Spring Squirrel,

An Analysis of Artistic Teaching and Care

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Abstract:

The following analysis uses the idea of a/r/tography to gain a fresh perspective on the idea of care in the classroom. The lenses used for viewing care are that of the artist, researcher, and teacher. Each lens has its own unique expression, and each perspective intends to aid future educators to further contemplation about care philosophies. The author uses her written and illustrated work, *Spring Squirrel,* to analyze the plight of students who often receive a lack of care due to their identity. Multiple research views on this subject are also examined, as are classroom practices. The author concludes with her concept of care, and how educators can implement this aspect of education in everyday practice.

Introduction:

Elliot Eisner stated, “Experience is central to growth because experience is the medium to education. Education, in turn, is the process of learning to create ourselves, and it is what the arts, both as a process and as the fruits of that process, promote.” As a future art educator, I am often asked to reflect upon my experiences such as my practices in the classroom, the studio, and in the world of academia, to inform my work as a professional. In addition to these areas, I also reflect upon my personal experience in order to tell others my own unique message. These aspects of my identity as a teaching artist reflect the idea of a/r/tography, or what Rita L. Irwin defines as, “to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings.” The a/r/tographer is not just a researcher, artist, and teacher, but also a part of a larger community of a/r/tographers that share similar ideas as colleagues.

My personal a/r/tography experience has been a search for a deeper understanding of care in the classroom community and what this aspect means to our society as a whole. A small idea that came from a personal experience of inequality toward my partner grew into a deeper recollection of my own philosophies. As I developed my educational values, I built upon my experiences as an artist learning from others in the studio. I also built upon the research of other, more experienced educators, and I reflected about my own student teaching practices. These thoughts culminated in a written and illustrated children’s story called *Spring Squirrel, the Superb Storyteller.* This book shares a few small messages that I felt I had to tell the world. The book helped me to be concise about my message and think of ways to share this philosophy with students.

I would like to pose the following statements for further analysis: Everyone has a personal struggle, but society seems to fixate on those in our culture whose disability is more prominent. As an artist, I must find a new perspective on this societal norm, and express my idea of a solution from a myriad of possibilities. As a researcher, I can draw on the thoughts of myself and of other experts to supplement my own reflections and give my philosophies credence. As a teacher, I can put my artistic abilities and research theories into practice in my future classroom to show my students care in a very real way. Through the creation of *Spring Squirrel*, I further defined my a/r/tographer role and I honed my skills in each of the respective areas in order to contribute more to each of these fields of study.

The Experience:

Special people and experiences in my life helped me to have a passion for the story I wanted to tell. In college, I met my partner, Kyle, who was born with a rare heart defect. At one week old, he lost oxygen to his brain and had to undergo surgery. As a result, he had speech delay, vision impairment, concentration struggles, and a reading disability. Becoming friends with someone who regularly dealt with the uncaring attitude of society toward him changed my life. I was given a first row seat to watching this man struggle with college and eventually dropping out of school due to the anxiety and demands a four-year university requires. I quickly realized that most of Kyle’s life-changing moments in education happened as a result of the actions of his educators. Unfortunately, his professors did not recognize Kyle’s hard work, and he was often seen as lazy or ignorant despite his best efforts to create quality work. I began to ponder how I, as a future educator could have a very similar impact on my students who struggled, for whatever reason. I wanted my impact to be a positive one, but I was not sure how to connect with students who clearly did not have the same optimistic thoughts about school as I did.

Meanwhile, I was working with the Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences Program (UCARE) under the direction of Professor Elizabeth Ingraham. As a requirement of the program, I was to work under Liz for one year and then make a project of my own in the second year. During our first year, Liz and I brainstormed ideas for my project. We decided upon me making a book that was written and illustrated for children. I was not quite sure what I wanted the theme of the book to be, but I had thrown around the idea of a book about how the student who did not quite “fit” found a new perspective about school and life in general to further reflect upon my personal experiences with Kyle.

In the fall of my senior year, I eagerly went to bookstores searching for children’s books to give me inspiration. At a large bookstore, I sat down gleefully in the children’s section and began to read book after book. As time went by, I found a disturbing pattern in these books. All of the protagonists were too perfect. No one had a struggle that they would have to live with for the rest of their lives. The books just had problems that were quickly resolved. I asked internally, “Where are the Kyle-like characters? The ones who struggle daily with a disability, yet, still have the courage to overcome it?” This pondering lead me to the help desk of the store where I asked, “Are any children’s books available where the protagonist has a disability in which they must overcome such as dyslexia, ADHD, or autism?” The response was quite sad, yet, quite telling. The woman stated that the store only carried books that helped “deal with those sorts of people.” The sort of people she was talking about happened to be a person very important to me. He did not need to be dealt with so much as given the respect and care that all people deserve.

As all great artists need, I had been given my spark, my inspiration to speak through my creativity. I would tell a story about a person who was just like Kyle. The protagonist would be someone who was very bright, but whose brightness was overshadowed by misguided thoughts about their strengths. I began to formulate an artistic expression, and my journey toward *Spring Squirrel* began.

The Artist:

As an artist, I desired to show care in my artistic creations by fully understanding my subject matter. To begin my sketches, I researched and recreated many illustrations from children’s books. I took extensive notes on the books’ construction, overall themes, and drawing techniques. I then decided on a back yard theme for my book and made a storyboard with images of key scenes and words that I wanted to be said in my book. This process was done through creating quick sketches on notecards and taping them down to a piece of foam core in the order I wanted the scenes and words to be viewed. I confirmed which animals I wanted in my book and researched them through photography in nature on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s East Campus and in Pioneers Park Nature Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. I further understood the animals through expressive sketches of preserved animals in the University of Nebraska State Museum collection. Mr. Tom Labedz, collections manager of the Division of Zoology, informed my practice greatly through his extensive knowledge of birds and mammals. I gained a very deep understanding of these animals through this concentrated study and felt able to illustrate them in a way that did justice to their species. I began to make a mock up illustration of my book, and I thought about page layout and composition. I would then create my final illustrations, scan them and digitally enhance any colors or remove unwanted marks, and send them to the printing company to be bound and produced in bulk. Meanwhile, I was investigating a way to understand how to speak in a way that did justice to my students and my profession as an educator.

