



Care Pedagogy as a Catalyst for Transformational Higher Education: A Reflective Study of Female Academics

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Abstract

This reflective study aims to explore the use of care pedagogy as a teaching philosophy to address the challenges encountered by students in higher education. Care pedagogy has recently emerged as a powerful lens through which to examine the complexities of teaching and learning in higher education. This qualitative research study explores the perspectives of four female academics at the University of Technology who embrace care pedagogy as their teaching philosophy. The study is underpinned by the social justice framework, which fosters inclusivity, equitable, ubuntu principles and student-centered perspective in higher education. As a data collection methodology, a focus group of monthly meeting where each author shared their own teaching philosophy that were latter triangulated to care pedagogy. The data was thematically analysed. The findings show that care pedagogy can serve as a catalyst for transformative teaching practices. Implementing the care pedagogy not only improves classroom engagement but also aggrandizes graduate attributes. Furthermore, the authors recommended that the sustainable development goals be incorporated into the curriculum, which has the potential of enhancing graduate attributes. In conclusion, the promotion of social justice and Ubuntu principles by care pedagogy has the potential to transform higher education, humanize the curriculum, and enhance graduate attributes.

Key words: *care pedagogy, teaching and learning, higher education, teaching philosophy*

1. Introduction

Despite the growing influence of neoliberal ideologies that favour efficiency and economic outcomes over the holistic well-being of students, care and compassion for students continue to be the cornerstones of higher education (Andrew et al., 2023). Approximately 51% of students in South African come from impoverished backgrounds (Statistics SA, 2019) where disorder, instability, and uncertainty are the norm (Makhanya, 2024). These figures align with the alarming 60% dropout rate in higher education in the South African context (Higher Education News, May 8, 2024). Higher education has been characterized by a Western approach and a paternalistic approach where students must show their resilience and fitness in this arena (Maluleke, 2020). To that end, it is critical to make a deliberate effort to decolonize the curriculum. Traditional models of education often overlook the profound importance of nurturing relationships within the learning environment. In response to these complexities, care pedagogy has emerged as a transformative lens through which educators can reimagine their practices. One major contributing factor to students dropping out of higher education, according to Lorenzo-Quiles et al. (2023), is a lack of care practices, compassion, and civility between students and academics. Whilst Vogt (2002) argued that caring pedagogy is associated with mothering, and traditional Western notion of feminism. Similarly in an African context caring is an act of ubuntu which is also non-gender specific.

The higher education environment remains unfriendly for some students, particularly those who come from impoverished backgrounds and have low self-esteem. There is abundant literature (Mofokeng & Tlou, 2023; Thompsons et al., 2023; Byshevets, 2023; Miles et al., 2021; Ahmad, 2019) that demonstrates that some students experience frustrations and stress in universities. These include, but are not limited to, a feeling of alienation, stigmatization, the physical structure of higher education institutions being big and complex, diverse backgrounds of students, socio-economic challenges, ill health, academic performance, career choice, the mode of teaching with the recent adoption of blended learning, and academic performance (Morshidi et al, 2023; Miles et al. 2021; Novakowski et al., 2010). Furthermore, the extended periods of physical separation between staff and students during the COVID-19 pandemic, which relied on virtual communication through screens, has further heightened the emphasis on relationality and engagement (Gravett, Taylor & Fairchild, 2024). Covid-19 pandemic brought with it a new realisation of caring for students' well-being and their academic progress. These conditions are likely to exacerbate where a pedagogy of care is lacking. In response to

these complexities, care pedagogy has emerged as a transformative lens through which educators can reimagine their practices (Mofokeng, 2022; Bellantonio, 2023).

