Lead with Care

Connecting Theory with Practice in Implementing

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article examines how educational leaders can cultivate an ethic of care in culturally responsive ways as they seek to implement the cultural awareness competencies in Pennsylvania's Common Ground Framework (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). Although Common Ground is a Pennsylvania specific educational policy, it has implications for anyone in a leadership position that seeks to improve outcomes for all students in a politically tempestuous environment. The benefits of culturally relevant pedagogy to all students in K-12 schools will be highlighted as the reader examines what it means to create culturally competent, caring environments for school staff, students, parents and the community alike.

Keyword: Ethic of care, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally competent care, leadership, Common Ground Framework, diversity.

Introduction

Leading in a diverse society requires practitioners to move beyond an everyday understanding of the concept of "care". Recent developments nationwide may give educational leaders pause in their implementation of best practice in culturally relevant pedagogy as they seek balance between what is shown to work and public scrutiny of their efforts in enacting change. The key to leading in this environment may be to refocus our efforts on an ethic of care. There is a deeply rooted connection between what it means to care for our students that is threaded throughout the theory of culturally responsive pedagogy. And, there is strong evidence that leaders who create a caring environment in their schools by demonstrating care for their teachers can impact classroom practice. This article promotes connecting a theoretical, culturally competent ethic of care to the practice of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy by cultivating environments conducive to teacher growth and reflection through a formative and caring leadership approach.

To better understand how to lead in an increasingly diverse society, we must first examine how schools, communities, and theory have developed over time. We can then begin to look at how school leadership can thread the needle of a divisive political landscape to better support teaching and learning in their schools.

Gen Z: The Most Diverse Generation in History

The current generation of students is the most diverse in American history. According to Parker & Igielnik (2020), 52% of Gen Zers are non-Hispanic white, 25% are Hispanic, 14% are black, 6% are Asian and 5% are some other or two or more races; it is projected that by 2026, most Gen Zers will be nonwhite. In the United States, this threshold has already been met regionally. In the west, 40% are nonwhite and in the south the figure is 46%. Nationally, the teacher workforce is far less diverse. In 2017-2018, nearly 8 in 10, (79%) of teachers identified as being non-Hispanic white (Schaeffer, 2021). In Pennsylvania the data are in starker contrast. In 2020-2021, only 6% of Pennsylvania teachers were people of color compared to 37% of its students. Additionally, 48% of Pennsylvania schools employed no teachers of color at all (Cabral et al., 2022).

Simultaneously, we are witnessing an increase in students who identify with the LGBTQ+ community. Nationally, 7.6% of adults identify as LGBTQ+ while 22.3% of Gen Z identify the same, more than double the Millennials who identify at 9.8% (Jones, 2024). As of July 2024, 18% of LGBTQ couples were raising children under the age of 18 (Wilson & Bolton, 2024).

Across the US, 15% of students receive special education services (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024c), 10.6% of students are English learners (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2024b), and 16% are living in poverty (National Center for Educational Statistics 2024a). When these data are taken into consideration, along with intersectionality between factors, it is clear the students, families and communities we serve continue to diversify at a rapid pace. Consequently, schools cannot wait until the educator workforce reflects the students and families we serve to provide all students with the education and outcomes they deserve.

For many, including myself, a diversifying society is cause for celebration. Yet we also know that traditional teacher training and professional development have done little to address the many ways in which different cultures communicate and learn (Gay, 2002, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Samuels, 2018) leading to explicit calls for both preparation and professional development to change (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2010; Harmon, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Additionally, some have recognized that identifiable efforts to embed culturally relevant pedagogy into schools often amount to unrecognizable application of its tenets such as adding a few books to the curriculum by black or Latinx authors or celebrating Kwanzaa (Dixson, 2021; Ladson-Billings 2014). These schools espouse the values of culturally relevant pedagogy yet fail to realize them in practice.

To address this reality, under chapter 49 of the Pa. Code, Pennsylvania has charged its schools and educator preparation programs to provide professional development designed to "improve professional employees knowledge of professional ethics and culturally relevant and sustaining education" 22 Pa. Code § 49.17(a)(6) through the implementation of the Cultural Awareness Competencies, part 1 of the Common Ground Framework (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024).

