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Critical Race Theory and Caring as Channels for Transcending Borders between an African American Professor and Her Latina/o Students

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ABSTRACT: This reflective essay uncovers ways in which critical race theory and caring are key to crossing racial, cultural, and linguistic borders between professors and their students. Many scholars have noted how critical reflection relates to effective teaching, especially when taking into account student learning. Reflecting upon archival data and participant observation, the author describes, through various stories, how she uses critical race theory and caring to connect with her students in spite of their differences. The author also provides examples of how her students reciprocate her care in extravagant ways.

KEYWORDS: reflective essay, Latina/o students, race, culture, critical race theory

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Critically caring about students with an understanding of critical race theory is essential in our multicultural world. All educators are called to have high expectations, teach about the dominant society, and provide the skills to overcome discriminatory practices. Critically caring is particularly important for the educators who are outside of their students' racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. When I demonstrate authentic care for my Latina/o teacher education students, I find that they express motivation to rise to my high expectations and become excellent educators. This reciprocal relationship, in which I initiate care and the students respond in kind, is truly a beautiful process. This notion of care is sometimes lost in the emphasis on strategies, but without critical care and the ensuing reciprocity, the profound impact on the professor and students is lost. It is important for all to understand the power that critical caring has in transforming not only the lives of their students, but their own lives as well.

As a graduate of an Historically Black University (HBCU), I found comfort in having professors who demonstrated care and concern in not only teaching the necessary content, but in teaching social skills to help us, as African American

students, navigate through life successfully in spite of any discriminatory practices we might encounter. Because of this caring practice, I have indeed achieved many academic milestones and want students at my Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) to experience the same success.

African American professors are an anomaly in the U.S. educational scene, however. In 2013, only 6% of full-time faculty members in degree-granting universities were African American, while 79% were White (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). This is problematic for many reasons, including that students miss exposure to the rich experiences of these professors and relationships that may assist them in overcoming areas of marginalization in their own lives. Students also miss witnessing the achievements and contributions of African American scholars. For these reasons and more, it is important to support African American professors in their pursuit of scholarly and teaching excellence at their perspective institutions.

Even though literature documents the experiences of African American professors at majority institutions, there is a dearth of information about their experiences at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Such accounts would answer questions such as “What happens when African American professors teach at HSIs?” and “Do African American professors thrive at HSIs due to some of the shared civil rights struggles of Latinas/os?”

As an African American professor, one of my goals is to make a positive impact on my students by giving them the same tools my HBCU professors gave me. Indeed, I not only teach the content, but I encourage excellence and determination, so my students may also overcome discriminatory practices. More than that, I want my students to be excellent models for their own pupils, impacting their lives positively.

However, I have found that as an African American female professor at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), my race and gender often serve as an initial cause of suspicion on the part of my students and even some colleagues. I cannot blame my students and these colleagues because we still live in a racist and biased world. As an African American female who experiences racism, I have also been suspicious of others' motives. Because an administrator and students had questioned my reasons for wanting to come to a HSI during my campus visit for my position, I decided to address this issue for the first day of classes in fall 2014. In that first semester, the students made no comments but seemed receptive.

Later, when I shared with my faculty mentor that I had made this speech, she laughed. Her laughter indicated that she thought it was unnecessary to defend my presence. Surprisingly, however, when I did not give that speech the following spring 2015 semester, one of my Latina students asked why I chose to be at our institution. In answering her question, I explained my research interests and how they related to the geographical area. I also mentioned my personal interest of wanting to grow personally and professionally by placing myself in a totally different environment so that I could learn, in situ, the cultural norms and ways of being for Latinas/os. After my elaborate explanation, the students told me that they thought

my rationale was “deep” and that they did not think some of their professors relate their mission and vision as to why they are at our university in a meaningful way.

As a result of these conversations and interactions with my students, I decided to use critical reflection as a way to chronicle my teaching and learning experiences during my first year at this Hispanic-Serving Institution. In her work on teacher reflection, Jaeger (2013) stated that there is nearly universal agreement that reflective teachers are generally effective teachers. However, she adds that it is also important to also consider student learning. In fact, after studying the work of other scholars on the topic, Jaeger stated, “What a teacher thinks about is at least as important as participation in the act of reflection itself, and the tendency of researchers to separate reflection from student learning is problematic” (p. 98). In this paper, I critically reflect upon my practice and how it impacts student learning.

