Caring and Understanding “As Nearly as Possible”: Towards Culturally Responsive Caring Across Differences

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Although teachers claim that caring for students is their main reason for entering the profession, research indicates that many urban students describe their teachers as uncaring. This article delineates a culturally responsive form of caring that juxtaposes Nel Noddings’ theory of care and Gloria Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Responding to the demographic imbalance between teacher and student populations in urban schools, culturally responsive caring is facilitated by three factors: White teachers need to (1) develop a culturally diverse knowledge base; (2) interrogate their identity, position, and privilege; and (3) critically examine curriculum and pedagogy. These factors can potentially influence White teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and practices, which may enable racialized minority students to accept, rather than reject, their attempts to care.

Keywords: teacher-student relationships, urban schooling, care theory

My teacher last year yelled at us all the time, but I don’t think he cared about us because all he did was yell, and he never said the good things that we did, only the bad things. I don’t think he liked us. (Howard, 2002, p. 438)

The teaching force in the province of Ontario is comprised overwhelmingly of educators who are White, female, middle-class, and who speak English as a first language. This is in stark contrast to the majority of students enrolled in urban schools, who are predominantly racialized minorities and immigrants from poor and working-class
families whose first and home languages are not English (Gerin-Lajoie, 2008). Consequently, scholars have raised concerns regarding the effectiveness of pre-service teacher education programs to adequately prepare White teachers to work with racialized minority students (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005).

A number of recent studies have shown that students consistently cite caring teachers as the most important factor contributing to their successful experiences in school (Garrett, Barr, & Rothman, 2009; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995). For students from racialized minority groups, who often experience schools as alienating and disempowering—as the epigraph that opens this paper reveals—the need for caring teachers is even more critical than for their more privileged peers (Howard, 2002). Data from the Toronto District School Board, for example, reveals alarmingly disproportionate push-out rates for racialized minority students: 37% to 40% of students who speak Spanish and Somali, as well as English-speaking Caribbean students, leave school before graduating from high school. These student groups also have the lowest EQAO test scores, the lowest rates of school attendance, and the highest suspension rates in the Board (Brown, 2006, 2009; McKell, 2010).

So how should White teachers care and understand across differences? In this paper, I aim to address this important yet difficult question by bringing together Nel Noddings’ ethic of care (1984) and Gloria Ladson-Billings’ theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (1995). I argue that White teachers will never be able to completely understand the lived realities and systemic conditions of racism that people from racialized minority groups experience. However, they need to cultivate a deeper knowledge and experiential base and interrogate their own identities and privileges in order to bridge differences “as nearly as possible” (Noddings, 1984, p. 16). While teachers will never be able to fully put themselves in the shoes of “others,” a deep understanding of the roots, processes, and effects of individual and institutional racism—as well as an ongoing self-examination of how racism operates and how it benefits them—is crucial if White teachers are to work effectively with students from racialized minority groups.

Schools as Oppressive and Uncaring Spaces

I contend that teachers not only occupy positions of authority in schools, but also become gatekeepers of the dominant society. Schools are powerful institutions that privilege Eurocentric and middle-class values and norms, which reflect, and are reinforced by, the dominant mainstream. Teachers have the power to transmit and reinforce school and societal norms to their students. Many stress the acquisition and practice of normalized and universalized ideas, beliefs, and behaviours, which are based on the ideology of the dominant sectors (i.e., White and middle-class). Since these knowledges and practices are valued by the dominant mainstream, some scholars and educators maintain that teachers ought to impart them and students ought to acquire them (Payne, 2005).

For many students from racialized minority groups, what often ensues is a process of assimilation in which they are expected to conform to White, middle-class worldviews and ideologies. Racialized minority students experience a cultural conflict between their home and school contexts, and feel that their home and cultural backgrounds are minimized and devalued in schools (Dei, 2010; Delpit, 2006; James & Saul, 2007).
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Schools, then, become oppressive agents and sites of social reproduction that uphold the racial and socio-economic status quo, rather than agents and sites of liberation and emancipation. As a result, many poor, immigrant, and racialized minority students become disengaged and unsuccessful academically in school.

In response to the educational crisis for students from racialized minority groups, various reform initiatives have been developed and implemented. At the macro-level, the push for “teacher quality” (Darling-Hammond, 2005) and “research-based instructional strategies” (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2004) highlights responses to critiques of teacher preparation, ability, and pedagogy. School districts have created alternatively themed-schools, such as Afrocentric and boys-only schools, have put a cap on class sizes, and have expanded Head Start and early learning programs (Elmore, 2004) in an effort to better support struggling students. Schools have also turned to pre-packaged curriculum programs, which promise to provide the ‘silver bullet’ to waning academic achievement (Garan, 2002). What is sorely missing from school reform efforts and discourses, however, is the affective domain of teaching and learning. I contend that without considering and cultivating culturally responsive caring relationships between teachers and students, the academic success for many students from racialized minority groups will remain, in the words of Langston Hughes (1990), as a “dream deferred” (p. 221).