Political Headwinds

Politically, implementing the Common Ground Framework is not without its potential pitfalls. Nationwide there has been a push to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion from the public discourse. Alexander et al. (2024) have identified 870 anti-Critical Race Theory bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements, and other measures introduced by 249 local, state and federal government entities since September 2020. Commonly referred to as "divisive concepts laws", these measures are intended to chill the discourse in our nation's public sector surrounding efforts to make the services we provide equitable.

While Pennsylvania itself is not subject to a statewide law banning the inclusion of culturally relevant practices, 6 such bills have been introduced at the house and senate levels and 7 local school boards have approved policies that dictate how schools consider issues of diversity, equity and inclusion. The Common Ground Framework itself represents a compromise solution to settle

a lawsuit filed by the Thomas More Society on behalf of three western Pennsylvania school districts (Schultz, 2024). These examples in addition to political divisions in local communities may give school leaders pause or they may find themselves disallowed altogether to use the language of the Common Ground in their professional development plans.

While certain aspects of the language in the cultural awareness competencies may be problematic in some schools, the understanding of how different cultures learn and how to leverage this knowledge into best practices should not be in question. In developing culturally caring spaces, the intent of this article is not to supplant or subvert the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy in schools that is necessary to support our diverse youth. Rather, it is to encourage leadership to create caring environmental foundations that promote deep teacher reflection on what it means to adopt a culturally responsive pedagogy in meaningful ways to benefit all students, regardless of their backgrounds.

Review of the Literature

To better understand the links between culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally competent caring and leadership for care, relevant theory and research from all three traditions provides insight for leaders who seek to create caring environments. An underlying thread of care presents itself as a potential key to improving the academic, emotional and physical wellbeing of students and teachers alike.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Referred to by many names including culturally sensitive, centered, contextualized and responsive (Gay, 2018), culturally relevant pedagogy is a disposition toward working with diverse learners that "filters curriculum content and teaching strategies through their cultural frames of reference to make the content more personally meaningful and easier to master" (pg. 32). She states:

> A very different pedagogical paradigm is needed to improve the performance of underachieving students from various ethnic groups — one that teaches *to and through* their personal and cultural strengths, their intellectual capabilities, and their prior accomplishments. Culturally responsive pedagogy is this kind of paradigm (Gay, 2018 p. 32).

It asks us to move beyond a learner deficit paradigm and instead endeavor to achieve excellence in working with culturally diverse students by developing cultural competence, holding all students to high levels of achievement, and challenging the social order. It asks us to approach our work with the commitment that all students can achieve academic success, to build strong relationships between teacher-student, student-student, and to facilitate high quality instruction and assessment for student achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

Beyond a purely theoretical construct, culturally relevant pedagogy grew from an investigation into actual practice in the classrooms of African American students whose teachers demonstrated excellence in improving student achievement. This important distinction grounds the theory in stories of student and teacher success.

The Origins of a Theory

The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy was proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995b) based on a two-year study of 8 teachers both white and black who demonstrated profound skill in producing meaningful results with African American students. It represented a first step in connecting decades of theoretical work in improving educational outcomes for students of color with practice that was shown to work. Ladson-Billings sought out innovative and effective educators of African American students and worked backwards to identify elements of their practice and disposition that ensured the success of their students.

Instead of focusing on a deficit model and why students are incapable of learning, she sought to "problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling and society" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b pg. 483). She focused on what teachers do to improve student outcomes. Through this work she found that "a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy would necessarily propose to do three things--produce students who can achieve academically, produce students who demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings 1995b pg. 474). To achieve this, she identified three broad dispositions demonstrated during multiple observations, interviews and interactive dialogue sessions between the participants. First, the teachers recognized that all students are capable of academic success and viewed their pedagogy as the method to attain this. Second, it is the teacher's role to develop and maintain strong relationships with their students as they encourage them to learn collaboratively and be responsible for each other. Third, they understand the meaning of knowledge, how it is constructed and how to appropriately assess student learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

In subsequent writings, Ladson-Billings (1995a, 2014) noted the factors identified amount to "good teaching" when they also offer opportunities for classroom interactions that recognize and celebrate cultural differences, encourage individuals to learn about their own cultures and at least one other, and take learning beyond the classroom in identifying and solving real world problems in the community. She noted that to "examine success among the students who had been least successful was likely to reveal important principles for achieving success for *all* students" (2014, pg. 76).

