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# Let Care Shine Through

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**Culturally relevant, critical care: A social justice imperative**

“People won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This oft-quoted phrase, attributed to a wide range of people including Teddy Roosevelt and John C. Maxell, is a fitting theme for this issue addressing the centrality of relationships to high quality teaching and learning. But what does it take to communicate care to students? As well-known care scholar, Nel Noddings, explained, care is in the eyes of the receiver. That is, it does not exist unless the “cared for” confirm that they experience it. The diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and circumstances of students in U.S. schools can challenge teachers’ ability to effectively enact care. In fact, what is perceived as care and the purposes of care are not universal. Educators who wish to develop strong relationships with students will need to rise to Jacqueline Jordan Irvine’s (2001) challenge to investigate “the complexity of a term that seems so simple—care” (p. 8).

“Culturally relevant critical teacher care” (CRCTC) represents a way of thinking about and enacting care as a moral imperative for historically under-served populations of students in U.S. schools. Coined by Mari Ann Roberts (2009, 2010), CRCTC is a synthesis of the work of scholars, particularly scholars of color, who have described teachers’ care for marginalized students as an act of social justice (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2005). The words “culturally relevant” refer to the responsiveness of teacher care to the values, knowledge, and histories of their students. The word “critical” refers to the teacher’s insight into the socio-political realities of their students’ lives, particularly what may be a long history of injustice that shapes their educational experience and their future opportunities.

In a recent study of exemplary teachers of African American students, Melanie Acosta (2013) found that the teachers were aware of the enduring marginalization of African American

people and deeply committed to preparing students for futures their ancestors were unable to experience. The teachers' caring was similar to Rosalie Rolon-Dow's (2005) articulation of "color(full) critical caring" which recognized the sociopolitical circumstances of middle school Latinas. These studies explicitly link teachers' caring behaviors with a larger social justice agenda of repaying the education debt owed to students who have been historically underserved in U.S. schools.

### **Guiding Principles of Culturally Relevant, Critical Teacher Care**

In order to cultivate CRCTC in educators for whom it is not intuitive, its guiding principles must be understood. The three principles include political clarity, critical hope, and asset-based thinking.

**Political clarity:** Alice McIntyre (1997) described the politically *unclear* caring of several preservice teacher candidates and noted its potential danger to their students. The teacher candidates, proclaiming their care for their students, were inclined to pity them, blame them for behavior they viewed as unruly, and attempt to "save" the students from what the novices viewed as their own and their families' deficiencies. In contrast, teachers who have political clarity are aware of the widespread existence of societal injustice, recognize that injustice is typically reproduced in schools, and maintain a commitment to an active struggle for equity of educational opportunity and outcomes. They do not shy away from naming inequities their students encounter in and out of school, and strive to help them develop strategies to navigate and, perhaps, transform obstacles.

**Critical hope:** In his book, *Pedagogy of hope*, Paulo Freire (2002) explained, "I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream...I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete

imperative” to transform the world (p. 8). Critical hope is a deep sense of responsibility for the collective wellbeing of humanity. As Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2009) explained, this is an audacious, active hope, that, like the roses that grow out of the cracks in concrete, has the “strength and tenacity to reach for the sun” (p. 186). Teachers with critical hope maintain a vision of a more just society and embrace their responsibility to educate students who will work to enact that vision.

**Asset-based thinking:** Culturally relevant, critical teacher care is also fueled by a respect for and valuing of students’ knowledge, resources, and ability to excel. Norma Gonzalez, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti’s (2005) work on funds of knowledge is an example of an asset-based approach that maintains “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (p. x). Similarly, Tara Yosso’s (2006) discussion of community cultural wealth highlights the many kinds of resources, or assets, that children, often viewed as deficient, bring with them to school. Research has demonstrated that when educators focus on assets, rather than deficits, student success increases (Comber & Kamler, 2004; Rios-Aguilar, 2010). Educators must remain vigilant so as to avoid allowing deficit-based thinking to infect their practice and, consequently, their students.

### **Four Domains of Teaching Practice**

In a recent interview and observation study of teachers in an urban elementary school in one of the nation’s largest school districts, we found that enactments of culturally relevant, critical care were shaped by four domains of teaching practice.

### **Expanding the Meaning of Student Achievement**

Although the public has been encouraged to define student, teacher, and school success in terms of test scores, the teachers in our study held a broader definition of what counts as success.

The teachers embraced their responsibility to help students to improve academic skills; however, they recognized that focusing on academics alone would not be sufficient to prepare their students for what Carl Grant (2012) referred to as “flourishing lives.” Learning how to respect another’s perspective, communicate in different social settings, and persevere in the face of challenge were just as significant as improving students’ academic performance. One of the teachers explained that it was her obligation to “push learning past the textbooks...teaching many skills, values, and ways of thinking that will not only help [students] to perform well on a test, but that they’ll also be taking with them out into another class, home, social interactions, and careers.”

As an example, when a student wrote a profane letter to another student, the teacher talked with her about the importance of communicating her feelings, the various ways in which to do so, and the potential consequences of each approach. They worked together to revise the letter. Learning how to work through anger and communicate effectively are skills that the teacher believed students need to experience success in and outside of school.

