Creating a Ninth-Grade Community of Care

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ABSTRACT. This qualitative case study analyzed how one large high school created a community of care for ninth-grade students. Data were collected during the 2006–2007 school year, including observations, individual interviews, and focus group interviews of 1 female teacher and 9 of her students. Findings suggest the Freshman Focus teachers and program helped to establish three caring relationships (teacher to program, teacher to student, program to student) that promoted a community of care. The development of positive teacher beliefs about students, supportive teacher–student relationships, and the promotion of academic and life skills may help create a caring community in which students are the primary receivers of care.

Keywords: adolescent development, care, community of care, high school, personalized learning environment

During Freshman Focus I’d taken so many pictures of all the things my Freshman Focus students did in just nine weeks that I decided to put them together in a slide show to share with my students. At the end of the slide show I wrote a letter thanking them for inspiring me. To me, it was just another letter but my kids were crying. They didn’t want it to end. They were hugging me and saying, “What am I going to do without Freshman Focus?” And that’s just one class. And I try to tell the kids, “This is what you did in just nine weeks. This is how you affected the school in just nine weeks. Imagine what you can accomplish in three nine weeks. In four years.”

The above quote is a comment from Mrs. Cartright, our freshman lead teacher participant, speaking to the effects the Freshman Focus program had on students, herself, and the school community. The Freshman Focus program mainly consisted of a transition course that is designed to facilitate students’ transition into high school and to help students learn the academic, social, and life skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond.

The Need for a Personalized Learning Environment That Promotes a Community of Care

Studies have suggested that numerous students experience difficulty during the transition from middle school to high school, finding it hard to adjust to their new school (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Cushman, 2006; Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999; Mizelle, 2005; Mizelle & Irvin, 2000; Queen, 2002; Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2002). Evidence indicates that the way in which students make the move from middle school to high school predicts student success at the Grade 9 level because many students make the decision to complete or quit school within the first weeks of their ninth-grade year (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999). Despite such evidence, high school educators report using only a few practices to support their incoming ninth-grade students during this critical period (Hertzog & Morgan, 1998, 1999).

Investigations on how comprehensive high schools attempt to promote a supportive community for students found that many high schools are organized in ways that are counterproductive to promoting caring relationships and a deep sense of belonging (McQuillan, 1997; Sizer, 1984). Additional studies have involved investigations on how schools that took on the persona of a personalized caring learning community positively influenced students’ development needs and educational practices (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Schussler & Collins, 2006), as well as helped students make the transition and adjustment into high school life (Fields, 2005; Hertzog & Morgan, 1999; Legters, 1999; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2001). Further, research has indicated that the presence of high-quality teacher–student relationships (e.g., relationships characterized by high levels of trust, care, and respect) and emotional and cognitive support are critical for the positive development of students (for a review, see Eccles, 2004). Thus, there is a need to develop and maintain supportive relationships within schools and create a caring school community for all students, especially incoming ninth-grade students.

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What Is Care in the Context of a School Community?

Although care itself is hard to quantify (Schussler & Collins, 2006), Noddings (2005) asserted that the need to be taken care of is a universal characteristic. Noddings claimed that all individuals want to receive care, and unless care is actually received, the caring relationship is incomplete: “No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students, the claim ‘they don’t care’ has some validity” (p. 15). Thus, caring entails a sense of mutuality and connection, is an integrated part of a reciprocated relationship, and is often not accomplished without action (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Hayes, Ryan & Zseller, 1994). Caring also involves individuals’ desire to understand and help one another reach their fullest potential (Schussler & Collins). Specifically, caring can be characterized by the ways in which teachers and schools protect students and promote their development, as well as the ways in which students give back and ultimately support the success of the school community (Chaskin & Rauner). This reflects the notion that although care is discussed primarily in terms of relationships with others, care can also be discussed in relation to a nonhuman structure such as the school (Schussler & Collins).

From research on care and caring school communities, it appears that the teacher–student relationship established between an adult and an adolescent determines, to a large extent, the degree to which students feel cared for and part of their school community (Noddings, 2005; Osterman, 2000; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Teachers are a vital component to creating a community of care, as they provide a bridge between the school and the individual student (Bosworth, 1995). Teachers who care about students provide the socioemotional support that students need to be successful in school and enhance their feelings of school belonging (Eccles, 2004; Roers, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). Further, it is the teacher’s responsibility to not only create caring relationships with students, but also to help students learn how to care (Noddings).

Differing perspectives on a caring community. School has been identified as a key arena for the nurture and promotion of caring (Chaskin & Rauner, 1995). The concept of a school as a community and the importance of care in schools have been addressed by recent literature on effective schools (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Noddings, 2005; Schussler & Collins, 2006). The term community describes “the aspects of social settings that satisfy people’s needs for connection and belonging” (Solomon, Battistich, Kim & Watson, 1997, pp. 235–236). Battistich et al. discussed common features of a community as “places where members care about and support each other, actively participate in and have influence over the group’s activities and decisions, feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group, and have common norms, goals and values” (p. 137). This sense of caring and support established within caring school communities allows students to develop trusting relationships, which in turn fosters their emotional and intellectual growth (Hayes et al., 1994).

Although research reflects these various characteristics (Goodenow, 1993; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Solomon et al., 1997), there is variation on the conceptualization and operationalization of school as a caring community. Schools as a caring community can be a complex concept, embodying organizational structures, the experiences and perceptions of individual members, and experiences and perceptions that represent groups and collectives (Solomon et al.). Researchers that have taken a sociological–organizational approach to understanding care in schools have examined aspects of a caring community in relation to the organization of the school as a whole (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988; Newberg, 1995; Solomon et al.). In contrast, researchers with a social psychological focus have examined individual perceptions and experiences of school as a caring community, as well as the perceptions and experiences of a group of people (e.g., cohesiveness; Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1992). Most researchers that have examined community at the high school level have focused on organizational structures rather than on students’ perceptions of the experience of a community of care. Researchers have also investigated variables that are related to the notion of school as a caring community, including a sense of belongingness, social relatedness, social support, attachment, affiliation, and connectedness (Goodenow; Nichols, 2008). Further, a caring school community has been examined from the perspectives of teachers (Bryk & Driscoll), students (Schussler & Collins, 2006), and both teachers and students (Battistich et al., 1997).

