

# Don't Throw the Rocks!: Cultivating Care With a Pedagogy Called Rocks-in-the-Basket

Colette Rabin

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*Colette Rabin*

# Don't Throw the Rocks!: Cultivating Care With a Pedagogy Called Rocks-in-the-Basket

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Q1

Due to the current focus on individual achievement in education, relational ethical stances, such as care ethics, are particularly important. To be prepared to teach care ethics, teachers need exposure to pedagogies that cultivate students' capacity to care. *Care* refers to the capacity to become aware of and attend to others' needs. This study examined a case of care theory in practice through a pedagogical strategy called "rocks-in-the-basket." The findings illuminate what is involved in translating care ethics into pedagogical features: (1) without predefining *caring*, the rocks-in-the-basket experience increased students' awareness of what constitutes care through reflection, (2) a dialogue fostered learning about care, and (3) the practice cultivated a focus on caring acts that otherwise might be overlooked and therefore gave rise to opportunities for students and teachers to develop the habit of mind to confirm each other. These pedagogical features illuminate how to translate a care perspective toward moral education into practice.

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Keywords: caring, case study, teacher education, moral aspects

Developing the disposition to care for others is central to moral life (Noddings, 1984, 1992, 2002). Today, individualistic enlightenment views of autonomy permeate our thinking about nearly every aspect of schooling, even morality (Gilbert, 2009). Traditional moral education is often conceptualized individualistically, such as in hero stories that celebrate one individual separate from the group (Bennett, 1993), and is linked with competitive methodologies to inculcate virtues (Kohn, 1993). This focus on individual achievement fosters competitive, isolationist habits of mind (Bowers, 1993; Orr, 2004). For example, though supervising preservice teachers in an elementary school classroom, I observed 4th-grade students engaged in an activity called "box of praise." The teacher reads aloud notes of praise that the students had written about any peers of their choice and placed them in a "box of praise." When the teacher read the day's list of praises, several English language learners were ignored. Such prevalent methodologies foster competitive self-concern—as opposed to inclusion and compassion.

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Q2

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Care ethics attributes our caring actions partly to the caring relationships in which they occur. An ethic of care is a relational moral ecology. Relational ethicists view moral education as being inextricably linked to each individual's influence and moral growth is considered partly collective. Noddings (2006) clarifies: "(H)ow good I can be depends at least in part on how you treat me. Possibly no critical lesson is more crucial to moral life and happiness than this one" (p. 118). As social beings, we do not act in a vacuum; our actions are, in part, responses to our human environment. In other words, Lindemann (2006) argues, 30 35

We couldn't even *be* the persons we are if it weren't for all the other persons who respond to us, care for us, teach us, include us in their activities, and find room for us in their society. This is what Annette Baier means when she says we are all "second persons," persons produced by other persons rather than punctual selves. (p. 75) 40

Along these lines, Tronto (1993) explains that care ethics recognizes our interdependence: "We will need to rethink our conceptions of human nature to shift from the dilemma of autonomy or dependency to a more sophisticated sense of human interdependence" (p. 101). As moral agents, we are neither entirely isolated nor entirely dependent on others. Within a moral ecology, interactions in relationships are recognized as contributing to moral growth and moral identity. 45

## Pedagogies for Care Ethics

Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) conceptualizes moral growth as occurring in the midst of enduring, reciprocal, and responsive relationships. To teach from the relational moral perspective of an ethic of care, teachers must learn to design pedagogies that do not pit students against one another, but instead cultivate appreciation for each other's needs and concerns. She defines *care* as engrossing oneself enough in the cared-for's needs to be moved to act on his or her behalf. In contrast, in a traditional conception of moral education, a body of knowledge is inculcated in individuals who then employ that knowledge to make moral decisions. However, rather than distinguish moral education as a discrete subject, a practice John Dewey (1859–1952) likened to teaching swimming outside the water, care ethics recognizes the social and moral relevance of relationships as the site of, and motivation for, moral behavior. 50 55

Thus, instead of a body of abstract, predetermined virtues to be learned didactically, care ethics focuses on several open-ended, process-oriented experiences through which students learn to care: modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation. Summarized briefly here, a teacher models caring, creates opportunities for students to "practice" caring for others, and initiates students in dialogue in which the interlocutors are more important than their arguments. Last, *confirmation* refers to recognizing the underlying best possible motive behind an outward action. Educators have begun to consider how these open-ended processes might be applied in various disciplinary areas to foster caring (Author, XXXX; Author, XXXX; Selman, 2003). In addition, educators are starting to focus on transforming classroom management strategies to reflect this perspective of fostering empathy and care ethics. 60 65

## Pedagogies for Care Ethics and Traditional Classroom Management

Several classroom management strategies, such as jointly constructed classroom rules and morning meetings, have been put forward as pedagogies that foster social and emotional learning and a caring community (Butchart, 1998; Charney, 2002; Watson, 2003). Studies have shown that morning meetings, in which teachers explicitly teach such social skills as how to greet one another, can be instrumental in cultivating a caring community (Bornstein & Bradley, 2007; Canney & Byrne, 2006; Kriete, 2002). However, such theoretically grounded practices are still rare in practice and in teacher preparation programs, where preservice teachers are likely to experience classroom management as control measures to react to problems (Butchart, 1998; Charney, 2002; Kohn, 1993; Ullucci, 2009; Watson, 2003). For example, preservice teachers at the large urban university where I teach often report that their mentor teacher was forced to cut morning meetings due to testing demands. If they do experience morning meetings, they describe them as allocated to a brief segment of time, reflecting the traditional segregation of ethics from academics. Furthermore, despite decades of research on the limits of their use, rewards and punishments still proliferate in classroom management strategies (Kohn, 1993).

