

6-27-2020

Culturally Relevant Care Through the Lens of Duoethnography

Jacqueline B. Koonce

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, jacqueline.koonce@utrgv.edu

Karin A. Lewis

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, karin.lewis@utrgv.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Koonce, J. B., & Lewis, K. A. (2020). Culturally Relevant Care Through the Lens of Duoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 1721-1735. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4489>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Culturally Relevant Care Through the Lens of Duoethnography

Abstract

Our study endeavors to explore how culturally relevant care manifests in our teaching at a predominantly Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Through duoethnography and collaborative interpretation of narrative data from our former students, we seek to better understand our own and our students' learning experiences. Collecting our own and our students' perspectives and stories about lived experiences with us as professors in narrative form allows for us and our respondents to reflect and express freely—to share views, impressions, interpretations, and experiences in our/their own words. Analysis of narrative reflections provides an opportunity to craft a story, to give voice to those living within the intersection of race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural teaching–learning relationships at a predominantly Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Findings intend to illuminate personal epistemologies (Hofer & Bendixen, 2012) and dispositions for transcending cultural, racial, and linguistic boundaries in higher education, thus providing a multifaceted collective story of cultivating care in cross-cultural teaching–learning relationships.

Keywords

Culturally Relevant Care, Critical Race Theory, Latinx Students, Duoethnography

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Culturally Relevant Care Through the Lens of Duoethnography

Jacqueline B. Koonce and Karin A. Lewis

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg, Texas, USA

Our study endeavors to explore how culturally relevant care manifests in our teaching at a predominantly Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Through duoethnography and collaborative interpretation of narrative data from our former students, we seek to better understand our own and our students' learning experiences. Collecting our own and our students' perspectives and stories about lived experiences with us as professors in narrative form allows for us and our respondents to reflect and express freely--to share views, impressions, interpretations, and experiences in our/their own words. Analysis of narrative reflections provides an opportunity to craft a story, to give voice to those living within the intersection of race, ethnicity, and cross-cultural teaching-learning relationships at a predominantly Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). Findings intend to illuminate personal epistemologies (Hofer & Bendixen, 2012) and dispositions for transcending cultural, racial, and linguistic boundaries in higher education, thus providing a multifaceted collective story of cultivating care in cross-cultural teaching-learning relationships. Keywords: Culturally Relevant Care, Critical Race Theory, Latinx Students, Duoethnography

Introduction

As an African-American woman (i.e., Black) educated at an Historically Black University (HBCU) in the southern region of the U.S. and a European-American woman (i.e., White) educated at a predominantly white university in the northern region of the U.S., we both chose to move to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands to teach, research, and serve at a predominantly Hispanic-Serving university. From this orientation, we asked:

- 1) How are our instructional activities, behaviors and interpersonal experiences perceived by and interpreted by our predominantly Latinx students?
- 2) As outsiders to our students' Latinx culture and local community, what meaning-making and implications can we derive from our own and our students' reflections on our teaching?

We responded to these questions through analysis of student surveys, course evaluations, journaling, and our reflective conversations through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Our responses, through duoethnography, illuminated personal epistemologies (Hofer & Bendixen, 2012) and dispositions for transcending cultural, racial, and linguistic boundaries in higher education, thus providing a multifaceted collective story of cultivating care in cross-cultural teaching-learning relationships.

Review of Literature

Caring and Shunning Deficit Thinking

The often-quoted phrase, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care,” rings true in our pedagogy, yet that phrase does not unpack all of what it means to care and love our students. In fact, care alone is not enough if it does not take into account the political and ideological dimensions of caring (Bartolomé, 2008), for even love can be oppressing. When we use the word *care*, we refer to culturally relevant caring that shuns deficit thinking regarding our Latinx students and provides them with the tools and strategies they need to also counteract societal inequities.

Some teachers claim to love their students, according to Bartolomé (2008), but their love is often “condescending and very much informed by unacknowledged deficit views of their students” (pp. 2-3). In these situations, she continues, teachers have low expectations of their students thinking that the students have their own culture and do not need the dominant culture forced upon them. However, Delpit (1995), in her seminal work, *Other People’s Children*, discusses the importance of preparing students for the culture of power or the dominant culture. Students need “warm demanders” (Roja & Liou, 2017) who “learn about their students’ interests, aspirations, and ecological surroundings to know how to communicate a genuine sense of care (De Jesús & Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006, as cited in Roja & Liou, 2017), and create conditions that focus on academic success in which failure is not an option” (Bondy & Ross, 2008 as cited in Roja & Liou, 2017). The teachers in Roja and Liou’s study (2017) commented on the interrelatedness of care and high expectations in their social justice work with students. It is from this social justice stance that we explore our high expectations of ourselves and our students as an ethic of care in the context within which we teach and learn.