Others have extended the potential effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy to include members of all races, linguistically diverse populations and the LGBTQ+ community (Byrd, 2016; Folkman & Li, 2025; Paris, 2012; Samuels, 2018). Folkman & Li (2025) note that queer students have their own cultural practices and share many characteristics with other marginalized students. For instance, they tend to share interests in music and dance expression, they favor collectivism over individualism, and they strive for social acceptance and societal change. Additionally, using culturally relevant pedagogy that attends to the culture of LGBTQ+ students may connect them to the larger queer culture, something they may not have access to in their home environments, creating schools that represent safe places for them to be themselves. Gay (2013) notes that "focusing on gender, sexual orientation, social class and or linguistic diversity" (p. 52) are all potential applications of culturally relevant pedagogy. She emphasizes that educators should "make their commitments explicit and how they exemplify the general principles and values of teaching to and through cultural diversity" (p. 52).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Practice

Although the theory of culturally relevant pedagogy is a somewhat recent development, Harmon (2012) notes that after the civil war, "early African American schools were using culturally responsive teaching, a multicultural curriculum, differentiation, and critical thinking, among other instructional practices that are culturally congruent for African American students" (pg. 19). She notes of these schools, "documents and records indicate that attendance was high, and students moved quickly and successfully through the curriculum" (pg. 19). After these elements were stripped away in the south, African American teachers who moved north continued to incorporate its tenets by enhancing curriculum with multicultural elements, stories, and developing relationships with students, families, the community and the church. This underscores the premise that when educational practice is developed in a culturally congruent way, students will achieve success.

In regard to modern schooling, although they will remain anomalies until policy systems change it has been noted that when schools engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, they find success in reducing the achievement gap (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Researchers have also found that implementing pedagogy that considers student interest and choice, and promotes understanding their own cultures and that of others can improve academic achievement and overall student engagement (Anyichie et al., 2023; Byrd, 2016; Tanase, 2020).

Among effective culturally relevant practices for all students, Tanase (2020) identified cooperative learning, collaborative problem solving, constructivist principles, group work and small group discussions when they are tied to the promotion of societal change. Byrd (2016) found that in addition to improving student learning outcomes, "encouraging students' understanding of their own culture and raising awareness about racism and discrimination is related to students' ethnic-racial identity development" (p. 7). Byrd recommends teachers "get to know students, including their cultural backgrounds, and personalize instruction…teach about cultural diversity even when the class is not diverse"….and "encourage appreciation for diversity but acknowledge current inequities" (p. 7). She concludes that "culturally relevant teaching remains an important method for promoting achievement for students of all races" (p. 7).

To better understand how teachers implement culturally relevant pedagogy effectively, it is necessary to investigate their dispositions as they support the needs of their students in every way possible. The ethic of care has been closely tied to culturally relevant pedagogy throughout its development.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Care

Culturally responsive pedagogy is deeply rooted in and inseparable from an ethic of care (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ware, 2006). When asked if they care about their students, universally leaders and teachers respond in the affirmative. Theorists have posited there is a difference between caring *about* and caring *for* our students which can impact academic and social outcomes (Gay, 2018; Noddings,1984; Rabin & Smith, 2013). Understanding the difference between these two positions is important in addressing how leadership encourages environments conducive to culturally relevant practices. As many of its elements can be traced to a disposition

of caring *for* our students (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b; Thompson, 1998). It is this very attitude that naturally leads many effective teachers to high levels of achievement in culturally diverse settings. To leverage the interplay of care and cultural relevancy, it is crucial that we understand these connections as well as how care itself can be practiced in culturally competent ways.

