

Teaching English in Palestine: Building trusting relationships by centering humanity

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2023.01.01>

Anita Bright*, Mary Goodrich**, Caroline Purcell***, Kimberly Ilosvay****

*Portland State University, USA/ Bethlehem University, Palestine; abright@pdx.edu

**Al Quds Open University, Palestine; goodrichm321@gmail.com

***Mount St. Mary's University Seminary, USA/ An-Najah National University, Palestine;
purcell@msmary.edu

****Palestine Polytechnic University, Palestine; Konnnect9501@gmail.com

Abstract

As educators, we recognize the centrality of humanness above and beyond everything else in our professional practice. As such, the affective aspects of instructional engagement rest at the center of language learning and teaching. Through this paper, four educators from the US explore the ways the affective side of language learning and use shows up in their work in Palestine. Drawing from feminist epistemologies, critical race theory, and liberatory practices, the authors trace the trajectories of their professional practices, and explore the ways they learned to center the affective aspects of instruction, leveraging culturally sustaining practices, and highlighting various ways to engage in solidarity. Through four vignettes, set at four distinctly different Palestinian institutions of higher education, each contributor highlights a unique experience that exemplifies centering the affective aspects of language teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Palestine, affective, relationships, solidarity, occupation*

Introduction

For so many educators, a focus on the academic content is central. And although content, is, of course, of tremendous importance, we recognize the urgency of humanizing all of our work, because first and foremost, we are whole people, with complex histories, beliefs, ideas, and visions for what may lie ahead. To forget this holistic aspect of ourselves (and our students) is a tremendous loss, which adds urgency to keeping our affective side— or whole-person-ness— central in our work.

This urgent need is of course resonant across all content areas— the sciences, literature, the arts— and of course also in language teaching and learning. Language carries power in unambiguous but nuanced ways, and can establish, maintain, defend, and modify hierarchies. This holds true in education in general, and in cross-cultural language-learning contexts, all of which is heightened when a range of histories, beliefs, views, and visions come together (Gambrell and Bright 2022). Because each educator brings a complex history and identity, nested in temporal, spatial, historical, and individual contexts, working in a multilingual and multicultural environment invites deep introspection as a means to identify areas of opportunity, limit, strength, and potential for growth (Moth 2014, Varghese et al. 2005). As such, this collaborative research explores the ways in which the **affective** side of teaching and learning can play a central role in the educational process.

We turn to Critical Race Theory as a construct through which to both engage and honor the histories and identities of students— and ourselves— as we move through the academic demands placed before us. We seek to establish “bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities” (Gay 2010, 31). Through this work of holding heartfelt focus on the affective side of our work, we seek to leverage a pedagogy that engages

students, and serves as a kind of momentum-builder for continued, further growth and progress. And in considering the ways our work as educators layers together with the work of our students, we consider the dynamic change that can occur for all involved. As Bakhtin explained, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (1984, 110).

Context

In summer, 2022, the authors of this article all arrived in Jerusalem to prepare for our upcoming work in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Stemming from the 1948 declaration of Israel as an independent Jewish state, which was followed by two wars, Palestinians gradually lost access to a number of basic human rights (Hussein, Wong, Bright 2022). In the current context, according to the 2022 Amnesty International Report titled *Israel’s Apartheid Against Palestinians: A Cruel System of Domination and Crime Against Humanity*, Palestinians endure a number of dehumanizing realities resulting from the presence of the Israeli Occupation Force. These include the “use of military rule to control and dispossess” (p. 17), “denial of nationality, residence, and family life” (p. 18), “disruption of family life” (p. 19), “restrictions on movement” (p. 19), “dispossession of land and property” (p. 22), and “suppression of Palestinian’s human development” (p. 26), among others. The Amnesty International Report (2022) went on to state,

Israel has imposed a system of oppression and domination over Palestinians ... The segregation is conducted in a systematic and highly institutionalized manner through laws, policies and practices, all intended to prevent Palestinians from claiming and enjoying equal rights to Jewish Israelis within Israel and the OPT [Occupied Palestinian Territories], and thus intended to oppress and dominate the Palestinian people. This oppression and domination have been cemented by a legal regime that controls (by negating) the rights of Palestinian refugees residing outside Israel and the OPT to return to their homes. (p. 266)

To further expand upon the construct of **occupation** in this context, the recent publication by Amnesty International (2022) described the ways in which the occupation of Palestine is not simply geographic, existing in Palestine and Israel, but rather, all-encompassing as well. It’s not only the *land* that is occupied; it also includes the Palestinian *people* who are occupied, based on national Israeli laws, with access for Palestinians controlled through a punitive system of surveillance, restriction of movement, razorwire-topped walls, as well as roadblocks and checkpoints.