Caring in the Form of Rigor and High Expectations

Several authors have suggested the importance of having high expectations of students as a critical component of caring. In fact, “...teacher expectations for students have proven to be a powerful predictor for students’ access to a rigorous curriculum, a demanding classroom environment, and academic performance” (Liou, 2016, as cited in Roja & Liou, 2017, p. 31). According to Landsman (2004), strategies to communicate high expectations include, but are not limited to, “teachers’ use of diverse and positive representations of peoples in the curriculum; a pedagogy that clarifies false generalizations about racial groups and marginalized communities; and encouraging students to participate in academic programs and curricula to further their advancement in the P-20 educational pipeline” (as cited in Roja & Liou, 2017, p. 31). These enactments of caring resonate with us; thus, we incorporate these strategies in our teaching with the intention to empower our minoritized students.

Critical Caring

In Nieto’s (2008) chapter, *Nice Is Not Enough: Defining Caring for Students of Color*, she discusses the importance of critical caring and seeing each student as a member of a cultural or racial community as well as an individual (as cited in Garad, 2013). Nieto emphasized the importance of not taking on a charitable approach with students, but instead, take on the approach of rejecting the hidden curriculum about race and ability (Garad, 2013). Indeed, having high expectations and believing in the potential of every student is part of the ethical essence of critical care we endeavor to enact.

Relational Caring

Many authors have also written about treating students as if they were family. While we reject treating undergraduate students as children, we acknowledge the importance of wanting the best for them, just as we desire for our very own kin. Roja and Liou (2017) found that teachers thought it was important to treat students as if they were family, highlighting the salience of empathic mentorship in caring. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) also talked about authentic caring among African American women teachers and called it politicized mothering. Beauboeuf-Lafontant explored these teachers' maternal strategies with students and the political awareness that informed those strategies. She also emphasized that being a politicized mother is more than being a maternal educator and having a love for students. Instead, she states, "...A politicized educator advocates for, and struggles with children—especially those considered "other" in society—out of a clear-sighted understanding of how and why society marginalizes some children while embracing others" (p. 257). Again, while we teach adults, we strongly believe that our students desire advocates – educators who care and act on behalf of their students' best interests.

Like Beauboeuf-Lafontant, we also resist against taking on a savior or missionary stance with our students. As Salazar (2016) stated, "Students don't need to be fixed, changed, or saved. Help them find their wings. Help them soar." We embrace that belief in our students' competencies as part of our mission. Our students are full of gifts, promise, and potential. We encourage them to share those gifts and fully realize their potential through the power and promise of education.

Having a maternal sensibility is often devalued by members of the culture of power. In fact, Casey (1990, 1993) "found that many of the White educators had a desire to 'deconstruct the maternal'" (as cited in Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008, p. 254). Instead, these White educators upheld patriarchal views of teaching. As professors of Latinx students, we embrace our role as nurturing and caring facilitators of their learning. We are not Latinx, but we take time and attention to learn about our Latinx students' linguistic and cultural norms in order to connect with them. As teachers in Bartolomé's study surmised, we also believe that our different racial and cultural identities do not preclude us from connecting with our students in meaningful ways.

Political Nature of Caring

As previously stated, caring for and nurturing our students is not soft or weak; rather, it has a component of political advocacy. We want our students to embrace their agency to change unjust practices by engaging in social justice activities sparked by our class conversations and actions. In fact, Jesús "Pato" Gómez focused on love overcoming disproportionate power relations. Bartolomé stated that "His work focused on helping adolescent students develop the political and ideological clarity necessary to distinguish oppressive and subordinating love from love that is psychologically healthy, liberating, and affirming one's humanity" (p. 1). Like Gómez, we choose to take an agentive stance and object the status quo in our classrooms in order to embrace the challenges of dismantling systemic inequities, cultural, attitudinal, and socioeconomic barriers that our students may face.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs our duoethnography is critical race theory (CRT). CRT examines relationships between race and power, and as outsiders to our predominantly Latinx region, we are conscious about our areas of privilege as we work with

our Latinx students. One way that we push against dominant ideologies in our teaching is through the act of counter-storytelling, which is a method of telling a story that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 27). One such myth is that students of color need to be changed or saved (Salazar, 2016). We value our students’ funds of knowledge, and we are as much their students as they are ours. We teach them the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need as teachers, and their feedback also gives us insight to the pedagogy needed for Latinx students. They also teach us about their cultural ways of knowing explicitly and purposefully because they want us to better understand their race and culture. In this article, our counter-story is to tell our and their stories to push against dominant perspectives about Latinx people and culture.

Culture is also related to CRT. Nieto and Bode (2008) state that culture is a combination of gender, language, ethnicity (country of origin), and race. Because we live and work in a predominantly Latinx culture, we are always conscious of culture as it relates to our teaching, scholarship, and service. We purposefully listen to our students and colleagues’ perspectives to guide our steps as we consider how to teach in more culturally relevant ways and conduct research that honors the Latinx people we serve.

