Nurturing Caring Relationships through Five Simple Rules

In my office I have a picture that reminds me the priority is the people we teach—not content, assessments, or compliance. The picture is of high school multilingual refugee students holding our published anthology of writing. One of these students is Camille. Surrounded by students from Southeast Asia, she is the only one from Africa. What most people notice is her clothing, a traditional African dress and head covering of bright blues and greens. However, what I notice every time I look at the picture is her eyes—they are not looking down, but are looking right at me, the picture-taker, with pride as she holds the book she co-authored.

During a summer program, the relationships I developed with these students became the central point of our learning, teaching, reading, and writing. These relationships might have been unlikely given that we were separated by a chasm of cultural, linguistic, experiential, and socioeconomic differences. Yet, the relationships nurtured the students’ remarkable literacy improvement—even for Camille, an unlikely candidate.

After seeing the final product of the program, the anthology, an administrator joked that I was a fairy who sprinkled magical dust on the students to get those results. But as I told him, I don’t have magic—I just play by the rules: five “simple rules” that set conditions for caring relationships to emerge (Tytel and Holladay). These simple rules, or guiding principles, mediated relationships with students, particularly Camille, and might be used to nurture relationships with all students in the ELA classroom.

Importance of Relationships with English Learners

Nel Noddings explains that caring relationships between the student and teacher should be the prime goal of education. Students must feel that they are more important and valuable to the teacher than the subject matter. Establishing the relationship before teaching, the teacher assumes the position that “I am first and always one-caring” (175). Noddings further asserts that students cannot effectively learn until they feel cared for. Therefore, teachers should first care for the students, then teach them even in light of standards-based reforms.

Surely all students benefit from caring relationships with adults in educational environments, but much research illustrates the high importance for English Learners (ELs). High school ELs are navigating adolescence while negotiating multiple cultures and languages. Some high school ELs are new to the country, perhaps coping with trauma, and in the midst of learning a new language and adjusting to a new life. Others have lived in the United States many years yet struggle in the classroom due to years of schooling that ignores their language and culture. Moreover, ELs might be more likely than mainstream students to face legal issues, poverty, and academic struggles. Ironically, these students need relationships with teachers the most, yet due to language and culture differences.
between them and the teachers, could be less likely to have them. However, when student-teacher relationships do occur, adolescent ELs can benefit emotionally and academically. Studies show that encouraging relationships with adults can positively affect academic engagement, specifically for Latino youth (Boutakidis, Rodríguez, and Miller; Green et al.). Yet, the caring relationship must be authentic and culturally responsive.

In a study of Mexican American high school students, Angela Valenzuela explains the difference between aesthetic and authentic care. Aesthetic care is primarily concerned about practices that, on the surface, appear to foster student achievement such as teaching to the test or strictly following mandated curriculum. On the contrary, most Latino/Latina students are motivated by authentic caring that is based on a relationship. When that relationship is absent, misunderstandings proliferate between student and teacher, which may ultimately lead to student failure. Valenzuela concludes that most immigrant families believe that “learning should be premised on a humane and compassionate pedagogy inscribed in reciprocal relationships” (14).

A study of immigrant youth from various countries suggests that relationships with teachers are the second highest predictor of academic success, only foregrounded by the parental relationship (Sadowski). Similarly, researchers emphasize the importance of teachers knowing the past and present life experiences and circumstances of refugee students to most effectively teach them (Roxas and Roy; Stewart, “My Journey”). Indeed, a relationship has the power to mediate students’ difficulty living in challenging circumstances that often accompany immigration to a new country (Stewart, “Giving Voice”).

**Simple Rules for the ELA Classroom**

Establishing relationships in the classroom can be difficult. Both teachers and students navigate complex networks of relationships constrained by rigid schedules, high student-teacher ratios, curriculum mandates, and testing practices. Yet many brave teachers are taking professional risks (Wickstrom et al.) in the midst of high-stakes accountability to “covertly challenge parts of the educational system” (Gilbert 27) they deem harmful to their students.

It can be useful to consider the patterns that emerge from these complex networks of interactions in classrooms (Patterson, Holladay, and Eoyang). Over time, these patterns can become norms, expectations, or guiding principles that may either be explicit or unspoken. Complexity researchers sometimes call these “simple rules”—patterns in our behaviors that emerge from the interactions of people in the system that tend to influence subsequent practices, attitudes, and discourse. They are not “rules” in the sense of “laws” imposed from above or “classroom rules” that focus on compliant behavior. They are more like the conventions of grammar—patterns in the ways we use language. We agree to follow these “rules” because they are functional and help build coherence in the system.

