Teacher Care Webs: Meeting Needs when Students Present Sustained Challenges

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# Introduction

I began this study wanting to understand what it takes to sustain the professional responsibility of teaching even during the most difficult circumstances. Though teachers may not be commonly identified as care workers in popular media, teachers care for students every day – in varying ways, to varying degrees, and with varying success – and often under conditions that thwart their attempts. Public schooling in the United States originated as a mandate for moral and civic (feminine) nurturing of the populace, and while the emphasis on the “soft” side of education surges and recedes with the changing of the zeitgeist, the heritage of the original vision that cast teachers as professional nurturers is increasingly visible in current mainstream discourses on inclusivity; safety and mental health; “soft” or “non-cognitive” skills, like grit or compassion; cultural responsivity; socio-emotional learning; and trauma-sensitive approaches.

Yet perhaps since the Cold War, teachers’ care work has often been subsumed in their pedagogical responsibilities, and is under-valued by comparison (consider the hierarchies of assessment, from the classroom to international rankings, that exist to gauge academic progress and the absence of any parallel metrics for care-related or “soft” skills). Furthermore, the US education system as a whole, being enmeshed in the same historically-rooted complexities related to race, gender, and ability as the rest of the country, struggles with ambivalence and varied experiences of education as either, or both, the practice of freedom as well as of domination (hooks, 1994). For some or many students, being in school as a member of any minoritized group (people of color, people with neurodivergencies or disabilities) changes their experience, from one that emphasizes being in school to learn, to one that suggests it is just as if not more important that they prove their capacity, worth, and/or equality to the majority/mainstream student (hooks, 1994). Teachers consciously and unconsciously mitigate the experiences of minoritized students in the classroom through their various forms of care and caring relationships.

At the same time, stress, burnout, and high turnover characterize the profession in public schools, especially within Special Education (Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014). The stress, burnout, and turnover problems are compounded by the public tendency, sometimes backed by education research findings, to blame teachers (or “teacher quality”) for the problems students face in schools: problematic curricula and disappointing academic outcomes, disproportionate disciplining of minoritized students, the school-to-prison pipeline, or the achievement gap between genders, races, and Special and General education students, as a few examples. As a result, teacher self-care, wellness, well-being, mental health and more recently “mindfulness” have been explored as interventions or solutions for teachers in education research, but these have limited adoption and varying success -- perhaps because they are simplified, secularized and transplanted into the West from the East, or perhaps because they are offered as a panacea for the complex range of issues US teachers uniquely encounter as care workers, creatives, intellectuals, and pedagogues working within institutionalized racism, sexism, and ableism. Self-care without self-awareness – or awareness of the underlying needs self-care meets – is a generic solution to an unspecific problem, and therefore likely to have limited efficacy and benefit.

## Purpose

For this study, my two guiding purposes were to avoid the common yet artificial bifurcation of teacher and student, and to explore the care dynamic that connects self and other in classroom situations through specific attention to awareness of needs. Awareness of needs involves the capacity to identify one’s own needs and to ideate or recall strategies for meeting those needs, and even then the additional ability to evaluate both the immediacy or importance of the need and the feasibility or practicality of the strategy for meeting it. As Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943) and the associated critiques and criticisms of the model illuminate, needs are subjective and universal, physical and immaterial (i.e., emotional, mental, spiritual).

Yet for the teachers I am interested in, awareness of needs is not so simple. Numerous models conceptualize teaching and teachers as having responsibility for meeting the needs of their students, their school-based associates and administrators, their students’ families and care givers, and themselves. For example, the Teaching Brain model (Rodriguez, 2013) highlights the meta-cognitive awareness employed by master teachers who think not only about how they are thinking in a classroom and how their students are thinking, but also consider how they are thinking about their students’ thinking. Thus examining teachers’ self-care while also attending to conceptions of student-care creates an complete understanding of a relationship that is an inter-dependent circuit; and care operationalized as awareness and meeting of needs reveals the vital human function of caring and care work, rather than obscuring the primary role of nurturing in the formation of functional individuals and communities -- as is the pattern of white supremacist settler colonial patriarchy. Because white supremacy and ableism are inextricably linked in capitalist societies, caring for students who are minoritized (females, individuals of color, low performers) and/or labeled as ‘unable’ (students with special needs or oppositional behaviors) is politically radical and radically challenging work. Therefore, I also chose to focus on the care dyad that exists in the midst of an inclusive classroom between the teacher and the student they deem “most challenging.”

