

[Home](#)[Current Issue](#)[Archives](#)[Buy](#)[Contact](#)September 2016 | Volume **74** | Number **1****Relationships First** Pages 50-54

Let Care Shine Through

Elizabeth Bondy and Elyse Hambacher

Caring for students is a moral imperative, a way to take steps toward justice for historically underserved children.

People won't care how much you know until they know how much you care. This oft-quoted phrase speaks to the centrality of relationships to teaching. But what exactly does it take to communicate care to students?

As Nel Noddings (1984), explains, care is in the eyes of the receiver; care doesn't exist unless those being cared for truly experience it.

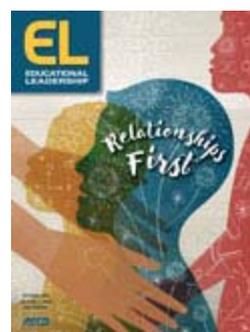
People's perceptions of what care encompasses, and the purposes of caring, aren't universal, which means that students' diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and circumstances can challenge teachers' ability to show caring in a way that truly gets through. To develop strong relationships with students, educators need to rise to Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's (2001) challenge to investigate "the complexity of a term that seems so simple—*care*" (p. 8).

One approach that considers students' culture and social conditions helps us navigate those complexities. *Culturally relevant critical teacher care*, a term coined by Mari Ann Roberts (2010), is a way of thinking about caring for students as a moral imperative, a way to not only offer warm support, but also take steps toward justice for historically underserved children.

This way of thinking synthesizes the work of scholars, particularly scholars of color, who describe educators' care for marginalized students as an act of social justice (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2005). Such caring is "culturally relevant" because teachers learn about and respond to the values, knowledge, and histories of their students; it's "critical" because it shows insight into the sociopolitical realities of students' lives, particularly a history of injustice that shapes their educational experience and opportunities.

Melanie Acosta (2013) recently found that exemplary teachers of African American students were both aware of the enduring marginalization of African American people and committed to preparing black students for opportunities that their ancestors were unable to experience. These teachers likely showed culturally relevant and critical caring. For example, one of Acosta's teachers described her attention to teaching her students "how the game of school is played" (p. 122). The teacher was referring to the importance of helping students master the implicit cultural practices of schools, often referred to as the hidden curriculum. Although some students have mastered the expectations of schools—sit in your seat, raise your hand—many have not had the opportunity to practice those skills, and Acosta's teachers were determined to help students master them.

Similarly, Rolón-Dow (2005) described some middle school educators' "color(full) critical caring," which

[BUY THIS ISSUE](#)[Read Abstract](#)

recognized the sociopolitical circumstances of Latina students through actions like "treating students as if they have your last name" (p. 103). This kind of caring is based on authentic, personal relationships and a sense of responsibility for the child's well-being; it is linked to knowledge of the child's particular community context. Studies like these explicitly link teachers' caring behaviors with a social justice agenda of repaying the education debt owed to historically underserved people.

Principles of Relevant Caring

Approaching students with such informed care isn't necessarily intuitive. To cultivate culturally relevant critical teacher care, we need to understand three guiding principles.

Political Clarity

Rather than pitying marginalized students or attempting to "save" them from the perceived deficiencies of their families, teachers with political clarity are aware of the widespread existence of injustice. They recognize that injustice is typically reproduced in schools and they remain committed to an active struggle for equity in educational opportunity and outcomes. They don't shy away from naming inequities their students encounter in and out of school.

Critical Hope

In *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. It's an audacious hope, one that we might compare to flowers growing out of cracks in concrete, reaching for sun (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). Teachers with critical hope maintain a vision of a more just society, and they embrace their responsibility to educate students who'll work to enact that vision.

