



The Role of Caring Instructors in Postgraduate Education: Perceptions and Experiences of TEFL Postgraduate Students and Instructors

Maryam Shakouri¹, Zohreh Nafisi^{2*}

¹ PhD Candidate, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran, maryshakouri@gmail.com

^{2*} Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran, z.nafisi@alzahra.ac.ir

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article type:
Research Article

Received:
07/09/2020

Accepted:
20/11/2020

Studying the role teacher care performs in education is necessary to address the human aspects of teaching. However, TEFL postgraduates have been a neglected cohort in most of the previous studies of teacher care. Therefore, this study investigated the role of caring teachers in TEFL postgraduate education based on the perceptions and experiences of postgraduate instructors and students. Accordingly, 20 students, both MA and PhD, and 6 postgraduate instructors were selected, through purposive sampling, from two state universities in Tehran. Conducting semi-structured interviews with both groups, data were collected and analyzed within the framework of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), as a qualitative paradigm. Due to the complex and contextual nature of teacher care as an abstract concept and still under-researched in TEFL, IPA was employed to provide an in-depth understanding about the role of caring TEFL instructors in postgraduate education. The findings revealed that caring instructors could perform a key role in strengthening postgraduates' motivation and therefore enhancing their academic performances, creating a stress-free and peaceful learning environment, inspiring them to make transformative decisions in their lives, and their learning how to care in academic settings. This research has implications for instructors, teacher educators, and policy makers seeking to establish moral education at TEFL postgraduate level.

Keywords: Caring Teacher, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Postgraduate Education, TEFL

Cite this article Shakouri, M., & Nafisi, Z. (2022). The role of caring instructors in postgraduate education: Perceptions and experiences of TEFL postgraduate students and instructors. *Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies*, 9(2), 149-171.

DOI: 10.30479/jmrels.2021.15226.1859

©2022 by the authors. Published by Imam Khomeini International University. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



1. Introduction

During the last decades, education has been criticized for emphasizing the technical features of teaching disproportionately with less emphasis on its human features; thus, the necessity to investigate what role teacher care performs in education has been highlighted by researchers (Goodlad et al., 1990; Noddings, 1992; Velasquez et al., 2013). Caring pedagogy, as a framework to obtain an insight into the moral dimensions of teaching (Noddings, 2013), has been extensively researched (Velasquez et al., 2013) and teacher care is emerging as a crucial element of effective teaching. Over the past few years, scholarly interest regarding care in higher education has been increasing (e.g. Anderson et al., 2020; Haynes & Macleod-Johnstone, 2017; Tang et al., 2020; Walker & Gleaves, 2016), however, TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) postgraduate education is still an under-explored context in caring pedagogy and relatively less attention has been devoted to the role of care in TEFL postgraduate programs.

Addressing human aspects of teaching in the framework of moral education (Noddings, 2013) can be of considerable importance at the postgraduate level since students are typically confronted with challenges and concerns due to the emotionally and academically demanding nature of undertaking postgraduate studies (Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020; Coneyworth et al., 2020). More crucially, various recent studies have shown evidence for mental health crisis among postgraduates which necessitates considering intervention strategies to overcome the problem (e.g., Butler-Rees & Robinson, 2020; Evans et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2019). For instance, according to Evans et al. (2018), not feeling valued by their instructors and their lack of support towards students are among the major reasons for postgraduates' being more than six times as likely to suffer from depression and anxiety as compared to the general population. These findings further highlight the necessity to investigate establishing supportive moral education programs at the postgraduate level. Moreover, exploring the role of caring teachers specifically in TEFL postgraduate education can be of great significance since TEFL instructors train future teachers/instructors in language teaching area and one critical period for developing both technical and relational teaching expertise is during teacher education (Woodcock & Reupert, 2012) in which instructors' performances and behaviors might affect the perspectives of their students in language teaching.

Given that care is a contextual concept which might be understood and enacted diversely in different contexts and communities (Mariskind, 2014) and regarding the global growth in postgraduate studies (Morgan, 2014) plus the above-mentioned issues, studying the role of teacher care at the TEFL postgraduate level is a promising research field that can enlighten

the outcomes of providing moral education for postgraduate trainee population. Hence, the current study aims at exploring the role of caring teachers in TEFL postgraduate education based on Iranian TEFL teachers and students' perceptions and experiences. In order to ensure achieving in-depth information about the role of teacher care, which is a complex abstract concept (Roberts, 2010) with contextually-based aspects (Fine, 2007) and still under-researched in TEFL postgraduate context, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the methodological approach in this study. It allowed us to examine the role of teacher care in depth based on the meaning residing in the perceptions and experiences of Iranian TEFL postgraduate students and instructors rather than predetermined hypotheses (Smith et al., 2009).