A final component of CRT that relates to our research is the critique of liberalism. Decuir and Dixon (2004) state that CRT scholars are critical of three basic notions that have been embraced by liberal legal ideology: the notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law, and incremental change. The notion of colorblindness is the one tenet of liberal legal ideology that relates to education scholarship and is something we absolutely reject with our teaching. Colorblindness prevents the learning of the intricacies and differences among race and culture that make each of us unique. It detracts from the strengths and unique characteristics of various cultures. Additionally, “the notion of colorblindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as Other” (Decuir & Dixon, 2004, p. 29). In order to be racially and culturally-aware activists, our students must be cognizant of society’s racism in order to counteract it. To embrace colorblindness would perpetuate inequity. We want our teacher candidates to continue to embrace their heritage and share that pride with their students.

Methodology

We are two women from distinctly different backgrounds who chose to transplant their careers in higher education to a predominantly Latinx community on the US-Mexico border to teach at one of the largest Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) in the US with a student population that is predominantly Latinx (90%). As women from different backgrounds, academic disciplines, regions of origin and cultural upbringing, we endeavor to make meaning through our layered autoethnographic reflections of individual and collective experiences crossing borders, boundaries, and cultures within the context of being outsiders, others, within this Latinx university community.

Autoethnography, “a genre of writing research that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (Patton, 2002, p. 86) seemed like a good fit for a place to begin to explore our lived experiences within this particular HSI context. Leveraging critical reflexivity, we engaged in duoethnography to collect narrative vignettes of our lived experiences teaching within this context, along with collecting our students’ narratives reflecting on their experiences with us and interpreted our experiences through lenses of race, class, gender, privilege, cross-cultural encounters, and social forces. We unpack our educative experiences teaching and learning in this HSI and illuminate implications for us as researcher-educators engaging in critical self-examination and relational ethical plurality as key elements of our duoethnographic inquiry into an ethic of care (Ellis et al., 2011).

Duoethnography: A Dialogic Methodology

Duoethnography is a qualitative research methodology when “two or more participants bring different life experiences and ways of knowing and perspectives to a shared phenomenon” (Monzó & Soohoo, 2014, p. 155). Leveraging duoethnography as methodology, as a process of inquiry, we systematically reflect individually and collaboratively to write and interpret our vignettes of transformative moments during our teaching (Chang, 2008). Through critical reflexivity, the authors individually and then together explore their lived experiences interpreted through lenses of race, class, gender, privilege, cross-cultural encounters, personal values, and social forces. We unpack the layers of cross-cultural lived curricula, educative experiences and illuminate implications for us as researcher-educators in higher education engaging in critical self-examination and relational ethical plurality as elements for understanding and interpreting our duoethnographic inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011). We bring our different life experiences, perspectives, interpretations, and ways of knowing to the shared phenomena of our teaching at this HSI as the context and catalyst for our inquiry. We interrogate our choices, actions, feelings, languages, and interpretations as lived curricula and layer our narratives among our students’ narratives in a collective account of our experiences (Hughes & Pennington, 2017). We engage in duoethnography as the process for our inquiry.

Data Sources

Data sources for this study include: each author’s autoethnographic narrative reflections on her teaching experiences, researcher individual field note journals, narrative student comments from each author’s course evaluations during a three-year period, and anonymous narrative responses to a survey of former students of each author during the three-year period.

Data Gathering Process

First, following Institutional Review Board approval, we collected the anonymous narrative comments from our students’ course evaluations of our teaching during a three-year period. Then, we each sent our former students an electronic survey questionnaire with the same open-ended questions requesting that they share their experiences and perspectives of being students in our classes. Concurrently, both authors committed to individually writing reflective vignettes of our own experiences teaching these courses from which we collected the student data.

During the data gathering process, we met regularly to discuss our thoughts, impressions, perspectives, and ways to organize our process and project. We recognize that, as qualitative researchers, we are part of the phenomenon we endeavor to study, and we are the data collection instruments, as well as instruments of analysis. We debriefed to calibrate our efforts, and we remained flexible in order to allow the emergent quality of the study to evolve.

We discussed and determined the focus and topic of our individual writings, and then we invested time to write individually. Once we completed our individual writing, we met to discuss and share what we had written. Collaboratively, we made decisions on which stretches of narrative we had written individually would be the pieces we would focus our collaborative writing on. We structured the core of the duoethnography around the three to four individual stories each which we selected together. Those stories drove the structure of the duoethnography. We then engaged in critical reflexivity as the thrust of our interpretation and critique of our stories (Ellis, 2011). We viewed the stories for analysis by leveraging the lenses of critical care.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an intentional iterative process that alternated between individually reading the collective narrative data from our own students and our own reflections, and then we collaboratively read and shared our preliminary individual thematic analysis. We discussed and negotiated consensus on emerging themes within and across the data, thus layering commonalities and distinctions. Recursive reading through the data focused on identifying stretches of narrative examples of enacted care. We grouped excerpts from the different sources to exemplify themes and sub-themes. Our interpretations of the data were informed by our theoretical framework and we returned to the literature to juxtapose our findings with previous research. We frequently checked our positionality and sought outside perspectives from Latinx colleagues to assure we were interrogating not imposing our perspectives, privilege, and social power. We followed six revolving tasks as a guiding process: (1) (re)locating phenomenon; (2) (re)locating “self” within a(nother) cultural experience/context; (3) (re)constructing central autoethnographic question(s); (4) (re)reading theories/current literature; (5) (re)assemblage, writing, interpreting themes across data; and (6) (re)membering, (re)member checking, and (re)checking interpretations, ethical concerns, overall credibility (paraphrased from Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 86)

Trustworthiness

We employed four facets of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For credibility, we read data individually to identify preliminary themes and then we met frequently to discuss emerging themes common across data. We explored transferability by reading manuscripts from diverse perspectives throughout data analysis (e.g., postcolonial lenses; Anzaldúa, 2007). For dependability, we detailed our processes and sources. For confirmability, we engaged in peer debriefing and we connected our findings and interpretations with extant literature (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We selected representative quotes to illustrate common themes and distinct enactments and interpretations of critical care.

