

# **Caring and Beyond “Motherly” Caring in Primary Teaching: A Case Study of a Taiwanese Primary School**

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*The article, based on an ethnographic analysis of the gendered link of caring in primary teaching with motherly work/roles, seeks to articulate the notion that caring in primary teaching may be complex. Data were collected from a case study conducted at a Taiwanese primary school between 2008 and 2009. The findings suggest that the importance of caring was acknowledged, but teachers’ responses about caring varied. Although male teachers manifestly distanced themselves from caring, the evidence suggests that caring does not exclusively relate to gender. Three non-gender-specific values — personal attributes, an emphasis on professional skills, and the discourse of humanism — were proposed for explaining the complexity of the caring phenomenon in the primary-school context.*

*Keywords: caring; motherly work/roles; femininity; masculinity; teachers’ gender; primary teaching*

## **Introduction**

A large body of literature has addressed the close relations between caring and primary teaching. For example, caring, as Noddings (1986) noted long ago, is “reactive and responsive” and “embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and in an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for” (p. 19). In addition to conceptualizing the

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association between caring and primary teaching, Nias (1999) described caring “as affectivity, as responsibility for learners, as responsibility for the relationships in the school, as self-sacrifice, as over-conscientiousness and as identity” (p. 66). Caring can be expressed in the ways in which teachers show their concern, compassion for and connectedness to pupils as well as their engagement and delight in pupils’ learning, sensitivity to pupils’ needs, advocating for the welfare of pupils, and providing closeness, warmth and nurturing activities. As Ashley and Lee (2003) argued, for primary teachers, “the most significant daily act of caring about children probably concerns the management of their relationships” (p. 31). According to Rogers and Webb (1991), “good teachers care, and good teaching is inextricably linked to specific acts of caring” (p. 174). Nias (1999) succinctly equated primary teaching with a “culture of care” (p. 66).

Moreover, much attention is placed on the link between caring in primary teaching and sex-role stereotypes due to the continuity/emulation between caring in classrooms and caring in the domestic sphere (Acker, 1999; Bolton, 2007; James, 2010; Vogt, 2002). Caring in primary teaching involves offering “natural, quasi-maternal caring,” which is deemed to be a natural extension of motherly roles (Acker, 1999, p. 19), or as a natural sphere for women; women are presumed to be inherently more suited to or capable of caring for children in school. Bolton’s (2007) study pointed out that the symbolic association of the “good teacher” for the young with such feminized emotional codes as caring and empathy has been long held. Chan (2011) also identified the uses and effects of “meticulous women” as a specific discourse accounting for why teaching young children is female-appropriate work in Hong Kong. Consequently, accompanied by the fact that caring is arguably a gendered activity (Forrester, 2005), female teachers in primary teaching are purportedly regarded as natural nurturers, caregivers, and as surrogate, substitute, or quasi-mothers. Such a view is also confirmed by local Taiwanese research. Primary teaching, in Chien’s (2005) view, is an occupation saturated with feeling so that a buttressing teaching culture based on caring and caring as a motive for choosing teaching as well as caring for and loving children as the motives of teachers’ choice of career should be emphasized. According to Hsieh (1995), gender-related perceptions embedded in caring is considered central to female teachers’ duties and roles. In a large-scale investigation, approximately 38% of primary teachers responded that their role is like “nannies” (Chuang, 1998). Similarly, in the research of Chang, Hwang, and Yang (2000), female teachers indicated that they are considered “nannies of high quality” (p. 97).

Nonetheless, concerns that caring as a strength is not exclusive to women have been addressed (Noddings, 2005). As Uitto and Estola (2009) reminded us:

Yet, there were also stories that questioned these contrasts and showed that there are many possible ways to be a female or male teacher. Female teachers could be authorities and male teachers carers. (p. 527)

For example, male educators in Osgood’s (2005) research reported their positive views that men are capable of working against entrenched stereotypes and social expectations of masculinity; thus, engaging with caring is not only comfortable for men but within their capacities (Haase, 2010; Pullen & Simpson, 2009). Cushman (2008) noted that there appeared to be a changing role for men. Men can deconstruct stereotypes by demonstrating their “feminine side” in being tender, caring, sympathetic and expressive of emotions, or by disidentifying with normalized assumption of masculine traits (Pullen & Simpson, 2009), such as toughness and control. Vogt (2002) also argued for caring to be understood as a continuum between femininity and a less gendered identity.

In view of these arguments, this article seeks to deconstruct the gendered link between caring in primary teaching and motherly work/roles, and to demonstrate that the notion of caring is complex. This topic is largely missing from local Taiwanese research and should be further examined. That is, through an exploration of teachers’ perceptions, experiences and attitudes toward caring in their teaching practices, this article suggests that the idea of framing caring as motherly work may overlook more complex ways in which caring may be interpreted and enacted. The study therefore contributes to opening up more insightful inquiry into the varied articulations of and meanings attached to caring.