Care pedagogy approach to higher education stresses the development of compassionate, empathetic, and nurturing relationships between teachers and students. It acknowledges the significant impact that these relationships may have on students' learning and overall development (Ahmad, 2019; Fagbenro et al., 2024; Frantzeska, 2023). Its multifaceted nature goes beyond the simple transfer of knowledge to fostering a comprehensive, humanistic educational experience (Hatem et al., 2008; Velásquez et al., 2013). Waddington (2018) contends that there has been an outcry in higher education for student support, as well as a move towards more compassionate leadership and teaching practices. Acknowledging students' diverse cultural backgrounds is critical for teaching and learning in care pedagogy.

This study delves into the perspectives of four female academics at the University of Technology who have adopted care pedagogy as their teaching philosophy. Using a social justice framework and a reflective approach, this research investigates how can care pedagogy promote an inclusive, equitable, and student-centered higher education environment. This exploration seeks to demonstrate the potential of care pedagogy to transform educational practices and enhance student engagement.

2. Literature review

In the changing environment of higher education, there is an urgent demand for educational frameworks that give priority to diversity and the well-being of students. The significance of relationships, connections, and care in the process of learning and teaching has become more prominent in higher education. This approach aims to go beyond a neoliberal, competitive, and individualized system that often lacks empathy (Bovill, 2020; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017; Kinchin, 2020).

2.1. Care pedagogy and Scholarship of Teaching and learning

The pedagogy of care and care ethics (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018; Noddings, 2012) may appear discretionary in higher education; yet policies such as teaching and learning and assessment policies impose a duty on academics to nurture and mentor students.

The well-being and academic progress of students are entrusted on academics, it becomes their direct responsibility. According to Noddings (p772, 2012) “the objective [of teaching and learning] is to understand what the cared-for [student] is experiencing and to hear and understand the needs expressed.” Care pedagogy and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) intersect as academics continue to explore, reflect on their practice, and discover new ways to impact relevant content. The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, a discourse on higher education, has gained traction in the past two decades due to empirical research on effective teaching methods, course design, and student learning practices. Caring pedagogy, often known as caring ethics, is a critical moral stance in the research of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Mortari, 2016; Gleason & Mehta, 2022). Care pedagogy extends beyond the curriculum mere content and prioritize the student's process of growth and advancement. It explicitly promotes the integrated curriculum (London, 2022). London, (2022) developed a comprehensive guideline for teachers on how they can incorporate the care approach in designing the curriculum. These are: to teaching based on 10 principles, which are as follows:

London's collaborative teaching principles are sequential; they begin with preparation, move on to genuine student engagement, and end with the teaching and learning evaluation phase. Lecturers carefully and consciously plan these stages to impact quality content; it does not accidentally happen. Furthermore, these principles affirm that care pedagogy is based on the concept that education is more than just a transaction of information; it is a transformative journey of personal and intellectual growth. Effective pedagogy considers students' emotional, social, and cultural requirements, as well as their cognitive growth, which are the principles of education theories. Additionally, Gleason and Mehta (2022) and Collins-Warfield et al., (2023) argue that compassion and genuine interest in the student can help to create a supportive, empowered learning environment that promotes student engagement, resilience, and improved academic performance.

Epistemological access, etymology, and ontological discourses are incorporated into caring pedagogy to improve the student experience. Mainly to emphasis the purpose of the relational care based on mentor and mentee or a carer and care-for (Bozalek& Winberg, 2018). Collins-Warfield et al., (2023) argue that a compassionate educator prioritizes the individual needs, interests, feelings, aspirations, and motivations of their students. By establishing trust and comprehending their perspectives, the educator promotes personal growth and development. The aim of this study is to investigate the teaching methods employed by four female academics at the University of Technology in KwaZulu-Natal province employ the artifacts of care

pedagogy practices in their daily engagements with their students. Educators are obligated, both directly and indirectly, to demonstrate care (Noddings, 2012) as prescribed in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

2.2. Qualities of a good lecturer

Teaching is a profession and a calling that is profoundly rooted in love, compassion, the cultivation of young minds and nation building (Maluleka, 2020; Madero, 2021). A teacher ought to establish a strong connection with the content, environment, and students by incorporating all aspects of a person, including physical, social, mental, and emotional aspects, into the teaching process. Compassion for teaching and the ability to establish a connection with students are regarded as critical components of education, from basic education to higher education. The transmission of knowledge is not possible when there is a lack of emotional connection between the teacher and the students. The students are the focal point of each phase, which is why compassion in teaching commences with the planning, execution, and evaluation phases.