A Duoethnography of Care for HSI Latinx Students

Jackie. In developing our survey questions, we wondered why students in our subsequent classes chose us as their professors. It gives us a clue to their perceptions prior to entering our classrooms. When asked if they were hesitant or concerned about taking a course with me, most of my former students, through their survey responses, said they were not hesitant in taking my course because they had either had me as a professor before, or other students recommended me as a professor. In fact, one student said, “No actually a lot of students seemed to recommend her as an instructor.” Another student said in response to impressions of me as a professor, “she was very warm, radiated that she cared, and I felt like when I spoke, she listened.” Yet another stated, “None [no concerns]. I had the honor of having Dr. Koonce for three courses, and they were all enjoyable, insightful, and helped me grow as an educator. She was always available and provided great feedback in a timely manner and was very understanding and actually worked with her students. I truly enjoyed having Dr. Koonce as a professor.” These student comments really warmed my heart and tell me that they sense that I indeed care for them and that I love teaching them. What they may not realize is that when they respond to my care in authentic, meaningful ways, it makes me want to give even more. This reciprocal process, which happens cyclically throughout most semesters, really takes my breath away and sometimes brings me to tears at the end of the semester when I tell

the students just how much they have taught me and how much they mean to me. The students in this region are really diamonds, and I am thankful for the privilege of teaching them the content, skills, and professional dispositions they will need in their future classrooms.

Karin. My conceptual framework for teaching is that of relationship. Relationship infers connection, consanguinity, correlation. For successful and meaningful relationships to thrive, trust and respect are paramount. In teaching, the kinship of the relationship comes from a long lineage of teachers and learners who came before us. Teacher candidates in my classes, and in-service educators in my graduate classes, share a common ancestry of a certain kind. We come from a long line of teachers that reaches back through history in every culture and continent. And as with any relationship, whether familial by heredity or by the choice to care about another, the teacher-learner relationship also requires cultivation. To commence with building a relationship, we first must care enough to really get to know each other.

Woolfolk points out that “caring teacher-student relationships are consistently associated with better school performance” (2019).

To cultivate a caring relationship in teaching, I focus my attention and intention on getting to know my students, as well as sharing about myself so that they, too, really get to know me. Specifically, I share my stories: “I expected Dr. Lewis to teach me in a way I could understand and she did. She was always so patient and used a lot from her personal life to explain the process of human development. That truly made the difference!”

In sharing my stories based on my own lived experiences, both as a mother and as a teacher and life-long learner, my students perceive that I care about the lived experiences from which we relate. The following comments from former students represent countless comments I receive in course evaluations and in the survey of former students we conducted: “She was a really happy person and caring for her students... a kind professor.”

I also encourage my students to share their stories, as learners, parents, siblings, sons and daughters, spouses, teachers. In listening to their stories, I come to know each of them and appreciate the unique funds of knowledge and expertise of experience they bring with them into my class.

“Stories are not replicable because our lives are unique. Our uniqueness is what gives us value and meaning” (Remen, 1996, p. xvii).

The time and attention taken to actively listen to my students’ stories and share my own establishes a safe, respectful learning environment and the return on investment is priceless. In the words of one former student:

[Dr. Lewis is] Friendly, warm, and knowledgeable, but approachable. She was willing to take the time to explain assignments a second and/or third time. Dr. Lewis also learned along with her students which meant that she was not afraid to admit that she does not always have the right answer. That is an admirable characteristic.

Many students, and the students they in turn will teach, have encountered barriers and challenges that perhaps we will never fully comprehend. Some cross the US-Mexico border daily to attend class. Some grew up undocumented or in migrant worker families. Others grew up in *colonias*. The region where I teach statistically represents the highest poverty rate in the US. Embracing vulnerability allows for the courage to share stories of challenge and resilience we can all appreciate. Sometimes all I can do is listen—validate their lived experience.

“Listening to stories also can be healing. A deep trust of life often emerges when you listen to other people’s stories. You realize you are not alone; you’re traveling in wonderful company. Ordinary people living ordinary lives often are heroes” (Remen, 1996, p. xix).

Yet, my caring for my students and empathizing with their challenges does not mean I lower my high expectations for them.

At first I was scared because of the many expectations in the class. Then, as the semester went on, Dr. Lewis changed certain aspects of the course and was sensitive to student needs. She was flexible, but I knew that she wanted us to learn and was not dumbing down information or expectations. I went to see her in office hours and I really had a wonderful and positive experience. As we talked and shared ideas I began to become more comfortable because I learned that we had many of the same investigative research interests in common.

