

OUTSIDER TRANSPLANTS AT A HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTION (HSI): TEACHER EDUCATORS ENACTING AN ETHIC OF CARE

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Abstract

Applying an ethic of care as a theoretical framework to inform our work, the authors engaged in a collective biography writing process to explore caring within the context of the teaching-learning relationship. The following paper provides glimpses into intentional teaching enactments of caring and our experiences with our students' reciprocity. The enactment of care could greatly enhance the teaching and learning experiences of teacher educators, preservice teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs, and ultimately the students in their future classrooms. Reflecting on and examining our own diverse experiences and perspectives, our other-ness and insider-outsider status, informs our decisions for how we develop our teaching-learning relationships. Analyzing and sharing our decisions in how we practice the art and science of teaching future teachers, viewing our craft through the lens of an ethic of care, helps us develop intentionality and a richer repertoire of purposeful instructional tools.

Keywords: teacher education, ethic of care, teaching-learning relationships, diversity

The authors' collective biography writing process evolved organically. In the beginning, we simply recognized our shared interest and experiences and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate. An activity during a college-wide retreat planted the seed, which we have cultivated into the following paper. During the retreat, the faculty divided into small groups of people from various departments and disciplines. The authors first met each other in one of those groups. We created drawings of our backgrounds, experiences, and interests that ultimately led to our being at the university, a large Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in Texas situated on the US-Mexican border. Each person shared her drawing with the group and explained each item included in the picture. The activity provided the refreshing opportunity to meet colleagues who spoke with passion about teaching and cared deeply about students. We encountered kindred spirits. The experiences we shared resonated with each of us, and we agreed to work together on some kind of project related to the teaching-learning relationship and what it means to care. What does care look like in teaching? The following paper provides glimpses into those intentional teaching enactments of caring and our experiences with our students' reciprocity. We believe the enactment of care could greatly enhance the teaching and learning experiences of teacher educators, preservice teacher candidates in Teacher Preparation Programs, and ultimately the students in their future classrooms.

An Ethic of Care

Noddings' (2003) ethic of care theoretical framework informs our work. She relates caring to empathy and understanding of what students expect of teachers. The person initiating care (in our case, the teacher educator) is called the one-caring, and the one receiving care is called the cared-for (our students). Noddings states, "Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves" (p. 24), adding that our actions are dependent on the needs of the cared-for. That is, we should base our pedagogical decisions on the needs of the cared-for and not our own. Likewise, the cared-for also have a responsibility in this relationship with the one-caring through reciprocity of caring. Reciprocity is important to the maintenance of the relationship, and prevents the cared-for from turning on the one-caring in concern for self (Noddings, 2003). As teacher educators, we tend to give more of ourselves when our enactments of care are reciprocated. We found that, once the recursive process of this kind of empathic caring begins, reciprocity initiates an inspiring cycle, a relationship of care that influences meaningful, mutual learning.

Moreover, caring is integral to engaging students of color. Delpit (1995) alludes to a breakdown in relational caring when "teachers see little in common or shared in purpose with their students. The academic success of students from subordinated backgrounds lies very much in the quality of the relationships which their teachers establish with them... the form of caring they demonstrate" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, pp. 251-252). Angela Valenzuela (1999) focuses on teacher caring as the source of Mexican-immigrant and Mexican-American students' success. Students desire authentic caring in which teachers see them as valuable, interesting human beings. Authentic caring is different from the usual aesthetic caring in response to students' school-based attitudes and ideas. Valenzuela suggests authentic caring is a prerequisite for students to care about their education (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008). This evokes the oft-quoted maxim, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care" (unknown). We genuinely care about our students and their reciprocity, and our course evaluation comments demonstrate that they sense it.

Caring within the context of the teaching-learning relationship does not mean that one avoids critical care. Wink (2005) suggests that caring and critical pedagogy are not dichotomous. She explains that "pedagogical caring" coincides with "the dialectic of a critical stance" in order to meet current students' needs (p. 168). In our work, we found that students appreciate challenging assignments and high expectations, as well as empathy. For example, we both work with students experiencing extenuating circumstances, yet we still expect excellence in their final assignments. We hold high standards and expect students to display professional dispositions. Therefore, like Wink, we believe that caring and critical pedagogy are synergistic.

