

"BUT IS THEIR KINDNESS ROOTED IN OUR LIBERATION?"

TEACHER EDUCATORS OF COLOR REIMAGINING
CRITICAL PEDAGOGY THROUGH A CRITICAL FUNDS
OF CARING APPROACH

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Abstract

Shallow notions of social justice, including race - and oppression - evasive discourses such as “niceness” and “kindness” (i.e., institutional norms and practices that obscure the structural and ideological roots of racial injustice), are a staple of elementary education teacher preparation in the U.S. Building on Newcomer’s (2018) notion of funds of caring – “authentically caring and culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students” (p. 182) – and critical pedagogy, which challenges conformity to injustice by cultivating awareness of unjust socio-political conditions in learner’s lives, we conceptualize “critical funds of caring pedagogy.” Critical funds of caring is a pedagogical stance and component of critical teacher agency that teacher educators of Color embody in their teaching and relationship building with pre-service, linguistically minoritized teachers of Color. In this conceptual paper, we highlight four components of critical funds of caring pedagogy that extend our understanding of how teacher educators of Color utilize their critical teacher agency to confront hegemonic, assimilatory, and subtractive schooling practices. These four components include 1) enacting

teaching as political work, 2) caring rooted in collective liberation, 3) humanizing vulnerability, and 4) culturally and linguistically sustaining praxis.

Keywords: critical teacher agency, critical pedagogy, teacher education, preservice teachers of color, teacher educators of color, politics of care, kindness, elementary education

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It is a pattern we (authors) notice every semester in response to the questions *What does it mean to be an educator for racial justice?* Or *what is teaching for racial and social justice?* Many, if not most, of our students reply with some version of *being an educator who is nice and welcoming to all learners, or it all goes back to teaching kindness*. It is no surprise. Our students are primarily undergraduate students training to become pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade (PK-8) teachers in the U.S., where kindness and niceness are dominant cultural norms (Bramen, 2017). As such, kindness and niceness are perceived to be adequate stand-ins for social and racial justice in schools and society at large (Castagno, 2019; Gardiner et al., 2023; Pascoe, 2023).

Indeed, teaching students to be kind or nice is a staple of elementary education (Chang-Bacon, 2022; Gooding, 2019; Turner, 2019). Pay a visit to an elementary school in the U.S., and chances are you will see "Spread Kindness," "Kindness Zone," and "Be Kind" prominently displayed on school buildings and inside classroom walls. Cast as a panacea for all forms of oppression, including racial harm, these pithy, feel-good expressions are part of what comprises the regime of kindness – a culture that seems to include a commitment to confronting hate and inequality but that actually exacerbates injustice (Pascoe, 2023). Relatedly, Castagno's (2014, 2019) scholarship on niceness in educational settings points to niceness as the oppression-evasive institutional norms and educator practices that perpetuate the racial, class, and gender status quo. In effect, through kindness and niceness, "systemic inequalities get made to look like individual ones" (Pascoe, 2023, p. 29), and whiteness – an identity, ideology, and institution that normalizes the concentration of privilege and power within the dominant racial group (Maher & Tetreault, 1998; McLaren, 1998) – is reinforced rather than challenged (Castagno, 2019). These institutional norms, embodied teacher practices, and discourses of kindness and

niceness emerge from and prop up racial liberalism – a dominant ideology in the U.S. that reduces racism to its psychological facets (i.e., individual bias or prejudice) and ignores its enduring systemic dimensions and historical legacies (Guinier, 2004; Mills, 2017).

Yet, scholarship emphasizes the persistence of structural racism in K-12 schools (Kohli et al., 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This scholarship establishes how our education system functions as a purveyor of assimilatory, stratifying, and racialized schooling (Love, 2019), where students of Color, including language-minoritized students, continue to bear the brunt of educational inequity (Souto-Manning et al., 2021). Moreover, within teacher education programs themselves – the education spaces designated to prepare and support the next generation of classroom educators – “racism is embedded and invisibilized” across their programmatic structures (Kohli et al., 2022, p. 53). Returning to those feel-good platitudes about kindness, what good are interpersonal expressions and demonstrations of “kindness” if the root causes of racial harm (i.e., white supremacist policies, practices, and programmatic structures of K-12 schools and teacher education programs) remain intact? How are we complicit in reproducing injustice in schools when we do not offer our future teachers the opportunities to unmask these alluring discourses and practices in classrooms and schools?