Sharing stories is the cornerstone of my classes. Stories are also an important learning strategy—it's not all about content delivery or methods—we need to relate to one another to be able to learn from one another. How students articulate what they remember about me as their teacher hints at the impact of intentionally sharing stories, beyond the technical: “[Dr. Lewis shares] Approachable Caring Knowledge - practical not just book learning. [She is] Professional. Knowledgeable. Down to earth. Organized.”

Of course, the texts and research articles I assign are important, and they provide knowledge from experts and a multitude of theories and examples of best practices. Yet, I do not rely on books and research articles alone. Teaching, to me, is not merely transmission of knowledge and information. “When we haven't the time to listen to each other's stories we seek out experts...But reading such books is a very different thing than listening to someone's lived experience” (Remen, 1996, p. xxviii). As a qualitative researcher and ethnographer, the stories of lived experiences take center stage in my classes. “Stories allow us to see something familiar through new eyes...facts bring us knowledge, but stories lead to wisdom” (Remen, 1996, p. xxx).

As an educator, it is my intention to take a learner stance, an inquiry stance. I purposefully orient myself to be open—open to the possibility that I do not know, perhaps I don't know what I don't know. A student noted, “I guess my first impression was that she was not from here.” Indeed, I am not.

As an Anglo from the Northeast US teaching and learning among predominantly Hispanic students in a community with a culture and history remarkably different from my own, I see it as an asset to *not* be the expert. As one former student remarked, “[Dr. Lewis is] Very open-minded; inclined to encourage students to think freely and creatively; non-threatening/intimidating.”

My intention to be open-minded resulted from having, on more than one occasion, students in my first few semesters at the university reveal to me that they almost dropped my class after looking me up and seeing that I was an Anglo (White, non-Latina). Although, in the survey results for this study, more recently most students now rely on word-of-mouth references from my former students, if they want to investigate me prior to taking a class with me. Apparently, I come highly recommended: “My first impression was that she was very nice and wanted for her students to succeed and would assist any student who is struggling with their coursework. She was friendly and willing to answer questions.”

The unconscious mind is always eavesdropping on our relationships and we are often unaware of the messages and meta-messages that translate themselves to another person in our presence. Sometimes the messages we convey unawares may be even more coherent and relevant to the needs of others than the messages we consciously devise (Remen, 1996, p. 209).

Although I intentionally select stories to share that are meant to be illustrative of concepts and theories I teach, or instructive regarding methods and strategies, the exchanging of and listening to stories most importantly allows the teaching-learning relationship to thrive. I care about my students, and I suspect that they glean more from the stories I tell to teach than I imagine or intend. At the end of the spring semester, a group of students lingered after class. One student said, “we really love the stories you tell. You always make me think about things differently. I have learned so much!”

Such spontaneous expressions of appreciation resonate deeply with me. I am truly grateful and touched. Indeed, I get a great sense of contentment from those moments. It’s the little things like that that inspire me to invest in my commitment to teaching above my other responsibilities and continue to cultivate relationships where we all teach and learn from each other.

Jackie. Karin, I agree that cultivating positive relationships is key in teaching. That is the one central aspect of teaching that I did not focus on in the early years of my career working with high school students. Yes, I cared about them and built relationships, but I often did not investigate the “why” behind the “what” of all of my students’ behaviors. In other words, I did not thoroughly investigate possible causes to some behavioral issues. While working on my doctorate, I learned through my field experience course work, teaching, and other courses, just how foundational relationship building is for fostering community in the classroom. While I am not perfect with my student-professor relationships now, I am much better than I used to be in caring for my students, especially when it comes to what impacts them.

The lesson I learned as a result of my early years of teaching and graduate work has helped me at our HSI. The students and I thrive on connection while participating in the learning experience. In order to cultivate a positive connection and community, I work at making myself approachable. I help students feel that they can talk to me about their concerns as it relates to their success in my courses. In fact, a few students stated in their surveys:

Dr. Koonce was extremely professional and approachable. She offered her guidance and support to all students and was consistently available for students who sought out her knowledge and expertise.

Wow! She is really nice and down to earth...I'm going to learn a lot in this course. I was so excited to start the semester. Dr. Koonce has a passion in her eyes that you can spot from a mile away. She made the first day of class fly by, and I was interested in the material we were going to learn.

Dr. Koonce was professional and warm. She encouraged everyone and was fair. My first impression of Dr. Koonce was that she is a very approachable professor as well as caring for her students.

I remember thinking that it was going to be a neat experience seeing that Dr. Koonce wasn't from the region. I was excited to learn from her perspective. She seemed very knowledgeable in her field. She was very nice and helpful, and I knew it was going to be a great course.

Especially since she was going to be our professor. She started building relationships with us day 1, and we were able to learn about her and what the course entailed.