The typical job description for lecturers in higher education emphasizes four primary strategic areas: teaching and learning, research, community engagement, as well as administration. Nevertheless, the job description includes implicit embedded duties and responsibilities that are intended to foster student development without being therapeutic (Martin 2023). The preparation of students remains essential, despite the alignment of teaching in higher education with neoliberalism, which prioritizes income generation (Iguodala et al., 2020). The qualities of good lecturers have been the subject of numerous studies, which have consistently demonstrated that subject matter expertise, communication, listening, respect for students, and caring are among the most prevalent attributes of a successful lecturer. The findings of Andrew et al. (2023) and Osinki & Hernandez (2013) are consistent with the recent study conducted by Yu et al. (2024). The following are characteristics of a good university lecturer as described by students:

- Kind, gentle, respectful, friendly and non-threatening to students.
- Passionate, sincere, supportive and always willing to help students.
- Patient and has an empathetic ability to understand each student's psychological situation and challenges.
- Good pedagogical competence and communication skills in helping students understand curriculum contents easily.

- Humorous and creative, with the ability to create an interactive and joyful learning atmosphere and the ability to inspire and motivate all students to learn and be creative.

These attributes are aligned with pedagogy of care or compassion pedagogy which promotes good communication, and good respectful relationships with students (Andrew 2023). In line with Osinki & Hernandez (2013) perspective of a good lecturer translates to student-teacher relationship and epistemological discourses that enforce the care pedagogy. This relationship is further imposed by the nature of the curriculum which is student-centric that prioritises the needs of the students.

Contrary to the characteristics of a good lecturer some lecturers might be good subject matter experts but lack soft skills. Lecturers sometimes claim that they care about their students, yet the students do not feel that compassion. It is such cases where the disconnection between the lecturer and students occurs and results in frustration. Conducting evaluation at the end of each module thus becomes important to identify and bring corrective measures (Noddings, 2017). A student comment in Meyers, (2009, p. 26) mentioned:

This is by far the worst professor in the entire history of professors. She does not like her students at all and has no business in a teaching capacity. If given the option of having this professor or Satan, I would definitely choose Satan. Satan probably has more of an interest in seeing you succeed, and most likely has a better personality as well.

A lack of compassion and care can lead to anguish, bitterness, and a loss of self-confidence in students. Thus, evaluations should not be a check-box activity, but rather used to improve learning programmes.

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Care Pedagogy

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) enacts the pedagogy of care (Agherdien, 2023). The pedagogy of care is underpinned by many theoretical frameworks like social justice, ubuntu, an African perspective on humanity, social constructivism, and SoTL (Mortari, 2016; Wegrzyn & Perry, 2021). The theoretical perspective of this paper is rooted in social constructivism theorists such as relational pedagogy and humanistic education theories.

Relational pedagogy advocates for the practice of teaching and learning that is grounded in a pedagogy of taking care, whereas humanistic education theorists emphasize the importance of

addressing learners psychological and emotional needs in the learning process (Gravett et al., 2024). In the same vein, the Proponents of Humanistic Education theory focus on the holistic development of individuals, stressing self-actualization, personal growth, and emphasizes the importance of emotions in learning process. Universities are called to carry out transformative learning that is based on the Ethics of Care (López, Rodríguez & Herreria, 2021). Humanistic education can be applied through consistently providing on time constructive feedback, promoting emotional well-being, and creating safe learning environments.

