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Motherhood and Teaching: Radical Care

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Synopsis

This essay is a personal reflection on how I leverage my positioning as a caregiver in my roles of a mathematician, teacher, and mother, to advance a vision for a more just and equitable society. I argue that care at home and in the classroom takes similar forms, and can be liberating instead of oppressive.

1. Introduction

The number of women who are mathematicians, college professors, and mothers is growing. We are becoming more visible in academia, and we are learning to walk more confidently on the tightrope among the worlds we occupy. However, the balancing is by no means easy and it is not yet possible to rest in the intersection of these worlds. In particular, we are still, by and large, expected to be caregivers in all aspects of our lives. If we do not mother our students efficiently, our course evaluations may suffer [13]; our colleagues may confuse our assertiveness with aggression; and our families may accuse us of being inadequate mothers and partners. I am aware that I am historically conditioned (I might even say coerced) into caregiving, and find these societal expectations oppressive and burdensome.

Yet, I find myself, a mother of two children and a mid-career mathematics educator, steeped in caregiving at work and home. The current state of the world gives me no choice but to take care of others, especially the most vulnerable ones: children, the marginalized, the discriminated against, and the minoritized. I have come to believe that this is a form of radical pedagogy, and that it is intertwined with the pursuit of justice.

In this essay, I describe this pedagogy of caring, explain what makes it radical, and argue that motherhood, mathematics, and teaching can all be forces for pursuing justice through this radical pedagogy of caring.

2. My journey

My formal training is that of a mathematician. I received a Ph.D. in Pure and Applied Logic and immediately abandoned research in the field to re-train in mathematics education. There were many reasons for this switch, a combination of interests, personal traits, and gender issues that are now impossible to disentangle. For one, I found the culture of mathematics research too competitive for my liking. I also really liked teaching, and was always disappointed by supervisors who labeled students as lazy and untrustworthy. My excessive enthusiasm for teaching was frowned upon by my advisor and professors, who were dismayed that I would choose a teaching postdoc over a research one; but I did, and spent the next four years learning about K-12 education, teacher training, and, most importantly for my vocational journey, about the intersections of mathematics, teaching, and social justice. I learned that mathematics is a critical tool for reading the world [10], as it allows us to view injustice through a quantitative lens.

This was relevant to me as I have always had a deep longing for justice. After my post-doctoral training, I got a tenure-track position at a liberal arts university whose mission is built around social justice, and have been there since. My teaching, research, and service revolve around justice and equity, and in the past few years I have been striving to become an effective anti-racist educator. As I have aged and become established in my position, I have become less afraid to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. I have always felt a deep affinity for the students I have taught, but now I know enough to look through additional lenses, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion, to better understand them.

I am and have always been a feminist. I took my share of Women's Studies courses in my twenties, and I work hard to empower women I work with. When I am worn out, I consider myself a bad feminist because I am a caregiver at work and at home. However, this has come to be my teaching and parenting philosophy. Before I make an argument for this philosophy, I will briefly discuss some things that get in the way of caring in the three realms I mentioned: mathematics, teaching, and motherhood.

3. Fear as obstacle

Americans are afraid of many things [8], and it is not surprising that in parenting, teaching, and mathematics (so in particular in teaching mathematics), there is much fear, and consequently a lot of need for control.

As every mathematician and mathematics teacher who was ever asked about their profession by a stranger can attest, people think that math is hard. They will unabashedly tell you that every chance they get. Because math is hard, people fear it, so much so that many develop math anxiety. Mathematics anxiety is a phenomenon that affects large numbers of children and adults alike. It is now believed to affect brain function, and is associated with lower mathematics performance [3, 19]. Research traces causes of math anxiety to social cues: children pick up negative attitudes about mathematics from their teachers and family members [3], as well as the society as a whole. In particular, in the U.S. there is a prevalent belief that only certain people can be good at math [5], which also affects children's and adults' attitudes toward it.

Similarly, parents claim that raising children is hard [9]. Every generation thinks that this is the most challenging time to raise children, and there is some evidence that today's parents may be right: they deal with high expectations put on parents (especially mothers), mommy wars, conflicting professional advice, not to mention the rise of hate speech and hate crimes, along with renewed prospects of nuclear war. Because parenting is hard, parents, especially new ones, become vulnerable to the fear-based parenting advice [6]. Proliferating parenting books, selling in large quantities, profit from parental anxiety and offer contradictory advice. Books whose titles include phrases such as "the collapse of parenting" [17], "what parents need to know to keep their children safe" [1], or "ten days to a less defiant child" [4] often suggest strict regimens as answers to parenting problems. If only it were that simple.

Educators nationwide can attest to the fact that teaching is hard, and not just because of the ongoing attacks on K-12 [16] and higher education [11, 14]. Our workdays do not end at 5pm, and competing demands of teaching, research, and service in higher education often make academics feeling scattered and frazzled. Because teaching is hard, we might succumb to fear-based teaching, and the "us versus them" mentality, where we keep our distance from students because perhaps we fear them too.