[SITUATIONS ARE CHALLENGING, not necessarily just a student. The key idea here is that the more we know about our integral needs for security, growth, and transcendence, the more we can care for them in healthy ways, despite the difficulties that we systematically encountaer working under dehumanizing paradigms in education. The more we can care for our own needs in healthy ways, the more we can reclaim our selfhood, our subjectivity, and our agency, all of which support our self-actualization. The more I can be a full person, a human, not an oppressor, the more I can collaborate equitably, be in solidarity with, Others. The more I see Others as foreign, problematically different, distant, unlike, unequal to my self, the more I will be likely to oppress them, objectify them. Consciously moving towards self-actualization is key to rsirupting dysfunctional systems, but for many people (Kaufmann and Maslow’s idea of self-actualizers tied to the collective) it’s not a purely individual, purely internal activity that happens in a vacuum; it involves broader social concern, and collaborative, equitable engagement in collectives. That’s why something like care webs is a really important complement, because they radically reposition educators as givers and receivers of community-sanctioned care.

Care webs are…

## Research Questions

Within the overarching purposes guiding this research, the immediate, specific purpose of this study was to explore how public school inclusion teachers in the United States describe identifying and caring for the basic needs of both themselves and their most challenging student(s).

My research questions were:

1. Student-Oriented Set
2. In what ways do teachers describe students’ basic needs?
3. In what ways do teachers describe meeting students’ basic needs?
4. Teacher-Oriented Set
5. In what ways do teachers describe their own basic professional needs?
6. In what ways do teachers describe meeting their own basic needs?
7. What relationships might exist between these two sets of questions?

## Theoretical Framework

### Interpretive Epistemological Orientation

I believe that I am operating within three interpretivist frameworks to understand the research process and data collected in this study. I think I qualify as subscribing to a symbolic-interactionism framework for my overarching purposes because I am interested in how teachers describe their most challenging student relationships, the meanings teachers assign to the phrase ‘basic needs,’ and the representations teachers make of their care for others and to themselves. However, I may be actually doing more of a phenomenological study in that I am exploring the phenomenon of relational care, specifically with respect to the most challenging relations of care in classrooms. I am interested in the recounting of the lived experiences of my participants, and in how the observer (the teacher) and the observed (the student) connect. However, I am not sure that I subscribe to what is apparently the North American type of phenomenology that insists upon a “fixed essence” that transcends the varying experiences and recollections of the participants (Battacharya, 2017, p. 64). At the same time, constructivist grounded theory is the most intuitive for me in trying to understand and make insights out of the interview data I collected.

If these epistemological orientations explain how I know (or am attempting to know) what I know, the following theoretical frameworks are what have guided my interests, research questions, data collection, and preliminary analysis.

### Care Theory

To say that teachers care is a vague and misleading statement; teachers may not care all the time or for all students, or they may care chiefly about pushing their students towards values or goals using means that are cruel or problematic (Noddings, 2005). While Carol Gilligan’s groundbreaking (and sexist) feminist thought on moral development (Gilligan, 1982) may be foundational to ethics of care, philosopher Nel Noddings introduced the idea of relational care in education (1984) as a specific occurrence whereby the teacher aims to establish a caring, trustworthy dynamic with a student, and the claim to a caring relation hinges not only on the teacher’s perspective but also on the students’ view of the teacher’s care. In the relational sense of care, the care-giver (the teacher) is primarily characterized by an energetic sort of receptivity towards the one cared-for (the student). The teacher may not agree with or react to satisfy (or discourage) the students’ needs and wants, but will “take into account the feelings and desires that are actually there [in the student] and respond as positively as [the teachers’] values and capacities allow” (Noddings, 2005). At the other end of the dyad, the student recognizes and in some way responds to the caring stance of the teacher “in some detectable manner” (Noddings, 2005).

Care theory builds on Dewey’s conception of “personal capacities” as “adaptations” to “environing forces” (Dewey, 1930, p. 16, as cited in Noddings, 2005) and posits a “moral interdependence” that explains the actions and orientations between students and teachers in a classroom, and also between the environmental factors that affect how each partner in the teacher/learner relationship behaves in the world. The relational view of caring in education thus aligns and even extends student-centered pedagogies like constructivism, Universal Design for Learning, critical pedagogy, and practices like differentiation or Response to Intervention because it recognizes complex personhood (Gordon, 2008) at both ends of the teacher/learner dyad and requires that the teacher be responsible for caring about the interplay of individual needs in relation.

Care theory is also is congruent with Freire’s emphasis on dialogue (1972), which is emphasized by Noddings as a hallmark of the care foundational to competence in teaching. Freire tied dialogue to love, and proclaimed it the method by which praxis transforms the world; similarly, Noddings ties it to the teachers’ motivation to increase their competence in order to better serve individual students (Noddings, 1999). At the same time, it recognizes that the teacher has, in this relational view, a responsibility to care with “integrity,” meaning that establishing and maintaining the caring relation is the priority in all things the teacher does with and introduces to the student, and that a well-intentioned teacher who becomes overly dedicated to what they believe the student needs actually interferes with the students’ development and selfhood, and thereby loses the relational priority of their care work and thus the integrity on their side of the relation of care.