## **Dangers Related to the Gender-specific Notion of Caring**

In contrast to the idea that caring work remains gendered and is assumed to be inherently suited to females (Acker, 1999; Bolton, 2007; James, 2010; Thornton, 1999; Vogt, 2002), researchers have proposed that the gendered association between female teachers and motherly caring is dangerous and should be challenged (e.g., Maguire, 2005). Regarding dangers related to the gender-specific notion of caring, three points are particularly important.

First, caring is considered as a lack of professionally relevant experience and skills (Vogt, 2002). As feminist researchers warn, behind the discourses of caring and mothering

(Maguire, 2005), gender bias is embedded in the construction of skills in society. Crompton (1997) stated: "Once a task has been defined as a 'female' occupation, then it is very often defined as unskilled, or lacking in importance, as compared to 'male' jobs" (p. 105). Reskin (1988) argued that "women's assignment to child care, viewed as unskilled work in our society, illustrates these patterns" (p. 66). Bolton (2007) pointed out the emotional segregation that is involved in the teaching of young children, relying on feminized codes such as caring and nurturing rather than on "the acquisition of technical skills" (p. 17). Given that these qualities are in-born maternal qualities ascribed to women, teaching the young is devalued as being easy, less intellectually demanding and semi-professional (Bailey, 1996; Bolton, 2007; Johnston, McKeown, & McEwen, 1999). The devaluation of caring jobs in a society is thus accompanied by low pay and low status (Rice & Goessling, 2005; Vincent & Ball, 2006). By contrast, male teachers are keen to work with older children and improve pupils' knowledge, which are not only intellectually and professionally demanding and require advanced teaching skills, but also through which men are able to define "their contribution as different to, or better than, that of female teachers" (Skelton, 2003, p. 206).

Second, men performing work involving caring are perceived as being problematic or risky because of their masculinity and perceptions by others (Jones, 2008; Skelton, 2003; Thornton, 1999). Caring is stereotyped in terms of being associated with maternal symbols or an archetypal female quality that is symbolically juxtaposed at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy (Swain, 2006). Male teachers not only display resistance to caring so as to "establish themselves as different, and women as other" (King, 1998, p. 105), but also tend to take on disciplinary or physical tasks to emphasize the masculine and hard side of their work (Allan, 1993) so as to distance themselves from being constructed as feminine (Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004). While working in highly feminized primary teaching (Li, 2014), male teachers experience intense heteronormative surveillance (Martino & Frank, 2006). Research also sheds light on societal negativity and pessimistic reactions to males opting to work closely with young children (Johnston et al., 1999). For example, there is the ever-present specter of the constructed identity of the "inadequate male" (Jones, 2008, p. 700), or male teachers may be labeled as "unnatural" and "odd" (Thornton, 1999, p. 46), given that caring is considered inappropriate for "real men" (Skelton, 2003, p. 204). Consequently, segregated gender roles have contributed to male teachers dissociating themselves from caring work (Haase, 2010). Instead, they seek to work in upper-year school levels or pursue career promotions (Jones, 2008).

Third, it is suggested that because of social demands and expectations, the boundaries between teaching work and caring seem to be blurred (Acker, 1999). Self-sacrifice is labeled as one set of caring (Nias, 1999); thus, the blurring of borders between labor and love increases teachers' workloads and stress levels (Easthope & Easthope, 2000), and even cause female teachers to ignore their own needs, such as emotional, health or household needs (Chan, 2004; James, 2010). Moreover, caring is presented as coming naturally to women, so female teachers' professional competence and efforts become invisible and undervalued (Forrester, 2005).

However, the noteworthy argument that caring is not equivalent to parenting, and thus discourses of motherly care are improperly applied to teaching and teachers (Ashley & Lee, 2003), has emerged in the literature. James (2010) indicated that despite being labeled as “selfish” or “uncaring” and experiencing alienation from their female peers, some female teachers tend to resist the dominant notion of caring, illustrating that not all women are happy with being (expected to be) caregivers (p. 532). In exploring teachers' work, Acker (1999) highlighted that unlike real-life mothers, there are limits to how much teachers can care for their pupils; we tend to forget that teaching children is a job or a career. According to Bolton (2007), teaching practices should not be judged by either biological or discursively determined factors. Primary school teaching can be a complex mix of maternal and masculine traits (Griffiths, 2006), whereby the gendered associations between caring in primary teaching and motherly work/roles should be challenged, as evidenced in the cited studies and the present work.