Traditional classroom management encourages students to compete over suppressing their negative behavior, rather than teaching how to care and cooperate with one another. Teachers need exposure to practical pedagogies that transcend the status quo of ingrained individualistic notions of morality. The “rocks-in-the-basket” classroom practice developed by Rachel,<sup>1</sup> a veteran elementary teacher, explicitly aims to cultivate caring. Over the 40 years that Rachel taught K through 5th grades, she used the rocks-in-the-basket practice to create opportunities for her students to learn to care for one another. Over time, Rachel was able to hone and sustain the practice despite education trends that often hindered her efforts to help her students develop an ethic of care. This study examines key features of the rocks-in-the-basket practice that could help teachers, in-service and preservice, transform traditional classroom management practices to foster caring.

### THE STORY BEHIND ROCKS-IN-THE-BASKET

Rachel began her first year of teaching in the late 1960s in an “ungraded” 1st-grade class in an impoverished rural district. Her class included typical 6-year-olds, as well as teenage students who had been held in 1st grade for many years to learn to read. The older students towered over their younger classmates; several were taller than Rachel.

Rachel began the rocks-in-the-basket (RITB) tradition as a response to the violence of a rock thrown by Aaron, a teenage boy, at a 6-year-old Susan that barely missed her head. All the students who saw how close the rock came to Susan’s face fell silent and still. Recess was over. Rachel slowly approached, picked up the rock, and walked back to the classroom; her students followed in uncharacteristic quiet. Rachel recalls:

I had the rock in my hand and it didn’t hit Susan’s head and it was a miracle. I didn’t know what to do next. I was shocked. All the kids were staring at me. I realized I was still holding the rock that had narrowly missed Susan. I had an idea in that moment and I said, “It’s really a wonderful thing that this rock didn’t hit Susan. If that had happened, we’d be on the way to the hospital now and

this day would be a very different one from how it can be now. I'm happy for you, Aaron, that you missed your target, and I'm happy that you are okay, Susan." Then I dropped the rock into this basket I had on my desk. Everyone was shaky and frightened . . . We were all focused on that rock—the damage it hadn't caused. The idea evolved from that one rock that I put in the basket; each time I saw it, I remembered the anger and potential consequence of the anger. From then on, when I'd notice someone do something, anything, that contradicted their anger, that was considerate, caring, or friendly, I'd say, "Let's put another rock in the basket. Let's practice noticing what's caring." It just grew out of that experience and began to chip away at the fear in the classroom.

Students began adding rocks to the basket whenever they noticed an act of caring. Each time they added a rock, the class discussed the reason and Rachel made an entry in a journal she also kept in the basket. After Rachel and her students had collected about 100 rocks, they held a celebration and reflected on what actions led them to put each rock in the basket. Then they emptied the basket, reflected on reasons to put them back in, and started again.

## METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

This study considered the RITB practice was for its potential as a noncompetitive, student-centered experience designed to foster an environment in which students could learn to care. Because little is known about teaching care ethics, I took a qualitative approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). I recruited Rachel and three of her colleagues, each of whom had expressed an explicit commitment to teaching care ethics, as participants, and gathered data from several sources: (1) classroom and playground observations, (2) class and teacher journals, (3) participant interviews, and (4) surveys.

Over the course of one school year, I observed ten 60-minute periods in four classrooms (one 1st grade, one combination 2nd-3rd grade, one 4th-5th grade, and one middle level combination class of 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-graders) and ten 30-minute periods on the playground. During and immediately after each observation, I took detailed notes following accepted practices (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In addition, I videotaped and transcribed each of these observation periods.

I also had access to the journals stored in the baskets (Merriam, 2002), as well as additional journals each teacher used to record their reflections about their use of the RITB practice.

I conducted and tape-recorded individual interviews of approximately 45 to 60 minutes with each teacher, 10 self-selected 1st- through 4th-graders, and five self-selected 5th-graders. Following Glesne's (2006) suggestion, I conducted these interviews primarily as a listener and learner.

I also gathered pre- and postsurveys from the teachers and all the students involved. Anonymous surveys<sup>2</sup> gave me a chance to ask questions and freed the students and teachers from concern over how their honest answers might influence either relationships or grades (for students).

To interpret these data, I began with a priori categories from Noddings' (2002) dimensions of moral education. As described above, these dimensions are the nonteleological, process-oriented experiences that Noddings posits to develop the capacity to care: modeling practice, dialogue, and confirmation. Following Merriam's (1998) description of a grounded theory approach, I cross-checked my initial interpretations within one data set (e.g., interviews with Rachel) against other data within and across data sets (e.g., interviews with other teachers, and observation field notes)

to verify the utility of Noddings' categories to make sense of this data. Over time, I derived 150 relevant and stable categories using the method of constant comparison (Merriam, 1998).