### Emotional Labor in Public Inclusion Classrooms

Noddings also ultimately emphasized the “incidental learning” that occurs when caring, competent teachers enrich their teaching by “freely giving” stories and experiences and insights to students that come with “no strings attached,” with no expectations that they will “learn” these ‘gifts’ and perform their learning in any sort of test (Noddings, 2005). The “exchange value” of how and what teachers share with students can also be understood through the paradigm of “emotional labor,” which “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality” (Hochschild, 2012). Though the original work on emotional labor came out of studying how flight attendants were molded by corporate expectations, it is relevant in particular to a discussion of how teachers manage situations and dynamics that repeatedly challenge their emotional composure. In clear congruence with Noddings’ conception of relational care, Hochschild draws on the example of the social worker’s emotional labor, “whose look of solicitous concern makes the client feel cared for” (2012). Hochschild also recognizes the “special relevance” of emotional labor to women, because it is historically “one of the offerings they trade for economic support,” and teaching has been a female-dominated profession in the United States since the inception of public schooling. Finally, questions of exploitation of emotional labor arise based on the “distribution of many kinds of profits – money, authority, status, honor, *well-being*” [emphasis added] (Hochschild, 2012) – and education research as well as journalism have long documented discrepancies between how teaching is recognized in these respects as compared to other pursuits and industries in the society, as well as the general disillusionment expressed by teachers in each of these regards.

Of significance to this study is the idea that because emotional labor regularly requires “transmutation” -- that the private act of having feelings or emotions be regulated according to the guidelines imposed by “large organizations, social engineering, and the profit motive” (Hochschild, 2012) --- the cost of emotion work can affect “*the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel…In short, when the transmutation works, the worker risks losing the signal function of feeling*” (Hochschild, 2012). Teachers who survive the burnout drop-off that occurs by or around year five for most newbies in the profession and who are able to sustain work through challenging relationships with students may become adept at transmutation. Yet, if their profession requires Noddings’ relation of care characterized by integrity and careful attention to the limits of self-serving care that actually interferes with the selfhood of students, the signaling function of emotions is important for teachers to maintain. The social science of emotion is complex, but regardless of whether one adheres to a more organismic model (William James, Sigmund Freud) or an interactional model (Dewey, C. Wright Mills), the emotions convey needs. Being able to pick up on these needs in ourselves and others is an integral part of the metacognitive work of teaching so that others learn.

Teaching, like medical treatment, is a unique action in the sense that we cannot teach in isolation. The task of teaching cannot be achieved autonomously or individually but hinges on another person – the student, the learner (Ryle, 1952). The essential relation between teaching and learning illuminates that when a learner is not learning, a teacher is not completely teaching. Similarly, when a teacher is not learning, the teacher is not teaching, because if they do not adjust their actions in order to achieve learning, the success of their work is limited. Therefore I suggest that if a teacher is not able to learn from the signals of their own emotions during the course of a challenging dynamic with a student that requires their sustained effort, their ability to help that student learn – and metacognitively understand the signals from that students’ emotional system – will be limited.

Emotional labor becomes more and more invisible in a society that is increasingly service-industry oriented but values quantification and charting as both metrics of progress and the rationale for actions; or in what can be called a “broken care system” (Hochschild, 2012). As the gap between the rich and poor grows in society, the poor experience a loss of service or quality service while the rich experience a growth in services that cater to their unique class-based needs. Special education is a good example of the broken care system in education, because it is over-representative of minoritized students of lower SES. Many of these students are pushed out of the public charter schools that cater to middle-class families through enriched curricula and specialized missions (e.g., arts-based, STEM) and into under-funded public schools where the special education system is notoriously failing to produce equitable achievement amongst its students as compared to the general education students. Or these students may be adopted by public charter schools that use rigid, data-driven, militaristic systems to bolster student achievement for those who can persist through this unique brand of care. In addition, as the public school system becomes increasingly privatized, it is interesting to consider how the organizations managing teachers socially engineer the emotional aspects of their jobs and thus exert control over a historically essential aspect of teacher labor.

### Technologies of the Self

At the end of his life Foucault, after having studied how the self is objectified through “the dividing practices of scientific inquiry,” became interested in “how a human being turns himself or herself into a subject” (Foucault, Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988, p. 3), which became termed “Technologies of the Self.” Foucault termed anything a “technology of the self” if it allowed an individual to act on themselves by themselves or with others in order to transform themselves into a particular sort of subject (McWilliam & Taylor, 1996). A teacher who, through the ethic of care or the care work system, sustains a relationship despite its challenges and attempts thus to improve their competency in various domains (behavior management, emotional resilience, engaging lesson design), is working to exert their influence and thus increase their subjectivity in an education system that demands, through standardization and accountability initiatives, the teacher be both subject and object at alternating points.