## **Research Methods**

The data that this article draws upon were collected as part of an ethnographic study exploring the gendering of primary teaching. As Holmes and Schnurr (2006) claimed, workplaces are some of the most significant arenas whereby individuals “do gender” while constructing their professional identities and meeting their work expectations. The fieldwork was conducted at a primary school located in southwest Taiwan between November 2008 and July 2009. Bradley (2007) proposed, in terms of social science research, that there are three levels: the macro-social level, the meso or institutional level, and the level of individual actions and interaction as the micro level. Regarding the meso and micro levels, she further suggested: “The meso level is often tackled through case studies; while interviews or observations are used to address micro sociological issues” (p. 88). In line

with Bradley's view, the two research methods of non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were the main sources of data collection for this case study. First, as Mason (2002) argued, observation allows a researcher to observe the behaviors, interactions and ways that people account for these actions in their natural environment, minimizing the risk of the researcher altering or manipulating the settings (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Non-participant observation was employed to explore what a teacher's work is and how gender affects teachers' jobs, actions, experiences and ideas. Non-participant observation included shadowing six class teachers (four females and two males) who were chosen for the age range of pupils whom they taught (from Year 1 to Year 6). Shadowing was used because it is considered "observation on the move" (Czarniawska, 2014, p. 43). According to McDonald (2005), shadowing can "produce the sort of first-hand, detailed data that gives the organizational researcher access to both the trivial or mundane and the difficult to articulate" (p. 457). Among the teachers shadowed, Miss Fiona (all participants are anonymized), a young single woman, and two teachers (Mr. Gary, Mrs. Elisa) working as managerial members, were included to broaden an understanding of views and opinions of teachers from diverse working experience and backgrounds (see Table 1). Butler (1990) argued that "gender ought not to be perceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (p. 143). Observations were also carried out at various settings, such as staff offices and meetings, school events, and even private teachers' gatherings. These provided me with many opportunities to discuss issues with more teachers and managerial members (such as Mr. Sam) in order to better understand how teachers worked and interacted in their workplace. Fieldnotes, along with my personal thoughts, feelings, and reflections related to this ethnographic study, were taken throughout the duration of the research.

**Table 1: Participants**

Name	Positions	Participation
Mrs. Maggie	Class teacher of Year 1	Shadowed, interviewed
Miss Fiona	Class teacher of Year 1	Shadowed, interviewed
Mrs. Elisa	Class teacher of Year 3, subsection leader	Shadowed, interviewed
Mr. Jason	Class teacher of Year 4	Shadowed, interviewed
Mr. Gary	Class teacher of Year 5, subsection leader	Shadowed, interviewed
Mrs. Yvonne	Class teacher of Year 6	Shadowed, interviewed
Mr. Johnny	Class teacher of Year 6	Interviewed
Mrs. Angel	Subject teacher	Interviewed
The principal		Interviewed
Mr. Sam	Class teacher of Year 5; subsection leader	Informal discussion

Second, interviews not only offer richer and more extensive material, but also reveal ways in which interviewees “construct reality and think about situations” (Yin, 2009, p. 264). It is worth noting that there were no male teachers teaching Years 1, 2 and 3 in this numerically feminized school (28 out of 41 teachers were females). At the end of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight teachers, including the six teachers shadowed, one male class teacher (Mr. Johnny) and one female subject teacher (Mrs. Angel) (see Table 1). In addition, the principal was also interviewed (see Table 1), for, as Yin (2009) noted, interviews with key organization members rather than just the studied group help gain further insights. By interviewing the teaching staff from different posts and teaching work, the aim is to find greater gender balance and also to better understand “what is important in the minds of the subjects themselves” (Bogoan & Biklen, 1998, p. 35). Interviews consisted of open-ended questions primarily focusing on teachers’ incentives for choosing teaching, their perceptions and experience pertaining to teaching work, and classroom practices and gender in the workplace. Answers derived from interview data seem to reveal the teachers’ personal feelings, thoughts and motivations behind public behavior, as remarked by Lichtman (2006). The interviews lasted between one and two hours. Interview data were tape-recorded and later fully transcribed into English.

Yin (2009) pointed out that interview data do not just provide “answers to specific questions” (p. 264). In this respect, the issue of caring was not an area I consciously or specifically sought to explore, but it emerged as a salient theme continuously reappearing and being mentioned as I analyzed data from classroom observations and interviews. Combining these “unexpected” data and other evidence in the study, empirical findings are presented below.

## **Research Findings**

### ***Teachers’ Caring Behavior and Responsibilities***

Mrs. Maggie (a class teacher of Year 1) was the first teacher I shadowed. An extract from my first week’s fieldnotes epitomizes how teachers engaged in caring:

Even though Mrs. Maggie was having lunch at her desk, she comforted a crying boy and several other boys complaining about their classmates’ misbehavior, kept reminding pupils who had finished lunch to do the cleaning, and urged the remaining pupils to finish their lunch soon. (fieldnote, 2 December 2008)

She turned her head to me and said: “Teaching younger pupils is like being a nanny.” The excerpt points out that primary teaching is the work of “the more socially and gender-circumscribed caring and nurturing roles” (Hansen & Mulholland, 2005, p. 128).