Whether we acknowledge them or not, these “simple rules” set conditions that influence the patterns in complex systems such as student and teacher actions. A shared set of “simple rules” can set the conditions for the emergence of the patterns we want to see (Patterson, Holladay, and Eoyang). Although “simple rules” might seem trivial, they have the power to exert influence over parts of the system that either facilitate or inhibit the relationships we want to occur.

Yet I have seen, and admittedly perpetuated, patterns that do not support relationship building or learning for ELs. These alarming patterns emerge out of the larger educational system and may be evident even in the most caring teacher’s classroom. They can be referred to as “signal fires” (Tytel and Holladay) because they point out undesirable behavior due to unhealthy patterns within the system. Some signal fires I have noticed are fixed classroom roles of unequitable power, student disengagement in curriculum that ignores their bilingual and bicultural identities, and an unyielding loyalty to the tests and their preparation. These signal fires illustrate the need to seek ways to weaken the patterns that emerge from a system fueled by grading, standardization, and accountability. One way to weaken those patterns is to develop a set of shared “simple rules” that set conditions for more desirable patterns.
Nurturing Caring Relationships through Five Simple Rules

I wanted to identify a set of “simple rules” that would set conditions for authentic caring to occur through relationships. Specifically, I sought to explicitly emphasize that students and teachers should be continually engaged in shared activities as a community of learners, free of traditional power differences. To set conditions for these patterns, I created my five “simple rules” for literacy learning.

Teaching Context
For four weeks, six hours a day, I taught eight refugee students from Burma and the Congo who had been in the United States for two to five years. They attended an urban high school in a Southwestern state where the classes were crowded and the curriculum was highly standardized. Although I am a university professor, I was invited to teach these students in an enrichment program where I had curricular and instructional autonomy.

The program was based on using students’ knowledge of their own cultures and life experiences to improve their reading and writing. I chose literature that students could read independently or comprehend as I read aloud in shared reading. This included picture books, poetry, short stories, and novels in English and students’ L1s. We read literature about their countries and the experiences of other immigrant youth while writing our responses and our own essays, poems, and narratives about our lives. This provided an avenue for the students to assume the role of the teacher and explain specific experiences, phenomena, and even vocabulary to the entire class, including me. Indeed, as the only one in the classroom with no immigration or refugee experience, there were many instances where the students were automatically positioned as the possessors of knowledge needed to best understand a text.

One of the members of this community was Camille. A multilingual native-Congolese, 17-year-old Camille immediately struck me as one of those students who often fall between the cracks. These are the students who are passed over for tutoring, enrichment, or even interventions because everyone knows they have virtually no chance of passing the tests by which they, their school, and their teachers are evaluated.

To illustrate, it took me multiple tries the first day to even learn her name. Each time I asked, her words were inaudible as she whispered something into her book that I could not determine. I learned later that Camille had just completed her fifth year in US schools yet was still labeled Beginning for English language acquisition, showing no progress on reading, writing, listening, or speaking assessments designed for English learners. Not surprisingly, she had never passed any of her state assessments in the four tested content areas.

However, Camille was the most cosmopolitan world traveler among the class, living in eight different countries and speaking four languages. She was also the most dedicated—walking much farther in 100-degree weather than any of the other students to come to the summer program.

My Five Simple Rules
The simple rules I used to guide instruction nurtured my relationship with all students, but perhaps most significantly with Camille. Below I describe how I enacted them in the classroom, and how they affected my relationship with this amazing young woman.

1. I learn, you learn.
Students needed to see me as a learner, engaged in discovery, if they were to become learners as well. The process needed to be transparent as I learned with them and from them, all while modeling literacy as my learning tool.

With Camille, my learning was tested in every way. It was much more difficult to learn from her than the other students. However, as I regularly expressed my interest in learning about her life, languages, and culture, progress was made. When I helped her use sentence frames to write a “Where I’m From” poem (Christensen; Lyon), I explained how she needed a line about something her family told her growing up. While the other students chose phrases about working hard or loving one another, Camille, head still lowered, lifted her eyes to mine and said in all sincerity: “Don’t sleep with the boys.” I assured her that was actually good advice and would make an excellent line in her poem (see Figure 1).
In the final week, Camille taught us about corn, *chakula* in Swahili, and how a village would share a field and work together to plant and harvest. Though not speaking above a whisper or meeting a student’s gaze, she answered all of the questions in enough detail that we understood the picture better.

3. I read, you read.

I read aloud to the students every day, but we also read silently, sitting with our book of choice, snacking on our leftover lunches. I resisted the urge to “do work”—answer emails, prepare the next activity, or even work individually with students. Although I knew Camille always needed individual help, I determined that modeling independent reading was a priority.