Equally important relational pedagogy posits that learning occurs within the context of relationships emphasizing empathy, mutual respect, and understanding. As an enabler to the decolonisation of thought and practice, the pedagogy of taking care advances the idea of togetherness (López, Rodríguez & Herreria, 2021). MacGill, (2016) takes this point further by asserting that care pedagogy is a transformative learning exercise that academics carry through compassion, understanding and love. They shape educators' practice and position meaningful relationships as fundamental to effective teaching and learning. They further explore ways of encouraging connections, authenticity and responsiveness, hence Gravett et al., (2024) referring to this theory as the pedagogy of mattering. The pedagogy of mattering expands the framing of relational pedagogy by offering insight into how learning is experienced, how staff and students are entwined with care and how they inform the everyday life of higher education as articulated in the curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of the project is to engage students, facilitate their self-actualization through care pedagogy, and reform educational processes that improve graduate attributes. This study utilised a qualitative reflective narrative approach to examine the experiences of four female academics in the department of human resource management at the University of Technology in the province of KwaZulu Natal. These academics have wealth of industrial and higher education experiences although some are newcomers. Nonetheless, their shared objective is to exchange care pedagogy methods and experiences, leading to the eventual co-creation of care epistemology (Bilous, 2018).

According to Mortari (2015) defines reflective research as an approach that examines several philosophical viewpoints on reflection, including pragmatistic, critical, hermeneutic, and

phenomenological. This type of research is prevalent in the field of education, particularly in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning studies (SOTL). The researchers subject themselves to rigorous examination on a topic of interest. As per Olmos-Vega et al., (2022) and Stalmeijer et al., (2022), care pedagogy necessitates continuous, cooperative, and multifaceted procedures that prompt researchers to consider the ways in which their subjectivity and circumstances influence their study. The subjective aspect of caring pedagogy and reflection research frequently invites criticism from suspicious scientists. When conducting such studies, Olmos-Vega et al., (2022) advise reflective researchers to consider the following principles in their study areas.

- Qualitative researchers should actively embrace and utilize reflexivity at every stage of their research process.
- The research should prioritize self-awareness and critical examination of personal, interpersonal, methodological, and environmental factors.
- Reflexivity ought to encompass tangible actions.
- The entire research team must engage in collaborative reflexivity procedures.

3.1. Data collection and analysis

The four female academics collected the data for this study through their regular monthly developmental meetings over a period of five months. These meetings took the shape of reflective research as explained above by Olmos-Vega et al., (2022). These focus group-type of meetings are developmental, reflective, notes are taken, and questions are asked with the purpose of learning from each other in this versatile group of academics. The initial purpose of these meetings was to mentor young upcoming academics; however, learning is a two-way approach it has double-loop learning effect.

According to Noddings(2017) researchers in care pedagogy should enhance the quality of their study by drawing on own their personal experiences and engage in tangible examples. Self-awareness and collaboration should be practised as these would enhance the quality, depth, and impact of the study.

Reflective studies are qualitative in nature and qualitative data analysis like content analysis and thematic analysis methods are used to analyse the data. Reflective studies are known for its complex and bulk and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Dawadi, 2020). Thematic

analysis steps are useful in capturing details. That strengthens the study in terms of rigour and trustworthiness. Various themes were identified from each participant reflective.

4. Findings

Participant 1:

4.1. Empathy and Passion for Teaching

In my teaching career, I have realised that passion for teaching as well as showing empathy, patience and compassion for students make students look forward to engaging with me as their lecturer. The educators' practice of compassion should be guided by the sensitivity of recognising the systemic inequalities facing students we teach. This was validated by a comment made by a former student in his course evaluation form where the student stated that:

“You are a great lecturer, organized, responsive, patient, and very inspiring and professional. Your passion comes through in your teaching and seems to be part of what makes you an effective lecturer. The strategy you have adopted of involving us in the learning process, although sometimes we can be very difficult and discouraging, allowing us as students not just to listen to your teaching but also to freely express our thoughts, knowledge, and understanding help me gain insight into many of the concepts we have learned in Business Management lectures”.