The following comment, made in the context of handing out pupils’ medicines, exemplifies caring and teachers’ responsibilities in the context of primary teaching in Taiwan. Mrs. Angel (a subject teacher) stated: “It’s very common for parents to have their kids bring their medicine to school as kids need to take it during school hours” (fieldnote, 9 December 2008). In terms of Taiwanese primary teaching, this scene is not unusual as children’s parents or family members are required to work. Mrs. Angel also stressed that the role of medicinal provider was crucial for teachers, particularly those teaching younger children, and recalled her experience that “some parents have made or will make complaints about the class teachers who neglect or forget the proper time for children to take their medicine” (fieldnote, 9 December 2008). She proceeded to describe how she manages this type of caring work:

For me, the strategy is to ask pupils to put their medicine on my desk as soon as they arrive at the classroom. Another way is to ask pupils directly if their parents tell them to give me something when they leave home or if their parents note down a message to me. (fieldnote, 9 December 2008)

Her accounts serve as an indication of parents’ expectations of teachers as caregivers in their children’s learning environment, echoing King’s (1998) argument that “teachers of young children are automatically assumed to care about and provide care for their students” (p. 65).

By contrast, male teachers, rather than occupying the “caring” role, are positioned as having different roles that “continue to replicate the patriarchal norm” (Burn, 2002, p. 37). As Seidler (2007) also argued, male teachers tend to behave in macho ways, so it is rare for them to display more compassionate feelings and emotions. However, the evidence from my study shows that male teachers had their own somewhat subtle/hidden ways of caring for their pupils. During a particularly hot afternoon, Mr. Gary (a class teacher of Year 5) consented to children sharing their sports drinks after completing their PE class. As children shared the cold drinks with excitement, in my fieldnote I made the following comment: “I speculated how unlikely it was that any of the students noticed that these bottled drinks had been chilled in a fridge by Mr. Gary earlier that day” (fieldnote, 20 April 2009).

My observation notes also disclose how children require teachers' caring. One day Mrs. Maggie directed my attention toward a girl coming to ask for some ointment due to a cut on her finger. Despite the fact that the girl's parents had treated her cut, over four consecutive days she kept coming back either to ask for treatment or to let Mrs. Maggie witness her suffering. Mrs. Maggie, being rather amused by this, commented: “How can a girl get hurt almost every day? She must long for my attention. I'm sure that expressing my sympathy and care, rather than medical treatment, works better” (fieldnote, 9 December 2008).

### ***Teachers' Different Perceptions of Caring***

When interviewed about their teaching practices and experiences, the teachers' responses about caring varied. Some teachers positively identified with the similarity between caring and motherliness. According to Mrs. Elisa (a class teacher of Year 3), “In primary teaching, I feel, sort of, like the continuity, the extension of family parents' caring. Certainly, it's impossible for teachers to entirely replace parents” (interview data, 2 July 2009). In our interview, Mrs. Maggie discussed the importance of motherly caring for young children prior to addressing my question:

The time spent caring for children is massive owing to the differences and particular conditions among children. The work resembles that of mums. Take diet and dressing problems, for example: some children have dietary requirements, and some get confused about suitable attire for hot or cold weather, particularly for those who are raised by or live with grandparents instead of their parents. They're not aware of how to handle these sorts of life problems. (interview data, 29 June 2009)

Her detailed comments confirmed the gender-specific perceptions linking caring in her teaching work with motherly work, also echoing James's (2010) view that caring is needed particularly “in an environment where teachers believed their students were not being adequately mothered at home” (p. 526). Some female teachers did display great pleasure when playing motherly roles in their classrooms. During my shadowing, I sensed clearly that enquiring about children always prompted, for example, Mrs. Maggie and Mrs. Angel to engage in a great deal of conversation with me, delighted to provide me with ideas from their abundant caring experiences.

Furthermore, the significance of children's ages emerged as a factor when the teachers considered caring in terms of motherly work in their teaching practices. In Mrs. Maggie's

words: “Because pupils in primary education are under 12, female teachers are quite suitable, as they’re just like mothers looking after children. This also sets parents’ minds at rest” (interview data, 29 June 2009). The class teacher of Year 6, Mrs. Yvonne, also supported the idea that “it has to do with children’s ages. When you teach younger children, they like to stay around teachers, normally” (interview data, 26 June 2009). Mrs. Angel’s brief explanation was that “little children are different from older ones” (interview data, 3 July 2009). Female teachers were not alone in this perception, as the male class teacher of Year 4, Mr. Jason, also addressed a similar view: “I say yes. I agree it’s younger children who need more care giving, and teachers have to offer this” (interview data, 24 June 2009). The teachers’ accounts appear to suggest that primary teaching is represented as caring work suitable for women (Li, 2014).