In this conceptual paper, we – two teacher educators of Color who work within a Liberal Studies program that primarily serves a Latinx and first-gen population of future elementary teachers – document how we strive to support the development of students’ critical teacher agency. By critical teacher agency, we are referring to the potential for pre/in-service teachers to utilize their pedagogies to disrupt the racialized structures of schooling, which detrimentally impact the lives of minoritized students, their families, and communities. We engage this work through the collective care of communities of Color – care that moves beyond superficial, hegemonic notions of kindness or niceness that fail to challenge whiteness and the racial status quo. As teacher educators of Color, we challenge the practices and institutional norms of kindness and niceness that pervade elementary teacher education through what we conceptualize as “critical funds of caring pedagogy.” This approach is a critical pedagogical stance that can nurture the

critical teacher agency that teacher educators of Color embody as they support their linguistically minoritized pre-service teachers of Color.

Below, we review some of the literature on kindness and niceness in K-12 settings and teacher education and how it functions as a tool of white supremacy. Then, we build on the theoretical foundation of funds of knowledge and the scholarship on care to conceptualize critical funds of caring pedagogy- a pedagogical model that extends our understanding of how teacher educators of Color support future teachers with confronting hegemonic, assimilatory, and subtractive schooling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

KINDNESS & NICENESS AS TOOLS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

White supremacy is at the core of U.S. liberal society and its institutions (Feagin & Ducey, 2018). Rather than granting equal rights to all people, at its foundation, the U.S. is structured by a racial contract to maintain the supremacy of whites (Mills, 2017). As a system of domination, white supremacy "...does not just privilege whites but is also run by whites for white benefit" (Mills, 2017, p.117). In the context of schools and teacher education settings, white supremacy is evident in what counts as official school knowledge (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016; Love, 2019), which constitutes the numeric majority of teachers and teacher educators (Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001) and who receives access to educational resources and opportunities.

Illuminating the inner workings of structural racism, critical race theory (CRT) is a lens well-suited to make visible racism's permanence and white supremacy's embeddedness within U.S. institutions (Bell, 1993; Crenshaw, 1995; Harris, 1993). As a field of study that emerged from critical legal studies, CRT in education uncovers the manifestations of structural racism in schooling along historical, institutional, and interpersonal levels (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano, 1998). Through the key tenets of CRT, we center race and racism, amplify the experiential narratives of students, teachers, and teacher educators of Color, and produce scholarship that works to shed light on and transform unequal educational conditions. With this focus

on uncovering power, we are better able to unpack the pervasiveness of niceness and kindness in elementary teacher preparation.

Scholarship underscores that kindness and niceness in schools are mechanisms that enable white supremacy and whiteness in K-12 schooling. Pascoe's (2023) ethnographic study examines what she terms the "regime of kindness" in secondary schools, a culture that seems to include a commitment to confronting injustice but that effectively reproduces it by allowing structural inequalities to continue unchecked (p.24). In Castagno's (2014) ethnographic study, niceness is defined by the ideals of neutrality, compassion, and equality—ideals that are bound to whiteness and that work to fortify racial inequity. Whiteness is upheld through the norms and practices of niceness, which include "silence around issues of racism, homophobia, and sexism; coded language that allows for the discussion of 'others' while not actually naming them as such; and the general avoidance of potentially uncomfortable or controversial conversations" (Castagno, 2019, pp. xi-xii). Indeed, Castagno (2019) demonstrates that niceness is not a passive approach but an active silencing of the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. Illuminating how niceness functions to uphold ideological and structural oppression, Castagno (2019) notes:

Within a frame of Niceness, oppressive actions are not actually oppressive; they are just hurtful. They are therefore assumed to be the result of individuals who have made bad choices or who just do not know any better. This framing diverts attention away from patterned inequity, structural oppression, and institutional dominance. But structural phenomena cannot be addressed with individual explanations. Inequity thrives when we limit our understanding of it to individual intentions, knowledge, instances, and interactions. (Castagno, 2019, pp. xi-xii)

Given niceness' function as an effective tool to obscure structural inequity, hamper meaningful systemic change, and uphold whiteness, its presence within teacher education serves a similar purpose.