## FINDINGS

The findings revealed several interrelated dimensions to the design of pedagogical strategies for care. First, the open-ended nature of not predefining why rocks went in the basket, in contrast 155 to a preset list of rules, instigated awareness and reflection over care. Second, the students and teachers engaged in a dialogue over what constituted care and said these discussions about what makes an action caring fostered learning about care. Third, instead of focusing on what not to do, as in, "Don't throw the rocks," RITB served as an impetus for participants to actively seek out caring. Thus, opportunities arose for the students and teachers to refrain from controlling 160 students' antisocial actions, and instead to actually support them in "developing the habit of mind to notice and learn about caring through confirming each other." I also discuss what the teachers and students described can go wrong with RITB and how these potential issues inform teaching teachers about the pedagogy. Before discussing these findings, an understanding of how the RITB activity was implemented in the classrooms is necessary.

### What Is Rocks-in-the-Basket? 165

One teacher described RITB's purpose as "teaching the students to create a happy caring place to be." Each classroom contains a basket on a tray holding about 100 rocks in a central place. To acknowledge an act they deem "caring," students place a rock in the basket. They explain their reasons for doing so to the group and add a journal entry describing the experience. This journal is kept in the basket. Seventh-grader Maya shared an example that characterizes the practice and 170 its purpose:

If I helped someone up instead of continuing to play, someone notices and tells the teacher and the class about it. We talk about it and it helps the kids feel safe and the person who did it feels better and then we've got an environment going where it's easier to be nice.

Maya paints a picture of a moral ecology, alluding to the collective dimension of caring and 175 learning to care. It may be more difficult to care when we are not cared for. The perspective of a moral ecology attributes moral action in part to the social context in which it occurs.

### *How to Prepare Students to Participate*

As 4th-grade teacher Oliver described how to guide the process and prepare students to engage 180 in it, he touched on the open-ended processes that Noddings ( ) posits as core to caring moral education: modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation. Q4

We *model* noticing caring actions and asking students why they think an action might be caring, if they do. If I see a student include another (*practice*), I'd describe it and put one in. We talk about how it needs to be honest and authentic. Over time, students learn to notice and they put rocks in after we talk about why (*dialogue*). 185 Q5

The teachers “model” noticing care and initiate “dialogue” with their students. With time, the teachers said their students learn to notice (confirmation) when they are practicing caring.

*Anyone Can Put a Rock In*

Over time, 5th-grader Sarah said that the students learn to notice when rocks could go in, describing this learning as the challenge. 190

If only the teachers point out rocks, then you’re just doing it to follow. It needs to be something that we kids learn to do on our own. We learn to notice it. Without that, it would be so easy to get one in. A teacher would just say be quiet, share the ball, and you would. But basically we don’t put them in for stuff the teacher just said to do. It’s more like it’s about learning to notice yourself. If you are used to noticing what is caring, then you learn how to care for your friends. 195

*A noncompetitive, collaborative, cyclical process.* The teachers and students characterized RITB as collaborative and noncompetitive. For example, teacher Rachel said,

It’s very different from a situation where an individual is singled out and complimented for pre-decided behavior that is proper or appropriate. Others look at them either with envy or feel less adequate or more determined to compete to do the same thing themselves. The result can be actually treating each other less well, since students are learning to see each other as rivals. 200

Third-grader Frank argued that not competing is essential to considering another’s needs:

It’s not about win and lose; some kids would feel bad and that can’t be helpful for creating a good classroom. Everybody ends up feeling better and then it’s easier to be kind. In a competition, you want to be the one who wins so you aren’t learning to think about anyone else. 205

Once all the rocks are in the basket, the class celebrates. Celebrations differ based on grade level and students’ interests. First-grader Sara described a typical celebration, which involved spending an afternoon in class with “free choice.” The students had multiple options for activities: “We have free choice, like play, writer’s workshop, games, or building with blocks.” Fourth-grader Shia’s comment shows how the students in general contrasted this collective celebration with something more tangible and independent: “Everyone is celebrating and that’s what makes it fun. It’s not getting something. I’m not going to keep anything for myself. What if only 2 people went? Fun happens together.” 210

Along these lines, the teachers and the older students (4th–8th-graders) repeatedly shared that they considered the learning more powerful without individual extrinsic rewards. Fifth-grader Sadie wrote, 215

The celebration is motivating, but it’s not the reason you put the rocks in. It comes so much later than the rocks and you won’t be getting stuff that only you have. That could actually make your friends jealous. So the focus is on the way you are treating each other, and it happens all year, over and over.