Asset-Based Thinking

Culturally relevant critical teacher care also values students' knowledge, resources, and ability to excel—their individual and culture-connected assets. González, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) work on funds of knowledge is an example of an asset-based approach. Similarly, Yosso's (2006) discussion of community cultural wealth highlights the many kinds of resources that children bring to school. Research has demonstrated that when educators focus on assets, rather than deficits, student success increases (Rios-Aguilar, 2010). Teachers who care for students remain vigilant that they don't let deficit-based thinking infect their practice.

Teachers Who Let Care Shine Through

We recently observed two 5th grade teachers in a high-poverty urban school who had been identified by their principal and colleagues as very successful in working with student behavior in racially and economically diverse classrooms. Both of these teachers held high student expectations and obtained high academic performance from students. In formal interviews with the teachers, they consistently mentioned teaching their kids skills to navigate a system where the odds were stacked against them. In interviews and 56 hours of observation of both teachers (whom we'll call Ms. Grover and Ms. Sampson), we saw examples of practices reflecting culturally relevant critical care.¹ Let's highlight four aspects of such practice.

1. Expanding the Meaning of 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 success. They embraced their responsibility to help students improve academic skills. However, they recognized that focusing on academics alone wouldn't be sufficient to prepare their students for flourishing lives; learning to respect another's perspective, communicate in different social settings, and persevere in the face of challenges were just as significant as academic performance.

Ms. Grover explained that it was her obligation to "push learning past the textbooks ... teaching many skills, values, and ways of thinking that they'll also [take] with them into another class, home, social interactions, and careers."

When a student wrote a profane letter to another student, Ms. Sampson, who believed in teaching kids how to work through anger and communicate effectively, talked with the student about the importance of communicating her feelings, various ways to do so, and the potential consequences of each approach. They revised the letter to enable the student to communicate her feelings to her peer in a way that felt authentic to the student while also opening up conversation with that peer.

The teachers' expanded understanding of achievement also included encouraging students to speak out and act on matters important to them, to help them tackle obstacles that lay ahead for them. One teacher asserted, "Students must stand up for themselves ... you have to provide opportunities for that." For instance, when one of Ms. Grover's students reported that he had been treated unfairly by an adult in the cafeteria, Ms. Grover involved the whole class in a problem-solving activity to develop potential responses. She guided the students in considering responses, and together they drafted a message explaining the concern to the relevant adult.

2. Overhauling Deficit

Teachers who enact culturally relevant critical care recognize the pervasiveness of deficit thinking in the U.S. education system, and try never to let such thinking shape their views of students' aptitudes. Ms. Sampson spoke candidly about how, early in her teaching career, she thought "poor them" about students from low-income families. She made assumptions:

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

Teachers who want to respond to students' real needs and challenge injustices can begin by asking students these very questions to gain insight into their identities, assets, and aspirations. Knowing these things about kids can help teachers shift their paradigm. Teachers will not only build good relationships with students, but they will also use students' perspectives along with insights into students' sociopolitical realities to shape caring practice.

Effective teachers also overhaul students' deficit views of themselves, which are learned over time through the media and even in school. Consider how Ms. Sampson zealously responded when a student said he was content with receiving a C because "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 do his very best all the time, and your grandparents and I feel the same way about you. They don't look at you and say, "Oh, he's just an average boy." ... Nobody here thinks you're average and

you need to prove to us that we're right.

Messages like this reshape students' identities so they see themselves as capable, deserving, successful young people.

3. Offering High Expectations and Support

Although teachers often repeat the mantra, "I have high expectations for all students," proclaiming this is simply not enough. These culturally responsive 5th grade teachers held high expectations *and* assisted students in reaching them. While refusing to accept anything less than students' best efforts, they provided supports. "It's not just, 'This is what I expect and that's it,'" Ms. Sampson explained. She frequently helped students meet her expectations by explicitly restating them, saying before circle time, for instance, "Before we go to the carpet, let me remind you: one pillow per person. No one can lie flat on the ground because there won't be enough room for everyone." She hoped to ensure that her students wouldn't be penalized for failing to enact the unwritten rules of school.