My first impression of Dr. Koonce is that she is that she had kind eyes and her overall presence made me think she was very confident in herself. Dr. Koonce was professional and also came across very knowledgeable about what would be taught throughout the semester. I could tell that she was a very organized and punctual person from how she conducted herself. I loved listening to her laugh and how she made Day 1 so memorable by interacting and

participating in an icebreaker activity with us. She was very unlike any professor I have ever had.

Like you, I also play a role as a student as well; they teach me about their cultural funds of knowledge. For example, we also share our stories, especially when we read the article, *My Mother Never Read to Me* by Cline and Necochea (2003). Some of the students shared how their families also did not read to them but enhanced their literacy through storytelling. However, hearing your students' voices and your own, I realize that I can improve my teaching by telling and inviting my students to tell more stories.

Karin. Jackie, I, too, endeavor to be approachable, available. I am very intentional about listening, actively listening. One student noted, that I am "... always listening to our thoughts about the concept we are learning in her class. Never one time where she isn't paying attention to our ideas." Another student shared, "she was extremely attentive with all the students."

It takes vulnerability and an investment of class time to share and listen to students as they share their experiences. Yet that seems to be most memorable to them, as reflected in one student's comments, "My most memorable experience with Dr. Lewis, would be whenever she would put her personal life experiences to what we were learning." Eliciting and listening to the students also seems to resonate with them and suggests an ethic of care, "[Dr. Lewis] provides examples of her life as a teacher or past experiences and allows her students to share their experiences as well and the memories we had about the rest of the teachers we have had throughout our life."

I suppose another way I enact critical care is that I share my own mistakes and challenges, and I recognize and remind my students that we are all human; we all make mistakes, and that is okay because we learn from them. I also point out that we are perpetually evolving in our understanding. We can change our perspectives. When we know better, we can do better, as Maya Angelou frequently said. I am very intentional about refraining from judging, even when a student makes assertions I may consider a stereotype, or that reveal a bias or assumption. Remaining open and asking probing questions to better understand where a student's thoughts and beliefs are coming from helps cultivate a safe environment for everyone to ask questions. "It was easy to ask her 'dumb questions' because I knew she wouldn't judge me. Other professors are hard to talk to because I really feel judged by them but she made it so easy to just talk to her."

At this point, I must acknowledge what could be a cultural challenge I have encountered. I tend to get at least one negative comment from a student in course evaluations each semester that contradicts the predominantly positive feedback from students, and it often relates to how I explain or answer questions. Perhaps it is my affect? Comments such as, "I tried to talk to her but she seemed uninterested on what I was saying" or "I asked her about a due date and she said look at your syllabus," and yet my intention is to be responsive to any clarifications needed, as referenced by a student in the same class, "The most memorable experience of this course was when the professor gave out her phone number to the students for any questions that may arise to ensure the students had a quick response which is a rare, but appreciated occurrence." Another version comes through in this student's comments, "Dr. Lewis was so kind and calm. However, her assignments were extremely confusing... I understand the importance of collaboration, but this made the course extremely unorganized and explanations extremely vague... This course was confusing and everything I learned, I learned myself." Yet again, from same course, "The professor always clarified any misunderstandings which was greatly appreciated, and the lessons were taught in a way where the learner would learn for long term use as opposed to learning for a short term." And another example, "I felt like I didn't learn much at all, yes we had to be reading each week however, I

felt as if the instructor just gave us the tools and didn't teach us anything and expected us to teach ourselves." In the same class, but from a different student, "the class got to "teach" each other and we got to work as a team to figure out the assignment." Contradictory feedback from students in the same class such as this prompts me to work harder to be clearer, because even when I think I am communicating and clarifying, I am still somehow missing some students who find my instructions and explanations confusing. With that said, the vast majority of students seem to appreciate my approach to teaching and active learning strategies, which evidently is not their typical experience. Perhaps that nudge out of their comfort zone is revealed in the negative feedback.

Karin. Jackie, I find it curious that students indicate that I am somehow different. Why aren't more professors teaching the way you and I approach the teaching-learning relationship? "She is different than other teachers because she likes to hear our experiences, and connecting it to our stuff. Many teachers just go over the lesson but never pay attention to our experiences plus we learn more when we connect our experiences to our learning." Perhaps this is the key to enacting critical care. The refrain, "She was a very caring teacher," to me, is a profound endorsement for how I intend to teach. The challenge is to convey that and reach all of my students.

Jackie. The question, "Why aren't more professors teaching the way you and I approach the teaching-learning relationship?" is indeed a loaded question. I wonder if the students are referring to professors outside of our college who they say do not make meaningful connections with them. I ask that question because our college-level colleagues really seem to be caring and invested professors. However, my students have also been amazed that I remember their names and shared that many of their professors do not remember their names.

In class, Dr. Koonce was a very dedicated professor who always took into account our suggestions, and I appreciated that she learned each and every one of our names. Her class was interactive, and I enjoyed all of the major assignments. Most memorable for me, is how Dr. Koonce will always greet you when I would see her outside of class and how responsive she was to my questions." I really liked that she tried to learn our names. Many times, professors do not get the opportunity to know us personally because they teach so many students. Dr. Koonce found it important to know who we were.