It is within this context of apartheid and oppression that three of the authors of this work had been selected by the US Department of State as *English Language Fellows* (ELFs), tasked with serving as English language instructors, collaborators, and resources in several communities across Palestine. Chosen for their wealth of experiences and expertise, each of the three ELFs, Caroline, Kim, and Mary, came to the work with a palpable blend of humility and willingness to learn, balanced with deep wisdom and insight. They were joined by the fourth author, Anita, a Fulbright Scholar also assigned to Palestine.

The centrality of humanness

For generations, the educational community has recognized the importance and centrality of the affective side of the educational experience. As Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) explained, “Human relationships are the essential ingredient that catalyzes healthy development and learning” (para. 12). Ensuring students know they are seen, included, and valued can make tremendous difference in ensuring their continued growth and learning (Friedleander et al. 2014). Looking to Critical Race Theory (CRT), Goma (2022) spoke to the urgency of relationships and rapport, explaining,

...In CRT, trusting relationships between students and instructors are crucial for the learning process. The first step in creating these trusting relationships in CRT is building rapport between the instructor and the student in order to establish a partnership between both (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). The rapport paves the way for the instructor to meaningfully challenge students and push them toward learning, which could only happen when trust between them takes place (Hammond and Jackson 2015).

This deep foundation of trust is essential, and although fear, intimidation, and humiliation can be (and have been) seen as “effective” in teaching particular lessons, these lessons come at great cost, with the potential to leave lasting trauma, which can persist across generations. Not only is punitive, hierarchical kind of instruction detrimental and harmful to students, it’s bad for the wellbeing of educators as well (Dutton-Breen 2022). There is a kind of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989) layered into practices like this, which serve to debase our collective identities.

Rather than leaning on practices that are likely to be damaging, and that perpetuate emotions such as anxiety and fear, we, as educators, embrace the notion espoused by scholars such as Noddings (2012). Together, we believe that centering the humanity of our students (and ourselves) is the most productive and rewarding way to engage in educational practices.

Through this work, as educators focused on the affective aspects of education, we turn to the notion of care, and the establishment (and maintenance) of caring relationships. These are active relationships, bound between the carer and the cared-for. Wherein the cared-for (be it the student or the teacher) is responsive to the reactions and feedback from the carer (Noddings 2012). In other words, a caring relationship happens when the student responds to the teacher and engages with the teacher. Caring relationships require at least two key actions on the part of the teacher. First, the teacher must be carefully attuned to the needs of students while differentiating between those expressed needs, and those ones assumed or ascribed by the curriculum and the school (Noddings 2012). The second action in caring relationships is the creation of an educational experience that connects the students to their past, future, and current experiences (Noddings 2012). These two actions require initiative on the part of the teacher to support the students, helping to move them forward towards success, whatever that may mean.

We recognize the reciprocal nature of this whole process. There is both the creation of space for students to share, but also the willingness to share of ourselves with students. Through all of this work, there is of course the tension between revelatory and obfuscatory parts of the relationship. While of course we do not “bare all” to our students, we make thoughtful decisions— sometimes in the moment— about what to share, what to blur, what to avoid.

Vignettes: Windows into our practice

In this section, each of the four authors provides a glimpse of the ways in which this deeply humanizing practice has shown up in their work with Palestinian learners. Drawing from our own histories, our vulnerabilities, our brave-ness-es.

Anita:

A Fulbright Scholar, Anita’s placement was at Bethlehem University in Bethlehem. While not in Palestine, Anita is a Full Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon, and serves as the Program Coordinator for the ESOL Endorsement. Her ongoing projects engage Critical Race Theory, and explore power, privilege, and the ways educators conceptualize ideas of social justice. Further, her work highlights the ways educators address systemic inequities, including racism, sexism, classism, linguisticism, and their intersections. Drawing from 20+ years as a public school education, as well as 15 years in higher education, Anita’s work emphasizes the ways

in which identity shows up in the professional practice of educators. Although Anita was not an ELF, her work with English language teaching and learning echoed and mirrored the work of Caroline, Cynthia, Kim, and Mary in important and generative ways.

Let me peer out at the world through your lens. (Maybe I'll shudder, or gasp, or tilt my head in a question.) Let me see how your blue is my turquoise and my orange is your gold. Suddenly binary stars, we have startling gravity. Let's compare scintillation - let's share starlight. — Naomi Shihab Nye

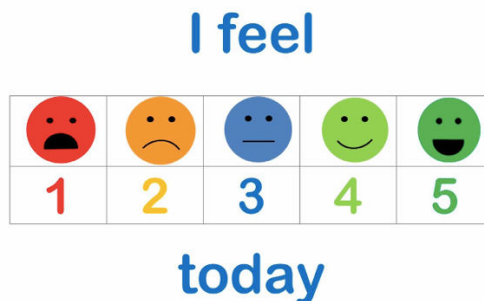
In my professional practice as an educator, I've long valued the ways our humanity shows up in our work. I want to "share starlight." First and foremost, I care about the lived experiences of our students, with a perpetual focus on the totality of experiences that brought my students to this moment, now. I love the questions, "What happened before? And before that, and before that?" I cherish the opportunity to see students in holistic, complete, contextualized ways, working to recognize all that makes them who they are, now, in this moment. It's important for me to "see" my students as best as I can, with all the nuance possible. As a learner myself, I have felt profound resonance with the adage, "Students don't remember what you taught them; they remember how you made them feel." This is most certainly the case for me throughout my life, and I find my work as an educator is profoundly informed by this notion. My own best memories as a learner were in the presence of educators who could see me, with all of my strengths and vulnerabilities, in ways that were tender and supportive.