Camille regularly took books home in English and one in Swahili. Yet she became attached to a book I thought might just be a reference book for us to look at images from the Congo. However, it became obvious she was spending a great deal of time with this informational text about her country. Each day during the last two weeks, she came in with that book and her writing notebook. I noticed that she was copying pages into her notebook each night—word for word (see Figure 2).

4. I write, you write.

I wrote in my journal and for publication in our anthology. The students saw me write and revise every day. We wrote about celebrations, dreams, and our most difficult times. Writing became the prime means we had to share intimate knowledge about our lives with each other.

All of the other students, although with fewer years learning English in US schools, had five final products for our anthology. Although Camille only completed two, a poem about herself and a migration narrative, what she communicated through

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2. I teach, you teach.

I regularly told students that they needed to teach me and others about what they knew. To clarify this, I brought books that reflected their language, culture, countries, and experiences to position them as the teachers at times. They used these stories and illustrations to write, speak, and draw to teach me and each other about themselves.

I purposefully included a book about daily life in Africa and the Swahili language, *Jambo Means Hello*, in our classroom activities to attempt to privilege Camille’s voice and include her in class discussions. The book contains 26 letters that are accompanied by a word in Swahili, a description of its importance in African life, and many pictures. I often read a page, and then asked students to write about what they saw in the pictures. I explained the vocabulary in English that accompanied the pictures, but we needed Camille to teach us how to pronounce the word in Swahili and explain the illustrations.

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FIGURE 1. Camille’s “Where I’m From” poem

I am from a small home in my country, from the Congo in Africa
I am from trees and animals, hot days
where women have braided hair
I am from the elephant, the pink or white flowers planted in a garden.

I’m from people getting married, from Arun*, Contee*, and my sister’s husband, Abraham*.
I’m from money and a family store.
From have a good life and don’t sleep with boys.
I’m from Christians, Jesu.
I’m from Congo, Tanzania, Zamb, Zimbabwe, Zimba, and South Africa.
Chakula and corn, from the time my brother died, killed by the government in the Congo.
When we moved and my sister’s husband died.
I have pictures of my sister’s husband.

I am from a small city, from the government killing many people in the Congo

*Names replaced by pseudonyms

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FIGURE 2. An Excerpt from Camille’s Writing Journal

In the Congo, cover 15 percent of the forest land and help protect. Rework abundant wildlife and
workers to change fully patrol the parks.
this writing was telling. In her migration narrative, she wrote about living in eight different countries and the trauma her family faced in most of them (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3. Camille’s Migration Narrative**

**Congo**
I was born in the Congo. The Congo has abundant wildlife and plants. Many people have families and the government said no people could go to school. Life is so important to many people and my parents said we had to move from our country because the government said we could not have freedom.

**Zambia**
In Zambia it was so different. There were many people there who did not have freedom in their countries. My father had good kids and a good wife. The government wanted to kill my father. He had to pay them money to keep our house. When my sister, Miriam, was born, the government told my mother and father that they wanted to kill her. They wanted to kill many people and damaged many homes so about 30 percent of the people moved to another country.

**Tanzania**
In Tanzania the government said the children had to go to school to learn Swahili or English. The government told my father he had to give them one of his daughters to be a soldier’s wife but he said no because they would kill her. Then we moved to Mozambique.

**Mozambique**
The government said that we had to speak one language because they would kill the people who spoke my language, Kirundi. My father said we had to move to another country. My parents told us that the government killed my brother and my sister.

**South Africa**
In South Africa many people died because they did not have a job to make money. In my house we did not have water so we went to the forest to fetch water. The government wanted my father to go to the forest because they wanted an animal to kill him. The government killed my big brother. They also almost killed my mother and little sister when they tried to see my big brother.

**Zomba**
In Zomba we saw more people die in the forest. The government killed women and children.

**Zimbabwe**
In Zimbabwe, my family had a big problem. My sister’s husband died. People came to the church to kill him. There were many Congolese workers in Zimbabwe. I went to school in Zimbabwe.

**America**
I was eleven years old when I moved here.

During writer’s workshop, the other students read me their final drafts so I could type them on my laptop and print them at home since we did not have technology available. One day, Camille told me she did not want to read her writing about coming to the United States because she would cry. I immediately told her she did not have to. Then I asked if she did not want the other students to read it. She replied no, asking that I include it in our anthology so other students could know her story.

5. I care about you, you care about others.
(And maybe me, too.)

By reading others’ stories and writing our own, I hoped that caring relationships would ensue. As I genuinely inquired about students’ language, culture, country, and life experiences, I wanted them to know that I cared about them as individuals. Caring began quite simply—greeting them in their languages and learning to say their names correctly.

