

CARING THROUGH DIFFERENCES IN A CHILD CARE COMMUNITY:
NURTURING ADULT RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEL NODDINGS'S CARING-ETHIC

by

LENIECE (LYN) IRENE LUCAS

Bachelor of Communications, 1994
University of Texas at Arlington
Arlington, Texas

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Introduction

I love this impossible job--this difficult, often underappreciated, yet important work. Every day of the past 20 years of my life has truly been a new adventure as I respond to statements like, “Ms. Lyn,¹ there’s two dead birds under the swing,” or “Ms. Lyn, an 18-wheeler just ran off the road and hit the side of the building,” or “Ms. Lyn, there’s a hole in the side of his nose, come quick, come quick.”

I am the director of a childcare program. “Director” in this case, is an ever-growing all-inclusive word with many meanings: mother, janitor, receptionist, marketing specialist, social-worker, financial advisor, money-collector, teacher, mentor, bouncer, musician, party-planner, special-events coordinator, payroll administrator, people-manager, cook, bus driver, nurse, plumber, enforcer, entertainer, counselor, trainer, evaluator, coach, and child advocate. Within the mix of daily activities are the most important ones of all, the interactions between people.

I often admire the caring classroom environments that teachers nurture. I appreciate the patient and smart way a teacher helps a toddler separate from his or her parent in the morning, or the life-coaching moments of teachers asking children questions like, “How do you think you would you feel if someone did that to you?” I struggle, however, with the experience of spending so much time on de-escalating hurt feelings, misunderstandings, and conflicts between people who work at the program. I have wondered why maintaining caring relationships among the adults at the program is difficult, especially because the job requires nurturing interactions between teachers and

¹ “Ms.” commonly precedes the teacher’s first name in southern preschools.

children. In addition, early childhood professionals spend a lot of time discussing how best to maintain caring classroom communities.

I work in a field that emphasizes nurturing relationships, loving teacher/child interactions, and reciprocal relationships with parents. Over the years I have experienced cognitive dissonance due to the contradiction that exists between the desired gentle classroom approach and the assertive, business-like approach that too often flavors the office and corridor of early childhood programs. Dealing with difficult issues—like managing adult responses to children who have serious behavior challenges, collecting money from families that do not have it, and negotiating hurt relationships between staff members—gets in the way of the sought-after caring early childhood culture.

I used Nel Noddings's articulation of caring as a lens through which to view the caring-situation and also as a framework for building an understanding of caring attitudes at La Casa. Informed by the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1984, 2003), introduced an ethic of caring as a counter-point to the more traditional views of ethics as principles and values. She took time to consider the differences between traditionally masculine and feminine approaches to moral dilemmas and gave voice to the "feminine," writing a book-length essay in "practical ethics from the feminine view" (2003, p.3). Noddings argues that scholars have often considered ethics in terms of masculine experiences and expectations and that the natural approach to ethics ought to be guided by "the feminine spirit" (2003, p.3), which is grounded in relatedness. The historically masculine-driven value system has measured morality in terms of loyalty to principles. Noddings suggests that people are easily de-valued when hard-line principles are the guideline for ethical behavior, while a caring-ethic is malleable and allows for

consideration of human need in a variety of contexts stating, “To care is to act not by fixed rule but by affection and regard” (p. 24). Considering the experiences of staff at La Casa through a caring lens is a particularly relevant viewpoint for this study, given that all of the participants are females working in a field dominated by women. In addition, Noddings applies much of her theory to education, making the intent of her theoretical framework directly applicable to this study.

Purpose of Study

Over the years, as I have experienced work in for-profit and non-profit programs, I have become increasingly interested in exploring the culture of the early learning work environment. These last five years, my work has occurred at La Casa (pseudonym), an inclusive preschool that welcomes children who have medical and developmental special needs as well as their typically-developing siblings. La Casa is a fascinating site for a study that is grounded in differences of many kinds: cultural and racial differences, ability differences, power differences and pedagogy differences—but more on that later.

After 20 years of work in early childhood education, in both program leader positions and as a trainer in the community, I have learned that questions frequently arise about managing relationships among staff. And while experts in the field recognize that caring relationships are important in early care and education communities (e.g., Baker & Pettit, 2004; Brazelton, 1992; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Hohmann & Weikart, 2002; Perry 2002; and Swick, 2006), researchers have given much less attention to the impact of the director-teacher and teacher-teacher relationships in an early learning environment. Through this study, I strive to understand [1] the experiences of early childhood staff at La Casa, as they foster caring-communities and nurture relationships among one another;

[2] the barriers faced while encouraging and engaging caring attitudes and approaches; and [3] the ways staff respond to these barriers.

La Casa

La Casa is a unique and special place. I initially began working at La Casa 13 years ago, when La casa exclusively served children affected by HIV and AIDS. After three years, I left La Casa to work as the director of a preschool where my own children could attend. I returned to La Casa five years ago to find an evolved version of the place I left. La Casa's expanded mission now includes children with various diagnoses, including Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and autism. Many of the children are or have been a part of the Child Protective Services (CPS) system because of severe neglect or abuse, leading to the additional challenges of working with children recovering from trauma (Lucas, 2007).

My questions regarding the difficulties that adults face between one another in early learning communities stayed with me from non-profit to for-profit programs and back again. La Casa is a non-profit program that depends on tuition for only 2% of its program costs. Government and private grants and donations fund most of the program. La Casa is a diverse community with families living in domestic violence shelters, government housing apartments, and lower and middle-class homes. The household incomes range from \$0 - \$100,000 per year, with a median income around \$13,000 per family. The racial makeup of La Casa families is 44% African-American, 10% African (various countries), 35% Hispanic, 10% Caucasian, and 1% other (see fig. 1). An ethnically diverse group of refugees, illegal immigrants, legal immigrants, and natural born citizens walk their children into La Casa each day. La Casa families are led by

single mothers, single fathers, same-sex partners, grandparents as heads of households, married heterosexual parents, and foster families.

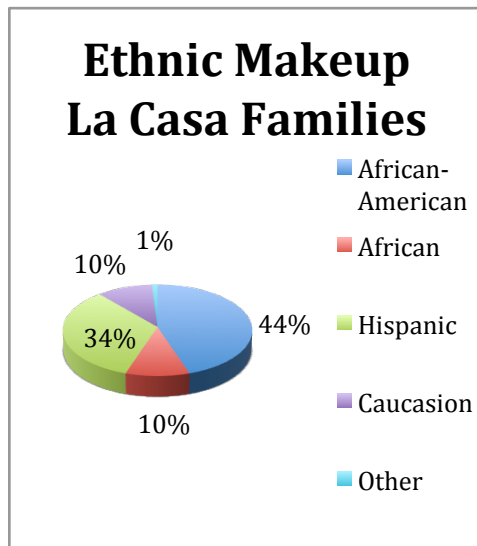


fig.1

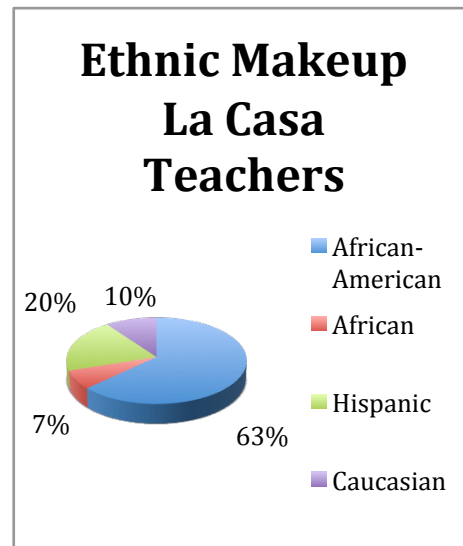


fig.2

When I walk into a La Casa classroom, I see children in wheelchairs, older children who need diaper changes, children who eat using a feeding tube that connects into the stomach, children who have one limb or who are blind or deaf or traumatized by life circumstances. The varying abilities of the children contribute to the unique diversity that is La Casa.

Through the years the teachers at La Casa have evolved as needed to care for and educate the children. For example, when I left La Casa 14 years ago, none of the teaching staff had college credit hours. During the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation process seven years ago, many of the teachers and other staff enrolled in the local community college. Today, most of the teachers have their Child Development Associate (CDA) and are working on completing Associate Degrees in Early Childhood. Other teachers are interested in fields such as nursing and are full-time students. The program staff is an ethnically diverse group (70% African-

American, 20% Hispanic, and 10% Caucasian—see fig.2). I am a Caucasian woman and am responsible for managing the department as a whole, including two supervisors: one African-American woman supervisor and one Caucasian woman supervisor. When I worked at La Casa initially, 13 years ago, I was one of the supervisors. Although the program has hired some male teachers in the past, at the time of the study, all of the staff was female.

La Casa is a community of people with diverse abilities, needs, racial and cultural groups, languages, education, income, family-types and circumstances. Half of the families at La Casa have at least one family member who is HIV+ and the other half have children with neurological disorders such as cerebral palsy or seizure disorders, genetic disorders such as Down syndrome, or other conditions such as blindness, autism, or hearing differences. Some families have a need for drug rehabilitation programs, others for counseling, parenting, job coaching, healthcare, or financial assistance, in addition to childcare. There are three social workers at La Casa who help connect families with community resources. Approximately 16% of the La Casa families have at least one parent who illegally resides in the United States from countries such as Honduras and Mexico, while other families reside on political asylum or with a green card from countries such as Sierra Leon, Cuba, Malawi, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mexico. Although families primarily speak the languages from their home countries in their homes, English and Spanish are the primary languages spoken in the classrooms. Some of the families from other countries have a college-level education but cannot utilize their formal educational certifications in this country, while other families struggle with very little educational background and are functionally illiterate. Many of the La Casa families

are transient and move quite often, and other families have lived for generations in the urban area around La Casa.

Population

La Casa, the site of this study, is an inclusive preschool for children ages 0-5 years located in an urban area in the South. The preschool is accredited by NAEYC, a recognition that is a high-quality indicator in the field of early care and education. La Casa enrolls typically-developing children as well as children who need medically-managed care, have neurological and developmental disorders, or have other special-needs. The adult workers (teachers, supervisors, staff, and teams) at the preschool, however, are the focus population of this ethnographic study—not the children. I use *Teachers* throughout this study to refer to the direct caregivers for children in the classroom setting. I use *Supervisors* for the people who manage the childcare program. The word *staff* identifies the adult employees as a unit at the preschool program. The word *team* notes a group of people that have a common work focus (e.g., teachers who work primarily with infants are the “infant team”; likewise, the supervisors together make up the “management team”). At the time of this study, La Casa had 42 children, 16 teachers, two supervisors, and one director. I approach this study as a full participant-observer and work as the director at La Casa, allowing me uncommon access to a program that holds confidentiality at its core.

Methodology

A search for the best methodological “fit” for this study led me fairly quickly to ethnography as a form of qualitative research. A qualitative approach allows for inquiry into a socially-constructed situation that is interpreted through data explicitly relevant to

that specific culture and informed by an inter-subjective relationship that exists between researcher, research participants, and the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I chose a qualitative research method because I was in search of meanings within the cultural-context of La Casa to learn about the relationships among the staff at the program.

Qualitative researchers are interested in learning about the world through things that represent experiences in that world, such as field notes from observations, transcripts of interviews, and memos to the self (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative research “involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world,” attempting to make “sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 5). In other words, I gain knowledge from the people at La Casa from the meanings they assign to situations and base my interpretation of those events on field observations.

This ethnographic study, like most ethnographies, examines a culture along with the interjection of the researcher’s observations and interviewing (Glesne, 2006). An important reason I approach this study through ethnography is the respect and value ethnography—although not historically expected or even lived—allows toward the research participants. The project question, studied through a framework of caring (Noddings, 2003), begs a research approach that supports caring relationships between the participants and the researcher. Van Maanen (1988) underscores the importance of listening to and observing the actions of the members of the community being studied—so the researcher can as genuinely as possible represent the culture in writing in his or her recollection of ethnographic work:

A culture is expressed (or constituted) only by the actions and words of its members and must be interpreted by, not given to, a fieldworker. To portray culture requires the fieldworker to hear, to see, and most important...to write of what was presumably witnessed and understood during a stay in the field. Culture is not itself visible, but is made visible only through its representation (p.3).

An ethnographic approach allowed me to limit the possibility of seeming hypocritical when encouraging caring attitudes, by allowing a closeness, as opposed to a distancing, between myself and the participants. Compelled to *listen for the purpose of understanding* during interviews and observations, I was inspired by Nel Noddings's (2003) belief that "apprehending the other's reality, feeling what he feels as nearly as possible, is the essential part of caring from the view of the one-caring" (p.16). Listening for the purpose of understanding became somewhat of a mantra among research participants (as staff) at La Casa.

Investigating my research questions as a full-participant observer offered many opportunities to observe both planned and impromptu events. The participant-observer role also extended the time I was able to observe since my knowledge of how a caring ethic was affecting relationships at La Casa continued to inform my understanding on a daily basis, even as I turned in final drafts of my thesis. Some observations (see Appendix B) were planned events, such as training sessions regarding caring in the workplace and classroom visits (although my classroom visits were unannounced—this is typical in my job role). Observations from the field focused on positive, negative, and avoidance of interactions among teachers, supervisors, parents and children and occurred

in La Casa classrooms, hallways, and offices. Planned classroom observation times included observing during classroom center activity time—a time of day in which children make independent activity choices. In the preschool environment, classroom observation allowed me to witness teacher-teacher, teacher-child, child-child, child-parent, teacher-parent and supervisor-teacher interactions. I took notes during a one-hour observation of each (three) classrooms weekly for two months in addition to notes from informal observations. Because I approached this study as a participant observer, I was able to continuously observe interactions during classroom time even when the two-month-long formal observation time had passed.

I also wrote short field notes regarding conflicts, struggles, and successes that occurred at La Casa among individuals and then expanded on those memos when each workday was done. In addition, I recorded research memos to myself in which I noted connections I was noticing to Nel Noddings's thoughts on a caring-ethic or other thoughts I had during my time in the field that I wanted to remember. I kept a reflexive journal, which was a place for me to have an on-going conversation with myself about the research process and about the research itself. I kept this journal in my personal computer and ended up using most of it in data units when I noticed how many of my own notes connected with emerging themes.

I formally interviewed two supervisors and six teachers. Through interviews with teachers and supervisors, I learned about experiences staff had regarding relationships at work and what barriers the staff felt existed to nurturing caring attitudes at La Casa and other early learning environments where they have worked. I was specifically interested in finding out what each team member was noticing and experiencing regarding

relationships once we began to focus on a caring ethic (see Appendix A). Interested participants returned an invitation to participate in an envelope I placed in the staff resource room (see Appendix C). Each person who returned the form was interviewed in an unoccupied office. I offered each participant an opportunity to have their interview off-site, but all declined. I transcribed the interviews and then assigned data units to each important content piece of data source: interviews, observations, and notes. I then printed off each data unit onto an index card coded for source: teacher interview (yellow), supervisor interview (pink), classroom observation (blue), training observation (green), reflexive journal (purple), and other (white). Once I had unitized the data, I began to sort them for themes. As I unitized additional data sources and placed them on index cards, I added those data units to the piles of themes. Once I collected most of my data, I made note of the themes that I saw upon the first sorting, and then re-sorted them all (twice). During this process I moved data units to new places to support themes that connected with my research questions. This process helped solidify and deepen the themes as piles evolved from categories like “business behavior and caring behavior” to a priori themes such as “contribution and doing things differently.” I employed a constant comparative method of data analysis (Schwandt, 2001) in which I compared units from each data source to each other to generate empirical themes. Throughout the progression of the study, I compared the data repeatedly as I noticed a recurrence of particular themes and wanted to ensure my interpretation of the data unit was appropriate given the original context. I organized data units in a manner that allowed me to easily refer to the original whole data source. For example, I numbered every line of each interview and then kept every transcript in its entirety in a notebook. I also color coded the whole document

sources to match the data unit cards. There were many times during the writing process that I read a data unit card, but before using the quote or idea in my thesis, found the type of document based on the color, the document number based on the code on each data card, and the quote based on the line number that was on both the data unit card and corresponding whole document piece. This constant reconnecting with the main data source was a recurring event throughout the writing process.

The macro-emerging themes included [1] complicating caring relationships; [2] supporting caring relationships; [3] forming caring relationships; and [4] maintaining caring relationships. One theme seemed to be present throughout all of the macro-themes: differences. The ways in which people allow differences to inhibit or forge caring relationships emerged as an overarching presence in this study.

Findings

I. Experiencing Caring Relationships:

We are both free—that which I do, I do –and bound—I might do far better if you reach out to help me and far, far worse if you abuse, taunt, or ignore me. As we build an ethic on caring and as we examine education under its guidance, we shall see that the greatest obligation of educators, inside and outside formal schooling, is to nurture the ethical ideals of those with whom they come in contact. (2003, p. 49).