Having said this, however, I also contend with the idea that not all students *wish* to be seen by me, or by anyone else. In spite of what I desire, I must perpetually think about the ways in which not all students want to be seen by me for reasons I may never know or understand. This is of course completely fine and perfect, and it's my obligation to respect and value this stance, as well— while also continuing to be available should the circumstances change.

As I reflect on these ideas, I consider the ways in which my work in Palestine is shaped and informed by these notions. Because I value and prioritize the now-ness of each moment, and want to ensure my learners are as "seen" as possible, I have chosen to begin each class with a rapid check-in with every single student.

As such, the first few minutes of every single class begin in the same way. I project a slide onto the screen in the front with some kind of emotional scale included, usually a series of emoji faces labeled with numbers 1 through 5, as shown in Figure 1. I use a different format each day, sometimes with images of animals showing different emotions, or of toys or cartoon characters expressing different feelings, but always with some numerical value attached. Beside the images, I have the text, "Which number matches how you feel today?" And with this new-each-day image on the screen, alongside the question, "Which number..." I quickly go around the room and ask each person for a number. "Amira? Nisreen? Rawan? Yousef? Shahd? Saeid? Zain?..." In response, each student offers a number aligned to how they feel in this given moment.

If students are feeling at the more buoyant, joyful end of the scale, I mirror this joy back to them, and say something like, "Great! Maybe you'll have warmth to share with a classmate who might need it today!" If a student is somewhere in the middle, I say, "Ok, some days are like this. We'll have this in mind as we work together today." And if a student is in the more troubled or pained end of the scale, perhaps feeling exhausted, distressed, angry, or some other more negative emotion, I say something like, "I see you. Today we will all treat you with extra support and tenderness."

Figure 1. Example of daily check-in graphic

The whole process takes just under 3 minutes for a class of 36 students— although I do privately follow up with each person who indicated the lowest / most pained level each day. Their reasons are both common to other young adults their age (arguing with friends, feeling sleepy, pining for specific material possessions), and also unique to the context of existing in Palestine (harassment at military checkpoints, family members arrested, murder of community members at the hands of the occupying army, etc.).

And while of course I want to be honest and present with the students, I am sensitive about imposing my own baggage and experiences on them, although I am of course open to sharing. For this reason, I do not typically volunteer my own feelings on whatever scale we are using *unless they ask*. But after the first few days of class, in following this pattern of asking students how they are, the students begin to ask me how I am feeling, as well, and I am more than happy to be honest with them. Some days I am walking on sunshine, rejoicing in the beauty of the world, and other days I am a quaking bundle of worries and sadness— and I am candid about it, in the spirit of reflecting my authentic humanness, and honoring *their* authentic humanness.

One particular day, I came to class tremendously worried about my mom, who was hospitalized and in tremendous pain. As the students asked me how I was on the scale that day, I could not mask my tears, and said I am feeling really sad and worried, and rated myself the most distressed on the scale. In that moment, they all lovingly murmured words of warmth and solidarity, and said, “Today we will be extra kind to you, because you need it.” Given the overtly religious context of Palestine, multiple students also noted they would pray for my mom, as well.

Later that day, one of my students, Mohammed, sent me an email, with the subject line, “I hope you’re okay.” It read almost like a poem:

*Good evening, doctor Anita
I hope you're doing your best.
And that your mother is always fine
And I will pray for her ☐
Don't worry, I'll prepare the homework.*

Although simple, this message was written in far stronger English than Mohammed typically offered, which indicated to me he had sought help in composing this. This human-to-human message mattered to him, such that he wanted to get it “right” in ways that were important to him. His sentiment made me weep, and I could not help but laugh at the beautiful promise he offered in his final line.

To me, this offered such evidence of the urgent importance in centering relationships, and being willing to bear witness to the complex humanity of one another. Choosing to open *every class* by

centering **how we are** sets the foundation for so much more nuanced work together. Moving forward with academic content is so much richer and so much more meaningful when connected to our lives, to our hearts, to our realities. And in the end, although of course strengthening their English is important, what matters more to me is being present in ways that are authentic and humane, with the opportunity for real human warmth to flourish.