It continued by asking them to explain a picture in a book that had particular meaning in their culture. I wished they would begin to care about each other as they learned about how they were alike and different. Lastly, I hoped that by engaging in these literacy experiences together, they might even begin to care about me.

Whereas the other students indicated they felt care and reciprocated it by text messages, handwritten notes, or oral language skills, Camille demonstrated care in a different way—using another form of literacy. Camille, the student who worked hard to not be noticed—never looking at anyone and only speaking in a whisper—came to school the last day of the program transformed and ready to be seen. She walked in with her writing notebook and her beloved book about the Congo in hand, bedazzled literally head to toe in the most vibrant outfit I had ever seen. She didn’t have to speak to tell us about it—as soon as she arrived we all understood it was what she told us about the day before. This was the special outfit that represented her culture—the only one she had in the United States that was solely worn on special occasions. She beamed as we gathered around her—the Burmese girls telling her how pretty she was and asking questions about the dress. She held her head up, sometimes even looking us in the eye, and answered our questions slightly above a whisper.
How Simple Rules Facilitated Our Relationship

Great transformation occurred over my four weeks with these students, but especially with Camille. I credit much of this academic and emotional transformation to the relationship we built through the simple rules, our class’s guiding principles. The first two exemplify our interdependence: I learn, you learn. I teach, you teach. They established our need for one another in the class. Then, the next two rules further define the teacher’s and students’ relationship, transcending the traditional grader/worker roles: I read, you read. I write, you write.

The final simple rule is perhaps a summation of them all: I care about you, you care about others. (And maybe me, too.) As we learned, taught, read, and wrote together, we began to know one another. Sharing our lives through various forms of literacy naturally paved the way for relationships to occur. Literacy can uniquely be used to mediate relationships as it allows us to know and be known more fully by others.

Although it was difficult to piece together from her writing and our conversations, I did learn more of Camille’s story. Due to being born breech, she was deprived of oxygen for a long period of time, possibly causing brain damage. She stated, “so I have trouble in my head.” Persistent trauma during childhood, lack of regular education until entering the United States at age eleven, and the challenge of learning a new language were all additional contributors to Camille’s absence of progress over the past five years as measured by state assessments. However, through building a relationship with her, inviting her into my life and waiting for her to invite me into hers, I could see that academic progress was certainly possible.

Act with Courage

Establishing caring relationships with English learners is crucial—particularly for students like Camille. Even though it is difficult to know them, we must learn about them to effectively teach and serve them—providing them engaging curriculum and appropriate services that meet their needs. Nevertheless, there is pressure in the ELA classroom to direct accountability to test scores and fidelity to the implementation of programs that promise great literacy gains (Gilbert).

Yet we must act with courage and direct our accountability, fidelity, and commitment to the young adults in our care—the new arrivals, long-term English learners, undocumented, unaccompanied minors, refugees, and “Camilles” who demonstrate no progress after many years. We can learn from and with them as we use literacy to nurture relationships in the classroom. This was true in my intensive summer program with a few students, but it can also hold true as ELA teachers interact with many students over an entire school year. Classroom teachers are currently using these simple rules with secondary students in a state that faces increasing high-stakes accountability and curriculum mandates while receiving a large and growing number of ELs.

It undoubtedly requires courage to take action to change the negative patterns in our educational systems (Patterson, Holladay, and Eoyang) that prevent relationships from developing. My relationship with Camille was accomplished through creating the five simple rules to guide our learning. Although I never shared them with the students, in retrospect, I think the effect could have been even more powerful if the students explicitly knew the rules that governed our classroom—if they knew I would never ask them to do anything that I wasn’t doing myself.

The administrator who knew these students by way of their test scores remarked that I had magical fairy dust. Yet, could that magic be available to us all as we set conditions to privilege relationships within a constraining system? What if teachers played by rules to work between the cracks of the system to keep students from falling through them? For the sake of all our students, I hope these questions do not remain unanswered.

Works Cited


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Mary Amanda (Mandy) Stewart is an assistant professor of bilingual and ESL education at Texas Woman’s University and may be reached at MStewart7@twu.edu.

**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

When we intentionally respond to the diverse needs of our students, we are differentiating the product, process, or content of learning according to the learning style, interest, or readiness of our students. In this Strategy Guide, you’ll learn about a number of specific methods that can help you to gain a fuller picture of the interests of your students as well as what your students understand, know, and can demonstrate by doing. [http://bit.ly/1x5X88d](http://bit.ly/1x5X88d)

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To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to ksearsmith@ncte.org: your name, your phone, your email; author, title, publisher, date of publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. If you have the four copies of the publication needed for distribution to the Selection Committee, please send them to the postal address below. (If not, we will request them from the publisher.) Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2016, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attn: Kelly Searsmith.