--Nel Noddings

Noddings (2003, 2006) makes several claims regarding the lived caring-ethic that connects with experiences at La Casa. She acknowledges difficulties, such as feelings of guilt and conflict, when people disagree but care about one another. She also highlights

the intrinsic joy that one feels when another person accepts the caring relationship and the reciprocal caring-attitude that occurs as a result.

Noddings (2003, 2005, 2006) strongly asserts that experiencing care—to care for others and to be cared for by others— is a basic human need that is universally accessible to the degree that caring should be the primary goal of both parenting and education.

Noddings accentuates the need for people to live out a caring-ethic and develop relationships with an “attitude of warm acceptance and trust” (p. 65) as a form of pedagogy and practice, supporting the role of every individual as learner and teacher.

A community that invites all members to be critical thinkers values learner-teachers who will suggest better ways of doing things. At La Casa, I noticed that when all members of the team help mold the environment, each person has some ownership in the community, creating a situation in which members become invested to help one another make it through difficult times.

Feeling included: Making a difference through contribution

Everybody's just trying to pitch in. Everybody's trying to come up with ideas of how to fix this or that, and just incorporate their ideas, to give the room a facelift and just do better.

--Ms. LaCrisha

When others consider and meet our needs we feel like someone cared enough to notice us and respond to us as individuals. Responding to the needs of others is especially important in preschools, because, as Jorde Bloom (1997) states, “All individuals need to feel that others care about them and are concerned about their welfare. Early Childhood workers especially need mutual support because their work requires so much nurturing of others”(p.5). People need to engage in caring relationships not only for the experience of

being cared for, but also for the experience of caring for others. As Noddings (2003) further articulates, “as human beings we want to care and to be cared for” (p. 7). Children exhibit this need early in life and tend to “misbehave” when their need to be cared for is not being met. If a child needs attention, for example, he or she will find a way to get it, even if it is negative attention.

One morning at La Casa, I observed four-year-old Charles exhibit his need for care in the form of attention seeking. Charles was in Ms. LaCrisha and Ms. Lissette’s class. Ms. LaCrisha is the kind of teacher who makes you feel like she can make anything work. She has the personality of a leader, a coach, a coordinator, the slightly type A personality who seeks organization and is comfortable directing others. She is also amazing with children. She is a master at working with children who have behavior issues. Ms. LaCrisha also has a very soft heart. One time, I walked into the nursery where she was holding a tiny newborn who had Down syndrome. I noticed one little tear falling out of the corner of her eye. I asked if she were okay, and she looked up at me and said, “Oh, babies just do this to me sometimes.” LaCrisha’s co-worker, Ms. Lissette has worked at La Casa for over 10 years. Lissette has a sweet, mild-mannered personality and is kind to others, children and adults alike. I literally do not recall ever having a parent complain about her. Children run into her arms, screaming, “Ms. Lissette! Ms. Lissette!” for a big hug when they see her in the hallway.

Charles had experienced trauma and neglect during the past few years of his life and Child Protective Services had removed him and his very ill baby sister from his mother’s home a year ago. I watched as he desperately tried to get the attention of Ms. Lissette. She was attending to two other children in the room who were arguing over dress

up clothes (Ms. Lisette's co-teacher, LaCrisha, had stepped out to get some art supplies). I observed as Charles threw a puzzle piece across the room, pushed art supplies off of a table, and then knocked down another child's tower. He ran from one area to another like he was a tornado in the room, destroying each peaceful activity in the process. Some children yelled out, "Charles no...Ms. Lisette!" while others burst into tears when Charles disturbed their activity. Ms. Lisette stood up from where she was and walked across the room to Charles, who then ran away from her and continued to interrupt the tasks of the other children. Just at that time, Ms. LaCrisha walked into the room—at which point, Charles looked immediately in her direction.

Ms. LaCrisha, never taking her eyes off of Charles, calmly but with a serious demeanor, walked over to him and bent down to his eye level. She said, "Charles, you take a minute to calm down and then we need to talk about what happened and fix the room. We're not going to let our day go this way." Charles independently walked over to an area in a corner of the room that is a designated quiet space with a thick area rug, beanbags, and books. He threw himself down on a beanbag and hunched over with his head low and arms around his legs. He had gone from looking and behaving very angry to looking and behaving very sad. Ms. LaCrisha did not go with him but did work near him, keeping her eye on Charles but also interacting with other children. After a few minutes, Charles grabbed a book and began to read. LaCrisha walked over, sat next to Charles, and asked him about what had happened. Charles said he was "over" Ms. Alicia because she had told him that they would play a game together but then became busy with other kids.

Hearing what Charles said, Ms. Alicia walked over to join him and LaCrisha. Alicia explained to Charles that the other children in the classroom need her attention as well. She said that after she helped the other kids, she would be ready to play the game with Charles, but he was not “respecting his friends or the classroom.” Ms. LaCrisha then asked Charles to consider other ways he could have handled the situation that would “be kind to our classroom and our friends.” She asked him how he thought it made the other children feel when he knocked over their toys. Charles said the other children were sad. He agreed that he could choose to let Alicia know that he would set up the game and wait until she was ready, or find a friend to play the game with until she was able to play with him. After some prodding by Ms. LaCrisha, Charles cleaned up the areas of the room he had destroyed.

While Charles did receive attention from the teachers, he also missed out on his game time with Ms. Alicia because by the time he had cleaned up the room and discussed his behavior with the teachers, it was time for snack. Charles had missed the morning opportunity to play the game with Alicia (positive attention), but he did get the teacher’s attention by misbehaving. Charles said he also felt bad about destroying the other children’s activities. The teacher’s dialogue with Charles helped him think about how his actions affected his friends, his teachers, himself, and the classroom community. The teachers are hopeful that the next time Charles is not getting the attention he desires from another person, he will choose to handle it in a manner that does not lead him to miss something he really enjoys—like playing a game. They strive to teach Charles socially appropriate ways of getting his needs met that also support his confidence and

intrapersonal skills. This teaching approach nurtures Charles' ability to consider another person's feelings and to form caring relationships.

Learning how to be socially appropriate is a part of growing up. As we grow from children into adults, we continue to have a need for attention, and contribution, and acceptance. Likewise, from time to time, even adults make choices in the heat of the moment that they regret later. Like Charles, adults sometimes fail to receive the attention they desire. For example, a waiter in a restaurant may ignore them. Some adults will handle such a situation by causing a scene that disrupts everyone around them, possibly leading to the adult being asked to leave or possibly jeopardizing the quality of the food they receive. We hope that the adult in the restaurant has learned a socially appropriate way of handling their frustration. Eventually we learn the importance of helping to make sure the needs of people we care about are met.

Noddings accentuates the important act of the one-caring viewing the cared for as their "best self" stating that, "More important than anything else, however, is whether the child is welcome, whether he is seen as a contributing person" (p.65). The La Casa teachers and supervisors also reported a need to feel included. One staff member, for example, said it was important to her that her co-workers did not see her as an "outsider." A culture in which caring attitudes dominate supports everyone's needs getting met. Reportedly, members of the team at La Casa appreciated that management considered teacher's needs. They reported a surge of positive energy when each member of the team began to contribute ideas and helped "make things better." The team accentuated the importance of accepting others and being accepted in a work and learning place like La Casa that is inclusive of all kinds of people—Hispanic, African-American, African,

differently-abled, one-armed, gifted in languages, HIV-positive, a refugee, Muslim, Christian, and human—human—human.

The adult staff member hurts when she believes that a group of co-workers do not like her. Growing from a culture in which individuals contribute independently to accomplish goals into a culture in which individuals build reciprocal caring relationships with others (who then as a team tackle goals) creates an environment in which everyone is more likely to feel included. Each person's success depends upon the success of her co-workers. The truth is, in a work environment that is as relational as early childhood, each person's success is already connected to the success of others. The difference is this: once an individual in the work group invests in the success of her co-workers (rather than feeling threatened by the success of others), she is motivated to help the group, and individuals in the group then do well. This process supports caring relationships because when we experience care, we desire more care, leading to intrinsic motivation that helps caring attitudes continue. The process of nurturing a caring-ethic is much more than a means-to-an-end:

The one-caring has one great aim: to preserve and enhance caring in herself and in those with whom she comes in contact. This [nurturing care] quite naturally becomes the first aim of parenting and of education. It is an aim that is built into the process itself—not one that lies somewhere beyond it. (Noddings, 2003, p. 172)

At La Casa, the process of nurturing the ethical ideal helped usher in an invitation to contribute to the entire La Casa community. La Casa is becoming an environment where everyone is a contributor and is important. The understood value of each person's

contribution is the case not only for children in the classroom setting, but also for the adults in the classroom. For example, in one classroom a teacher was doing most of the “custodial” types of work in the room: changing diapers, cleaning tables, sweeping floors. A cleaning crew handles the custodial duties for the common areas of La Casa (hallways, break room, bathrooms, etc.).

While duties such as changing diapers and keeping the room clean are one component of being a toddler classroom teacher, it is only one part. Who wants to change diapers all day and *not* also participate in planning learning activities for the children, help solve classroom problems, or communicate with parents about the children? Unfortunately, some early childhood classrooms create this work imbalance. This model has one teacher, sometimes called the “lead teacher,” who primarily communicates with parents, makes purchasing decisions, and plans the learning activities for each day. The second teacher, sometimes called the “assistant teacher”, primarily changes diapers, helps with potty-training, and cleans up messes in the room.

Although we do not have “lead teacher” and “assistant teacher” titles at La Casa (everyone is simply “teacher”), the assistant/lead teacher model had been the situation for the past six years of Ms. Tabitha’s employment at La Casa. According to the High/Scope foundation,² the La Casa curriculum framework, teams of teachers, who each contribute to child assessment and activity planning, is essential to the quality early learning environment. The “lead/assistant” teacher model still took place in the toddler room, despite our efforts to offer High/Scope training on team teaching. However, about a

² The High/Scope Research Foundation is a well-known leader in early childhood curriculum that is based on a longitudinal research study that began in 1962, also known as the “Perry Preschool Project.”

month after we began the focus on caring attitudes at La Casa, one of Ms. Tabitha's supervisors noted a change in her contributions:

She is becoming more and more interactive with the children as opposed to doing more of the tasks in the classroom. I think there's more mutual respect for one another. There's just a lot more communication in general versus before when it [Ms. Tabitha's interactions with others] was really distant and just kind of, you know, very business like, and almost had an attitude with me, and now it's a lot more, "Hey, how was your day? Have a good evening. I'll see you later." And just more open communication.

Ms. Tabitha's co-teacher appreciated the evolution of Tabitha's work from custodial task-doer to idea-and-problem-solving contributor. The toddler team became energized. They began holding team meetings on their own, without a supervisor having to schedule it. The team members started to seek feedback regarding their implementation of curriculum, and the team members would engage in discussions about curriculum instead of only listening to the feedback.

Eight months after we started focusing on caring attitudes at La Casa, Ms. Tabitha often leads the classroom team meeting discussion and is quick to address problems and possible solutions while also including the rest of the team in the process. Tabitha benefited from the process of nurturing a caring community, as evidenced by her active involvement with her classroom. And her classroom community benefited from not only the many ideas and actions the toddler teacher contributed, but also from her active role in continuing the process of nurturing the ethical ideal. Noddings (2006) discusses the importance of teacher choice and involvement in curriculum planning stating that

meaningful contribution to the curriculum motivates teachers creating an “intellectual excitement” (p. 343).

This process led to a paradigm shift. Other team members also commented that the work-community culture made a difference in how welcomed a person felt to contribute. This shift was evident in weekly teacher team-meetings as teachers worked collaboratively to discuss and plan curriculum. Consider, for example, Ms. DeDe, a very competent teacher with over 10 years’ experience in early childhood education. She is a young, dedicated early childhood professional who has a very close family. For example, church on Sundays is an all day event that her family shares together. Ms. DeDe and her family even spent one Thanksgiving at LaCasa cooking a meal for the children who lived in the residential program (a group foster care setting) at that time. Ms. DeDe runs a smooth, fun and interesting classroom with a predictable routine that allows for many learning experiences for young children. She has also been a supervisor of a childcare program. She revealed that before our focus on caring attitudes, she felt like—even during team meetings—she was in the room for staffing coverage but not to contribute ideas to the classroom: “it was just like my ideas didn’t matter.” She felt a shift in her own ability to contribute [with the paradigm shift at La Casa,]: “But now, with the caring approach, everybody’s taking it on. It’s just like, ‘Hey, what’s your opinion?’ or ‘What do you want to do’ and ‘This is what I’d like to do.’ And we sit down and talk about it.” This shift affected not only those who had been on the side-lines (of contributing significantly to the classroom), but also people like Ms. Lisette who was already a primary contributor to her classroom community before the focus on caring:

Asking somebody their ideas, if they have ideas [to contribute] to the lesson plan, some people would rather not, but others might want to contribute something and you need to give people that opportunity to do that, and to feel included, and then they're a part of something. This is better for most people.

The team accomplishes more when the entire community feels invited to contribute in multiple ways, and it produces an energy that motivates each individual to continue to think, share, and ask, listen and contribute. For Ms. DeDe, she felt welcomed to contribute; for the toddler teacher, Ms. Tabitha, it was realizing she had important things to contribute; and for Ms. Lisette, it was learning the value in inviting others to contribute. Contribution to the work and learning community created a positive environment at La Casa in which team members are less likely to seek out work elsewhere and more likely to be at work, each day, on time, happy and ready to experience the day in connection with team members, children, and families.

The desire and opportunity to contribute to the management and care of the classroom can extend to the children as well. One day I observed the following in Ms. LaCrisha and Ms. Lisette's classroom:

Ms. LaCrisha is cleaning and rearranging the classroom centers. She begins to move a shelf and five-year-old Billy says, "I want to help," and begins pushing the shelf. Oliver comes over and begins pushing as well. Two other children come over to help. Ms. LaCrisha suggests additional ways each child can contribute: "Billy, [as he picks markers up off of the floor that have fallen underneath the now moved shelf], why don't you go

find a piece of paper and see if these markers still work.” Billy says, “Okay,” and gets a piece of paper, sits down at a table, and begins making marks with each marker, sorting out the ones that work from the ones that don’t. “Aaron,” Ms. LaCrisha says, “Can you push that table?” Aaron begins to push a small, circular table that is used as a dining room table in the home center area.

The room was filled with busy, happy children helping to make their room better by cleaning and rearranging. When Billy offered to help, Ms. LaCrisha could have responded by saying, “No, this is a teacher job, go find a center to play at.” But she didn’t. She allowed each child to help with the project, even though it may have been more efficient for the teacher to rearrange the furniture herself. The children expressed a sense of accomplishment as they pointed out to me, “Look, Ms. Lyn, what I did, I pushed the shelf over there” or “I did the markers and it was a lot of work!” This was an opportunity that the teacher recognized and seized.— but only because she could afford to give the time. Negotiating time and human energy is a balancing act.

Nurturing caring attitudes is complex; it is not just “add caring and stir.” Encouraging everyone to contribute is not without its difficulties. For example, one supervisor was trying to get everyone’s opinion on *everything* before making decisions. She learned that there are some decisions the supervisor alone needs to make about the program decisions that cannot wait for consensus or do not need a consensus. Ms. Shelly is a well-educated woman with a youthful affect. She has a very casual demeanor and dress, and teachers seem to feel she is approachable. Ms. Shelly has an extra soft place in her heart for children who are different. Considering getting consensus from the entire

team before acting on issues, Ms. Shelly noted, “I think it [seeking out staff opinions] can go either way, because when you have too many ideas and it’s hard to narrow them down, it’s overwhelming.”

Furthermore, sometimes supervisors do not get consensus because people do not always agree. Noddings (2003) approaches the subject of conflict and guilt as problems that arise from caring in this context. She notes that conflict may occur due to a discrepancy between (1) what the one-caring feels is best for the cared-for, and what the cared-for feels is best for herself or (2) when what several cared-fors need from the one caring is incompatible. The discrepancy or incompatibility between individuals then turns caring into “cares and burdens” (p.18).

The existence of conflicts that arise in the process of caring or unintended negative results from caring can also be a source of guilt for the one-caring. But as Noddings also notes, this struggle is simply part of caring as a lived ethic. Consider Noddings’s first point regarding the perception of incompatibility. When community members want to contribute in similar ways, or when they need the same things, a harmonious, ideal situation can arise when the supervisor supports the need of the team.

For example, a teaching team could notice that the transition time from lunch to nap is hectic and want to alter their routine by patting children’s backs when the children lie down on their mats. The supervisor could simply say, “Great idea. What do you need from me to support this?” However, in this same situation, one teacher might say that there is not a problem with the transition and that altering it would cause problems. The teacher may believe that children would then become dependant, not being able to fall asleep without having their backs patted. With such different views, there is conflict. The

latter case was an actual situation at La Casa, and the team worked through the conflict by talking about the positive and negative possibilities of each option. Then they negotiated to allow a short story while children transitioned to their nap mats and then to pat the backs of the children who seemed to need it. In this case, recognizing the conflict and assessing the options helped both teachers see that the perspectives were not incompatible.