I found that learning students' names and being the same in and out of class really meant a lot to students. Perhaps, many of us, as professors, are so focused on our scholarship that we neglect engaging with our students in meaningful ways. I think uncovering real plausible answers would require further study.

On a slightly different note, the students also seemed to sense the time I spend getting to know their culture. When asked about a memorable experience, a student replied, "Her dedication to teaching at the higher level. She treated us as educators not just students. She also understood cultural backgrounds and differences which was amazing and was always open to discussing sensitive topics." Another student mentioned my use of *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiah (2014) and wanting to use that book in her own classroom. I am pleased that they see my efforts in getting to know them and inviting them to investigate other cultures. In a previous quote, the student mentioned how they were excited to have me as a professor because I was from a different region and culture and would bring a different perspective. These comments reflect the fact, as previously stated, that we take turns as teacher and learner. Being open and vulnerable in this way is also an enactment of care.

Karin. Jackie, I agree that really getting to know my students includes learning their names, practicing pronouncing their names accurately, and learning about their culture and personal histories that brought them to my classroom. I invest an entire class session on having each student create a Journey Line on a large sticky poster that they adhere to the walls of the classroom. I bring boxes of colorful markers and encourage them to include any people and events that inspired or led them to be where there are now, on the cusp of becoming teachers. I join them and create my own as well. They are free to include anything important to them and draw it however they would like. I am always impressed with the variety of approaches and symbols they use. Each Journey Line is unique, just as they are. We do a Gallery Walk, and then I open up the invitation for anyone to share their Journey Line poster with the class. I rarely have a student who doesn't choose to share. Sometimes there are tears and frequently gasps from "aha" moments. Not only do I really get to know them better, their struggles and triumphs, and the inspiring people in their lives, but they get to know each other. It has been a powerful process and many mention that particular activity as one of the most impactful. Even though they take many classes together in the Educator Preparation Program, they remark how they did not know so many important aspects about each other. They did not know they were not alone in their navigation of education. They see me as relatable when I share my own challenges and barriers faced. They see me differently, and they see each other differently. They state that they intend to use the activity when they become teachers to get to know their students and help the classroom community come together. Indeed, it is a tangible opportunity to become more open and vulnerable as we collectively enact an ethic of care.

Discussion

In writing this duoethnography, we found that several themes emerged as we and our students reflected on pedagogy and dispositions. For example, we found that it is important to cultivate positive relationships and reciprocate care. One way we cultivate those relationships is by sharing our stories and listening to our students' stories through the facilitation of activities, such as Karin's enactment of Journey Lines, in order to uncover the individual and collective narratives of our predominantly Latinx students. These individual and collective narratives provide the counter-story to those perpetrated by the dominant culture. Students' counter-stories also debunk the colorblind myth, which CRT purports to unravel, in that we hear the uniqueness of each student's experiences in our activities. The strengths evident in each story contribute to the collective strength of our predominantly Latinx institution and community.

In sharing counter-stories, we are also helping our students to self-advocate politically for the Latinx community. As "politicized mothers" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008), that is key to authentic caring. Additionally, we found it important to hold students to high expectations but be flexible when tragedy and unexpected challenges strike without sacrificing rigor. Our students shared that they appreciated these accommodations that we made without "dummying down information or expectations."

Furthermore, students' responses on our course evaluations and research survey revealed that they perceived our instructional activities and behaviors as evidence of our "caring" and "approachable" demeanors. Their responses directly addressed our research question on how our students perceived and interpreted our pedagogy and dispositions. We also constantly read and participate in professional development activities to hone and enhance our teaching skills because we realize that there is always room for growth and change.

The data from this duoethnography also addressed the research question regarding the meaning-making and implications we derived from our own and our students' reflections of our teaching. While meaning-making is always ongoing, we have learned to listen and learn

from our students. We have also learned that it is imperative to connect students' experiences to course content for cultural relevance. As evident by Jackie's student who shared that she "understood cultural backgrounds and differences ... and was always open to discussing sensitive topics," we learned to continue this practice of bringing in readings and facilitating culturally-relevant discussions in our courses.

We still have a lot to learn about our own pedagogy and those of our HSI colleagues within and beyond our institution. As we mentioned, some students seemed surprised by our caring nature and expressed that it was uncommon. Indeed, we find it difficult to think of our education colleagues as some of those professors, because they also seem kind and committed; however, we honor our students' voices by calling for more scholarship on HSI faculty's pedagogy as well as students' perspectives of their professors' instructional activities and behaviors.

Much work on culturally relevant caring in our increasingly diverse world is needed, and we hope this work furthers the discussion on best practices to transcend boundaries with student populations whose race and culture differ from one's own. We are far from perfect, but we are learners committed to the best pedagogical practices and dispositions that our students deserve.