Noddings’ Ethic of Care

Feminist philosopher Nel Noddings (1984) calls for educators to re-imagine schooling as a moral enterprise through an ethic of care. She argues that the main aim of education should be to “nurtur[e] the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable persons” (p. vii). For Noddings, both caring and being cared for are basic human needs and are fundamental to human relationships. From the moment we are born into the world, we are engaged in the process of caring. As infants, care is vital to our very survival and, during each stage of human life, there is a need to be cared for, understood, received, respected, and recognized. Noddings extends her notion of caring to animals, plants, things, and ideas. However, for this article, I focus on her concept of caring relationships between the one-caring and the cared-for. More specifically, in the context of schooling, I situate teachers as the one-caring and students as the cared-for.

In cultivating caring relationships as a reciprocal progression, the process begins with the “engrossment” by the one-caring towards the cared-for. Engrossment does not refer to infatuation or obsession, but instead highlights how the one-caring becomes receptive and attentive to the cared-for. In doing this, the one-caring attempts to “grasp one’s reality” by “stepping out of one’s own frame of reference and into another’s” (Noddings, 1984, pp. 14, 24). The one-caring becomes engrossed with the cared-for in order to “feel what he feels as nearly as possible” (p. 16). He acts in a way that signals to the cared-for that he is making an “attempt to care” (p. 37). The word “attempt” is crucial to highlight because, unless the cared-for chooses to receive and accept the caring, such an interaction cannot be considered caring. The relationship is only complete when the cared-for receives the attempt and signals to the one-caring that it has been accepted. In this regard, the one-caring’s needs and interests become secondary to those of the cared-for through what Noddings calls “motivational displacement.” Therefore, Noddings’
ethic of care is relational, reciprocal, and dependent upon the actions of both the one-
caring and the cared-for.

Noddings’ care theory has received a number of criticisms from educational
theorists. Some contend that it is too soft or feminine (Hoagland, 1990). Noddings
counters this criticism by saying that “there is nothing mushy about caring. It is the
strong, resilient backbone of human life” (1992, p. 195). Others suggest that Noddings’
theory of care is problematic because it does not take into account diverse ethno-racial
and cultural differences between the one-caring and the cared-for (Thompson, 1998;
Wilder, 1999). I want to build on this critique by raising a question: Can teachers who are
not members of racialized minority groups “grasp the reality” or feel what members of
those groups feel? More directly, can White teachers truly become engrossed with their
racialized minority students? Noddings urges teachers as the one-caring to “feel with” or
see through the eyes of their students as the cared-for (1984, p. 30). But the question
remains: What would this look like? Is such a relational aspiration even possible?

**Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Critical race scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) developed the theory of
culturally relevant pedagogy as an intervention to the ongoing academic
underachievement of students from racialized minority groups generally, and of African
American students in particular. Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) works to minimize
the cultural mismatch that students experience between home and school by urging
teachers to utilize their students’ home and cultural backgrounds as resources and bridges
for school curriculum, teaching, and learning. CRP is based on the assumption that, when
teachers integrate and employ their students’ frames of references, lived realities, and
interests, student learning becomes more personally meaningful. Consequently, students
become more engaged and perform better academically. Ladson-Billings draws on Paulo
Freire’s (1970) work by honouring students’ cultural backgrounds and ways of knowing,
thereby transforming classrooms into spaces of liberation. CRP has become “useful for
teaching students of any race or ethnicity” (1994, p. 15), and has been utilized with
Latino/a, indigenous, and Asian students in the United States, and with Aboriginal and
Black students in Canada (Aguilera, Lipka, Demmert, & Tippeconnic, 2007; Braithwaite
& James, 1996; Gay, 2000; Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Maina, 1997).

Although education scholars have convincingly demonstrated the positive impact
of utilizing culturally relevant and anti-racist pedagogy for teacher and student
empowerment (Dei, 2010; May & Sleeter, 2010), many White teachers remain reluctant
to address race and racism in their classrooms. They see conversations about race as
political, uncomfortable, and not classroom appropriate (Young, 2010; Troyna & Rizvi,
1998). Rather than recognizing the operations and effects of systemic racial privileging
and discrimination, many White teachers adopt what they see as a ‘colour-blind’
mentality, arguing that they “do not see race, just kids.” These teachers fail to account for
how race and racism are embedded in school and society, thereby privileging some
groups and marginalizing others. Patrick Solomon and his colleagues (2005) frame this
resistance as a “discourse of denial” that is embedded in “ideological incongruence;
liberalist notions of individualism and meritocracy; and negating white capital” (p. 153).
When asked to confront the issue and to interrogate their taken-for-granted privileges,
some become angry and frustrated. As a result, race and racism “are regarded as realities and sites of contention that would best be addressed by ignoring it” (Solomon et al., 2005, p. 161). Thus the colour-blind mentality and the affective discomfort of White teachers, lead to minimal, if any, meaningful anti-racist work in schools (Carr & Lund, 2007). Such a situation leads me to ask: If White teachers do not confront race and racism, how will they truly care about, and understand, students from racialized minority groups?