The second point Noddings makes is about differences regarding the perception of needs. I struggled with handling my own conflicts at work regarding what I thought someone needed and what she thought she needed. While I felt the staff member was excellent at many aspects of her job, I also felt like she was not successful in other work-areas, even after a year of mentorship. I recall telling myself, “I must not be doing this caring thing right,” because if it were the natural reaction, it would be easier. The staff member and I had many conversations regarding her work, and her views and my views about her work. In the end, we agreed to make some adjustments to her job responsibilities. Although the staff member is the one who physically requested the formal change, the alteration was difficult to make because it strained our relationship. Realizing that the caring conflicts and the guilt associated with them are just a part of living an ethic of caring, helped me to resolve an overly self-critical response. As Noddings articulates,

The test of my caring is not wholly in how things turn out; the primary test lies in an examination of what I considered, how fully I received the other, and whether the free pursuit of his projects is partly a result of the completion of my caring in him. (p. 81)

I also realize that I am in the midst of learning how to live a caring ethic and that through practice and experiencing care, I become a more proficient one-caring.

The struggle with conflict and guilt as it relates to living a caring-ethic stimulates a constant consideration of behaviors and attitudes. A caring-ethic is not lazily lived nor is it simple to understand, and mistakes will occur, but intentions are important. Noddings comments, “There is no unbridgeable chasm between what I am and what I will be. I build the bridge to my future self” (p. 102). This statement highlights the importance of the process of living a caring ethic. Accepting the risk of feeling the conflict and guilt associated with caring means that when I reflect on my actions at the end of the day, I reflect knowing that my intentions were to have a caring attitude in my interactions with my co-workers: a caring attitude throughout the contributions, the difficult conversations, the disagreements, and the journey for better understanding, building, brick by brick, that bridge on which I continually walk.

Teamwork

I feel like there is a lot less complaining and a lot more proactive interactions among the teachers. I feel like there's a lot more of a sense of support and if someone is having a hard day other people are willing to step in and pick up the slack to help accommodate the person who is struggling.

--Shelly, Supervisor

We agreed as a team to try to keep a caring-ethic in constant consideration. Teachers and supervisors agreed to do our best to assume that others have good intentions and to listen to others with the purpose of understanding their point of view. We agreed that it was okay to disagree and that it was okay to approach one another for explanations

of the other's point of view, so that, even if we still disagreed, we could leave with a better understanding of the other person's perspective. We discussed these two items in staff meetings, we held a training session in which we practiced possible caring responses to conflicts, and we all encouraged multiple dialogues between teachers and teachers, supervisors and supervisors, and teachers and supervisors regarding caring in our preschool community. The continued focus on caring attitudes set the stage for what Noddings (2003) calls "practice in caring...a form of apprenticeship" (p. 122) and a continued opportunity for us all to learn from one another.

This concentration on caring had a positive effect on teamwork. Just like the genuine conversations that began to take place, a genuine team approach to work load and problem solving became evident. Several teachers mentioned that they noticed everyone contributing, and those who did not contribute before mentioned that they now feel like they *could* contribute to the team. As Ms. Shelly noted,

I've seen a lot more team work during nap time—of two people, one working on the daily sheets and one working on anecdotal notes, but they are both working on classroom related things as opposed to sitting around and talking about whatever, or going to another room and talking about whatever.

This change was an evolution of sorts, because at La Casa we had always tried to encourage teamwork. Ms. Devon had some thoughts regarding team approaches. Ms. Devon is a teacher who articulates her words slowly, and clearly, having worked with many children who have hearing disorders. She has a soft, hushed, and sweet, high-pitched voice. Ms. Devon seems to be in constant consideration of the blessings in her

life. She is the kind of person I imagined would have few conflicts in her relationships. As Ms. Devon mentioned, “There’s such a team process that happens. The fact that there is no specific lead teacher shows this. In all of our literature it’s ‘teams.’” This comment highlights the existing focus on teamwork and the growing process that happens when people on the team strive to relate to one another with a caring attitude.

Individual contributions for the purpose of creating a better community increase the group’s cohesiveness, something essential for an early learning environment to have low staff turnover and happy, productive teachers (Bloom 1997). Ms. LaCrisha commented on this, saying:

Everybody’s just trying to do better, as far as, like, where we were lacking on the anecdotal [observation notes] and coming up with better a plan for everything, and just being consistent with our schedule. Everybody’s showing that they really want to do it by just asking, “What are you going do here?” “Can I get this for you?” You know, just pitching in to help out. Everybody’s working together. I mean, not even in just our own rooms—we’re going out into the other rooms. We gave Ms. Tabitha and them some home center stuff, because they didn’t have anything. They were using a box. So we gave them a table. I told Ms. Tabitha I would help her take that pencil thing off the wall.

Teamwork, sharing of ideas, and listening to the ideas of others has inspired a realization within our preschool community that allowing for multiple possibilities is inherent in our work. Noddings (2006) asserts that caring leaders should be teachers who help others

problematize issues and open spaces to question and to pose new ways of doing things.

She says that leaders

can listen, ask probing questions and lead discussions. They can make it both comfortable and rewarding for teachers to seek help instead of trying to hide their weaknesses, doubts and failures. They can serve as models of critical thinking by showing that they continually question even the methods and procedures that they themselves have officially advocated.

(p. 344)

Having some guidelines is necessary to form and organize program operations. However, if a policy or process does not make sense in a particular situation, teacher-leaders should pursue alternative solutions. Teamwork supported the teacher-leader dynamic.

For example, families at La Casa are told to bring their children to preschool dressed in their “day clothes” and out of their “night clothes.” When little Jessica came in several days in a row dressed in her pajamas, the teachers got her ready for the day: changed her clothes, brushed her hair. In the past, the supervisor would have dictated the response to this type of situation and likely would not accept the child into care until her parents had dressed her for school. However, this time, the teaching team and supervisor discussed the situation, deciding that because they realized that the grandmother was having a lot of other stress in her life, for now, they would choose to support the family without a conversation about the pajamas. They agreed that, yes, children should come in ready for the day and, yes, they should accept Jessica into care in her pajamas. In this case, the team sought out possible options, opening a space for creative solutions by questioning procedures rather than simply implementing them.

Interestingly, though the staff had not talked with her family in regard to the pajama-situation, the following day, Jessica came in fully dressed. Reflecting on this coincidental event, Ms. Devon said that she realized, “This is what’s best for *this* child, *this* family, *this* situation, and tomorrow will be different.” Ms. Devon shared what she has learned about team approaches to policy and procedure issues saying:

The absolutes, I don’t think they work in early childhood. To be in a team where we just don’t deal with absolutes I think helps a lot. But having, “Well I’ve been the lead teacher” for however many years, and “We always do Halloween at the end of October and if this parents doesn’t celebrate it then they can just not be here for our Halloween party.” That kind of stuff, isn’t productive.

This kind of questioning and flexibility is a big leap for many people in our setting. Unfortunately, preschools often have the “this child, this family, does not fit our program” syndrome, which is evident in the number of children who are “kicked out” of preschool, often due to child behavior or family non-compliance issues (Jacobson, 2005). According to a study completed in 2003 by Yale Child Study Center researcher Walter Gilliam, for every 1,000 students enrolled in state pre-k programs, 6.67 are expelled as compared to 2.09 of every 1,000 school-age children. The numbers are even greater in private community preschools. When I worked at a for-profit preschool company, directors often asked families to find another childcare program. Some families of “well-behaved” children threatened to sue or leave the program if an “ill-behaved” child remained at the preschool. We can do better. I am not suggesting that early care and education programs disavow rules and expectations; again, these are essential. I am

suggesting that we allow space for dialogue and allow opportunities for multiple possibilities to play out, especially when doing so poses very little risk.

We must value teacher-director relationships that encourage teachers to contribute their minds and spirits to the program. The manner in which supervisors support teachers is important as Noddings (2006) articulates: “Caring leaders invite participation and responsible experimentation. They avoid coercion whenever possible” (p. 344). A truly strong supervisor avoids an oversimplified, black and white, right and wrong, rule-driven approach to supervision and instead lives a thoughtful, caring–focused approach. As one early childhood education researcher noted, “Administrators seeking to exercise this type of power find, in caring, a useful and appropriate ethical perspective, for carings’ emphasis on cooperation and supportive interactions is central to the concept of facilitation” (Beck 1992, p. 485). Although a caring leader may necessarily occupy the position with greater power on the team, she should think of herself as an *equal* part of the team, welcoming contributions and criticisms from each team member in order to nurture teamwork in a caring environment.

Handling the hard times

I’m not here for the money, and the perks while they are fabulous, aren’t earth shattering, but the relationships are.

--Ms. Devon, Teacher

Difficult times are a part of life. Like many managers of early childhood programs struggling to make financial ends meet during tough economic times, the management team at La Casa was asked by the Executive Director to cut staffing hours. We discussed many ways of approaching the problem:

“We could cut everybody’s hours by the same amount and spread it out evenly.”

“We could lay off some people.”

“We could tell everyone they are laid off, and then invite everyone to re-interview.”

None of these suggestions seemed right, especially considering our focus on nurturing the ethical ideal within a caring environment.

Then Ms. Mona chimed in. Many people at La Casa have referred to Ms. Mona as “a strong black woman.” She has strong opinions. She can handle supervisory issues with a clear confidence built upon years of experience in crisis management, scheduling, and problem-solving. Ms. Mona is usually clear if she agrees or disagrees with you. If she has questions, she will ask in a direct, matter-of-fact way. Ms. Mona negotiates between a strict-mother manner of working with teachers and teams and a softer grandmotherly manner in supporting staff members in their struggles to become better teachers. Considering our dilemma, Ms. Mona suggested, “Let’s look at this in a non-traditional way. We’re open seven days a week; if we allow people to work non-traditional hours, and just cut back hours from a few part-time staff and not fill any open positions, we’ll be fine.” The management team proceeded to meet with each and every individual to explain the situation and ask about her ability to work alternative hours. The response was pretty positive, at first, although the more some people thought about it, the more some realized it would not work for them personally. The more others thought about it, the more they fell in love with the idea of a new schedule and did not want to change it back. The supervisors continued to talk with and get feedback from the rest of the team. Discussions went on for days. In the end, some people had changed schedules and others did not.

While everybody did not get everything they wanted, I do think most people experienced the cutbacks as one teacher did who commented, “Through all of the changes, my specific needs were kept in mind.” This approach took longer than it would have if the supervisor just sat down and “fixed” the problem by putting pencil to paper and then announcing the new schedules, but in the end, we still had a happy, cohesive team. One supervisor reflected,

Changes like that... with the way [the economy] is, are going to be hard anyway...; if we had not been in that mindset [of caring] and we would have just cut hours and rearranged people and not had those conversations, I think it would have been disastrous. You know, I mean it was hard, but it wasn't disastrous.

Each supervisor invested a lot of time negotiating what would work for each individual in consideration of the program needs as a whole. I asked each person I interviewed to reflect on that particular event. Each teacher, having experienced past staffing cutbacks, appreciated the care the supervisors took in handling the situation. Ms. Devon responded,

The fact that none of the staff members quit is kind of the answer to that. I mean seriously. Watching as my hours went from 40 to 30 to 20 to who knows what this week will be, and understanding that that's not how I want it, and I pretty much suspect that's not how you want it or how Matt [the executive director] wants it even, but that this is where we are, and this is what's (A) financially sound and (B) best for the resources we have now including the children and the families, and realizing that three months from now, six months from now, that will swing the other way.

Situations like this one require the supervisor to make a decision on how to handle things based on many factors, including how much time is available to manage such an event. When an event will significantly affect people's lives and relationships, it is especially important to view the handling of the situation through a caring lens. Choosing to have individual conversations regarding the adjusted schedule was not easy or efficient. In the long run, however, the dialogical opportunity saved relationships and the quality of the program. While this process was time-consuming, in the long run we saved time because we did not need to hire new staff—no one quit. We retained our relationships among staff members because there was no negative gossiping and confrontation over unfairness. And the quality of the program progressed as teachers continued to contribute in positive ways.

People in the workplace are more likely to feel cared about if team members—especially supervisors who may alter things like work schedules—take time to learn what is important to the individual members of the group. Learning each person's opinion and preference can become a real management dilemma, though. I have witnessed programs in which the very sweet center director tries to accommodate everyone's wishes and ends up with five too many people between the hours of 8:00-2:00 and five too few people between the hours of 2:00-6:30. Just as the classroom teacher has the whole classroom to consider, the program supervisor has the whole program to consider. Decisions need to take the entire program into consideration, but those decisions can occur in an environment in which caring relationships exist. Likewise, a caring leader will have difficult conversations with teachers. A caring approach does not mean a loopy-goopy,

unsafe, anything-goes environment. Noddings (2003) writes about teacher/child relationships in a way that supports this idea:

The receptivity of the one-caring need not lead to permissiveness nor to an abdication of responsibility for conduct and achievement. Rather, it maintains and enhances the relatedness that is fundamental to human reality and, in education, it sets the stage for the teacher's effort in maintaining and increasing the child's receptive capacity. (p. 60)

Caring attitudes foster relatedness between individual people that overrides the simple, tangible, immediate issue. So while Ms. Devon, and others like her, may be a little sad that her hours temporarily changed, she is mostly glad for the connections she has at La Casa and willing to go through the hard times with the other members of our team.

Trans-reciprocity

That's why I love this program: I love to see the care-giving from the children and staff happening to everybody at the same time.

--Preschool Teacher

Many months into our focus on nurturing caring attitudes, La Casa team members were more likely to assume good intentions from co-workers and seek to understand their points of view. I was observing the toddler classroom team recently during the morning activity time and returned during naptime to offer feedback on child-teacher interactions. The observation went very well. I was impressed by the cooperation among the three teachers and the smooth, malleable, yet predictable way they managed the class. At the end of the feedback session, I asked the teachers how they felt about their classroom team. They told me each week during their team meetings they have all become very

comfortable asking one another about things they may disagree about. They also said that they are equally at ease telling the rest of the team their point of view when asked. Ms.

Tabitha reiterated,

We all agree that we want to be able to share information from ourselves and ask information from each other. We don't get offended when someone on the team asks us about something because we want to understand. We all do this for each other.

Caring interactions lead to an understanding via a form of empathy or *engrossment* (p. 17). Engrossment is different from the simple empathy of *projecting* oneself onto another person's place and is instead more akin to "receiving" (p. 30) the other. Such empathy leads to "engrossment" (p. 30). Ideally this caring relation is returned, becoming a reciprocated experience. When one person responds to an act of caring by reciprocating a caring attitude, the caring is then completed (Noddings, 2003). Reciprocal caring in relationships affected responses among teachers who developed a caring relationship. As Ms. Devon said,

Knowing how I'm treated and then reciprocating that onto other co-workers, there's a real...friendship...; it's more than we're just work buddies. So what does that do for me and Ms. Antoinette? Yea, I want to help you out! Or, no, I don't want to spread that rumor about you.

Noddings (2003) proposes that a caring relationship leads to a reciprocal situation between the cared-for and the one-caring. Ideally, a recursive caring cycle occurs in which the one being cared for recognizes and feels warmed by the caring, and the one caring, in turn, feels motivated (intrinsically) to continue to care. This intrinsic

motivation also extends to the one being cared for, who may then contribute to the relationship in caring ways. As the above quotation from Ms. Devon above exemplifies, because I felt a connection with someone when they were so kind to me yesterday, today that connection remains and in return, I choose to be caring toward them.

Ms. Shelly commented on the positive effect she believes this transference of caring will have: “The [caring] skills they learn here will carry over into the community. I think interactions with parents has also been affected. It just kind of has this trickling affect.” The caring attitudes became evident throughout the preschool community. Whereas reciprocity is giving back a caring attitude to the one who gave it, what I have noticed at La Casa is more like trans-reciprocity; the transferring of the caring attitude shown toward someone other than the person who initially approached with the caring attitude.

Daniel Goleman, in *Emotional Intelligence*, says that emotions are contagious. The La Casa team members reported an emotional dynamic in their caring experiences clearly connected to Goleman’s ideas about emotional contagion. Ms. Sara commented about the contagious nature of caring. Ms. Sara is comforting to children, often offering a warm hug, encouraging words, or insisting in a slow, calm, and even voice that a child follow the rules—again, and again, and again. She is still on the young side of life, yet has grandmotherly demeanor, her dark brown arms often reaching down to bring a toddler into her lap. She is one of the most empathetic people I have ever known and seems to internalize what other people are feeling. Ms. Sara has worked at La Casa long enough to have experienced almost every transition the program has made. The older she

gets, the more patience she garners for children—and the more exasperation she experiences with adults who fall short of her high, but appropriate, expectations.

Ms. Sara said that when teachers, support staff, and supervisors are caring toward one another, it “spreads all over everybody else, like butter.” She also said,

You may come in feeling a little bit down, but once you come in and somebody’s like (cheerfully), “Good morning! Hey how are you?” and they’re genuine, they say, “How was your day? How was your night? Are you okay?” Then that person, it kind of rubs off on him, and they find themselves (cheerfully saying), “Hey!” and just doing it, without thinking.