Sadie described how several factors help students focus on how they treat each other: the length of time between the action and the celebration, the collective nature of the celebration, the ongoing or cyclical nature of the process, and the lack of individual extrinsic reward. Rachel argued that students learn how to treat one another well only over time through such an activity, rather than a distinct unit on “how to be honest”: 220

It can never be a one shot deal. Not 15 minutes in the morning. Really, behavior does not change like that. “Rocks” needs to be done authentically, consistently, and to start with the kids. We point out small real good things they do and we build from there. They notice, we fill the basket, empty it, and start again. 225

Thus, the RITB experience is woven throughout the school days and years. In fact, decades of research on extrinsic versus intrinsic motivation confirms that extrinsic motivation only works in the short term to suppress undesired behavior (Kohn, 1993). As Rachel noted regarding the RITB experiences: 230

No one is going to receive more or less than anyone else. There is no hierarchical ladder of achievement. Nothing like, “I began the idea. I get the attention, the gold star.” The students are more freed up to inquire over their actions and learn from them. 235

Indeed, 4th-grader Samantha wrote, “The learning comes from remembering to notice the friendly aspects.”

### Predefinitions Versus Awareness and Reflection Over Care

This focus on awareness and reflection over care lies at the heart of the RITB practice. The practice requires no set of rules or predefinitions of what caring means or how students should treat each other. Thus, RITB demands that the teachers and students become aware through reflecting on what would constitute caring in a given situation. Fourth-grade teacher Tim said, “At first, the students want to put a rock in for what I told them to do, or for what got one in the last time.” As 7th-grader Mira said: 240

At first I’d want to try to get one in for sitting quietly. You don’t put a rock in for being told to sit still and quiet because how is that making it a happy or caring environment? What’s the point of that? That’s not enough for what RITB is about. We deserve more than that. We need to actually feel appreciation or gratefulness for the rocks to go in. Also, one of the important ways is to notice a caring thing someone else did. 245

Mira describes her awareness of authentic feeling for others involved in actual caring beyond outwardly conforming to rules. 250

Because caring requires taking account of individuals and situations in all their particularity and complexity, pedagogies that teach care ultimately would not predefine caring. Rather than telling students about caring actions and asking them to do them, RITB requires the students to reflect on which actions may be caring or how and why an action could be caring. Establishing particular rules could take away the decision making, and thus the thinking process, from the students; with RITB, students have the opportunity to learn by considering what constitutes caring in a specific context. Ultimately, setting predefinitions implies there are universalizable definitions of *caring*: 255

There is also a rejection of universalizability, the notion that anything that is morally justifiable is necessarily something that anyone else in a similar situation is obligated to do. Universalizability suggests that who we are, to whom we are related, and how we are situated should have nothing to do with our moral decision-making. (Noddings, 1992, p. 21) 260

Here is one example of how RITB plays out without rules. Sixth-grader Lucy said, “You can’t plan what you’ll get one in for. People put one in when you’re being there for another person, so 265



that can mean a lot of things. It orients me to thinking about a person, not a rule.” Characteristic of many comments, Lucy’s suggestion that the lack of predefined rules and spontaneity enabled her to consider a friend’s specific need indicates that the open-ended nature of RITB could facilitate students’ learning about care.

In the following example, RITB’s lack of structured rules allowed the teachers and students to notice features of the students’ actual friendships. During the 2nd-graders’ lunchtime, Ella asked Samantha to play: “Want to play house with Alicia and me?” Samantha replied, “Can I be a queen?” Later, when Rachel asked her students about their lunchtime, Samantha told her about Ella’s invitation and suggested they put a rock in the basket: “Ella included me. She let me be a queen. We played the three of us instead of the two of them.” Rachel provided context:

Ella and Camilla often exclude Samantha, or they might include her, but relegate her to a lower status in the game, like to serve as one of their pets; so, this was important for the three of them. While including each other could be a good rule, relationships with kids are more complex than that. How is Samantha included? What does it mean to her to get to be a queen? When you only have a set rule of including, then you don’t have a way for the kids to really work on their specific situations.

This scenario shows how rocks should only be put in the basket if students and teachers have actually considered each other’s particular concerns. If the rule required students to “include others in play,” Ella and Camilla could have thought they had done the “right thing” just by including Samantha in a lower status role. Also, one might question what they would have learned from just enacting a requirement.

The open-ended nature of “also” allowed RITB to support inquiry into students’ exchanges that unearthed cultural differences and acknowledged diverse understandings of care. In one example, Lara, a new 2nd-grader from Papua New Guinea, used Ted’s things without asking. Ted rebuked Lara, who appeared surprised and did not respond. Rachel approached and the following conversation ensued:

Rachel: Ted and Lara, can you each share what’s going on?

Ted: She keeps taking my stuff.

Rachel: Lara? [Lara was quiet and Rachel knelt down and asked her more specifically] How are you seeing things?

Lara: Well, my family and friends at home, we use the same things.

Rachel: So you were treating Ted like family?

As the conversation continued, Lara explained how her family shared. Rachel then asked Ted to describe how his family might treat each other’s belongings. Rachel then said,

It’s such an important learning that people from different places treat each other well in different ways and even make friends differently. It’s our job to learn from each other. Let’s put a rock in the basket for Samantha and Ted learning to understand each other. Samantha treated Ted like family and they both listened to what that meant to the other.

