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Love for the Sound: Poetic Explorations into the Meanings Four String Teachers Ascribe to Care in the Studio Music Context

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Abstract

This study explores the complexities of caring for students in a music studio lesson. In this study, we engaged four experienced string teachers in in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore their understandings of caring for their students in studio music lessons. Caring and compassion are concepts that have received greater attention in music education literature in recent years. A critical turn in music education has accompanied this attention. We connect these two discourses through a theoretical framework of mature care as transformative practice. This framework is situated in

Pettersen's concept of mature care. We applied the listening guide method of qualitative research and the gateway approach to analysis to create four found poems based on semi-structured interviews held with four experienced South African string teachers. This article illustrates the complex nature of the meanings of care, and advocates for instrumental music teacher preparation that ensures instrumental music education is infused with an ethic of care.

Introduction

South African music education is still largely shaped by the inequitable policies that shaped education during apartheid (Drummond, 2015). To some extent, one could argue that the system employed in formal music education in South Africa, where students are expected to complete board examinations in both music performance and theory and where the public and private school curricula are primarily based on these examinations, is a remnant of South Africa's colonial past (Lucia, 2007). Van der Merwe (2019) describes the impact of these forms of assessment on South African secondary music education as uncaring practices that serve to maintain structural inequities. Despite these assertions, we also know from personal and professional experience that many South African music teachers care for their students and that this care manifests in their interactions during individual music lessons. Caring for a student during a music lesson may entail working with repertoire that is culturally affirming to the student (Hess, 2020) or acknowledging the hidden curriculum in many music examinations and explicitly teaching students about this hidden curriculum (Elliott & Silverman, 2014). However, negotiating what caring for one's students means within a biased and colonial system (Carver, 2017; McConnachie, 2021) remains a complex task. Therefore, this study aimed to understand the meaning four experienced string teachers ascribe to care in the context of studio music lessons.

Development of the Concept of Care in Music Education Literature

Noddings (2013) is viewed as one of the foundational educational philosophers considering the implications of an ethic of care for general education. Her conceptualization of an ethic of care has influenced the framework for compassion in music education (Hendricks, 2018) and the concept of selffulness in music education (Silverman, 2012). Through these works, the concepts of caring and compassion have received greater attention in music education literature in recent years (Hendricks, 2017; Silverman, 2012; Van der Merwe, 2019). These authors' contributions to understanding the meaning of care in music education are founded on a relational ethical paradigm. Silverman (2013) builds on work by Pettersen (2012) to create a relational understanding of meaningfulness in music education that is informed by caring for the self and the other. The relational understanding of meaningfulness aligns with their discussion of selffulness, in which music education is not viewed as altruistic, but rather

as selfful when the teacher can also care for themselves through the practice (Silverman, 2012).

Interest in care and compassion has coincided with a deepened critical stance, wherein many music education practices that had previously been taken for granted have been critiqued as being hierarchical (Allsup, 2016), racist (Hess, 2017), classist (Bates, 2018), imperialist or colonial (Hess, 2015a), and sexist and heteronormative (Gould, 2013). This critical turn has also included acknowledging the relational damage and trauma that could result from oppressive music education contexts (Bradley & Hess, 2021). Furthermore, a growing awareness of trauma and the repercussions of trauma has influenced other relational concepts in music education and community music. Walzer (2021) highlights the impact trauma, particularly the traumatic events of COVID-19, have had on fostering eudaimonic relationships in music education contexts. Work in trauma-informed music education practices has also been supported by creating trauma-informed frameworks for community music practice (Birch, 2022).

We interpret the growth of critical pedagogies and frameworks as developments of music education practices as social praxes (Elliott & Silverman, 2014) informed by an ethic of care (Held, 2005; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993). The interest in care and compassion in music education cannot be disentangled from this critical turn. This entanglement is confirmed by Silverman's (2020, p. 7) assertion that a praxial approach to music education is focused primarily on creating socially just music education (considering the "why-what-how-where-when" of democratic music education) and motivated by an ethic of care. Thus, an ethic of care could be viewed as one possible relational worldview that can help instrumental music teachers understand the social transformation required within a studio lesson context, in order to pursue more equitable and just music education practices (Van der Merwe, 2019). This assertion is supported by Silverman (2020):