Thoughts just go from one person to another. So I believe it’s contagious. Some people interviewed felt that experiencing a caring environment at work positively affected their relationships at home. For example Ms. Sara said, “You know, I’ve been at work, I’ve been getting all this love, and all of this, and then I can go home and conquer whatever’s outside the door, outside of La Casa. I just think it filters over.” In simple terms, caring creates caring.

Consideration of the other person’s situation has also extended into how teachers handle issues with parents. Ms. Devon explained, “There has been discussion in team meetings like, ‘What do you think is going on with that family?’ vs. ‘Well, if that were my child, I would ___.’” A vast difference exists between *judging* families and their choices and trying to *understand* families and their choices. Too often, in childcare settings, we judge moms negatively if they leave their child in care while they go to the gym, or bring their child in with messy hair, or always pay their tuition late (especially if

they drive a nice car). Obviously no one should ignore abusive or neglectful situations; however, giving families the benefit of the doubt can yield positive results.

For example, there was one family at La Casa who brought their baby in filthy on a daily basis, often in an old, very dirty, and wet diaper. Some staff members made judgmental comments, such as: “If you don’t care enough about your baby to keep her clean, you shouldn’t have babies in the first place.” We are lucky at La Casa to have social workers and a nurse on staff, which is extremely atypical in a childcare setting. The social worker sat down with the family to ask how they were doing and to mention we had noticed the baby coming in quite dirty each day. This family had a complicated situation, but among other things, the family had been living without water for several weeks and they were having severe financial problems. They anticipated that they would soon be living out of their car. Afraid to talk with anyone, the family worried they might lose their baby to Child Protective Services (CPS). They loved their baby, and were good people who found themselves in a bad situation. The social worker connected the family with community resources that reestablished water service. The immediate help and resources enabled the family to better care for the child. Trying to *understand* families and assuming the good intentions of families affects parent-teacher and parent-supervisor relationships. This caring—not judging—approach builds relationships, fostering trust and diminishing fear.

The trust that builds in the caring work environment enables staff to take risks, like the risk of trying something new. For example, Ms. Tabitha has worked for years in an environment in which children in her class speak Spanish, yet she has not learned or used any Spanish herself. Recently, on her own, Ms. Tabitha began to learn some Spanish

words in order to better communicate with Veronica, a child who is blind and bi-lingual. “Si, bien,” Ms. Tabitha said as Veronica pushed the button that makes music come out of a toy. Another risk might be asking a person about her point of view when you are worried that you might have a disagreement. Taking risks can be scary, but can have positive results. As Ms. Shelly said,

I think when I first started here, there was a lot more tension, anxiety, and fear among the staff that I feel has changed. In the staff-to-staff relationships I feel like there is a lot more communication and drawing on one another’s strengths.

Trans-reciprocity extends the benefits from a caring relationship between two individuals to the entire community, especially when many individuals are living with a caring ethic. Trans-reciprocity is like a snowball that gets larger and larger with granules of care as relationships among all constituents—staff—children—parents—and community are all affected by the joy caring relationships produce. The workplace community at La Casa has become energized as teachers take risks that develop into valuable contributions and also caring relationships.

Summary

In this section, I have discussed contribution and teachers who either felt more welcomed to contribute or more capable of contributing after staff members began focusing on caring attitudes. Teachers also supported children in their interests in helping in the classroom, resulting in self-competent statements from preschoolers. As Noddings (2003) articulates and we experienced at La Casa, sometimes caring can manifest as

“cares and burdens” (p. 37) when the one-caring feels conflict or guilt due to either incompatible needs or a differing perception of need regarding the cared-for/s.

Teaching teams began to work together to fulfill classroom needs and discovered that multiple possibilities are acceptable. The La Casa supervisors avoided coercion and found that hard times, while difficult, were easier to negotiate with caring attitudes. I considered Noddings’s belief that a caring leadership does not lead to permissiveness, but does invite members of the team to question policies and procedures. Extending Noddings’s beliefs about leadership, the La Casa management team invited critical thinking from all members of the community. Lastly, the La Casa team experienced reciprocal caring behaviors, a key component of Noddings’s caring-ethic, that also translated into trans-reciprocity when staff began to have caring attitudes toward team members or family members who were not approaching them in the same way due to a “contagious” caring situation.

II. Complicating Caring Relationships:

We may become dangerously self-righteous when we perceive ourselves as holding a precious principle not held by the other. The other may then be devalued and treated “differently.” (2003, p.5)

--Nel Noddings

Noddings articulates the value of the one-caring striving to understand the cared-for. She believes that all members of an education setting should be teacher-learners to facilitate a teacher’s ability to understand the student and teach him/her well. She acknowledges the power differences that exist between teacher and student and negotiates the need for the unequal components of the relationship. Noddings suggests

that while power differences between student and teacher are inherent in the relationship, the focus of leaders in a school should be on maintaining a caring-ethic through contribution.

Noddings focuses heavily on her idea of “engrossment” (2003, p.30) and the development of a relationship as one-caring comes to know a cared-for. Noddings highlights the reciprocal nature of caring and the motivation that results. She is clear in her assertion that a caring-ethic cannot be prescribed, but that it must be lived and considered as situations, events, and people affect the caring response. Noddings asserts that believing others are motivated by good intentions helps support a caring-attitude.

Many events that occurred at La Casa connected to the components of Noddings’s caring-ethic stated above. For example, when teachers began to understand one another they became more forgiving of perceived discrepancies and differences. When teachers were bothered by another person’s actions, they would ask their co-worker to help them understand and vice versa. The reciprocal nature of this grace led to caring-relationships between teachers as they began to work with one another in a new dynamic. Differences of various kinds created a challenge in developing caring relationships between adults including; race & culture differences, ability differences, teaching/pedagogical differences, and power differences.

Race and culture differences

I'd say the most recent challenge I've had has been with people on staff who come from a very different perspective than I do. I don't want to say it's a race difference, or a cultural difference. I don't know. I mean it's just, maybe a personality difference?

--Ms. Shelly, Supervisor

When asked about barriers to caring relationships during our interview, Ms. Sara gave an example of a conflict many years ago between an African-American group and a Hispanic group of La Casa teachers. She reported that cultural cliques formed in which one group would judge and criticize the wrong doings of the other group. For example, she said the African-American teachers would complain that the Hispanic teachers coddled the children too much, “You can’t come in here and ‘sugar, honey pie’ [to the children in a soft, high-pitched tone], because you need to get down and say, ‘Johnny____[],’” Ms. Sara recalled speaking in a stern, lower-pitched tone. “But,” Ms. Sara said, “the Hispanic women would say, ‘We’ll we’re used to doing it [caring for children] this way!’ and the arguing back and forth would ensue.”

According to Ms. Sara the Hispanic teachers eventually worked primarily with the infants and toddlers, pampering and coddling them and the African-American teachers worked mostly with children who were two years and older, encouraging independence and life-skills. Ms. Sara continued discussing the results of this cultural conflict,

A clash started between everybody. Everybody started being in cliques and it was like, “Well all of us Hispanics, we’re all over here together, and we don’t want to deal with ya’ll.” And, “Well, we’re African-American and we’re in this clique, and we don’t like ya’ll ‘cause ya’ll think you are better than us.”

The staff members were polarized by the differences in race and culture. In addition, Ms. Sara reported the African-American group often felt the Hispanic group believed that the Caucasian administrators were always right “because they were white” and in charge. She continued, “I just think sometimes different races feel like if you are white then you

are right.” The teachers resented the educated, white administrators who were leading a program of primarily African-American and Hispanic children. The teachers thought the children needed guidance from adults who understood their culture and communities. Ms. Sara said teachers believed that the white administrators gained their knowledge from books while both the Hispanic and African-American teachers gained their knowledge from experience.

The differences each group had in their response to the white administrators fueled the racial rift, further complicating a situation in which all groups together were trying to care for young children. Other teachers interviewed indicated that race differences can be a barrier to forming comfortable relationships between supervisors and teachers because people of the same race are more likely to understand each other due to both shared historical experiences and shared socio-cultural expectations.

I personally recall being a new, white supervisor facing the sea of differences that is and was La Casa 14 years ago, not understanding at all what the issues were between the groups or why there was animosity toward me and the other supervisor, who was also white and who had a Masters level degree in human development. In addition to the two direct childcare supervisors (myself and co-worker) at that time being white, our direct boss was also white and had her Masters degree in counseling. So, at that time, the entire management team was Caucasian while the entire teaching team was African-American and Hispanic. I was naïve and had not yet learned how to genuinely come to understand someone who is different from me. At that time, I felt it was best to be “color blind” (Williams, 1997) which made me “blind” in many ways. For example, I was blind in my understanding of the complications between racial groups that surrounded me and also

blind in the depth of contributions that teachers from each of those groups were capable of providing. In addition, I had not given much consideration to the privileges afforded to me because of my race. When I chose to ignore differences, I simultaneously (even if unconsciously) allowed for conflicts, whether overt or covert ones, to undermine the culture of La Casa and the relationships between people who worked at the program. I negotiated between feeling too afraid to understand the issue and feeling like it was not my business to understand the issue. I rationalized if the conflict was not something I could fix, it was not something I should get involved in.

I attempted to gloss over conflicts by establishing a common ground and trying to refocus everyone on the needs of the children, even as I felt my own distancing differences from the rest of the group. Establishing a common purpose is valuable (see Section III of this thesis), but when there are heavy, negative, underlying issues, differences need to be understood. People need to be understood. Differences, especially when they get in the way of a caring early childhood environment, need acknowledgment and understanding—not glossing over, or *ignor-ances*. Noddings (2003) believes that differences between two people in a caring relationship must be understood in order for one person to meet the needs of the other person as one-caring. She states (2003),

It is only through inclusion that the parent or teacher can practice confirmation. I must see the cared-for as he is and as he might be—as he envisions his best self—in order to confirm him...It is an attitude that both accepts and confirms. It does not accept and shrug off. It accepts, embraces, and leads upward. It questions, it responds, it sympathizes, it challenges, it delights. (67)

Although here Noddings focuses on a teacher-student relationship, she is also discussing an “unequal” meeting between one-caring and one who is cared-for and applies this thought to a professional-client relationship, giving many adult-adult examples. While a caring relationship can bring an “unequal” relationship toward friendship, teacher-student and supervisor-employee relationships are as Noddings (2003) states, “necessarily and generously unequal” (67).

In contrast, sometimes we meet people who we immediately understand to some degree. Perhaps we grew up in similar neighborhoods, practice the same religion, are the same gender or ethnic group, or went through a similar experience, such as divorce or playing the same high school sport. These are ties that bind people together. Conversely, the fewer ties there are between two people, the more opportunities there are for misunderstandings. Perceived similarities could, however, also mislead one to believe a greater commonality exists than is the case. It is important therefore for one-caring to be open to understanding another person from that person’s perspective instead of imposing their own point of view about the other person. Commonalities can, however, create comfort in the hope that a shared experience exists.

Our challenge is to take advantage of occasions in our preschool community to create ties that will bind us together. Developing relationships between adults in an early childhood program is essential because of the impact relationships have on not only our workplace and the adults involved, but because of the impact adult relationships in particular have on the children’s learning environment. After all, experts in the field recognize that caring relationships are particularly important in early care and education communities (e.g., Baker & Pettit, 2004; Brazelton, 1992; Hohmann & Weikart, 2002;

Perry 2002; and Swick, 2006). If we can overcome our discomfort with differences we will discover that most of us have a very important commonality—to care and to be cared for (Noddings 2003). Once this reality is realized, differences become opportunities to broaden our knowledge, acceptance, and celebration of people who are not like us.

Gender differences are less problematic because we are mostly women in education (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007), however, relationships between the ethnic and racial groups continue to present challenges from time to time. For example, when Ms. Shelly, a Caucasian supervisor, was bothered by the work of an African-American teacher, she was uncomfortable about following through with her concern. While Ms. Shelly is comfortable working with children who are different, she found someone with a similar background as her own to discuss her dilemma in approaching the African-American teacher:

I don't want to come across as "here's this uppity white girl coming in to tell me how to talk to kids." I *really* want it to come across as I believe that there is a different way of approaching the situation and a different way that you can communicate with these kids that is more beneficial to them, and these are the reasons why. But part of my hesitation in doing that is I have had another conversation with one of the other white women on staff and just really talking to her about it because we come from similar [backgrounds]....and I asked her, "Help me to process through this. Is this my own personal issue? Is there really something different or wrong about the way she's interacting with these kids? And it was interesting because she said, "You know, that particular staff person is

probably the least irritating as far as her tone of voice...because I think her intentions are good, it's just that her manner is different." It is hard for me to parcel out what is my own personal issue versus something that is directly related to the program and doesn't match with our goals and intentions. There are more layers to it than just dealing with diaper changing.

Ms. Shelly was truly bothered by this internal conflict about child/teacher interactions and gave it thought for weeks. During this time, the unaddressed issue created a tense atmosphere in the relationship between Ms. Shelly and the teacher. The teacher could sense there was a problem and felt it was something personal; she felt like Ms. Shelly did not like her. Ms Shelly, meanwhile, was struggling with how to nurture a caring relationship with a teacher (with whom that type of relationship did not yet exist) and address her own questions about the teacher's behavior. Eventually, when another conflict arose that forced a conversation between them, the teacher and Ms. Shelly were both able to share their points of view about several things. Ms. Shelly gave the floor to the teacher first and tried very hard to understand and respond to her viewpoint, and the teacher did the same thing, listening to Ms. Shelly's point of view. After this experience, although the relationship was still a bit shaky, they began to relate to each other with a caring attitude fueled by understanding, a shared experience, and growing empathy.

Adult responses to such differences demonstrate to children how to handle these types of situations. Adults at La Casa have high hopes for the way children process and hold on to the experience of differences at the school as Ms. Shelly expressed,

I think so many preschool environments, or school environments or neighborhoods are probably pretty homogenous and the families' friends are probably homogenous too. But to give them a safe place of modeling that if you have Down syndrome, or HIV, or are missing an arm, if you're Hispanic, or African, or Caucasian, it's all acceptable and appreciated here. And so yes, I think there's a big impact on what we're doing here in the larger community. And I hope that these kids leave here and even if it's on a subconscious level, as they grow up, remember who their friends were when they were at La Casa.

Ms. Shelly suggests that the unusual diversity at La Casa affords the children an opportunity to come to know that caring relationships with people who are different is possible. The hope of the supervisor that the children hold onto that knowledge as they experience more homogeneous communities highlights the value given to such an experience at La Casa. While being comfortable with other adults, or sometimes even children, who are different does not always come easy for adults at the preschool, the knowledge that it can be so is a gift to be both received and given once experienced.

Ability differences

I think it was hard for the teachers to push through the initial fear, but once they did, I think they realized, it [including children who are differently-abled in the classroom] would work. It's hard and it's a little bit different, and you have to re-think how you do things, but it's possible.

--Shelly, Supervisor

The teachers in the multi-age room (children ages two to five years) were not so sure about a new child who was about to join their class. Their classroom already consisted of two children who are autistic, a child with an immune disorder, a child with emotional disturbances, many children with histories of abuse and neglect, and multiple children with diagnosed attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They had their hands full. So when the management team told the teaching team about Chrissy—a three-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, who was in a wheelchair, needed spoon and bottle feeding, and required diaper changes—the teachers thought, “no way.” In fact, in our interview, Ms. LaCrisha said to me, “I was mad at you. I thought, we already have these other kids in here, what if they hurt her?”

I was surprised when Ms. LaCrisha said this in the interview because I did not perceive that reaction from her. In addition to Ms. LaCrisha’s concerns about Chrissy joining the class, another teacher in the room initially told the supervisor that she didn’t think it would work and that it was a bad idea. Ms. Shelly, however, felt very strongly that Chrissy should be with her peer group and not with the infants:

I thought it would be good for her and for the teachers. She will never walk, or talk like others, and she will grow up in a world where she will always be different, and so why not give her the opportunity to have an impact on these kids and vice versa. Instead of putting her in the nursery because she’s tiny or whatever.

In this situation, it would have been easy for Ms. Shelly to use her power to force the situation or to do the really easy thing and just put Chrissy with the babies. Of course, a power-play by the supervisor would likely lead to an unsuccessful situation that could

potentially lead to turnover in staff. The relationship between Ms. Shelly and Ms. LaCrisha and the other teachers would suffer because the teachers would resent the power-push of the supervisor. In addition, the La Casa teachers already carry an emotional burden associated with working among children who have survived traumatic early childhoods (Lucas, 2006). When teachers experience the stress of vicarious trauma in combination with an unsupportive supervisory response, they are likely to feel resentful and may quit their job.

Ms. Shelly approached the teaching team to find out what the issues were. One of the teachers replied, “I don’t know about this [adding a child with cerebral palsy into the room]. I just don’t think it’s [an inclusive environment] going to work.”

Ms. Shelly responded, “What are your actual concerns?”