Similarly, Ms. Grover prodded a student to become more organized, because she knew remaining disorganized would keep him from reaching his highest potential. After having him take out his folder, she told him

Part of not being organized is not putting things in a specific place [placing 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 this student learn organization skills and coached him in doing so. She also held him accountable for drawing on those skills.

These teachers intervened to support students when material conditions threatened their ability to excel. When one student missed school because he didn't have a clean uniform to wear, Ms. Sampson insisted that he come to school and promised she wouldn't send him to the office, demonstrating her care for him and her commitment to his learning. By insisting that he come to school and being willing to break school rules to enable him to do so, Ms. Sampson displayed warm demanding, the practice of teachers who communicate care for students through their actions. She and Ms. Grover exemplified the warm demander's stance of persistent insistence on student participation and excellence coupled with the support required for students to achieve excellence (Hambacher, Acosta, Bondy, & Ross, 2016).

4. Teaching with Urgency

The teachers in our study insistently communicated—through their attitude, tone, and demeanor—that *what we're learning is important. There's not a second to waste*. This sense of urgency didn't stem from a desire to control or dominate students. Rather, it was connected to a sharpened understanding of students' vulnerability to societal injustice. The teachers' sociopolitical awareness reminded them that if they didn't teach with urgency, they'd give their students permission to fail and to suffer the consequences of a world in which the odds are not in their favor.

Ms. Grover and Ms. Sampson both consistently insisted that students be attentive and diligent. Ms. Grover frequently used the phrase, "get your head in the game" to communicate her expectation that students focus on the task at hand. We heard her tell her 5th graders, "While you're in my class, you are not to slouch. ... When you go to get a job and you're slouching, they're not gonna hire you. You need to sit up." She admonished a student who appeared lethargic, "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."

Caring and Concrete Action

As these teachers' practices show, culturally relevant critical teacher care is more a verb than a noun. It's tied to concrete action—not simply feelings or words. Caring in this way positions educators to open doors to the lives that students deserve. It is at the heart of a social justice agenda to improve our students' lives.

References

Acosta, M. (2013). *A culture-focused study with accomplished black educators on pedagogical excellence for African American children*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida.

Beauboeuf-LaFontant, T. (2005). Womanist lessons for reinventing teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(5), 436–445.

Duncan-Andrade, J. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(2), 181–194.

Freire, P. (2002). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: Continuum.

González, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Hambacher, E., Acosta, M. M., Bondy, E., & Ross, D. D. (2016). Elementary preservice teachers as warm demanders in an African American school. *The Urban Review*, 48(2), 175–197.

Irvine, J. J. (2001). *Caring, competent teachers in complex classrooms*. Charles W. Hunt Memorial Lecture. 53rd annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Preparation. Washington, DC: AACTE Publications.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rios-Aguilar, C. (2010). Measuring funds of knowledge: Contributions to Latino/a students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. *Teachers College Record*, 112(8), 2209–2257.

Roberts, M. A. (2010). Toward a theory of culturally relevant critical teacher care: African American teachers' definitions and perceptions of care for African American students. *Journal of Moral Education*, 39(4), 449–467.

Rolón-Dow, R. (2005). Critical care: A color(full) analysis of care narratives in the schooling experiences of Puerto Rican girls. *American Education Research Journal*, 42(1), 77–111.

Yosso, T. (2006) Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural

wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.

Endnote

¹ Elyse Hambacher conducted three formal interviews of each teacher and informally interviewed them after each observation.

Elizabeth Bondy is a professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at the University of Florida. Elyse Hambacher is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at the University of New Hampshire.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

classroom management, student behavior and discipline, student engagement and motivation, whole child: supported, whole child: engaged, audience: administrators, audience: district-leaders, audience: higher-education, audience: new-principals, audience: new-teachers, audience: principals, audience: teacher-leaders, audience: teachers, level: k-12

Copyright © 2016 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For **photocopy, electronic and online access**, and **republishing requests**, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "**Get Permission**" search field.
- To **translate** this article, contact permissions@ascd.org