Our care, our love even, has helped us transcend racial and linguistic boundaries. We strive to embody what Freire (1998) stated:

It is indeed necessary that this love be an "armed love," the fighting love of those convinced of the right and the duty to fight, to denounce, and to announce. It is this form of love that is indispensable to the progressive educator and that we must all learn (p. 41).

Bartolomé (2008) honors Jesús "Pato" Gómez whom she states, "focused on the revolutionary potential of love to equalize asymmetrical power relations among human beings" (p. 1). Gómez believed that love links with equality (Bartolomé, 2008). The care that exists between us and our teacher education students creates an equality among us that we hope our students foster in their own P-12 classrooms, so that their students will also care about their education as a result of their teachers caring for them.

We engaged in a collective biography writing process to compose our paper; it allowed us to compose our story vividly, so that the reader may also see her/his imaginable practice through our eyes (Davies & Gannon, 2006). As we describe our experiences with care, the reader may reflect on her/his own caring practices, and perhaps, prompt ideas for her/his pedagogical repertoire. To begin, we will contextualize our experiences by providing some background information about us as the authors of this paper.

Outsider Transplants

Although Karin and Jackie come to the University from quite different backgrounds, Karin from a predominantly white university in the north and Jackie from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in the south, we soon realized that in moving to the area and acclimating to a culture very different from our own, we had encountered similar/parallel experiences. We discussed our experiences as outsiders, new to the culture and the surprises and unanticipated challenges we faced. We shared the ways we very intentionally developed relationships with our students; how we shared our personal and professional experiences and stories with our students so they could get to know us, and how we came to know them.

Karin moved to the area and arrived at the University perhaps a bit naive. I had not anticipated the implications of my newfound minority status within the predominantly Latino/a community. I am made aware of my difference and how I am perceived; I am an outsider, a transplant. My outsider status became salient to my work. Being referred to as *Anglo* resulted in my acute awareness of and initial experience with feeling my outsider-ness, my other-ness. I had never before been identified as or labeled Anglo; it is not part of my self-concept or identity. Being referred to as Anglo felt foreign, uncomfortable, and loaded. Being cast as an Anglo, I found myself in an unfamiliar stereotype. Being Anglo in this region comes with historical baggage. I became much more cognizant of my appearance, visibly standing out among a predominantly Latino/a population, and the implications of assumptions that may be projected onto me. From my internal sense of self and looking out at the world around me, I sometimes forget how starkly different I appear, how very white I am (even my hair is white). For example, after thoroughly enjoying an interdisciplinary co-teaching opportunity leading a workshop on positive psychology and resiliency, at the conclusion my colleague had someone take a group photo. When she later emailed the photo to me, it struck me how much my almost glowing whiteness contrasted so obviously with everyone around me. I stood out as the only white person in the group of over 50 people. It is a curious, foreign feeling to experience moments of acute awareness of being so different from nearly everyone around me. I had not anticipated this, new to me, aspect of being a transplanted outsider.

In describing her initial experiences as an outsider in this context, Jackie first shared with me how she had thought that, coming from an HBCU, she would be able to relate to her students and they to her, perhaps better than others from outside the Latino/a culture, such as myself. Jackie characterized her experiences with faculty at her HBCU as nurturing, they invested in her academic and future career success; they took a deep interest in her, and she felt cared for (Noddings, 2003). She thought that the faculty remained so invested in her, and all their students, because they knew the racism and opposition their students would face in the outside world as they pursued their careers. Collectively, faculty and students took advantage of the predominantly Black environment to foster community, kinship, trust, and care, which sometimes took the face of tough love. Jackie attributes part of her success to this foundation. She described the HBCU faculty's critical caring (Wing, 2005), and consistently being there when she needed them, as phenomenal. Many of her former professors, even at the time of her own faculty appointment at our HSI in this region on the border with Mexico, still take time to advise her. Those fond HBCU memories led Jackie to expect a similar environment at our HSI, and she wanted to be a part of developing students' confidence and academic success through an ethic of care in her own teaching. However, to her surprise, when Jackie arrived at this HSI, a colleague told her that working at an HSI would be very different from her HBCU experience. Jackie's colleague seemed to doubt her commitment to and fit for the institution.