“Well changing her diaper and supervising her and all of the other kids,” the teacher said.

They proceeded to discuss every fear and every uncertainty, one by one until they had exhausted the concerns. In the end, the teaching team agreed to allow children like Chrissy into the classroom and Ms. Shelly agreed to offer herself as a resource and to try something different if inclusion did not work.

On Chrissy’s first day, she was first taken to the toddler room. Ms. LaCrisha described telling the children in her class about Chrissy: “I just told them we were going to have a new friend in class and that she was in a wheelchair, and she may not be able to talk and stuff, but that she was really just like all of them.” Ms. LaCrisha brought three children with her to go and get Chrissy from the toddler room. Ms. LaCrisha asked one of the children “David, can you tell which person is Chrissy based on what I told you about

her?” David walked over to Chrissy and said, “This is her.” The other children helped to carry Chrissy’s bags and blankets and escorted their new friend to their class.

Since then, the children and the teachers have been extraordinarily caring and helpful to Chrissy. Even the most aggressive children in the class make it a point to gently check on Chrissy, to help give her a bottle, push her wheelchair, talk to her, read her stories, and include her in their day. Ms. Sara remarked,

The kids will brush Chrissy’s hair back, or even when Jay [another child in a wheelchair with cerebral palsy] is there, they will feed Jay with pretend food and stuff. Jay will be smiling. And then the kids will go over and read to them [Chrissy and Jay]. And I just think that’s really neat, because I just think if you start it now, then as adults you’re not going to have people who have to go through life feeling different. And you may think they don’t know, Chrissy or Jay, that people are treating them different, but I believe they do.

I have seen Chrissy respond to these moments with a smile. She gets the biggest smile of all during circle time when, as she lays on a bean bag, the kids all sing as the teacher helps lift Chrissy slightly upward, “Chrissy, Chrissy, jump up and down, jump up and down, Chrissy, Chrissy, jump up and down, then sit, right back down.” The teachers also featured Chrissy as the “artist of the week,” posting a picture made by Chrissy who, assisted by a teacher and several children, made paint prints with her bare feet.

Ms. LaCrisha said in reflection, “It worked; it really worked. The whole class is working together to take care of Chrissy.” Ms. Shelly realized, too, that although she personally has a lot of experience working with children who have significant

developmental needs, for many teachers this is new. Ms. Shelly reflected on this situation after Chrissy had successfully become a part of the classroom community: “I think just equipping the teachers to be able to handle that situation [is important] because it’s scary if you’ve never experienced it before and there are a lot of unknowns.”

A constant openness about learning how to accommodate children with various needs is imperative when nurturing a community that has children who present with new conditions on a regular basis. Staff at La Casa have become much more inquisitive when a new child joins the program with an unfamiliar diagnosis. The quest for knowledge and accommodation instead of a quest for exclusion—to figure out all of the reasons a child’s placement in a classroom will not work—is a positive direction for teacher energies to go.

Adults abilities also vary. When Chrissy was about to enter the program for example, Ms. Shelley, who has many years experience working with children who have neurological disorders, advocated for Chrissy’s place in the multi-age classroom. The teachers, however, had a different ability-level in teaching children with neurological disorders—they had never worked with a child who had cerebral palsy. In addition, our intelligence profiles vary,³ some teachers are better versed in brain development and are proficient at planning experiences that are responsible to the key experiences young children need (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002). Other teachers are more artistic while still others are more socially capable. Learning how to handle ability differences between staff members at La Casa has also been a challenge at times. Adults tend to judge each other based on their own history and life experience. People with closed world-views can

³ Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences theory suggests eight intelligence domains: linguistic, logical, kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal

create unfair judgment on another human being who has their own life history, a more appropriate context to use when considering that person's actions and behaviors.

Reacting negatively to others before learning about them can create a strain on relationships. If one staff member comes across as socially rough and uncaring to others, for example, that affects the way other people in the community relate to her. One name staff member recalled her initial feelings about working at La Casa years ago:

When I first started working here compared to now there was a lot more tension in the classrooms and there were certain classrooms where people were literally afraid to go in there because of the way teachers interacted with them or with the children. It was just this, "please don't make me go in there." And I felt it too, even just having to go in there to find out how many kids were in the classroom. There were certain classrooms where I would have to stand outside the door and say, "okay, I'm going in now..." which is ridiculous, it's a preschool environment, it should be fun and it should be caring and it should be supportive and loving and all of these different things that we talk about, but it wasn't necessarily being played out on a daily basis.

Tensions between adults result from misunderstandings and false assumptions that then lead to fears of what the other person will think, of conflict, of being "put down" or reprimanded, or of not fitting in. For example, one staff member commented about her previous supervisor, "Anytime I was called into the office it was like, 'oh no, what's gonna happen?'" The management team worked purposefully to limit exchanges that would feel intimidating and tried to remember that ability level for addressing

problems vary. For example, if we needed to meet with a teacher in private, we began meeting in a room that is sometimes used for therapy, but is often available. The therapy room has a warm, comfortable atmosphere with comfortable chairs that face one another while the supervisor offices have a big desk that sits between the supervisor and visitor.

Even though Ms. Mona has a more demanding and direct communication style, she began to incorporate a more caring approach in her responses. For example, after it appeared a parent had not complied with a request that she bring in diapers, Mona said “Okay, we’re going to assume she has good intentions and just ask her about the diapers.” A less-caring Ms. Mona response would accuse the parent of not taking care of her responsibility and threaten a suspension of services unless she complies. In this case, the caring approach served the supervisor well, because when she asked, it turned out the parent *had* brought the diapers, the staff was just unable to locate them. The new focus on caring approaches at La Casa shifted our cultural paradigm in many ways, as I wrote in my journal,

We’ve changed the nature of how we view each other and how we view the care that we provide the children. Now I have a greater understanding of people’s hardships, struggles, love for their work, goals, etc.

The La Casa team has learned a very important lesson that makes us better educators, better supervisors, better co-workers, better community members. We have learned to recognize and appreciate that there are ability-differences to some degree between all people. In addition, all people, no matter what their limitations, have important things to contribute to our community. Noddings (2003) is purposeful about declaring a caring attitude “universally accessible” (p. 5). We all, with our gifts and limitations in hand,

have something to learn, and something to teach. *Everyone* has the ability to express what they have learned about caring toward others and to learn more about caring from others.

Teaching/pedagogical differences

Negotiating between appropriateness and inappropriateness is a constant conversation in an early learning setting. Early childhood professionals talk a lot about “developmentally appropriate practice,” an activity or communication that fits the developmental age of a child (Bredekamp and Copple, 2008). We strive to have appropriate classroom settings that include nurturing interactions between teachers and children. For example, we expect teachers to respond quickly to children who are in distress, bending down to be at the child’s eye-level, instead of talking over a young child.

In the childcare office, we encourage appropriate business-practice. Early childhood leaders often talk about and go to professional development workshops about being “professional.” Some child care programs help facilitate this idea with dress-code expectations along with boundary expectations between teachers and families. Preschool teachers, for example, may not be allowed to spend time with families after-hours doing baby-sitting work because administrators are worried about an inappropriate, non-professional relationship developing.

Other childcare programs have strict boundaries regarding how teachers are allowed to comfort children. For example, one local childcare company does not allow teachers to pat children’s backs at naptime or hug the children because they are worried about an allegation of inappropriate touching. Coming to terms with what staff believes is appropriate and inappropriate can create a barrier to caring relationships when co-

workers disagree. In the multi-age classroom, appropriateness was negotiated when the team was not in agreement regarding Chrissy's enrollment. In the office, appropriateness became an issue regarding teacher/supervisor relationships; as Shelly explained:

I think when you become comfortable with one another some of the professionalism can be lost. And so, you have conversations about things that aren't necessarily appropriate for a preschool environment or there's a lack of respect between supervisors and teachers. It's like, "oh, but you're my cousin! Or you're my friend" vs. being respectful and saying yes, we can get along and have great times together, but I'm also your supervisor, and so when it comes down to discipline or doing other things that are required, that respect still needs to be there.

Sometimes, teachers also struggle with putting their own pedagogical views into practice when they work with a co-teacher who has a different teaching philosophy. This difference can begin with a subtle uneasiness between two people and lead to a downright hostile situation. Ms. Lisette spoke about one such co-teaching relationship.

Ms. Lisette said she and her co-worker had very different approaches as teachers, especially concerning guidance and discipline. The co-teacher wanted order in the class; children quietly practicing their letters, cleaning up messes quickly, and exhibiting good, quiet behavior. Ms. Lisette did not value the same type of order. For example, she was not bothered if a block from the block center was taken to the home center to act as a temporary iron (in fact she would encourage such creative use of tools), while her co-teacher felt objects should be in their intended place. The teachers differences were at

first ignored by both of them, until the annoyance grew into what Ms. Lisette said felt like bullying behavior.

It's a little different than childhood bullying. But, a comment was made, not directly to me, but we were in the same classroom, and a comment was made, and she was talking to one of the kids, and she said, "I'm *not* Ms. Lisette. So this is what I said to do." And so a little later I asked her, "What did you mean by that? I have *never* contradicted *anything* that you have said. If you told them to do this, than that's fine, and I won't go behind you and say that's not okay to do that, and give them different directions. I've *never* done that to you. So why would you do that?" And then she changed her story and she didn't do that to me again, but that didn't stop her from talking (about me) behind my back.

These teachers may never agree with each other about classroom management issues.

They may, however, come to understand the other person's pedagogy and therefore, gain a better understanding of that person's teaching-style.

Ms. Devon, a toddler teacher, also remembered a time when she and her co-workers had different opinions of what was appropriate. As she remembered an experience she had at another preschool where there was disagreement between staff, Ms. Devon sighed deeply. Some of the other teachers felt strongly about having a more "structured" classroom and did not feel having center areas in the classroom was conducive to proper learning, while Ms. Devon felt strongly that children should have choices each day and learn in an experiential way.

Ms. Devon said her co-workers would not respond to her when she said hello in the mornings, and they would open her classroom door, peek in, say something negative about her teaching, and then close the door as they walked off. She said this group of teachers would all get up and walk away when she entered the break room saying, “Okay, we’re done here” even if they had just sat down. Although she tried to engage the other teachers in conversation, Ms. Devon said there was no interest on the other teachers’ part to come to know her point of view or to try to share their point of view with her. Devon experienced a hostile work environment and chose to leave that program. Coming to understand other people and their choices might help to dissolve the ingredients that foster such negative relationships in the first place.

Appropriateness is a largely socially-constructed norm and may change from time to time depending on the context. The community is healthy when space exists for questioning and challenging pedagogical differences. Understanding alternate opinions is imperative. Noddings suggests that in schools, there should be guidelines to appropriate behaviors, but that the focus of the people in the school should not be about law and order but “contribution to the maintenance of caring” (2003, p. 201). Doing something simply because the supervisor said to do it that way leads to a rut of thought and action. Doing things because that is how they have always been done leads to a hum-drum, going-about-our-business without regard to the human beings that make up our community type of environment. Making alterations in our policies, procedures, and practices as needed ensures we keep paying attention to the important work of nurturing caring citizens and maintaining the ethical ideal.

Power differences

Many educators and philosophers have agreed that knowledge is power (Bacon, 1597). Often administrators withhold information from individuals, which can feel like abuse of power. Ms. Mona is not that type of supervisor. She is the type of supervisor who shares information readily to help give employees a proper context within which to either judge or respond to actions on her part. Ms. Mona believes that competent supervisors share information while incompetent supervisors are afraid to share information:

Because they're [supervisors] scared how the staff is going to react. And a lot of times, if a staff already doesn't have a rapport with their supervisor, they end up quitting. So they don't want to tell them until the last minute. And that way, they [staff] don't have a choice, but to adjust. I don't like that. I like for the staff that I'm working with to transition into a change very smoothly. I have a big team meeting. I go and I tell different shifts, then I have a big team meeting, and we talk about the changes.

Changes in a childcare program, or doing things differently, can cause fear of the unknown, but they also offer opportunities for shared information and shared decision-making. Ms. Mona, for example, believes in sharing information that will have a daily effect on the lives of the people on her team.

Ms. Devon told me about an experience she had at another preschool in which information was hidden from parents and staff. She had been hired to replace a teacher who was fired. The director of the program, however, did not tell anyone the original teacher had been fired. Instead, the director told everyone that the original teacher was ill

and would be out for a while and that Ms. Devon would be the substitute teacher until the original teacher returned. Ms. Devon said she knew this was a bad sign of things to come, but she needed the work and went along with the story. Living a lie not only set Ms. Devon up for poor relationships with the teachers and parents at the program, but it did not give very much credit to any other adults in that community. Ms. Devon guessed that the director's decision to be dishonest was to "save face" or to avoid the conflict that would have occurred if the other adults in the community had the correct information.

Indeed, when the truth did come out, the director and many teachers left the program, and those who remained did not trust Ms. Devon. The distrust that existed toward her was upsetting for Devon who did not orchestrate the situation or the dishonest presentation of her teaching role. While some of this change (in staff) may have been for the better, staff related issues such as turnover, motivation, job satisfaction, and morale are major problems in many early childhood programs (Baker & Petitt, 2004 and Bloom, 1988). These adult issues also have a negative effect on children and their social-emotional health, which extends to their ability to not only develop cognitively, but to become capable citizens (Baker & Pititt, 2004; Goleman, 1996; and Noddings, 2005).

The director in this example withheld information in order to control the situation at her school. How would the situation have altered if the director, while maintaining confidentiality as to why the teacher was no longer there, did share the fact that Ms. Devon was a permanent, full-time member of the team? While Ms. Devon suggests that the director lied to the adults in the program to keep order, the end result was the exact opposite. Yet, during my time in this field, I have witnessed many times that an administrator withheld information such as staffing changes, children's transitions, and

other programmatic alterations for similar reasons. Learning that sharing this type of information *supports* cohesiveness in a group, instead of tearing at it, is essential. Sharing power as it relates to control and information is necessary and much healthier for the adult relationships that exist within the group.

In contrast to the previous example of a supervisor choosing *not* to share information, Ms. Shelly (La Casa supervisor) explains the value she places in sharing power:

I think it strengthens [the relationship] also in building trust and respect on both sides, and not micro-managing their lives. And it's really important for me to let the teachers know and to show them that I respect them and I believe they are competent individuals who can handle situations and giving them the power. Because I feel like in a lot of ways, not only here, but in their lives outside of here, a lot of our staff doesn't have a lot of power and control over what's going on in their lives.

The La Casa management team made an effort to support more caring relationships between adults by sharing power. We met weekly to discuss nurturing a caring-ethic at La Casa and as we reflected on problems that arose between adults, we came to the realization that a different problem-solving approach would better reflect a caring ethic. Whereas previously at La Casa adults who had concerns were encouraged to go to the supervisor who then could “take care” of the problem, the team at La Casa decided a better situation would exist if adults interacted directly with the person involved in their conflict. Previously, the supervisors were in the position of managing other people's conflicts and fixing their problems. While it is beneficial to have people on staff who can

help mediate from time to time, the supervisor-as-problem-solver dynamic created a situation in which a supervisor ended up taking away the control from the individuals (teacher or parent) for whom there was actually a problem and, consequently, robbed the teacher or parent of the opportunity to have a voice in the resolution of their own situation. Supervisor as problem-solver is one way to manage a program, and can be successful in terms of peace being maintained among adults at the program—but, may not be successful in terms of maintaining an ethical ideal in which relationships are cultivated. If the relationship is respected, the individuals must have an opportunity to understand one another and to relate to one another directly in order for the relationship to become a caring one and to create a reciprocal caring situation. If the “boss” gets in the middle, she steals the opportunity. Noddings (2006) asserts that caring leaders invite participation from teachers regarding policies and procedures (p. 344)—surely this extends to participating in resolving issues that parents have about their classroom.

Supervisor Ms. Mona mentioned another way she tries to ensure that power is shared. She said that when she walks into an area with children and a teacher, she defers any question regarding the child or the classroom to the teacher:

When ... a kid says to me, “Ms. Mona, can I have so-and-so and so-and-so?” I’m not just going to say, “Sure, go ahead.” I’m going to ask, “What did Ms. Sara, tell you?” Because I have to ask questions. I can’t just ... go back there, butting in and thinking I know everything, because then ... the staff...[are] like, “She thinks just because she’s the supervisor, she can just come back here...” It also takes away the staff’s credibility.

While the La Casa team has learned the benefit of sharing problem-solving between

adults, remembering to include others in conflict resolution takes purposeful practice.

In the classroom, on the other hand, the teachers of children three and older spend an enormous amount of time teaching their students problem-solving skills. Teaching little ones how to solve issues between children in the classroom community, and then working in a program culture that promotes the leader solving conflicts between adult people creates a discord that resonates throughout the program. Such disharmony creates a “do as I say and not as I do” atmosphere, which is not at all in keeping with most current early childhood learning theories that emphasize the importance of modeling caring behaviors for children (Bredekamp & Copple ,1997; Hohmann & Weikart, 2002). In addition, it limits the opportunities for adults to model caring attitudes for other adults, an important component of mastering living a caring-ethic.

