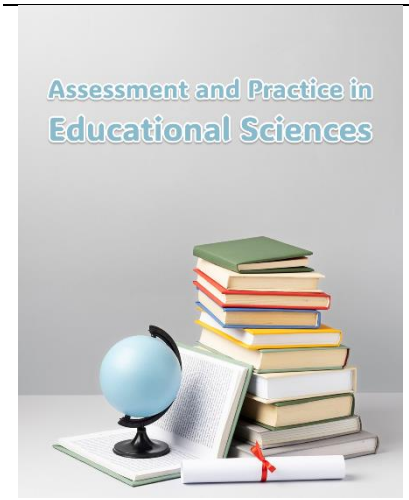
Assessment and Practice in Educational Sciences



Exploring Lower Secondary School Teachers' Perceptions and Lived Experiences of a Caring Educational Approach in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Rapid transformations in the contemporary world have fundamentally altered the nature of teachers' roles and expectations of educational systems, such that teachers are now responsible not only for content instruction but also for emotional guidance, human support, and creating conditions conducive to learners' personal development. The purpose of this study was to explore lower secondary school teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of a caring educational approach in the classroom. The study employed a qualitative research design. The participants were lower secondary school teachers who, in recent years, had directly encountered the "caring educational approach" in their classroom teaching practices. Using purposive sampling, 19 teachers were selected. Data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenology based on the seven-stage approach of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1998), with semi-structured interviews used as the data collection instrument. To establish the validity of the research instrument, two methods were employed: (1) reflexivity and (2) selective participant review. To establish reliability, two methods were used: (1) peer researcher analysis and (2) examination of interpretive agreement among analysts. According to the findings, lower secondary school teachers' lived experiences of the caring educational approach in the classroom comprised 120 meaning units (interpretive codes), organized into 24 preliminary interpretive themes (interpretive concepts) and subsumed under six overarching interpretive themes (meaning categories): (1) perceiving the adolescent's critical lifeworld, (2) human and professional drivers of commitment, (3) structural barriers and professional erosion, (4) pedagogical agency and the creation of space, (5) managing conflicts in the boundaries of care, and (6) existential openings and pedagogical transformation.

Keywords: lived experiences, curriculum, caring educational approach, lower secondary education.

Introduction

Contemporary educational systems increasingly recognize that teaching cannot be reduced to the transmission of disciplinary knowledge or the management of academic performance. The teacher's role encompasses cognitive, emotional, relational, ethical, and developmental dimensions, particularly during adolescence, when students experience rapid changes in identity, emotion regulation, social belonging, autonomy, and expectations of significant adults. Within this context, the quality

of teacher–student relationships has emerged as a central factor shaping students' motivation, engagement, adjustment, and educational experiences. A recent systematic review of adolescent motivation research demonstrated that teacher–student relationships are conceptualized through multiple dimensions, including emotional support, closeness, conflict, responsiveness, and perceived care, and that these dimensions are closely connected with students' motivational functioning (1). Similarly, students' perceptions of classroom interactions and the extent to which teachers are supportive, attentive, and relationally available have been shown to be associated with stronger behavioral and emotional engagement in school (2). These findings suggest that the relational dimension of teaching is not peripheral to educational effectiveness; rather, it constitutes one of the conditions through which learning, participation, and personal development become possible.

The importance of this relational dimension becomes particularly salient during lower secondary education. Early adolescence is characterized by heightened sensitivity to peer evaluation, a growing desire for autonomy, fluctuations in self-concept, and increased vulnerability to emotional distress. At the same time, adolescents continue to depend significantly on supportive adults who can recognize their needs without undermining their emerging independence. Research has shown that adolescents' satisfaction with school is meaningfully connected to the quality of their relationships with teachers, and that behavioral engagement can function as an important mechanism linking positive teacher–student relationships to students' school experiences (3). Positive relationships may also have reciprocal effects, as supportive teacher–student interactions can contribute not only to student outcomes but also to improved teaching practices by strengthening teachers' responsiveness, motivation, and instructional effectiveness (4). Consequently, the classroom can be understood not merely as a site of curricular delivery but as a relational environment in which students' willingness to participate, take intellectual risks, express vulnerability, and persist in learning is shaped by the way teachers recognize and respond to them.

Within this relational perspective, the concept of a caring educational approach has gained increasing attention. Caring pedagogy refers to an orientation in which the teacher deliberately attends to the learner as a whole person and treats educational interaction as an ethical and relational responsibility rather than a purely technical task. Such care may involve listening, emotional availability, respect for individuality, recognition of personal circumstances, responsiveness to vulnerability, and the creation of a classroom environment in which students feel valued and psychologically safe. From the students' perspective, educational care is communicated through concrete behaviors, not merely through teachers' intentions. Research on students' experiences of teacher care indicates that care is perceived through attentive communication, responsiveness, respect, presence, and the teacher's willingness to understand students' needs in context (5). Likewise, early adolescents have described caring teachers as those who listen, show interest in students as individuals, provide emotional and academic support, demonstrate fairness, create a sense of belonging, and communicate that students matter beyond their academic performance (6). Thus, caring is enacted through everyday pedagogical encounters and becomes visible in the small relational practices through which teachers communicate recognition, dignity, and concern.

The caring approach also has a strong connection with socially just education. Pedagogies of care challenge impersonal, standardized, and purely performance-oriented models of schooling by emphasizing responsiveness to differences in students' circumstances, resources, identities, and needs. In studies of health and physical education, caring teaching has been conceptualized as a complex relational practice through which teachers attempt to build meaningful relationships and support inclusion, fairness, and social justice (7). Broader work on pedagogies for social justice similarly demonstrates that student and societal well-being can be promoted through practices that foreground relationships, participation, recognition, inclusion, and responsiveness rather than treating educational achievement as an isolated individual outcome (8). In the Iranian educational context, the relationship between care and justice has also been emphasized. Research among Iranian English language teachers has shown that caring pedagogy can be understood as a form of socially just instruction in which teachers seek to recognize

learners' diverse needs, provide equitable support, and create educational conditions in which students are treated with dignity (9). These perspectives broaden the meaning of caring from interpersonal kindness to an ethically grounded pedagogical position that addresses both individual vulnerability and structural inequalities.

The practical manifestation of care in teaching, however, is complex. Care does not mean the absence of academic expectations, unrestricted emotional involvement, or the abandonment of professional boundaries. Rather, teachers must continually negotiate the relationship between compassion and authority, responsiveness and fairness, accessibility and privacy, and flexibility and curricular responsibility. Students may experience care when teachers adapt their communication, assessment, or instructional decisions to their needs, but teachers must also preserve educational standards and avoid creating unhealthy dependency or perceptions of favoritism. These tensions are particularly pronounced in lower secondary classrooms, where adolescents may simultaneously seek emotional closeness and resist adult guidance. The complexity of caring relationships has been documented in research demonstrating that building good teacher–student relationships requires sustained pedagogical judgment, sensitivity to context, and awareness of the social meanings embedded in everyday interactions (7). Similarly, research on the communication of educational care indicates that students distinguish between authentic relational care and superficial or instrumental forms of teacher attention, suggesting that effective caring requires congruence between teachers' intentions, behaviors, and students' interpretations (5).

The conditions under which care is enacted have also changed as teaching increasingly extends beyond traditional face-to-face classroom environments. Digital and online learning environments have highlighted new dimensions of teacher care, including accessibility, timely feedback, individualized communication, and the challenge of maintaining relational presence when physical proximity is absent. Research with secondary mathematics students has shown that online environments can either support or constrain the teacher's capacity to communicate care, depending on how teachers structure interaction, responsiveness, and opportunities for personal connection (10). This finding is important because it indicates that caring is not restricted to a particular instructional format; rather, it depends on the relational meanings generated through pedagogical practices. Whether in physical or digital classrooms, students' perceptions of being seen, heard, respected, and supported remain fundamental to the educational experience.