Importance of the school as a caring community during adolescence. Although a caring school community may benefit students of all ages, it is particularly important for schools to meet students’ needs during adolescence, a time marked by multiple developmental changes and declines in academic motivation and engagement associated with school transitions (Eccles et al., 1993). During middle adolescence, individuals experience many cognitive, social, and psychological changes (Steinberg, 2005). Adolescent development at this age is characterized by an increased capacity for abstract thinking, an increased drive for autonomy paired with a continued need for close relationships with nonfamilial adults, and a continued orientation toward peers (Eccles, 1999; Gavin & Furman, 1989). Further, adolescents are engaging in developing a coherent sense of self, which builds on their sense of competence and confidence (Erikson, 1968). Traditional high schools are often unresponsive to adolescents’ developmental needs and are characterized by a sense of mistrust between students and teachers and a lack of community, common goals, and shared values (Eccles,
In order to facilitate positive development, caring school communities can create a context that is responsive to adolescents’ developmental needs.

Small learning communities as a way for high schools to promote care. One way to aid adolescents with the transition to high school is through providing developmentally responsive support structures at the Grade 9 level. Research on the small schools and the small learning community reform effort suggests that freshman small learning communities, also known as ninth-grade houses or freshman academies, are developmentally appropriate organizational structures for students at the high school level (Cotton, 2001; Fields, 2005; Legters, 1999; Sammon, 2007; SREB, 2002; USDOE, 2001). Freshman small learning communities report a number of benefits, including increases in personalization, belongingness, connectedness, and care (Fields; Sammon; USDOE). Such increases are achieved by personalizing the learning environment around students’ developmental needs in an effort to help students gain the skills necessary to transition into and complete high school. Students and teachers are typically organized into small, teacher–student interdisciplinary teams with team classrooms located in close physical proximity to each other that share common rules, procedures, and intervention strategies. Curriculum is student-focused, integrated, relevant, and rigorous. Additionally, Grade 9-only support personnel, structured advisory programs, academic and social support services, and transition classes are all components of a freshman small learning community (Fields; Legters; Sammon; USDOE). Typically offered during the first semester of high school, freshman transition courses are being coined “jump-start programs for ninth-grade students” (SREB, p. 6). Freshman transition programs provide students with the academic and life skills necessary to be successful during their first semester of their ninth-grade year, throughout high school, and beyond (SREB).

Theoretical Underpinnings of Study

In the present study, we used four theoretical underpinnings to help guide our research. First, we utilized self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and stage–environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993) to guide our understanding of students’ basic and developmental needs. Self-determination theory provides a framework in which to understand care as a universal characteristic that responds to a set of basic psychosocial needs. Stage–environment fit theory focuses on the extent to which adolescents’ developmental needs are met within the school environment and highlights the importance of a developmentally responsive school environment. The third theoretical framework, a multilevel conceptualization of a caring school community (Battistich et al., 1997), builds on the first two frameworks by focusing on how adolescents’ needs are met within a caring school community. This framework provides an understanding of how student and teacher needs are satisfied within a community. When these needs are met, individuals are more likely to develop an emotional bond with and commitment to the school community. Last, Schussler and Collins (2006) examined how care exists within one unique high school. Their construct of school care highlighted the types of different relationships that may emerge from a school context as well as under what conditions such relationships may be formed and nurtured to promote a community of care. Together, these four frameworks provide a robust and interconnected theoretical foundation to guide the present study. Each of the four frameworks is discussed subsequently in detail.

According to self-determination theory, individuals have basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985). These are needs that humans strive for across the lifespan and allow intrinsic motivation and higher quality learning to flourish (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Competence involves an individual’s feeling effective in his or her interactions with the social environment and experiencing opportunities to express his or her capabilities (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Harter, 1983). Relatedness involves an individual’s feeling a sense of connectedness to others in his or her social group (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Autonomy involves experiencing one’s behavior as an expression of the self (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-determination theory is a central component of our conceptualization of a caring school community. Students’ needs are being fulfilled within the school setting and their level of engagement or disengagement is dependent on the extent to which these needs are met. Chaskin and Rauner (1995) stated that “[c]aring responds to a set of basic psychosocial needs, including needs for independence and connection, belongingness and membership, for safety and support, and for individual and social competency” (p. 666). Thus, self-determination theory highlights the importance of creating a school community in which students are able to satisfy their basic needs.

In addition to the basic psychological needs that individuals strive for across the lifespan, adolescents have unique developmental needs. It is essential that these needs be addressed within the school setting. Eccles (2004) highlights the importance of a developmentally responsive school context in stating:

Individuals have changing emotional, cognitive, and social needs and personal goals as they mature. ... schools need to change in developmentally appropriate ways if they are to provide the kind of social context that will continue to motivate students’ interest and engagement as the students mature. (pp. 125–126)

Eccles and colleagues’ stage–environment fit theory suggests that an increasing mismatch between students’ desires and opportunities within the classroom and school results in a decline in motivation and engagement (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993). Adolescents’ basic and developmental needs highlight the importance of building a caring
school community to provide supportive teacher–student relationships and positive peer relationships in school to create a zone of safety and comfort that is crucial for healthy development (Eccles, 1999).