> From this viewpoint, musical mentors who are solely concerned with teaching instrumental musicking techniques are not engaged in praxis—ethical knowing, thinking, and doing—and praxial musical personhood formation. To promote a socially constructive and ethical musical personhood, musical mentors of all kinds must harness musical affordances with a conscious commitment to an "ethic of care" and care guided actions. (p. 7)

We believe this study contributes to instrumental music education and care discourse by providing significant insights into how experienced string teachers understand care within the studio music context. Exploring the meaning of their stories gave us insight into their worlds, helping us understand the frameworks they currently employ to care for their students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informed this study is derived from research which views care as a socially transformative practice (Boulton & Brannelly, 2015; Bozalek, 2015; Roberts, 2010). This framework is born out of feminist philosophy encapsulated in an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Tronto, 1993). Pettersen (2012) refers to care with transformative potential as mature care. Relational ontology forms the basis for mature care. Pettersen (2012) expresses this by stating that:

> With an alternative moral ontology, where the starting point is human connectedness and interdependency as it is in an ethics of care, the welfare and growth of one individual is seen as intertwined with the flourishing of others. This is also the assumption underlying the concept of mature care. (p. 370)

Relational ontology asserts that "what is always at work within relations [is] the effective presence of a founding and irreducible plurality" (Benjamin, 2015, p. 2). This irreducible plurality then means that the person cannot be untangled from the relational web in which they came into being. Therefore, the flourishing of the individual cannot be separated from collective flourishing (Silverman, 2020). In similar manner, care of the self cannot be disentangled from care of the other (Pettersen, 2012). However, mature care contributes to relational ontology by acknowledging that these relationships are not neutral (Held, 2005; Tronto, 1993). Instead, power structures (the result of many forms of relationality acting out in time and space) determine what kinds of relationships are valued and what kinds of knowledge carry value (Bozalek, 2015). Furthermore, these power structures also determine the different responsibilities various parties have to care for one another (Bozalek, 2015; Tronto, 1993). Bearing this in mind, the enactment of mature care may therefore align with self-compassion as affirmative politics (Hess, 2020). Furthermore, enacting mature care may also be described as practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy where the teacher cares for the student by "sustaining the cultural competence of their communities and dismantling coloniality within educational practices" (Good-Perkins, 2021, p. 47).

This theoretical framework shaped foundational assumptions in our study. The following section will discuss how these theoretical assumptions played out practically in our methodological choices.

Methods

Since we were interested in exploring individual teachers' in-depth understanding of a complex social phenomenon, following a qualitative approach was most applicable (Tisdell & Merriam, 2016). As music educators, we became interested in comprehending the act of caring for one's students, with hopes of improving music education practice. As a result, the main question guiding this study was: What are the meanings four experienced string teachers ascribe to care in the context of studio music lessons in South Africa? Since the theoretical framework assumes a critical or transformative worldview (Mertens, 2008), our

interpretations of these meanings were tinted by our understanding of the roles power and privilege play in society (Bozalek, 2015).

Our research approach within this study can be described as arts-informed basic qualitative inquiry (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014; Stake, 2005). This strategy of inquiry uses strategies informed by the creative arts to research complex social phenomena (Leavy, 2017). The use of arts-informed inquiry also aligns with feminist calls for recognizing alternative forms of knowledge production (Mertens, 2008). Furthermore, this form of inquiry allows for more equitable dissemination of research findings (Oliveira, 2019). We also believe that the practice of arts-informed research is well situated to honour the participants as competent and experienced music educators and excellent performers. The arts-informed research design we applied to this specific study was also chosen as a research method, as this study speaks to practicing mature care as transformative practice. One aspect of such a transformative practice is to disrupt positivist epistemological assumptions (Mertens, 2008). We believe that the arts-informed approach utilized in this study is one way of disrupting such positivist epistemological assumptions.

This study's data are comprised of semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 48 minutes. The interview protocol was used in our research as a guide; however, the topics covered in each interview were determined by the participant and what stories they were willing to share (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Three of the interviews took place in the participants' classrooms and the fourth was conducted over Skype. We used a responsive interviewing approach, viewing the interview as a dialogue, and as new information and insights came about, we adapted the interview protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). During the data collection process, we did not interfere with the participants' daily activities and teachings. The interviews were then conducted during a time of their choosing, and their insights were kept confidential. We assigned the participants pseudonyms, as they preferred to stay anonymous.