Rachel explained later in her interview:

I think it was important to highlight how we each have our own ways of trying to make friends, and culture comes into play . . . . The reason Lara treated Ted like family is everyone in her previous

community in Papua New Guinea is considered family. Because we don't have some sort of list of what to celebrate with a rock, I have a chance to highlight something relational when it might not be recognized as such because it's a different cultural norm. In the classroom later, we decided to talk about sharing.

If social norms were predefined, as in "don't steal" or "share," would Rachel and the students have inquired into or uncovered how Lara used Ted's things as a way to treat him like her family? With RITB, cross-cultural norms could be discovered and appreciated. 310

Fourth-grader Sam described how he thinks this open-endedness ultimately contributes to awareness and thought concerning one's actions in relationship to peers:

Let's say you have some food, so you're eating and there's one piece of chicken, and you want to eat it. Rocks teaches you to think, well, what if she wants it, too? So I need to ask first and if she wants it maybe I can offer it. Or if I really want it, maybe we can split it in half. It's not the rule of sharing, you see, it's the remembering to ask or to think about whatever would be caring at that time. 315

Freedom from defined reasons to put a rock in the basket allowed Sam to develop a habit of mind to consider others' needs in context, an inclination at the heart of what it means to care. Essentially, caring requires the propensity to approach another with the question: "What are you going through?" (Noddings, 2002, p. 17). 320

The teachers also described how the open-ended nature of RITB could increase the responsibility to gain awareness of one's feelings, to reason, and to intentionally choose to act with care. For example, 4th-grade teacher Oliver said, 325

It's moment-by-moment. The teacher can't plan for it. You have to be present to what's actually happening in the classroom, which makes you aware of your actions and the children become aware of theirs. It's not just for the children. It's for the teacher, too. Because I am not working with a simplistic list of behaviors, I can become aware of much more, like how my thoughts lead to actions and affect the kids. If I'm irritated with them I notice a series of events follow. That awareness comes from looking at the moments as opportunities to put rocks in. 330

Oliver said the lack of specific rules and spontaneity in RITB leads him to recognize the consequences of his thoughts on his actions. For Oliver, the practice contributes to mindful or intentional action or to care.

## A Dialogic Practice 335

In RITB, student dialogue renders the students themselves the namers and models of caring. In the process, a student suggests a rock should go in the basket; once it does, the students and teachers explore their thinking about why the action was caring. This dialogue was cited repeatedly as how the students learned about moral action. Kohn (2004) refers to dialogue over the thinking involved in moral decision-making as "deep modeling" and argues that teachers engage in it to make moral actions less 340

out of reach, done only by others and handed down . . . (T)eaching by doing can change how children regard the activity in question, the people who engage in the activity, and the very idea of authority. It has, in a word, a powerful debunking function. (p. 186)

RITB includes not only teachers' metacognition, as Kohn suggests, but also students' own backstage thinking, which may involve even more "debunking." For example, 5th-grader Sophie described to her peers her reasons for considering an act caring: 345

Sophie: I put a rock in because Sally noticed I wasn't playing with anyone and asked me to join her game. She had to take the time out from her own having fun to notice my situation.

Teacher Oliver: What motivated you to do this, Sally? 350

Sally: I have been alone on the playground and I know what it's like, so I saw her and thought about that.

In his interview, 5th-grader David shared how he learns about "being there" for his peers from his peers' description of their caring actions such as Sally's above, "I learn about care when I hear things like Sally said. It gets me to think. I hear and think about what someone thinks it takes to be there for each other. I can ask why." David's statement, "I can ask why" suggests the proximity of his peers' modeling. Ethical decision making can seem distant and authoritarian, as Kohn ( ) suggests, and we still do not know when it is developmentally appropriate for students to learn specific relational skills, such as perspective taking (Selman, 2003). How much more important then might it be for pedagogies that aim to teach children to care to emerge from the children's needs themselves? The dialogic dimension of RITB puts students at the center of their own moral learning. 355 360

Q6

### Opportunities to Notice Care and to Confirm

To voice their experiences of care, the students and teachers said that they had to focus on noticing moments of empathy, of cooperation, and of mutual understanding. In contrast, traditional classroom management focuses our attention on the negative experiences that require our immediate attention and response, as exemplified in a rule like, "Do not throw rocks." Fifth-grader Lia explained clearly, "You don't *have* to notice if someone is being nice to you, but you do if you get kicked. You could do something generous and no one notices because no one has to." Lia pointed out that it is more difficult to notice caring given the absence of the urgency pain evokes. Psychologist Hoffman (2000) describes traditional empathy training, referred to as "inductive training," that involves "making the child vividly aware of the hurt that he or she has done—most notably by making the child imagine how it would feel to experience similar harm" (Slote, 2007, p. 15). Although inductive training is clearly critical, here we are concerned with how students can learn not only to refrain from harmful actions, but also how to engage in caring social actions. RITB was a platform for inducing students to notice and reflect about caring actions. 365 370 375