Battistich et al.’s (1997) multilevel conceptualization of a caring school community incorporates self-determination theory and stage–environment fit theory by focusing on adolescents’ needs and how they are met within a developmentally responsive school setting. Battistich et al., in line with Deci and Ryan (1985), believe that students have basic needs (belonging, autonomy, and competence) and the degree to which they are actively engaged in school depends on the extent these needs are being fulfilled. The assumption is that when individuals’ needs are satisfied within a community, they are more likely to become emotionally bonded with and committed to the school community and identify and behave in accordance with its expressed goals and values (Battistich et al.). This multilevel conceptualization of a caring school community is in line with previous research finding failure to connect with teachers and classmates is associated with school disruptiveness, social alienation, and dropping out (Benner & Graham, 2007; Finn, 1989, 1993; Murdock, 1999). Further, a sense of school connectedness can serve as a protective factor for students (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Finn, 1993). Using this multilevel conceptualization of school as a caring community allowed us in the present study to examine a community of care in which students’ dynamic and ongoing needs are being met within the school context.

Last, Schussler and Collins (2006) found that within the context of one alternative high school, five different types of caring relationships existed: teacher–student care, student–student care, school–student care, student–school care, and student–teacher care. All students addressed, to varying degrees, the importance of teacher–student care and student–student reciprocal care. Pervasive elements included opportunities for success, flexibility, respect for students, a family-like atmosphere, and a sense of belonging. These elements were evident throughout each of the five caring relationships. Schussler and Collins also reported that organizational factors such as school size, class size, and core values allowed the previously listed pervasive elements to exist within the high school setting. Their construct of care allows for the examination of multiple caring relationships within a school context. Although Schussler and Collins’ study focused on how one innovative high school promoted care for all its entire student population, in the present study we examined how one large high school created a community of care for a select group of students.

Schussler and Collins (2006) called for additional studies that investigate the presence of care in schools with a focus on “What does care look like in a school setting?” and “How does the organization of a school affect the existence of care?” (p. 1461). With researchers such as Schussler and Collins calling for additional studies that investigate exactly how care exists in schools, it was our intent to highlight how one large high school created a community of care for ninth-grade students. In an effort to ground our research with others who have studied like topics, this study was informed by Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory, Eccles and colleagues’ (Eccles et al., 1993) stage–environment fit theory, Battistich et al.’s (1997) definition of care in relation to creating a caring school or caring community, and Schussler and Collins’ (2006) construct of school care. Given these theoretical frameworks and previous research on “caring” and “community,” we define a caring school community as a place where students and teachers care about and support each other, where individuals’ needs are satisfied within a group setting, and where members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group.

Examining High School as a Caring Community: Listening to Student and Teacher Voices

Most research examining school as a caring community has relied on quantitative methods (Battistich et al., 1997; Goodenow, 1993). Few qualitative studies have focused on students’ perceptions of understanding high schools as caring places (e.g., Cushman, 2003; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Battistich et al. assessed students’ sense of the school as a caring community using self-report measures of student autonomy, classroom supportiveness, and responsiveness of the school environment, along with teacher self-report measures and classroom observations. Their results indicate that there is a positive relationship between a sense of community and student motivation (for a review, see Battistich et al.; Osterman, 2000). However, self-report and observational measures do not directly examine students’ own perceptions of their school as a caring community. An in-depth examination of student and teacher voices would provide a deeper understanding of their perceptions of school as a caring community.

Qualitative studies examining student voice, especially those that focus on student belonging and care in the high school environment, are not very prominent in secondary educational research. Cushman (2003) and Schussler and Collins (2006) are two notable examples that highlight care as being important at the high school level. Cushman conducted a qualitative study highlighting the educational needs of high school minority students, including their need to be cared for. Schussler and Collins conducted a qualitative investigation of how students in one alternative high school perceived care. These researchers found that high school students need to both receive and give care and that this is associated with positive outcomes, such as the establishment of a school environment conducive to increased learning. However, less is known about the teacher’s perception of a caring school community at the high school level. Thus, there is a need for more in-depth studies that examine student and teacher perspectives of high schools as caring communities.
In the present study we used a within-site case study approach to explore how a large high school created a community of care for ninth-grade students in order to complement and extend previous work. Listening to student and teacher voices can be a powerful way to examine how schools can effectively meet the needs of adolescent learners. Using an in-depth within-site case study approach allowed us to capture the complexity of both student and teacher perceptions about school as a caring community and what factors helped to create this type of community within one large high school for ninth-grade students.

Method

Purpose

The present article is part of a large multisite qualitative case study investigation conducted during the 2006–2007 school year that focused on understanding how freshman small learning communities help students transition into high school in developmentally appropriate ways (Kmiec, 2007). A total of 67 participants were involved in the larger multisite case study of three high schools, including 5 site-based administrators, 4 site-based small learning community coordinators, 3 freshman lead teachers, 33 freshman academy team teachers, 1 district-level small learning community director, and 21 freshman academy students. Data collection methods for the larger study included focus-group interviews, individual interviews, classroom observations, and the collection of archival evidence. Personalizing the learning environment, partially defined as promoting belongingness and care, emerged as the prominent theme in the data analysis process (Kmiec). One particular high school’s freshman small learning community stood out from the data as fostering a strong community of care, which is the focus of the present study.

The aim of this present constructivist qualitative within-site case study investigation was to further analyze the data set obtained from the one high school found to have a community of care for its ninth-grade students. Specifically, we wanted to know, “How does Westshore High School1 create a community of care for its ninth-grade students?” An in-depth, multisource within-site case study approach highlighting student and teacher voices helped to provide a deeper understanding of how a community of care is perceived by students and their teacher at Westshore High School. Student and teacher voices are the focal point of this article, with observations and the structure of the freshman small learning community serving as secondary sources of data.

Context

Westshore High School is a 50-year-old high school located within a large, urban socioeconomically and ethnically diverse school district in the Southeastern United States. Demographic data provided by the school district reported that at the time of data collection (2006–2007 school year), Westshore was a large high school with a total school enrollment of approximately 1,800 students, including 522 ninth-grade students. Fifty percent of Westshore’s population was classified as minority, and 34% qualified for free and reduced lunch.