Caroline:

Caroline was assigned to An-Najah National University (ANNU) in Nablus, Palestine. She has 20+ years of experience teaching life skills and academic English to immigrants, undergraduates, and graduate students in the Baltimore/Washington Metropolitan area. After her assignment in Nablus, she returned to her position as Program Coordinator of the English Language Program at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, where she has taught various English language courses over the past fifteen years. Her international seminarians are a unique and diverse group of students who have often suffered from lives of poverty, trauma, and political unrest in their home countries. In the U.S., many continue to suffer, facing discrimination not only from some Seminary professors but also from the American seminarians with whom they live in community for the academic year. Some have even been subjected to abuse by priests who hang the threat of "we can send you home anytime" over their heads. Being aware of this, her goal -- and one, which she encourages her instructors toward -- is to make the classroom a *sanctuary*: "a place of refuge or safety." Having some basic knowledge of the Palestinian context, Caroline wanted to continue to operate from this perspective of creating a sanctuary and establishing trusting relationships where students felt safe to learn.

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause--the cause of liberation. --
Freire

Creating a sanctuary, establishing relationships, and building trust is easier to do with 4-8 graduate students who live in community at a Seminary. Creating a sanctuary, establishing relationships, and building trust with classrooms populated with 40+ first year university students -- some of whom are at the beginning (A2) level of English proficiency -- was a bit more challenging. The means I used to accomplish this to allow the students' voices to be heard was through an online journal assignment.

English language educators know that online journals are a non-threatening way for students to practice English and therefore gain proficiency in the language. However, it is also an effective tool for establishing relationships and building trust

Journal Assignment:

- You will be required to keep an online journal during the semester.
- Only the teacher will read this journal.
- Your journal will be like a conversation between you and your teacher. In your journal, you can ask your teacher questions. Your teacher can ask you questions, too.
- Don't worry about mistakes! You will not need to correct any mistakes.
- The journal will be worth 50 points.

When teachers respond weekly to their students' thoughts, these private conversations progressively deepen over time and spill into the classroom. When I ask a question in response to what students have written -- they will come to me after class to answer me, to talk, to elaborate. They want so much to share with me aspects of their lives...

In the Fall of 2022, my Writing 1 class had 40 students who were assigned ten journal assignments over the course of the semester, resulting in my reading and responding to about 400 submissions. From these submissions, three themes emerged: 1) emotions; 2) beauty; 3) living under occupation.

Emotions

I was surprised with how honest the students were. They shared their innermost thoughts on love, hate, jealousy, hopelessness; they shared their feelings of isolation, thoughts of suicide. I felt incredibly honored that they were willing to expose their vulnerability and share with me thoughts often considered “haram” (forbidden or taboo) in their religion.

Love and hate..
dig into my heart,
they dig into my soul like a knife,
like hills quarreling with each other
but neighboring,
perhaps I should leave myself on the coast
directly without listening to the call for revenge,
without accusing anyone,
without drawing the sword,
I can only grow like this.
-- translated by Mohammad

Beauty

Students often shared the beauty of their homeland, Palestine. Palestinian poetry, music, dancing the Dabke. The importance of family... their family time on Fridays... of food... of Ramadan... of Al Aqsa Mosque... The fun and the hard work of harvesting olives.

Oud Cries: Trio Joubran

Imagine walking into a hall, you hear Le Trio Joubran's Oud tunes playing hide and seek in the background. Sudden silence fill the air as you walk into the hall and after a moment euphoria rushes filling your heart with adrenaline as you hear Darwish's words hugging the Trio's exceptional music. You finally can feel something as both are pouring passion and life. Life is indeed the word to describe the unforgettable collaboration. This is one of most amazing and frequent yet disparate fantasies.

Le Trio Joubran is a Palestinian musical oud group , the three brothers master composing and playing the Oud, and the middle brother makes the instruments they use.

Their music is a work of art and inspiring passion and perfection.

When I listen to their music, I almost can hear myself speaking to me, pushing me to the limit. I can hear the poetry of Darwish, of life and death, of hope and anger, i can almost hear my own voice alive.

--Rasha

The Occupation

To provide context, Nablus, where I live and work, has long been a center for resistance against settler colonialism, and 2022 saw the emergence of a new resistance movement called “The Lion’s Den.” In response to the actions of the Lion’s Den, who claimed responsibility for attacks on Israeli soldiers, Israel collectively punished the people of Nablus starting on October 12, 2022, by sealing off the city. All

the roads into Nablus were blocked with cement blocks, giant piles of dirt, closed gates, sandbags, and other forms of physical obstacles. This choking siege lasted for three weeks, and during this time, students and professors who lived outside of the city were unable to get to campus. Classes were conducted via zoom at first, and then back in person – if students were able to travel the extra two-three hours each way to circumvent road closures. Students have written about visiting fathers in jail. Uncles killed. They could not sleep because of gunshots. When Palestinians are killed daily, or camps are attacked, or the drones buzz incessantly, my students would tell me in class: **“We are used to this”** often followed with **“but we hate that we are used to this.”**

Many students have shared what it’s like to live under occupation... what it’s like to live in a city besieged. In the example below, the student’s home is strategically located in Nablus, so it is often used as a place for Israeli soldier security operations.