2. Literature Review

Identified as the foundation of all successful education (Noddings, 1992), care, is a “mental, emotional, and physical effort involved in looking after, responding to, and supporting others” (Baines et al., 1991, p.11). As a multidimensional concept (Fine, 2007), care is not only a behavioral but also an intellectual act which involves making judgments and decisions with an ethical component (Velasquez et al., 2013). Context and culture are determining factors in the formation of care theories as the possibility of this concept to be understood and enacted diversely in different settings and communities has been recognized (Mariskind, 2014). For a relation to be identified as caring it should be reciprocal and both the one-caring and cared-for must contribute to the relation (Noddings, 2013). It means that care for someone is ineffective unless some kind of action by the one-caring is performed and that action must be recognized and responded by the care-receiver. Noddings (2013) believes that caring as an ethical orientation is a form of relational ethics. The philosophy of education underlying Noddings' ethical relational care, as the theoretical underpinning in this study, is in line with the view of language as social practice and dialogic teaching, which have been dominant for the past three decades in applied linguistics, as it is established based on this notion that education is relation.

To be cared-for is a basic human need which brings about the sense of security vital for survival, advancement, and growth. Receiving care has some benefits such as increasing sense of belonging and expanding the capacity to connect with others which can result in increased happiness and promoted welfare (Mayseless, 2016). Caring teachers can build up trust which results in establishing open communication with students and enhance their willingness to disclose emotional and personal information (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Therefore, care, as a fundamental factor in reinforcing

meaningful teacher-student communications, allows teachers to fulfill students' expressed needs with empathy and concern (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). Providing care is not only beneficial for students who receive care but also for teacher as the one-caring, since it upgrades his/her self-evaluation, health, happiness, and social bonds (Mayseless, 2016), and consequently, validating his/her sense of meaning at work (Lavy & Bocker, 2018). This internal motivation is necessary to enact care since providing care may not be easy, with respect to the various factors determining appropriate decision on the genuine type of care for each student (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020).

Recently, scholarly interest in the concept of teacher care in higher education has been increasing. Most of these studies focused on the conceptualization of care in various contexts due to its still being under-theorized in higher education. For example, Tang et al. (2020) declare that teacher care is "perceived as a deepening of trust, mutuality, responsiveness, and reciprocity between students and teachers, and an enrichment of caring scope, embodied in the conceptualization of Pedagogical Care to Holistic Care and then onto Sustainable Care" (p.6). Pedagogical Care refers to teachers' educational qualities, Holistic Care concentrates on holistic caring support and Sustainable Care focuses on reciprocity of care and sustainable bonds. In another attempt to elucidate the qualities of teacher care from the perspective of university instructors, Walker and Gleaves (2016) identify four main categories. A relationship at the center, as the first category, reveals the criticality of the teacher-student relation for the instructors. The second category, compelled to care, addresses the salience of a compulsion to care. Caring as resistance is the next category dealing with the conceptualization of dissonance in the institutional-personal connection. The last category is named caring as less than which indicates that academics' conflicting feelings can undermine their personal ethics. In a study carried out by Teven (2001), university students' perceptions of their teachers' caring were explored to recognize particular teacher characteristics which communicate caring to students and distinguish those teachers' misbehaviors that adversely affect the students' perceptions of caring. According to the findings, teacher immediacy, responsiveness, assertiveness, and verbal aggressiveness are associated with students' perception of teacher caring. Bandura and Lyons (2012) also introduce six caring actions of university instructors, including instructor preparation and enthusiasm, establishing a safe and encouraging environment, recognizing students' learning differences, involving students and checking for comprehension, providing constructive developmental feedback, and instructor availability.

Studies which have explored the role of caring teachers in education demonstrate that they are powerfully influential individuals in their students' lives. For instance, Lee and Yuen (2019) state that students regard teacher care as a significant feature promoting their academic achievement. Teachers as important transmitters of knowledge, teachers as caregivers, pedagogical care, teachers as advice-givers, and teachers as role models are identified as caring teachers' roles which contribute to students' academic success (Lee & Yuen, 2019). Anderson et al. (2020) also insist on the powerful influence of teacher care on university students' engagement with subject matter, their eagerness for learning, and aspirations for the future. Additionally, an in-depth literature review on caring pedagogy depicts profound impact of caring teachers on students' motivation and learning enjoyment (Bieg et al., 2013; Comadena et al., 2007; James & Shamma, 2018; Tas et al., 2019), their well-being (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020), optimizing their commitment to learning (Lumpkin, 2007), their creative self-efficacy (Liu et al., 2021), their engagement (Tas et al., 2019; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2013), their self-efficacy (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Lewis et al., 2012), and enhancing their achievement (e.g. Lewis et al., 2012; O'Brien, 2010; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Yu & Singh, 2018). However, when it comes to postgraduate education and applied linguistics realm the scarcity of research on caring pedagogy and particularly on the role of teacher care is considerable. Thus, the current study aims to concentrate on the experiences and perceptions of Iranian TEFL postgraduate teachers and students to explore the role of caring teachers in TEFL postgraduate education. To this end, this study addressed the following research question: How do Iranian TEFL postgraduate students and instructors perceive the role of teacher care in postgraduate education?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

In this study, to capture a holistic view about the role of teacher care, as a complex multidimensional concept (Fine, 2007), in TEFL postgraduate education both students and instructors' perceptions and experiences were considered as the sources to collect data. The sample comprised of 20 TEFL postgraduate students, aged 24-44 years, and 6 TEFL instructors, aged 37-56 years. The participants were selected from two prestigious and well-established state universities in Tehran, Iran. The instructors' teaching experience ranged from 7 to 20 years and they taught various TEFL courses including, curriculum design and materials development, second language teaching, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, language testing, and etc. The

students also had the experience of teaching general English at universities or language institutes; therefore, they had a broader perspective about the role of teacher care. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant.