Purposive sampling was used (Schwandt, 2007). These four participants were selected due to their extensive experience, and knowledge regarding caring pedagogy ensuring that they were able to provide us with rich data (Schwandt, 2007). The participants are respected string teachers and who have a range of teaching experiences, including working in different institutions, and with different age ranges.

We used the listening guide method of qualitative research during the first coding cycle (Gilligan, 2015) as it has been shown to be effective when used to facilitate psychological discovery. The listening guide method of qualitative research was developed by Gilligan, a foundational figure in the feminist ethic of care. The assertion that relationality, subjectivity,

and power are fundamental to understanding care aligns with the listening guide's assumptions as a relational method of qualitative research (Gilligan, 2015).

The listening guide process involves four listenings. The first listening is listening for the plot. During this listening, we as researchers tried to locate ourselves and the participants on the physical and psychological map. The second listening is listening for the I-voice. Throughout the listening we isolated the I-voice and wrote the resulting voice in poetry. This step helped us to track the participant's emotional journey during the interview. In the third listening, we listened for contrapuntal voices, which is when we paid close attention to the cadence, pitch, tempo, and other expressive aspects of the participants' voices to analyse the voices present. This procedure led to an analysis we would compare to contrapuntal analysis, in which we isolated the voices and endeavoured to understand how they interact with each other. The fourth and final listening involves composing the analysis. For this listening, we revisited each of the previous steps to create a coherent narrative representation of the participant's experiences.

The gateway approach (Mears, 2009) was employed as the analysis technique during the second coding cycle. This analysis technique also aligns with feminist ethics of care and the transformative paradigm. We considered the use of the gateway approach particularly appropriate for this research as it focusses on revealing the true, human voice of the participants, which is the aim of this study. As Mears (2009) writes:

> The emergence of feminist research, postmodernism, post positivism, and similar research perspectives has focused heightened attention on the complexities of experience and the meaning making process, turning from a scientific model that quests for facts to support a reified truth and committing to an exploration of the varieties of experience and diversities of perception. With attention to the effect of power relationships on the research environment, qualitative researchers have shown a growing interest in narrative investigation. (Mears, 2009, p. 55).

The poems presented in the findings result from a combination of the listening guide and gateway analysis (Mears, 2009). This combined approach to analysis included a thorough rereading of the data. First, we identified important narrative portions informed by the first cycle coding. We then copied and pasted these narrative portions into a separate document. During the next reading of the data, we paid attention to repeated phrases or ideas. This section aligns with the listening for contrapuntal voices, but instead of listening for shifts in the recorded voice, we were reading for motives and the development of these motives. We arranged the data according to core ideas. Then, we reread the data and highlighted phrases or words that were meaningful or carried emotional weight. These phrases were arranged to create the poems presented in this article's findings.

Findings

The findings are presented in the form of found poetry (Prendergast, 2006). These poems may be viewed as a distilled version of the participants' voices. Presenting the findings in this form gives voice to the participants' experiences and provides the reader with a glimpse into the intricacies of cultivating caring relationships in music studio settings. We chose to present the findings as poetry since the typographical possibilities allowed us to clearly show the different listenings of the listening guide in the text. We highlighted the embedded I-poems by writing these I statements in bold. In this way, a reader could read the entire poem or isolate the I-voice. When reading the I-voice in isolation, the reader can follow how the participant places their subjective self within these stories. The "You-voice" was isolated by formatting these utterances in italics. We interpret this voice as fulfilling one of two roles (a) speaking with a moral authority (you should), or (b) shielding the I-voice by placing distance between the self and the experience. We used spacing to indicate how the participants' voices changed as they moved through descriptions of what they understood as being caring or uncaring instrumental education. Words and expressions related to caring, are found to the left of the poem, and uncaring words and expressions are found on the right. In this way, the reader could read the poem to experience the participants' voices in their contrapuntal entirety, or the reader could isolate a voice and read only this voice. Also, the act of reading poetry brings the contrapuntal voices we heard in the participant's stories to life.