During the 2002–2003 school year, faculty and staff at Westshore joined with their school district to submit a federally funded grant aimed at establishing small learning communities within their school with a targeted focus on ninth-grade students in an effort to help increase Westshore’s overall student achievement, academic rigor, and student retention, as well as improve school culture and climate. At the time the school district applied for the smaller learning community grant, Westshore’s student enrollment was approximately 2,000 students, including 659 ninth-grade students. Forty-seven percent of Westshore’s students were classified as minority, and 48% qualified for free and reduced lunch.2 At the time of application, school district data reported that Westshore’s Grade 9 retention rate was approximately 14%, slightly lower than the 16% retention rate across all schools selected by the district to be part of the federal grant application. Further, Westshore reported a graduation rate of approximately 72%, slightly lower than the 76% school district’s graduation rate but higher than the state average of 69%. The school district received a total of 4 years of federal funding for its four high schools that applied for the federal smaller learning community grant, including Westshore High School. Implementation began during the 2003–2004 school year.

Westshore’s freshman small learning community consisted of numerous initiatives, including interdisciplinary teacher–student teams with common planning, a ninth-grade transition course (Freshman Focus), numerous transition events, variable learning time for Algebra I students, cross-curricular lessons, and academic and behavioral incentives. At the time of the study, the principal had been at Westshore as both a teacher and administrator for 24 years. Many faculty and staff were Westshore graduates. Westshore High School was reported to have a very low teacher turnover rate.

At the time this study took place, Westshore High School’s freshman small learning community consisted of three Grade 9 teacher–student interdisciplinary teams. One teacher was appointed as the freshman lead teacher in charge of all freshman small learning community activities, the Freshman Focus program, and other items related to the teaching and learning of ninth-grade students. The Freshman Focus program consists of all Freshman Focus courses, which every ninth-grade student was enrolled in during their first nine weeks of the 4 × 4 block schedule. Administrators hand-scheduled many of Westshore High School’s incoming ninth-grade students to assure that there was 90%–95% purity, the extent to which teams share common students, for the first 16 weeks. All
students, with few exceptions, were taught by their team teachers.

Identification of Participants

Our study used purposive sampling to select all participants (Merriam, 1998). This study highlights Mrs. Cartright, a White 26-year-old female freshman lead teacher in her third year of teaching, and nine of her students. The voices of the lead teacher and students serve as the primary focus of this study. The freshman lead teacher was selected based on her active involvement in the freshman small learning community, including its Freshman Focus program. All ninth-grade students in her American Government course during the time of data collection who were continuously enrolled at Westshore since the beginning of the 2006–2007 school year were asked to participate in this study. Although students were no longer enrolled in the transition course at the time of data collection, all students were enrolled in American Government with the freshman lead teacher. Nine students, including two Black females (Kori and Katie), four White females (Sylvia, Monica, Samantha, and Brigette), one Black male (Jkwon), one White male (Evan), and one Hispanic male (Darren) agreed to participate. All participants, including parents or guardians of the minor participants, signed informed consent forms. Student participants were read a student assent and asked for verbal affirmation prior to participating.

Data Collection

Conducted during the 2006–2007 school year, we used Merriam’s (1998) qualitative case study methodology grounded in the aforementioned theoretical perspectives on school care and schools as caring communities (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Eccles et al., 1993; Schussler & Collins, 2006) to gain a deeper, more intimate understanding of how Westshore High School created a caring community for its ninth-grade students. Case study research methodology examines a bounded system within its context through the collection of multiple sources of data, resulting in a theme-based description of the case (Creswell, 2007). Case study methodology is recognized as an exemplary means to investigate a single entity within its context, such as an innovative program (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Creswell referred to case studies that focus on a single program as a within-site case study. Further, case study methodology is also known to be a preferred method for answering how questions (Yin, 2003). Because of its recognized ability to answer how questions and study a single program, a within-site qualitative case study methodology was the preferred methodology for investigating how Westshore High School created a caring community for its ninth-grade students.

As part of a much larger multisite qualitative case study of three schools that highlighted the voices of district and school personnel as well as students, in the present study we focused on only the data collected from one school site. This data consists of three 45-min interviews with the freshman lead teacher, one 60-min student focus-group interview, and multiple classroom observations. By holding one 60-min student focus group toward the end of data collection, the researcher was able to ask students questions based on data gathered during class observations and lead teacher interviews.

Semistructured interview protocols guided all interviews, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure subject confidentiality. Questions were general in nature, becoming more specific as the interviews progressed. Sample student questions included: “What were your first impressions of Westshore high school?” and “Describe a typical school day.” Sample lead teacher questions included: “What do you perceive are the outcomes of your freshman small learning community?” and “How has such a community affected teacher–student relationships?” All interviews were audio-taped and completely transcribed. Numerous methods were used to minimize the effects that subjectivity might have on the research, including member checks, peer reviews, keeping a research journal, and using analyzed data to help the continual data collection process.

Data Analysis

The present study utilized Hatch’s (2002) inductive approach to data analysis, whereby, through the process of looking for patterns in data, general statements regarding the phenomena were made. Theory, it is hoped, will emerge inductively from the phenomena within its context (Hatch). Hatch’s method of inductive analysis was selected because of its ability to work flexibly within multiple qualitative paradigms, including constructivism, and its ability to allow participants’ stories to emerge from the data.

Inductive analysis involves a series of steps that begins with reading and rereading the data to acquire a deeper understanding of the data and separating the data into analyzable parts, referred to by Hatch (2002) as frames of analysis. Frames of analysis place parameters on what data needed to be more carefully examined. The frames were then read again in search for domains or pieces of data that had a relationship with one another. Using the main research question as a guide, domains were refined to those relationships and the elements of that relationship that most clearly represented how Westshore High School promoted a community of care for ninth-grade students (teacher–program: buy-in that promotes care; teacher–student: developmentally responsive traits that promote care; and program–student: personalized learning environment that promotes care). Each domain was examined to make sure there was sufficient evidence in the data to include the domain in the study and to uncover any disconfirming evidence. By asking questions such as “What does all this mean” and “How does all this fit together” (Hatch, p. 173), the theme of the present study, the Freshman Focus program and its teachers create a
FIGURE 1. Ninth-grade community of care.
reflected in her previous excerpt. It was often a challenge to elicit teacher buy-in and to have teachers recognize the success of Freshman Focus. In reference to gaining the support of other teachers, Mrs. Cartright stated, “I’d say overall, with the exception of a few teachers in a few departments, the end result, which was like pulling teeth to get, is that a lot of teachers recognize ‘Hey, that actually worked.’” When teachers recognized the success of Freshman Focus, they were more likely to buy into the program and, subsequently, were more likely to promote a community of care. Although some teachers eventually bought into and supported Freshman Focus, there were a few teachers who remained resistant. Mrs. Cartright spoke of how resistant teachers often worked against promoting a community of care by tearing Freshman Focus down, even in front of the ninth-grade students:

I had to confront a teacher because he told his students in his science class that “Freshman Focus is a waste of your time. You don’t need to learn how to be organized and you don’t need to have all of these fun activities. You haven’t earned them.” On that day we were having a pep rally, and many students who I had in homeroom or had in Freshman Focus or students I didn’t even have, came to me and said, “Mrs. Cartright!” And they were crying because it was something that was dear to them, and this man was breaking it down. What I realized is a lot of teachers, if they don’t understand it, they tear it down.

This lack of consistency among teachers in supporting Freshman Focus and the contradictory messages sent by teachers have the potential to undermine the effectiveness in promoting a cohesive community of care. Further, the previous statement reflects the negative impact teachers can have when there is a lack of buy-in to a program, especially a program that students are emotionally invested in. Lack of teacher buy-in may inhibit teachers’ ability to create caring relationships with their students and to help students learn how to care (Noddings, 2005).

One of the main tools in eliciting teacher buy-in was referred to by Mrs. Cartright as selling the product. She stated, “We sold the product and the product was that freshmen are as good as every single class here at Westshore, if not better.” Developmentally responsive teachers believe in their students and encourage a more positive view of students among other teachers (Eccles, 2004). In a discussion with Mrs. Cartright, she explained that the teachers who bought into Freshman Focus and believed in their students sold the product to other teachers by utilizing incentives for students and demonstrating commitment, allowing for a more cohesive program and increasing student enthusiasm. She reported that it often took the entire duration of the program and, for some, the entire school year to produce results that demonstrated the success of Freshman Focus and its students and to effectively sell the product to other teachers. When asked to provide an example of selling the product to teachers with the aim of getting them on board, she said that Freshman Focus teachers need to

Just produce. Just show. Just sell. It’s a product. We have a product. The product is freshmen. Take a look at what they can do. Take a look at how their results differ from other classes. Don’t you want to be a part of this? It is successful. It’s been so long since maybe you’ve tasted success. Come on board, we’d love to have you. Buy in. And it took one year to get the results we have this year, which are teachers who are angry they’re not in it.

After seeing that students in Freshman Focus experienced positive results, such as increased academic performance, Mrs. Cartright mentioned that many teachers responded with increased buy-in and support. Following Noddings’ (2005) notion that teachers must believe in and care for their students, when teachers believed ninth-grade students were as good as all other students at Westshore, positive teacher beliefs and care toward ninth-grade students reportedly increased.

Mrs. Cartright shared the following story of successfully selling the product and gaining buy-in from a veteran teacher who resisted participating in Freshman Focus until success was demonstrated:

So that’s really cool to see someone who was just like me say they’re dead set against it. In one nine week (program) we have altered her perception to the point where the seasoned teacher now wants to be a part of it. That’s… really what you face a lot of times, a lot, especially freshmen because nobody really wants to take care of them. They’re the hard group.

The veteran teacher attended every Freshman Focus event and, after seeing the success of the program first hand, became an enthusiastic supporter. Mrs. Cartright spoke to selling the product, along with the challenges of changing teachers’ perceptions of ninth-grade students. This quote highlights an essential aspect of teacher buy-in. Teachers who bought into Freshman Focus believed that ninth-grade students were worthwhile and that they were no more difficult to teach than other grades. These positive perceptions of ninth-grade students were reinforced throughout the program and helped teachers to build a community of care. Teachers demonstrated care by expressing concern about students’ academic and nonacademic well-being and by developing a positive rapport and sense of connection with students (Schussler & Collins, 2006). Teachers who hold positive beliefs about their students are more likely to develop high-quality teacher–student relationships and provide students with the social-emotional support that they need (Eccles, 2004). Selling the product and eliciting buy-in from veteran teachers produced a ripple effect that helped build further teacher support of Freshman Focus and increased the sense of community among teachers. This often resulted in teachers connecting with each other, an increase in enthusiasm, and positive teacher morale, providing a solid foundation that allowed teachers to effectively utilize the Freshman Focus program as a means to promote a community of care. The teacher buy-in and positive beliefs about ninth-grade students that promoted a sense of care supports...
our definition of a caring school community as a place where students and teachers care about and support one another.

**Teacher–Student Relationship: Developmentally Responsive Traits That Promote Care**

I think that it takes a talented, dedicated, passionate person to teach freshmen. Somebody that is very gifted in that regard or willing to learn. But, to thrust somebody into the freshmen situation that really doesn’t want to do it, you’re doing that teacher a disservice and you’re doing the students a disservice because they’re just not going to put up with them.

Mrs. Cartright emphasized the need for teachers to have a deep commitment to understanding students’ developmental needs in order to best teach and reach today’s adolescents, saying, “It takes a different individual to teach freshmen. It takes somebody who’s going to have the energy, stamina, dedication, and excitement level to do it.” Similar to Mrs. Cartright, students also emphasized the need to be taught by an individual who exhibits developmentally responsive traits. At one point during the interview, students were talking about teacher qualities they viewed as positive and particular teachers who possessed such qualities. Kori stated that Mrs. Cartright was very easy to get along with, making both class and school easier for her. Sylvia stated, “Mrs. Cartright, she shows you it’s her classroom. She runs it. She’s in control.” Later on during the focus group, Sylvia returned to the conversation about teacher traits: “Some [teachers] are just really friendly and laid back like Mrs. Cartright and the others are just really strict all the time. You feel like they don’t even want to be there. They’re just there for the money.” Students agreed that they wanted their teachers to be friendly, responsive, easy to get along with, laid back, nice, funny, and in control of the classroom. Echoing research by Wong and Wong (2004), students wanted their teachers to be warm and friendly, yet business-like, as they connected not only teacher control but also teacher effectiveness with respect. Further, students believed that the teacher’s attitude made the class boring or fun. If the class was perceived as fun, students looked forward to that part of their day and were reportedly more willing to engage and participate in the class. In line with Eccles (2004), from both the teacher and student perspectives, it appeared that the teacher’s ability to understand and be responsive to students’ developmental needs was powerful at producing a community of care. To ensure that developmentally responsive teachers were working with ninth-grade students, Mrs. Cartright reported handpicking all Freshman Focus teachers.