My University Context and Research Question

My university is located in Texas, and the border fence between the United States and Mexico is only a few yards from where I park my car at the university. This institution is a distributed university, meaning that we have campuses in different cities. The geographical region is mostly Latina/o with high poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The city where I teach has approximately 183,000 inhabitants and is one of the poorest cities in the United States. The percentage of persons living below the poverty level is 35.3%, compared to 17.6% in Texas as a whole and 15.4% in the nation. Latinas/os make up 93.2% of the city’s population. From 2010-2014, 86% of the residents age 5 and above spoke a language other than English at home.

Despite socioeconomic obstacles, residents of this city and region are rich in cultural traditions, personal relationships, and perseverance. For example, students and community members often share their value of close family relationships and interactions around oral stories. In fact, students often nod and share their own accounts of families sharing stories when we read the article, “My Mother Never Read to Me” (Cline & Necochea, 2003). Furthermore, the students’ perseverance is evident in their care for families. Several students support their families, and their devotion to them is a driving force in their desire to receive an education. An area newspaper named our locality as one of the safest cities in the nation, which may be associated with the caring and familial affections residents have for one another, whether related or not. In fact, one Latina attributed the feelings of welcome and warmth I recounted to Latinas/os adopting some strangers they feel affinity for into their very own families.

Regarding institutional and higher education contexts, my university offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees and had about 28,584 students as of fall 2015 and 1,039 full-time faculty for that same time period. In fall 2015, 23,934 of our students received federal financial aid; non-U.S. residents are not eligible to receive this type of financial aid. Eight hundred and twenty of our students had

international student designations and, of this number, 562 were from Mexico. My university is designated as an HIS. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) defines HIS as an higher education institution that at least 25% of full-time-equivalent undergraduate students are Hispanic. In fall 2015, 88.8% of our students were Latinas/os. Although 0.7% of the students were African American, there were very few African American faculty members. In fact, I have been the only African American faculty member in my university's College of Education. At the time of this publication, one African American female lecturer has become part of our college. I have taught approximately 450 students since fall 2014 (including my current classes). Of these, only 15 have been White; none have been African American. To my knowledge, I have taught no students of other ethnicities or races.

With this institutional backdrop, I raise my research question for this reflective essay: How does an African American female HSI professor use critical race theory (CRT) and the ethic of caring to transcend borders with her Latina/o students?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed this reflective essay is made up of critical race theory (CRT) and the ethic of caring. Critical race theory informs this work in that it examines the relationship between race and power. CRT centers on effects of racism, while also addressing the hegemonic system of White supremacy (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). Ladson-Billings (1998) adds that a critical race analysis in education would focus on "curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation as exemplars of the relationship that can exist between CRT and education" (p. 18). This reflective essay examines how using care in curriculum and instruction helps to eradicate racial barriers and provides liberatory power to the students as well as the educator. Students feel safe to express themselves in a caring atmosphere, and, when they sense that the care is genuine, they reciprocate this caring, thereby offering liberatory power to the teacher.

Conversely, educators have to be careful not to perpetuate the hidden curriculum (Freire & Ramos, 1970), the curriculum that maintains the values and beliefs of the hegemonic system. It is possible to perpetuate this system by having low expectations of marginalized students and avoiding teaching them the norms of the dominant society, claiming that they have a rich culture and do not need to know about the oppressive one (Rojas & Liou, 2017). It is important that students have teachers with high expectations, who teach them about inequities and share how to participate in social action. Indeed, it is important that marginalized students have exposure to the same rigorous curriculum as the dominant society. It is unjust not to expose students of color to the dominant, hegemonic system because the educator might be worried that students will feel badly. Educators should see their students as capable of maintaining their own cultural norms while also understanding those of the dominant culture. Such knowledge enables students to

advance economically and possibly unravel these unjust socioeconomic conditions. It is through this social action that students of color are empowered to do something about racism and other forms of discrimination.