Q7

RITB serves to symbolically underscore acts of caring that could easily go unnoticed; in noticing them, students can learn from them. One 5th-grader described RITB succinctly in her survey: "It underlines caring acts . . . that might have just gone by." In fact, many students described how practicing recognizing care made acts of caring memorable: "Putting a rock in makes it something you remember and you have to remember to put it in. The basket reminds us because it's a symbol. I could do a generous thing and not even realize what I did was worth doing or mattered to the person." The rocks in a sense serve as a kind of witness to an event having occurred and having mattered. 380

Ultimately, this habit of witnessing, or acknowledging, care serves to provide an opportunity for students and teachers to confirm one another. Noddings (1995) describes confirmation: “Here is this significant and percipient other who sees through the smallness or meanness of my present behavior a self that is better and a real possibility” (p. 25). Confirmation entails recognizing a best motive underlying extant behavior. Fifth-grader Shia described a characteristic situation in which RITB helped make her friend notice the moral motive underlying Shia’s choice:

When Mara had a daddy-long-legs on her, I picked it up and took it off her. I’m often doing daredevil things that get me in trouble. I’m not doing the normal girl things. So Mara could have seen me this way again. It was dare-devilish, but also I wouldn’t really have chosen to hold a live spider and she noticed that with a rock. I saw that she noticed I’d risked my own enjoyment for her (because she hates spiders). The whole class witnessed that angle on what I did and thought about it; I remember.

Shia points out that Mara could have seen her daredevil behavior in only a negative light. This is particularly interesting given the power of traditional gender roles to shape how we perceive each other—risky behavior could not be as appreciated in girls. However, RITB seems to have afforded a space for Mara to transcend judging Shia, because Mara was poised to look for ways to appreciate her and to confirm what could be caring. If students are practicing thinking beyond superficial purposes of others’ behaviors, it may be more likely for them to overcome easy judgments and confirm each other.

Although RITB is not to be conflated with a gold star for a spelling test, the following example shows how a teacher confirmed one English language learner’s care for her schoolwork. Since status can be associated with English proficiency in particular, it is interesting how RITB facilitated Rachel’s confirmation of a student’s effort and care over learning English, as opposed to her mastery.

I asked my students to put their corrected spelling tests in their backpacks. Willford came back and said Isabelle had thrown hers in the garbage and everyone saw that Isabelle had missed half and I didn’t want that to be the only thing everyone noticed—her failure. I asked her to return with her test. Everyone was watching. I knelt down near her desk and said, “This is a special moment because you are showing all of us how much you care about your learning.” I turned to everyone and said, “Children, is this the last year you’re in school?” Sally addressed Isabelle, “You could try again.” I said, “Yes, there are many opportunities to learn and you care and you do. Ripping it up and throwing it away may not help. It happened, and happens to everyone sometimes. Put a rock in the basket for caring so much about it. I remember when you could not read and when you knew half the spelling words you know now.”

Whereas Isabelle’s peers could have merely noticed a failed spelling test, Rachel points out an underlying motive for Isabelle’s throwing away her spelling test—she wouldn’t be upset unless she cared. She situated Isabelle’s low spelling score in the larger context of both her commitment and her progress. Rachel described:

Difficult moments aren’t hidden away. I knew why I was asking her to bring that test back in. That could have been authoritarian and produced fear. But it created a dramatic moment. All the students were listening as I acknowledged her caring. Since they were all aware of her throwing it away, I think it gave the students an opportunity to reflect on how they struggle, too, and to move from condemning and judging—to relating to the struggle.

Rachel recognized more than a grade. She acknowledged her student's struggle and concern for her work.

In another example from a survey, teacher Oliver wrote how RITB encouraged him to confirm his students:

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Bradley and Sam don't admit when they hurt others. The other day they finally were honest with me and admitted that they picked on a younger boy. They were honest and took responsibility. This could be seen as only negative, but there is big learning here in their case and RITB charges me with the responsibility to go about looking for it. They are actually learning to be accountable. This is a real step towards learning to care and, therefore, we need to recognize it with a rock in the basket. The practice of RITB reminds me to do that.

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Oliver said that RITB puts him in a frame of mind to recognize challenges involved in the actual incremental growth it takes to learn to care. Without RITB to support this recognition, opportunities to confirm could be overlooked.

Along the lines of recognizing incremental growth, Rachel asserted that RITB's power comes from the authenticity involved in acknowledging a challenge head on. This authentic recognition of challenge is akin to the story of the first rock:

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Sometimes kids just want to throw the rocks, like the story that started RITB. We have to say, "I won't put a rock in if we're hurting each other." That would be a lie. I also won't put one in if I told you to do your math and you did it. Instead we look for authentic reasons to put them in for all students. All students we want to support with RITB—for Emily the other day, it was even for when she was just able to stand near others and talk about what's challenging. RITB will lose its power if it's saccharine or false. The other day I put one in for Emily telling how hurt she was by the other girls and the others for being there for that. She trusted us enough to share what was really going on and the others listened. So rocks is about the possibility, the potential. For possibility to be powerful it has to be real. I'm sure we misinterpret and so on, but that's what we're aiming for.

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Rachel's comment unearths the necessity of authenticity if RITB is to function and cultivate confirmation.