Another related technology elaborated by Foucault are “technologies of power,” which “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination” (Foucault, 1988, p. 19) and turn the subject into an object – but is not the same as state control. These two technologies together produce “governmentality,” which is of interest in this study because governmentality does not suggest that government or power flow from a specific point in society, but rather it is “a diversity of elements out of which particular rationalities are made possible” (McWilliam, 1996, p. 14). The relationship between a teacher and the student they identify as consistently “challenging” can become frought with bureaucratic power if the teacher attributes the students’ behaviors to causes outside of the teachers’ influence and/or control and moves to refer the student to special education or additional intervention systems.

As evidence, he traced the history of Western education to its two original principles in Greek antiquity: ‘care of self’ and ‘knowledge of self.’ Care of self, understood as a preoccupation with ones’ soul or deep self-examination, was originally a precursor to knowledge of self (Foucault, 1988). The Platonic pedagogical model, which emphasized the individual’s responsibility for care of self and the tutor’s (Socrates’) responsibility for leading out the soul of the pupil (Foucault, 1988). With the advent of writing the inherited technique of disclosing of the self, a sort of self-examination that supported self-renunciation as a method of spiritually understanding ones’ soul and place in the universe, was replaced in the 18th century with a medical model that used the same techniques of self-disclosure not to renounce the self but to positively constitute a new self (Foucault, 1988). At this point, knowledge of self became both a changed and favored maxim that influenced Western education and pedagogies. Combined with the understanding that the English “education” derives from educere (to lead or draw out) and educare (to train or mold) (Craft, 1984), we see that there is an inherited mandate in education for teachers to do both for their students but also for themselves. Thus self-care can be understood not as a trendy, commercialized fad panacea, but as a professional, personal, ethical responsibility to self and other.

Foucault pointed out that the care for individual life is becoming the duty of the state, despite the state’s history of employing destructive mechanisms that objectify individuals – this resonates with ethic of care boundary around imposing your will upon another person (interfering) under the guise of care. The idea of “technologies of the self” guides an analysis of any “activity of ruling” or authority, of which public school teachers certainly qualify as the leaders of those their classrooms, and asks the analyzer to pay attention to the ways in which teachers “shape, normalize, and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions, and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable…the humble and mundane mechanisms which appear to make it possible to govern (Miller and Rose, 1990, p. 8, as cited in McWilliam, 1996, p. 15). Thus by asking teachers to identify both their own needs and the needs of their most challenging students, as well as how these are met, we can also explore the ways in which oppressive objectivizing occurs in classrooms for both the most challenging and thus vulnerable students, as well as for teachers as cogs in a larger machine, and we can also find the liberatory practices that are employed to establish or bolster the subjectivity and autonomy of both parties in the teacher-student dyad.

Finally, it is of interest to note that Foucault ultimately identified himself not as “a writer, a philosopher, a great figure of intellectual life: I am a teacher” (Martin, 1988, p. 8). Foucault said that “the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning,” (Martin, 1988, p. 9) and this is indeed how many master teachers view their evolution in the profession.

### Disability Justice and Radical Love

The term “care webs” comes from Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and the chapters in her book *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (2018). The term refers to the social network of myriad forms of care offered for and by people with disabilities as they mobilize to meet their needs in the absence of reliable, sustained, quality care in the public sphere. This book, written “in the matrix of many sick and siabled femme of color care webs,” is a manifesto of “disability justice,” a term, concept, movement, and set of actions and intentions invented by Black, Indigenous, and people of color who are also neurodivergent and/or disabled. In the field of special education, discussions of ableism are curiously rare or absent. Disability justice is a relevant conversation to be having in this field and in any discussion of social deviance (which “challenging behaviors” in the classroom are) because it centers disability and sickness, examines how colonialism created these, and illuminates how “ableism helps make racism, christian supremacy, sexism, and queer and transphobia possible, and that all those systems of oppression are locked up tight” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, no page number). Further, echoing Foucault, it demands that solutions to such oppression come not solely or even primarily from the state but that they rest instead on a “vision of liberation that understands the state was built on racist, colonialist ableism and will not save us, because it was created to kill us” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, no page number). Special education in public schools, as an apparatus of the state, and teachers in inclusive classrooms as extensions of the state, must be vigilant and aware of the ableism that pervades our perspectives on deviant behavior in the classroom. The antidote is inclusive, radical love; a “shift in our ideas of access and care…from an individual chore, and unfortunate cost of having an unfortunate body, to a collective responsibility that’s maybe even deeply joyful” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018, no page number).

