because they were not fully completed. *It is important to note here that the sampling method makes it difficult to*

*confidently generalize in statistical terms with respect to results beyond the immediate context investigated.* All of these students had participated in outdoor education for this particular year. The survey was administered in the final school term of the year, thus enabling students to make a reasonably informed judgment based on their experiences in school for the majority of the year.

## Results

Exactly 22 action focused meanings of caring, the meaning unit interpretations, were identified through the interviews (see Table 1) leading to the development of 44 survey statements. These statements were converted into questions with Likert scales (Neuman, 1997) focused on the two domains of interest: *outdoor education* and *other classes at school*. It is important to reiterate that the sampling method makes it difficult to confidently generalize in statistical terms beyond the immediate context investigated. Statistical t-tests were used to compare the means of the responses for *outdoor education* and *other classes at school*, in conjunction with the other variables: *close friends* and *other people*. Using this technique four particular result statements were developed:

**Table 1: Meaning unit interpretations derived from student interview data**

|                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Caring is helping someone when they are sick                                |
| Caring is including someone so that they don't feel left out                |
| Caring is checking to see how someone was feeling                           |
| Caring is helping someone when no-one else wants to help                    |
| Caring is helping someone when you see they are in need                     |
| Caring is putting the needs of someone else before your own                 |
| Caring is comforting someone when they aren't feeling happy                 |
| Caring is keeping someone company                                           |
| Caring is helping someone without having to be asked                        |
| Caring is helping someone when they are having trouble with something       |
| Caring is helping someone to understand something                           |
| Caring is supporting someone                                                |
| Caring is trying to make someone feel better                                |
| Caring is giving your time to help someone                                  |
| Caring is reassuring someone                                                |
| Caring is encouraging someone                                               |
| Caring is helping someone improve what they are doing                       |
| Caring is checking to see if someone is feeling OK                          |
| Caring is checking to see if someone needs someone to talk to               |
| Caring is trying to make someone feel happy and that someone cares for them |
| Caring is helping someone with their belongings                             |
| Caring is doing your fair share of work to help someone                     |

1. The level of caring for and by *close friends* was virtually the same in *outdoor education* and *other classes at school*.

$t(36) = 0.05$ ,  $p = .9$ , two tailed ( $\mu_1 = 170.09$ ,  $\text{var}_1 = 1494.97$ ;  $\mu_2 = 169.95$ ,  $\text{var}_2 = 646.71$ )

2. The level of caring for and by *other people* in *outdoor education* was significantly higher than caring for *other people* in *other classes at school*.

$t(36) = 4.93$ ,  $p < .001$ , two tailed ( $\mu_1 = 154.20$ ,  $\text{var}_1 = 644.71$ ;  $\mu_2 = 136.26$ ,  $\text{var}_2 = 965.66$ )

3. The level of caring for and by *close friends* and the level of caring for and by *other people* were very similar in *outdoor education*.

$t(36) = 2.56$ ,  $p < .05$ , two tailed ( $\mu_1 = 170.09$ ,  $\text{var}_1 = 1494.97$ ;  $\mu_2 = 154.20$ ,  $\text{var}_2 = 644.71$ )

4. The level of caring for and by *close friends* in *other classes* was significantly higher than the level of caring for and by *other people* in *other classes at school*.

$t(36) = 6.09$ ,  $p < .001$ , two tailed ( $\mu_1 = 169.95$ ,  $\text{var}_1 = 646.70$ ;  $\mu_2 = 136.26$ ,  $\text{var}_2 = 965.66$ )

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate that this particular outdoor education context was experienced by these students as more caring than their other classes at school. This was especially relevant when it came to caring for and being cared for by other people, that is other students, where the outdoor education context was reported as being of much more importance than were other classes at school.

When in outdoor education, these students experienced caring for, and being cared for by, students other than their close friends to a level similar to that experienced with their close friends. Not only were individuals caring for and being cared for by their close friends in outdoor education, but these caring actions were occurring between students who were *not* currently close friends and who may not have actively cared for each other in their other classes at school. A further interpretation of this result is that these students were actively developing close friendships in outdoor education, whereas in other classes at school this friendship development was relatively static or at least less prevalent. This process of

friendship development reflects on the quality of peer relationships in the two contexts, revealing the potential in outdoor education for practical learning about moral issues (Youniss, 1980), as well as learning which involves higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1981). Caring in classes at school seemed to be mainly that between close friends. Beyond these close friendship relationships, caring between students that occurred outside the control of the teacher was not experienced necessarily as a normal part of classes at school.

### Knowing how to care

The results may be seen as support for the success of the curriculum and pedagogy implemented in this particular outdoor education program regarding caring. Further to this they support the notion that an important aspect of the educational content of this outdoor education program could be described, using the concepts of Gilbert Ryle (1949), as an experiential "knowing how" of caring which underpins a more theoretical understanding, a "knowing that" with respect to the structures and relevance of caring. This understanding helps to clarify the position of outdoor education in deliberations regarding the school curriculum as a whole. It is especially evident when this outdoor education context is juxtaposed with the other classes in school, as in this study. Even though caring was valued highly by the school, as expressed through the school administration, caring between students, who of course make up the vast bulk of the school population, was experienced in outdoor education to a greater extent than in other school classes. Why is it that in outdoor education a milieu can be created which more successfully supports the achievement of caring amongst students in a school which values caring across all of its programs? This question highlights some of the differences between the school and outdoor education contexts, an area ripe for further research.

### The role of the teacher

While the teacher-student relationship has not been a focus of this study, the teacher obviously has an extremely important role to play in the creation of a teaching and learning context within which students can care for and

be cared for by their peers. Rebecca Carver (1996), commenting on the role of the teacher in experiential education, observes that:

Teachers, as senior members of learning communities, are role models and influence the experiences of students by the way they react, respond and take action in the combination of settings in which they are viewed by students. In addition to modeling behavior, their responses to student behavior affect student experience.

(Carver, 1996, p. 11)

Although the teacher's role assumes more in terms of immediate and ultimate responsibility than that of the students, this should not isolate the teacher within a completely different set of values than the students. The teacher is a member of the learning community and, by way of his or her senior status in this community, can act to cultivate a context which supports students 'knowing how' to care. Synthesizing the work of Berman (1997) and Noddings (1995) in this area reveals important aspects of this learning context: (1) caring should exist and be modeled, (2) caring should be practiced, (3) caring dialogue should occur, (4) caring should be confirmed, and (5) perspective taking and conflict resolution situations should be experienced. The importance of the teacher and the way he or she works to cultivate this learning context is another area which would benefit from further research.

### Conclusion

When surveyed regarding their experiences of caring at school, based on understandings of caring which were derived from the experiences of their peers, these Year Nine students reported that outdoor education was a more caring context than their other classes at school. This was especially relevant when relationships beyond those with close friends were reflected upon. This difference is underpinned by a curriculum and pedagogy in outdoor education which can support the development of caring relationships amongst students and thus a caring student community.

The results of this study support the curriculum and pedagogy of the particular outdoor

education course investigated, which were focused on the creation of caring relationships. Further to this they reveal that within a school which values caring highly in all of its programs, students reported that outdoor education was the context within which the experiential learning of caring between students was the most successfully addressed.

In short, the results of this study reveal that the outdoor education context can be structured to provide a learning milieu very different from that which is present within the generic classroom, or which may even be achievable within the bounds of the school. This context can influence the student experiences of caring and their learning in this area.

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