At the same time, the expectation that teachers provide emotional and relational support must be examined in relation to teachers' own occupational well-being. The increasing emotional demands placed on teachers can become a source of stress, fatigue, and professional strain, especially when organizational structures do not provide adequate support. Qualitative research comparing elementary and middle school teachers has revealed substantial sources of teacher stress and has emphasized teachers' desire for systemic solutions rather than solely individual coping strategies (11). Secondary school teachers have also reported that post-pandemic school environments continue to be characterized by pressures that leave many teachers "surviving rather than thriving," highlighting the need to rethink how teacher well-being is supported institutionally (12). These findings are especially relevant to caring pedagogy because caring requires emotional investment, attentive presence, and sustained engagement with students' difficulties. Without supportive organizational conditions, the moral commitment to care may become a source of emotional exhaustion rather than professional fulfillment.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified awareness of this issue by placing social-emotional needs at the center of educational practice. Secondary teachers were frequently required to provide emotional reassurance, maintain social connection, and respond to students' distress while coping with their own uncertainty and workload. Research examining teachers' experiences during the pandemic illustrated the reciprocal nature of giving and receiving care and demonstrated how social-emotional learning became deeply entangled with teachers' own emotional labor (13). This period made visible an aspect of teaching that had often remained implicit: teachers are not merely implementers of social-emotional programs but relational actors whose

own emotions, vulnerabilities, and professional resources shape the quality of care they can provide. Therefore, understanding caring education requires attention not only to student outcomes but also to how teachers themselves experience the responsibilities, rewards, conflicts, and emotional costs of care.

Existing research has begun to illuminate teachers' lived experiences of caring practices. In the Iranian context, a study of early elementary school teachers showed that a caring approach in the classroom is experienced through relational sensitivity, emotional support, attention to students' individual characteristics, and the teacher's commitment to creating a humane learning environment (14). However, the developmental characteristics of lower secondary students differ substantially from those of early elementary students. Adolescents experience stronger needs for autonomy, more complex peer relationships, greater sensitivity to respect and humiliation, and more pronounced identity-related struggles. Consequently, the forms of care that teachers employ, the boundaries they negotiate, and the meanings they attach to caring interactions may also differ. The experiences of lower secondary teachers therefore warrant independent investigation rather than being inferred from studies conducted at other educational levels.

Another important issue concerns how caring practices are recognized and evaluated within school systems. Many educational institutions continue to prioritize measurable academic indicators, formal lesson planning, examination outcomes, and administrative accountability. Yet much of the work involved in caring teaching—listening to a distressed student, modifying a lesson in response to a classroom's emotional state, protecting a student from humiliation, helping an isolated adolescent reconnect with peers, or referring a vulnerable student to appropriate support—is difficult to quantify. This creates a tension between the visible and measurable dimensions of teachers' work and the less visible relational labor that may nevertheless be central to students' development. Studies showing that teacher relationships influence engagement, satisfaction, motivation, and learning underscore why this relational labor should not be treated as supplementary (1-3). The caring approach therefore raises broader questions about what educational systems recognize as legitimate teaching and how professional effectiveness is conceptualized.

A phenomenological perspective is particularly appropriate for examining these questions because caring is experienced and interpreted within specific social, emotional, and institutional contexts. The same teacher behavior may carry different meanings depending on the student, situation, previous experiences, professional identity, or school culture. Interpretive phenomenology seeks to understand such meanings through close engagement with lived experience rather than reducing the phenomenon to predefined variables. The hermeneutic approach developed by Diekelmann and colleagues emphasizes interpretation of experience through iterative movement between individual accounts and the broader meaning structure of the phenomenon (15). In such research, the researcher does not function as a neutral extractor of facts but participates in a disciplined process of interpretation in which meanings are developed through engagement with participants' narratives, linguistic contexts, and the whole–part relationship of the hermeneutic circle.

Methodological rigor is therefore particularly important in studies that investigate teachers' lived experiences. Interpretive analysis requires transparency regarding how codes, meaning units, and themes are generated and how alternative interpretations are considered. Research on coding in semi-structured interviews has emphasized the challenges associated with determining units of analysis and establishing meaningful intercoder agreement in qualitative inquiry (16). Interpretative phenomenological research similarly requires systematic and reflective procedures that enable the researcher to move from detailed experiential accounts toward defensible interpretive themes without losing the complexity of participants' meanings (17). Strategies such as reflexivity, peer dialogue, and interpretive comparison can therefore strengthen the credibility and coherence of analysis.

Participant involvement may also contribute to the credibility of interpretive phenomenological research when used carefully. Member checking in interpretive phenomenological analysis can help researchers determine whether preliminary interpretations remain recognizably grounded in participants' accounts, while also acknowledging that interpretation cannot simply be reduced to participant confirmation (18). In this sense, validity is not understood as discovering a single objective representation of experience but as developing an interpretation that is experientially credible, conceptually coherent, transparent, and adequately supported by the narratives from which it emerges. This methodological orientation is especially suitable for caring education because the phenomenon involves subtle interpersonal meanings, emotional tensions, moral judgments, and contextual negotiations that may not be fully captured through quantitative scales or externally imposed categories.

Despite the expanding literature on teacher–student relationships, caring pedagogy, social justice, student engagement, and teacher well-being, several gaps remain. Much existing research focuses on the consequences of positive teacher–student relationships, students' perceptions of teacher care, or particular pedagogical settings, while fewer studies investigate how lower secondary teachers themselves interpret caring as a lived professional practice. Moreover, the available literature indicates that caring simultaneously encompasses emotional responsiveness, ethical responsibility, pedagogical flexibility, relationship building, professional boundaries, organizational constraints, and effects on teachers' own sense of purpose (4, 6, 12). These dimensions cannot be adequately understood by examining care solely as a discrete instructional behavior or relational variable. What is needed is a contextualized account of how teachers recognize adolescents' needs, what motivates them to engage in caring action, what structural and emotional barriers they encounter, how they translate care into classroom practices, how they manage relational boundaries, and how caring transforms their perceptions of students, teaching, and themselves.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of lower secondary school teachers regarding the caring educational approach in the classroom.

Methods and Materials

The study employed a qualitative research design and adopted an "interpretivist" orientation using "interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology," based on the seven-stage approach of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1989). Lower secondary school teachers who, in recent years, had directly encountered the "caring educational approach" in their classroom teaching were identified as potential participants.

The characteristics of the participants were defined as follows: (1) holding at least a bachelor's degree in a field related to the curricular and instructional content taught to students; (2) having at least 5 years of research experience or professional work experience related to the central focus and topic of the study; (3) having direct and articulable experience of encountering the "caring educational approach" in their own classrooms; (4) willingness to participate in semi-structured interviews and share their experiences; and (5) providing informed consent for audio recording and research use of the information. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (a) teachers who did not have sufficient experience of the phenomenon or were unable to articulate their experiences; (b) participants who discontinued the interview for personal or professional reasons; and (c) the possibility of bias or conflict of interest, for example, holding influential administrative roles in curriculum policymaking that could affect the individual's lived experience. In this study, which was based on an interpretive phenomenological approach, purposive sampling was used. The purpose of sampling in phenomenological research is to select individuals who possess relevant, profound, and authentic lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, participants were selected not on the basis of statistical representativeness but on the basis of information richness. In this study, lower secondary

school teachers who had directly encountered the phenomenon of "caring education" in recent years were identified as potential participants. Purposive sampling makes it possible to select experiences with the greatest descriptive and interpretive power, thereby enabling the researcher to reveal the dimensions of meaning associated with the phenomenon in greater depth. In addition, maximum variation sampling was employed to ensure diversity of experience so that the views of teachers with different lengths of professional experience, teaching disciplines, and school types (public and private) were represented in the analysis.

In phenomenological studies, sample size is determined on the basis of the principle of data saturation. Saturation is achieved when new interviews no longer generate novel themes and new information merely reiterates previously identified themes. In this study, interviews continued until no new themes emerged from the data and repetition of content became predominant in the analysis. Ultimately, 19 experts were selected using this sampling technique until theoretical saturation was reached. The characteristics of the 19 experts are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics

No.	Gender	Educational Qualification	Experience (Years)	Place of Employment	Survey Code
1	Female	Bachelor's degree	17	Public school	N1
2	Female	Master's degree	18	Private school	N2
3	Male	Doctoral student	22	Public and private schools	N3
4	Female	Master's degree	13	Public and private schools	N4
5	Female	Master's degree	26	Public and private schools	N5
6	Male	Bachelor's degree	9	Public school	N6
7	Male	Doctoral student	16	Private school	N7
8	Male	Doctoral student	24	Private school	N8
9	Male	Master's degree	14	Private school	N9
10	Female	Doctoral student	26	Public and private schools	N10
11	Female	Bachelor's degree	8	Private school	N11
12	Female	Doctorate	20	Public school	N12
13	Female	Master's degree	15	Public school	N13
14	Female	Doctorate	23	Public and private schools	N14
15	Male	Master's degree	7	Public school	N15
16	Female	Master's degree	18	Private school	N16
17	Female	Bachelor's degree	10	Public school	N17
18	Female	Bachelor's degree	9	Public school	N18
19	Female	Bachelor's degree	8	Public school	N19

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection instrument.