### Maslow’s Hierachy of Needs

Maslow proposed that people’s needs motivate human behavior. He posited that needs can be reduced to five basic sequential and universal categories (1943). Beginning with physiological needs that ensure survival, next is the basic human need for safety, followed by the need for love/belonging, subsequently for esteem, and only then the we attain self-actualization, our ultimate need.

Much of the discourse about self-care or wellness or even just teaching tends to disembody teachers. By this I mean that the physiological reality of hormone-induced stress response, the unconscious corporeal communication of emotion that occurs constantly between humans, and the concrete environment that drives the sensory perception systems of teachers that act in symbiosis with their cognitive processes are all usually omitted from the context as talk of “evidence based practices” and even meditation or mindfulness are foregrounded in education research and public commentary instead.

While Maslow’s hierarchy of needs remains strictly theoretical, and one with excellent and valid critiques that highlight the ethnocentric and overly-simplistic layered pyramidal model, the primacy of physical needs seems a key but under-considered component of the conceptual mess that is “teacher wellness.” It matters because while our culture doesn’t always recognize it, physical needs are the basis for emotional and cognitive needs. If we are good at identifying and caring for our own needs, we may indeed be “well” enough to care for others in ways that are grounded in our humanity first and foremost.

### Socio-Emotional Learning or Competency

Teaching is social by nature (Lortie, 1975) and therefore embodied. Embodied socialized activity (i.e., the things we physically do in the environment) is driven by individual and interconnected physiological reactions and/or responses, which are tightly liked to our emotional and cognitive processing (DO I NEED TO CITE THIS?!?!). As affective neuroscience demonstrates, emotions are “not only profoundly intertwined with thought” (Immordino Yang & Damasio, 2007, p. 4) but also underlie the personal, internal thinking and decision making that support our social interactions (Immordino-Yang, 2011). Thus, there is a close relationship between embodied experiences in the physical environment, emotions, thoughts, and related/resulting social interactions that are a hallmark of schooling.

Meta-cognition, or thinking about one’s own thoughts as well as emotions, is a critical aspect in teaching (Rodriguez, 2013a; Rodriguez & Solis, 2013; Rodriguez, 2013b). According to Rodriguez, master teachers think not only about their students’ emotions and thoughts, their own emotions and thoughts, and then also how they think and feel about their students’ emotions and thoughts (Rodriguez & Solis, 2013). One concept to describe this intense type of higher-order thinking is Emotional Intelligence. Salovey & Mayer formally described emotional intelligence (EI) in 1990. Goleman’s 1995 publication of *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*popularized EI and began a second, alternative conception of the construct. EI is traditionally defined as “the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189 as cited in Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011). The widely-employed skill-based Mayer-Salovey model of EI consists of four separate “branches” that can be assessed in terms of standardized emotional quotients: perception of emotion; use of emotion to facilitate thought; understanding of emotion; and management of emotion (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004). To illustrate the demonstrated interdependency between emotion and cognition and its implications in the classroom, the solid content area expertise and cognitive skills requisite of quality teachers (Goldhaber, 2009) and purportedly measured by academic assessments have been positively associated with higher EI scores (Brackett et. al., 2011).

Take the example of Socio-Emotional Competency, or SEC, to witness the disembodied way in which we talk about teacher competencies related to emotion and higher-order cognition, and treat teachers as “empty vessels,” a view of students as passive “blank slates” that has been essentially debunked with the ascendancy of constructivism. Because EI is believed to inform how we learn social and emotional skills (Lopes, Brackett, Nezlek, Schütz, Sellin, & Salovey, 2004), it is closely related to the broader construct of social-emotional competency (SEC) (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Though there is a dearth of empirical research on teacher SEC and its relationship to teacher quality (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), some research has described how SEC might attune a teacher to a wider range of signals from students. Diverse classrooms call for advanced social sensitivity in the form of a teacher’s ability “to detect others’ emotion states, adopt others’ perspectives, enhance communication, and regulate behavior” (Brackett et al., 2011, p. 96).

## International Precedent/Comparative Treatments of Teacher Needs/Self-Awareness

In US traditional teacher training programs, most admissions do not involve an assessment of teacher EI or SEC. Contrast this to Finland’s interview process for entry into teacher training programs, where “the best candidates then go through a series of interviews to judge their fit for teaching, on factors such as motivation and emotional intelligence” (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010, p. 19). Similarly, Singapore screens prospective education students by their “passion, commitment, communication skills, empathy, and disposition to be a good teacher” (Tucker, 2011, p. 180). Other European and Nordic nations implicitly convey a belief in SEC by formally structuring time for personal and group reflection as well as collaboration during teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

## Social Justice Implications of Teachers who Have Self-Awareness (Need awareness, emotional awareness, meta-cognition, etc.)