Modeling the ethical ideal serves two purposes: (1) it serves as a way for others to learn from and observe what caring-behavior looks like and (2) it is a way for the one-caring to hone the skills that nurture the caring ethic. Practice in caring is like an apprenticeship (Noddings 2003, p.122) in becoming a caring citizen and is an essential part of nurturing a caring environment. In addition, an early-learning environment deserves adults who understand the importance of modeling because children need to have good models during the time in their lives when they formulate beliefs about how humans should relate with one another. A Caring-Leader, or early childhood supervisor, also models for teachers an ethic that is expected throughout the early-childhood community, enhancing the program culture as a whole.

Caring-Leaders allow themselves to be empathetic and understanding with teachers, rather than distant. Noddings refers to this as engrossment, a concept connected with Martin Buber's (1996) I-Thou relationship:

My Thou must be *in* the relation for the relation to obtain, but he need not acknowledge my Thou-saying in words so that others may discuss it. What the cared-for gives to the relation either in direct response to the one-caring or in personal delight or in happy growth before her eyes is genuine reciprocity. It contributes to the maintenance of the relation and serves to prevent the caring from turning back on the one-caring in the form of anguish and concern for self.
(p. 74)

In an early-childhood environment, this concept of engrossment and reciprocity is essential. Engrossment occurs as one-caring understands the cared-for and seeks to meet her with a caring attitude and support the cared-for in her success. What the success is about is determined by the cared-for and learned by the one-caring as she comes to "feel with" the cared-for. When the cared-for has this relational experience, Noddings suggests that she reciprocates a caring attitude toward the person who initially cared for her. Care and joy felt by teachers translates into care given in the classroom and joy received by watching children learn and grow and exhibit their caring selves. Reciprocal caring relationships between adults and between adults and children creates a situation in which there is an intrinsic motivation to keep on caring and to keep on teaching. Noddings (2003) comments on the effect of a caring-teacher,

Besides engaging the student in dialogue, the teacher also provides a model. To support her students as ones-caring, she must show them

herself as one-caring. Hence she is not content to enforce rules—but she continually refers the rules to their ground in caring. (p. 178)

The importance of modeling is the primary reason caring attitudes weaves in and out of adult and children's interactions in an early childhood community. The child's learning environment and the adult's work environment are intertwined so closely they are almost, but not quite, the same. One is not impacted without also affecting the other.

If every person has a caring attitude toward others in the community, each person is more likely to give voice to her own situation. In other words, if I care enough to know my co-worker, I will give space for her actions and allow her words to teach me who she is as opposed to assuming I already know her. In connection with this idea of supporting adults in the resolutions of their own problems, and after dialogue between supervisors and teachers at LaCasa, the team began to specifically refer adults (teachers or parents or supervisors) directly to the adult with whom they had an issue. As a team, we all agreed to invite one another to come to us as individuals to ask for more information if something arose that was bothersome, such as, "Help me understand why Nathaniel has to say 'cup' before you will give it to him." Rather than the questioning teacher going to other adults on staff and complaining that "Ms. Lucia is mean to Nathaniel. When he was thirsty, she wouldn't give him his cup" (which could quickly turn in to voiced, negative feelings between both parties—only to other individuals). Complaining about one co-worker to another not only jeopardizes the relationship between the two with the issue, but also negatively affects the entire team by damaging the cohesiveness of the group (Bloom, 1997).

Because this was a procedural change, the La Casa team needed to articulate the problems between staff and suggest alternate ways of handling conflicts between adults. The team needed to talk about the difficulties there might be in doing things differently. The discussion included agreeing not to get defensive when another person approaches with a question, and for both individuals to remember (1) to assume the other person has good intentions, and (2) to listen to understand the other person's point of view. While Noddings emphatically does not have a prescriptive suggestion of how "to do" caring, she does believe that an ethic of caring is "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings, 2003, p.2) and takes things into context as opposed to working on a "rule before right" (Noddings, 2003) set principles and values regardless of the context. The La Casa staff felt assuming good intentions (much like Noddings (2003) belief that one should "attribute the best possible motive" to others [p 193]) was important. In other words, there is not a set of pre-determined principles on which to judge caring acts. Instead, an encouragement of caring attitudes predominates. Whether or not a caring attitude was present during an inter-personal interaction will depend not on a rule (e.g. "no stealing") but on the motivations of the person's actions (e.g. "I chose not to steal because then Kathy would no longer trust me and she would be without").

One teacher during the training suggested that it is easier for a teacher to approach another teacher with a concern than for a teacher to approach a supervisor with a concern due to the power difference between a teacher and a supervisor. We acknowledged that a teacher approaching her supervisor with a concern is a risk on the teacher's part and that, especially at first, could feel uncomfortable. Approaching a peer with an issue comes with the risk of that peer becoming upset while approaching a supervisor with an issues

risks job security. The supervisors realized the uncertainty and reiterated that they too would assume good intentions and listen to understand, and, they also offered themselves as mentors and resources for any teacher who needed guidance in how to approach the other supervisor. The supervisors also agreed to be there to support teachers when responding to concerns of a parent or co-worker who wanted the assistance.

Many teachers and parents found approaching people directly was difficult at first. One parent said she was worried about talking directly with the teachers because the teachers might get angry about the parent's concern and take it out on her child. I have heard parents again and again make statements like that, often requesting that I (as the supervisor) respond to a parent concern without letting the teachers know that the parent had a concern. Likewise, some teachers were not comfortable addressing a problem with another adult because of worrying the other adult would "take it the wrong way." New ways of doing things take practice before they feel comfortable.

One team had a positive experience regarding this approach. After Ms. Shelly suggested to a parent, who had constant complaints, that the parent talk directly with the teaching team about her concerns, Ms. Devon (one of the teachers on the team) spoke about her feelings throughout the conflict resolution process:

I mean it was really frustrating, but instead of internalizing [the negative feelings] and turning that frustration on that child or being unprofessional with that family the team planned for a long time about "what can we do to change this?" To see that parent come back [after talking with the teaching team] and write that letter [of apology] and then to see that parent and that group of teachers be like, "that situation was yesterday, today's a

new day and we move on,” and then to see the relationship now, specifically with the teacher she had such a conflict with...I won't say it surprised me, but it was like, “Yes! Hallelujah! We as a team did it.”

The specific agreements between the teachers and the parent may be different from what the supervisor would have orchestrated. It has been the experience at La Casa that when the people most affected by a problem are the same individuals involved in negotiating the solutions, the result is more likely to be successful. Perhaps the success is due to the ownership the individuals had in the solution. In addition, if the supervisor “fixes” the problem, the next incident would prompt either the teacher or the parent to get the supervisor to handle the situation—again. Instead, the teachers learned and the parent learned that they could handle it themselves. Their involvement with the solution not only helped ensure a successful result, but also helped build a stronger relationship between the parent and the teachers.

The experience at La Casa has been that teachers are more quickly at ease in approaching another teacher or a parent with a concern than their supervisor. Reasons for not feeling at ease approaching the supervisor include both fearing a conflict, possible negative results from a conflict, and feeling that it is not appropriate to question a supervisor about the supervisor's choices or behaviors. Parents seem to have had a similar response. The La Casa team is hopeful that as supervisors demonstrate caring attitudes, especially during times of disagreements with teachers, that understanding and empathy will build, engrossment will occur, and teachers will become more comfortable approaching supervisors directly with concerns.

Summary

This section has focused on the role that differences play in adult relationship building at La Casa. Differences in background and culture, ability, opinion, and power have all been barriers to nurturing caring relationships at one point or another. However, this investigation suggests that understanding these differences is a conduit to caring attitudes between people. Noddings's belief that principles can serve to distance people is important to consider in a community like La Casa where people with various cultural backgrounds may value different types of principles—but all want to care and to be cared for.

III. Nurturing Caring Relationships:

The teacher as one-caring needs to see from both her perspective and that of the student in order to teach—in order to meet the needs of the student. Achieving inclusion is part of teaching successfully, and one who cannot practice inclusion fails as a teacher (2003, p. 67).

--Nel Noddings

Noddings (2003) attributes one's commitment in living a caring-ethic to one's success in applying caring attitudes. She continuously accentuates the role that "engrossment" (p.30) plays in nurturing caring relationships and is careful to differentiate the term engrossment from empathy by underscoring the non-objectification that occurs among cared-for's and one's-caring.

Noddings articulates that in a caring relationship a motivational shift moves the focus of one-caring from them to the cared-for. She believes that dialogue between two people nurtures the one-caring's understanding of the cared-for. Noddings presents a caring-ethic as a thinking-and-feeling ethic in which individuals must be open to

developing engrossment and capable of applying a caring response appropriately in various contexts.

Noddings presents different dynamics of caring based on proximity to others and insinuates that the degree to which one can care for another is affected by the opportunities the two parties have to know one another. She believes that it is important that one-caring is prepared to care for people she does not yet know. Noddings also responds to the existence of people who have sociopathic personalities and suggests that one-caring will not find joy in this relationship and learn to spend her energies on more fruitful relationships.

Noddings continuously emphasizes the importance of modeling in maintaining a caring culture. She believes that people need to witness a caring-ethic in action and that practicing living a caring-ethic helps individuals become more competent in applying a caring attitude.

Understanding differences and similarities

When I know you're adopted, or Ms. Merva is on a diet, or that Ms. Shonte wanted to be a nurse—you know just those little things--I have a commonality with you. I shouldn't go to Ms. Merva with a box of cookies, and I should ask Ms. Shonte about school. I mean, there are conversations to be had.

--Preschool Teacher

We form opinions about people and about situations based on what we know. However, early in a relationship, we do not know much about one another. We know our first impressions and assumptions about people based on appearances, body language and what they have voiced. Sharing information about ourselves and sharing experiences

together are primary ways we have learned to come to know one another at La Casa. We are learning to appreciate that each individual is the expert in her own experience and, therefore, the most valuable resource in explaining her own point of view. Ms. Sara commented on the impact of getting to know other adults in the workplace better:

I think when you have time where everybody can get together and communicate on different issues, different situations and stuff, I think it makes a difference, because it makes people more relaxed. When you do stuff where everybody can come together and do activities where you can show them that “Hey, we all are alike, and we all have something to bring to the table.” I think it makes a difference.

Ms. Sara illustrates that sometimes learning more about each other has helped us to understand how we are similar.

A work population that is heterogeneous like La Casa creates an initial situation in which people who share obvious (visible) similarities bring themselves together based on their perceived commonality. In other words, if I find myself in a group of people I am not familiar with, I will feel most likely to be accepted by a person who I believe will understand me and accept me. If, for example, I find myself in a random group of women, but I notice one is holding a baby, I would be likely to approach her and comment about the beautiful baby. My work with young children combined with my own motherhood and the fact that the woman is holding an infant would cause me to believe that we may have a kid-connection. As Sara mentions above, opportunities for adults in the La Casa community to spend time with one another opens up a space for

them to dig deeper than things like skin tone or motherhood to find their connections with one another.

Ms. Devon, a Caucasian teacher who has adopted and fostered children who come from various racial backgrounds, felt a new connection with some La Casa African-American families when she ran into the parents at the clinic she takes her children to:

Because now, I'm just like them. And for a lot of these families, by appearance, I'm not. It's just assumptions that we make on one another. To see that we have the same doctor, that has opened more doors.

Commonalities connect us. Understanding others connects us and translates into behavior that is caring. After watching people on the team come to understand one another better, Ms. Lisette noticed budding connections between people. She commented,

You'll find that knowing that *you've* been through that [the same situation] too, you've been in that situation and had those same feelings, and you know what you felt. It goes into a caring environment because you care about how others feel, and they pick up on it [your understanding], and they'll be able to trust and care for you.

Ms. Lisette's comment reflects a deepened sense of connection between adults at La Casa when one person shares an experience with another person who can empathize with the feelings associated with the event. Ms. Sara's earlier comment that recognizing similarities between individuals inspires people to appreciate what others (who may be very different) may have to contribute in the workplace. In addition, Lisette's comment also extends Ms. Devon's feelings of inclusion and acceptance in a racial group that is

different from her own when the adults all realized they attend the same health clinic. Both Sara's and Devon's comments focus on opening the doors for making a caring connection while Lisette's thoughts speak to what occurs when a caring attitude begins to be present between two individuals. This budding connection is a part of the process that occurred at La Casa when nurturing caring relationships.

Shared experiences and connections translate into caring actions and re-actions from staff. Connections between staff help feed into the behavior of making positive assumptions when one person understands the other. For example, Ms. Devon noticed Ms. Shonte's response to Natalie's temper-tantrum. Natalie is Ms. Devon's child, giving Devon both the teacher and parent perspective at La Casa. Reportedly, Ms. Shonte told Natalie in a stern voice to stop throwing a fit and to use her words. Ms. Devon described her feelings at that moment she heard her co-worker "get on to" Devon's child:

"The Mommy in me wanted to say, 'Okay, first of all, she's only been in here for two weeks, so cut her some slack.'"

Ms. Devon then said that because she has come to know Ms. Shonte, her reaction to the situation was altered,

"Because I know [Ms. Shonte] better," Ms. Devon said, "[I know] she wasn't picking on a kid, she was actually trying to give her skills...and so it wasn't an emotional response [on Devon's part], but it was more of a thoughtful response."

Ms. Devon went on to describe how she chose to model what she thought was a more "graceful" response to the temper tantrum for her co-worker. Devon bent down to where Natalie was on the floor and said,

“Natalie, I can see that you are upset right now, but I can’t understand what your body is trying to tell me. When you are ready, come and tell me what you need to be happy.”

Ms. Devon then walked away from Natalie, while Ms. Shonte was getting the table ready for snack. Natalie walked over to the table and Ms. Shonte asked her if she would like to have snack. Natalie shook her head up and down. Shonte said,

“Okay then, go wash your hands and you can have snack.”

Natalie did this while her mother, Ms. Devon, looked on while working in the room with other children.

An alternative, and less caring, response would have been for Ms. Devon to complain to other teachers at La Casa about Ms. Shonte’s work with children. Complaining about the actions of her co-teacher would likely spur either agreements or disagreements from others, eventually resulting in a split between a “camp for” and “camp against” Ms. Devon and Ms. Shonte. Such responses split teams long-term and hurt relationships. Sometimes people refer to this (talking negatively about people when they are not present) as gossiping, and it is an ongoing concern for program staff because it dirties the workplace environment with misunderstandings, insults, and negativity.

Of course, even when information is shared directly between individuals (as opposed to complaining to a third party) there will still be disagreements. For example, even after coming to know the importance that Ms. Shonte gives to building independence in toddlers, Ms. Devon may still not agree with the way Ms. Shonte handled the temper-tantrum. However, Devon does now understand Ms. Shonte’s *motivations*, which re-routes her judgments about Ms. Shonte’s actions as well as her

response in the moment. Because Devon choose to handle the conflict in the moment with a caring-attitude, she spared her relationship the struggles that gossiping causes.

This issue of immediacy is important because having a caring attitude is easy when things are going well. However, in that difficult moment, when the opportunity arises to either help or hurt a relationship, team members must remember to keep a caring attitude. As Noddings (2003) explains, living with a caring-attitude takes a purposeful effort for “commitment is required to establish the ethical ideal” (p.104). Commitment to a caring ethic supports a process in which people move from knowing, to understanding, to “feeling-with” another person in search of the caring experiences they naturally hope to recapture. “Feeling with” appropriately describes the concept of engrossment.

Noddings uses this important concept to distinguish it from the more masculine definition of empathy. Noddings explains, “I do not project; I receive the other into myself and I see and feel with the other” (p. 30). She reaches for an empathetic understanding of the situation, one in which she can feel herself in the teacher’s position, thereby understanding the human element. Noddings continues, “When one cares, there are active moments of caring in which the engrossment must be present. In those moments the cared-for is not an object” (p. 74). Nurturing an environment that does not allow for the objectification of people is extremely important at La Casa where many teachers represent cultural groups that have been marginalized, objectified and enslaved.

Empathy is often compared to putting oneself in someone else’s shoes. Noddings points out that empathizing is a projection of oneself onto another based on analyzing someone’s situation as opposed to “feeling-with,” which is focuses on reception. Unlike

empathy, a caring-ethic seeks to receive another person into herself and to “see and feel with the other” (p.30). Noddings uses *engrossment* to underscore the importance of *receiving* in this relationship. The degree to which we are able to receive others is affected by the degree they are willing to share themselves with us. The dependency each person in a caring-relationship has on the other highlights the importance of trust in a caring relationship.