Allowing students to have their voice heard, made newly acquired Business Management knowledge more emancipatory and more meaningful. Through a reflective exercise this student was able to give constructive feedback and took responsibility for his actions. The learner clearly espoused graduate attributes that we work so hard in instilling in students.

My teaching philosophy resonates well with the constructivists ideology as I believe in engaging students through entrepreneurship activities that encourage team formation, creativity and collaboration through the creation of ideation businesses called practice ventures that students are expected to develop, validate and launch into the market. That on its own, creates a nurturing and inclusive community where students, guided by the lecturer prioritize understanding each other's needs and look out for each other, thus ensuring the successful execution of the project (Fagbenro et al., 2024; Frantzeska, 2023). Exposing students to authentic assessments enhances their creativity skills and provides the best platform for applied knowledge linking theory and practice.

Another exemplifier of care pedagogy as outlined by Maultsaid & Harrison (2023) is that of setting high expectations of work and showing concern for students' personal life. I do not

know how many times I have been to Head of Department Office, sharing the challenges students are faces with, be it struggling to find accommodation or coming to class on an empty stomach. To me this is what humanising education is all about.

Levitt et al., (2023) define a passionate teacher as an educator who is supportive, enthusiastic, committed and creative. Such educators offer social support that impact student intrinsic motivation and engagement positively, leading to enhanced student learning and well-being.

4.2. Attentive carer

I believe in a passion-driven teaching philosophy which leads to increased student engagement and motivation. Not all students freely engage in class as some are vulnerable and come to class with a variety of psychosocial issues. My role as the educator and an attentive carer is to practice attentive listening, exercise patience, show empathy and allow ideas to slowly emerge especially from the less confident student. Identifying with students' concern and viewing issues from their perspective increase social consciousness and impacts positively on learners' outcomes (Gorny-Wegrzyn & Perry (2021). Employing such pedagogical strategies contributes to a sense of community and facilitate social justice.

Participant 2:

4.3. Espoused care pedagogy philosophy

The foundation of my care pedagogy philosophy is based on the idea that "my students matter." This philosophy has remained an integral part of my teaching career. Care pedagogy is subjective, consciously planned, intentionally and continuously applied. When this philosophy is espoused students can significantly benefit and feel that they indeed matter. I have worked in the field of education for approximately twenty-five years. This covers higher education as well as high schools in quintiles two and four, respectively. Students come from diverse backgrounds however with a common goal to attain a qualification that will uplift their lives and backgrounds. Students typically bring a significant amount of personal baggage to university, which may increase in the university setting. Academics are tasked with fostering students into robust, self-sufficient, and independent individuals who can successfully transition into the workforce.

My approach of care pedagogy is underpinned by a variety of humanistic ideologies. In caring pedagogy, Maslow's theory of needs—which highlights self-belief as a fundamental component of personal development—is significant. Carl Roger's person-centered approach, a humanistic theorist, has influenced my philosophy of care pedagogy. The constructivist theory of Lev Vygotsky and multi-intelligences of Howard Gardner are important in understanding the students as social, emotional and spiritual being. Rousseau's theory of learner development and the uniqueness of their requirements reinforces my care pedagogy philosophy. The school system is heavily ingrained with the preponderance of injustices sown by the apartheid system. In that situation, social justice must prevail in all higher education systems. Thus, care pedagogy can be used to ameliorate the system.

4.4. Creating self-worth

Apart from the numerous principles of care pedagogy that I implement in the classroom, I will concentrate on a single instance of my enacted care pedagogy philosophy. I assign my final-year students the responsibility of writing about themselves or their self-worth at the commencement of each academic year. This may appear to be a low-level task in the context of Bloom's taxonomy, and my students typically perceive it as such until they begin writing. The objective of the exercise is to determine the value they assign to themselves. The exercise is built upon the frequently asked query "Tell us about yourself," which is commonly used in job interviews. Interviewers occasionally ask candidates to provide an explanation for why they believe they are a qualified candidate for the position. Candidates who are weak in terms of self-identification, self-worth, and confidence would encounter difficulty in responding to this question.

