

The Caring Paradigm

by Rebekah Brock Russell

Caring for one another is an important aspect of living a life of charity. Throughout a child's experience in our New Church schools they are taught the Golden Rule, learn of the Lord's love and care for us, and are encouraged to be charitable to all in their classrooms. Many teachers, however, struggle with how best to lead their students in putting these ideas into action. In addition to learning the Lord's truths, we want them to learn how to live according to them. We want them to become truly caring individuals.

My final Master's project in Loyola University's Family Studies department involved working with Dr. Dana McDermott-Murphy, a developmental psychologist, on a program she and Dr. Harriet Heath developed, called "The Caring Paradigm." Many of the Catholic schools in the Chicago area have incorporated this into their programs.

What I most appreciate about this program is that a school can become a more "caring" school without using much academic time. This can be achieved by looking at our own system of communication and putting concerted effort into creating a more caring environment for students to learn in and from. Of course, I believe that many New Church teachers do a wonderful job of creating a warm, loving environment and have put much thought and effort into helping their students to develop into caring individuals. Taking a look at some specific components of caring may help them to further those goals and validate their existing efforts.

During the workshops which introduce the program to a school, teachers spend time thinking about and discussing what is involved in caring. They look at the kinds of attitudes/behavioral characteristics, skills and outcomes that are involved in caring. They assess where they see that caring exists and does not exist in their school. The teachers then come up with a definition of caring which lays the groundwork for application in individual classrooms and the school in general. Overall the goal is to generate awareness of the messages and degree of caring the students are absorbing on a day-to-day basis. Assuming students know how to care is not a given anymore. Increasing their awareness of what skills are involved in caring will help them to become more caring individuals. Parents and the home environment obviously play an important role in this as well.

There is a great deal of educational research which backs up this concept in terms of using cooperative learning, cross-age tutoring, and literature-based reading programs, to name a few. Research has shown that schools which are primarily focused on strict academics have lower scores than schools that include more affective, relational experiences in day-to-day life. In the workforce it has been found that the more successful, valued employees are those that can communicate well and work effectively with other people. We hope that students who are taught in a caring environment will learn all these necessary skills, develop a more positive sense of self, and therefore be more able to care for others. Implications here are far reaching in terms of an individual's ability to sustain long term relationships, maintain a healthy marriage, be a caring parent, etc.

This paradigm looks at many different aspects of caring on several different levels, including student interactions, classroom structure and pedagogy, curriculum content, and family and community involvement.

An important aspect of The Caring Paradigm is being able to identify and communicate needs in an effective manner. Young children usually express their needs freely, but, as they become older, this becomes much more difficult. Girls particularly struggle with this as they tune in to how they “should” feel (and therefore please the people around them) instead of how they really are feeling. Many adults have difficulty identifying their needs as well, perpetuating this model for the students.

One way of incorporating affective lessons into academic subjects, such as reading, is through literature-based reading programs. Classroom structure is another way. We all know that just putting students into groups will not necessarily make a successful, cooperative group. With some specific direction, practice and discussion, we can use our academic time to encourage caring and teach the students some specific skills that will help them develop this.

Conflict is always present in the classroom in one form or another. Based on the idea that caring is a process, students are encouraged to solve conflicts by completing a planning process. With the teacher’s guidance they become more aware of each other’s goals, feelings, and personal characteristics that affect the situation. They then brainstorm possible solutions, choosing the best solution based on all the guides available. Students are then asked to act on the solution and reflect on whether it was workable.

Parenting is a very intense form of caring and many of the skills needed to parent successfully are those needed to care for each other. This can be illustrated to students in monthly parent-infant visits to the classroom. Before the mother and baby come to the classroom, the teacher and students spend time talking about the baby’s needs while in the classroom, possible developmental changes since the last visit, and what the mother and father may need to do to take care of the baby.

I feel that as a result of my research and involvement with this program my classroom has become a more productive, supportive place. I have been actively working on creating a classroom that I hope feels more caring to the students. The desks are placed for cooperative group work, and I am using more cooperative learning techniques than before. The structure and content of my lessons has also altered somewhat to encourage supportive interaction among the students; and when there is conflict I use the steps in the caring process so that they are actively involved in figuring out, and carrying out, a solution. I also use prayer more in my classroom and, as we all try to do, try to instill a sense of the Lord’s love and caring for us through our daily interactions. In the process I have learned some skills which I feel help me to communicate better with parents and with co-workers. I feel that becoming a truly caring teacher is an evolving process and one that is easily incorporated into the journey of regeneration. Focusing on this has enabled me to tap into some key personal characteristics and tendencies that affect how I relate to my students and others around me. The insights I have gained from my personal

experience with this have been invaluable personally as well as professionally. Please contact me for further information if you are interested in learning more.