Another tenet of CRT is counter-storytelling (Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Parker & Lynn, 2002), 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). Even teachers who claim to be social justice advocates may approach their work by having “pity” for students (Rojas & Liou, 2017) instead of truly caring for them. Their pity contributes to a deficit, subtractive model of teaching (Valenzuela, 1999). Instead of using the word *sympathy* to mean pity, W.E.B. Du Bois uses this term to describe empathetic teaching that entails action in response to that empathy, as well as taking time to know the students’ ecologies and cultures. My counter-narrative is meant to join those scholars who argue for caring in action (Rojas & Liou, 2017). I value the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) of my students and also teach them the knowledge and skills they need to have an “armed love” (Freire, 1998), a kind of love that further equips my students to advocate and have high expectations for their own future pupils.

An important concept that relates to CRT is culture. Nieto and Bode (2008) assert that culture is an amalgamation of gender, language, ethnicity (country of origin), and race—a category constructed based on social concepts as well as a host of other factors (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). It is important to consider all aspects of culture at all times, but especially when immersed in a completely different cultural environment, as I am on a daily basis. Institutions also have their own culture. For example, close relationships between faculty and students are part of my institution’s culture. It is important to broaden our notion of culture to prevent stereotypes and create mutual respect, understanding, and a safe and caring educational atmosphere.

All in all, CRT and caring are inextricably tied. In order to effectively advocate and act on behalf of marginalized groups, one must also care about the people one is serving. A saying often attributed to Teddy Roosevelt is, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” People sense when you care about them, and oftentimes, they reciprocate that care, as explained in the next section.

Caring and CRT are tightly linked. Noddings (2003) explains:

Caring involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference into the other’s. When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. Our reasons for acting, then, have to do both with the other’s wants and desires and with the objective elements of his problematic situation. (p. 24)

Noddings (2003) adds that an important difference between the ethic of caring and other ethics is that its foundation is on the relationship between the “one-caring” and the “cared-for.” In this relationship of caring, she emphasizes the necessity of reciprocity for maintaining the relationship or connection.

Having high expectations is also part of caring and critical race theory. Several scholars have written on caring and its connection to social justice (Bartolomé, 2008; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Rojas & Liou, 2017; Valenzuela, 1999). These authors emphasize the importance of “linking love to equality” (Gomez, 2004 as cited in Bartolomé, 2008, p. 1) by providing a rigorous academic curriculum and pedagogy and having “high expectations to promote students’ histories, self-respect, and preparation for a more just future” (Rojas & Liou, 2017, p. 28). They oppose those educators who say they love or care about their students, yet do not teach their students the dominant discourse because they claim that these students have their own culture and do not need the dominant culture imposed upon them (Bartolomé, 2008). This concern is reminiscent of Delpit’s (1995) dismay with educators neglecting to explicitly teach grammar rules. Such rules prepare students to engage and speak back to the dominant discourse. Of course, explicit instruction alone is not beneficial for all students of color. Having high expectations and teaching the dominant discourse in order to arm students with what they need to combat injustice is part of the “warm demanders” or professors’ responsibilities to their students (Bondy et al., 2013). Bartolomé (2008) and Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) sum up the argument stating that caring is insufficient unless students are respected and taught the skills they need to survive racism and oppression. In fact, to do otherwise is actually “a form of racism and naturalize(s) their [people of color’s] intellectual promise as subordinate to White students’ academic superiority” (Rojas & Liou, 2017, p. 28).

The relationship between critical race theory and caring should be strongly considered, especially when working with students of color. In purposefully thinking through both theories, I was better able to reflect on and understand my experiences.

Method

What follows is a critical reflection (Jaegar, 2013) of my own teaching over three and a half academic years, in which I use CRT and caring as my conceptual frameworks. Jaegar states that there is almost universal agreement that reflection is critical to effective practice, but adds that this assertion means nothing if it is not connected to student learning. The reflections herein continue to inform my pedagogy as I strive to improve my teaching and understanding of the students with whom I work. All reflections are based on 12 undergraduate and four graduate education classes, which I taught from fall 2014 to fall 2017. All of the classes were focused on print and/or digital literacies. Overall, I have taught approximately 450 students, primarily Latina/o.