Poem 1: Daisy: A shared love for the sound

A willingness to learn,
curious spirit,
attentiveness,
enthusiasm,
love for the sound

He was a hard taskmaster[1].
Not somebody **I got close to**.
Not scared of him.

He could be severe
made me practice.
A good player,
a very high standard

[1] We are aware of the weight of this term. However, we believe that keeping close to the participant's verbatim words reveals important aspects about the hierarchical nature of some instrumental music education settings.

for us.

I have a very high standard.
I do set the bar quite high.

It's very important
for her
to please the teacher,
to please her mum.

I love teaching her.
She cares for the music

I struggle with these conversations:
What are we doing here?
The relationship that we have is important to her

The individual child
in every lesson
in that moment.

Today is a new day,
a new chance.

I change the lesson,
I watch,
I change,
I adapt.

I know them well

I care about
good musicianship skills
a healthy human being

I love
responsibility,
an honour

How are you?
Trying to find a way in.
A relationship forming
before instruments.

Attending to the person
serving them,
caring for them.

Poem 2: Roxanne: Something can spark there

I got a little student.
absolutely loved it.
I've never stopped teaching.

In certain students there's
something that others don't have.
Doesn't matter if it's rough,
something can spark there.

He was not a slave driver[2]
Maybe **I didn't need** slave driving
I'm fairly diligent
He must have seen something in me

There's a time
when it's best to move on.

That is a bond that we built.
You help them through…
somewhere we had a
connection

What makes somebody tick?
If **I don't**
I can't

[2] We believe this is an instance where the participant had internalised the imperialist structures of the specific classical instrumental music education context to such an extent that these structures are mirrored in her language.

get inside
to help.

You have to go
where they are now.
walk the road with them

Loyalty
open and honest.

personal relationship.

A lot of baggage…
those lines
have to be crossed
with greatest caution.

If somebody comes to you in trust
don't push them away.

Poem 3: George: Love for the instrument

My father played the cello
I followed
Being a cellist is teaching.

Love for the instrument, music
Wanting to do it
Practice…
practice
practice.

I loved
I loved
My love was based on respect.

I'm a performer
who teaches.
Foremost,
I'm a cellist.

teaching.

The most amazing person.
She was
a parent
a caring human being.
a turning point for me.
I teach in that way.

I have a bit of both.
I really teach that to my students.
A bigger musical idea
a bigger phrase
to be engaging.

Everybody has technical limitations.
Technique is a means
to bring about a musical idea.

I have a very special relationship.
Institutions don't

As a teacher.
therapist
manipulator
abuser

You have a responsibility
not to go down that road.

Make it a caring

be receptive
listen, hear and feel.

I manage okay.
You need peace and quiet.
You need quality time with your instrument.
That is my main frustration.

Poem 4: Pablo: It becomes part of your body

Your own personal relationship with the instrument

. [3]
The way your body interacts
with the instrument

your personal experience
then you can help other people.

It was inevitable
one grew into that.
To interact with music
you learn to play an instrument.

He was
primarily a teacher
a good player
I became interested in emulating him.
very ambitious
very careful
very demanding.
He expected a lot.
You adapt.

The violin is
extremely personal
apart of your body.

Everybody has technical problems
Solving technical problems,
that's the learning process

You get into that person's body,
understand their technical problem,

[3] The floating period is intentionally used to give the reader time to think about what has just been read and what is to come.

help them

You start thinking from outside
an objectivity
reflects back on your own playing
solving problems

My philosophy as a teacher:
teach them how to teach themselves
They discover their own way
It's a journey of discovery

Playing the violin,
    your own competitor
training our reflexes
is extremely athletic

    Students that
    are demanding on themselves
    that are ambitious
    have complex personalities

Be careful,
make suggestions

You adapt to the student
The way you teach
adapting to the student
    You can't get the student to adapt to you,
    that's coaching
    a huge difference between teaching and coaching
    Coaching maybe also have its place
You must strike a balance
enough freedom
That makes musicians

You see their inclination
learn to develop that
Make a connection

pull up the rest of the person

You have to adapt

You get to know your student better,
it's a long-term relationship
they grow into the instrument
it's years and years of work