This activity requires anonymous writing to retain dignity. I analyse these writings and build themes. Students often experience emotional breakdown when they realize gaps and challenges in their lives and careers, which can negatively impact their academic performance. We offer advice and direct students to other departments. I mentor and coach them in creating their own growth strategies. I also recommend finding coaches and mentors outside of academia.

4.5. Double loop learning

As indicated, SoTL incorporates care pedagogy, reflection, and a sense of purpose when teaching, which may include assessing my abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. The features of the Johari window blind spot quadrant have played a crucial role in helping me understand myself as an educator. Care pedagogy has the ability to turn teachers into learners (Bozalek &

Winberg, 2018; Pranjic, 2021; Agherdien, 2023). I discover myself and grow while teaching. I learned a lot about listening, thoughtful speaking, and student needs.

Caring pedagogy fosters the development of student-student and teacher-student relationships by fostering collaboration and assisting students in recognizing their self-worth (Bowne, 2017). Through care pedagogy the both teachers and students develop trust and respect for each other (Gorny-Wegrzyn & Perry, 2021). It subtly illustrates the vulnerabilities of each side, emphasizing their mutual dependence for effective outcomes.

Participant 3:

4.6. Experiences of care pedagogy

My care pedagogy is based on the preceding authors' beliefs. As an aspiring academic with extensive industry experience, my main goal is to foster a sense of belonging, trust, and mutual respect between students and myself, promoting academic, social, emotional, and moral development through "growing together." This technique helps me reflect on the shared journey of personal and academic improvement, recognizing that everyone in the educational community contributes and benefits. This technique often involves active listening, sharing practical professional experiences, understanding student conditions, and creating inclusive and responsive teaching experiences. Over the past eight years, I have established several teaching and learning ideas that inform my caring pedagogy.

4.7. Relationships

I think building trust with my students is crucial. This requires getting to know them and caring about their life. In my first two meetings, I ask them to describe themselves and explain why they chose HRM and where they see themselves in ten years. I learn about their professional ambitions and why they choose our field from our conversations. I can also recognize introverts and communication problems. I engage these students more, guide them, and give them leadership responsibilities in class projects to enhance their confidence. I also promote honest communication to make people feel valued and understood.

4.8. Compassion and empathy

Observing students' different requirements over the years has taught me that some use NSFAS grants to help their family due to their parents' unemployment and poverty. As a lecturer, being empathetic and understanding my students' diverse needs and backgrounds can help me tailor my teaching methods to support each student effectively by providing emotional support, recognizing when students are struggling, and offering help or resources that can make a difference, such as employment or internship programs. I established "Sizosebenza Sonke MUT Project," a platform for Advanced Diploma and Postgraduate students to discuss career options, and I help them prepare for interviews using my 20 years of HR recruitment and selection experience.

4.9. Creating engagement spaces

One of my caring teaching principles is to identify and accommodate varied learning styles and skills, such as practical and project-based learning. I give all students a fair chance. I created a program for academically challenging students. I saw that "at-risk students," used to describe academically failing students, is stigmatized, demoralizing our students. Thus, I created "rise and shine," teaching online students on Saturday mornings. This allows individuals inquire, hide their identities, and discuss intellectual issues. In a friendly setting, we address these difficulties to prevent peers from labelling them sluggish learners. Since starting the program, my students' pass rate and class involvement have improved greatly.

4.10. Continuous enhancement

I continuously use caring pedagogy as I reflect on my teaching and ask students for feedback. I attend regular professional development on care pedagogy and inclusive education and encourage students to give informal feedback during rise and shine sessions. I believe that by using these values to my teaching, I can foster a caring and supportive learning environment that benefits all my students.