The first data source was archival data, which include institutionally administered course evaluations and university statistics from my university's public information officer, from whom I requested an open-records account. Next, I gathered my written reflections of student-professor interactions and students' comments in class assignments.

A discussion of methods would be incomplete without an explanation of the one-caring participant: Me. I am from Soul City, North Carolina, a federally funded (start-up) community founded in the 1970s under the leadership of Civil Rights Leader, Floyd McKissick. Part of the original intent of Soul City was to provide socioeconomic opportunities for all races, but especially people of color who were migrating to urban areas. The city was designed to include housing, a health facility, businesses, recreation, and other services. Lawsuits and investigations caused Soul City to enter foreclosure in 1979 even though Soul City Company was eventually cleared. Unfortunately, the efforts to help this majority African American city flourish floundered, and it is now primarily a residential neighborhood. Nevertheless, I grew up relatively comfortable with other diverse African Americans because I lived in a community and attended school with those of my same race.

Later, I received my undergraduate degree from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (A&T), a Historically Black University (HBCU). At that institution, I met several well-accomplished young African American students, many of whom, like me, were North Carolina Teaching Fellows. The program, at the time, provided a \$20,000 scholarship, which covered my total educational costs; the only stipulation was a requirement to teach for four years in the state of North Carolina. My classmates and I had ambitious goals but struggled with our "different world" of moving from adolescence to adulthood. Encouraged by an A&T professor to go to an Ivy League graduate school, I later attended Teachers College, Columbia University, and earned my Master of Arts degree in English Education. After receiving my master's degree, I taught English language arts for 9th – 11th graders (primarily 10th grade) for six years in North Carolina, followed by two years as Clinical Faculty back at A&T. My work at A&T reignited my desire for a Ph.D., so I left and attended Michigan State University, where I earned my Ph.D. in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education with a specialization in Language and Literacy Education. After that time, I began my current work at the Hispanic-Serving Institution in Texas.

Transcending Boundaries

One thing that is important in planting oneself in a different geographical, cultural, and linguistic context is learning to transcend boundaries. I had to place myself as a learner, as well as a professor, in order to establish positive professor-student relationships and develop challenging, yet engaging pedagogical practices. What follows is my journey from joining the faculty at this

HSI to implementing strategies to help me transcend boundaries and develop positive relationships with my students.

Establishing Professor-Student Relationships

I landed at my HSI somewhat incidentally. I cared about the issues and concerns of Latinos/as and African Americans, in particular, but I was unsure of which institution I would best fit to work with one of these populations. I applied at two HSIs and other institutions (an HBCU as well as primarily White institutions). I received offers at both HSIs in the same state, and I took that to mean that I was definitely supposed to be in this context. I was impressed with both institutions, but I was especially impressed with my current HSI because of the faculty and students I met on my campus visit. The faculty members were kind and gracious; they, in fact, were caring, which attracted me here. Having a great work environment with great colleagues and students was important to me. I was nervous about proving that I cared about the students and that I was not here merely for a paycheck, but I was determined to learn about the region and to show that my care was genuine.

Finding my place as a non-Latina professor at an HSI was challenging, but not formidable. As previously stated, over the course of a year, I discovered that genuinely caring and showing an interest in my students transcended cultural and linguistic boundaries. One thing I do at the beginning of every semester is to give time for introductions with students. I also place name tents on their desks using horizontally-folded index cards for them to write their names. First, I call the attendance, asking them to be patient with me as I learn to pronounce their names as a non-Spanish speaker. However, I often surprise them because I ask staff to help me pronounce the first names of my students prior to the first day of class. Then I ask students to introduce themselves. As they do so, I pay attention to how they pronounce their names, and I also have a visual, in the form of their name tents, to help me with learning and remembering their names. I ask the students to keep their name tents on their desks for about 3 weeks, and at the end of that time, I remove this scaffold and go to each person recalling their names. I have done similar activities in all the classes I have taught in my teaching career.