Jackie shared about her initial and ongoing experiences with people asking her, incredulously, why would she come to this region? I, too, am repeatedly asked that same question, and I remain puzzled by the inferred disbelief that anyone would want to come here. The question seems to suggest a level of skepticism or suspicion of our intentions for coming to live and work in the area. Jackie anticipated the suspicion initially, because she is part of a very small percentage of African Americans in the area. As a minority herself, she related to questioning the intentions of outsiders, considering the incredible amount of racism in the United States. She imagined she also may have questioned whether or not outsiders had genuine intentions and truly wanted to uplift those in her race. In her first semester, to address students' anticipated curiosities, she conscientiously composed a script for introducing herself to her students, stating why she moved to this region and our

institution. Admittedly, however, after living in the area and teaching at the institution for a few years, Jackie grew weary of those questions. Nevertheless, she accepts that every semester, many students will pose those questions. She considers it a reality of distrust and racism in our society, and has come to recognize the questions as a way of protecting oneself from outsiders who might have questionable motives.

Jackie also encountered a few colleagues whose comments seemed to insinuate that they questioned her devotion to teaching, research, and service. Such comments hurt and offended her, because she pours her heart and soul into her students, has developed a strong research agenda, and participates in various levels of service, including in the surrounding community. She felt that although she may be qualified for the position, she may be perceived as not quite qualified enough, because she is not Latina.

Both Jackie and I value the opportunity to live and learn in this new cultural context, and we are confident that we contribute to the diversity of our HSI. We share a passion for teaching, an appreciation for diversity, and we both remain highly invested in our students. We hope that our consistent passion for teaching, conducting research relevant to the area, and participating in service to the community will, over time, be the catalyst for demonstrating our integrity and genuine intentions.

Enacting an Ethic of Care: Knowing Our Students

In addition to our experiences as outsiders, new to the culture and the surprises and unanticipated challenges we faced, Jackie and I discovered the similar ways we very intentionally develop relationships with our students; how we share our experiences and stories with our students so they get to know us, and we get to know them.

We believe teaching and learning is a relationship. Like any relationship, it takes effort, attention, and consideration. To engage in conversations with students in order to let them get to know us and for us to get to know them, we make a point of always showing up to class early and staying a few minutes after class. It is important to us to really get to know our students. On the first day of class, I bring colorful cardstock table tents, markers, crayons, glitter pens, stamps, and stickers, and have the students write their names on both sides and decorate their table tents. This is how I learn their names, because as a visual learner I need to see the students' names with their faces. Jackie also gives students large index cards on the first day and asks them to fold the cards horizontally and write their names on the front and back, so that she can associate names and faces with "name tents". She also has students engage in an opening activity; they give their name, major, hometown, if not from the immediate area (we have learned over the years that most of our students are local), course goal (other than an A), and interesting/fun fact.

I point out to my students that they too can do this when they become teachers to learn their own students' names. I ask my students to write three things that are important for me to know about them on the inside of the table tent. I set the table tents on a table near the door, and as students arrive in class they pick up their table tents, take their seat, and put their name tent on the table in front of them. I can see their names and people sitting behind them could see their names as well. This is also how I take attendance. It saves time, and I do not waste class time calling roll. As students arrive, I start class with a conversation about what is going on in their lives, what good things happened since our last class meeting, and I share brief stories about me. I share stories about personal and professional experiences, because I want students to know me as a person. I found that when people know you as a person and feel that you know them, they work harder for you and I work harder for them, because we care about each other. Mutual respect and mutual care reflect reciprocity. I want my students to look forward to coming to class, to enjoy coming to class every day, and when they do, I do too. I really do love teaching. I love getting to know people, particularly people who have different perspectives, life experiences, cultures, and backgrounds than me. I learn more about myself the more difference and diversity we have in our classroom.

Enacting an Ethic of Care in the Classroom

The process of caring begins even before our classes start. We reach out to welcome our students a couple weeks before the term begins, introducing ourselves and stating how we look forward to our class and the learning journey we are about to embark on together. Several students have admitted to me that they almost dropped my class when they saw I am Anglo. Reaching out in advance helps mediate preconceptions. Once the class begins, we further develop trust and establish a safe space for learning through engaging activities that both model and provoke critical and reflective thinking about classroom practices.

I emphasize that we will start our class meetings on time, and I expect everyone to be in class on time. I talk about being professionals, practicing being a professional and part of that is being on time. I say, “imagine if you are a kindergarten teacher and you don’t show up on time to work... what would happen? Do you think that your principal would find that to be acceptable? How long would you keep your job?” I assert that if being late to work is not acceptable, then it is not acceptable in our class either, because we all need each other for a successful learning experience. Being on time demonstrates respect, respect for each other’s time and investment in our class. I want them to be successful. I share with my students that I would be remiss if I did not hold them accountable to the same expectations that they will face when they become teachers. In my mind, that is one way I demonstrate that I care about my students. I care about their future. I care about the profession, and I want them to be successful. Perhaps I am strict and set high expectations academically and interpersonally in class, yet I hold students to no higher expectations than I have of myself.