Table 1
Demographic Data of Participants

Participants	Gender	Level	Years of teaching experience
Sara	Female	PhD	12
Shadi	Female	PhD	18
Ayda	Female	PhD	10
Ali	Male	PhD	7
Negar	Female	PhD	15
Taha	Male	MA	4
Sama	Female	MA	2
Nima	Male	MA	5
Zahra	Female	MA	3
Mahsa	Female	MA	3
Kian	Male	MA	5
Arezu	Female	PhD	8
Mitra	Female	MA	11
Bahar	Female	PhD	8
Narges	Female	PhD	14
Hasti	Female	PhD	10
Atena	Female	MA	7
Mahya	Female	PhD	17
Anita	Female	MA	3
Roya	Female	PhD	7
Arash	Male	AP ¹	15
Bitra	Female	AP	8
Mehdi	Male	AsP ²	16
Elnaz	Female	AP	7
Amir	Male	AsP	20
Narmin	Female	AP	14

¹ AP: Assistant Professor

² AsP: Associate Professor

3.2. Materials and Instruments

The following instruments were utilized to collect data:

3.2.1. In-Depth Interview

In-depth interviews were employed in this study as the main data collection method. Open-ended semi-structured questions, developed according to the literature review and the purpose of our study, guided the interview sessions. Additional probing questions were also employed to encourage further elaborating and offering rich data. The participants were

asked to discuss the issues regarding teacher care and its role in TEFL postgraduate education according to their experiences as postgraduate students and instructors. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the concept, the participants were also encouraged to discuss their experiences concerning the lack of care, if any.

3.2.2. Students' Written Accounts

To ensure selecting the postgraduates who had lived experiences of postgraduate instructors' care, the students were requested to write an account describing one exemplary case of their caring postgraduate instructor and illustrate his/her behaviors and acts regarding their teaching approach and relationship with students.

3.3. Procedure

To select information-rich individuals who had lived experiences of teacher care, purposive sampling was selected (Maxwell, 2013). In this regard, among both PhD and MA TEFL students, those who had passed at least one year of postgraduate studies were invited to participate in the study via email. This was to select the students who had experienced the wider range of teaching practices during their postgraduate study and consequently had more reliable and richer data to offer. Finally, 20 postgraduates who were self-identified as having experiences of teacher care during their postgraduate education volunteered to take part in the study. Moreover, to certify the authenticity of students' self-identified experiences of teacher care, they were requested to write an account describing one exemplary case of their caring postgraduate instructor. The caring actions described in these accounts were scrutinized and their agreement with the literature on teacher care in higher education (e.g., Anderson et al., 2020; Walker & Gleaves, 2016) was observed. In addition, to ensure the purposive sampling of caring instructors, at the end of each interview session, the students were requested to introduce their most caring teachers in the faculty according to the issues discussed in the interview sessions and their written accounts. Finally, seven instructors were introduced as caring teachers by most of the students and among them, six volunteered to be interviewed. To collect data, in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author in the university campus. Each interview session was held individually and face to face at a time most convenient for each participant. All the interviewees were provided with informed consent forms and they were assured that the confidentiality of their personal information would be preserved. Interview sessions lasted for about 50-75 minutes. They were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed as quickly as possible. Finally, the data consisted of about 1650 minutes of recorded interviews which were transcribed verbatim.

3.4. Data Analysis

In this study, data were analyzed according to IPA as a qualitative approach in which the meaning is derived from participants' lived experiences and their personal perceptions rather than predetermined hypotheses (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Concerning IPA, the iterative process of data analysis started with an active engagement with the data and repeated reading of each transcript line-by-line to analyze the experiential understandings and claims of participants about the role of teacher care in TEFL postgraduate education. Using three levels of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual annotations, the emergent themes in the experiential material were identified, considering both commonalities and nuances, first for each interview and then across interviews (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). Subsequently, patterns between initial emergent themes were identified and they were clustered to develop the final super-ordinate themes (Table 2). In thematic development, not only the underlying meaning of a theme and its importance and relevance to the role of teacher care, but also its frequency was taken into consideration (Smith et al., 2009). The data were analyzed thoroughly by two researchers who discussed to coalesce their ideas and achieve a consensus on the emergent themes which contributed to the reliability of the results. To ensure the trustworthiness of findings, various strategies were employed encompassing researchers' prolonged involvement in the setting, member checking, collecting rich data through in-depth interviews and purposive sampling, triangulation of data sources through collecting data from both the postgraduates and instructors from two different academic settings and via both interviews and written accounts, triangulation of analysts, data saturation, and iterative data analysis (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

This study aimed to explore TEFL students and instructors' understanding of the role of caring teachers in postgraduate education. Four interrelated themes emerged from the data, including caring instructors as motivators, caring instructors and sense of relief, caring instructors and transformative decisions, and caring instructors as role models. These themes are further elaborated below.