NICENESS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Bissonnette (2016) interrogates the concept of "niceness" and, specifically, the culture of niceness in teacher education, which functions to uphold whiteness and stifle culturally responsive teacher preparation. Bissonnette finds that niceness "allows [pre-service teachers] to offer 'nice,' liberal-oriented insights without truly engaging in the complex, arduous, self-reflection processes culturally responsive teaching requires" (2016, p. 10). Bissonnette (2016) exposes and critiques this culture of niceness while offering a blueprint for pedagogical approaches rooted in vulnerability and critical reflection. Relatedly, Reidel et al. (2024) found niceness to be a significant barrier to teacher educators' willingness to enact culturally relevant pedagogy. The teacher educators in their Professional Learning Community expressed wanting to avoid what they perceived to be difficult and uncomfortable discussions and instead opted "to be nice" (p. 268). Similarly, Harris (2024) employs the concept of 'bad faith' to describe how niceness functions in teacher education to hinder teacher preparation for culturally responsive teaching. Gardiner et al. (2023) add a gendered analysis by arguing that niceness is a "shared disposition" amongst white women to protect their comfort and release them from a responsibility to dismantle inequality (p. 91).

Collectively, these studies offer fertile ground for interrogating the notions of kindness and niceness in education. As highlighted in the literature, kindness, and niceness are constructs that work to protect white comfort and uphold white supremacy while stifling critical and emancipatory approaches to teaching. Still, the majority of studies center the perspective of white researchers and teacher educators. The current study creates space for pedagogues/ researchers of Color to shift towards concepts of care in their work with a majority student of Color pre-service population. To this end, we look to the literature on care, specifically critical and authentic forms of care. Foundational work by Noddings (1984, 1992), Valenzuela (1999, 2008), and Pascoe (2008) (discussed below) help us articulate a pedagogical approach that opposes regimes of kindness and offers possibilities to challenge the workings of power and injustice in our schools and in our world.

SHIFTING FROM NICENESS AND KINDNESS TOWARDS CARE

Several researchers have made valuable contributions to our understanding of care in education (e.g., Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; DeNicolo et al., 2017; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Pham et al., 2024; Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Roberts, 2010; Rolón-Dow, 2005). Here, we review foundational studies describing the role of care in education and literature describing possibilities for care as transformative work.

Noddings (1984) conceptualizes care in the classroom as a relational and reciprocal act whereby teacher and student enact care through meaningful interactions and within an environment grounded in physical and emotional safety. Noddings (1984, 1992) distinguishes between two types of care: aesthetic care and authentic care. Aesthetic care prioritizes things, objects, and ideas, while authentic care focuses on people and relationships. Extending Noddings' (1984) work, Valenzuela (1999) investigates the concept of care in her ethnographic study centering Mexican-origin youth while re-emphasizing the role of trust, vulnerability, and reciprocity among students and teachers. In defining authentic care, Valenzuela adds an important dimension: centering discussions related to race, power, and difference. In later work, Valenzuela (2008) expands on this articulation of authentic care when she names *politically aware authentic caring* as comprehensive (attending to students' material, physical, psychological, cultural, and spiritual needs) and driven by a commitment to social justice and community well-being. Relatedly, DeNicolo and colleagues (2017) articulate what they call *cariño conscientizado* to identify a praxis based on care, which, they argue, is necessary when disrupting educational inequity and creating a sense of belonging for immigrant-origin youth. Finally, to challenge the regime of kindness that offers a superficial notion of care, Pascoe (2023) argues that a *politics of care*, "an approach to issues of power, resource distribution, and public morality that centers human needs...and disparities in institutions and organizations" (p.29) can do more to challenge inequality than individual approaches such as kindness.