Conclusion

We hope our study contributes to the discourse on cultivating an ethic of care in higher education and provides insights into cross-cultural, racial, social, and linguistic differences among professors and students. We intend to explore ways to cultivate an ethic of care in critical pedagogy in order to transcend boundaries, engender trust, develop mutual understanding and respect, and reciprocity in empathic teaching-learning relationships. Given globalization and the increasing diversity in the U.S. general population, a growing immigrant population, and predictions that within the next 10 years 25% of all school children in the US will come from homes where they speak a language other than English (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2014), our study findings offer potential mechanisms and dispositions for transcending cultural, racial, and linguistic boundaries in higher education, particularly in a College of Education where we teach current and future educators who have and will continue to have those increasingly diverse students in their classrooms.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (2007). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bartolomé, L. I. (2008). Authentic cariño and respect in minority education: The political and ideological dimensions of love. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 1(1), 1-17.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2008). Chapter twelve-politicized mothering: Authentic caring among African American women teachers. *Counterpoints*, 319, 251-264.
- Bondy, E., & Ross, D. D. (2008). The teacher as warm demander. *Educational Leadership*, 66(1), 54-58.
- Casey, K. (1990). Teacher as mother: Curriculum theorizing in the life histories of contemporary women teachers. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 20(3), 301-320.
- Casey, K. (1993). *I answer with my life: Life histories of women teachers working for social change*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Chang, H., (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cline, Z., & Necochea, J. (2003). My mother never read to me. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 47(2), 122-126.

- Decuir, J. T., & Dixon, A.D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, 33(5), 26-31.
- De Jesús, A., & Antrop-González, R. (2006). Instrumental relationships and high expectations: Exploring critical care in two Latino community-based schools. *Intercultural Education*, 17(3), 281-299.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York, NY: New Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T., & Bochner, A., (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>
- Garad, B. H. (2013). Spiritually centered caring: An approach for teaching and reaching Black students in suburbia. In C. Dillard (Ed.), *Engaging culture, race and spirituality: New visions* (pp. 66-80). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Gómez, J. (2004). El amor de la sociedad del riesgo: Una tentativa educativa [The love of the risk society: An educational attempt]. Barcelona, Spain: El Roure Editorial.
- Hofer, B. & Bendixen, L. (2012). Personal epistemology: Theory, research, and future directions. *APA educational psychology handbook*. 1. 227-256. 10.1037/13273-009.
- Hughes, S., & Pennington, J., (2017). *Autoethnography: Process, product, and possibility for critical social research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Landsman, J. (2004). Confronting the racism of low expectations. *Educational Leadership*, 62, 28-33.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Monzo, L. & SooHoo, S. (2014). Translating the academy: Learning the racialized languages of academia. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7(3) 147-165.
- Nieto, S. (2008). Nice is not enough: Defining caring for students of color. In M. Pollack (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism* (pp. 28-31). New York, NY: New Press.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Remen, R. (1996). *Kitchen table wisdom: Stories that heal*. Riverhead. New York, NY.
- Roja, L., & Liou, D. D. (2017). Social justice teaching through the sympathetic touch of caring and high expectations for students of color. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 68(1), 28-40.
- Salazar, M. (2016). *UT Rio Grande Valley Data Summit Speech*. Harlingen, TX.
- Suárez-Orozco, C. & Suárez-Orozco, M. (2014). *Structuring opportunity for immigration origin children. Bread and Brain, Education and Poverty Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Scripta Varia 125, Vatican City 2014* www.pas.va/content/dam/accademia/pdf/sv125/sv125-suarezorozco.pdf
- Tonatiyah, D. (2014). *Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight for desegregation*. New York, NY: Abrams Books.

Author Note

Jacqueline B. Koonce is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Bilingual and Literacy Studies at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Dr. Koonce's work has appeared in the *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *The Qualitative Report*, *the Journal of Literacy and Technology*, *Annual Editions: Multicultural Education, 17th Edition*; *Journal of Language & Literacy Education*; and the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. Her current research focuses on early literacy development and the impact of caring on all students, but particularly, students of color. She is also studying African American women's language and literacy practices. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to:

BMain 2.110; Department of Bilingual and Literacy Studies; UTRGV; One West University Boulevard; Brownsville, Texas 78520; USA. E-mail: jacqueline.koonce@utrgv.edu.

Karin Ann Lewis is an associate professor in The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Teaching & Learning Department. Following a 27-year teaching career in public education, she received a Ph.D. in Educational and Counseling Psychology from the University of Kentucky in 2010. Dr. Lewis teaches undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses in cognition, learning, human development, curriculum and pedagogy. Dr. Lewis's scholarly focus takes on complexities of identity and agency from a social justice perspective meant to challenge the status quo and open up transdisciplinary discourses by seeking ways to transcend the current educational paradigm through transformative, culturally responsive pedagogy. Her scholarship is grounded in qualitative, collaborative, collective ethnographic methodologies. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: BMain 1504A; Department of Teaching and Learning; One West University Boulevard; Brownsville, Texas 78520; USA. E-mail: karin.lewis@utrgv.edu.

Copyright 2020: Jacqueline B. Koonce, Karin A. Lewis, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Koonce, J. B., & Lewis, K. A. (2020). Culturally relevant care through the lens of duoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(6), 1721-1735.
<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss6/19>