Only a Palestinian can experience occupation many times. A fierce knock on the door in the middle of the night can only mean one thing. Everyone knows what comes next. Years ago I was unfortunate enough to experience this. A fierce knock on our door or what actually feels like a kick down woke me and my siblings up. Scary soldiers woke us up with their rifles and face masks on. It all felt so surreal, almost like a vivid nightmare. The only explanation we had received was this house is now being used in a security operation. It takes no more than that for my family and I to spend the next two weeks homeless living at our neighbors house. I can’t begin to fathom the prospect that we were the lucky ones that were able to come home, eventually, safe. Whatever that means.

--Mona

There continues to be daily news of unarmed Palestinians being killed, Israeli settlers attacking Palestinians, and Israeli soldiers and settlers demolishing Palestinian homes. Nevertheless, the students persevere, exhibiting the **sumud** that seems to characterize all Palestinians. The notion of *sumud* roughly means “steadfastness” -- both personally and collectively -- but also “refers to ways of surviving in the context of occupation, chronic adversity, lack of resources and limited infrastructure” (Marie, Hannigan, & Jones, 2018). The writings about living under occupation were especially poignant, honest, and heartbreaking, writings wherein *sumud* was interwoven with emotions ranging from despair and hopelessness to anger, desire for freedom, and genuine hope.

In a devastating event in February 2023, Israeli military forces stormed Nablus, killing 10 Palestinians and injuring 453 others. What is so incredibly tragic, sad, frustrating, and maddening for my students is that they feel that the world has abandoned them; that no one cares that their people are killed daily; that no one cares that their homes are being demolished.

I felt incredibly privileged that they shared their story with me. Teaching in Palestine has been transformative for me in countless ways.

Transformation

What began as a means for students to practice writing in English and a means for me to establish and build relationships turned into so much more. While I hope they actually improved their writing, I am the one who learned so much. I have been transformed... I’ve learned what it means to be part of a big loving family, to be so worried about marks, to eat maqluba under an olive tree, what it’s like to fast from sunrise to sunset, and why. I’ve learned the exhaustion of traveling for hours because of road closures, the humiliation of checkpoints, and being denied entrance into a land that once belonged to you. I have a better understanding of the beauty and richness of Palestinian culture and the horror of what it means to live as a second class citizen under occupation/settler colonialism.

People always ask us: “Do you like teaching in Palestine?” And I think I can speak for each of the authors when I say that the answer is, unequivocally yes. Personally, I have been transformed... By the people I’ve met, the overwhelming kindness... the relationships... the connections. The centrality of the affective side of this work of language learning and teaching has been remarkably powerful.

Mary:

Assigned to Al Quds Open University and based in Ramallah, Mary has experience in K-12, university, and community-based education. After spending the first part of her career as an elementary special education teacher, she shifted her focus to English Language teaching. She spent the last 6 years teaching intensive English to international students at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, where her students came from diverse countries and cultures. Seeing cultural stereotypes fall away as the students learned to trust each other was one of her greatest joys. It is one of the few contexts where a nun from South Korea, a grandmother from Saudi Arabia, a recent high school graduate from Venezuela, and a basketball player from Japan would be in the same room together learning not only English, but discovering their common humanity. As well as teaching at Gonzaga, Mary helped in the formation of an English program for refugee elders, which had the goal of teaching basic survival English, providing community orientation, and fostering social interaction. The elderly are often marginalized, and this can be magnified even more so for refugees. More important to this group than learning English or how to use public transportation, was knowing that they were ‘seen.’ Mary believes this is at the heart of all teaching.

I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.-- Maya Angelou

One morning, I was waiting for the student leader of a class I was teaching to arrive. Eventually, starting without her, a text arrived: she couldn’t come, her young brother had been arrested the night before in a raid on the refugee camp they call home.

Another class. A student arrives late. When asked why, she shared that 2 of her cousins had been intentionally ran over by a fanatic settler. Both died.

An excuse for not coming to class arrives in my email – my father has been in prison for 3 years. He is being released today.

My dream is to be a martyr, shares a young female student. I need to do something to protect my family. It’s better than dying old or in a car accident.

Yesterday the settlers started shooting fire and rocks towards my brother's car. My brother had his wife and my mom and dad and his daughter in the car. One of the settlers shot a rock at my dad's head. He has a fracture in his skull.

I want to be a teacher, but there are no jobs.

I want to study abroad, but it is impossible.

I have been arrested 3 times.

Palestinian students live with this every day, some more intimately than others, but not one is immune from the uncertainty, constraints, and impact of living in a country with such an uncertain future. I have recently heard this psychological impact described as PTSS – Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but without the ‘Post’. For these students, the trauma and the stress are ongoing. How can students survive, let alone thrive, in this environment?

And what can I do? I have no influence with governments or policies, I cannot effect any change in their circumstance. I am not a psychologist, I cannot help my students process their psychological wounds. I am their teacher, and for a short time at that. I will be leaving before long, privileged to have the freedom to pursue my dreams.