In the US, teacher preparation programs may increasingly recognize that teachers grapple with social challenges arising out of diverse inclusive classrooms. Descriptions of the difficulty some teachers face with classroom management seem to reflect the failure of traditional preparation programs to address teacher SEC and the implications this has on students vulnerable to institutional abuse or dehumanization: teachers are correct in their perception of their preservice training—they were not prepared to deal with all children in poverty schools. Indeed, they were selected and prepared to teach only those youngsters who can learn without teachers, and to regard everyone else as a ‘problem’ someone else should have to deal with (Haberman, 1995, no page number). In this case, formal preparation has not trained teachers to engage with social differences and with their own beliefs about such differences.

In other perspectives, teachers’ inequitable treatment of students of color is attributed to racism; but an alternative explanation is the under-preparation of self-awareness in new teachers, who resort to stereotypes and implicit racial bias to explain both what they do not understand in their students and in their own social and instructional ineffectiveness as teachers ((Darling-Hammond, 2010, CITE IMPLICIT BIAS). Some research has suggested that though they lack the pedagogical and content knowledge of certified teachers, minority paraeducators are in a better position to engage in culturally responsive teaching with minority students than trained teachers (Rueda, Monzó, & Higareda, 2004). But this does not deal with the vicarious trauma students of color can experience through the unconscious or conscious racism meted out by well-intentioned white teachers, who might be better poised to serve a social justice consciousness through better-developed self-awareness. Despite the increase in teacher preparation programs that include clinically-based practicums and the rise of mentorship induction, many teachers are still not trained in culturally sensitive or responsive teaching (Monzó & Rueda, 2001), which would likely be targeted in a curriculum valued self-awareness skills.

# Literature Review

To begin my literature review I consulted with professors and graduate students in the field of special education, teacher education, international education, and school psychology as well as journals and articles encountered through my various graduate courses and years of study. I collaboratively identified and refined a list of terms that approximated or related to my subject area – how teachers care for the needs of their most challenging students, and how they care for themselves while doing so. I arrived at a list of 19 unique subject terms that utilized Boolean search operators to capture all derivatives of the root word of interest. I coupled each of these 19 subject terms with 3 consistent terms, linked by AND, to ensure that the literature would be related to inclusive education, teachers, and behavior – because behavior is the most typical marker of classroom-based challenges, whether they originate from academic issues or from socio-emotional concerns, and the addition of this word excluded articles with a more general focus on teachers engagement with inclusive settings and practices. Finally, the set of three consistent terms was joined, using AND, to either “special education,” “special needs,” or all derivatives of the root word “disab,” to insure that results would not discuss inclusion in general but would focus on exceptional students in inclusive settings. I consulted with athe College of Education at Umass’ research librarian to determine the best strategies for coordinating the various terms involved in the search and chose ERIC, Academic Search Premier, PsychInfo and PsychArticles as the databases for the search as they are the most relevant to understanding the research literature on my topic. I limited results to articles published after the IDEA reauthorization of 1990, and limited results to scholarly (peer reviewed) journals. The table below shows the exact terms and results of the search (result numbers with an asterisk indicate the list of results with duplicate articles from previous searches removed, which occurs automatically).

Table 1 – Literature Search and Results

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **SEARCH TERMS** | Teacher OR educator | Teacher OR educator | Teacher OR educator |
| Behavior | Behavior | Behavior |
| Inclusi\* AND education | Inclusi\* AND education | Inclusi\* AND education |
| Special education | Special needs | Disab\* |
| Concern\* | 103/91\* | 40 | 112/89\* |
| Care | 64/57\* | 31 | 56/52\* |
| Caring | 7\* | 6\* | 3 |
| Retention | 5\* | 1\* | 4\* |
| Attrition | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Burnout | 7 | 2 | 5 |
| Coping | 13 | 8 | 10 |
| Cope | 5 | 4 | 8 |
| Need\* | 453/374\* | 435/346\* | 461/379\* |
| Resilien\* | 3\* | 3\* | 2\* |
| Stress\* | 29\* | 9\* | 26\* |
| Well\* | 147/116\* | 81/57\* | 143/105\* |
| Health | 78/68\* | 29\* | 87/74\* |
| Self | 165/130\* | 80/55\* | 172/127\* |
| Notic\* | 8\* | 3 | 7\* |
| Ableis\* | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mindset | 1\* | 1\* | 1\* |
| Compassion | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Patience | 1 | 1\* | 0 |

A total of 918 articles resulted from the search. When duplicates were removed using Zotero, 797 articles remained. Additional duplicates were removed manually, resulting in the removal of 15 additional articles, and leaving 782 articles.