To ensure the validity of the instrument and the data collection process, criteria of credibility or trustworthiness were employed. In interpretive phenomenology, because the researcher is considered part of the process of interpretation and meaning construction, validity is not assessed through traditional measurement criteria; instead, concepts such as "interpretive transparency," "meaning coherence," and "experiential credibility" become important. Accordingly, two principal methods were used in this study to enhance validity: (1) reflexivity and (2) selective participant review. Reflexivity is one of the most important means of enhancing validity in interpretive phenomenological research. In this method, the researcher continuously records assumptions, initial impressions, professional background, and personal preconceptions in a reflective research journal so that the interpretive process remains transparent and traceable (Smith et al., 2009). In this manner, interpretive transparency and research integrity were strengthened, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. In selective participant review, portions of the preliminary analysis, including descriptions of experiences or initial themes, are presented to participants in order to determine whether the researcher's overall understanding of their experience corresponds with their actual perceptions (Koopman-Boyden & Richardson, 2016). This method helps preserve the accuracy of descriptive meaning and prevent

distortion of the data. In this way, the researcher ensured that the preliminary interpretations were grounded in the teachers' actual experiences.

In interpretive phenomenological research, reliability does not refer to the mechanical stability of data or the replicability of findings; rather, it refers to the "robustness of the analytical process" and "consistency of interpretation." In this study, two methods were used to enhance the reliability of the qualitative data analysis: (1) peer researcher analysis and (2) examination of interpretive agreement among analysts. During peer analysis sessions, the researcher presented the interpretive logic underlying the analysis and received critical feedback. This process enhanced the coherence, clarity, and precision of the analyses and prevented the researcher from becoming confined to unilateral interpretations or unsupported readings (Fade, 2004). Peer analysis created a high degree of transparency and strengthened the meaning coherence of the findings. In the method of examining interpretive agreement among analysts, two or more analysts independently reviewed sections of the interview transcripts and proposed their own meaning units and preliminary themes. The analyses were then compared to determine whether the interpretations demonstrated "semantic equivalence" (Campbell et al., 2013). The purpose of this method is to identify conceptual similarity, meaning coherence, and interpretive alignment among analysts rather than formal equivalence of codes. This process demonstrates that the researcher's analysis of the data is defensible and that the extracted meanings do not arise from incidental or idiosyncratic understanding but are grounded in the data and discernible patterns. The level of interpretive agreement among analysts in this study was determined to be .74, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Interpretive phenomenology: Interpretive phenomenology, rooted in Heidegger's philosophy and the hermeneutic tradition, is based on the principle that human experience is always formed within the contexts of meaning, language, culture, and the individual's lifeworld; therefore, understanding experience cannot be achieved through description alone and also requires interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretive approach of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1998) is one of the most widely recognized methods of data analysis within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition and is grounded in the philosophical foundations of Heidegger, Gadamer, and van Manen. Unlike descriptive approaches, this perspective considers the complete bracketing of presuppositions impossible and regards the researcher as part of the process of meaning production (van Manen, 2016). The seven stages of this approach are described below:

Step 1: In the first step, the researcher reads the texts holistically in order to develop an initial comprehensive understanding of the experience and its context. This stage is known as *hermeneutic immersion* and serves to facilitate deep familiarity with the participant's "lifeworld" (Diekelmann et al., 1989).

Step 2: The second step consists of "line-by-line analysis." At this stage, the researcher searches for significant concepts, linguistic patterns, ambiguities, tensions, and metaphors. This process is essential not only for identifying themes but also for understanding the meanings generated through the participants' linguistic and cultural contexts (Smith et al., 2009).

Step 3: In the third step, the researcher extracts preliminary themes; however, unlike descriptive phenomenology, theme development occurs simultaneously with interpretation, and the researcher assumes an active role in exploring meaning.

Step 4: In the fourth step, the researcher discusses the preliminary themes through group interactions or joint interpretive sessions. According to Diekelmann, dialogue with other researchers constitutes an essential component of the hermeneutic process because meaning becomes richer through dialogue, critique, and reflection (Diekelmann et al., 1989).

Step 5: In the fifth step, the confirmed themes are systematically organized and semantic relationships are established among them so that the "interpretive structure of experience" can emerge. The outcome of this stage is the creation of a meaning map of the phenomenon under study that demonstrates how the themes interact with one another (Allen & Tanner, 1989).

Step 6: In the sixth step, the researcher writes a comprehensive interpretive narrative in which quotations and meaning analysis are presented in an interwoven manner. This stage represents one of the principal distinctions of interpretive analysis

because the final narrative is simultaneously descriptive and analytical and seeks to render experience meaningful within the context of the individual's lifeworld (Noon, 2018).

Step 7: In the seventh step, the researcher engages in systematic reflection on the analysis, reexamines presuppositions, assesses the internal coherence of the narrative, and ensures that interpretations are consistent with the data and defensible. In this approach, continuous reflection replaces member checking because, from a hermeneutic perspective, meaning is not fixed and the participant is not necessarily regarded as the ultimate authority on interpretation (van Manen, 2016). The outcome of this approach is an in-depth and contextualized interpretive narrative of human experience, making it particularly appropriate for the present study.

Findings and Results

Of the participants, 6 were male (31.6%) and 13 were female (68.4%). Six participants held bachelor's degrees (31.6%), 7 held master's degrees (36.8%), 4 were doctoral students (21.1%), and 2 held doctoral degrees (10.5%). Six participants had 10 years or less of professional experience (31.6%), 8 had between 11 and 20 years of experience (42.1%), and 5 had more than 20 years of professional experience (26.3%). Eight participants worked in public schools (42.1%), 5 worked in private schools (26.3%), and 6 teachers worked in both public and private schools (31.6%).

A. Step One: Holistic Reading of the Texts and Development of a Comprehensive Understanding (Hermeneutic Immersion in Teachers' Lifeworlds)

The first stage in the interpretive approach of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1989) involves repeated, continuous, and holistic reading of all interview texts in order to develop a comprehensive, empathic, and multidimensional understanding of lower secondary school teachers' lived experiences of the caring educational approach in the classroom. Within the Heideggerian interpretive phenomenological tradition, hermeneutic immersion constitutes a foundational stage in which the researcher, without rushing to fragment the data, conduct discrete coding, or segment themes, situates himself or herself within the fluid stream of lived experiences, tones of speech, silences, emotional turbulence, and perceptual horizons of the participants.

Accordingly, the researcher repeatedly read the narratives obtained from 19 semi-structured interviews with lower secondary school teachers from beginning to end as an interconnected and living whole in order to become familiar with the teachers' lifeworlds, the challenging context of lower secondary classrooms, tensions associated with adolescence, and the human and organizational relationships prevailing within schools. At this stage, the researcher suspended theoretical presuppositions, abstract structures, and prior judgments in order to allow the phenomenon of caring to emerge within its natural and everyday context.

The comprehensive and holistic understanding emerging from this phenomenological immersion indicated that teachers' experiences of caring in the classroom were not perceived as an administrative or formal technique, but rather as an ethical mode of living and a way of being-in-the-world. In their lived narratives, lower secondary school teachers encountered a generation of adolescents struggling within the turbulent transition of puberty, fragile identities, emotional voids within the family, and fear of peer judgment. In the midst of these circumstances, teachers entered the field in response to an inner call of conscience and inspired by their own educational past, while simultaneously carrying the burden of mandated textbook pacing, test-oriented schooling, and the persistent shadow of psychological burnout. Consequently, caring was represented by teachers as a continuous art of balancing affection with authority, personal boundary-setting with the prevention of dependency, and ultimately an effort to untie cognitive knots and restore students' psychological well-being.