Teachers who understood the unique, developmental nuances associated with ninth-grade students were able to create a community of care. Participants in this study suggested that Westshore’s Freshman Focus teachers promoted a community of care by establishing supportive teacher–student relationships and helping students adjust to high school life and beyond. A supportive teacher–student relationship was a key element in promoting a developmentally responsive, caring relationship. Students reported that a supportive teacher–student relationship made them feel more comfortable, connected, and all part of the same team.

Darren: She told us, “If you don’t feel comfortable you can come to me,” so we did.
Researcher: So there was a comfort level there?
Evan: Yeah.
Darren: Part of our team.

This supportive teacher–student relationship allows students to feel cared for and to have their needs for connection and belonging satisfied within the school community (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Solomon et al., 1997). This is aligned with our definition of a caring school community as a place where students and teachers care about and support each other and where students’ needs are satisfied within a group setting.

Mrs. Cartright reported that as her Freshman Focus course drew to a close, many students expressed a concern about their desire to have her as their teacher in the future: “What do we get next year? What happens to us next year, Mrs. Cartright? Will you be our teacher? Will we have you at least for homeroom?” She shared accounts of ninth-grade students that would run down the hall to give their former Freshman Focus teacher a hug and tell them how much they missed being in his or her class. Apparently, Freshman Focus teachers established a strong teacher–student relationship that students valued, appreciated, and missed once Freshman Focus ended. This type of relationships built on trust, care, and respect is essential for the positive development of students (Eccles, 2004).

In addition to promoting care by establishing a supportive teacher–student relationship, students reported that their Freshman Focus teacher showed care by helping them acclimate to high school life and beyond. Specifically, students mentioned how their Freshman Focus teacher kept them informed and helped them develop academic and life skills. Numerous students, like Evan, spoke of their Freshman Focus teacher telling them about school policies, procedures, and routines, as well as giving tours of the high school facility:

She showed us every little thing that we could ever think of. She did not need to do this for us, but she just showed us every little thing that she thought that we might not want to do and she gave us tours.

Further, students were confused about what high school teachers expected from them and how best to learn in the high school classroom. Students mentioned how their Freshman Focus teacher helped demystify teacher expectations, helping to prepare them for academic success. Freshman Focus teachers also increased students’ academic skill sets: “I remember in Mrs. Cartright’s class, in Freshman Focus, she taught us how to take notes when the teacher’s talking, when we’re reading something, and stuff like that. I think that helps us a lot” (Samantha). Additional skills, including being proactive, synergizing, and helping others were also...
encouraged. One student, Brigitte, recalled an assignment where they were to go home and positively, without resistance or hesitation, do whatever their parents requested:

She told us to do something like just go home and when your parents asked you to do something, we were to say, “Okay, I'm on it,” and just do it and see their reaction. A bunch of kids came back to class and were like, “My mom was like, ‘Oh, my! What was that?’”

Having a deep commitment to understanding ninth-grade students' developmental needs resulted in the promotion of a community of care. Teachers who understood the unique, developmental needs of ninth-grade students created a caring community. These developmental traits provided an opportunity for supportive teacher–student relationships and the ability to help students adjust to high school life and beyond.

**Program–Student: A Personalized Learning Environment That Promotes a Community of Care**

The dodgeball competition was probably the students' most favorite thing. You saw everything that we had taught them such as being proactive, “Okay, step forward and I'll take the hit then you throw the ball,” teamwork, synergizing, to thinking winning's really awesome. To see the freshmen do something you don't see seniors do which is go up to the other teachers and other kids and put into effect everything we've taught them. It was inspiring to see.

The previous quote from Mrs. Cartright exemplifies the importance of creating a personalized learning environment specifically for ninth-grade students. However, when students were asked to describe their freshman small learning community, they were unable to elaborate, responding with comments such as “What's that?” It appeared that the Freshman Focus program, which consists of all the Freshman Focus courses, built a more personalized setting for students than their freshman small learning community.

As a result of the Freshman Focus program, students experienced an increase in community and had opportunities to develop the academic and life skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond. A personalized learning environment helped to build community membership and feelings of belonging among students and teachers by fostering an environment in which students could relax and be themselves, “It helped to have a class that you could just relax, be yourself, and have fun but also one that teaches you things” (Samantha). Students specifically mentioned the Grade 9–only focus of Freshman Focus, finding it appealing. Providing opportunities for connection and belonging is important, as previous research has established a relationship between promoting social connectedness and belongingness with fostering student engagement and learning (Goodenow, 1993).

Further, when students' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are satisfied within a caring school community, students are more likely to feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group and behave in accordance with its goals and values (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Through a personalized learning environment, ninth-grade students experienced an increase in belonging to a community. Specifically, there was a strong sense of cohesiveness, group identification, and pride that reportedly changed the student culture. Students reported a deep sense of freshman pride, noted by students as being proud of belonging to a group, which they attested was a result of what they learned in their Freshman Focus course. Students spoke of working together to win a school spirit contest at the back-to-school pep rally. For example, Sylvia and Katie explained that prior to the pep rally, all Freshman Focus classes got together and practiced so students would know what to do, how loud to be, and how fun pep rallies could be. The intent was to help the ninth-grade students feel more comfortable participating, recognize themselves as a cohesive group, and feel proud to be a freshman. Throughout numerous interviews, Mrs. Cartright referred to how, as a result of Freshman Focus, ninth-grade students developed a deep sense of freshman pride in which they recognized themselves as a cohesive group: “They identify themselves as a group of freshmen, not as 'alternative, punk, or prep'. The student culture has changed as a result of what we’ve done this year. I think it has become very cohesive” (Mrs. Cartright). This sense of acceptance and group cohesiveness was witnessed during multiple classroom observations. Students' sense of freshman pride and group cohesiveness supports our definition of a caring school community as a place in which students feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group.