The Ethic of Care

Since its inception in the foundational works of Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984), interest in understanding what it means to care for others and how it supports the education of our children has grown. Recognized as a feminine ideal of the relation of caring between one and another, the ethic of care can be described as the act of nurturing the other much as a mother would a child. Recognizing flaws in the Kohlbergian stages of moral development in its exclusion of the feminine voice, the ethic of care focuses on community and the needs of the other instead of a paternalistic focus on the moral actions of the individual. It depends on knowing and understanding what the cared for needs, and in providing this, the carer is rewarded by the cared for response.

Noddings (1984, 2013) argued that we can care about an idea or someone we do not know, but we can only care for those with whom we have a reciprocal relationship. In this sense, we may care about the academic success of our students but when we care for our students first, and provide them everything they need to be emotionally and physically well, we have entered a caring relationship that will lead them to academic success.

Caring is a relational ethic in which the carer listens to and responds to the needs of the cared for, puts their own needs on pause in providing the support needed, and stays in the relationship for as long as it takes. Quoting the philosopher Martin Buber (1970), Noddings writes "One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity" (as cited in Noddings, 2012 p. 53). In this view, the relationship is completed when the cared for responds. A child might stop crying when the mother provides a hug, or a student might give a high five when a benchmark is achieved (Noddings, 2012). In adult relationships, the roles of carer and cared for can be reversed, but in a teacher-student or parent-child relationship, only the adult can act in the caring role.

Beck (1992) identifies promoting human development and responding to human needs as the two goals that define a caring ethic. To do this requires three activities, "(1) receiving the other's perspective, (2) responding to the awareness that comes with this reception, and (3) remaining in the caring relationship for an appropriate amount of time" (p. 462). Noddings (1984, 2012) distinguishes between natural caring and ethical caring. Natural caring occurs in the mother child relationship and is exhibited in teachers who love their students unconditionally. Ethical caring is a volitional act born of a sense of duty to do whatever is needed in response to the needs of the cared for. This distinction makes clear that teachers seeking to act in culturally responsive ways are often naturally inclined to do so (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). It also makes clear that like other ethical positions, the teacher can make a rational choice to care for their students in ways that are culturally responsive to student need (Thompson, 1998). The latter may take some work, but many have noted that a caring ethic is one that can and should be practiced by men and women alike throughout the educational enterprise (Brunner, 1998; Louis, et al., 2016; Noddings, 2006, 2012; Shelby, 2003).

Culturally Competent Care

If we are to establish an argument that cultivating communities of care can develop the foundation of culturally relevant pedagogy in our schools, we must address what it means to care in different cultural contexts. Thompson (1998) argues that even though care ethicists espouse a commitment to diversity, traditional care ethics generally function with a white middle class perspective of what it means to care. In this way, the traditional perspective can be colorblind in its attempts to treat all students equally, as if there are no cultural differences to account for in a caring relationship. She notes, "what passes for polite race discourse in education, therefore, is usually either racial obliviousness or the bestowal of honorary whiteness on all students" (p. 524). Additionally, there are structural deficiencies in the ethic of care as it tends to be practiced that lead us to "ahistoricism, cultural bias, and obliviousness to systemic power relationships" (p. 527). These criticisms do not imply that using an ethic of care is detrimental to culturally relevant pedagogy, but they do inform us in reorienting care so that it accounts for race, class, gender, cultural and other differences. As we reframe our work around an ethic of care with this knowledge, it offers us the opportunity to engage in culturally relevant practices that address colorblindness. To do this work we must understand what it means to care within the context of the communities we serve.

For example, Thompson (1998) notes that in a white middle class understanding of care, nurturing draws the carer toward establishing safe places at home, where a respite to innocence shelters the cared for in a troubled world. Conversely, from a black perspective, care looks like connecting the cared for to the broader community, through the church, the practice of "other mothering" and empowering the cared for to maintain their dignity in an inherently racist world where their strength lies in collective work toward justice. Imposing the former perspective on culturally diverse students forces the cared for to abandon their cultural roots in favor of a white middle class understanding of which they may not be culturally fluent.