B. Step Two: Line-by-Line Analysis, Exploration of Lived Meanings, and Interpretive Extraction of Meaning Codes

After completing the first step and developing a holistic and intuitive understanding of the lifeworld context of the 19 participating teachers, the researcher entered the second stage of interpretive analysis. This stage, conducted within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1989) and informed by approaches to in-depth interpretive analysis such as Smith et al. (2009), focuses on the "precise, line-by-line, and meticulous analysis of the text of each interview."

At this stage, the researcher moved beyond the broad horizon of the initial understanding and entered the deeper layers of the narratives, tracing linguistic patterns, metaphors, silences, tensions, expressive paradoxes, and implicit meanings. Through repeatedly posing interpretive questions to the text—for example, "What experience of caring lies behind these words?" and "What meaning of professional identity or human relationship is the participant expressing through this interaction?"—the researcher began the process of extracting meaning units.

Sections of the narrative texts were reconstructed while preserving the authenticity of the teachers' language so that they could serve as the basis for linguistic analysis and the extraction of interpretive codes. At the conclusion of the analysis of all 19 interview transcripts, exactly 120 interpretive meaning units were identified, organized, and consolidated from the participants' statements. These 120 meaning codes transformed the raw data into comprehensible psychological, pedagogical, and philosophical propositions that would constitute the foundations for theme development in subsequent stages.

An example of the researcher's interpretive engagement with selected excerpts from teachers' narratives and the extraction of corresponding interpretive codes is presented below:

For example, while examining the statements of Participant 1 (P1), who described the emotional state of a student as follows:

"When I enter the classroom, I feel as though the students are struggling in a strange limbo. They stare at one point during class and do not really know what they want from life. Even when you gently remind them of something out of concern, they immediately become defensive and think you are trying to undermine their independence; yet deep in their eyes, you can see a plea for a warm and caring look."

Through line-by-line analysis of this section of the narrative, the researcher interpreted the conflict between "asserting independence" and "the need for care" as an indicator of an adolescent identity crisis, leading to the extraction of codes such as profound confusion regarding self-definition and resistance to accepting adult guidance.

Likewise, while examining Participant 11's (P11) narrative concerning the experience of silence and deep listening:

"I learned that when my student is holding back tears, I should not immediately open the textbook and start teaching. I put the chalk aside, pull the chair forward, and without any judgment or preaching, I simply look into the student's eyes so they can be sure that this is not a courtroom, but a refuge where their real voice can be heard."

In this passage, the researcher identified and coded the metaphor of "the classroom not being a courtroom" and the pedagogical act of "putting the chalk aside" as interpretive codes related to active listening, suspending formal instruction in favor of psychological healing, and creating a safe relational space.

Step Three: Extraction of Preliminary Themes

Within the descriptive phenomenological tradition, the researcher seeks to reduce data to objective descriptions free from presuppositions through bracketing or epoché. In the interpretive (hermeneutic) approach, however—particularly in the seven-stage method of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner—theme extraction is not a merely mechanical, summarizing, or naïvely inductive process; rather, it occurs simultaneously with deep interpretation. At this stage, the researcher assumes an active, dialogical, and meaning-oriented role and, through use of the hermeneutic circle—a continuous movement between part and whole—rereads the meaning units in light of the horizon of pre-understandings and the lived context.

Table 2. Mapping and Formulation of Meaning Units (Interpretive Codes) into Preliminary Interpretive Themes (Interpretive Concepts)

Meaning Units (Interpretive Codes)	Preliminary Interpretive Themes (Interpretive Concepts)	No.
Establishing warm eye contact and patiently listening to adolescents' mental concerns without prematurely judging their behaviors. Creating opportunities for students to express suppressed emotions through deliberate silence and avoiding hasty adult advice. Paying close attention to tone of voice, body language, and signs of learner distress during individual conversations after instruction. Accepting students' sincere statements as valid truths for them and respecting adolescents' personal lived narratives. Providing empathic feedback and demonstrating a deep understanding of students' psychological crises through calming and existentially reassuring statements.	Active and authentic listening: Creating opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and deeply listening to adolescents' emotional disclosures without premature judgment or blame.	1
Observing profound confusion among students in defining who they are and unconscious resistance to accepting adult guidance. Rapid changes in learners' appearance and behavior as signs of struggling to establish an independent identity distinct from others. Continuous fluctuation between a false sense of adulthood and a deep need to rely on the caring support of those around them at school. Excessive preoccupation with comparing oneself with others, leading to reduced concentration on academic goals. An unrecognized crisis associated with physiological changes that makes adolescents' behavior appear unpredictable, aggressive, and anxious.	Identity turbulence during puberty: Teachers' experience of encountering inner unrest, role confusion, and self-concept crises among students in Grades 7–9.	2
Dominance of rigid administrative bureaucracy and demands for superficial paperwork instead of attention to human relationships in the classroom. Indifference of ranking and incentive systems to teachers' unseen caring efforts to psychologically restore learners. Administrators' mechanistic view of teaching as merely an employee duty, without consideration for the spirit of education. Formalistic evaluations by educational experts focused exclusively on written lesson plans while neglecting the ethical life of the classroom. Feeling that the time and energy teachers devote to healing students' psychological distress are undervalued.	Systematic neglect of pedagogy: The dominance of rigid administrative directives, superficial teacher evaluations, and disregard for teachers' immeasurable educational efforts.	3
Postponing classroom questioning or instruction of a demanding new topic when collective student anxiety is observed. Adjusting the amount of homework to students' critical family circumstances or unforeseen psychological pressures. Intelligently integrating adolescents' everyday emotional experiences and problems with curricular topics to make learning meaningful. Temporarily departing from the approved lesson plan and devoting time to discussion of the psychologically unsettled climate of the classroom. Diversifying educational assessment methods in favor of students who experience inhibition and fear during written examinations.	Flexible curriculum reconstruction: Adapting the instructional process to the psychological climate of the classroom, modifying assignments, and pausing instruction during students' emotional crises.	4
Reflection of severe parental conflict and divorce in substantial declines in adolescent mental health and academic motivation. Lack of affection and being overlooked at home, leading to excessive demands for teachers' attention.	Emotional voids in the family context: Teachers' understanding of the consequences of family conflict, parental neglect, divorce, and home-related psychological pressures on students.	5

Parents imposing heavy and perfectionistic expectations without understanding students' abilities and emotional pressures. Emotional coldness in parent–child relationships that turns the classroom into a refuge in which students seek healing. Parents' preoccupation with livelihood concerns and adolescents' emotional abandonment during the most sensitive stage of personality development.		
Carrying the heavy burden of students' grief and psychological pain into one's personal life. Feeling helplessness, severe psychological exhaustion, and depletion of inner energy because of continuous engagement with students' difficulties. Absence of psychological recovery sessions, self-restoration programs, and counseling services specifically for teachers within the educational system. Feeling alone in addressing adolescents' profound emotional difficulties and lack of institutional support for teachers' caregiving burden. Gradual erosion of teachers' patience and emotional resilience through repeated exposure to unresolved suffering among vulnerable students.	Emotional exhaustion from continuous care: Teachers' psychological depletion caused by the burden of hearing students' sorrows, sustained compassion, and the absence of self-restorative mechanisms.	6
Recognizing differences in students' dispositions, talents, and interests without making humiliating classroom comparisons. Respectfully viewing academic errors or behavioral lapses as natural components of adolescents' developmental pathways. Consciously refraining from negatively labeling weaker or different students and preserving their human dignity in the group. Avoiding making teachers' affection and respect conditional upon academic achievement or high grades. Honoring the gradual and small efforts of slower learners through profound and authentic descriptive encouragement in front of classmates.	Unconditional acceptance of student individuality: Respecting individual differences, avoiding comparisons among students, and accepting each individual's strengths and weaknesses within the group.	7
Observable withdrawal during recess and inability to establish friendships with classmates. Intense fear of peer judgment and ridicule that prevents voluntary participation in classroom activities. Painful experiences of exclusion from peer friendship groups because of behavioral, physical, or socioeconomic differences. Chronic anxiety about being left alone during projects and collaborative classroom activities. Feeling alienated from the school's social environment and perceiving it as unsafe and humiliating.	Relational isolation at school: Experiences of encountering peer rejection, student withdrawal in the schoolyard, and anxiety regarding group belonging.	8
Allocating a few minutes at the end of class for quiet conversations beside the teacher's desk to hear students' confidential problems. Using quiet areas of the schoolyard or hallway during recess to inquire about sad and withdrawn students. Creating an intimate conversation corner or a shared reflective notebook for students who feel embarrassed to verbalize their distress. Firmly reassuring students that personal secrets, failures, and family suffering will remain confidential among parents and school personnel. Creating opportunities for informal conversation during practical and workshop activities to establish deeper human connections with adolescents.	Creation of micro-spaces for safe communication: Designing brief private opportunities—beside the teacher's desk, during recess, or after class—for emotional expression and follow-up on student problems.	9
Reduction of students' existential worth to quantitative report cards and grade point averages in the eyes of parents and school administrators. Family resistance and complaints when a portion of class time is devoted to empathic and educational discussions.	Dominance of test orientation and grade-centeredness: The predominance of quantitative assessments, grade competition, and unreasonable parental and systemic expectations regarding purely academic outcomes.	10