Table 2

Summary of Initial Emergent Themes and Final Super-Ordinate Themes of the Role of Teacher Care

Initial Emergent Themes	Final Super-Ordinate Themes
Persist trying despite challenges Student engagement Study to appreciate Extra attempt for achievement Lack of care disheartens	caring instructors as motivators
Feel secure/confident Less stress Less cared-for: more anxious	caring instructors and sense of relief
Continue education Better lifestyle Positive change of perspectives Less caring: bad decisions	caring instructors and transformative decisions
To be like him/her Be cared-for: learn care	caring instructors as role models

4.1.1. Caring Instructors as Motivators

One of the most important roles played by caring teachers, as perceived by TEFL postgraduate students and instructors, was their considerable power to motivate and encourage students in their postgraduate education. The participants showed that the teachers' caring actions, for example, their understanding students' personal or academic problems, attempt to foster relationship with students, pedagogical care, reducing power distance, and validating students' efforts and ideas strengthened the students' motivation as they navigated through the years of their postgraduate studies. The instructors' caring actions encouraged the postgraduates to intensify their efforts to promote their academic performances. For example, one of the PhD students stated that "When caring professors show support and attention to my points of view and my contributions, it makes me sort of hopeful and confident and encourages me to go beyond and make advancements" (Arezu). Teacher care also motivated the students to persevere in their attempts despite confrontation with personal or academic difficulties: "... sometimes there might be some moments that you feel fed up and demotivated to continue your education or to do your academic assignments, but the presence of caring professors is an incentive to tolerate the pressure and keep trying" (Mitra). Similarly, one of the instructors believed that her showing understanding towards her student's personal problems encouraged

her to endeavor more than before: "... I thought that she deserved a second chance so let her take the exam for the second time ... she had changed to be the best and most studious one in my class" (Elnaz).

Moreover, statements like "When you see that your teacher really cares for you, you feel more motivated to pursue the project and even you get more interested in the whole field" (Ali), or

... I found philosophy interesting as well. Of course, if she was mean and angry to me and didn't care enough, I wouldn't go near philosophy because that wasn't anything near my path or the horizon that I have chosen for myself (Mahsa).

showed how the instructors' care also developed the students' interest in different areas in their field of study. Teacher care was also an incentive for most of the students to have active participation in the class enthusiastically:

I wanted to engage in the activities and to talk or do the tasks or whatever. And I wanted to do it wholeheartedly and didn't care about results at that moment. I wanted to share whatever I knew with my classmates and with my professor (Zahra).

It is also important to consider that most of the participants highlighted how teachers' care impressed the postgraduates and they took extra efforts in order to express their heartfelt appreciation for their instructors' care. This demonstrated mutual caring between the students and instructors and how students also validated their teachers' attempt and concern for the enactment of care:

When I see a teacher dedicating his time and energy to us, I feel embarrassed not to do my own part. Even sometimes, I may have some problems in my own personal life and I might not have enough time to be ready, but only and only because of my teacher's caring behavior I feel more responsibility to study (Taha).

I have seen that when I show my students that I am caring for them, they would respond to that quite well, not only with their results, but with the way that they send you a text, the way that they drop in to say hello to you (Bita).

Many also highlighted that cutting care out of teacher-student relationships could dishearten the postgraduates and affect their performances negatively. For instance, according to one of the instructors: "lack of care makes students actually run away from you ... even if you can give them a lot of knowledge. They don't want that. You would also make them hate education" (Arash). In a similar vein, Shadi, a PhD student stated: "I will stop

communicating with that teacher and I will finish the course and kiss it goodbye forever”.

4.1.2. Caring Instructors and Sense of Relief

The participants underlined the positive role of caring teachers in relieving the students’ stress that typically they may experience due to the heavy university workload during the years of postgraduate studies. They all agreed that the sense of relief brought by caring instructors paved the way for having improved performances and pleasant learning experiences. For example, one of the PhD students believed that “teacher care can be the best policy because it removes tension that students may feel in the class and when they are relaxed, they feel more confident and prepared to learn” (Shadi). According to the experiences of many postgraduates, the best class was the one in which a caring instructor had created a stress-free learning environment:

Most of the time, he encourages us to be optimistic and get rid of our stress and anxiety. He doesn't force us to study. He always wants to make sure that we are not worried about our exams. He’s actually on our side. I can say that his classes are my best experiences (Taha).

On the contrary, some of the students also shared lengthy narratives of their experiences with less-caring teachers and the anxiety that they felt in their classes. They all agreed that this tension was a serious obstacle in their educational path even at the postgraduate level:

I was really scared even though I had studied the materials ... It was just blank in my head. I'm not kind of memorizing everything and I try to learn something deeply and engage myself with what I'm learning, to be able to argue, to connect it to my prior knowledge of any. I just felt that I was memorizing everything because I couldn't remember anything after his class. I was so shaky and stressful to the point that I had to leave and change my class ... (Mahsa).

One of the caring actions of the instructors that created a sense of relief among the postgraduates was their attempt to minimize the power distance between themselves and students and building a friendlier relationship. In this regard, one of the MA students explained how her caring instructor had created a stress-free atmosphere for the students to share their ideas and she could easily express her disagreements while working on a project:

... She was listening to me as if I was her colleague not her student ... Sometimes, I thought that I might seem impolite after disagreeing with her but then the next day I saw her greeting warmly with me or

sending me some nice messages through social media ... you could feel relaxed and confident while working with her (Atena).