This last point illustrates the importance of developing a deep understanding of other cultures if we propose to develop ethically caring relationships in diverse classrooms (Thompson, 1998). When teachers are ill-prepared in how cultures communicate, the cared for's response can easily be misinterpreted by the carer as disrespect, unruliness, or lack of interest in the academic process (Rabin & Smith, 2013). This can lead to assumptions about entire diverse communities, parents of diverse children, academic abilities and interest, and best practices in diverse classrooms. The inadequately prepared teacher in this case often reverts to curriculum designed to control instead of educate and increases discipline referrals for diverse students who may not be fluent in the white, euro-centric expectations of our school systems (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

The Intersection of Care and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gay (2018) expands on the difference between caring *about* and caring *for*, and notes that while the two are interconnected, to care *about* is to focus on the well-being and academic success of diverse students while to care *for* these students requires us to do something to positively affect their outcomes. The teacher must take on the role of "warm demander" (Ware, 2006) and do everything in her power to ensure that students are successful by delivering high quality instruction and holding them to a high standard of achievement academically and behaviorally through care and support. Gay (2018) writes, "teachers demonstrate caring for children as students and as

people" and they show "concern for their psycho-emotional well-being and academic success, personal morality, and social actions, obligations and celebrations, communality and individuality, and unique cultural connections and universal human bonds" (p. 59). Teachers honor their humanity.

Ladson-Billings (1995b) found that rather than being merely about affective connection to their students (although they did seem to care in this way), the teachers in her study viewed care as a deep "commitment to what scholarship and/or pedagogy can mean in the lives of people" (p. 474). They demonstrated care through concern for "the implications their work had on their students' lives, the welfare of the community, and unjust social arrangements" (p. 474). To achieve this, she found that the participants "maintain fluid student-teacher relationships; demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students; develop a community of learners; encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another" (p. 480).

Thompson (1998) argues that an anti-racist curriculum is critical in developing caring relationships between teacher-student, student-student, and teacher-teacher but this is not enough. She proposes five dimensions of practice that will advance a culturally relevant practice through the ethic of care: (1) teachers must respect students by getting to know their situations, (2) they must help students develop strategies for survival, (3) classrooms must be places where diverse students are treated with respect, (4) both teachers and students need to be versed in a variety of cultures, and (5) teachers and students must embrace inquiry to explore and consider the views of others.

Gay (2002) suggests building community in diverse settings is key to culturally relevant teaching as it reflects the "cultural environments where the welfare of the group takes precedence over the individual and where individuals are taught to pool their resources to solve problems" (p. 110). In a study of black women educators, Green (2023) found that participants made it a point to develop an understanding of their students and their families. These women "discussed how they loved and cared for their children in their classrooms as strongly as they did because they felt personally connected to them through shared culture" (p. 946). She proposes that educational administration should provide the space for teachers to participate in activities that allow them to reflect on anti-bias and anti-racist ideas rooted in an ethic of care to build communities of practice that uplift diverse children.

Recognizing that most of the teaching workforce does not share a culture that is reflective of their students but does possess the capacity and ability to apply a culturally competent ethic of care and culturally relevant pedagogy as outlined above, I turn now to developing caring school environments conducive to administrative and teacher growth and improved practice.

Leading with Care

Noddings (1984) believes that when we enter caring, mature relationships, either party can act as the carer or the cared for, and that reciprocity or mutuality are inherent in the relationship. Further she suggests that educators have an obligation to help our students develop the capacity to care for others (Noddings, 2005). This is done in part through modeling what it means to care for others and in so doing, we show students what it means to be in caring relationships with each other; caring begets caring and leads to organizational growth at all levels. This last idea has powerful

implications in our schools as we examine how leadership encourages safe, caring environments where teachers have the capacity, knowledge and skills to care for their students and each other in culturally relevant ways that attend to their unique cultural experiences.

