

SP21: Radical Care: Teaching & Leading for Justice in Schools
Class Facilitation Topic: Womanist & Black Feminist Notions of Care
Group Members: T and Syd
Highlights and Takeaways

Reading: Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002)

In Beauboeuf-Lafontant's article entitled "A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers", Womanism often used synonymously with Black Feminism, explicitly addresses the intersections of "racism, sexism and classism" as it impacts Black Women, how it shapes their perspective and experiences and recognizes these experiences as "normative, not as a derivation or variation of black male or white female behavior (Collins, 1991 as cited in Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72) The article continues by highlighting key tenets of womanism and how these connect to the idea that Black women in educator roles have historically exhibited high levels of care.

The Embrace of the Maternal

The idea of "embracing the maternal" rests in looking at, treating and caring for the students/children in your classroom as if they were your own children. Marva Collins, one of the Black educators highlighted in the articles noted the importance of not separating what is good enough for our own children versus what is good for other children. She states "If the school was going to be good enough for other children, it had to be good enough for my own." (Collins and Tamarkin, 1990/1982 as cited in Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002 p. 73). T noted that "This piece instantly brought me back to my Charter school days where a common observation and topic of conversation was that while many of the founders and executive leaders of the school network hailed it as the best of the best, most of their children went to private schools. I found this to be quite common as I connected with."

While we completely agree with the practice of loving and caring for our students as if they were our own children and would hope that this level of care was brought into all of our educational spaces, we did struggle a bit with what felt like a deficit-based, "savior-esque" tone from some of the commentary about children and their families by some of the highlighted educators. My feelings were echoed by Lisa Delpit when she stated that "the teachers, the psychologists, the school administrators . . . look at "other people's children" and see damaged and dangerous caricatures of the vulnerable and impressionable beings before them. (Delpit, 1995 as cited in Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 74). We also wonder to what extent this perspective assumes that adopting philosophies and practices that people use with their own children in the classroom is healthy and positive. What about toxic "mothering" practices that make their way into the classroom? It also left us wondering if the blurring of the line between classroom teacher and mother is connected to the unrealistic expectations, burden of selflessness and burnout of Black woman educators. What is the boundary needed to create spaces of care for both child and educator? As people that have been both the beneficiary and participant in "othermothering" both in my personal and professional life, this idea of communal responsibility and care really stood out and feels like an important part to preventing the type of singular responsibility that causes burnout.

Reading: Bass (2012)

This question of what it means and looks like to “operationalize care” in schools raised a few questions for us. What are policies that center care and promote “institutional care”? What do these look, feel and sound like? What are the dangers of this kind of language or approach? How do we keep centering care from becoming another form of rubric or checklist? Can we make it systemic without traditional forms of evaluation? What about when an act of care is not black or white? Bass (2015) uplifts several steps that schools should take towards institutionalized care that respond to some of these questions while raising others. There were a few that we wanted to uplift.

- Recommendation 1: Commit to employing caring teachers, faculty, and staff.
 - How is “caring teacher” defined? If care is not a universal concept, how do we equip school leaders and hiring staff to engage with this way of hiring? Who decides what care looks like? How could this be demonstrated in a hiring process?
- Recommendation 2: Commit to continuous, purposeful professional development focused on understanding the backgrounds of the students they serve.
 - How do we ensure that such PD experiences aren’t full of bias, deficit-based language, and superficial level understanding that causes more harm than good? How do we keep this “understanding” from turning into a savior complex?
 - What is the intersection between “understanding” and “care”? Does understanding automatically equate to more empathy and care? Can this be fostered through PD?

Reading: Witherspoon & Arnold (2010)

This work looks at and analyzes/explores how spirituality and womanism influences/inspires the caring aspect of educational leadership. They note that, “Womanist theory makes salient the values of Black people, particularly Black women, and provides a lucid illustration of education and leadership born out of protest and social justice.” (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010, p. 221) Some highlights of this discussion included:

- The historic/present role of Black women in the Black Church -- “mothering” activities such as providing food, clothing, childcare, Biblical instruction (Sunday school) and promoting education & community involvement. Opportunities for leadership were present in the Black Church for Black women and served as sort of a training ground for their career development.
- **Comparison of Pastors & Principals:** Both are “givers of care who actively attempt to change the world in which their parishioners [/students] live, which makes them both personal mediators but caregivers to the larger masses, directly and indirectly.”
- “...*care* as basis for ethical decision making and moral development” (220)
- “...*education* as a means for transforming society and promoting democratic principles...” (220)
- *Intersectionality* allows us to study the individual and the group simultaneously, w/o losing focus on one or the other; it sustains a **both/and** dynamic.
- “While policy is usually interpreted as corporatist, rational, and modernist. . . Obediently implementing policy was not what these women believed to be most important to effective leadership.” (225)

Reading: Wilson (2015)

Some key highlights from this articles included:

- “*Transformative educational leadership* is a political process that requires educators to understand that schools should be sites of resistance where they work to redress inequities” (5)
- “. . .*critical care* entails one’s empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and calculated risk-taking. . . “ (6)
- COMPASSION & EMPATHY are **vital**
- Without the trust of the community & parents, transformative leadership is quite difficult
- Operating from critical care/ transformative leadership requires understanding that education is **more than a job**; passion and devotion for the students, parents, and community are essential.