The teachers’ expanded understanding of achievement also included developing student voice. As one teacher put it, students must “stand up for themselves; I try to give them that voice... [and] you have to provide opportunities for that student to have a voice.” In order to tackle the obstacles and challenges that lay ahead, the teachers encouraged students to use their voice to question, speak out, and act on matters that were important to them.

### **Overhauling Deficit Thinking**

Teachers who enact CRCTC recognize the pervasiveness of deficit thinking in the U.S. education system (Valencia, 2010) and are vigilant about ways in which a deficit orientation may

shape their own views of students' aptitudes. One of the teachers in our study spoke candidly about the assumptions she made about students early in her teaching career:

[I] assumed, "poor them," this is what [students] need...but having no idea of their perspectives or their point of view... or what things that teachers do that affect them. I never stopped to ask students, "What are some things that a teacher has said to you or done... that's really been helpful? What hurts you? What makes you not really want to learn?"

In addition to interrogating one's own beliefs about students, enacting CRCTC can begin by asking students these very questions to gain insight into their identities, assets, and aspirations. It is these kinds of questions that have the potential to contribute to a paradigm shift that embraces students' assets and their perspectives as central to shaping caring practice.

In addition to ridding themselves of deficit thinking, teachers who enact CRCTC overhaul students' deficit views of themselves, learned over time through the media, in school, and throughout society. Consider how this teacher zealously responds when one of her students says he is content with receiving a C because, according to the student, "it means average":

You think you're average?! You're not average... I don't raise my son just to be average. I want him to excel, I want him to do his very best all the time and your grandparents and I feel the same way about you. They do not look at you and say, "Oh, he's just an average boy." They see you like I see you, that you're capable... Nobody here thinks you're average and you need to prove to us that we're all right.

Through messages like this one, the teachers strived to undo students' deficit thinking and reshape their identities as capable, deserving, and successful young people.

## **Holding High Expectations and Removing Barriers to Success**

Although teachers often repeat the mantra, “I have high expectations for all students,” proclaiming this is simply not enough. We found that the teachers in our study held high expectations *and* assisted students in reaching those expectations. In other words, “it’s not just, ‘This is what I expect and that’s it,’” one of the teachers explained. While they refused to accept anything less than students’ best efforts, they also provided supports to enable students to reach expectations. For instance, one teacher frequently helped students to meet her expectations by reminding them of what was expected: “Before we go to the carpet, let me remind you: one pillow per person and no one can lie flat on the ground because there won’t be enough room for everyone.” In the following example, we see one of the teachers prodding and assisting a disorganized student to become more organized:

How could this be more organized? (She tells the student to take out his folder.) Part of not being organized is not putting things in a specific place. (She places his homework in the left-side pocket of his folder.) Next time you need to put your homework in your folder. It’s gonna take work...but you need to do it to stay organized. Next time we take out our homework, I’m going to be looking at you to make sure you take it out of your folder.

She insisted that the student learn organization skills and coached him in doing so. She also held him accountable for implementing organizational skills by noting what she expected to see the next time she called for homework.

Similarly, teachers intervened to support students when the material conditions of their lives threatened their ability to excel. When a student could no longer transport his materials home due to the deteriorated zipper on his backpack, the teacher stapled the backpack together

thereby enabling him to do so. When a student missed school because he did not have a clean uniform to wear, the teacher insisted that he come to school and promised that she would not send him to the office. Defying the school's uniform policy demonstrated to the student her care for him and her commitment to his learning.

### **Teaching with Urgency**

Urgency is communicated through the teacher's attitude, tone, and demeanor. The teachers in our study insistently communicated the message: *what we are learning is important and there is not a second to waste*. This sense of urgency does not stem from teachers' desire to control or dominate students. Rather, their urgency is connected to a sharpened understanding of students' vulnerability to enduring societal injustice. The teachers' sociopolitical awareness reminds them that if they do not teach with urgency, they give their students "permission to fail" (Ladson-Billings, 2002) and suffer the consequences of a world in which the odds are not always in their favor.

We found that these teachers demanded success by refusing to grant children the permission to fail. One of the teachers frequently used the phrase, "get your head in the game" to communicate her expectation that students focus on the task at hand. After insisting that students get their head in the game, she declared, "While you are in my class, you are not to slouch... You see, when you go and get a job and you're slouching, they're not gonna hire you. You need to sit up." We heard a similar message when a student appeared lethargic: "What are we waiting on? Get out your agenda and write down your home learning so we can go to the library. I need you to get it out when I'm telling you to." Concerned for students' achievement in school and throughout their lives, the teachers consistently insisted (Authors, 2015) that students be attentive and diligent.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

As is evident in the teachers' practices, culturally relevant critical teacher care is more a verb than a noun in that it is tied to concrete action--not simply feelings or words. Approaching care in this way requires educators to reconsider their assumptions about the purposes and practices of care in school. Enacting CRCTC positions educators as "gate openers" (instead of "gate keepers") to the flourishing lives they deserve (Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1995). As such it is at the heart of a social justice agenda to improve students' lives and the communities in which we live.

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