By contrast, some teachers argued against the gendered associations between teaching jobs and motherly caring work/roles. Three sets of reasons were proposed: gender identity, class size, and the influence of sex-stereotypes. To illustrate Mr. Gary’s stance that “I don’t agree with the idea of equating teaching to motherly work,” he considered social and biological factors:

We have to take into account social identities of both genders. Men tend to be uncaring in tasks such as doing house chores, compared to the prudence exercised by women. Being grown-ups, teachers still are affected by this sort of gender concept ... Male teachers rarely teach Low Years [Years 1–2]. Perhaps the influence of biological genes is inevitable. Pupils of Middle [Years 3–4] and High Years [Years 5–6] have male teachers. (interview data, 2 July 2009)

Then he added: “I don’t suppose that we [male teachers] will become feminized because of female predominance in our school” (interview data, 2 July 2009). Embracing the importance of gender identity and biological factors, what Mr. Gary also expressed was the opinion that he did not see his work as being maternal. Moreover, Mr. Gary’s explanation echoed the view that men are often expected to play the main role in managing older children rather than caring for the young (Haase, 2010; King, 1998; Li, 2016), as discussed later. Class size was another reason why the teachers did not accept the notion of equating teaching with motherly caring. Mrs. Yvonne referred to large classes:

It can’t be that case. We have to see how many pupils there are in a class. A mother having 30 children is different from a mother having one or two kids. And love and caring varies and differs. (interview data, 26 June 2009)

She added: “there’s no possibility for teachers to substitute mothers” (interview data, 26 June 2009). Additionally, the influence of stereotypes was suggested. Miss Fiona (a class teacher of Year 1) straightforwardly raised her doubts about sex-role stereotypes in the following way:

Might not be mothers. It’s a stereotype that it’s always mothers who take care of babies after they’re born, isn’t it? And then we take it for granted. However, you know, it isn’t true? Fathers can do it as well. (interview data, 24 June 2009)

### ***Men’s Dissociating From Caring***

Debates surrounding the rarity of male teachers in primary teaching also demonstrate that men dissociate or remove themselves from motherly caring work/roles and construct a more masculine, such as disciplinary or powerful, approach when teaching (Haase, 2010; Li, 2016). As noted, my fieldwork school had no male teachers teaching young children. Addressing this issue, the principal attributed it to the lack of male teachers’ willingness. But when asked what if a man volunteered to teach younger children, he, with an emphatic voice, replied: “I’d ask about his motivations, and then I might consider it” (fieldnote, 25 December 2008). Noticing my confused look, he further explained:

Of course, I’d need to understand why he wants to teach Low Years as I think he should choose to do other jobs to develop his abilities. Am I right? If he’s serious about taking the job, I’ll respect his decision. But, I’ll ask him first, what on earth for? (fieldnote, 25 December 2008)

His explanation and the concentration of female teachers teaching younger children reflect the concerns that teaching young children was an “unnatural,” “suspicious” choice for men (Haase, 2010; King, 1998; Skelton, 2003).

More responses from male teachers confirm their distancing from caring. When discussing his profession, Mr. Jason supported the need for caring. However, he concluded by stating: “That’s why I can’t teach Low Years’ younger children” (interview data, 24 June 2009). In fact, at the time of our conversation, Mr. Jason, with nearly 20 years of experience, once expressed his reservations about being a Year 4 class teacher, as it was his first time teaching “such young” children. Similarly, Mr. Johnny (a class teacher of Year 6) responded: “I’ve never taught pupils of Years 1 and 2 because of school arrangements. I don’t try to, either. Maybe younger children need more caring, and I’m afraid that I’m not good at it”

(interview data, 24 June 2009). It appears that the enactment of caregiving is a source of tension and conflict (Thornton, 1999), and that men lack confidence in such work. The comments made by Mr. Sam (a class teacher of Year 5) illustrated women's suitability for caring. He told me: "You should go ask female teachers. Maybe it's Low Year children who need motherly figures in schools. Perhaps it's because pupils of High Years are older" (fieldnote, 27 March 2009). Clearly, there is the perception that young children needing caring are tied to women's capacity (Bolton, 2007; Rice & Goessling, 2005).