Another comforting caring action, as perceived by most of the participants, was the instructors' showing understanding towards their academic problems and providing help whenever possible:

... I think the most important [quality of caring teachers] is being always there for you. Because when you know that there is someone who's available, who you can talk to and rely on whenever you are facing problems, I think this solves 50% of your problem. This is something emotional. If the emotional side of the problem is resolved, you can feel less stressed. Then you will be better able to find solutions for the problem (Nima).

Conversely, remaining ignorant of the students' academic problems caused the feeling of uncertainty and nervousness: "Exactly when I needed her help I was left alone. You know in such cases, suddenly you feel that you're in darkness and you don't feel secure." (Negar).

4.1.3. Caring Instructors and Transformative Decisions

When the participants were invited to discuss the postgraduates' any decisions taken in their lives under the influence of teacher care, all of them highlighted its significance as "it defines or sets a different path in front of the students" (Arash). According to one of the PhD students, that's why "instructors should feel the necessity of caring for students because it can drastically change whatever they want to do, their course of actions, and their decisions ..." (Sara). The majority of the postgraduates expressed that they took some decisions that positively and considerably changed their path in their academic lives and the key role of their caring instructors was unquestionable. Mostly, these decisions were about the students' intention to continue to higher education or to reconsider university dropout while experiencing difficulties in their lives:

... I didn't plan on continuing my studies after getting my master's degree. But two of my teachers at that time really supported me and motivated me. They told me that you should continue your studies; don't even think about being stopped (Negar).

... I was thinking about dropping out. With two young children, my situation was totally different from my classmates. I was under a lot of pressure that once I burst into tears at the university... but her support convinced me to keep trying (Anita).

To some of the participants, caring teachers were the inspiration to make a beneficial change in their lifestyles or to adopt a different viewpoint in their lives:

“He always tries to encourage us to work out and do sports and meditation ... I was influenced by his advice and started to spend more time on exercising” (Taha).

“She changed my way of thinking. Taught me how to critically think about everything and not to admit everything before investigation ... This has changed to be my approach in life” (Atena).

Others also emphasized that the lack of teacher care had an undeniable impact on considering decisions that could negatively change the postgraduates’ academic direction: “... actually I was thinking of making a bad decision in the second semester and leave the PhD program because of the teacher and the kind of situation that she made for us ...” (Bahar).

4.1.4. Caring Instructors as Role Models

All of the postgraduates and their instructors insisted on the prominent role of caring teachers in learning how to care, specifically in educational settings. Sentences like “I would like to be someone like him” (Narges), “she is my role model” (Ayda), “I want to do the same” (Hasti) were stated numerous times. Many expressed that they imitated their caring instructors’ actions to care for their own students and also to refine their method of teaching: “... I was too strict about those students who were absent and also about the materials I provided in the class, but after meeting her, this has changed ...” (Bahar). The pleasant feeling of satisfaction and having successful achievements as the outcomes of teacher care was the main reason for most of the participants to see these teachers as their role models. Having felt the significant impact of teacher care on their education, many showed enthusiasm to exert a similar positive influence on their own students:

Even in my own teaching performances, I usually try to act like them because of the wonderful feeling that I got and experienced while I was their student and I would like my own students also to experience such incredible feelings that I had myself and grow and flourish (Sama).

The opportunity to observe teacher care was highly emphasized as an effective way of learning how to care rather than instruction-giving: “It is the most powerful way... I think instead of coming from books, texts that they read, mostly it comes from what they see during this course of two or three years they spend here” (Mehdi). Teachers’ consistency in the enactment of

care in different situations was necessary to facilitate noticing caring actions by the students and pave the way for learning how to care:

... It was not just one specific moment [of care] ...I saw the effect that he had on all of us, the mean ones, the grumpy ones, the kind ones, the silly ones, all of us loved him. This is not by accident. Something was happening and this caught my attention (Mahsa).

It is important to consider that, experiencing teacher care was not the single factor to be able to bring care to the individuals' teaching approach and other issues such as their personality might be a determining factor in deciding on practicing care or not. One of the experienced instructors metaphorically elaborated on this issue:

... I've always knew if one day this person becomes my colleague, he will in fact do something harmful, although I was a model for them. So that is so I say the seeds which are in your personality, if they are bad seeds, the water is the same, the sunlight is the same, so what happens that one seed becomes a beautiful tree and the other becomes something corrupt? (Amir)

4.2. Discussion

In this study, the role of caring teachers in TEFL postgraduate education was explored according to the experiences and perceptions of postgraduate students and instructors. Various interrelated themes demonstrated how caring instructors could perform a key role in improving postgraduate students' motivation, creating a peaceful atmosphere conducive to learning, inspiring them to make transformative decisions and their learning how to care.