One fear-based response to adversity is creating stricter rules. We might believe that if we are the authority, if we are in charge, as educators and parents, then there will be no problems. That we have to be strict with children, and we have to be strict with college students. Some of us even teach mathematics as a strict set of rules to be memorized. But what if, instead of being afraid of uncertainty, we decided to embrace the messiness of parenting and teaching? And what if, instead of viewing them as hard, we embraced parenting, teaching, and mathematics with joy? And, finally, what if, instead of *fear of* the other, we practiced *care for* the other? As I write this essay, the movie *Won't you be my neighbor* about the life of Mr. Rogers, who is best known for his unwavering belief in care for others, is playing in theaters. Reviewers are describing the movie's message as subversive, and one reviewer writes the following:

The film succeeds on the radically subversive and obvious notions we learned when we were children: that being nice is not a weakness; that speaking with care is a thing we do simply because we believe the person we're talking to is a human being with worth and dignity. What's most startling about *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, and what makes it feel almost elegiac, is how very jarring that message feels. [20]

This essay proposes care for others as an antidote to fear-based living, parenting, and teaching. As the above quote suggests, in the present moment, this has become a radical, even subversive notion.

4. Framework

One could argue, and rightfully so, that there is nothing new about caring: it is what is expected of mothers and of teachers alike, though perhaps less so in a mathematics classroom. Bartell's work [2] is instructive in understanding what types of caring can be considered radical. She describes caring as a process and moral stance, and cites previous research that shows how proper caring can contribute to student learning. Bartell focuses primarily on K-12 education and affirms that many teachers go into this profession due to their desire to care for children. However, teacher care can often be damaging, especially if it is colorblind or if it sees children as needing to be saved.

Bartell uses the term “caring with awareness,” which closely corresponds to the term “radical care” used here. Bartell describes teaching with care as follows:

Teachers that care with awareness know their students well mathematically, racially, culturally, and politically. They work to understand and make connections with students’ cultures and communities; help students develop positive racial, cultural, and political identities; reflect critically on their own assumptions and practices about students’ cultures and communities, including rejecting and confronting deficit and colorblind perspectives; and labor to neutralize status differences within and beyond the classroom walls. Teachers that care with awareness engage in discussions of race and racism with their students, listen for counter-narratives that might help shape a more caring bond between them and their students, and stand in solidarity with students. They use the knowledge gained from all of these avenues to support students’ academic success, accessing students’ existing mathematical and cultural knowledge and scaffolding tasks based on where students are to engage them meaningfully in building new mathematics knowledge.

This description beautifully captures the type of care I strive for in my classroom: it is not charity, it is not weak, and it is not easy. It requires self-education, reflection, and courage. In the next section I will describe some ways in which I practice this pedagogy, noting that it is aspirational and not a destination one ever fully gets to.

5. Radical care

The definition of *radical* I am using here is one found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: “very different from the usual or traditional” [15]. According to this definition, all care can be considered radical because so much of what we see in the news and social media these days seems to be the opposite of care.

I teach at a medium-sized private liberal arts university. My students hold varying amounts of privilege; certainly the mere fact that they are attending an institution with a sizeable tuition is a form of privilege.

However, the amount of privilege students hold has changed in the ten years I have been there. Whereas once most students lived on campus, had at most one job, and had ample time to do homework, now they work multiple jobs, live off-campus, raise children, have terminally ill parents, or suffer from a variety of mental health issues, to name a few. Many deal with micro and macroaggressions on a daily basis. My students' lives are messy. My classes have been attended by babies, dogs, service cats, and my own children.

I find teaching and parenting messy. One can attempt to keep chaos at bay by abiding by strict rules: never accepting late homework or keeping to fixed mealtimes and bedtimes. I do neither, and have instead learned to embrace the mess. Once, most university professors were White men wearing ties, there was silence in the classroom and the professor was the supreme authority. Once, a guiding principle for parents was that children were to be seen and not heard. These are no longer the case, and I for one rejoice.

My classroom and home are as democratic as institutions can be where one person holds more power than the rest. In many ways, they are remarkably similar. In both spaces, I demand caring for each other, working together, answering each other's questions, viewing each other as experts. We talk about complex issues such as taking a knee, stereotyping and bias, or disrespect for the teaching profession. I cry. I reflect on my practice. I listen a lot, and try to understand: for example how the system is failing my students of color, or how my children are hurting. And whatever I do, I always strive to help develop critical thinkers and compassionate doers, who will strive to dismantle systems of oppression. This also means that talking back is a given, that rules are negotiated, and that I am not always right, and am certainly not always in control.