Psychological pressures created by standardized and quasi-final examinations that eliminate opportunities to attend to human dimensions. Dominance of exhausting competition among students instead of fostering cooperation and concern for others in the classroom. Unfair assessment of teacher effectiveness solely on the basis of average examination grades rather than ethical and developmental criteria.		
Simultaneously demonstrating unconditional kindness and firmness in enforcing fair classroom rules without resorting to violence or humiliation. Clearly explaining the boundary between humor and intimacy and the need to maintain mutual respect in everyday classroom interactions. Avoiding authoritarian strictness while preventing disorder and deterioration of educational standards. Using authority based on trust and persuasive communication rather than rigid power grounded in punishment and reprimand. Quickly restoring collective student focus to instruction immediately after emotional release and empathic interactions at the beginning of class.	Redefining intimacy alongside authority: Preserving classroom respect and instructional order while acting kindly, without slipping into disciplinary permissiveness.	11
Sustained improvement in concentration and freeing students' minds from emotional turmoil within a safe and calming classroom environment. Reduction of examination-related fear and inhibition because of confidence in the teacher's fair and compassionate perspective. Activation of critical thinking and creativity in students' responses because fear of giving incorrect answers has been removed. Observable and stable improvement in understanding difficult academic concepts compared with classrooms characterized by violence and suppression. Enthusiastic participation of all groups of students in academic discussions without anxiety about criticism, reprimand, or punishment from the teacher.	Cognitive openness in learning: Increased concentration, reduced classroom anxiety, and authentic improvement in the quality of understanding academic content within a context of learners' emotional ease.	12
Extreme reactions and sudden tearfulness in response to the slightest educational correction made publicly. Unpredictable emotional outbursts caused by continuous suppression of anxiety and accumulated external tensions. Extreme sensitivity to even mildly harsh teacher tones and rapid collapse of motivation to continue learning. Apparent indifference and emotional coldness as defensive mechanisms against fear of academic failure. Psychological fragility under examination conditions, substantially disrupting actual learning performance.	Emotional fragility in the classroom: Teachers' daily encounters with hypersensitivity, sudden aggression, abrupt declines in morale, and learners' emotional instability.	13
Teachers' persistent anxiety about falling behind the official instructional pacing schedule during the academic year. Severe shortage of classroom time for emotional check-ins because of the heavy volume of textbook content. Teachers being involuntarily compelled to rush through difficult concepts while overlooking the emotional needs of students requiring attention. A sense of suffocation and time-related stress caused by the mismatch between weekly instructional hours and prescribed curricular content. Sacrificing empathic classroom dialogue in the accelerated race to complete all pages of officially prescribed textbooks.	Overloaded textbook content: Pressure arising from the voluminous official curriculum and the continual rush to complete textbooks by the end of the academic year.	14
Continuously encouraging dependent students to make independent decisions and solve personal problems using their own internal capacities. Intelligently and gradually creating distance when signs of unhealthy attachment and emotional clinginess to the teacher are observed.	Prevention of excessive dependency: The teacher's strategic effort to prevent excessive psychological dependence and guide students toward self-reliance and self-esteem.	15

Empowering students to establish peer relationships rather than relying exclusively and continuously on the teacher during recess. Appropriately and promptly referring adolescents requiring specialized support to the school counselor in order to avoid assuming the role of therapist. Teaching resilience and the ability to accept hearing "no" as part of developing individual identity and personal autonomy.		
Experiencing a profound internal sense of responsibility for students' human development beyond the formal framework of teaching prescribed content. Hearing the voice of professional conscience that calls upon the teacher not to ignore students' visible and hidden suffering. Prioritizing developmental and ethical concerns over mechanically completing the textbook when a student is in crisis. Holding a firm belief in teaching as an existential mission and lived commitment rather than merely an administrative occupation. Experiencing intense guilt when ignoring or hurriedly passing over adolescents' urgent emotional needs.	Awakening of the teacher's moral conscience: An inner call, a sense of human responsibility, and ethical commitment to students' existential futures beyond the employee role.	16
Establishing specific and limited timeframes for responding to students' nonacademic messages on social media outside school. Consciously protecting the teacher's private matters, family secrets, and personal concerns during emotional conversations with curious adolescents. Differentiating the psychological boundary between concern for solving students' problems and maintaining peace within one's own private and family life. Avoiding unnecessary meetings outside the school environment in order to protect professional dignity and religious and legal boundaries. Politely discouraging adolescents from intervening in the teacher's personal life while expressing appreciation for their goodwill and concern.	Regulation of the teacher's personal boundaries: Balancing accessibility for emotional support with preservation of the teacher's privacy, personal life, and family boundaries.	17
Renewing motivation and alleviating psychological fatigue through empathic conversations with committed colleagues during recess. Collaborative reflection among caring teachers to identify constructive solutions to students' shared behavioral difficulties. Feeling reassured by belonging to an informal subculture that supports care and compassion in the workplace. Learning practical techniques of human communication with adolescents through observing the successful experiences of other concerned colleagues. Strengthening professional solidarity and collective commitment to implementing the principles of emotional education throughout the school environment.	Synergy among caring peers: The experience of exchanging experiences, engaging in dialogue, and receiving encouragement from colleagues who share a similar caring and educational orientation.	18
Reduction of hostile behavior, ridicule, and bullying among peers and their replacement with empathy and mutual kindness. Stronger students spontaneously taking initiative to help weaker classmates learn within a friendly classroom climate. Development of collective belonging and deep bonds among students as members of a supportive and empathic family. Establishment of psychological safety to the extent that students express opinions without fear of being judged. Transformation of the classroom from a site of individualistic competition into a collaborative ecosystem characterized by collective and ethical responsibility.	Emergence of an ethical classroom community: Transformation of the classroom from a competitive and hostile space into an environment characterized by cooperation, peer empathy, and collective psychological safety.	19