In stark contrast to caring as female work, my study evidenced that teaching difficult classes and older children are "men's work" (Li, 2016). Furthermore, echoing Bailey's (1996) view that males tend to be "weightier in an intellectual sense" (p. 177), Mr. Johnny deliberately stressed the difference that teaching older pupils was academically challenging:

The knowledge younger children need is of a lower level and what they need is caring. Teaching High Years and Middle Years is more challenging and I can concentrate on knowledge instruction and counseling. I just cannot imagine myself talking to younger children in a childish way. (interview data, 3 July 2009)

Obviously, this male teacher regarded himself as being suitable to teach older pupils, a skill which is construed as requiring more professional skills and intellectual knowledge than caring for younger children, for the latter role is represented as an easy/easier job. His comments also help explain why men are less likely to engage with feminine aspects of teaching such as caring (Allan, 1993; Mills et al., 2004; Noddings, 2001), as these remain undervalued, whereas accessing powerful positions involving fear and respect are "strengthened by the social distance of men from children" (Haase, 2010, p. 188).

### ***Transcending the Gendered Boundaries of Caring***

Vogt (2002) argued that caring in primary teaching can be viewed as a continuum that is "highly linked with femininity at one end and with a less gendered identity at the other" (p. 262). Drawing on Vogt's view of "less gendered identity," this article attempts to identify three non-gender-specific values: the influence of personal attributes, the emphasis of professionalism, and the humanistic approach discernible in gendered caring. In so doing, I seek to demonstrate that rather than being merely a nurturing job or an extension of motherhood, caring, at least as a phenomenon in my case-study school, is complex.

First, my research data indicate teachers’ personal traits as a key factor affecting their perceptions toward caring. An example of this comes from Mrs. Yvonne. In her nearly fifteen years of teaching, there was only one time that she taught Year 1. She described the job like “a hen leading 12 chicks. It was lovely and fun” (interview data, 26 June 2009). Nonetheless, she reiterated that according to her “personality” (interview data, 26 June 2009), she disliked either getting close to or having intimate contact with pupils. The strong comments made by male teachers were also an indication of the influence of personal qualities. Mr. Gary admitted that his difficulty of caregiving derived from the disposition of his personality and a lack of closeness in his own childhood background. Mr. Jason summed it up well: “I just can’t teach young children of Year 1” (interview data, 24 June 2009).

The following examples from my fieldwork provide more evidence. By my observation, Miss Fiona, despite being a Year 1 class teacher, seemed not to embrace her role as a caregiver. Unlike her colleagues teaching younger children (such as Mrs. Maggie), she rarely had physical contact with her pupils. For instance, when discussing how she dealt with ill children and the medicine they had to take, she bluntly replied: “I just leave these matters to pupils” as she never remembered the right time to remind children to take their medicine (fieldnote, 15 May 2009). On some occasions, Miss Fiona revealed her personal predilections and teaching ideas by asking me: “Did you notice? Apart from academic learning, I offer pupils plenty of opportunities to practice, to solve problems and do things on their own” (fieldnote, 9 June 2009). Becoming a mother was a “turning point” for Mrs. Elisa to learn to accept “physical closeness, caring and their importance” in her career (interview data, 2 July 2009). Importantly, these examples dislodge the claim that caring is an in-born female attribute. Female teachers also need to learn or change traits or habits in their personality to embrace caring work or roles (Burn, 2002; Li, 2014; Skelton, 2003).

The second value foregrounded in the present work is professionalism. Woods and Jeffrey (2002) note:

From a notion of the “good teacher” based on “personal qualities” (Broadhead, 1987), the emphasis is now on teacher competencies, such as subject expertise, coordination, collaboration, management and supervision. (p. 95)

When talking about the importance of caring, Miss Fiona unexpectedly put it this way:

It’s skills, our practical teaching. We need skills that accumulate with time. Then we make adjustments after teaching so many children. When questioned, teaching experience is hardly interpreted by words. (interview data, 24 June 2009)

I reminded her that she had completely forgotten the topic: caring. Miss Fiona hastened to answer: “Love is needed, of course” (interview data, 2 July 2009). After this brief response, she again turned to the significance of skills: “When you teach children, skills are needed. Providing lots of love, and not teaching them, isn’t enough” (interview data, 2 July 2009).

Other teachers, regardless of their pupils’ ages, also placed much emphasis on teaching skills, knowledge and expertise, which were all valued as requisites in their profession, as the following interview extracts show:

Teaching needs some skills. They’re necessary, indispensable. (Mr. Jason, interview data, 2 July 2009)

I don’t think that teaching the young is an easy job. For such younger children, you need more advanced skills. Otherwise, children won’t be able to understand what you’re trying to teach them, or the warnings you’re giving. (Miss Fiona, interview data, 2 July 2009)

You have to use knowledge, involving astronomy, geography and history, to make such young children understand things. These are real skills. (Mrs. Maggie, interview data, 29 June 2009)

If it’s an easy job, children ought to be educated at home by their parents or, like in some films, by teachers who only received a secondary educational qualification but are qualified to teach in primary schools in remote areas. (Mrs. Yvonne, interview data, 29 June 2009)