Towards Culturally Responsive Caring

Teachers often cite caring for students as a main reason why they joined the profession, yet many students from racialized minority groups report feeling that teachers do not care (Dei, Mazzuca, & McIsaac, 1997; Grant & Sleeter, 2007). I intend to address the disconnect between teachers and students by bringing together insights from Nel Noddings’ ethic of care and Gloria Ladson-Billings’ culturally relevant pedagogy. I do this through what I am calling “culturally responsive caring” which expands upon what another scholar frames as “culturally relevant caring” (Parsons, 2005). I want to put forward the idea that White teachers may be attempting to become what Noddings calls the one-caring toward students from racialized minority groups. However, they may not be adequately conveying their attempts in a way that encourages students as the cared-for to accept their intentions. A substantial part of White teachers’ inability to adequately convey their care, I contend, is their resistance to addressing issues of race and racism. It is my hope that by juxtaposing Ladson-Billings’ CRP with Noddings’ ethic of care, we might have a framework through which White teachers can learn to care in a much more culturally responsive way that will assist them to become more engrossed with their students “as nearly as possible” (Noddings, 1984, p. 16).

Culture consists of “values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldviews created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion, or other shared identity” (Nieto, 2004, p. 146). It shapes how one views and interacts with the world at large. Hence, how teachers demonstrate their caring is intricately tied to culture. Before moving forward, it’s important to recognize the following concerning White teachers working with students from racialized groups: First, culture is neither static nor monolithic. It changes and varies between groups and within groups. However, it is important to respect the broad patterns that emerge when examining populations. Second, while there are many exemplary White teachers who forge caring relationships with students from racialized groups, research indicates that there are barriers and limitations to whiteness (Marx, 2008). Rather than dismissing these barriers as inevitable and insurmountable, teachers who employ culturally responsive caring must acknowledge and work within and through these limitations. Teachers who do this are demonstrating commitment not only to their students, but also to themselves as they interrogate their own taken-for-granted norms, assumptions, and practices.

Culturally responsive caring is facilitated by three factors. White teachers need: 1) to develop a rich, and culturally diverse knowledge base; 2) to interrogate their identities and the privileges associated with them; and 3) to critically examine curriculum and pedagogy. These factors are necessary for White teachers to fulfill Noddings’
requirement of engrossment in a way that will hopefully lead students to accept, rather than reject, their attempts to care.

**Developing a Culturally Diverse Knowledge Base**

Teachers can develop a culturally diverse knowledge base in part through community immersion as a means to better understand students’ values, traditions and worldviews, learning and communication styles, relational patterns, and gender role socialization (Delpit, 2006; Gay 2000; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paley, 1979). A culturally diverse knowledge base is important, especially in urban areas, because the majority of teachers do not live in the neighborhoods where they work (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). The race and class differences between teachers and students in urban settings can compound the difficulty of developing caring relations. Since White teachers “can’t teach what [they] don’t know,” to borrow from Gary Howard (2006, p. xv), they must seize opportunities to know their students meaningfully. By developing a rich knowledge base, teachers can move beyond the position of cultural voyeurs and engage with the communities in which they work.

Teacher immersion in the lived realities of their students can be a powerful catalyst for developing caring relations. Since the vast majority of White teachers have not been victims of systemic racism, community immersion can provide them with deeper insights into the various manifestations and impacts of oppression and marginalization on the students and their communities. Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha (2001) conducted a study of successful teachers in “migrant impacted” schools in the United States. Although a substantial number of teachers in these schools were White, they sought opportunities to build relationships with students and families and to become actively involved in the communities. Home visits provided an avenue through which teachers learned about their students’ life stories and gained knowledge about their families on a more personal level. Aside from home visits, teachers may choose to shop at stores, eat at restaurants, and attend religious services in their students’ communities. Attending students’ after-school events and community meetings can offer insights not only into student interests and community concerns, but also into individual and institutional racism.