In 2016, Mcknight, Graybeal, Yarbrow, and Grabeal surveyed over 13,000 students and educators from 23 countries across the globe about their views on what makes an effective teacher. The top qualities identified were the ability to develop trusting, compassionate relationships with students, and a patient, caring, and kind personality. The ability to relate to students, value and feel compassion for them as human beings, and serve as a role model or mentors rated higher than teacher knowledge or instructional methodologies across this broad sample. Building trusting relationships opens the door to a safe place to offer emotional validation. Everyone has a need to be seen, heard, acknowledged.

When I first came to Palestine, and even now months later, my students often ask me what I think of their country, their cities, their families, and themselves. I am constantly giving praise and affirmation. Initially I misinterpreted this as a way of fishing for compliments. I understand the exchange differently now. When you grow up believing that you are 'less than'— forgotten or ignored by the wider world— you are consumed with the need to feel that you matter, that someone hears your voice. I came to Palestine as an English teacher; I am becoming someone who bears witness, seeing and acknowledging my students' struggle, resilience, and value (Goodrich 2023).

In 1993, George Ella Lyon wrote a poem called "Where I am From." Since then, educators all over the world have used this poem as a template (Lyon 1999) to help students express the unique experience and influences that have shaped them – their families, religion, rituals, food, friends, and in this case, political realities. I chose to leverage it as vehicle for using language to express oneself in a powerful way, but also as an opportunity to validate their experience by acknowledging the complexity of who they are - not only the burden of occupation, but also the joy of family, the love of religion, and they many myriad of things that make up each one. The power of poetry, and the challenge, is that thoughts and ideas need to be expressed in a compact way. Language has to be chosen carefully. Emotion needs to be conveyed without the luxury of many pages. To do this in a second language could have been daunting. But the students undertook the challenges and the results are both beautiful, uplifting, and heartbreaking. Then they trusted me to share a small slice of these works here.

Through the trusting relationships we build together, I want my students to know: **I see your struggle. I learn from your openness. I share your joys and cheer on your dreams. I envy your strong connections to faith and family. I grieve your losses. I admire your bravery and resilience in the face of adversity.**

*I am from the prettiest country of all
The flower of youth, and the sorrow
From bravery, fighting, and praying
I am from running for your life and there is nowhere to hide
From Palestine and traditions
I am from the moments that I wouldn't trade for anything
- Riham*

*"I am from the good Palestine
The land of beauty and the people
I am from the bad Palestine
From the bad life, and the bad occupation, and checkpoints
I am from the homeland, and the home
I am from the land of peace which has never seen peace
I am from this life
I am from Palestine"
- Shayma*

Kim:

Assigned to Palestine Polytechnic University in Al Khalil (Hebron), Kim has over twenty (20) years of experience planning, implementing and evaluating academic exchange programs for U.S. government agencies and revered educational institutions. She has designed and taught course curriculum for diverse undergraduate, graduate, and PhD student groups specializing in ESOL, neuroeducation, cognitive processes, reading and language arts methods, education policy and practice, and multicultural education amongst others. Her international experience working in India, China, Tanzania, Ecuador, Belfast, Cambodia, Egypt, Palestine, and Canada allows her to develop inclusive intercultural methods of teaching and learning to enhance education progress of students, teachers, and administrators domestically and globally.

An educator's job is "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. — bell hooks

As I prepared for my Fellowship in the Palestine territories, I read about many challenges that exist throughout the country. However, I was naïve about how the challenges would impact me, but perhaps more importantly, how the challenges would impact my students daily. As in the other vignettes, my students face a myriad of barriers when embarking on the road to education. The school system itself is fraught with inequities, my students bear witness to killings of family and friends, houses are demolished with little warning, public humiliation is a constant, and difficulties around active movement invoke frustration and heartache. A longtime friend from Palestine once told me, "In Palestine, you gotta have a dead heart, not just a broken heart!!" I entered the journey with a steadfast conviction that I would not become jaded to the inequities nor let the personal fear of this harsh statement diminish the personal connections that are important to my teaching.

In reflecting on what author bell hooks (2014) said about the role of educators and her call to "respect[s] and care[s] for the souls of our students," my teaching focuses on educational methods that are central to this idea. Relationships and trust are important factors in learning. Trust requires benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competency. These factors are often not overt in teaching, but are at the heart of deep learning. My students are confronted with external issues while also contending with the normal stress and work of studying in university. Teaching in this context requires a special navigation of these challenges.