You get to know people
dealing with real intimate feelings
control it
You have to get very close

Discussion

In the discussion we respond to the research question posed at the beginning of this article: What are the meanings four experienced string teachers ascribe to care in the context of studio music lessons in South Africa? It is clear from our analysis that the participants in this study could practice truthful and mature care (Pettersen, 2012). The teachers interviewed in this study expressed that a shared love of sound could form a context in which caring musicking could take place. However, they were also aware of the fact that some instrumental music education contexts were harmful and uncaring. The participants also indicated that some instrumental music education contexts could be harmful to the teacher. This indicates that they are also looking for meaning and selffulness in their instrumental teaching practice.

Mature care and power when caring for students

Music educators, particularly music instrument teachers, develop an interest in the performance and technicalities of an instrument. However, as highlighted by Silverman (2020), merely cultivating technical expertise, and teaching technical excellence and mastery does not equate to caring and just music education. Pablo displayed a keen awareness of the distinction between educating in a caring manner and merely training students technically. Daisy and Roxanne also showed an awareness of the reciprocal relationship between the teacher and the student. However, George was the only participant who stated that instrumental teaching within the structures we currently work in South Africa in Western classical music was primed for abuse. This realization is, to some extent, also reflected in Roxanne's use of the term "slave driver" to refer to one of her music teachers. The need our participants expressed to circumvent these hierarchical norms in music education speaks to a growing awareness of the need for mature care as social transformative practice in music

studio contexts. To pursue more equitable and just music education methods, instrumental music teachers may find it helpful to adopt an ethic of care as one alternative relational worldview. This can help them grasp the social transformation needed within a studio lesson context. Although our participants did not directly speak to the more critical aspects of an ethic of care (Bozalek, 2015) and mature care (Pettersen, 2012), they did use language that reflects an awareness of the imperialism and possibilities for abuse within the instrumental teaching context. This awareness, albeit subconscious in the case of our participants, creates a responsibility to contribute to the continued development of our music praxes.

A shared love of sound as a meeting place for teachers and students

In this study, the participants often referred to a love of sound as a mutual meeting place for them and the students. The love of sound may be seen as the context in which mature care as transformative practice is rooted. A love of the sound may serve as a meeting point where the teacher is able to take responsibility for caring for the student by being responsive to their musical needs and employing their professional competence to guide the student towards meeting those needs (Bozalek et al., 2014).

The love of sound may speak to shared aesthetic values or shared musical contexts (Van Elferen, 2018). Although it aligned with our initial assumptions, the literature also indicates that timbral preference may not align with instrument choice (Kuhlman, 2005). However, the teachers we interviewed shared a connection with the unique timbre of their instruments with us. This love for the sound was central to their relationship-building with their students. We are therefore left wondering if nurturing caring relationships between these teachers and their students leads to the shared love of sound as space for caring or if the shared love of sound was the initial space for nurturing caring relationships.

Instrumental music education as a harmful space

Jacobs (2016) explained that music students experience an inner struggle within harmful teaching environments. This struggle relates to unnecessary stress and emotions they might experience due to their music lesson context. Jacobs (p. 112) portrays her participants as experiencing “an inner struggle within the student with not feeling good enough”, “branding a student as a teacher if not viewed as good enough for solo-performance”, and a need for “[m]ore support in the form of music-making opportunities.” Her research found that the relationship between a student and teacher can be sensitive and that negative experiences can severely impact the student’s musical development (Jacobs, 2016).

Practicing mature care as transformative practice requires that music teachers become aware of the possibilities for music education to cause harm (Elliott & Silverman, 2014). This research aligns with research on anti-racist music education (Hess, 2015b) and research on

music education and trauma (Bradley & Hess, 2021). Our participants highlighted the need for a personal connection with their students to ensure the supportive teaching environment. By being truly receptive to a student's feelings and emotions, the teacher could empathize with the student's lived experiences and better understand the individual in front of them. However, we assert that we cannot create genuinely supportive environments without questioning the very imperialist structures of instrumental music teaching in South Africa (Carver, 2017; Drummond, 2015; Lucia, 2007), as these outdated, imperialist systems in South African instrumental music education distort the meaning of caring in the desired teaching environment.