Participant 4:**4.11. Reflecting on Care Pedagogy in Higher Education.**

For the past two years, my journey as a lecturer in higher education has deeply intertwined with the lives of students from diverse and often challenging backgrounds. My students come from homes where social, psychological, and financial disadvantages are a daily reality. This understanding has shaped my teaching philosophy, leading me to embrace care pedagogy as a central element in my approach to education.

4.12. Creating a motivational environment

At the beginning or end of each lecture, I make it a point to share motivational messages with my students. This practice is not merely about imparting academic knowledge; it is about nurturing a sense of hope and resilience. I believe that education should be a holistic experience, one that not only equips students with intellectual tools but also inspires them to persevere in the face of adversity. By offering words of encouragement, I aim to instill confidence in my students, helping them see that their efforts in academics and personal lives can lead to meaningful achievements.

4.13. Addressing Diverse Needs

My role as an educator extends beyond traditional teaching. I recognize that each student brings a unique set of experiences and challenges into the classroom. This awareness compels me to go beyond standard curricular requirements, accommodating the different needs of my students. Whether it's providing additional academic support, offering resources for personal development, or simply being available for a listening ear, I strive to create an inclusive and supportive environment. The belief that every student deserves an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background, underpins this commitment.

4.14. Making Learning Accessible

Knowing that my students may face various barriers to learning, I employ teaching methods that simplify complex concepts and make content accessible. This might involve breaking down information into manageable parts, using relatable examples in their native language, or integrating multimedia resources to enhance understanding. By tailoring my teaching strategies to the diverse learning styles and needs of my students, I aim to foster an environment in which all students can engage with and grasp the material.

4.15. Support for struggling students

When I notice a student struggling, I take proactive steps to offer support. This may involve one-on-one meetings to address specific challenges, providing additional resources, or simply offering words of encouragement. The goal is to ensure that no student feels left behind or unsupported. By being attentive to the individual needs of my students, I strive to create a classroom atmosphere that prioritizes care and empathy. I have studied the concept of “pedagogy of care” and recognized how integral the educator’s values are in shaping the student experience (Gomy-Wegrzyn & Perry, 2021).

My experience as a lecturer has strengthened my belief in the significance of care pedagogy in higher education. By prioritizing attentiveness in my teaching, I aim to establish an educational encounter that is profound and empowering for my students.

5. Discussion

The themes from the reflection align with the characteristic of care pedagogy and the attributes for the good lecturer as espoused in literature (Yu et al. 2024; Andrew et al., 2023; Osinki & Hernandez 2013; Hamza et al., 2010). Teaching, as previously noted (Maluleka, 2020; Madero, 2021), is a career driven by love that necessitates considerable work for its implementation. While Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson (2016) contemplate that compassion and care pedagogy as the ‘bedrock of education’ learning may not occur in a hostile environment. Additional effort to engage with students and support those who are struggling in improving their grades, boosting their self-esteem, and preparing them for the workforce is apparent. Conversely, this reflective research has enabled participants to enhance their Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), promoting the dissemination of best practices.

The above reflections emphasised that the connection between the teacher and the student has its basis on epistemic access. Thus, caring without expertise of a subject matter is irrelevant. Care pedagogy is not compulsory in the higher education sector but the autonomy that comes with the sector allows educators to maintain a sense of community and affinity with learners (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016). Educators and students work together to enhance student’s learning experiences without compromising the quality of education.

Enacting the pedagogy of care is not without the challenges, it does require a focused and enthusiastic lecturer with strong personality. The teaching classroom environment is diverse

and highly contested (Gravett, Taylor & Fairchild, 2024). Through reflective inquiry, the study has illuminated ways in which care pedagogy can catalyse transformative teaching practices that enhance student engagement and success. By examining the interplay between care and pedagogy, this study contributed to a deeper understanding of how nurturing the lecturer-student relationship can serve as a foundational pillar for inclusive higher education. This study has also provided evidence-based insights to inform institutional policies and practices aimed at fostering a more caring and inclusive educational environment.