To help support our understanding of each other at La Casa, Ms. Shelly coordinated an activity to start a meeting in which each person brought something representing her past, her present, and her future. One at a time, we got up in front of the group to present the items. Some people brought pictures, others props. For example, I brought a picture of me with my Mom and Dad on the day I was adopted (past), a picture of my children and husband (present), and money representing the debt I hope to pay off someday (future). People brought items representing relationships (“a wedding ring that was my grandmothers”), accomplishments (“and they said I’d never go to college”), and abstract values (“honesty is very important to me”). During the activity, Ms. Sara, hesitated for a moment after hearing “who’s next?” One of the last to volunteer to present her items, she stood up and said softly, “I’ll go” as she grabbed a dark-blue bag the size of a back-pack. Ms. Sara slowly approached the front averting her eyes from the group. She faced the group, reached into the bag and pulled out an old, square Polaroid picture. The smudged white bottom margin showed years of holding. She looked at the picture herself before showing it to the group and said in a hushed voice, “This is a picture of my Mom. [pause—silence] Some of you know [pause] she died this past year.” The room was so silent, attention people were giving to Ms. Sara could be heard.

Every single eye was on her. Ms. Sara's voice was a little shaky as she passed the picture to someone who began passing it around. Ms. Sara then said, smiling and louder than before, "We were playing BINGO in that picture." Many in the group nodded their heads and smiled with slight laughter when Ms. Sara made the BINGO statement. Ms. Sara, still smiling, gathered the bag closed, took a deep breath, and walked to her seat while her eyes followed the picture of her mother that was being passed from hand to hand.

Throughout this activity there was appreciation for how each person contributed through sharing and listening. Each time a new person would stand up in front of the room with their items, a fresh excitement would fill the room as full attention focused on the person sharing. Exercises like this one can help lay the groundwork for general knowledge and understanding of other people's lives and can help give greater context to the actions of others. Sometimes we do not know basic things about our co-workers because it is not considered "professional" to share personal information, or because we get so wrapped up in the many goals of each day that we do not take the time to get to know foundational things about each other. The staff members I interviewed at La Casa all commented on how much they appreciated the ways this activity helped them learn things about their co-workers they did not know, and share information about themselves. They wanted to do similar activities in the future. A workplace that holds *relationships* at its foundation must invite such experiences regularly.

Ms. DeDe specifically commented on the positive effect of the past/present/future activity. After she shared a little about herself in the

past/present/future activity, she felt like her co-workers understood her better, and would be less judgmental:

I had responsibilities, but I've been at the house. I'm still at the house, you understand why I'm so scared to when I get married to move on. Because I've been at the house for twenty-five years. I've never been away from my Mom. That's the reason I never went off to school. Because I've been at the house, I'm just a homebody, a nurturing family, so it's just like, "Hey, now we know that that's why DeDe's like she is."

The understanding from others was also reciprocated. Ms. DeDe made similar comments about her feelings toward other people once she got to know and understand them. She commented that after listening to a co-worker with whom she initially did not get along, she was able to "understand that person and know where she was coming from." She said that after coming to know someone that "you tend to be more nurturing toward that person" because you understand them.

Before our purposeful attempt to understand each other, we tended to compartmentalize one other at La Casa. For example, Ms. Sara was the "special events planner" Ms. Devon was the "hearing differences" person, Ms. Connie the "kitchen" person. We would see each other through a work-duties-lens allowing job descriptions to define who we are to one another. Coming to understand each other as *whole* people instead of compartmentalized people has been beneficial because it creates additional opportunities to find connections (similarities) and to understand differences, which sets the groundwork for caring in the workplace. For example, teachers are also mothers, students and neighbors. They are healthy sometimes, ill at other times. Parents are also

students, employees, and church-goers. They are tired at times and energetic at others. When discussing the importance of relating to “the whole child” Noddings (2005) mentions the need to remember that “students are whole persons—not mere collections of attributes” (p. 10). This consideration is at the cusp of caring, and is important to note because it helps teachers and parents to maintain good relationships. Ms. Shelly, one of the supervisors, commented,

I think identifying that and acknowledging that for the parents and for the kids that they too live in a very stressful environment, and how can we as their childcare providers interact with them in a way that supports them and encourages them and recognizes that when they are venting in frustration that there’s probably something else behind it and it’s not against us specifically.

In addition, when teachers view mothers of preschoolers simply as what the ideal mom should be and when mothers view teachers simply as what the ideal preschool teacher should be, there is no grace allowed for less-than-perfect moments. For example, if a mom snaps at a toddler teacher at the end of the day because the child’s diaper-bag wasn’t all packed up and ready to go, the teacher may become personally offended. If, however, the teacher thinks to herself, “You know, I know this mom has a lot of things going on in her life and probably is just ready to get home,” then the teacher is considering the mother as a complete and complicated human-being, just like herself. A whole-person-view preserves relationships and motivates caring attitudes between all adults.

In fact, during our focus on caring attitudes at La Casa, our attention effected co-worker relations, as well as staff relationships with parents. Getting to know families in ways that help early-childhood staff understand their family culture is also beneficial. “I loved going to the Holiday Party,” Ms. Devon said, “because I get to see the families in a different light and they get to see me in a different light, and I think those times are really important to help build a connection.” The Holiday Party is a La Casa community event in which all families and all staff members are invited to celebrate the wintertime celebrations. The party is held at a local hotel where families and staff gather to share a meal, dance, play games and socialize. Both the holiday party and the staff “past/present/future” activity allowed relationships to expand from a singular context (the classroom) to many contexts (a party, a personal sharing activity during a training). Creating various venues in which to spend time with others in the La Casa community gave everyone an opportunity to develop a broader and deeper understanding of the people who participated in those events.

Sharing information and learning about others is a starting place, and certainly valuable. However, in order to move closer to a caring relationship, such knowing must be expanded to generate a shift from what is motivating the one-caring to act “at the service of other” (Noddings, 2003, p. 33). When I listen to someone tell me about her I have a more appropriate context within which to understand her, but my greater understanding may not always ensure good communication. Dialogue is an added layer to both build and maintain a caring relationship.

Communication and a common purpose

Because sometimes it really is about somebody doing too many cleaning tasks in the classroom and sometimes it's really about something totally different.

-- Supervisor

Conversations between two people help them connect with each other, especially when both parties are listening with the intent of better knowing the other person. Many researchers and educators acknowledge the important role dialogue plays in supporting caring relationships. Listening for the purpose of understanding another person's point of view is fundamental to many who believe that context matters (Faundez, 1998; Freire, 1998; and Noddings, 2003) and is the cornerstone of a caring ethic and relational work. As Noddings articulates, "The purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care" (2003, p. 186). This type of relation between people helps them to have meaningful conversations surrounding topics of concern: they are more likely to come to discuss the true issue (as the person with the issue would define it) instead of a safe representation of a hidden issue.

One staff member remembered a time when she faced this difficulty: "I've had work experiences before where, I've had arguments with a supervisor over a box of pasta that costs a dollar, you know, and I'm like, 'What's the real issue here?' and we never got to the real issue." Such arguments left the staff member frustrated and affected her relationship with her boss. It is important to take time to have the genuine, or honest, conversation in an early learning environment because of the example teachers must exhibit for young children. For example, several teachers who were interviewed commented on the impact of dialogue between two teachers, Ms. Tabitha

and Ms. Anne, who worked together in one classroom, but were constantly at odds with one another. The conflict was not usually overt, but affected the atmosphere of the classroom when the teachers were together. There was a thick, slow-moving, uncomfortable feeling in the air, even as the teachers quite comfortably nurtured the children in the room. In other words, the teacher-teacher relationship was strained but the teacher-child relationship was nurturing.

Through creating caring relationships, the teacher-teacher relationship was changed from strained to cooperative. One day during nap-time Ms. Tabitha complained about Ms. Anne to Ms. LaCrisha. Because this happened during the time we were focusing on a caring ethic Ms. LaCrisha suggested that Ms. Tabitha try to sit down with Ms. Anne and discuss their differences, to listen to Ms. Anne and understand her better, and to offer her own feelings as well. Ms. Tabitha agreed to give that a try. “They were much closer [after they talked]” Ms. LaCrisha said,

Ms. Anne would say things before she even knew what she was saying. It was like she wouldn't even think about it. And so I think after they talked, I guess she kind of realized, ‘Hey, maybe I was doing that.’ And she would talk to her, and they would work it out—they ended up getting along.”

Reportedly, Ms. Anne would do things that offended Ms. Tabitha, such as calling her “sweetie.” Ms. Tabitha felt the sweetie comment was belittling. After they came to understand where the other person was coming from, the issue was quickly resolved. Anne did not mean to offend Tabitha and had no idea she was being offensive until Tabitha informed her. In fact, after Anne realized she had been offending Tabitha all of

this time, she understood Tabitha's demeanor, which Anne felt was standoffish and rude. Anne began calling Tabitha by her name and Tabitha began to have more open and positive body language during her work-time with Anne. Both Anne and Tabitha seem much more comfortable during their time together now, which also makes the entire classroom feel more welcoming.

While amicable relationships are certainly more palatable than tense relationships that foster a negative environment, we were ultimately striving for the closer caring-bond that came to exist between several other team members. For example, I noticed when observing Ms. Maria and Ms. Gabby that they effortlessly knew how to care for and help one another; they seemed like close sisters constantly assisting the other without even needing to ask. Maria and Gabby have worked at La Casa for over 15 years each, and have shared many experiences together. Neither one of them appears to speak negatively of the other to anyone but themselves. Ms. LaCrisha and Ms. Lisette have a similar relationship although they have known each other for less time. In fact, during her interview Ms. Lisette commented, "I enjoy being here now with the coworker that I have, my co-teacher. I think we mesh really good together." Some of these close, caring relationships were already caring or on their way before we began focusing on creating a more caring environment at La Casa. Those relationships served as models of the ideal during our journey to cultivate more caring attitudes between people who did not seem to click so naturally.

Having an honest conversation is easier when relatedness is supported in teacher-teacher, teacher-supervisor, and teacher-parent interactions. Ms. Shelly reflected on the change at La Casa since the team started focusing on caring attitudes: "It seems like

there's a lot less tension and a lot more communication." Eventually this emphasis on dialogue will lead to a powerful place—caring relationships, as Noddings suggests,

What I am advocating is a form of dialectic between feeling and thinking that will lead in a continuing spiral to the basic feeling of genuine caring and the generous thinking that develops in its service. Through such a dialectic, we are led beyond the intense and particular feelings accompanying our own deeply held values, and beyond the particular beliefs to which these feelings are attached, to a realization that the other—who feels intensely about that which I do not believe—is still one to be received. (2003, p. 186)

Our need for relatedness is what motivates us to do the work of maintaining caring relationships. Noddings suggests that ethical caring is born out of natural caring—“that relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination” (p. 5).

We come to a place in our relationships that is deeper than the initial knowledge from first impressions. Our understanding is now informed by our observations, our interactions, and our responses with one another. Depending on the nature of those experiences, we end up in our relationships somewhere on a spectrum between disregard and caring. Noddings considers varied levels of caring using the idea of concentric circles in which the one caring is in the middle, “in the inner, intimate circle, we are because we love” (p.46), and explains the more distance from the middle, the more distanced the caring relationship until the outside of the circle is reached where people exist that we do not yet know. Noddings suggests that for the people outside of the circles, or “proximate others” the one-caring should be “prepared to care” (p. 47). Where

we are on this spectrum or in these concentric circles impacts how we handle disagreements and conflicts with others. This positioning is essential, because disagreements will always occur. Differing opinions are not only okay, but are invited. Some people refer to accepting different opinions as “diversity thinking” which makes it all that much more desired at a place like La Casa. In fact, Noddings suggests that quality caring schools invite constant questioning of policies, procedures, and approaches in the learning environment (2003), suggesting a call for diverse thought in education settings. Viewing decisions through a lens of caring helps ensure our practices reflect a caring ethic, as Ms. Shelly, one of the supervisors notes,

I think just re-framing our mindset so that it’s not just NAEYC accreditation and meeting standards, and “well, you’re supposed to do it this way because that’s what NAEYC says or that’s what the state says,” but we’re going to do it this way because that’s the most caring approach we can have.

A part of re-framing our mindset at La Casa has been a conscious effort to assume that others have good intentions. This idea comes from Noddings’s suggestion that in addition to dialogue, we must “attribute the best possible motive” to the other person (2003, p. 178). Although Noddings is referring here to students, in our work at La Casa we have extended this to refer to the assumptions teachers and supervisors make about each other and about families. Staff responded positively to the idea that the teacher-teacher relationship should function in this manner, but interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, there was quite a bit of trepidation among staff about the supervisor-teacher relationship functioning in the same way. Of everyone interviewed,

the three teachers and one supervisor warned that sometimes when the supervisors assume that all teachers are good intentioned, supervisors can come across as being naïve and teachers can take advantage of them. One supervisor, Ms. Mona, explained this in our interview:

Sometimes people just think, “You must think I’m stupid to believe that the whole world is nice.” So it’s like, “You’re naïve to the fact that everybody’s not nice. That’s how people end up getting over on you.” Or, you’re not open-minded enough to where you’re ignorant. It’s like you have lack of knowledge in that area. So it can go either/or. That’s why you have to have a balance when you’re dealing with people. You have to have a balance, and you have to get a chance to know the people. Don’t get me wrong, even the nicest people get over, but the bottom line is that they respect you enough to most of the time not *want* to get over on you. It’s a difference of respect level. It’s like, “Just tell me the truth.” And once they know how you are, then they can just come to you and say, “Ms. Mona, look, I’m having this problem.” And then if they know that you’re going to work with them, you’re going to work with them. If they know that you’re *not* going to work with them, they tend to lie to you.

One African-American teacher, Ms. LaCrisha, said she thought it might be more typical of a white person to approach supervision in such a way (assuming good intentions), but not a black person:

Sometimes you just got to get a black supervisor in here like Ms. Mona to lay it on the line and tell the black folks how it is. I know it seems too direct sometimes, but sometimes that's what you need.

This begins to touch again on different backgrounds as a complicating factor to a caring attitude. Ms. LaCrisha asserted that the caring supervisor approach is inspiring whereas the assertive supervisor approach is a kick in the pants. She said there is a need for both. At the close of our conversation, Ms. LaCrisha said that she appreciated how we treated her: I had believed her about an issue she was having with her children and the management team had made a scheduling accommodation for her. "Look now I'm gonna cry," she said, wiping tears from her eyes.

I have learned a lot from LaCrisha and I think we have a good relationship. I have learned that in my work world, I do not have to be, nor do I want to be, the expert in everything "early childhood." LaCrisha, for example, is the expert in toddler-classroom management issues. She is also, among a few others, an expert in behavior management. Recognizing LaCrisha's talents and allowing space for her contributions while maintaining a caring attitude with her is energizing. My caring attitude toward LaCrisha requires me *not* to be worried that her expertise will diminish my own competence—but instead receive joy out of her success. The result is that many actively competent adults contribute their expertise and talents to the preschool and workplace creating an "our place" instead of a "my place/your place".

Ms. DeDe also had reservations about supervisors making positive assumptions all of the time, but she felt keeping an open mind was important:

Because you never know what that person is telling you, and they can pull the wool over your eyes, and you can become naïve to what they're saying. Even though they're telling you that, and you want to expect good intentions from that person, you have to look at the whole picture of *everything*.

This topic prompted many conversations in the interviews and in the trainings. Ms. Sara commented that sometimes when you create a nurturing environment you can get a "false sense of hope...and don't look at the negative part of it." There seemed to be a lot of discomfort regarding supervisors assuming that teachers have good intentions. This surprised me. I thought it would be a welcome suggestion, especially from the teacher's point of view, but instead, many teachers felt like their co-workers would take advantage of this new approach.

The teacher's reluctance to supervisor's assuming good intentions of others was fueled by a situation in which one teacher was dishonest about her reasons for missing work. She had also been dishonest with her co-workers about a personal issue. The supervisor attempted to approach this person with a caring attitude, assuming her actions were motivated by good reasons, so she met with the teacher to discuss the negative effect of her absences on the program. The supervisor tried not to judge the reason she was absent, but instead tried to address the effect of her absence on her co-workers and the children. During the process, the rest of the team was unaware of the conversations between the supervisor and the teacher. From the team's point of view, the supervisor was just letting things slide because she was assuming good intentions.

Supervision and management of programs can get complicated. The supervisor does need to consider the “big picture” and pay attention to the actions of the team members and what those actions reveal about each person. Poet Maya Angelou says that people show you who they are. For the few people out there who are truly not well intentioned (e.g., a sociopathic personality), their ways will gain notice in a culture grounded in caring because eventually such people will stand apart from the caring group. Noddings acknowledges this type of personality: “one may behave as cared-for in a relation where the necessary feeling is absent more or less accidentally and egocentrically” and continues with “the one-caring may eventually realize her irrelevance and withdraw” (p. 77). In other words, if one teacher is constantly approaching a co-worker with a caring attitude, but the co-worker is not capable of reciprocating to some degree, the teacher may choose to put her energies in a relationship that would be more likely to result in a completion of a caring attitude.