This scholarship connects care and critically informed/infused practice. Several related studies offer valuable articulations of culturally relevant care (e.g., Hambacher & Bondy, 2016; Parsons, 2005; Watson et al., 2016), but these were less aligned with our focus. The present framework emphasizes transformative and liberatory praxis that is deeply connected to and informed by students' (pre-service teachers of Color) and our (teacher educators of Color) shared funds of knowledge. Like Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002), whose conceptualization of womanist care in education centers on African American women's histories, identities, and advocacy work, our understanding of care is unique in that it is rooted in our knowledge and identities. Indeed, our critical care grows out of and is nurtured by our students' and our own funds of knowledge. What follows underscores the link between critical care and funds of knowledge.

CONNECTING CARE AND FUNDS OF KNOWLEDGE

Wolf (1966) first conceptualized "funds of knowledge" to name and recognize the resources and knowledge(s) utilized by household members for survival in the household economy (Hogg, 2011). Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992), as well as Moll et al. (1992), further developed this concept in their work centering on Mexican-American families and households. This work marked a significant shift in the ways Mexican-American culture and language were typically characterized in education research. Where most researchers viewed Mexican students and families as deficient and lacking educational resources and knowledge, Moll and colleagues' (1992) work prompted teachers to recognize and value the cultural and linguistic resources originating from students' homes. The idea was that teachers could potentially draw on these assets in the classroom to support learning and create home-to-school connections.

Building on this foundation, Newcomer (2018) conceptualized "funds of caring" as "the ways in which authentically caring and culturally responsive relationships between teachers and students can build emotional, social, and academic resources for [culturally and linguistically diverse] students" (p. 182). Newcomer (2018) explores how two dual-language Latinx teachers enact culturally relevant pedagogy,

draw from students' funds of knowledge, and cultivate authentically meaningful relationships with their Latinx middle school students. Specifically, students expressed that they felt safe, cared for, and supported by their teachers because of their shared experiences with immigration, language learning, and discrimination (p. 189). It follows that an important feature of their "funds of caring" was their teachers' ability to draw from their experiential knowledge to address issues related to power and injustice. Below, we extend Newcomer's (2018) notion of "funds of caring" through a pedagogical approach grounded in critical praxis and enacted by teacher educators of Color teaching and learning alongside pre-service teachers of Color.

CRITICAL FUNDS OF CARING PEDAGOGICAL FRAMEWORK

CRITICAL FUNDS OF CARING PEDAGOGY AND TEACHER EDUCATORS OF COLOR

We define *critical funds of caring pedagogy* as a pedagogical approach that draws from our racialized experiences in schools, our cultural backgrounds and histories, and our identities as people of Color to build meaningful, reciprocal relationships with students. Through this approach, we support our students' praxis-oriented critical teacher agencies.

This framework emerged from our experiential knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2020) as (1) people of Color who have and continue to experience racialization (Omi & Winant, 2015) and (2) as teacher educators of Color who have worked within the field of teacher education for over 11 years (first as graduate student TA's and instructors of record for the "diversity" and foundations courses at our respective universities, then as contingent faculty members in teacher education programs and now as tenure-track faculty). Additionally, this pedagogical framework is rooted in the idea that teacher educators of Color bring unique and valuable knowledge and experiences. These "critical funds" are born of our cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) and experiences navigating white institutions. Moreover, they are motivated by a deep care for community that goes beyond supporting students to earn a passing grade, a credential, or a degree. We are working

towards collective liberation. Given the current political climate, this commitment to the first-generation students of Color in our classrooms and the second and third generations feels even more urgent than ever.

As part of our commitment to continue to develop as critical pedagogues, we engage in *praxis pláticas* (Jimenez, 2020) to think through, dialogue, and cultivate our critical funds of care. While we teach our students to recognize, value, and draw from their funds of knowledge, we simultaneously draw from and sustain our own funds of knowledge. Therefore, this framework is specifically by and for teacher educators of Color. Emerging from our experiential knowledge as teacher educators of Color and our ongoing critical reflection of our pedagogy, we offer critical funds of caring to articulate the work we do in developing students' critical teacher agency.