When asked how teachers avoid the pitfall of misinterpreting RITB as merely an extrinsic reward for following the teacher's instructions, Rachel described another way RITB supports the teachers confirming students. This use of rocks to confirm relates to Buber's conceptualization of the term *confirmation*, from which Noddings' ( ) use is derived. Buber (1965) writes:

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Man [sic] wishes to be confirmed in his being by man, and wishes to have a presence in the being of the other. The human person needs confirmation because man as man needs it. An animal does not need to be confirmed, for it is what it is unquestionably. It is different with man: sent forth from the natural domain of species into the hazard of the solitary category, surrounded by the air of a chaos which came into being with him, secretly and bashfully he watches for a Yes which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another. (p. 208)

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Buber's (1965) notion of confirmation, like Noddings' ( ), contrasts distinctly with rewards for following rules. Human beings need to be confirmed just for being. Rachel describes putting rocks in the basket to confirm students just for "having a presence":

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Sometimes I put one in when a child is not doing something in particular. I'll say, "Let's put a rock in the basket because you are just being Steven and it's a miracle." Nothing must be done to be affirmed, to be valued for being a human being, not for what you do well but for who you are; I'm

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saying to the students, “Your being with us is enough.” Sometimes I’ll do this with the whole class. I’ll say, “Everyone is here together. This is a wonderful opportunity.” This creates an atmosphere, an environment where less rules are necessary and more understanding and appreciation of each other happens. School becomes more homelike. The students feel more appreciation of themselves, more at ease at school and then are in a position to extend care to others. It becomes a place where one student is less likely to throw a stone at another.

Rachel’s articulation of putting a rock in the basket “for who you are” encapsulates the open endedness of the pedagogy and keeps it from becoming a tool for extrinsic motivation. In contrast, classroom management strategies that give students gold stars for good behavior celebrate that which distinguishes an individual from the group.

### Challenges to Implementing Rocks-in-the-Basket

What happens when we fail to recognize students “just for being”? Recognizing what can go wrong with implementing RITB deepens an understanding of the practice and clarifies the challenges of using it well. For example, teachers may use it to highlight the actions of one student more than those of another, use it as extrinsic motivation, or implement it inconsistently.

Teacher Rachel suggests that fidelity to RITB “demands a kind of vigilance on the teacher’s part. It’s like what is required to go from walking to running a marathon. You have to practice every day.” Without consistent effort, the practice may fail to create any real change. Thus, the teacher needs to adopt the habit of mind to notice caring, which requires a shift in teacher awareness, particularly in classrooms where the predominant management practices are extrinsic and punishment based.

A teacher also might err on the side of noticing one student more than another or misidentifying uncaring actions as caring. When I asked Rachel about these issues, she described how she strove to include everyone, even as she noticed an individual:

I would directly take the student aside from the others and acknowledge how wonderful it is for her to have so many real reasons for rocks, and explain how the next step for us will be to encourage the whole group, especially those who haven’t put one in, since RITB is a whole community experience. I entrust a strong student to encourage her peers.

Rachel pointed out that a key to quelling the tendency toward individualistic focus is to purposely “notice things that are not about each student.” She gave this example:

I’ll say, “I’m just thinking about all of you as authors who create different stories for each other to read; let’s put a rock in the basket.” Then, “David, you put it in.” I’m having someone new put the rock in for something that is not referential to one over and above another. This helps to transcend the individual discord that is noticed most of the time. I’m also giving all kinds of kids the opportunity to put one in. RITB done well just isn’t about me putting one in for myself.

This move away from individualistic concerns enables her students to consider an other’s needs more readily, which, over time, creates the moral ecology in which students can care authentically.

Another challenge is to recognize acts of genuine caring in the first place. Rachel cautioned against relying on RITB as the sole way to create a positive environment, in part because doing so would weaken its potential. At Rachel’s school, a student in a class where the teacher was just learning to use RITB said, “Oh, yes, I get them in when I am quiet and do what the teacher wants.

And he forgets to put them in, so he puts lots in just for everyone being quiet.” Without dialogue over the meaning of the students’ moral actions, without the decision making or thinking arising from the students, the process is arguably undermined. Rachel’s description of the multiple factors impacting classroom management illustrates the challenge to using RITB as it is intended to be used: 515

A way to dismiss RITB as not working is to consider it the answer to *the* happy caring environment. It needs to be considered as one of many things to do. To give an extreme example, if you have a child who’s kicking or biting, you must stop the child. That takes so many factors: strong insistence, the relationship with that child and her family, basic rules, consistent efforts to explicitly teach social ways of being. At the same time, when there is a moment when this child *is* being really caring . . . then you *do* encourage with a real reason for putting in the rock. But if you expect too much of RITB, then you become inauthentic, and it’s doomed. You don’t try to find it in a violent moment . . . I put the first one in *after* the violence had stopped and the rock did *not* hit someone in the eye. 520

RITB is not a panacea. It does not replace, for example, the need for rules. Well-managed classrooms are characterized by rich, intellectually engaging, meaningful, and culturally relevant curriculum. RITB seems to work best when done artfully and in concert with these other critical dimensions of an effective learning environment. 525