A strong sense of belongingness, group identification, and pride fueled students' desire to help future incoming ninth-grade students. Students demonstrated care and became active members of the caring community through preparing to start a peer mediation II course that would support incoming ninth-grade students going through the Freshman Focus program the following year. Students spoke of their desire to provide experiences for incoming students similar to what they had encountered during the Freshman Focus program that helped them develop a sense of belonging and group identification. The fact that students wanted to act in such a caring way by giving back and providing a positive experience for future students indicates that they want to reciprocate care (Schussler & Collins, 2006). Further, it signifies that students were committed to the program and identified with the program's goals and values, suggesting they were part of a community of care (Battistich et al., 1997).

The Freshman Focus program instilled a mindset that helped students to prepare for the academic rigor and maturity associated with high school, and helped them to gain the life skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond. Mrs. Cartright stated,

It's about getting kids from the get-go in the right mindset to be here and it's a hard mindset to break, because you've got kids who are coming from middle school and [they have]...
this immature middle school mentality, “He said, she said, don’t touch me and he’s looking at me funny.” It’s an issue of changing that mindset.

As part of the Freshman Focus curriculum, students developed academic skills, such as keeping a structured notebook and learning how to take notes. The curriculum helped to promote meaningful learning, as well as the development of life skills, such as self-renewal, taking responsibility, and being proactive. The use of a structured notebook not only helped to promote students’ organizational and note-taking skills, but also helped to facilitate meaningful learning and a deeper understanding of the material: “I tell all my freshmen, ‘Your notebook, your organization, and ability to take notes and understand them is far more important than your ability to recite facts on a test’” (Mrs. Cartright). As a result, many students experienced positive academic outcomes. After the first nine weeks of the school year when they were enrolled in the Freshman Focus course, ninth-grade students overall had a higher level of academic performance than all of the other grade levels, as well as the previous year’s ninth-grade students.

Students viewed the course as providing them with useful, relevant information that could prepare them for life. For example, the Freshman Focus curriculum included Sean Covey’s (1998) Seven Habits for Highly Effective Teens in order to help students develop effective life skills. The habits described in the book taught and reinforced skills to help prepare students for success in high school and beyond. Students learned habits such as sharpen the saw (i.e., self-renewal), be proactive (i.e., taking responsibility for your life), think win-win (i.e., finding mutually beneficial solutions), and synergize (i.e., teamwork). Students reported learning these skills in Freshman Focus and applying them to other areas of their lives, helping them to be successful in life. Jkwon stated, “Freshman Focus helps you with life adjustments. First she [Mrs. Cartright] taught us the school, and then how to be prepared for life like being proactive and reactive, and synergize.” Monica also attested to the life skill benefits of Freshman Focus:

It teaches you ways of reacting, how to better prepare yourself, and how to make yourself healthier, like sharpening the saw. Instead of going to bed really late, go to bed early so you can wake up and you’re all refreshed in the morning.

Freshman Focus teachers encouraged students to apply academic and life skills to their lives. The interactive intraclass dodgeball competition is an example of transfer of such skills, where students were able to apply the life skills such as being proactive and synergize in such a way that simultaneously promoted students’ sense of group identification and belonging. Further, students’ interactions with peers and teachers during the dodgeball game reflected common values, such as respect for others and cooperation, which are promoted within a caring community. This is in line with Battistich et al. (1997), who suggested that when students’ needs are met within a community, they are more likely to identify and behave in line with the goals and values of that community. This also aligns with our definition of a caring school community as a place where students’ needs are satisfied within a group setting and where students feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group.

Discussion

In an effort to respond to Schussler and Collins’s (2006) call for additional investigations on the “who, what, and how of school care” (p. 1490), the aim of the present study was to extend the understanding of how high schools can create communities of care for students. Specifically, we explored how one large high school created a caring community for its ninth-grade students. We conceptualized a caring school community as a place in which students and teachers care about and support each other, in which individuals’ needs are satisfied within a group setting, and in which members feel a sense of belonging and identification with the group. This conceptualization of a caring school community proved useful in analyzing how Westshore created a community of care as the key components resonated within each caring relationship. Three caring relationships promoted a community of care for Westshore’s ninth-grade students: teacher–program, teacher–student, and program–student (see Figure 1). Two major conclusions materialized from this study. First, the Freshman Focus program and the Freshman Focus teachers, not Westshore’s freshman small learning community, were the essential elements in establishing a community of care for ninth-grade students. Second, the development of positive teacher beliefs about students, supportive teacher–student relationships, and the promotion of academic and life skills had the potential to create a ninth-grade community of care at Westshore in which students were the primary receivers of care.

Although such conclusions are informative and provide valuable insight, this study is not without its limitations. Due to its epistemological focus and case study methodology, the entire study is based on the voices of 10 participants from one school site. Additionally, data were collected during a relatively brief period of the school year, providing only a snapshot of how Westshore created a community of care. Although transferability of academic and life skills is inferred, but not specifically examined, this study does provide a descriptive picture of how a community of care at the ninth-grade level has the potential to influence the remainder of students’ high school careers.