I have found that teaching the whole student helps retention and performance; and that raising the whole child strengthens relationships and reduces conflict and frustration. I do not expect that students will leave behind their personal lives when they enter my classroom. If I only have high expectations of those who have settled lives, then I am not attending to equity, and I am not practicing education as liberation, but instead perpetuating the status quo. Instead, I allow students to redo certain assignments for a better grade, encourage multiple drafts on bigger assignments, and no longer require class attendance. I changed my attendance policy after a few semesters with students who were pregnant, giving birth, having child custody trials,

or had cars that failed to start approximately once a week. These policies do not mean allowing for excuses or inadequate work; in fact, I have found that students are willing to work harder and produce better work given the opportunity to attend to their lives while being enrolled in my class. This is consistent with research that shows that high expectations [12] and knowledge of students' life circumstances [2] contribute to their academic success. Furthermore, I have found that care for their well-being helps my math anxious students, and even sometimes allows them to experience joy in doing mathematics.

I have been able to do the same with my children. In particular, my older child has not had an easy time at school. A quirky, intelligent, socially awkward, and anxious child, he had difficulties getting along with other children, and even got suspended multiple times in kindergarten over reactions to classmates' teasing. As an educator, I was devastated that my own child would have trouble at school. But as I learned to hold students to a high standard while taking into account their unique situations, I was able to do the same with him: I learned to work with his strengths and hold him accountable while always having compassion for his difficulties. I learned to be an advocate for him before criticizing him, and helped him develop tools to succeed. Just like my students, he responds poorly to criticism, but he responds to high expectations with high performance. Our relationship has been strengthened as a result.

I too own many parenting books, and I have had many doubts over the years about whether I was an adequate parent. I too have succumbed to student blaming when classes did not go well. On most days, however, I strive to embrace the uncertainty and vulnerability that caring for others brings rather than making decisions from a place of fear, and I believe that I am a better teacher and parent for it.

6. Mathematics and Justice

The previous discussion connected motherhood and teaching through care, but I have yet to explain where mathematics and justice fit in. Is mathematics related to justice? Is justice related to motherhood? For me, the answer to both questions is a resounding *yes*: mathematics, teaching, motherhood, and social justice are all fully intertwined. I see my work in striving to uplift my students, especially those who are historically minoritized, and in raising my

children with respect and acceptance, as building a foundation in care. Once that foundation is built, the only thing to do is to join with young people in building a just world.

Mathematics plays a crucial part in all this. As Francis Su declared in his final lecture as MAA President [18], we should love mathematics for its truth and beauty, but we should never forget justice. We need to keep justice in mind when deciding who we label as a mathematician (and who we leave out), who to allow into our upper-division courses, whose voice to seek out in the classroom, and whose version of mathematics we teach. At the same time, mathematics itself is a powerful tool for recognizing injustice [10]. Just about any issue of justice, power, and oppression currently in the news has a direct link with mathematics; consider for example gerrymandering, minimum wage, police brutality, and income and wealth inequality. Many of these topics show up in my classes: we have used mathematics to analyze numerous issues, including incarceration, gender pay gap, minimum wage, teacher pay, and myths about crime [7]. Once this quantitative lens is turned on, it can never be turned off again. I have taught my students and children alike to be skeptical of claims based on quantitative data, as well as to ask for numbers when they are missing from the conversation, as exemplified by the following excerpt from a final reflection in a quantitative literacy course: “I learned to not trust all statistics I see and to do the math and research myself and then make my decision on whether or not to trust it.”

Care is of utmost importance in discussions about mathematics and justice as well, as not all students are in the same place regarding their experiences with oppression or willingness to acknowledge it. Although successfully facilitating difficult conversations in the classroom is challenging, creating a caring classroom environment in which these conversations can take place is a necessary foundation.

7. Conclusion

Of course, the work is uncomfortable, but it is also true that there is no growth without discomfort. I am a woman mathematician, which is certainly not as rare as it used to be, but is also not well accepted by everyone. Entering a classroom with the pedagogical approach that is not about survival of the fittest, that is not about who is fastest, quickest to raise his hand, or most

confident, is not easy; and I do not want to be perceived as too soft, too lenient, or the dreaded “too nice.” I sometimes get tired of course evaluations that praise my care and kindness, knowing that even though I strive to reinvent these terms, I am a product of countless generations of conditioning for being a caregiver. At the same time, I am indignant on behalf of some of my female-identified colleagues who refuse to play the traditional role, and are consequently punished by students and colleagues.

And, while I believe in having firm boundaries with children and students, I do not always succeed. I have put my well-being on the line for the sake of others, fully aware that I was being a poor role model by doing so. I have had my share of resentment, especially in moments of extreme fatigue at the end of 14-hour workdays, and 60+-hour workweeks: How much giving can one person do, and why are we not all asked to give in the same way?

Thankfully, most of the time I know the answer. As a highly educated White woman I may be set back by the patriarchy, but I am buoyed by other privileges I hold. To me, this means that I have a duty to show up every day for those who do not hold these privileges, and to help others with privilege learn to use it as a tool for building a better world: as a mathematician, as a teacher, and as a mother. I owe it to my children and to my students.

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