In addition, foreign teachers are a rarity at Palestine Polytechnic University, and it was clear from day one that student-teacher trust was an issue, especially for me. Students told me that their teachers did not always make classrooms safe places for learning. One student said, "[s]ome teachers never like what I say. They never liked what I thought...I never felt like I was, uhh, like a person or a student they love ... I didn't ask for help as well. Maybe they should have noticed my behavior." Several students revealed that they felt most classrooms were teacher-centered for lecture only. Furthermore, a small group of students warned that exposure to foreigners in the past revealed attitudes of hierarchy. One student said, "the last teacher that came from the US always said the methods and activities were done in the US and therefore were the right way to teach, that we should ignore what our Arabic professors do because teaching and learning has advanced and these teachers don't know how to teach." Students' reluctance to learn in new ways is understandable given their consistent history of being taught one way and the knowledge that everyone learns differently; there is no right way.

I thought about the layers of identity we bring to the classroom and how they reveal themselves slowly. Building relationships requires getting beyond those initial identities that surface through dialogue and time. Dialogue is at the heart of building relationships. Identity is both contingent and

relational. Our identities reveal themselves based on the people we are engaging with and the context with which we find ourselves. This intentional dialogue exposes the knowledge students bring to the class and builds trust in the classroom. I was unclear if we would reach the point of trust or have deep relationships.

I began teaching with a myriad of activities such as morning check-ins, I am from poems, and daily individual conversations. Additionally, I wanted each student to feel their voice was heard and valued, so I learned all student names, and gave content and interest feedback on all assignments. As the time passed, the inquisitorial nature of my students surfaced. The complexities of the context became profound. The pervasiveness of the occupation and their Palestinian identities necessitated students learning how to answer their own questions. Thus, we formed a **research club**. According to Immordino-Yang & Gottlieb (2017), “curiosity, a nuanced, implicit and emotional process during which you’re open, you’re safe...” This idea seemed perfect to create a space of trust and would allow student voices to be heard. The first official group decided to perform a research study about Arabic speakers learning English online. They were very interested in research to answer their many questions. We worked for months, most days of the week, online, at cafes, and got to know each other well both academically and relationally. Their proud Instagram posts began to filter to students across campus and at other universities. They began to ask me to be a part of the club. The rapport that was established between me and the students and between other students was infectious. We were applauded for our team work. Faculty and administrators at one of the presentations made comments such as, “I want to thank you, Dr. Kim, for showing us that **our students are capable of more than we allow them to do**. We teach them to study what we say without teaching them to do things like this [perform a research study and present it]. We need to value our students more and challenge them more...teach them more critical thinking.”

As I reflect on this process, I note that my work is heavily influenced by three scholars. Luis Moll, who, along with his colleagues Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), developed the idea of Funds of Knowledge, the concept that students come to class with a wealth of personal experiences and community knowledge that influence how they learn. I note the work of Eboo Patel (2022), who explained the importance of dialogue. “We need to learn how to build a social order that welcomes people from a range of identities and builds bridges of cooperation between and among us.” All identities are viewed as assets and that dialogue can bring cohesion. And finally, I look to the contributions of Stephen Krashen (1982), a linguist who developed the idea of the Affective Filter. The “affective filter” is a theoretical construct in second language acquisition. Simply put, he found that if the learner experiences anxiety or a lack of self-confidence or experiences trauma, there is a filter in the brain that obstructs the ability to learn. This is explained thoroughly through neuroscience.

Though my friend’s quote resonates more deeply with me now, I feel appreciative that I was able to establish strong relationships and build trust with my students even with the periodic times of sorrow. I am humbled that these students co-created a learning environment of trust where their depth of knowledge and the impact of personal experiences that influenced their academic learning could be shared. I am ever appreciative of what they taught me.

Significance

In what ways is this work significant? As educators, and more importantly, as members of multiple communities, we contend that this work carries weight in that we highlight the various ways in which we have chosen to establish and maintain connections with students, in ways that are nuanced, tender, dynamic, and authentic. By electing to take risks and share of ourselves, we create spaces in which our students may similarly take risks, and engage with an authenticity that may be different from their previous interactions with educators.

Through engaging in this work, we both recognize and contend with our outsider status, which in some ways may serve as a distancing, “foreign-izing” aspect of our connections, but at the same time, may offer opportunities for deeper or different kinds of connections. Because as outsiders, we are perhaps naive to (or unaware of) particular cultural norms or taboos, we may unintentionally offer a space for different kinds of interactions that are novel for our students and colleagues. We somehow have access to epistemic, axiological, and ontological ways of being and knowing that may not be readily seen or experienced in the local context. And this is not to say these outsider aspects are necessarily welcome or valued— but whatever the case, they offer something *distinct* from what our Palestinian colleagues are equipped to offer.