I shared with Jackie how I noticed my students, while working in groups during class, would discuss in Spanish, whispering covertly, and then as I walked around the room and came by their table they fell silent or switch to English looking like they had been caught doing something wrong. I asked my students what that was all about. After a very long pause, one courageous student spoke up. He said, “We don’t want to offend you:”. Puzzled as to how being bilingual or speaking in another language would offend me, I explained that my goal is for them to understand the concepts in our course. I recognize that for many students English is not their native language. I assured them that I am certainly not offended, I value bilingualism, and I encouraged them to discuss in whichever language they felt most comfortable to really grasp the concepts. I suspect that they did not really believe I meant it; they seemed tentative and cautious in discussing in both languages. However, after a few weeks, they became more comfortable and trusted that I am true to my word.

We intentionally focus on being attuned to our students. We take notes so that we remember information students share about their families, their work, and their interests. We follow up and ask them about specific things they mention, to demonstrate our genuine interest in them, and how we value their experiences and interests. They in turn become curious about us. We share stories of our own experiences, and when they ask questions about us, our families, and our backgrounds, we share stories and reveal aspects of ourselves that perhaps may resonate with them. I tie in stories of my own experiences into examples of the theories of learning. I use stories about my children and myself as a mother and teacher to illustrate the content of the course. Jackie has also shares stories of how her little sister by 13 years old acquired her literacy practices. We also share classroom management techniques and how to involve families in the learning process.

We also very intentionally add visuals to our slides and media to exemplify concepts. In doing so, we select images of diverse people, including images of individuals with exceptionalities and children, as well as parents and teachers of Latino/a and Mexican descent. We model what we hope they in turn do when they become teachers. We discuss diversity candidly in its broadest and most inclusive conceptualization. We ask them if they notice anything about our choices in visuals and media. They pick up on the diversity, and they discuss the importance of children seeing themselves and their families valued and reflected in instructional materials. We emphasize the need to include culturally-relevant materials and images. We include culturally-relevant articles, so that students can better connect to the material. We share with our students that we also want our own instructional materials to reflect our respect for their background and culture.

Students have shared that they work full-time, have families and responsibilities to their families, whether they have their own children or they contribute to their household with caring for siblings, parents, and grandparents. They juggle

multiple responsibilities and expectations beyond our classes. Karin shares with her students about her experience being a single mother with two teenage daughters caring for her ailing mother, and during that time driving an hour to go to class at night after working all day at school as a full-time teacher. Jackie openly shared with her students when her father passed away right before the beginning of a spring semester and her own challenges with illness. We assure our students that we understand that *Life* happens, and we will work together through whatever challenges arise. We explicitly state that we are not out to get them; we have been in their shoes, and our role is to facilitate their success. We believe their success is our success. Sharing about our own personal experiences, so that they can relate and know that we can relate for real, is another way of demonstrating that we care.

Enacting Care in Assignments

We care about our students and the quality of our instruction; subsequently, we plan carefully and intentionally; Karin embeds opportunities for students to have agency and autonomy and make choices. For example, for any papers that she assigns, she has each student sign up for their papers' due dates. She asks them to look at their schedules, assignments in other classes, and consider their family responsibilities. Each student selects the week for his or her paper to be due. Students are surprised that they get to choose their assignments' due dates. Karin also gives students choices in their assignments. For example, when she has them research something, they can choose the topic they research so that it is meaningful to them and whatever their field of study is, because she has students in her classes who are preservice teachers for all levels in all subjects. Giving them the option to select topics of interest to them helps them invest in the work and take ownership of it, which then results in better quality work. In their group work, they have options for how to present their work and she encourages them to be creative.

We both apply a variety of project-based assignments and integrate service-learning experiences with our students. Recently, Jackie started using a rapping activity (Saphier & Haley, 1993) to help students review concepts from two different chapters on either vocabulary or reading comprehension. Students work in groups to write down main ideas from their chapter of interest. Then, as a class, they come up with a list of must-haves for each rap. Students are then given time to develop their raps for a class performance, and they are encouraged, but not required, to perform their rap. Jackie does not assign this kind of review to all of her classes, since each class has a personality of its own, but in getting to know her students, she determines if the class' overall personality is up for it. The activity has been successful, and frequently mentioned in her course evaluations.