When examining our practice in education, it is not uncommon to look to similar fields to glean evidence of effective strategies for administration and leadership. Many educational leaders reading this piece can point to a bookshelf of volumes taken directly from the organizational and business traditions. In this piece I chose to look to nursing for the same purpose. As a field dedicated to caring at its core, there is much to learn from the field of nursing which faces many of the same trends that have focused educational leadership on productivity, managing scarce resources, and working with limited human capital, often at the expense of our core mission: to care for children. Unlike the field of education however, there is a strong tradition in nursing of examining how leadership can impact the patient by caring for their nurses There are useful lessons in this body of theory and research that can be applied to our work in schools by caring similarly for teachers and students.

A Leadership (re)Focus on Care

Concurrent with the emerging theories of care in the United States, a tradition of caring science developed by Katie Eriksson (1953-2019) emerged in the Nordic region specific to the field of nursing (Näsman, 2020). According to Eriksson (1983), "caring is inherently human. Caring for another human being is an act of love and mercy, *caritas. Caritas* is an active power, making nursing care efficacious" (as cited in Näsman, 2020, p. 2). Similar to the ethic of care, the theory of caritative caring was "formed around the following fundamental concepts: human beings as the entity body, soul, and spirit; and suffering; as well as caring as a communion where human beings' dignity comprises the fundamental worth" (Eriksson, 2007, p. 201).

Contrary to our common understanding, Bondas (2003) explains that administration is etymologically rooted in the Latin concept *administrare* from *ad* (to) and *ministrare* (minister), or to tend to the needs of someone; in this way the role of the administrator is to serve the patient first. Addressing the state of nursing administration, she notes "The focus has instead been on short-term problem-solving as a result of organizational and economic trends, such as measurable quality, financing, and productivity" (p. 249). She proposed a theory of caritative leadership inclusive of five theses: the human as vulnerable and moral, administration is directed toward an organizational culture of care, employees have the potential to minister to patients, leaders tend to both objective and subjective measures in planning for change, and the administrative functions of the organization are developed around the motive of *caritas*. Similarly, Foss et al. (2018) found that leadership in nursing is often focused on finance, administrative functions and the structures of practice. Through a combination of teaching and group conversations, participants in this study increased their caring values and reframed the fundamental traits of leadership toward love, care, and responsibility for others including patients and fellow staff members. Foss et al. effectively demonstrated a place for Bondas' (2003) theory in nursing practice. Inherent in this view is the subjective experience of the patient as a focus with administrative functions operating in service to the same.

As a nursing educator, Yvonne Näsman (2018) observed the overlap between the disciplines of nursing and educational leadership. Bridging this gap, she sought to examine how caring school leaders can focus on the ethical growth of school personnel toward a focus on caring for the student. While Eriksson (2002) notes, "Caring has a specific meaning context of its own—a caring relationship that arises in an unselfish relation with another and from a genuine desire to alleviate suffering" (p. 63), Näsman (2018) suggests that students and teachers may be suffering as well from ineffective teaching strategies or poor educational surroundings. Regarding caring educational leadership, she notes:

> It focuses on the protagonist of education, that is, the students, and on how the leader may support the staff to be able to educate and aid the students in the best way. It is shown by encouraging a culture of love, trust and forgiveness (p. 525).

She suggests that the value of this perspective lies in its ability to make school personnel and students alike feel seen and acknowledged as human beings deserving of love, dignity and respect. Further, the educational leader has the power to make the values of the organization explicit and to align them in accordance with the needs of the teachers and students with whom they work. This last point aligns well with Gay (2013) who notes that educators should explicitly identify how their values uphold teaching to and through cultural diversity.

Caring for Teachers

Recognizing that educators enter the field with a love of subject matter and a sense of duty to teach, Noddings (2006) argues that caring school leaders should protect the intrinsic interests of teachers and empower them to care for their students. Like caritative leadership which advocates for the patient first, when teachers are empowered to do everything necessary to improve the lives and learning of their students, the objective measures will improve. She argues that educational leaders should also be teachers who:

> make it comfortable and rewarding for teachers to seek help instead of trying to hide their weaknesses, doubts and failures. They can serve as models of critical thinking by showing that they continually question even the methods and procedures that they themselves have officially advocated (p. 344).