Relationality and reciprocity as central to the caring endeavor

The nurturing of caring relationships is central to practicing mature care as transformative practice (Bozalek, 2015; Pettersen, 2012). Three complex key elements are central to the process of nurturing caring relationships (Moen et al., 2020). First, teachers have to develop an interest in their students on a personal level; second, teachers have to be aware of the individuality of the student; and third, the teachers have to implement caring teaching techniques as part of the relationship's framework, such as planning and portraying caring measures. These insights were mirrored in the stories our participants shared. However, our participants also emphasized that instrumental music educators have expectations that they need their students to meet which will enable them to continue working in a caring way. The expectations included students showing commitment to a dedicated practice regime. Our participants also indicated that the love of the sound they shared with their students enabled them to continue working as caring music teachers.

Due to multiple stressful factors, teachers may suffer burnout at some point in their careers (Siebert, 2007). This may occur when teachers overstimulate their emotions, leading to severe fatigue, unnecessary anxiety, boredom and sometimes even depression. We assert that caring relationships between music teachers and students may counteract the stress and anxiety contributing to music teacher burnout by enhancing the selffulness of both the teacher and the student. This assertion aligns with literature on selffulness (Silverman, 2012). Selffulness is posed as an antonym for both altruism and uncaring, and captures the reciprocal nature of caring in instrumental music lessons. Silverman (2013, 2020) also indicates a relationship between finding meaning, and practicing mature care (Pettersen, 2012). Our participants emphasized the need to have a reciprocal relationship with their students. Loyalty and honesty form the foundation of an understanding relationship where the teacher wants the student to be as committed to learning the instrument as the teacher is to be teaching the student. When students develop musical independence through constructive and attentive teaching, students and teachers can find meaningfulness (Silverman, 2020) in their shared love of the sound.

Conclusion

Caring for students in the studio music lesson context is complicated. The imperialist structures within instrumental music teaching in the South African context further complicate what caring means in this context. Despite this study being situated in South Africa, we believe that the findings are transferable to international music education contexts, as many music teachers are expected to negotiate equally complex social structures. Negotiating this complicated context requires instrumental music teachers to practice mature care (Pettersen, 2012). The four participants' stories showed that they understood how individual music lessons could be caring spaces and that they had experienced uncaring spaces in individual music lessons. In addition, the participants indicated that they knew the possibilities for manipulation and abuse within the instrumental music teaching context. However, they only demonstrated awareness of the role of power structures (in the South African context we assert that this refers to the persistent imperialist structures governing instrumental music education) implicitly through their words.

An ethic of care may inform socially transformative musicking practices on a personal level for the teachers involved, within the professional studio lesson context. However, the participants in this study did not indicate that they were aware of the transformative potential of care, although they did indicate awareness of the hierarchical and, at times, oppressive nature of studio instrumental music education.

The findings of this study may speak to the need for further training on care in South African conservatories and schools of music. Hendricks' (2018) framework for compassionate music education may serve as a starting point for introducing these concepts to preservice instrumental music teachers. Selffulness and self-care are inseparable aspects of mature care (Silverman, 2012, 2013, 2020). Therefore, we encourage the further development of musician's health (Panebianco-Warrens et al., 2015) and mindfulness interventions (Botha, 2021) for future instrumental teachers.

Furthermore, it was clear that practicing care was a skill these teachers had to develop. This statement may speak to the need for preservice instrumental music teachers to gain more experience teaching in diverse contexts with the support of a mentor before they are expected to teach on their own. Despite some university pedagogy modules already including some of these opportunities, we assert that instrumental pedagogy lecturers could work more closely with general music educators and community music practitioners to provide more diverse preservice teaching opportunities for their students.
We also assert that the demands placed on string teachers in the South African context specifically necessitates the practice of mature care. Developing mature care may be

supported by providing undergraduate preservice instrumental teachers with introductions to critical social theory or critical pedagogies in general music education courses.

Through this exploration, we, as researchers, understood the role hierarchical (and in some cases imperialist) structures play in the participants' understanding of care. Furthermore, by understanding their students' stories, instrumental music educators can also better understand which strategies they could employ to promote transformative care in the string studio context in South Africa. We assert that this is a necessary step towards cultivating the socially transformative care explained above.

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