Discussion

Living, working, and simply existing in the Palestinian Occupied Territories is never simple, and never predictable. Given this context of tremendous uncertainty and tension, the press to build trusting, rewarding relationships is of utmost importance, with the potential for life-changing relationships at stake. In considering the ways in which affective aspects of our work are surfaced, we perpetually contend with our layers of privilege, recognizing the *voluntary* nature of our presence here, knowing that as holders of U.S. passports, we may elect to leave at any moment, with virtually no notice nor forethought required. This luxurious position sets us in stark contrast to our Palestinian students, colleagues, and friends, who are severely restricted in movement, bound not only by the documents they have been assigned, but by the unpredictable whims of individual Israeli Defense Force soldiers who may, on some unknowable instinct, decide to curtail or deny access to movement. Worse, these same soldiers, some with hair-trigger anxiety or anger, may engage our Palestinian students, colleagues, and friends with aggression or violence, which may lead to devastating outcomes. As authors, we recognize our insulation from this level of volatility, and we know that all Palestinians we encounter recognize this level of insulation, too. And what is most significant in considering this twinned vulnerability / insulation is the *unearned* quality of it. For the authors of this paper, it’s through no merit of our own that we hold U.S. identities; it’s simply the randomness in where and to whom we were born. Similarly, for all Palestinians we encounter, none *chose* their position, national identity, or legal status. Rather, these aspects of reality were imposed, and are the outcome and results of decisions made by others long ago, usually without their best interests in mind.

The painful (and maybe shameful) reality is omnipresent, with this vivid form of privilege (and denial of privilege) always at the surface. As such, we recognize the ongoing and urgent need to continue to center the affective aspects of our work, painful though it may be, particularly as we navigate our own comparatively lesser discomforts, disappointments, complaints, and compromises. Continuing to engage with humility (Bright, Acosta and Parker 2020) is essential, and while being of potentially significant importance to the Palestinians with whom we engage, we recognize the importance to us, as well. Remaining open, with a learner’s heart and mind, and an eye towards ways to engage with loving solidarity, is of utmost importance.

Equally important, we seek to emphasize that although we center the affective side of this work, we do not in any way show up as saviors, seeking to rescue or somehow transform the realities of Palestinians. Rather, we focus and emphasize the *with-ness* of this work, and the power in bearing witness, observing in ways that offer solidarity. In seeking to “share starlight,” we bring our authentic selves, with a desire to bear witness in ways that may transcend infinite boundaries.

References

Amnesty International. (2022). *Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity*. Amnesty.org.

- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Ed. and Trans.) University of Michigan Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological theory*, 7(1): 14-25.
- Bright, A., Acosta, S., Parker, B. (2020). Humility Matters: Interrogating Our Positionality, Power, and Privilege Through Collaboration. In J. Keengwe (Ed.) *Handbook of Research on Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education* (pp. 19-40). IGI Global.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Cook-Harvey, C. M. (2018). *Educating the whole child: Improving school climate to support student success*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/educatingwhole-child-brief>
- Dutton-Breen, S. E. (2022). *The Practice of Traditional Grading: A Site for Inquiring into Teacher Identity Friction in a US High School* (Doctoral dissertation, Portland State University).
- Friedlaender, D., Burns, D., Lewis-Charp, H., Cook-Harvey, C. M., Zheng, X., Darling-Hammond, L. (2014). *Student-centered schools: Closing the opportunity gap*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education.
- Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Gomaa, L. (2022). *Amplifying Arab American Heritage Language Students' Voices: A Multiple Case Study on Translanguaging Practices and Identity Negotiation in University Arabic Classrooms*. Dissertation. Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.
- Goodrich, M. (2023 [in press]). Changing the narrative: Living and teaching in occupied Palestine. *WAESOL Educator*, 48(2).
- Gambrell, J. A., Bright, A. (2022). Interrogating White Saviorism, Fragility, and Innocence in K-12 Teacher Education: An Ontology of Radical Love. In J. Keengwe (Ed.) *Handbook of Research on Social Justice and Equity in Education* (pp. 114-137). IGI Global.
- Hammond, Z., Jackson, Y. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Sage.
- Hussein, A., Wong, S., Bright, A. (2022). The Palestinian K-12 Education System: History, Structure, Challenges, and Opportunities. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.
- Immordino-Yang, M. H., Gotlieb, R. (2017). Embodied brains, social minds, cultural meaning: Integrating neuroscientific and educational research on social-affective development. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1): 344S-367S.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). Acquiring a second language. *World Englishes*, 1(3): 97-101.
- Lyon, G. E. (1999). *Where I am from: Where poems are from*. Absey & Co.
- Marie, M., Hannigan, B., Jones A. (2018). Social ecology of resilience and Sumud of Palestinians. *Health*, 22(1): 20-35.
- McKnight, K, Graybeal, J., Yarbro, J., Graybeal, L. (2016.) *The Heart of Great Teaching: Pearson Global Survey of Educator Effectiveness*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2): 132-141.
- Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford review of education*, 38(6): 771-781.
- Nye, N.S. (2010). *Time you let me in*. NY: Greenwillow Books.
- Patel, E. (2022). Interfaith America is building bridges of cooperation. *Ashoka*. <https://www.ashoka.org/en-us/story/interfaith-america-building-bridges-cooperation>
- Varghese, M., Morgan, B., Johnston, B., Johnson, K. A. (2005). Theorizing language teacher identity: Three perspectives and beyond. *Journal of language, Identity, and Education*, 4(1): 21-44.