Leaders invite teachers to experiment and participate in efforts to improve educational practice. But to accomplish this, a level of trust and safety to fail must be evident in the school culture, both are hallmarks of a caring school environment.

In applying an ethic of care to educational leadership, Beck (1992) identifies three challenges that school administrators are called to address: improving academic performance, battling social problems, and rethinking organizational structures. While perhaps not all inclusive thirty years later, these challenges are salient issues facing schools today. When moderated through an ethic of care, each of these areas can be addressed in ways that attend to the individual needs of students in culturally responsive ways.

For example, Beck notes that when care becomes the standard by which we address academic performance, teachers are encouraged to address the specific needs of the student first. And, with the cyclical nature of performance indicators and evolving academic standards, an ethic of care is

more stable. It can withstand the fickleness of changing administrations or political influence. When social problems are viewed through care, leaders focus on the health of their schools and communities. Human need becomes a priority, and leaders protect the organization from quick fix solutions that may distract from the goals of care. Finally, in rethinking organizational structure, care's "emphasis on cooperation and supportive interactions is central to the concept of facilitation" (p. 485). Beck argues that an ethic of care should guide us in meeting these three challenges by valuing the worth of each person and promoting personal and community well-being.

In her research, Brunner (1998) expands on facilitative leadership by identifying the ethic of care in the work of highly successful and well-regarded women superintendents. She found that through a feminine use of power, these leaders developed organizational power structures that can be viewed as *power with/to* instead of the more common *power over* model. In her view, the power with/to structure is facilitative of group problem solving, and professional growth. In her participants she identified "two equally important focuses: (a) relationships in general and (b) the well-being, both academically and generally, of the children in their districts" (p. 164). She concludes that the "feminine use of power supported the ethic of care practiced by the women superintendents as they worked to ease the rampant pain in the lives of children and adults in their districts" (p. 171). In alignment with Nasman (2018), here we see that an environment of care brings focus to the protagonist of education, the student, by empowering adults in the school to facilitate their well-being be any means necessary.

Connecting Caring Leadership to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

In their exploratory analysis of caring school leadership and its connection with student learning, Louis et al. (2016) identified several strong connections between caring school environments and their capacity to enact culturally responsive pedagogy. Noting that research most often focuses on relationships between teacher-student, they sought to establish that a caring learning environment should be expressed at all levels in the school, principal, teacher and student alike. To accomplish this, it is necessary to establish that caring relationships can transcend a dyadic or small group dynamic and take root throughout the organization.

They found that caring is important in schools and contributes to both effective school cultures and student achievement. Principals who care can create environments of personal safety that lessen the risks associated with changing classroom practice and instructional methods for a diverse student body. They support the development of schools that focus on equity and redistribution of resources to those most in need. Finally, they note that as individuals interact in dyads and small groups, caring at levels throughout the school may translate into organizationally caring cultures.

Discussion

Implementing a culturally responsive pedagogy in schools framed through the ethic of care is an inherently moral act that has the potential to improve the experiences of each child in our care. Recognizing the potential political pushback that leadership may experience, this process will take moral courage and recognition of the relational violations that occur in the everyday practices of our system of schooling as it is currently arranged (Simola, 2013). To accomplish this, Simola

recommends the use of care in morally courageous ways through a three step process that identifies threats to collective vitality, encourages the morally courageous use of voice, and promotes the enactment of moral courage throughout the organization. Specifically, she identifies three uses of care to develop moral courage: facilitate relational development through play, develop caring judgment through storytelling (ie. speakers, book studies, film), and develop caring habits throughout the organization by naming, norming and networking (Simola, 2013).