Clearly distinguishing between kindness and understanding of a student's emotional condition and the necessity of fairly and impartially assessing academic learning. Resisting requests from close students to overlook assignments or award undeserved and inflated grades. Discussing with students the principle that caring does not mean tolerating disorder or irresponsibility in completing duties. Responding calmly but firmly to students who interpret classroom intimacy as permission for disrespect or inappropriate joking. Maintaining equal treatment and avoiding accusations of discrimination or favoritism from classmates in grading and recognition processes.	Managing students' unfair expectations: Dealing with students' expectations of receiving unrealistic grades or being excused from responsibilities because of a close relationship with the teacher.	20
Lasting memories of healing kindness from former teachers and efforts to recreate the same feeling in interactions with current students. Long-standing pain caused by humiliation by teachers during one's own schooling and conscious efforts not to repeat it. Drawing inspiration from humane and supportive role-model teachers in patiently guiding difficult and maladjusted students. Personal commitment to healing the identity wounds of the new generation based on having undergone similar experiences during one's own adolescence. Deep understanding of students' vulnerability because of personal experiences of injustice and discrimination in earlier school years.	Lived experiences from one's own student years: Reflection of teachers' personal memories of supportive or harmful former teachers in shaping their own caring teaching styles.	21
Positive transformation in students' self-perceptions and beliefs in their academic competence after receiving authentic care. Gradual movement of isolated students from the margins of the classroom toward voluntarily reading or participating in front of classmates. Transformation of previous hopelessness, rejection, and failure into meaningful hope for educational futures and personal development. Significant enhancement of self-esteem among learners who had considered themselves worthless or incapable because of previous labeling. Emergence of intrinsic motivation to study and compensate for academic weaknesses, inspired by the desire to please a kind and accepting teacher.	Restoration of self-concept and motivation: Growth of self-confidence among withdrawn or academically weaker students and renewal of enthusiasm for participation in learning.	22
Creation of a protected space by an understanding principal for implementing flexible and nonroutine educational activities in the school environment. Encouraging support from the administrative staff when teachers prioritize the psychological and emotional well-being of vulnerable adolescents. Avoidance of bureaucratic rigidity by school administrators when teachers attempt to address students' crises. Formal and informal recognition by the principal of teachers' human-centered approaches as successful models among colleagues. Maintaining open access to counseling and administrative offices for collaborative support of students experiencing severe emotional distress.	Empathic support from school administration: The presence of supportive principals or vice-principals who value human-centered approaches and create a safe environment for teachers.	23
Teachers attaining a profound sense of inner satisfaction, enthusiasm for service, and relief from physical exhaustion after psychologically rescuing an adolescent. Finding meaning in occupational hardships and redefining teaching as an ethical and sacred endeavor toward human development. Experiencing vitality and a sense of historically meaningful efficacy in reconstructing the trajectories of students who had been on the verge of deterioration.	Deep meaning-making in the teaching mission: Teachers' experience of vitality, intrinsic job satisfaction, and awareness of their lasting impact on human lives.	24

Substantial reduction in feelings of boredom, work alienation, and occupational burnout through receiving emotional energy and heartfelt appreciation from students.	
Recovering the elevated dignity of the teaching vocation as a form of spiritual parenthood and a standard-bearer of humanity amid professional hardships.	

Step Four: Group Interactions, Joint Interpretive Sessions, and Dialogical Validation

Within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner (1989), understanding phenomena is never considered a univocal, individual, or isolated act confined to the mind of a single researcher. Interpretation is always generated within an intersubjective, historical, and linguistic context and acquires coherence through the fusion of horizons. The fourth step—the formation of an interpretive group—constitutes a central distinction between Diekelmann's approach and other interpretive phenomenological methods, such as those associated with van Manen or classical Heideggerian phenomenology. Diekelmann maintains that, in order to move beyond unconscious biases, transcend sedimented prejudgments, and reach the deeper hidden layers of the text, the researcher must engage in collective rereading, meticulous critique, and reflection.

At this stage, the 24 preliminary themes extracted during Step Three, together with the 120 foundational meaning units, were brought to the interpretive analysis team for critical rereading. In accordance with the research framework, the structure of the joint interpretive sessions, the dialogical process, points of hermeneutic friction, interpretive challenges, and the procedures for refining and consolidating the 24 preliminary themes were formulated in a precise and structured manner. At the conclusion of the fourth step of the Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner approach, all 24 preliminary interpretive themes successfully passed through the process of group interaction, critical dialogue, and joint reflective sessions and, without any reduction, addition, or alteration to the designed structure, underwent interpretive refinement, conceptual specification, and intersubjective validation.

Step Five: Organization of Themes and Formulation of the Interpretive Structure of Experience

At this stage, the 24 preliminary themes extracted from the data were organized into four-theme clusters and linked under six overarching interpretive themes (meaning categories) in order to reveal the organic whole of the phenomenon within the lifeworld of lower secondary school teachers.

Table 3. Meaning Map and Interpretive Structure of Overarching and Preliminary Themes in Step Five

Overarching Interpretive Theme (Meaning Category)	Related Preliminary Themes (Interpretive Concepts)	Semantic Relationship within the Interpretive Structure
Overarching Theme 1: Perceiving the Adolescent's Critical Lifeworld	Identity turbulence during puberty Emotional voids in the family context Relational isolation at school Emotional fragility in the classroom	Phenomenological foundation and developmental background: Perception of adolescent suffering, fragility, and need as the starting point of connection with care.
Overarching Theme 2: Human and Professional Drivers of Commitment	Awakening of the teacher's moral conscience Lived experiences from one's own student years Empathic support from school administration Synergy among caring peers	Internal fuel and lived motivation: The intersection of an individual ethical mission and environmental support that moves the teacher toward responsiveness.

Overarching Theme 3: Structural Barriers and Professional Erosion	Overloaded textbook content Dominance of test orientation and grade-centeredness Emotional exhaustion from continuous care Systematic neglect of pedagogy	Pole of tension and constraint: Continuous friction between the human call to care and the mechanistic, formal, and exhausting demands of educational bureaucracy.
Overarching Theme 4: Pedagogical Agency and the Creation of Space	Active and authentic listening Flexible curriculum reconstruction Unconditional acceptance of student individuality Creation of micro-spaces for safe communication	Domain of embodiment and educational action: Moving beyond passivity and transforming theoretical compassion into concrete modes of being, presence, and regulation of the classroom context.
Overarching Theme 5: Managing Conflicts in the Boundaries of Care	Redefining intimacy alongside authority Prevention of excessive dependency Regulation of the teacher's personal boundaries Managing students' unfair expectations	Interpretive rationality and balancing wisdom: Maintaining professional integrity, safeguarding educational justice, and protecting the sustainability of the relationship through boundary-setting.
Overarching Theme 6: Existential Openings and Pedagogical Transformation	Restoration of self-concept and motivation Emergence of an ethical classroom community Deep meaning-making in the teaching mission Cognitive openness in learning	Transcendent and transformative horizon of the phenomenon: The human reflection of the caring relationship in the simultaneous transformation of the learner, classroom community, and teacher identity.

Step Six: Development of a Comprehensive Interpretive Narrative and Representation of the Meaning Structure of Experience

The sixth step of the interpretive phenomenological technique represents the point at which analysis moves beyond conceptual abstraction and returns to the language of experience. Up to this point, the hermeneutic process had progressed across three levels: 120 meaning units as the smallest carriers of meaning within teachers' discourse, 24 preliminary themes as interpretive concepts constructed through connections among the meaning units, and six overarching themes as meaning categories representing the fundamental domains of experience. Step Six interweaves these three levels into an integrated narrative so that the "meaning structure of experience" can be represented as a living and interconnected whole. What is presented at this stage is neither a list of themes nor a report of analytical procedures, but rather a text in which the participant's voice and the researcher's voice merge to render experience meaningful within the teacher's lifeworld.

The Adolescent's Critical Lifeworld: The Perceptual Origin of Caring Action

Teachers' caring experiences are formed from the outset within a horizon in which the student is not a neutral recipient of content but a young person entering the classroom with existential questions, emotional ruptures, and internal pressures. The first overarching theme, comprising 20 meaning units, depicts this horizon as the starting point of the teacher's lived experience and demonstrates that the teacher's perception of the adolescent constitutes a prerequisite for the possibility of any caring action.

Drivers of Commitment: From the Teacher's Moral Conscience to Professional Synergy

The second overarching theme responds to a question emerging from the first overarching theme: If student vulnerability is so extensive, what force enables the teacher to remain committed to this pathway? The 20 meaning units associated with this

theme reveal four distinct sources of commitment that arise neither from the administrative system nor solely from occupational motivations.

Structural Barriers and Professional Erosion: The Gap Between Intention and Possibility

The third overarching theme portrays the central tension within the phenomenon: a teacher who wishes to care works within a structure that systematically restricts the possibility of doing so. The 20 meaning units associated with this theme reflect this gap across four distinct dimensions.

Pedagogical Agency: Creating an Emotionally Safe Space within the Formal Curriculum

The fourth overarching theme constitutes the action-oriented core of the caring experience. Within this domain, the teacher moves from perception and intention to action, and its 20 meaning units represent the most concrete level of the phenomenon because they demonstrate that care is not merely an attitude but a collection of specific and identifiable classroom practices.

Managing Conflicts in the Boundaries of Care: Regulated Intimacy and Teacher Boundaries

The fifth overarching theme reveals the most subtle and less visible dimension of the phenomenon: professional teacher care has boundaries, and awareness of these boundaries does not diminish care but constitutes a condition for its sustainability. The 20 meaning units within this theme demonstrate four distinct forms of boundary management.