### Introducing Preservice Teachers to Rocks-in-the-Basket

In the classroom management courses I teach in a large urban university graduate credential program, I ask my students to consider RITB and readings that critique the use of extrinsic motivation techniques (Kohn, 1993; Ullucci, 2009; Watson, 2003). Meanwhile, in their student teaching practicum, my students are placed in high-needs, urban schools, where they observe extrinsic rewards and punishment-based management procedures. Typically, they initially say that RITB would not work in their classrooms, citing such concerns as, “What if a student puts a lot of the rocks in the basket? What if a kid lies about why he put one in? What about the kid who lacks basic social skills?” 530 535

I will then model RITB in class. We discuss the need for consistent, open, direct, and authentic conversation over issues that arise, such as competing to get rocks in the basket. We discuss how to explain honestly to students that while competition can motivate us to develop our own strengths, at times it can stand in the way of our learning to care for and about others. Interestingly, my students seem intuitively aware that RITB cannot be used as the sole way to create the positive environment we seek. Instead, it simply creates an opportunity to directly teach caring ways of being. 540

I am currently exploring what happens when preservice teachers have this opportunity to learn about rocks and other alternatives to competitive extrinsic methods and then to design their own classroom management practices (Author & Smith, XXXX). How can teacher educators support their understanding of RITB when extrinsic motivation or competitive management systems are modeled in their practicum? 545

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### Limitations

Although RITB may help foster students’ learning to care, many elements limit these findings. The study was conducted in one school in four classrooms. Therefore, we cannot know whether 550

the practice could be applied again or if the same learnings could be achieved through another pedagogy. Given the rich findings concerning learning to care reported in this study, it seems important to take up such further questions. More research must be done to explore if this pedagogical tool could be adopted in other settings or to see if it could lead to lasting changes for these students when they move to other settings. Given the very real challenges of implementing RITB school-wide (not to mention the real challenges of actually learning to care), one might wonder about the long-term impact of the practice. How would the pedagogy grow and evolve as students and teachers understood it? Furthermore, what might we learn from introducing it to in-service and preservice teachers? 555

This study showed that when RITB is understood as open-ended and student-centered, spontaneous and authentic, the teachers and students found that it played a significant role in their learning to care. 560

### CONCLUSIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE

In general, RITB as a recurring, collaborative, student-centered experience supported learning to care in several ways; identifying these dimensions can help teachers understand how to create pedagogies for care: (1) The spontaneous, open-ended structure of this practice encouraged students to think about how to care and to define caring. The open-endedness also allowed for interpretation of contexts, such as gender and cultural differences. When Lara could have been considered to be stealing, RITB supported Rachel in appreciating Lara's actions as familial. (2) Students themselves served as ethical models for their peers when they explained through dialogue why they put rocks in the basket; the students described learning from each other's metacognition over their experience of care. For example, Jason articulated that he had to "remember" to refrain from teasing. This 4th-grader rendered his modeling of caring behavior explicit to his peers so they could learn with him. Because students themselves modeled and discussed the examples of caring, moral actions were centered in the students' experience and, therefore, seemed more within reach and more possible to learn from. (3) Finally, opportunities for confirmation arose. Confirmation is particularly important within an interdependent morality. Noddings (2006) associates the neglect of confirmation in moral philosophy with the "traditional unwillingness to recognize moral interdependence" (p. 114). Confirmation requires us to acknowledge each other's efforts when our actions are less than admirable. Instead of a punishment for a misbehavior, confirming asks us to look beneath the behavior to think about a student's best possible intentions. 565  
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Several examples of RITB showed how the students confirmed one another. Shia's self-described "not normal girl" behavior—picking up spiders to help a friend—was appreciated by her peers with a rock in the basket. In this situation, the structure of RITB supported Mara to transcend initial criticism of Shia based on gender differences. The practice of consistently "looking for something to appreciate" also gave the students an opportunity to transcend judgment over differences of language, as in the case with Isabelle. Also, the teachers were able to respond to students' individual and incremental growth toward caring, as in the example with Bradley and Sam when they admitted how they treated a younger student. Rachel also described how they confirmed each other just for "being." She added the necessity of authenticity; this need may clarify what is involved in translating care theory into practice. She drew on the original story 585  
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of RITB's inception and asserted that it must never be "saccharine or false." A commitment is needed from the teachers to refrain from using the rocks to encourage their students to "obey" them. The teachers and students strive for the RITB experiences to derive from each individual's inclinations to care for others. 595

Ultimately, RITB often provided ways for students to participate meaningfully in the moral growth of their peers; this opportunity contrasts markedly with pedagogical strategies relegated to segments of the day and in which students are required to compete against one another to demonstrate moral behavior. Instead of reacting to problems, the practice of RITB involves becoming more aware of and reflective about caring. In summary, this study points to the possibility that the lack of predefined rules, dialogue, and confirmation—all aspects of RITB practice—could afford pre- and in-service teachers rich possibilities to learn from theory translated into practice that fosters an ethic of care in the classroom. 600

## NOTES

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1. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
2. Kindergarten students often needed to dictate their responses to their teachers; thus, the surveys with these children were not anonymous.

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