Our first conclusion is that the Freshman Focus program and the Freshman Focus teachers, not Westshore’s freshman small learning community, served as primary vehicles to the establishment of caring relationships that helped to promote a community of care for ninth-grade students. Although Westshore established a freshman small learning community with teacher–student interdisciplinary teams, common teacher planning time, transition-related activities, academic and behavioral incentives, and a ninth grade
transition course (Freshman Focus), the community of care
that evolved stemmed from the Freshman Focus program
and its teachers. Students did not recognize their fresh-
man small learning community at all; the only community
they recognized was what developed as a result of the Fresh-
man Focus program. Although Schussler and Collins (1996)
stressed the importance of establishing care as an essential
trait within the entire school environment, Westshore es-
established a community of care for its ninth-grade students
through their Freshman Focus program, which organically
manifested into a grade-wide community of care. This is
aligned with previous findings that suggest freshman transi-
tion programs, including a freshman transition course like
Freshman Focus, have the potential to change school culture
(SREB, 2002).
Teacher buy-in to the Freshman Focus program was foun-
dational to promoting a caring community for ninth-grade
students. Over time, Westshore was able to sell the product
to elicit teachers with developmentally responsive traits to
buy into the program. It is important that, at a minimum,
al Freshman Focus teachers be purposively selected to teach
at this level based upon their developmentally responsive
traits. These traits reflect teachers’ deep understanding of
ninth-grade students’ unique needs. Given that Westshore’s
Freshman Focus program and its teachers were essential for
creating a personalized community of care, an important
implication is that a community of care can be developed by
a select group of teachers at the program level alone. Nodd-
dings (2005) suggested that in large schools it is especially
hard to promote care due to the inability to make the con-
nections necessary to foster a complete caring relationship
with every student. Our study suggests that such caring rela-
tionships can occur at the program level with teachers who
are developmentally responsive.
Our second conclusion is that the following components
had the potential to create a ninth-grade community of care
in which students were the primary receivers of care: (a)
teachers holding positive beliefs about students, (b) sup-
portive teacher–student relationships, and (c) the promo-
tion of students’ academic and life skills. This is in line with
Schussler and Collins’s (2006) finding that students are on
the receiving end of care for most relationships in the high
school context. Further, Noddings (2005) noted that stu-
dents must be on the receiving end of care in order for them
to truly recognize care. Noddings recognized the unequal
nature of the teacher–student relationship and maintained
that it is the teacher’s responsibility to not only create caring
relationships with students, but also help students learn how
to care. Although students were the main receivers of care,
students also showed signs of reciprocating care by giving
back through planning the formation of a peer mediation
II course to support incoming ninth-grade students. Giving
back to the community in a meaningful way is a need of
many adolescents (Battistich et al., 1997) that is being met
within Westshore’s community of care. This underscores the
need to further examine the relationship between students
giving and receiving care within the high school context
(Schussler & Collins).
Westshore’s Freshman Focus program that produced a
community of care for ninth-grade students may have the po-
tential to foster the development of positive teacher beliefs
about students. Teachers who bought into Freshman Fo-
cus believed ninth-grade students were worthwhile and no
more difficult to teach than upperclassmen. This helped to
promote positive teacher beliefs about students and encour-
aged a sense of caring toward ninth-grade students. Echo-
ing previous research, teachers who hold positive beliefs
about their students are more likely to develop high-quality
teacher–student relationships and support students’ needs
(Eccles, 2004).
Additionally, teachers who appeared to exhibit de-
velopmentally responsive traits seemed to have positive
teacher–student relationships that supported the promotion
of care. Teachers who consciously exhibit care are needed in
order to meet students’ basic psychological and developmen-
tal needs. Thus, teachers may play a central role in creating a
caring community in which teaching and reaching the ado-
lescent learner is achieved through holding positive beliefs
about students and establishing supportive teacher–student
relationships.
Finally, Westshore’s ninth-grade community of care ap-
ppeared to help students acquire academic and life skills.
Through the promotion of personal and social life skills that
were a part of the Freshman Focus curriculum, teachers were
able to demonstrate care and provide students with the tools
necessary to be productive, healthy, and happy individu-
als. Freshman Focus teachers may have helped to instill a
community of care through teaching students the basic aca-
demic (e.g., keeping a notebook, note-taking) and life (e.g.,
self-renewal, being proactive, taking personal responsibility)
skills necessary to be successful in high school and beyond.
Increasing students’ academic and life skills may help to sat-
isfy students’ basic psychological and developmental needs,
which is a central component of our definition of a caring
community (Battistich et al., 1997; Deci & Ryan, 1985).
Further, self-determination theory and stage–environment
fit theory stress that when students are able to fulfill their
basic and developmental needs, their ability to engage and
become functioning, active members of a community in-
creases (Battistich et al.; Deci & Ryan; Eccles et al., 1993).

In conclusion, the present study provides insight into how
a large high school created a community of care for its ninth-
grade students. Such a community of care was found to orig-
inate at the program level that manifested into a grade-wide
community of care. Ninth-grade students were on the receiv-
ing end of care, which appeared to be encouraged by teachers’
positive beliefs about students, supportive teacher–student
relationships, and the promotion of academic and life skills.
Further research is necessary to determine whether such pro-
grams generalize to an entire school or to multiple schools.
Studies that examine whether a caring community, based on
a transition program or course, can have a positive impact
on students throughout their high school career and beyond are also needed. Although this study demonstrates the existence of multiple caring relationships within one large high school’s freshman small learning community, additional investigations of these relationships and their associated outcomes are warranted. Longitudinal research is also needed to examine how care evolves and how students and the school environment can be best organized in order to create and sustain a community of care. Mrs. Cartwright made a case for an increased awareness of programs that create a community of care and the potential for such programs to have a lasting impact: “I think everybody needs to know that it [Freshman Focus program] works. If it’s done properly, with the right support, it is something that students will remember forever. It’s changed the atmosphere.”

NOTES

1. Westshore is a pseudonym.
2. Between the time the school district applied for the federal smaller learning community grant (2002–2003 school year) and the time of data collection (2006–2007 school year), two new high schools opened up in the area slightly reducing Westshore High School’s student enrollment.
3. Pseudonyms were used to protect teacher and student confidentiality.

REFERENCES


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