The next step will be to screen the abstracts of these articles and remove all of those that are not empirical studies. Subsequent inclusion criteria will be: participants include pre or in-service inclusion teachers; and the study involves students with some sort of exceptionality (special education, behavior issues, communication or language challenges).

# Methodology

This study is a qualitative inquiry into a shared experience between teachers – navigating the needs of a challenging student, and reflecting on what teachers themselves needed throughout that process. The shared phenomenon is the relational care between teacher and student, and the experience of “challenge” embodied in the student. Thus there is a phenomenon I am interested in, and to an extent it has a fixed “essence” in the inherent ideas of a sustained challenge to relational care, shared needs, and strategies for meeting needs. However, my approach to understanding the data ultimately relied on the fact that I didn’t understand a lot about my subject from the existing literature, and sought to draw out a theory or understanding from teachers’ responses. Thus I am not sure if my methodological orientation is phenomenological or constructivist grounded theory.

## Data Collection Methods

I employed convenience sampling and utilized my personal social networks to individually email potential participants with some general information about the study and the informed consent form attached. All but two of my contacts responded affirmatively. Upon receiving informed consent and establishing an interview appointment, I conducted formal semi-structured interviews with participants that consisted of questions and possible probes I prepared in advance. Interviews occurred over the phone (except for one interview that was conducted over email) and I typed into a document as participants spoke.

The primary interview questions were:

1. Think back to one of the most challenging students you have ever had, or have! Tell me a quick story about the dynamic that makes this student challenging; it could be you describe an interaction, or just generally paint a picture.
2. What would you say are this student's three most basic needs?
3. List three ways by which you have tried to meet those needs.
4. Considering the challenging aspects of the dynamic between you and the student in the classroom, what would you say were YOUR 3 most basic needs as a professional? In other words, what did you need in order to respond professionally or properly to the challenges that came up with this student?
5. How were your needs met, if at all?

## Participants

I recruited eleven participants in this study. Though participants had different types and amounts of direct contact with a classroom of students at the time of interview (one participant was on leave for health resounds; one participant was student-teaching in a graduate program; one participant who had been a pubic school teacher for years was now employed as a substitute; one participant was both an administrator and an art teacher), all participants had public inclusive classroom teaching experience and were currently employed in some capacity as teachers in inclusive classrooms in public schools. Because it was a convenience sample, I did not directly ask participants about their or the described student’s race (or gender) but later decided to record the information if I knew it directly or it was mentioned in the interview, as race and gender are an important dimensions of any social analysis in the US in particular.

Table 2 – Participant Demographics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **T initial** | **# years teaching** | **Gender** | **Race**  **/Ethnicity** | **Grades Taught** | **Student’s gender** | **Student’s race/**  **Ethnicity** | **Challenge: Academic/**  **Behavioral** |
| K | 10 | F | ? | 1st-12th | M | ? | Academic, behavioral |
| J | 10 | M | White | K | M | Black | Behavioral |
| G | 9 | F | White | 9th-12th | M | Latino | Behavioral |
| I | 0 | F | Latina | 9th-12th | F, F | White or Latina (unsure) and Black | Academic, Behavioral |
| JG | 11 | M | White | 7th | F | White | Behavioral |
| KN | 15 | F | White | K-12th | M | ? | Behavioral |
| M | 30 | F | ? | 3rd | F | ? | Behavioral |
| MM | 2.5 | F | White | K-12th | M | Latino | Academic, Behavioral |
| S | 16 | F | White | 4-5th | M | Black | Academic, behavioral |
| V | 14 | F | White | Elementary | M | ? | Academic, behavioral |
| MT | 11 | F | ? | 9th-12th | M | ? | Behavioral |

## Data Analysis Strategies

I guided my initial data analysis with an inductive approach. In other words, I did not begin with a testable hypothesis about the data and wanted to instead review the raw data, group it into units of meaning (codes), cluster these into larger groups (categories), and find patterns within and across categories (themes) (Battacharya, 2017). After reading through the transcribed interviews multiple times and keeping notes (memos in a researcher journal), I skipped much of the descriptions of students and instead focused on analyzing the ‘needs’ of both teachers and students, and the descriptions how needs were met. I highlighted phrases and words that directly answered the questions I had posed about needs and meeting them, and also ones that participants had offered as additional explanations (codes). I then began grouping these into categories that I either named or named using the verbatim words or phrases provided by participants (categories).