Karin provides her students the opportunity to design their own final exams, choose how to demonstrate what they learned in the course, such as through a conference-style poster session open to the college faculty and fellow students, or come up with their own proposal for how to be assessed. One class chose to do a video. They enlisted a film student who agreed to lend them his professional camera and helped edit their film. They wrote a script and each student had parts to play. They negotiated use of a classroom at a local public school to do the filming at night. They used props, costumes, developed their characters, and they rehearsed extensively. They acted out the theories studied in class as applied in practice in an elementary school classroom. The three ringleaders met with Karin several times for reassurance and to make sure they drew from and integrated all of the course content. The students researched, repeatedly reviewing the content of the course to make sure that they demonstrated concepts accurately. Their final film remains the most creative demonstration of learning Karin has ever seen. The night of the poster session for another class, at the conclusion of the poster session these students showed their film to all the students and faculty who attended. Half of the film used English and half of the film was in Spanish with English subtitles ("for Professor Karin"). In the scrolling credits the students included a tribute and expression of gratitude and appreciation for Karin and the opportunities for learning in her class; reciprocity of caring. It made Karin cry.

Our efforts to provide creative, self-directed, authentic learning experiences requires extra time and consideration, yet also shows our care about the quality of our students' learning experiences.

Reciprocity

We came to this particular region to teach, research, and serve the university and surrounding community. We also came to learn the cultural traditions of this unique region from our colleagues and learn along with our students. We did not realize when we arrived, but in enacting an ethic of care in our teaching practice, we experienced reciprocity of care from our students. It is that reciprocity, along with great mentorship from colleagues, that ties us to this institution.

Jackie feels a *phileo*, or brotherly love towards her students. As students learn from and experience the time she invests in crafting engaging, meaningful lessons, and they see how she truly wants to know them, they in turn give back to her. In her first semester, a student, knowing she had no family in the area, invited Jackie to join her family for Thanksgiving dinner. As students reciprocate care, the feeling turns to *epithumia*, a passionate love for teaching her students the content and dispositions needed to be stellar, impactful future teachers. Indeed, that passion results in Jackie's desire to give more and more of herself in response to her overwhelming experience of caring reciprocity, sometimes to the detriment of her own scholarship productivity. This love that Jackie feels for her students reminds her of Freire and Gómez's links of love to equality. She uses her love to transcend the boundaries of race and language.

At the end of each semester, we celebrate our students' hard work. Karin's first semester culminated in a Posada celebration at the class' service-learning site, complete with a giant piñata, traditional homemade tamale holiday meal, and mariachi music. Jackie's second semester, a student brought in several types of Mexican gorditas to acquaint her with foods from the local culture. Our students teach us about aspects of their lives that they want to share and we demonstrate that we value. Likewise, a student brought in tamales from a well-known restaurant an hour away, because she wanted Jackie to taste *quality* tamales. The student made sure Jackie took plenty home with her.

In addition to these caring acts, students have written numerous e-mails, cards, and course evaluation notes thanking us for knowing their names and "caring" (their word) about them. Many express their desire to take another class with us. Some have told us they hope to have the same zeal for teaching we demonstrate when they have their own classrooms.

We share a few of our experiences with reciprocity of care, but it has been our mutual experience that enacting care is actually a recursive series of reciprocal acts. Passionate reciprocal caring is cultivated and grows over the course of a semester. Truthfully, we make tighter connections in some classes more so than in others, but overall the ethic of care process persists. As educators we thrive on it, and we consider it one of the greatest rewards in the teaching-learning relationship.

Conclusion and Implications for Teacher Educators and Their Students

It is our hope that this paper provides our colleagues with insights, ideas, and perhaps a different perspective on the teaching-learning relationships we cultivate with our students in teacher preparation programs. Reflecting on and examining our own diverse experiences and perspectives, our transplant insider-outsider status informs our decisions for how we develop our teaching-learning relationships based on an ethic of care. Analyzing and sharing our experiences and decisions in how we practice the art and science of teaching future teachers at an HSI, viewing our craft through the lens of an ethic of care, helps us develop intentionality and a richer repertoire of purposeful, culturally responsive instructional tools. How we embody and enact critical caring pedagogy serves as models for how we expect our teacher candidates to engage with their own future students.

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