CRITICAL FUNDS OF CARING PEDAGOGY AND PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS OF COLOR

The majority of students in our program are first-generation, linguistically-minoritized students of Color whose working-class families have generations-long ties to the region. Located in an agriculture-rich part of the Southwestern U.S., the university where our program is housed has been designated a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). 65% of students within our program are Chicanx/Latinx, 23% are white, 5% are Asian American, and 7% are labeled under the category of "other." Black/African American and American Indian are not represented. Within Chicanx/Latinx, the largest minoritized group in our program, the majority of students are of Mexican origin. Some of the home languages that make up the linguistic repertoires of our students include Spanish, Hmong, Vietnamese, and variations of these.

Our students have had to navigate a context marked by strict racial and class hierarchies whereby agricultural business and wealth are concentrated in the hands of wealthy, white farm owners while the majority of exploited laborers are of Mexican or Hmong origin. Though most of our students are eager to learn about and name both their funds of knowledge and their experiences with oppression, the range with which they respond to connecting critical dialogue with transformative action as they challenge the discourses of kindness and niceness varies

considerably. Socialized under the regimes of kindness and niceness, many of our students believe that giving equal weight to “both sides” of an issue and never taking a firm, critical, activist stance is the most just approach. As such, the intentional disruption of the cultural norms of kindness and niceness is necessary to guide them in engaging and activating their critical teacher agency.

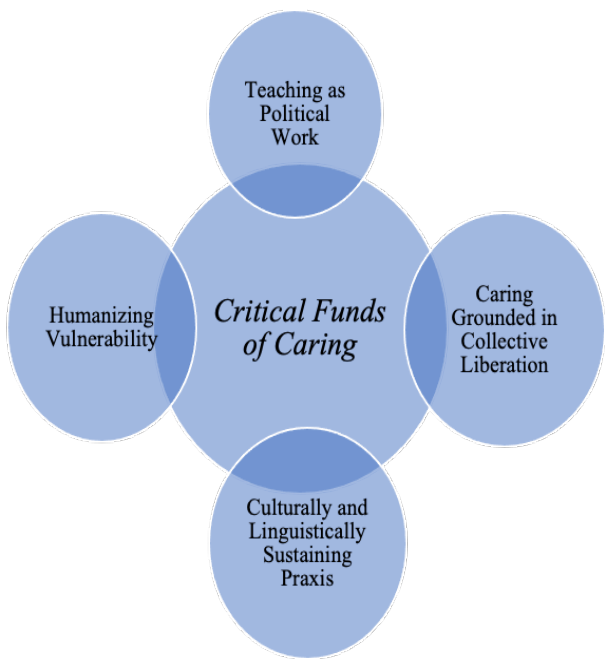
Though students of Color comprise the plurality of the students we serve, our program and the college are shaped by a pervasive culture of whiteness (Sleeter, 2001; 2017), where niceness and kindness are deployed in the service of white comfort. White faculty make up the majority of faculty members and are overrepresented in departmental, college, and university-level leadership positions. Aside from a few informal affinity group spaces, white, middle-class, monolingual norms are valued and centered across our college and program. Within our college, the dominant cultural model around niceness and kindness is highly valued and utilized to evade addressing injustice and oppression in substantive ways. Our colleagues are outwardly caring, polite, and cordial, but uncomfortable with transforming the embedded policies and practices within our college that contribute to the harm of minoritized youth and communities and impede the establishment of a culture of social and racial justice. For example, while there is a surface-level acknowledgment of the value of social justice, there is a lack of coursework for teacher credential students that supports their development of justice-driven pedagogies and teaching practices. There is also a lack of faculty— and indeed a staunch opposition within hiring committees to bring in such faculty— with the expertise to teach this coursework.

As junior scholars who are the only Chicanx faculty members in our department and who are part of a handful of critical faculty of Color within our college, we are unapologetic about teaching our courses through a direct analysis of power and structural injustice. While the labor we take on to disrupt the regimes of kindness and niceness often goes unacknowledged and puts us in a vulnerable position that constrains the exercising of our own critical agency as teacher educators of Color, we are committed to continuing this critical work.

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF CRITICAL FUNDS OF CARING PEDAGOGY

In what follows, we describe the four components of our critical funds of caring framework that aim to confront the regimes and discourses of niceness and kindness within teacher education: (1) teaching as political work, (2) caring grounded in collective liberation, (3) humanizing vulnerability and (4) culturally and linguistically sustaining praxis. Accompanying the description of each of the pedagogical components, we include questions that teacher educators can utilize to facilitate student dialogues, foster praxis orientations, and cultivate students’ critical teacher agency.