The response of the supervisor who has a caring attitude, however, will continue to affect positively the overall culture. A caring early childhood workplace does not allow a leader to ignore unacceptable behavior, but instead calls for responding in ways that maintain a caring culture. Together we create our culture, its norms, and its socially appropriate ways. The La Casa team is negotiating between those supervisors who are in control and keep things orderly and those supervisors who are caring and willing to allow for some messiness. The fact that a caring ethic has its complications creates an even greater need for people who can exemplify living with a caring attitude. I will explore this further as we consider in more detail the role that modeling and practice played at La Casa in the layered development of a caring-ethic (Noddings, 2003).

Modeling

And for the kids just modeling that [caring] and even if there is miscommunication, being able to work it through and talk about it as opposed to griping about it or complaining to me about it, or stomping around and being angry about it, that they're [teachers are] able to negotiate that and then for kids to be able to see that and learn how to do that in their own interactions.

--Shelly, supervisor

What I have discussed to this point is the beginning of a cycle that we hope persists at La Casa: the introduction and encouragement of caring attitudes, the exploration of what that means, coming to understand others by listening, assuming others are well-intentioned, and approaching conflicts with a caring attitude and in a manner that supports individual and program needs. An essential component of this cycle is modeling. Noddings explicitly states, "Practice is also required," noting that our images of who we are as humans is not made in our minds alone, but through our actions and connections with others as a result of those actions. Noddings agrees with Urie Bonfrenbrenner that children need a "competent adult to follow" (p. 121) who can help children take on increasing responsibility in their own caring-relationships. While modeling for others and practicing for oneself are differently intentioned, they each offer an opportunity for an improvement in self-competence as well as observation and learning from others.

In a preschool environment, this modeling and practice is of paramount importance. How can we expect three year olds to appropriately "use their words" as they sit at the peace table in the corner of the room with a friend, while adults are

complaining behind the backs of their co-workers? How can we expect teachers to consider the unique needs of each individual child, while we refuse to consider a family's special situation because "policy says" you must pay by noon on Friday, "no. matter. what."?

Modeling and practicing a caring ethic serves as an example for children *and* adults. Experiencing competency of a lived caring ethic teaches us all how to approach others with a caring attitude, and it inspires us to want to live toward this ethical ideal of caring. As Ms. Shelly noted, "Shifting to a caring philosophy and even just adding that word into our meetings and things I just think really ... changed my mindset." As the lens through which we view our preschool community becomes more and more caring-focused, the more our minds and our hearts come to rest in a place of comfort and joy.

Noddings speaks of joy frequently in her work: "The occurrence of joy is a manifestation of receptive consciousness—a sign that we live in a world of relation as well as in one of instrumentality...As basic affect, it accompanies our recognition of relatedness and reflects our basic reality" (2003, p. 147). Such joy is reflected in the staff responses about their work since the focus on caring attitudes. "It makes me like my job better," Ms. Shelly responded and continued,

it just makes me feel like, okay, because there are times when I feel like, "I am not cut out to be a supervisor. This is so just not my deal." But moments like that I feel, okay, there is an impact being made and I may not know all the NAEYC accreditation stuff or remember all of the rules all of the time, but at the same time in the context of community and caring a difference is being made...And so just earning the respect of the

staff and giving them respect in return. I think it definitely makes it a lot more of a pleasant and joyful experience for me.

Teachers also report a heartwarming joy in watching the children become caring. Ms. Sara commented on how the teacher's acceptance of children who seem very different from the others affects the typically-developing children's acceptance level:

I think when they (the children) see that you're being over there loving and caring to the kids, I think they pick it up and say, "They're just like me. Let me go love them." And I think it just happens. But if you're acting kind of standoffish from a child, I think the kids see that and think, "Something's wrong with that child."

The benefits of such modeling are tangible in the children. I have witnessed children who are mobile help non-mobile children by pushing their wheelchairs out to the playground. I have watched children who are delayed teach the typically-developing children valuable lessons about alternative ways to achieve a goal. I have watched children who are neurologically "typical" do interpretation work for the teacher in the room, revealing that a child with neurological delays needed something. I have noticed children who are typically developing try to ensure that their classmates who are differently-abled are included. My journal entry from March 25, 2009 illustrates this:

Aaron goes over to join Rigel, who is building with blocks, in play.

Chrissy's teacher has placed her on a bean bag near the boys in the block center area after asking the boys, "Is it okay if Chrissy is over here with you?" The boys both look up, Aaron nods yes and Rigel says, "sure."

Aaron picks up a piece of a toy and puts it near Chrissy's eyes, "See? See?"

See?” he says in a kind of baby talk sort of way. And then takes the toy and places it back on the block structure.

Children often nurture other children in the classroom as well . Ms. Lisette commented about this,

There’s a lot of little things: helping take care of Crystal, they all want to do it, they all love to. They all want to push her down the hall. They all want to hold her bottle for her. Stuff like that. Even just like with each other, there’s like a “Here, I’ll hold the door” You know, there’s little stuff like that. There’s a bunch of little, you know, caring about each other. It’s like if I split something with Ms. LaCrisha, “Here, you have half of mine.” And the [the children] do it too.

I found it magnificent to witness an entire caring community in action, as one supervisor reflects, “I’ve seen a big difference, although it’s hard at first, a big difference in the teacher’s willingness to accept children of all different abilities into the classroom. And then, seeing how that has translated into what the kids are able to do.” As Ms. Shelly put it, “Caring for yourself and caring for your peers and caring for the people that are in your family in the classroom, that’s a part of it too.” In this light, we are all learning from and modeling for one another.

Summary

Throughout this section, I address the important role that (1) assuming other people are well-intentioned and (2) listening for the purpose of understanding play in nurturing a caring attitude at La Casa: a caring culture can feel less structured, less predictable, and less punitive and calls for people who can model caring attitudes. The

shift from one norm to another on some days is an uncomfortable one, but the positive experiences of caring can motivate staff to continue to strive to maintain a caring attitude. Noddings's assertion that good teachers must work to understand students in order to meet their needs and include them in the classroom community connects with our experience at La Casa. We have experienced the ways that children and parents and teachers and supervisors relate to one another and contribute to the development of one another through relationships resulting in an inclusive culture.

Continuing Caring Attitudes and Relationships

As a parent this [caring environment] is exactly what my heart wants, and as a caregiver it feels so good to be in a place where that's what every body else's heart wants. And you know, Ms. Shelley and I have these "how I would change the world when we become emperor" conversations, and it's like," why is this [caring-ethic] just such a foreign concept to every body else when really it should be happening everywhere?"

--Ms. Devon

Ultimately, to watch the flow of a caring-ethic weave into and out of each relationship—teacher-teacher, teacher-child, teacher-parent, and teacher-supervisor—leaves me optimistic about our community. We learned several important things during this project that will motivate us to continue our journey toward living a caring-ethic. We experienced an improvement in quality of teaching when each teacher began to feel capable of and welcomed to contribute to the classroom in ways that were meaningful to her. occurred after building stronger relationships with one another through dialogue that focused on listening to understand. Through shared experiences, both inside of and outside of La Casa, we realized that regardless of how many differences exist between us,

there are always a remarkable number of similarities that tie us together. We also realized that it is in our differences that we have unique ways of contributing to our community that benefits everyone. We learned that it is possible for multiple truths to exist surrounding one situation and that being open to allowing for multiple possibilities can be fruitful.

Obviously, many challenges accompany the journey toward the ideal of a caring-ethic. Difficulties include the struggles we experienced with a new paradigm and the uncertainty that permeated the air at first and again from time to time as caring-approaches and attitudes became—and are becoming—*our way*, a definable part of the culture at La Casa. There was difficulty in managing the energy that the constant consideration of *what is caring in each context* took, which became less burdensome once experienced and dealt with. Supervisors in particular struggled with conflict and guilt that sometimes arises moving caring into the category of “cares and burdens.” We were challenged by the uneasiness teachers described when they were invited to approach supervisors with critique and when some teachers felt supervisors were naive to “assume good intentions” from everyone.

We grow in these experiences, however, as we practice, and reciprocate, think, and ask, and listen, and relate with others with our ethic in mind that we come to have a clearer understanding of what caring is because we have *engaged* in it. Then we go home at night realizing what is important about our work: thinking, as Ms. Shelly did, “I’m not here for the money and I’m not here for the prestige. I’m here because I care about these families and these staff and these kids.” When Noddings (2003) discusses the

construction and maintenance of the ethical ideal she articulates factors in living caring ethic and the resulting motivational affect to continue caring,

Dialogue, practice, attribution of the best possible motive: all of these are essential in nurturing the ethical ideal. But the ethical ideal does not exist in isolation from the whole self and a larger self-image. It is sustained by others-caring, and by cared-fors, and by its own past success. It is also sustained by a reservoir of strength in the general self-image. It has recourse in time and abandonment. (p.124)

La Casa early learning program is preschool. If we can't accept and celebrate an ethic of caring in early *care* and education, when in the world would we possibly consider it a more appropriate, expected necessity? At what other time in a person's life is it more important? We must give the gift of accepting an ethic of caring in our early childhood education programs, a gift to the children, a gift to the staff, a gift to the community. Rafanello (1996) stated it beautifully:

People's greatest need is to be valued, respected, and understood. We know that people who are involved in mutually supportive relationships cope better with stresses inherent in their personal and professional lives. A sense of community, in the workplace, provides employees with social support that nourishes the spirit and provides the impetus that makes individuals strive for optimal performance as well. Caring for staff not only makes for good business, it makes good sense. (p. 2)

More than ten years after Farranello's comment, this is still the case, and in more than ten years from now it will still be the case that caring makes sense.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Nurturing Caring Communities in Early Childhood Programs

Preschool Staff Interview Questions

1. We have worked as a team to implement caring practices, especially between adults, in our program. Tell me how this has been for you?
2. What has been the impact of everyone being asked to
 - a. relate to each other assuming we all have good intentions? And
 - b. listen with the purpose of understanding the other persons point of view?
3. In what ways have you noticed this caring-approach has affected relationships?
4. What parts of this caring approach between adults do you feel work? What is going well?
5. What challenges in implementing this ethic have you noticed? What doesn't work so well?
6. What gets in the way of being able to relate to others with a caring-focus?
7. How do barriers differ between teacher – teacher and teacher – supervisor relationships?
8. What things have surprised you?
9. What would you do differently?
10. Like most other agencies and companies, [La Casa] House has been going through some tough financial times. This has impacted decisions that affect all of us. In what ways do you think having a caring ethic makes any difference in how people receive the tough times? How so?
11. How have some of your other early childhood work experiences compared?
12. What are your general reflections on the past few months?
13. How would you recommend we proceed, as a team, with this caring ethic

APPENDIX B

Protocol For Observations

Context

- 1) Observations will occur in spaces where staff would expect to be observed by others, i.e. in the classroom while teaching, in a group training, or during music class.
- 2) The primary investigator will clearly be in a position to observe the group, i.e. will be visible.

Strategy

- 3) When conducting classroom observations, the primary investigator will follow the already understood protocol at the location. This means the primary investigator will carry a note pad, write down anecdotal notes and descriptions while in the room, and try not to be distracting to the class.
- 4) The primary investigator will take field notes immediately following events in which she is an active participant i.e. music time and training workshops.

Focus

- 5) The primary focus during observations will be any interactions between adults who work at the program. Secondary to staff adult/adult interactions will be parent/staff, adult/child, and child/child interactions; especially those that are spontaneous.
- 6) Things that might be ignored during the observation time could include; child self-talk during activity time, some children's play, some daily-living tasks, and some planned classroom activities proper.

APPENDIX C

Invitation to Participate

February 17, 2009

Dear _____:

As you know, we will be interviewing staff as a follow up to our implementation of caring approaches in our program. As some of you know, I am currently working on a Master's Degree in Education at TCU. As a part of a study I am conducting this semester, I am asking if some of you will participate by allowing me to audio-record our interview and use the information from the recording in the research. **You are invited to participate in this study.** Here are the details:

If you choose to participate, you may be asked to participate in a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio recorded.

Your consideration is appreciated, but not required.

When people agree to participate in a research study, they have the right to know the purpose of the research and how their confidentiality will be protected. They also have the right to know what to expect. The attached Informed Consent Document includes this information. Please do not sign the form now, we will review it together if you choose to participate in this study. I would be happy to answer any questions about the form or the study.

Within the next week, please fill out the bottom of this form and indicate your preference.

Thanks,

Lyn

Name _____

No, I prefer not to participate in the study

Yes, I would like to participate in the study



Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Research: Nurturing Caring Communities In Early Childhood Programs

Funding Agency/Sponsor: NA

Study Investigators: Principal Investigator: Dr. M. Francycne Huckaby
Secondary Investigator: Lyn Lucas, MEd Student

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of the study is to find out what staff members feel works well and does not work well when leaders try to encourage a caring community through adult relationships.

How many people will participate in this study?

Between 1-10 staff members will be sought out to participate in the study.

What is my involvement for participating in this study?

Each person who agrees to participate will be recorded during an interview with the researcher.

How long am I expected to be in this study for and how much of my time is required?

The interview will last between 45-60 minutes and will occur during the normal work day.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will they be minimized?

Some participants may feel uneasy being recorded. Each person will be shown how to turn off the recording equipment. The recording equipment can be turned off at any time. Some participants may get antsy sitting for 45-60 minutes for the interview. Water or soft drinks will be provided along with a soft-seated chair to minimize uncomfortable feelings.

What are the benefits for participating in this study?

Many of the potential participants have said they would like to be owners or directors of childcare programs some day. Participation in this study will be a training tool for those wishing to learn about leadership in early childhood.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?

You will not be paid for participating in this study nor will you receive any other sort of compensation.

What is an alternate procedure(s) that I can choose instead of participating in this study?

You may read the final product of the study which will also give you information about child care leadership.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

No one at the program will be told who is choosing to participate and who is not. The recording materials and paperwork will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researchers office. Items that are connect to you as a participant will have a code on it instead of your name. The paper that connects the participant with their code will be kept at the researchers home office in a locked cabinet. No person's name or identifying information will be written in any document that will be turned in or published in any form.

Is my participation voluntary?

Your participation is absolutely voluntary. It is okay if you choose to participate and it is okay if you choose not to participate. There will be no judgement concerning you either way.

Can I stop taking part in this research?

You may stop taking part in this research at any time. This will be immediately respected and no judgement will be made concerning a person's wish to stop participating in the study.

What are the procedures for withdrawal?

You can let the researcher know by note, by e-mail, by phone, or in person that you no longer wish to participate.

Will I be given a copy of the consent document to keep?

You will be given a copy of the consent document to keep.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study?

If you have questions about the study, you may contact Dr. M.Francyn Huckaby by e-mail: F.Huckaby@tcu.edu or by phone: (817) 257-7660.

Who should I contact if I have concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?

Dr. Meena Shah, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, Telephone 817 257-7665.
Dr. Janis Morey, Director, Sponsored Research, Telephone 817 257-7516.

Your signature below indicates that you have been read the information provided above, you have received answers to all of your questions and have been told who to call if you have any more questions, you have freely decided to participate in this research, and you understand that you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Participant Name (please print):

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

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VITA

Personal Background	Leniece (Lyn) Irene Lucas Arlington, Texas Daughter of Vaughn and Janiece Oliver Married Brad Lucas, August 2004 Two Children, Kayla and Corey Fitzgerald
Education	Diploma, Sam Houston High School, Arlington, Texas, 1988 Bachelor of Communications, University of Texas Arlington, 1994 Master of Education, Curriculum Studies, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, 2009
Experience	Children's Services Director, Girls Inc. Arlington, 1989-1994 Financial Counselor, Children's Medical Center Dallas, 1994-1996 Child Development Coordinator, Bryan's House Dallas, 1996-1999 Director/Education Specialist, The Children's Courtyard, Mid-Cities, 1999-2005 Program Director, Bryan's House Dallas, 2005-present Early Childhood Trainer, Lucas Workshops Fort Worth, 2004-present
Professional Memberships	National Association for the Education of Young Children Dallas Association for the Education of Young Children Texas Early Care and Education Career Development System Texas Youth and Childcare Workers Association

ABSTRACT

CARING THROUGH DIFFERENCES IN A CHILD CARE COMMUNITY: NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ADULTS USING NEL NODDINGS'S CARING-ETHIC

By Leniece (Lyn) Irene Lucas, M.Ed. 2009
College of Education
Texas Christian University

Thesis Advisor: M. Francyne Huckaby, Assistant Professor of Education

Mary M. Patton, Dean of Education

Sherrie L. Reynolds, Professor of Education

This study explores the relationships between adults who work at an inclusive preschool setting in the South using Nel Nodding's articulation of caring as a theoretical framework. Through this ethnography I sought to understand [1] the experiences of early childhood staff at an inclusive learning environment as they foster caring-communities and nurture relationships between adults who work at the program; [2] the barriers faced when trying to encourage and engage caring attitudes and approaches; and [3] the ways that the staff respond to these barriers. The thesis explores the ways [1] race and culture differences, ability differences, teaching differences and power differences can be barriers to care; [2] understanding similarities and differences through dialogue, building a common purpose, and modeling caring attitudes supports the nurturing of care; and [3] feeling included, an increase in team work, handling hard times with grace, and trans-reciprocity are experiences of care.