According to our findings, teacher care was perceived as a source of encouragement for students to maintain endeavoring in order to have a qualified academic performance and persevere in their attempts even when they underwent various challenges that they experienced as postgraduate students. Teacher care was specifically important when students found postgraduate education a challenge, as it is in line with O'Brien's (2010) assertion. Instructors' empathizing with students and understanding their emotional or academic challenges and difficulties, acknowledging students' efforts with respect to the demanding nature of postgraduate studies, building genuine relationship with students, lowering power distance, and finally their pedagogical care were perceived as the main caring actions contributing to postgraduates' motivation. This is in consistency with previous findings in higher education settings which have confirmed that caring teachers can positively influence students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning (Anderson et al., 2020; James & Shammas, 2018). Moreover, the finding is in

line with numerous studies which have verified the alignment of teacher care with maximizing students' academic success both in university setting (Comadena et al., 2007; James & Shammas, 2018; Lee & Yuen, 2019; O'Brien, 2010; Walker & Gleaves, 2016) and in school setting (Laletas & Reupert, 2016; Lewis et al., 2012; Yu & Singh, 2018). Agreeing with James and Shammas' (2018) contention, it seemed that teacher care triggered students' sense of self-worth and self-confidence and they felt more capable to do their academic activities. Participants also associated receiving care from instructors with heightened student engagement. Teacher care was an incentive for postgraduates' increased interest in their field of study, even in the subject matters which might seem boring or overwhelming for them previously, and for their increased active participation in class. This is consistent with the studies of Anderson et al. (2020) and Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) who verified that care for students can powerfully impact their engagement with subject matter. Therefore, as Probyn (2004) asserted, learning and teaching at higher education level is not simply a matter of engaging intellectually, but also an emotional undertaking. Furthermore, caring acts of instructors were greatly acknowledged by students and their effort to achieve academic success was perceived as a response to their teachers' care. This was evidence for the reciprocal and relational nature of genuine care in which the cared-for (student) contributed to the relation by responding to the caring action of the one-caring (instructor), as elucidated in Noddings's (2013) approach to ethics of care. In a similar vein, Laletas and Reupert (2016) and Anderson et al. (2020) reported that teacher care was reciprocated by students' commitment to their course content and teacher.

Furthermore, the influential role of caring instructors in relieving students' anxiety and challenges that they experienced during their postgraduate studies, and consequently in increasing their capacity for success was emphasized. Caring teachers' minimizing power distance, validating and listening patiently to students' ideas, building a friendlier relationship, and attempting to understand students' difficulties created a peaceful learning atmosphere. In congruence with our finding, Liu et al. (2019) found a negative correlation between mentoring relationship and postgraduates' stress and anxiety. They also demonstrated that mentoring relationship partly mediated the negative correlation between research self-efficacy and depression/anxiety among postgraduates. Likewise, Levecque et al. (2017) found evidence for better mental health among postgraduates who were supervised by an instructor with an inspirational leadership style. They also reported increased risk of experiencing psychological distress among postgraduates who were exposed to a laissez-faire leadership style. In our study, lack of teacher care was perceived as a determining factor in

postgraduates' heightened tension and feeling of insecurity which consequently affected their performances negatively. Naturally, postgraduates are under lots of academic pressure due to the challenging nature of the program (Coneyworth et al., 2020) and being deprived of teacher care brought about extra stress and vulnerability. This is in agreement with the findings of Evans et al. (2018) who asserted that instructors' lack of support was one of the major reasons for postgraduates' suffering from depression and anxiety.

Caring teachers were also an inspiration to postgraduates to take some decisions that beneficially changed their paths in their lives such as continuing to higher education. They were even more than an academic inspiration and influenced the students' way of being and ambitions beyond the classroom, for instance, some got inspired to create a positive change in their lifestyles or viewpoints. In fact, as it is in line with Macfarlane's (2012) contention, influential caring instructors mobilized students through inspiration in directions that change society for the better. Our findings were in consistency with previous studies in which the power of caring teachers on shaping students' aspiration for future and beyond the classroom has been contended (Anderson et al., 2020; Laetas & Reupert, 2016). It was also found that some postgraduates, under the influence of their caring teachers, reconsidered withdrawal from the postgraduate program when they were under pressure and struggling with academic difficulties. As noted earlier, teacher care was particularly critical when students found postgraduate education a challenge. According to O'Brien (2010), when success appears for students struggling with higher education, it is usually the result of instructors who care for them both as people and learners. In fact, when students feel secure in the caring relationship, the instructor as a caring person usually has a powerful influence (Noddings, 2013). Lack of teacher care was also perceived to have an undeniable impact on considering decisions that could negatively change the postgraduates' academic direction. It is also significant to consider that instructors' impact might go beyond individual inspiration, affecting students' relation to the world outside; hence, developing caring pedagogy is called for not merely as alleviation of difficulties but as responsibility towards students and the people in communication with them (Newstead, 2009).

It was also found that the opportunity of observing and feeling teacher care had the potential for TEFL postgraduates, as student teachers, to learn how to care for others and foster a caring student-teacher relation in academic settings. This implicit way of acquiring how to care was more emphasized in comparison to explicit instruction-giving. Agreeing with Noddings's (2013) assertion in ethics of care, showing how to care by instructors and consequently postgraduates' feeling what it meant to be cared-for were