It’s very difficult ... Teaching professionalism is important, but professionalism is difficult to quantify ... So, that’s why I disagree with teaching resembling motherliness. Teachers’ attitudes and professionalism are crucial. (Mr. Gary, interview data, 2 July 2009)

Among them, Mrs. Elisa gave a detailed account of why “teaching, I feel, is not that easy”:

This [teaching] requires skills and some talent ... We tend to assume that we’ve explained a point in an easy, understandable way, but children just don’t understand. You need skills to simplify, to illustrate until they understand what you’re referring to. I feel that you must have a certain amount of knowledge, and that knowledge you possess has to be precise. You need to choose adequate knowledge because there are various levels of it, basic and

advanced, and you have to decide which is best for pupils and their development. (interview data, 2 July 2009)

On the other hand, professionalism might imperceptibly permeate teachers’ teaching careers. When discussing teaching skills, Mrs. Maggie narrated the story about her determination to “teach younger children”:

I’ve spent a good deal of time and enthusiasm on a boy and his behavior problems. I tried to demonstrate that I cared by talking to him frequently, staying with him, telling him what was right and wrong, and taking him to church on Sundays. I even bought some stationery for him and told him straightforwardly that if he really needed something he could let me know. It took time, and in the end it didn’t work. The boy was caught stealing something at a grocery store. This failure triggered in me a deep reflection about these issues. From educational and children development perspectives, it’s crucial to nip children’s problems in the bud; that is, to educate and to tackle problems with pupils when their personalities are developing. (interview data, 29 June 2009)

Echoing Acker’s (1999) findings that however much teachers care and love, this cannot be understood as natural nurturing or an extension of motherhood, Mrs. Maggie’s experience indicates that although teachers had their various ways of interpreting and enacting caring, professional skills and capabilities are seen as valuable and necessary.

The third value registered here is the humanistic approach. Woods and Jeffrey (2002) outline humanism as a set of values featuring “holism, person-centredness, and warm and caring relationships” in teaching (p. 92). There is evidence in my study suggesting the existence of these humanistic values and attitudes when I explored teachers’ caring for their pupils. For example, Mr. Gary held the additional position of a Data Subsection leader, and thus he was aware of a wider range of information relevant to state subsidies and benefits. During my fieldwork, it was quite usual to see him spending his spare time seeking information online, filling in forms or discussing problems with someone (his section dean, pupils or parents). By using these resources, he assisted pupils in need even before parents asked for help.

Humanistic values may also be witnessed in the following example. To begin with, Taiwanese researchers, such as Hsia (2007), have voiced their concerns on transnational marriages. It is suggested that due to language and cultural difference, foreign parents (mainly mothers) require more educational, social and even financial information and resource for their children. With the remarkable growth in so-called “new Taiwanese

children” (*xin Taiwan zhi zi*), willingly offering relevant information and more assistance for these foreign parents has been part of my case-study school teachers’ work, as informed by Mrs. Angel and her colleagues.

Teaching, as Chien (2005) commented, is a humanistic career rather than merely centering on knowledge instruction. Close examination of my research data reveals more excerpts disclosing the humanistic dimensions of caring and values. An example occurred when shadowing Mrs. Maggie. In her class a boy seemed to be quiet. One day, she sighed to me that she could not help but postpone the appointment with her hairdresser, as she was engaged in accessing medical assessments and official records essential for the boy’s treatment and needed to drive him and his grandfather to the hospital for the boy’s assessments, which became an ongoing responsibility (fieldnote, 15 December 2007). Another example of humanistic caring by Mrs. Maggie occurred before the end of the first semester. Mrs. Maggie told me that she was planning an outing for several pupils from low-income or single-parental families during the forthcoming winter vacation, stating: “I hope to gain more awareness of and offer more assistance for them” (fieldnote, 8 January 2008). In essence, the humanistic approach is without gendered associations. As Woods and Jeffrey (2002) argued, teacher’s caring is also built on humanism, which is different from those views asserting that closeness with pupils is a way to buttress female teachers as mothers in the classroom.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this article, I have attempted to problematize gendered associations of caring with motherliness and to demonstrate the complexity of caring through an examination of teachers’ perceptions, attitudes and experience regarding caring. Indeed, caring may involve a variety of activities and feelings. As described, handing out pupils’ medicine represents one example of caring in the context of Taiwanese primary teaching. The importance of caring was acknowledged by the teachers, but different viewpoints about caring were expressed: some teachers supported the link between caring and motherly work/roles, while gender identity, class sizes and the influence of stereotypes were identified as factors creating distance between caring in the context of primary teaching from motherliness and femininity. When the teachers elaborated on the significance of caring in terms of motherly work, the children’s ages were also considered as a factor. Haase (2010) argued that many male teachers are unwilling to risk themselves by challenging dominant gender stereotypes