To begin developing themes, I tried to map out some of the connections within categories. For example, I asked, are there different or shared needs identified for students than teachers? Are there different or shared strategies used by teachers for students or themselves? Are there patterns amongst all the responses that can be explained by how experienced the teachers are? I began playing with diagramming and symbolizing the data in different ways, shown below.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
| Fig. 1 – Using Post-Its with codes from interviews to develop categories | Fig. 2 – Using Post-Its with codes from interviews to develop categories | Fig. 3 – A preliminary map of connections between categories to support writing memos |
|  |  |  |
| Fig. 4 – Further developing categories and initial themes using codes as well as symbols to represent participant demographics | Fig. 5 – An initial attempt at a map of connections between categories to develop themes | Fig. 6 – An initial attempt at representing themes, categories, and codes |
|  |  |  |
| Fig. 7 – A second attempt at representing codes, categories and themes – with participant demographics and raw data (codes?) symbolized using distinct linear connections | Fig. 8 – An initial attempt at exploring only the data on needs. The “spectrum display” (Henderson & Segal, 2013, as cited by Lyons, N.D., qualitative data visualisation blog at stephanieevergreen.com) shows that teacher needs and student needs were generally identified as being different. | Fig. 9 – A more artistic representation of the data set intending to integrate codes and more lengthy quotes with interview questions and respondent demographics (branches), my researcher journal memos and created category names (trunk), and emerging categories and themes (roots). |

# Tentative Initial Findings

All teachers were able to easily enumerate three student needs. When the interview turned to their own needs, a few paused and/or commented that “that’s a good question.” In response to the standard phrasing in the interview questions that asked for “basic” needs, only two teachers commented on what Maslow would consider the primary physiological and safety related needs

## Key Ideas: Needs

As demonstrated in Figure 8, teachers in my sample rarely talked about the satisfaction of their own needs and student needs as being similar. While the theme of relatedness or connectedness accounts for a few of the categories of student and teacher needs, student needs within this theme tended to be described in dyads, like “one on one,” or the singular “relationship”, whereas teacher needs for relatedness and connectedness were described more pluralistically or generally, as “administrative,” “structure,” “supportive colleagues.” The need most frequently articulated for teachers and students alike was categorized by myself as “self-determination,” which Ryan and Deci (2000) describe as consisting of relatedness, autonomy, and competency. Relationship followed by Structure (“security,” “stability,” “objective,” “keeping track of” plans, “sane,” “safe,” “boundaries”) were the 2nd and 3rd most cited needs for teachers and students alike. Patience and Training/PD were the only needs ascribed exclusively to teachers. Positivity, Individualization, Outlets and Separation were the only needs ascribed to students exclusively; Structure (defined above) was almost exclusively seen as a student need.

# Key Ideas: Meeting Needs

According to my results, a teacher’s capacity for fostering relationships (opportunities for ”one on one”) is what is credited with most meeting student needs for relationships that are caring, consistent, respectful, guiding

The school climate and culture (availability of administrative and mental health/service provider staff, procedures and processes, opportunities for dialogue and collegial support, belief in ”chances to prove oneself”) was the single most frequent strategy for meeting most teacher needs and some student needs. School climate/culture is the most important factor in allowing teachers to meet their own as well as student needs.

A category I termed Art of Teaching (professional autonomy, teacher-determined responses, experience, practice, wisdom, mastery, focus on self-awareness/reflection) emerged as a consistent theme in how teachers describe meeting most/ly student needs. Meanwhile, a category I called the Science of Teaching (Evidence-Based practices, best practices, tools like PBIS, BIPs, SSTs, high expectations) also emerged as a consistent theme in how teachers described meeting most/ly student needs.

## For Further Research

Asking about needs proved to be a productive prompt for all respondents, although two respondents began to speak about needs they had that were not being met, which was relevant but technically outside my scope of focus (and thus not included in my data analysis). Similarly, sometimes needs are ends, but also sometimes they become means to an end as well. For example, some form of structure is both a need and a strategy for meeting the need for structure. With two participants I asked about concerns, rather than needs, since there’s a lot of literature on “teacher concerns.” However, that seemed to lead respondents to share things they were worried about, which was not my focus, and thus I subsequently repeated the questions using the word ‘needs.’ I asked once about ‘desires’ in addition to needs, which I think could be an interesting additional line of inquiry. In two separate interviews I also asked about personal, in addition to professional and student needs, and found that the responses replicated the ideas that emerged anyway in both of those interviews as well as in the other interviews in which I made no such distinction. This combined with the collected categories of response suggests that, similar to the feminist maxim ‘the personal is political,’ most teachers find the boundary between professional and personal to be porous, particularly when they are more inexperienced. Finally, I sometimes asked in interviews about the extent to which teacher were able to meet their own needs *or* have their needs met by the school system. In further research I hope to find ways to expand on the understanding that teachers are part of a system, while also maintaining attention on the locus of control they do have when it comes to meeting the needs of themselves and others. I also think it would be interesting to attempt a data analysis that uses something similar to Maslow’s hierarchy.

# Conclusion

I am using the term “teacher care webs” to expand upon the binary notion of teacher-student and highlight the situated dynamic of that relationship.

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