I am sharing this strategy because I am astounded at the number of comments each semester by students who state that I am one of the few professors who called them by name. This is rather odd because our institutional culture promotes rapport between professors and students. One Latina student in the fall 2015 semester expressed amazement about it on three separate occasions. She stated that she gets excited when I say her name; another time, she asked how I go about remembering their names. Their reactions to my strategy, which takes little time but means so much, surprises me. As educators, we all have different ways of knowing our students. To be clear, I do not make myself out to be some savior of my Latina/o students, as I often have felt some Hollywood movies have made White teachers appear for lower socioeconomic

African American students. However, I must say that, as a graduate of an HBCU, I was really taken aback by my HSI students' accounts of many professors who did not know their names because, at an institution where the minorities of U.S. society are banded together as a majority, I expected professors to make a vested effort in getting to know their students. That was my experience at an HBCU, and it is also one of the reasons that my time there was so valuable to me. In the near future, I would like to survey and have conversations with my colleagues to learn more about their efforts to get to know students.

Developing High Expectations

Another way I create a positive classroom atmosphere is by requiring students to see me in my office for 10-minute appointments for a retrospective miscue analysis, a pedagogical practice in which teacher candidates ask permission and then audio-record their tutee or student partner (from their service-learning semester project), reading aloud and recalling a short story. During the reading, teacher candidates note any mistakes or areas to work on. The teacher candidates I work with are instructed not to make any marks or comments (e.g., correcting the tutee) while the student partner reads. The reading should also be a little challenging to reveal the areas of need of the student partner, but it should not be at the frustration level of reading. After the student partner reads the passage, the teacher candidate asks the student partner to retell the story and, if they struggle, the candidate asks comprehension questions to jog the student partner's memory. This retelling component helps this assignment take on a more skills, or even a more holistic approach to learning.

There are three reading models that teachers usually subscribe to in their teaching, whether consciously or unconsciously. They are the subskills model (mainly phonics and explicit instruction), the skills model (vocabulary or sometimes a mixture of subskills and holistic models), and the holistic model (using implicit instruction but authentic learning and materials). In the holistic model (Goodman, 2005), the focus is on comprehension and authentic learning. Even if I personally disagree with some of the models, I teach my students about each of them and give assessments for them to complete with their tutee from each model. That way, they can make their own conclusions and be knowledgeable about the various ways they can teach. I also tell my students that no one model is 100% effective, and encourage them to balance their instruction to meet the needs of individual students when they get their own classrooms. I expect students to be able to understand and implement this method well, so to meet these high expectations, I require them to meet with me one-on-one to share their rough drafts.

During class and the one-on-one meetings, I emphasize my high expectations for excellent work, especially since I set aside additional time to review these drafts. After our one-to-one meetings, I notice greater attention to detail and clarity in their final assessments. The students also value the care I demonstrate in wanting them to submit their best work. In fact, one student shared

that having this one-on-one time meant a lot to him, and he felt more connected not only to me, but to the institution. He commented on the rarity of the event in his college career, as well as the benefits of doing better on an assignment and getting to know the professor. In general, I conduct one-to-one conferences in several classes to give students individualized feedback as I see the need. I find it to be a great practice in making sure students understand new concepts and rise to higher expectations. It also helps me make personal connections with my students.

Nontraditional, Fun Pedagogical Practices

In addition to the especially high expectations I have for the final copy of the aforementioned assignment, I also use nontraditional, fun, and engaging strategies to connect with students and help them understand content. I do not believe that learning has to be dull and boring. I fit some activities to suit the personalities of my classes. For example, one class was especially fun-loving, and I had a powerful connection with them that developed over the course of the semester. Consequently, toward the end of the fall 2016 semester, I decided to use Saphier and Haley's (1993) idea of rapping as a summarizing activity.

At the time, I was a bit naïve about my students' exposure to rap music. Since this particular university campus is about one block from the US-Mexico border, I did not want to assume that they were familiar with rap, so I asked how many of them were familiar with the TV song opener for "Fresh Prince of Bel Air." Many of them raised their hands. I then told them that I would rap the song, and they could join me if they liked. Well, I started the rap, and many of them rapped with me raising their hands with expression as we arrived at certain spots of the song. At one point, I noticed one girl laughing hysterically, and then I laughed to the point where I couldn't finish the song. It was a great moment.