Existential Openings: Mutual Transformation of Student, Classroom, and Teacher

The sixth overarching theme opens a horizon within which caring action produces outcomes—not in the sense of reaching a definitive endpoint, but in the sense of generating feedback that reconstructs the meaning of the teacher's experience. This domain represents the point at which care also returns from the student to the teacher and transforms the relationship itself.

Step Seven: Reflexive Validation and Systematic Reconsideration of the Analysis

Step Seven is the point at which all seven interconnected cycles of Diekelmann, Allen, and Tanner's hermeneutic analysis converge and present themselves to the researcher as a meaningful whole. At this stage, the researcher engaged in systematic reflection on the analysis and explicitly articulated and examined conceptual, experiential, and methodological presuppositions, assessed the internal coherence of the interpretive narrative according to criteria of conceptual consistency and absence of contradiction among themes, and examined and confirmed the consistency and defensibility of the interpretations in relation to the data across three levels: meaning units, preliminary themes, and the overarching narrative. In this way, the 120 meaning units became firmly woven into the fabric of the 24 preliminary themes, while these themes, in turn, became interwoven within six overarching interpretive themes in such a way that each layer gave meaning to the layers beneath it while simultaneously deriving meaning from the layers above it. The final narrative was therefore no longer a collection of accumulated data, but a living and temporally situated whole in which adolescents' multidimensional vulnerability, the teacher's ethical calling, structural pressures and professional erosion, pedagogical agency, management of conflicts in the boundaries of care, and existential openings constituted threads of a single fabric, none of which could acquire complete meaning independently of the others. The final outcome of this seven-stage process is precisely what is expected of interpretive phenomenology and what distinguishes it from thematic analysis and model-building approaches: an in-depth and contextualized interpretive narrative of teachers' lived experiences of the caring educational approach; a narrative that is simultaneously descriptive and analytical and renders experience meaningful within the context of the individual's lifeworld rather than framing it in the form of a model or separable variables. In light of the reflective assessments conducted during Step Seven, such a narrative possesses sufficient robustness to withstand scientific evaluation, reviewers' critical questions, and future research comparisons and can therefore provide a credible foundation for practical recommendations, educational policymaking, and future studies. In other words, Step Seven crowns the hermeneutic process not by adding something new to the analysis, but by bringing what is already present to its highest level of consistency, coherence, and defensibility, thereby bringing the cycle of understanding and

interpretation to its final formulation. The meaning structure of the experience that the study initially sought to understand now—after seven steps—stands before us in a clear, coherent, and defensible form.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored lower secondary school teachers' perceptions and lived experiences of a caring educational approach in the classroom through an interpretive phenomenological framework. The findings yielded 120 meaning units organized into 24 preliminary interpretive themes and six overarching interpretive themes: perceiving the adolescent's critical lifeworld, human and professional drivers of commitment, structural barriers and professional erosion, pedagogical agency and the creation of space, managing conflicts in the boundaries of care, and existential openings and pedagogical transformation. Taken together, these themes indicate that caring education is not experienced by teachers as a discrete instructional technique or an additional interpersonal skill, but rather as a complex ethical, relational, emotional, and pedagogical mode of being with students. The findings further show that caring emerges at the intersection of teachers' perceptions of adolescent vulnerability, their moral and professional commitments, the constraints of educational structures, their practical classroom actions, the boundaries they establish, and the transformations that follow from these relationships. This interpretation is consistent with literature emphasizing that teacher–student relationships are multidimensional constructs involving emotional support, closeness, responsiveness, motivational influence, and classroom interaction rather than a single measurable behavior (1). It also corresponds with findings showing that students' engagement and educational experiences are strongly shaped by how they perceive their relationships and interactions with teachers (2, 3).

The first overarching theme, perceiving the adolescent's critical lifeworld, demonstrated that teachers' caring practices were rooted in their recognition of adolescents' identity turbulence, emotional fragility, family-related emotional deprivation, and relational isolation at school. Teachers did not interpret students merely through the lens of academic performance or classroom behavior; rather, they attempted to understand disruptive behavior, withdrawal, anxiety, sensitivity, and motivational decline as expressions of deeper developmental and emotional conditions. This finding is especially important in lower secondary education, where students are negotiating identity formation, autonomy, peer belonging, and increasing emotional complexity. The results align with research showing that the quality of teacher–student relationships is particularly influential during adolescence because students' motivation and school adjustment are closely linked to whether they experience teachers as emotionally supportive, respectful, and responsive (1). Similarly, Jiang et al. demonstrated that positive teacher–student relationships contribute to adolescents' school satisfaction through greater behavioral engagement (3). From this perspective, the present findings suggest that caring begins with interpretation: teachers first need to perceive the student's lifeworld and recognize the possible meaning behind behavior before they can respond educationally.

The preliminary themes of emotional fragility, peer-related isolation, and family emotional voids further reinforce the importance of teacher responsiveness as a protective relational resource. Participants described students who reacted intensely to criticism, feared humiliation, withdrew from peers, or sought excessive attention because of unmet emotional needs outside school. Such accounts resonate with studies emphasizing that adolescents often identify teacher care through behaviors that communicate recognition, safety, availability, and respect (6). Schat similarly found that educational care is experienced by students through teacher communication that signals genuine attention, responsiveness, and concern for their individual circumstances (5). The present findings add to this literature by showing how teachers themselves interpret the antecedents of student vulnerability and how these perceptions become the foundation for caring action. Thus, care appears to be relationally initiated by a teacher's willingness to read students' behavior contextually rather than react to it only disciplinarily.

The second overarching theme, human and professional drivers of commitment, showed that teachers' caring actions were sustained by moral conscience, memories of their own school years, supportive school leadership, and solidarity with like-minded colleagues. Participants frequently described caring not as an administrative obligation but as an inner ethical commitment and an essential component of what it means to be a teacher. This finding is compatible with research on caring pedagogy that conceptualizes care as an ethical and socially responsive orientation rather than simply a technique for classroom management (7). Likewise, pedagogies oriented toward social justice emphasize teachers' moral responsibility to create inclusive, humane, and supportive educational environments in which learners are recognized as persons rather than merely as performers (8). In the Iranian context, the association between care and justice has also been reported, with caring instruction understood as a means of recognizing learner differences and promoting more equitable educational relationships (9). The current study extends these findings by demonstrating that teachers' commitment to care is partly biographical: supportive or harmful memories from their own schooling shaped how they wanted to treat their students.

The role of colleagues and school administrators in sustaining caring practice is also noteworthy. Participants indicated that encouragement from empathetic principals and dialogue with caring peers reduced emotional burden and strengthened their commitment. This suggests that caring pedagogy is not solely an individual teacher disposition but is also facilitated or undermined by school culture. This interpretation aligns with broader literature on teacher well-being showing that relational and organizational conditions significantly affect teachers' capacity to cope with occupational demands (11, 12). When institutional environments recognize relational work, teachers may experience care as a shared professional value; when schools prioritize only measurable outcomes, teachers may experience caring as an invisible burden.

The third overarching theme, structural barriers and professional erosion, revealed a persistent tension between teachers' desire to respond humanely to students and the institutional demands of formal education. Participants identified overloaded curricula, rigid pacing expectations, test orientation, grade-centeredness, bureaucratic evaluation, and emotional exhaustion as barriers to caring practice. These findings indicate that teachers may value relational and emotional responsiveness while simultaneously operating in systems that reward speed, coverage, documentation, and examination performance. This tension is consistent with findings that teachers frequently experience systemic sources of stress that cannot be adequately addressed through individual coping alone (11). Secondary teachers have also described post-pandemic educational contexts as conditions in which they continue to "survive" rather than flourish because institutional pressures, workloads, and emotional demands remain high (12). The present study suggests that the expectation to care may become another source of strain when relational labor is unsupported and largely invisible.

Participants' descriptions of emotional exhaustion were particularly significant. Teachers reported carrying students' distress into their personal lives, feeling psychologically depleted, and lacking institutional mechanisms for emotional recovery. This closely parallels the experiences of secondary teachers during the COVID-19 period, when providing social-emotional support became an intensified component of teaching while teachers themselves also needed care and support (13). The present findings therefore highlight a reciprocal paradox: caring can be deeply meaningful and professionally rewarding, yet continuous exposure to students' suffering without sufficient boundaries or institutional support can become emotionally erosive. This duality helps explain why caring pedagogy cannot be promoted merely by asking teachers to become more compassionate; sustainable care requires organizational conditions that protect teachers' own well-being.