This reflective study has shown that academics possess the ability to bring about change and exert a constructive influence on the educational environment. This could consequently enable students to fully cultivate their compassionate nature and become responsible members of society. Lately, higher education institutions have experienced a surge in criminal activities, including incidents of gender-based assault and, worst case, homicide (Anderson & Naidu, 2022; SA News, 2023). Clearly, there is moral degeneration in societies, and through care pedagogy, students may learn to care for others as their environment as well. In this context, what is the role of higher education as trusted institutions of intellect and transformation? The high debates on academic freedom and autonomy need to be redirected to care pedagogy and ethics of care for social justice, Ubuntu, and inclusive education to prevail in higher education institutions.

6. Recommendation and new knowledge

The care pedagogy should not be limited to the interactions with student but be extended to the curriculum. We have integrated the SDGs into the human resource management curriculum by leveraging our academic autonomy and freedom, as we have identified a deficiency in our graduate attributes. This will assist students in the development of socially responsible citizenship and the acquisition of the ability to care for both themselves and others in accordance with the SDGs. The following is a simple approach which the SDGs and care pedagogy can be incorporated into the curriculum. By integrating care pedagogy with the SDGs, educators can create a more inclusive, equitable, and student-centered higher education system. It is important to note that not all SDGs were selected but only the goals which are in alignment with the philosophy discussed in this paper. This approach not only enhances classroom engagement and graduate attributes but also contributes to the broader goals of social justice, sustainability, and global citizenship.

Sustainable development goals and care pedagogy

SDG	Human Resource Curriculum
1. No poverty	Academic staff and students are part of community engagement projects. The department has developed an entrepreneurship module that will help students create employment for themselves and for others.
2. No hunger	Through the community engagement project, students learn to care for those who are less privileged. Moreover, by integrating community engagement and corporate social responsibility into education, students are encouraged to develop compassionate mindset and become active responsible citizens who contribute positively to society and towards attaining the goal of eradicating hunger in our community.
3. Good health and well-being	Promote caring for yourself and others. The university encourages students to seek help and utilize all its available services. Mental illness is on the rise, which sometimes results in students dropping out or getting involved in harmful groups.
4. Quality education	It is critically important to provide students with quality education and create conducive learning environments for all students. We promote universal design to ensure that no student falls behind.
5. Gender equality	It is critical for HRM students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to address gender equity issues in the organization. Employment equity Act No 55 of 1998 in the workplace is one of the policies they learn about.
8. Decent work and economic growth	HRM graduates are prepared to be custodians of governance in the workplace and be responsible for organization growth and development.
9. Reduced inequality	Again, in their program, HRM students learn inclusive principles.

16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions	Care pedagogy is crucial in realizing peace, ubuntu, and instilling social justice in our students.
17. Partnership	Students occasionally subjective to teamwork, which is crucial for learning to collaborate with others.

Integrated care pedagogy with the SDGs creates an educational framework that not only addresses the intellectual development of students but also their emotional and ethical growth. This approach equips students to contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and sustainable world.

7. Conclusion

As we conclude we highlight the significance of care pedagogy in shaping educational experiences that resonate with the diverse needs of today's students. In this approach we advocate that curriculum should be more than the sequences of standard content and activities, it should be holistic and be useful beyond university life. Additionally, assessments are utilized for assessing performance, allowing each lecturer to assess their value proposition and develop improvement strategies. As a way forward we will continue to use and appreciate the feedback from the evaluations that are conducted at the end of the semester. Programme evaluations assist in mapping the student-teacher relationship, viability of the module, teaching methods infrastructure, and many other variables. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to inspire educators to embrace care as a critical component of their teaching, fostering a more compassionate and transformative higher education landscape. The relational care does show the relationship between lecturers and students

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