As a precursor to students' writing and performing the rap, I grouped them and had them choose one of three chapters to summarize. They would soon, after we discussed these important summary points, use the agreed-upon ideas in their raps. In my de-identified course evaluations, some students commented on the question about their most memorable experience:

All of our group projects, but in particular, the rap. That is definitely something I will remember forever [Student 1].

During one class, she asked us to write a rap, but before that, she started singing her own rap. One of the classmates was recording her, and after a while, Dr. Koonce noticed her so she started laughing. Everyone started laughing, and it was a great moment [Student 2].

The most memorable experience would be the way she handled class. She makes learning fun [Student 3].

More students commented on the rap and other activities. As indicated by their statements, they had fun while also summarizing course material through

group work and then transforming that work into a rap. I was excited about that activity and their responses as well. It gives me great joy to see students have fun while learning. However, I must say that I would not do that kind of assignment with all of my students. I knew this class deeply, so I intuited that they would enjoy it.

Compassion and Reciprocity

One other way I have found to be helpful in connecting with students is to have compassion when they have tragedy and sickness. I was humbled in my students' caring for me when I lost my father and had major sickness in the same spring 2015 semester. Although I thought I had compassion, that experience gave me a greater level of empathy and caring for my students. That does not mean that I do not hold them accountable for work or that I accept any explanation for not submitting work without verification, but it does mean I have learned, as one student said on my course evaluations, that "life happens" and that I need to work with the students in their times of crisis. This need for caring for students in crisis can be applied to any institution, but it is especially needed in this region where familial connections are so highly valued. As stated earlier, some of our students support their families, and it is a driving force for their desire of a quality education, so when my students have verifiable emergencies, I help them in the best way I can. For example, some students, who cross or whose families cross the US-Mexican border, have been subject to crime. At least two students have provided evidence, one of them to the university, of crime in Mexico impacting them and/or their families. I have given additional time for submitting assignments during these times of distress. On a lighter note, I have also welcomed my students to bring their children to our classes if they do not have childcare. I go to these children and welcome them to put them and their parent at ease so that they know it is okay for them to be there. These are necessary efforts of care and empathy that faculty members at our institution employ, efforts that result in the reciprocity we appreciate from our students (Noddings, 2003).

Reciprocal and caring student-professor relationships, in which students act as teachers and professors become learners, are important in developing mutual understandings and creating an atmosphere of respect so that each party is learning. I have noticed my students acting as teachers in class conversations and in their papers. For example, one student explicitly wrote "We as Mexicans" in her paper to explain an important Mexican cultural tradition. This stance demonstrates that this student wanted to teach me about her Mexican culture. She assumed I did not know much about the Mexican culture, and from her and other students' similar writing and comments, I notice that they want to ensure I do not have stereotypes about it. They are my teachers, and I appreciate how they attempt to teach me. In fact, I consider it an act of caring. They reciprocate the caring I exert in preparing lessons, interacting, and grading by teaching me their cultural norms.

Another example of how my students exhibit care takes place at our course celebrations at the end of every semester. They have brought Mexican dishes, such as *gorditas*, a Mexican flatbread stuffed with meat, cheese, and other fillings, to teach me about their favorite foods. One of my students who had me as a professor twice picked up different types of *gorditas* for me to taste, demonstrating the care she had for me as her professor. My students exhibit the reciprocity that Noddings (2003) states is key in maintaining the connection between the one-caring and the cared-for. When we both gave of ourselves, we wanted to reciprocate our caring even more.

Recently, as an example of extravagant reciprocity, one of my classes planned and implemented a surprise birthday celebration for me. All of my students (past and present) are amazing, but this class truly "took the cake" literally and figuratively. I spent the majority of my special day doing what I love (teaching) with those I care for (my students). I told them about a week or so prior to my birthday that I was going to bring in mini-cupcakes so that they could help me celebrate. I told them to please not feel any pressure to do or buy anything for me. My only request was that they sing the birthday song in English and Spanish (or only Spanish).