The fourth overarching theme, pedagogical agency and the creation of space, showed how teachers translated care into concrete classroom practices. Active and authentic listening, flexible reconstruction of the curriculum, unconditional acceptance of student individuality, and creation of safe micro-spaces for communication were among the central practices reported. These findings strongly support the view that teacher care is communicated through observable behaviors rather than

remaining an internal intention. Whitehead et al. found that early adolescents identify caring teachers as those who listen, show interest in students as individuals, provide support, and create a sense of respect and belonging (6). Likewise, Schat emphasized that educational care becomes meaningful through communicative actions that enable students to experience themselves as recognized and valued (5). The present study similarly indicates that teachers operationalize care through small, context-sensitive adjustments, such as pausing instruction to address emotional distress, changing assessment methods, listening privately after class, or creating informal opportunities for disclosure.

Flexible curriculum reconstruction was especially significant because it demonstrates that caring pedagogy can involve pedagogical judgment rather than simply emotional warmth. Teachers sometimes modified homework, postponed difficult content, or temporarily suspended formal instruction in response to students' psychological conditions. This aligns with research conceptualizing caring teaching as responsive pedagogy requiring adaptation to students' needs and circumstances (7). It also supports broader social justice perspectives that emphasize instructional flexibility, participation, and responsiveness to diverse learner conditions (8, 9). Furthermore, the importance of adapting relational practices to the instructional context is consistent with findings from online secondary mathematics education, where care depended on how teachers used the learning environment to remain accessible, responsive, and relationally present (10). Thus, care appears less as a standardized set of actions and more as a form of situated pedagogical responsiveness.

The fifth overarching theme, managing conflicts in the boundaries of care, showed that teachers regarded boundary-setting as essential to sustainable caring relationships. Participants emphasized the need to combine warmth with authority, prevent excessive student dependency, preserve personal privacy, and resist unfair expectations for grades or exceptions. This finding is important because it challenges the misconception that caring education implies permissiveness or unlimited emotional availability. Instead, participants understood effective care as bounded, ethical, and professionally regulated. This interpretation aligns with research showing that constructing good teacher–student relationships is inherently complex and requires balancing closeness with professional responsibility (7). It also corresponds with studies indicating that positive teacher–student relationships can improve teaching itself by creating reciprocal conditions of trust and engagement, but such relationships remain effective when embedded within appropriate instructional structures (4). The findings therefore suggest that boundaries do not contradict care; rather, they protect relational integrity and prevent care from deteriorating into dependency, favoritism, or professional overextension.

The sixth overarching theme, existential openings and pedagogical transformation, represented the outcomes of caring practices for students, classrooms, and teachers. Participants described restoration of students' self-concept and motivation, greater cognitive openness to learning, the emergence of more ethical and cooperative classroom communities, and a deeper sense of meaning in the teaching profession. These findings are consistent with research linking positive teacher–student relationships with stronger engagement, school satisfaction, and academic participation (2, 3). They also align with evidence that positive relational dynamics may enhance teaching quality itself, suggesting a reciprocal process in which supportive relationships improve both student functioning and teacher practice (4). The present findings extend this reciprocal perspective by showing that teachers themselves may experience renewed purpose, professional vitality, and a stronger sense of identity through witnessing students' growth.

The emergence of an ethical classroom community is also consistent with socially just conceptualizations of caring pedagogy. Participants reported reductions in peer hostility, greater cooperation, more psychological safety, and increased willingness among students to help one another. These patterns parallel the argument that caring pedagogies can contribute to broader forms of social and educational well-being by fostering inclusion, participation, mutual responsibility, and respect (8). Similarly, Iranian research has linked caring teaching with socially just instruction and the creation of more equitable classroom

relationships (9). Therefore, the effects of care in the present study were not limited to dyadic teacher–student relationships; they appeared to reshape the social climate of the classroom as a whole.

The findings also converge with previous Iranian research on the lived experiences of teachers using a caring approach. Ansari et al. reported that caring among early elementary school teachers involved relational sensitivity, emotional support, recognition of individual differences, and commitment to creating a humane classroom environment (14). The current study confirms the relevance of these dimensions while also demonstrating the distinctive complexity of care in lower secondary education, where teachers must respond to adolescent identity struggles, stronger demands for autonomy, peer-related vulnerability, emotional volatility, and the need for more explicit boundary management. In this respect, the present findings contribute to the literature by showing that caring pedagogy is developmentally situated and may take different forms across educational levels.

From a methodological perspective, the use of interpretive phenomenology made it possible to reveal the relational and existential meanings embedded in teachers' accounts rather than reducing caring to predefined variables. The iterative movement between meaning units, preliminary themes, and overarching themes reflects the hermeneutic orientation proposed by Diekelmann and colleagues, in which understanding emerges through engagement with both parts of the text and the narrative whole (15). The use of interpretive comparison among analysts also addressed concerns regarding the unitization and consistency of qualitative coding raised in methodological literature (16). Likewise, reflexive analysis and transparent movement from lived accounts to interpretive themes are consistent with recommendations for rigorous interpretative phenomenological inquiry (17). Selective participant review further strengthened the experiential credibility of the findings by examining whether preliminary interpretations remained recognizable in relation to participants' accounts (18). Accordingly, the interpretive structure identified in the study can be understood as a coherent representation of how caring education is lived, negotiated, constrained, and given meaning by lower secondary teachers.

The present study has several limitations. First, because the study was qualitative and phenomenological, its purpose was to achieve depth of understanding rather than statistical generalizability, and the findings should therefore be interpreted within the contextual boundaries of the participating teachers and schools. Second, the sample consisted of 19 teachers selected purposively, and teachers who were willing to participate may have had greater awareness of or commitment to caring educational practices than teachers who declined participation. Third, the findings were based primarily on teachers' self-reported experiences, which may have been influenced by selective memory, social desirability, or retrospective interpretation. Fourth, classroom observations, student perspectives, parent perspectives, and administrative accounts were not directly incorporated into the analysis, meaning that the phenomenon was examined from the teachers' standpoint alone. Finally, because caring relationships are shaped by school culture, socioeconomic context, institutional policy, subject area, gender dynamics, and local educational norms, some dimensions of the phenomenon may differ in other settings.

Future studies should investigate caring educational approaches across different educational levels, school types, cultural contexts, and subject areas to determine which dimensions are shared and which are developmentally or contextually specific. Comparative qualitative studies could examine differences between elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary teachers, while mixed-method studies could use the themes identified here to develop and validate instruments for assessing caring pedagogy, professional boundaries, emotional burden, and perceived institutional support. Longitudinal research could also investigate how caring relationships evolve over an academic year and whether sustained caring practices are associated with changes in student engagement, self-concept, classroom climate, and teacher well-being. Future research should additionally include multiple perspectives by combining teacher interviews with student narratives, classroom observations, school administrator interviews, and parent perspectives. Intervention studies may also examine whether professional

development in active listening, relational boundary-setting, trauma-sensitive teaching, flexible curriculum adaptation, and teacher self-care can strengthen caring practice without increasing emotional exhaustion.

In practice, schools should recognize caring pedagogy as a legitimate dimension of professional teaching rather than an invisible personal contribution made by individual teachers. Teacher education and in-service professional development should include explicit preparation in active listening, adolescent developmental needs, relational communication, emotional regulation, professional boundary-setting, referral procedures, and strategies for responding to student distress while preserving academic expectations. School administrators should create organizational conditions that allow teachers reasonable flexibility in pacing, assessment, and classroom interaction when students face significant emotional difficulties. Schools should also provide structured opportunities for peer consultation, professional supervision, counseling support, and teacher emotional recovery so that the burden of care does not become individualized. Evaluation systems should recognize relational and developmental contributions alongside examination results, and counseling services should work collaboratively with teachers rather than leaving them to manage complex psychological problems alone. Most importantly, caring should be embedded within the culture of the school as a shared ethical and pedagogical responsibility in which student dignity, teacher well-being, academic rigor, and professional boundaries are treated as mutually reinforcing rather than competing priorities.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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