Figure 1
Critical Funds of Caring Pedagogy



Teaching as political work. At the core of critical funds of caring is the understanding that education is inherently political because education is situated within larger historical, social, and political

contexts (Freire, 1970; Gutiérrez, 2008) and reflects the unequal distribution of power and resources in our world. As follows, teaching is a political act. Underscoring the political nature of teaching, Nieto (2006) notes,

Teaching is political in the sense that power and privilege – through decisions about funding, curriculum, class size, testing, tracking, and other matters– exacerbate rather than ease social class and race inequalities. In effect, then, education helps determine the life chances of young people based on their identities and zip codes (p.1).

It is essential to enact care that is motivated by the knowledge of “what the stakes are” for minoritized youth and the praxis to transform those unjust conditions. The concept of praxis – the ongoing interaction between dialogue, reflection, and action towards the transformation of oppression (Freire, 1970) – is essential as it emphasizes our collective agency to work toward liberation. For Freire, the mark of true education is not simply learning for the sake of learning but learning to transform the world into a more just, equitable place, knowing not only how to read words but also how to read worlds (Freire, 1970). Critical pedagogy is thus foundational in guiding us to develop future teachers’ critical teacher agency, or their capacity to become pedagogues who are adept at disrupting the racialized structures of schooling, which detrimentally impact the lives of minoritized students, their families, and communities.

As Pascoe (2023) notes, part of the regime of kindness is the policing or silencing of what is deemed “political” (i.e., issues related to social injustice and talk that addresses systemic inequalities) (pp. 19-21). The expectation to not disrupt the institutional norm of kindness and niceness by broaching uncomfortable or “controversial” topics that aim to draw attention to or transform systemic injustices can then be a powerful force that works to stymie critical teacher agency. Challenging the dominant culture’s conformity to injustice, coloniality, and institutional racism by cultivating critical awareness of unjust social, political, and economic conditions in learners’ lives (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2008) is paramount.

To support our students and challenge the regimes of kindness and niceness that attempt to curtail their critical teacher agency, we provide students with examples of transformative elementary teacher pedagogy and curricular design to support their students in engaging in the process of praxis. For example, after assigning Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and articles such as "Action Research for Environmental Justice in the Kindergarten Classroom" (Waite, 2022) and "Why's Everyone White? Moving Toward Critical Pedagogy in an Elementary Classroom" (Kersten, 2006), some questions that are useful for supporting students with reflecting and dialoguing on what critical teacher agency looks like at the classroom level include,

- What is/are the "real world" problem(s) that elementary students researched and learned about?
- How did the teacher support students with "reading" injustice in their communities? What teaching tools did the teacher utilize?
- What were the critical consciousness and social action components in their learning?
- What problems in your schools, neighborhoods and communities need to be addressed and how can you imagine guiding your future elementary students through Freire's loop of praxis?
- What are examples of ways you and others in (y)our communities struggled and resisted against interpersonal and/or institutional oppression?

Moreover, towards challenging a "neutral" stance to teaching that emerges from the culture of kindness and niceness in teacher education, we implement culture circles for elementary educators within our curricula following Souto-Manning's (2010) six-stage process of *conscientization*. Modeling this teaching practice that begins with naming the most urgent needs in the lives of our learners, identifying the root causes of the problem, and finally designing a plan for action towards the transformation of the injustice provides students with a practical tool in their social justice elementary teaching toolbox.

Caring grounded in collective liberation. To authentically care for our students means that we see our struggles, joys, history of resistance, and possibilities for liberation as interconnected. Beginning with indigenous people resisting colonization to people of Color resisting segregation in society and schools and pushing for racial and economic justice, with our students we highlight the histories and possibilities of collective organizing. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) underscores how good teaching doesn't simply empower us with critical thinking, but it enhances community connection and that it is through mutual participation that the revolutionary possibilities of transformation come into being, "As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (p.8). We work alongside students to identify and name oppression and to validate their experiences with injustice while guiding them to see the knowledge and strength in our communities. It can be both an empowering and a painful process, but it is one that is hopeful as they come to recognize their power and agency.