Well, they totally surprised me! One after another, they brought in gifts and food. It took a while for me to understand that they had made elaborate plans. They gave me a class gift (a small balloon and Mexican candies), a birthday card in Spanish with special messages from each student, a huge strawberry cake that we shared as a class, Mexican sweet breads (*conches/molletes*, *marranitos*, *tempanadas*, and *biscocho*), Mexican cookies, chips, American cookies, sodas, ice, and other gifts. One lively student brought a *metraca* (a device that twirls and makes a loud sound) to celebrate the occasion. To commemorate the day, we also took a class photo.

I spent some time sitting with some of the students, and they asked me how I liked the city. I told them that I loved this place...that I'd found my sweet place, which a lot of people spend years trying to find. One student was a little surprised and said that many residents say this city is "trashy." I told her that that image might be what some of the residents think, but that I think they are diamonds. And...they are. I have found the great majority of this city's students and residents to be extremely kind and giving. Their hearts are huge, matching my own in many ways.

Consequently, I once wrote a poem called "Apasionada Professor," (Passionate Professor) about my passion and care for these students. It reads:

"Apasionada Professor"

*Apasionada, Passion
What drives you?
Passion drives me.*

*My students, the diamonds and precious treasures, entrusted to me
Bring me a well of joy.*

It almost seems unreal that this part of my career provides so much happiness.

Debates, kahoot, think-pair-shares, project-based learning, essays, raps (yes raps) and more,

And don't forget the explicit instruction, too.

I give them my best and keep learning from my colleagues, so I can grow and give even more.

It's been 3 years, and now I know what happens when I initiate genuine care for them, their education, and their well-being.

Reciprocity happens.

Am I selfish then?

I know the cared-fors reciprocate to the one-caring, and the ensuing passion drives me.

IT'S ON.

Passion begins and grows

Until it is so overwhelming

That I can't breathe or hold back the tears at the end.

They have become more than my students, but my teachers, and my extended family.

A home away from home.

First perceived as an outsider, yes.

But I get that.

They give me a chance to show I care, and

It turns into something beautiful.

Apasionada, Passion

What drives you?

The [university named] cared-fors drive me.

In this poem I describe that, when I initiate care, students respond in kind. However, I am no longer so sure that I'm the one who initiates the care; no matter who starts it, however, the process is truly beautiful. One student told me later that they would not have planned my celebration through the text-messaging system, *Whatsapp*, if they did not care about me. I told her that I knew that, and I cared deeply for them as well.

Wink (2005) discusses the concept that the need to connect caring to critical theory is more important than ever as demographics shift. It is definitely how I have adjusted to my demographic shift and have been able to transcend boundaries. In spite of the initial suspicion I faced in my first year at our institution, the acts of caring and critically reflecting upon my pedagogy have been instrumental in enacting and writing this counter-narrative. Wink (2005) states that "love trumps methods" (p. 167), but I say that "love trumps boundaries."

Conclusion

Having high expectations for all students and believing the best about them help them recognize their own greatness. These beliefs are also foundational to critical race theory and caring. Both theories are essential to meeting the needs of our majority Latina/o student body as we support them in their educational quests and help them find their wings. In 2016 Salazar spoke at the College of Education event, stating that students of color “don’t need to be fixed, changed, or saved. Help them find their wings. Help them soar.” Rather than seeing students from a deficit perspective because of their race, they should be recognized as treasures in and of themselves.

This reflective essay is significant because it sheds light on how professors can transcend racial, cultural, and linguistic borders and impact their students through purposeful acts of caring involving high expectations and empathy. Several of my colleagues do the same, if not more, in terms of caring for students, but according to my pupils, it is not pervasive throughout our university. Conversations on developing deliberate, appropriate, and critical caring relationships with our students are an important foundation for any university, but especially our institution, whose mission is to be bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate. To emphasize, I am no savior, just a teacher and learner. My pedagogical experiences and reflections have helped me better teach and support my students’ learning processes and educational goals.

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