beneficial for them to learn how to care for others. In accordance with ethics of care, prior to learning to care for others, one should learn what it means to be cared-for whether consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, teachers' consistency in caring for students in various conditions was an essential prerequisite to students' first recognition of and then learning caring acts. The definition of a caring teacher by Noddings (2001), as 'someone who has demonstrated that she can establish, more or less regularly, relations of care in a wide variety of situations' (pp. 100-101), also underscores the significance of regularity and consistency in enactment of care for distinguishing caring actions implemented by teachers. As teacher care was perceived as an influential factor in students' successful performances and in generating a pleasant academic atmosphere through alleviating possible challenges, postgraduates desired to have the similar beneficial impact on their own students. Hence, understanding what it meant to be cared-for, postgraduates claimed that in order to provide caring pedagogy as an EFL teacher in their own classes and to refine their teaching they imitated their caring instructors. Similarly, it has been also confirmed in previous studies that caring teachers play a pivotal role in modeling care (Laletas & Reupert, 2016; Lee & Yuen, 2019; Papadopoulos, 2017) and teacher care has been an influential factor in students' moral development (Velasquez et al., 2013). Identifying caring instructors as role models can be particularly important in TEFL postgraduate teaching classes since one critical period for developing both technical and relational teaching expertise is during teacher education (Woodcock & Reupert, 2012).

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study underline the necessity of considering the establishment of caring pedagogy and moral education in TEFL postgraduate programs. Raising awareness of teacher care, praxis of caring pedagogy and the detrimental effects of lack of care at postgraduate level in both pre-service and in-service teacher training courses can be an important step taken in laying foundations for extending moral education at TEFL postgraduate level. Teacher training programs should take into account the influential role of caring teachers in postgraduate education while pursuing strategies to enhance teachers' caring capacities, facilitate the implementation of care, and lower barriers to caring.

This study contributes to the literature on caring pedagogy in TEFL postgraduate education, but it has some limitations which should be noted. The experiences of the TEFL postgraduate instructors and students in the study cannot be considered as representative of all TEFL postgraduate teachers and students since the sample size was small and selected from two

state universities. However, the purpose of our research was to obtain rich data based on the perceptions and experiences of postgraduate teachers and students within a qualitative paradigm rather than generalizing the findings. Nevertheless, as an exploratory study in a context where a relative lack of research has been obvious, it yields useful insights which can be further extended and developed. For instance, our findings may lay the foundation for future studies seeking to develop instruments to examine teacher care at TEFL postgraduate level to achieve generalizable outcomes. Moreover, in this study we obtained self-reported data mainly through in-depth interviews, as one of the best and most popular methods of data collection in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), and future studies may incorporate other approaches such as focus groups or participant observation in order to refine our understanding of the role of caring TEFL postgraduate instructors.

The present study may have significant implications for university instructors, teacher trainers, policy makers, and administrators. Our findings call for placing caring pedagogy at the center of postgraduate programs not only to increase students' capacity to succeed personally, academically, or socially but also ease their academic challenges and concerns. This is particularly important in TEFL context where the instructors train future teachers/instructors and according to our findings their caring actions can affect the postgraduates' viewpoints about teaching and caring pedagogy and therefore the development of their relational teaching expertise. Teacher care is an influential factor touching lives of postgraduates both as individuals and members of the society; therefore, it merits the greatest attention by teachers and education authorities.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the TEFL postgraduate students and instructors for their valuable time and participation in this study, in which without their kind help and engagement, this study could have not been completed.

References

- Anderson, V., Rabello, R., Wass, R., Golding, C., Rangi, A., Eteuati, E., Bristowe, Z., & Waller, A. (2020). Good teaching as care in higher education. *Higher Education*, 79(1), 1-19.
- Baines, C., Evans, P., & Neysmith, S. (1991). Caring: Its impact on the lives of women. In C. Baines, P. Evans, & S. Neysmith (Eds.), *Women's caring: Feminist perspectives on social welfare* (pp. 11-35). McClelland & Stewart.
- Bandura, R. P., & Lyons, P. (2012). Instructor care and consideration toward students-what accounting students report: a research note. *Accounting Education*, 21(5), 515-527.
- Bieg, S., Robert, R., Jeanneine, J., & Waldemar, M. (2013). The role of teachers' care and self-determined motivation in working with students in Germany and the United States. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 60, 27-37.
- Butler-Rees, A., & Robinson, N. (2020). Encountering precarity, uncertainty and everyday anxiety as part of the postgraduate research journey. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2020.100743>
- Comadena, M. E., Hunt, S. K., & Simonds, C. J. (2007). The effects of teacher clarity, nonverbal immediacy, and caring on student motivation, affective and cognitive learning. *Communication Research Reports*, 24(3), 241-248.
- Coneyworth, L., Jessop, R., Maden, P., & White, G. (2020). The overlooked cohort? -Improving the taught postgraduate student experience in higher education. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(3), 262-273.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Eatough, V., & Smith, J. A. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In C. Willig, & W. Stainton Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 179-194). Sage.
- Evans, T., Bira, L., Gastelum, J., Weiss, T., & Vanderford, N. (2018). Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education. *Nature Biotechnology*, 36(3), 282-284.
- Fine, M. D. (2007). *A caring society: care and the dilemmas of human service in the twenty first century*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- 168 Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies 9(2), 149-171. (2022)
- Frymier, A. B., & Houser, M. L. (2000). The teacher-student relationship as an interpersonal relationship. *Communication Education, 49*(3), 207-219.
- Goodlad, J. I., Soder, R., & Sirotnik, K. A. (1990). *The moral dimensions of teaching*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Haynes, J., & Macleod-Johnstone, E. (2017). Stepping through the daylight gate: compassionate spaces for learning in higher education. *Pastoral Care in Education, 35*(3), 179-191.
- James, A., & Shammas, N. M. (2018). Teacher care and motivation: a new narrative for teachers in the Arab Gulf. *Pedagogy, Culture, & Society, 26*(4), 491-510.
- Laletas, S., & Reupert, A. (2016). Exploring pre-service secondary teachers' understanding of care. *Teachers and Teaching, 22*(4), 485-503.
- Lavy, S., & Bocker, S. (2018). A path to happiness? A sense of meaning affects relationships, which affect job satisfaction: evidence from two studies of teachers. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 19*(5), 1439-1463.
- Lavy, S., & Naama-Ghanayim, E. (2020). Why care about caring? Linking teachers' caring and sense of meaning at work with students' self-esteem, well-being, and school engagement. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 91*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103046>
- Lee, Q. A. Y., & Yuen, M. (2019). The role of teacher care in determining academic success of community college students: a case study from Hong Kong. *Pastoral Care in Education, 37*(2), 94-107.
- Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy, 46*(4), 868-879.
- Lewis, J. L., Ream, R. K., Bocian, K. M., Cardullo, R. A., Hammond, K. A., & Fast, L. A. (2012). Con Carino: Teacher caring, math self-efficacy and math achievement among Hispanic English learners. *Teachers College Record, 114*(7), 1-42.
- Liu, X., Gong S., Zhang H., Yu Q., & Zhou, Z. (2021). Perceived teacher support and creative self-efficacy: the mediating roles of autonomous motivation and achievement emotions in Chinese junior high school students. *Thinking Skills and Creativity, 39*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2020.100752>