And, indeed, love is at the heart of our pedagogy. As Freire (1970) articulates, "No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is a commitment to their cause – the cause of liberation." (Freire, p.89). Because we love our students, we want them to gain a deep awareness and understanding of the world around them, to see their own power and brilliance, and to bring their full selves and complex identities. This requires honesty, vulnerability, and drawing from our own *testimonios*-narratives related to our experiences with injustice, oppression, and resistance (discussed below). Indeed, truly caring for and valuing our students/future teachers requires that we offer an education that is founded on what Freire (1970) describes as "true solidarity," where we work in the community to free ourselves and our communities from oppression (pp. 49-50). Beyond supporting our students to meet the academic markers of success, we are invested in guiding our students to recognize the potential for liberation through education. Questions that guide our dialogues and engagement with preservice teachers' thinking about collective liberation in relation to critical teacher agency include,

- How can we create critical educational spaces that dismantle oppression and build community across difference?
- How do we think about and include parents, our elders and community members in our visions and praxis for change?
- What is our role as educators in transforming the world? In creating education for liberation?

Humanizing vulnerability. Humanizing vulnerability refers to the ways we strive to create spaces that recognize, value, and affirm our students' full humanity. We do this by working to resolve the student-teacher binary, recognizing that our students are also teachers who bring valuable knowledge and experience to our classroom (Freire, 1970). Our classrooms are also spaces of shared vulnerability. Given that our educational experiences are so closely tied to and shaped by the intersections of our race, class, and gender identities, we are intimately familiar with the ways schools work to subtract our rich linguistic and cultural resources, inflict trauma, and sever ties to our families and communities. Many of our students of Color carry trauma from their years of navigating systems of schooling that center and reproduce white supremacy. In our classrooms, we create space to share a full range of emotions that inevitably arise through the process of naming the oppressions we (as people of Color) experienced during our K-12 schooling. As professors who enact pedagogies of care, we model vulnerability through our narratives or *testimonios* as pedagogy, which "pieces together our mind, body, and spirit as well as our head, heart, and hands, and where teaching and learning are not disconnected, and theory and praxis are intrinsically dependent on each other" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p.368). As teacher educators of color, we have fought through, been pushed out of, earned accolades, and navigated our way through a U.S. schooling system that was founded on white supremacy. We know what it took for our students of Color to earn a seat in these institutions and recognize that a humanizing education is essential for their retention as well as their collective healing. Questions that prompt us to initiate reflexivity and vulnerability around our individual and shared humanity include:

- How do schools try to disconnect us from what makes us fully human?

- Who are the teachers we needed as P-12 students? How can we become those teachers?
- As people of Color navigating the U.S. education system, what parts of ourselves have we been forced to give up? How can we recover and repair these pieces of our identities?
- When it feels as though all of the injustices in our schools and in our worlds are overwhelming, what gives me hope? What gifts do I have to offer the world? My community? My classroom?

Culturally and linguistically sustaining praxis. A culturally and linguistically sustaining praxis involves drawing from our cultural and ancestral knowledge to connect with students, center their knowledge(s) and experiences, and weave together our stories of struggle and resistance. This is neither a linear nor top-down process. Following the practice of authentic care, our cultural and linguistic exchanges are reciprocal and mutually sustaining. While affirming our students' traditions, languages, cultural practices, and community memories (all of which are constantly evolving), our culturally-based knowledge is also being affirmed and sustained. We engage this work by guiding students to recognize their own and each other's community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) – the various and overlapping cultural and linguistic resources that enable them, as students of Color, to navigate a white supremacist schooling system. This is especially important as the literature highlights that teacher education continues to inflict epistemic violence on teacher candidates of Color (Souto-Manning et al., 2021) who find that their ways of knowing, speaking, and thinking are decentered and devalued in white teacher education (Leathers et al., 2024). Indeed, most of us experienced a U.S. educational system that was designed to subtract our cultural and linguistic resources to our academic and personal detriment (Valenzuela, 1999). By supporting our pre-service teachers' critical consciousness development and reclaiming of their cultural and linguistic resources and identities we simultaneously engage in a process of “re-membering within/against coloniality” (Zavala, 2016, p.3) and of recovering and sustaining our own familial, linguistic and cultural histories. Together, we create a teacher education classroom that de-centers whiteness and

uplifts our experiences, identities, languages, and knowledge(s) as people of Color. To guide our pre-service teachers in considering their role in affirming and sustaining their own and one another's cultural and linguistic resources, we ask:

- How are you working to sustain your cultures, traditions, and languages?
- How might we reclaim, restore, rebuild what was taken from us (through the ongoing, intentional, and violent processes of colonization and cultural genocide)?
- How do schools and educators contribute to the erosion and erasure of our rich cultural and linguistic resources?
- How might schools become sites for recovering and regenerating our cultural, linguistic, and ancestral knowledge?

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to articulate a pedagogical approach grounded in our experiences and identities as teacher educators of Color teaching future teachers of Color. What we identify as critical funds of caring is a braiding and extension of foundational theories and pedagogies rooted in care and transformative praxis, which recognizes the potential of education as a site for liberation. Kindness and niceness are institutional norms and educator practices within K-12, and teacher education upholds whiteness and stands in the way of equity (Castagno, 2019, p. 166). In this paper, we offer critical funds of caring pedagogy as a framework with the potential to challenge the way that these popular regimes and discourses mask the mechanisms of structural oppression. If we are truly committed to transforming educational injustice in substantive ways, there is a need to engage all stakeholders (i.e., teacher educators, program leaders, teachers, administrators, and community partners) with making visible and disrupting whiteness. Finally, in this work, we intentionally recognize the unique and valuable pedagogical work carried out by teacher educators of Color. In this way, we are also calling for institutions of higher education, and especially Minority-Serving Institutions, to hire, value, and support critical pedagogues of Color whose justice-centered

leadership and steadfast commitments to liberation are urgently needed now more than ever.

If the current political moment has taught us anything, it is that in the face of right-wing attacks on DEI, the dehumanization of im/migrant and linguistically-minoritized communities, the banning of books affirming of non-dominant students’ identities and experiences, the push for hateful anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and the looming threat of the dismantling of public education, kindness, niceness and superficial appeals to social justice is not enough in K-12 schools and they are definitely not enough in teacher education programs. To collectively work towards transformative structural change for a truly emancipatory education we must follow the lead of teacher educators of Color who are uniquely positioned to lead and who engage in this critical, transformative work rooted in our deep connections to and love for our communities.

TABLE 1
Questions to Support Critical Teacher Agency through A Critical Funds of Caring Approach

Critical Funds of Caring Component	Guiding Questions
<i>Teaching as Political Work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is/are the “real world” problem(s) that elementary students researched and learned about?• How did the teacher support students with “reading” injustice in their communities? What teaching tools did the teacher utilize?• What were the critical consciousness and social action components in their learning?• What problems in your schools, neighborhoods and communities need to be addressed and how can you imagine guiding your future elementary students through Freire’s loop of praxis?• What are examples of ways you and others in (y)our communities struggled and resisted against interpersonal and/or institutional oppression?

<p>Caring Grounded in Collective Liberation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can we create critical educational spaces that dismantle oppression and build community across difference? • How do we think about and include parents, our elders and community members in our visions and praxis for change? • What is our role as educators in transforming the world? In creating education for liberation?
<p>Humanizing Vulnerability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do schools try to disconnect us from what makes us fully human? • Who are the teachers we needed as P-12 students? How can we become those teachers? • As people of Color navigating the U.S. education system, what parts of ourselves have we been forced to give up? How can we recover and repair these pieces of our identities? • When it feels as though all of the injustices in our schools and in our worlds are overwhelming, what gives me hope? What gifts do I have to offer the world? My community? My classroom?
<p><i>Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Praxis</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you working to sustain your cultures, traditions, and languages? • How might we reclaim, restore, rebuild what was taken from us [through the ongoing, intentional, and violent processes of colonization and cultural genocide?] • How do schools and educators contribute to the erosion and erasure of our rich cultural and linguistic resources? • How might schools become sites for recovering and regenerating our cultural, linguistic, and ancestral knowledge?

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