for fear of “potential oppressive consequences” (p. 187). It is manifest that male teachers in this study tended to support the gendered idea that “men are strict whereas women are caring” (Hsieh, 1995, p. 192) and in maintaining distance from caring roles by engaging in “men’s work,” such as teaching older children or taking on disciplinary and more powerful jobs (Li, 2016; Luk-Fong & Brennan, 2010). This contrasts with the argument of Ashley and Lee (2003) that men may be “androgynous” as a feasible way of enacting caring (p. 30). To some extent, men’s pressure and worries about primary teaching have been reflected in the stereotyped representation of caring as feminine or feminized (Allan, 1993; Johnston et al., 1999; Mills et al., 2004; Thornton, 1999). In this regard, men seemed unable to transcend their gendered identities (King, 1998).

Yet my research evidence suggests that caring does not exclusively relate to gender (Noddings, 2005; Pullen & Simpson, 2009; Skelton, 2003; Vogt, 2002) because not all female teachers accepted the dominant social expectation of women being caregivers or exhibiting caring attributes. Doing gender “involves the (re)creation, negotiation and maintenance of difference in specific social and institutional contexts” (Pullen & Simpson, 2009, p. 565). For example, as discussed, rather than seeing herself as a caregiver, Miss Fiona disclosed that what she valued most in her work was “the importance of professionalism, autonomy and independence” (interview data, 24 June 2009). Mrs. Yvonne also recounted that making every effort to “instruct” pupils every day was the source of her joy (interview data, 26 June 2009). In this respect, these women provided concrete indications of women distancing themselves from enacting motherly care/roles, thus challenging the dominant caring stereotype and instead taking on, for example, disciplinary work (Li, 2016). Although the gendered associations of caring are embedded in some teachers’ perceptions, this research evidence reflects that being a woman or a man is different from displaying “feminine” and “masculine” attributes (Ashley & Lee, 2003; Pullen & Simpson, 2009), thus demonstrating that given that caring cannot be solely explained by teachers’ gender, it seems problematic to characterize caring in primary teaching contexts as being gender-specific.

Citing Ashley and Lee (2003), Forrester’s (2005) view is that caring in primary schools is “a complex endeavour not necessarily beholden to nurturing and mothering connotations” and “can thus be conceptualized in different ways” (p. 277). I have argued that the attitudes, behaviors and ideas of teachers about caring may involve a complex mix of three sets of non-gender-specific values: the influence of personal attributes, an emphasis on professional skills, and the humanistic approach. Not reducing caring to an in-born attribute, the evidence

suggests that women might also need to learn or adjust their personalities to be caring. Furthermore, notwithstanding the fact that the importance of caring is endorsed, quotes from the fieldnotes reveal how teachers of both genders strongly prioritized, valued and stressed learned and professional skills and knowledge in terms of their teaching jobs. Finally, my fieldwork notes reflect the closeness, warmth and caring in relationships and interactions between teachers and pupils, which were underpinned by a strong attachment to humanistic beliefs and attitudes. A number of the teachers valued and dedicated themselves to efforts that went beyond the limits of their roles as teachers. More importantly, the values, attitudes and views toward caring that teachers possessed mirror the implication that, as Vogt (2002) suggested, teachers might transcend the boundaries of patriarchal stereotypes and gender borders linking the construction of caring with motherly work/roles.

This study involved a contextualized culture-specific analysis, namely primary school teachers in the Taiwanese context. Due to limitations incurred by the data being derived from a single setting, the article thus makes no claim that the findings can be generalized to other teaching settings. Importantly, this article hopes to urge more scholarly attention to the complexities of caring work/roles in primary teaching and to contribute toward the literature on caring by adding specific Taiwanese data. Moreover, it should be noted that these three values do not exhaust possible influences on the dynamic between teaching and caring, including teachers' ages, life stages and experiences, parental expectations, and so on. Exploring such factors are suggested for future or further research so as to acquire more insightful understandings of the underlying complex dynamics between caring, teachers' gender and the cultural context.

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## 小學教學的關懷不只是「母親般的」關懷：台灣小學個案研究

李曉蓉

### 摘要

本文藉由民族誌分析小學教學中關懷與母親工作／角色的性別關聯，探討小學教學中關懷的複雜意涵。以 2008 至 2009 年台灣某小學的個案研究為資料，本研究發現雖然教師都認同關懷在小學教學中的重要性，但是對於關懷的觀點卻有歧異，例如男教師清楚表示自己的工作和角色與關懷相距甚遠。研究顯示，關懷並非只與性別有關，因此本文提出三個非性別特定的價值——個人特質、重視專業技巧、人道主義論述——以詮釋關懷在小學教學情境中的複雜性。

關鍵詞：關懷；母親工作／角色；女性特質；男性特質；教師性別；小學教學