- Liu, C., Wang, L., Qi, R., Wang, W., Jia, S., Shang, D., Shao, Y., Yu, M., Zhu, X., Yan, S., Chang, Q., & Zhao, Y. (2019). Prevalence and associated factors of depression and anxiety among doctoral students: the mediating effect of mentoring relationships on the association between research self-efficacy and depression/anxiety. *Psychology Research and Behavior Management, 12*, 195-208.
- Lumpkin, A. (2007). Caring teachers the key to student learning. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 43*(4), 158-160.
- Macfarlane, B. (2012). *Intellectual leadership in education: Revisiting the role of the university professor*. Routledge.
- Mariskind, C. (2014). Teachers' care in higher education: contesting gendered constructions. *Gender and Education, 26*(3), 306-320.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: an interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications Inc.
- Maysless, O. (2016). *The caring motivation: an integrated theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Morgan, M. (2014). Patterns, drivers and challenges pertaining to postgraduate taught study: an international comparative analysis. *Higher Education Research & Development, 33*(6), 1150-1165.
- Newstead, C. (2009). Pedagogy, post-coloniality and care-full encounters in the classroom. *Geoforum, 40*(1), 80- 90.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: an alternative approach to education* (2nd ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2001). The caring teacher. In V. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (4th ed., pp. 99-105). American educational research association.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: a relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
- O'Brien, L. M. (2010). Caring in the ivory tower. *Teaching in Higher Education, 15*(1), 109-115.
- Papadopoulos, I. (2017). Intercultural compassion in higher education. In P. Gibbs (Ed.), *The pedagogy of compassion at the heart of higher education* (pp. 73-84). Springer.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Sage Publications Inc.

- 170 Journal of Modern Research in English Language Studies 9(2), 149-171. (2022)
- Probyn, E. (2004). Teaching bodies: affects in the classroom. *Body & Society*, 10(4), 21-43.
- Roberts, M. A. (2010). Toward a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care: African American teachers' definitions and perceptions of care for African American students. *Journal of Moral Education*, 39(4), 449-467.
- Rossmann, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2012). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: a practical guide to research methods* (pp. 53-80). Sage.
- Tang, A. L. L., Walker-Gleaves, C., & Rattray, J. (2020). Hong Kong Chinese university students' conceptions of teacher care: a dialectical framework of care. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(5), 573-587.
- Tas, Y., Subaşı, M., & Yerdelen, S. (2019). The role of motivation between perceived teacher support and student engagement in science class. *Educational Studies*, 45(5), 582-592. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2018.1509778>
- Teven, J. J. (2001). The relationships among teacher characteristics and perceived caring. *Communication Education*, 50(2), 159-169.
- Velasquez, A., West, R., Graham, C., & Osguthorpe, R. (2013). Developing caring relationships in schools: A review of the research on caring and nurturing pedagogies. *Review of Education*, 1(2), 162-190.
- Walker, C., & Gleaves, A. (2016). Constructing the caring higher education teacher: A theoretical framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 54, 65-76.
- Wimpenny, K., & Savin-Baden, M. (2013). Alienation, agency and authenticity: a synthesis of the literature on student engagement. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(3), 311-326.
- Woodcock, S., & Reupert, A. (2012). A cross-sectional study of student teachers' behavior management strategies throughout their training years. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 39(2), 159-172.

Yu, R., & Singh, K. (2018). Teacher support, instructional practices, student motivation, and mathematics achievement in high school. *The Journal of Educational Research*, *111*(1), 81-94.