For example, a school might name as a caring habit to "care for each student, employee and community member in culturally relevant ways that honor their individual and unique cultural identities." To norm this habit will require that leadership honors this commitment in their actions and encourages the same from all members of the school community. And in networking, the leader engages teachers, students, parents and community members in conversation about enacting the habit, how it is accomplished throughout the levels of the organization, and encourages principled dissent when policy or practice are identified to be contradictory to the caring habit identified. Aligned with best practice in culturally relevant pedagogy, these examples represent a first step in developing organizational care.

Reynolds (2006) argued that leaders should better orient managers to the moral principles of the organization and that doing so makes these frameworks more readily accessible for even seemingly inconsequential violations of norms. In this way, the ethic of care can become part of the culture as each member of the school organization develops around the shared principles of culturally responsive pedagogy. To do so requires the organization to identify moral principles and develop them as specific goals.

To embed a culturally responsive pedagogy in our schools will take more than just a caring ethic. We will need to engage our communities in the types of discussions around race, bias, and best practices that make us "doers" of culturally responsive pedagogy in more than name only (Dixson, 2021). Creating caring environments in schools lays the foundation for these discussions to occur. When teachers are safe to reflect candidly on their own biases without fear, implement culturally responsive strategies without retribution for failure, and speak up when norms are violated, we will see the value in this position. Clearly this requires leadership to reflect on the meaning of care, the purpose of the enterprise and how our goals can be achieved by focusing on faculty, staff and students as human beings first.

Recommendations

To support the connections made between the traditions of culturally relevant pedagogy, the ethic of care and leading with care presented in this article, the following recommendations are presented for practicing school leaders.

Develop Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in Practice

Leaders and teachers alike should be well versed in the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and how it can be leveraged toward student achievement through the development of relationships that insist on a standard of high performance (Gay, 2018). Expanding the traditional definition of

diversity to include all marginalized groups in schools should be a priority to establish safe and supportive learning environments for all cultures (Byrd, 2016; Folkman and Li, 2025; Gay, 2013).

Focus on Care

Leaders should seek to understand what it means to care for students, faculty and the educational community in culturally relevant ways that honor their experiences and encourage personal and professional growth (Beck, 1992; Thompson, 1998). Establishing an environment where caring begets caring can change the culture of a school to refocus its members on the importance of caring for each other (Noddings, 2005).

Reflect on Leadership Values and Practice

Leaders should evaluate whether the focus of their schools is on test scores and achievement, or people first (Bondas, 2003). Developing leadership that values the student first with all other elements in service to the same can refocus our efforts on supporting the development of students as academically, emotionally and physically well human beings who are prepared to succeed (Nasman, 2018).

Lead with Care

Develop and nurture environments that are conducive to the promotion of care for students, teachers, parents and the community as partners in the successful growth of our youth. Establishing a sense of safety for faculty through care that is conducive to experimenting with new ideas without fear of retribution encourages the transition to teaching that supports the multicultural identity of our schools (Louis et al., 2016). Adopting a relational ethic of caring for our school communities can enhance our work in this regard (Beck, 1992; Gay, 2018; Noddings, 1984).

Summary

Throughout this article I have sought to establish how leaders can develop culturally competent, caring environments to form the foundation for implementing culturally relevant pedagogy. It is the leader who has the power to create spaces where teachers are encouraged to take the risks necessary to care for each child according to their individual needs and learning styles.

Establishing environments of care alone will not be enough. As leaders we must have the moral courage to recognize the inequities that are evident in the ways schools are currently structured, believe in the societal changes necessary to rectify these inequities, and advocate for appropriate solutions. The work starts in our own schools if we create the space for professional development that leads us to being "doers" of culturally responsive pedagogy by encouraging personal reflection and professional growth to recognize and guard against teaching that is antithetical to this end (Dixson, 2021).

Important to this work is investing in our own professional development by learning as much as possible about the cultures present in our schools and how best to support each one. We must reflect on our own implicit and explicit biases as well as those of our organizations and the field

itself. This work will not be easy and undoubtedly will face criticism from both inside and outside of the organization. But, by focusing on care and the duty to act in morally defensible ways, we can craft the types of environments that our diverse students and communities want and deserve.

About the Author

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