**Identity Interrogation**

Fundamental to understanding the detrimental and lasting effects of racism is White teachers’ interrogation of power and privilege and, more specifically, their participation and complicity in an educational system that has pushed out many students from racialized minority groups. While unpacking issues of power, difference, and inequity can be quite difficult for many White teachers, it is essential if we are to understand racially marginalized students. Specifically, White teachers must become conscious of whiteness and the unearned privileges that accompany whiteness. According to Peggy McIntosh (1993), whiteness offers numerous privileges that one can “count on cashing each day … like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 61).
White people have benefited in schools and in a society that has granted them privileges through dysconscious racism, or an “uncritical habit of mind (including perceptions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs) that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King, 1991, p. 135). This uncritical habit legitimates the myth of meritocracy that permeates neoliberal discussions of academic underachievement. White teachers need to seriously unpack such uncritical assumptions in order to understand the historical and contemporary dynamics of race and racism that privilege Whites and marginalize people from racialized minority groups. Unpacking dysconscious assumptions entails having White teachers examine their own values, biases, and stereotypes. Genuine self-reflexivity is necessary for White teachers so that they can challenge their own, as well as other people’s, perceptions, attitudes, assumptions and beliefs.

Critical Examination of Curriculum and Pedagogy

Lastly, White teachers must examine curriculum and pedagogy through a critical lens. This includes carefully scrutinizing textbooks and other teaching resources for implications that are not only racist, but classist, sexist, heteronormative, and ableist as well. Scholars have criticized curricular materials for reinforcing stereotypes and failing to adopt diverse cultural perspectives. Their research reveals that textbooks and other teaching supplements mainly focus on White and Eurocentric worldviews. By privileging curriculum about, and for, the dominant mainstream, students who represent diverse perspectives and ways of knowing are marginalized (Aikenhead & Michell, 2011; May & Sleeter, 2010). Teachers need to incorporate learning materials that represent student diversity and lived experiences because such curriculum will contribute to their students’ cultural competence. In other words, students will see themselves represented in the curriculum in a more inclusive and positive light, thereby preserving their cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The acquisition of cultural knowledge, such as developing an understanding of student language and communication style, is imperative if teachers are to craft their pedagogy in a way that is congruent to their students’ lives. For example, Hefflin (2002) found that teachers who utilized their African American students’ home language interaction patterns in the classroom with them saw increased academic success for these students. Similarly, critical scholars such as Christopher Emdin (2011) and Ernest Morrell (2008) argue for the use of hip-hop music in the classroom. They posit that the verbal and gestural language inherent in hip-hop can be leveraged as powerful pedagogical tools for teaching urban youth.

Conclusion

At the heart of culturally responsive caring are affective, reciprocal relationships based on mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Admittedly, for White teachers working with students and families from racialized minority groups, developing these relationships can be challenging. Many racialized minority students and parents experience schools as Eurocentric, and the White teachers who work in them as oppressive and uncaring, ostensibly operating on racist assumptions and practices that devalue their cultural
backgrounds (Vaught, 2011). Since schools and teachers become sites of social reproduction and assimilation into the dominant mainstream, they fail to utilize the cultural capital that students from racialized minority groups already have. Consequently, many students from racialized minority groups deem schools subtractive and disempowering (Valenzuela, 1999).

At the same time, some White teachers have internalized what Enid Lee (2011) calls a “Columbus or Christ mentality.” Rooted in a deficit model of thinking (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), this mentality is underpinned by a White supremacist and colonial notion that White teachers are needed to rescue racialized minority students who require salvation from their living conditions. Culturally responsive caring is the antithesis to such a notion because it establishes understanding and respect across differences as essential. It also positions teachers and students as co-constructors of knowledge in a Freirian way, in which teachers become learners and students become the instructors of school and society (Freire, 1970).

Teaching is a moral endeavour, and caring relationships are a prerequisite to the success of many racialized minority students. In agreement with Noddings’ position on the ethic of care, I do not believe that culturally responsive caring needs a checklist or recipe for implementation. Noddings herself states that caring is a “way of being in relation, not a set of specific behaviours” (1984, p. 17). My goal in bringing Nel Noddings’ thinking into relation with the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings has not been to provide a list of subsequent steps to more caring, inclusive teaching, but rather to offer a broad framework that can stimulate and enhance discussions about the development of caring relationships through a cultural lens. Culturally responsive caring is an ethical ideal by which White teachers can strive to build and strengthen relationships with racialized minority students. In order to realize the potential of caring relations, students must be convinced that teachers care and must agree to accept their caring efforts. As such, culturally responsive caring is a reciprocal dynamic between teachers and students that is not always guaranteed, yet is extremely necessary for the improvement of teaching and learning across differences.

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References


Notes

1 By “Columbus or Christ mentality” Lee is referring to colonial efforts that have used the Christian faith as rationale and justification for imperialism, domination, and forced assimilation on members of minority status groups. The use of faith to justify oppressive and violent acts has been examined by numerous postcolonial scholars (see Loomba, 2005; Pui-Lan & Donaldson, 2001; Young, 2001).

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