The Researcher:

My research required much investigation on a variety of subject matter in order to ensure that my book was created with respect to all parties that could be involved in the interpretation of its message. My inquiry began with the ethic of care in the teaching profession. Care is the root of this entire project and began the spark for my research. A leader in care research is Nel Noddings. She inspired me with the following words, “Human beings are born from and into relation; it is our original condition. This basic feature of care ethics is important for global ethics because it starts with neither the collective nor the individual.” All humans are molded and affected by their interactions and relations to other human beings. These interactions help to shape our society and our global culture.

Educators must understand that they teach two curriculums. The first is that of the subject matter. For example, I am an art teacher, so I teach primarily about artistic practice, art history, criticism, and aesthetics in my classroom. The second curriculum I teach is that of values and attitudes of society. Dewey called this the hidden curriculum, and Eisner has the following to say on the subject: “The curriculum is, looked at from a distance, a program designed to promote the development of that broad conception of cognition. Thus, when policymakers and educational theorists define a curriculum for a school or classroom, they are also defining the forms of thinking that are likely to be promoted in the school. They are, in effect, laying out an agenda for the development of mind.” The way educators teach students to handle situations through example and choice of lessons both big and small can help mold our society.

Therefore, since educators have this large responsibility of teaching youth what society should value, teachers must not only take their subject matter very seriously, but also their behavioral actions. Classrooms can be thought of as a community. Every time an educator fails to show care and understanding toward a student, they make the choice to show that care is not of value in the classroom. Each time an educator allows a student to express his or her views in a mutually respectful way care and relational understanding are emphasized. As I wrote my plot for my story, I asked an expert to be a critical colleague on my messages. Dr. Karl Hostetler, a professor from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who is well-versed in educational philosophy, agreed to read my early plot and gave me a few pointers about the messages I was trying to convey. Dr. Hostetler stressed to me how important the idea of giving and receiving is in a care relationship. In other words, care is only expressed if both parties feel their needs are being met. In the story of *Spring Squirrel*, I emphasized that Spring has something to contribute to society. She has an artistic talent and loves to tell stories. She was able to help her classmates learn how to create drawings, and they helped her gain confidence in her abilities. Spring and Compassion worked together to improve their learning, but their relationship was bi-lateral. Mrs. Bunny and Spring had a care relationship as well. Mrs. Bunny gained art ideas from Spring, and in return, Spring experienced the kindness and patience that educators should exude when working with a struggling student.

Many people define care in different ways. Through my work with Dr. Stephanie Baer, art education professor at the University of Nebraska-Kearney, I have begun to develop an idea of how I would like to define care. We have met for many hours of discussions about care in the classroom and how it ties into an overall philosophy of education. Currently, we are working toward collecting accounts of care from other educators and compiling this information into a book. Due to so much discussion of the topic, defining “care” became an ever-evolving idea. However, my idea of care is being a consistent teacher who strives to understand the background of each student walking into the classroom. A caring teacher works to build a rapport with the student that involves mutual trust and respect between all involved. A caring teacher understands that students require consistent expectations and discipline. An educator who promotes care strives to make each interaction with a student one in which problem solving is placed as a high priority, and the student feels free to express his or her opinions on a subject matter. To emphasize the need for care in all aspects of my story, I researched dyslexia and ADHD. These were two areas where I felt my protagonist might have been struggling. I consulted with Dr. Robert Reid, a professor from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln specializing in learning disabilities, for ideas of how to relate my book to real students who may be struggling with similar issues. He suggested I use words with rhyme or similar letter sounds to help students comprehend my story. He emphasized to me that I should not write to the disability but to the ability. This spoke volumes to me about our society and our need to recognize the strength in all individuals rather than their weaknesses. To further my research, I read the work of Edward M. Hallowell, M.D. entitled *Driven to Distraction.* This book focuses on the manifestation of ADHD in people of all ages. Dr. Hallowell spoke of the concept of changing the reputation of a person with ADHD within the small community of the family or classroom. A different expectation for a person who may struggle in a classroom culture to be successful despite their issues can encourage the student to have a brighter mindset and set higher expectations of themselves. These ideas directly related to Dr. Reid’s suggestions about recognizing the ability in a person rather than the disability. I researched dyslexia and its manifestations through the book *Overcoming Dyslexia* by Sally Shaywitz, M.D. Through this book, I learned that dyslexia is not seeing letters backwards, but a disconnect in understanding and expressing language. This extremely useful book gave me ideas for how to illustrate an image of Mrs. Bunny helping Spring with her reading work. It also helped me to modify the plot to Spring’s experience of being unable to express the words on the page. Mrs. Bunny and Spring would have to work together for many months rather than just a few short weeks to help her catch up to her classmates, and Spring would struggle with language her entire life. The book also was consistent with Dr. Reid’s suggestions to use similar letter sounds throughout the book to aid with reading. I wanted to emphasize the importance of a support system at all levels that helped Spring to succeed. Mama Squirrel helped Spring by encouraging her from home. Compassion helped Spring succeed through a peer relationship that offered mutual tutoring to solidify concepts. Mrs. Bunny became the school support system that helped her to succeed. Many people often do not realize how many different support systems must be put in place in order to help any child succeed academically. Educators must be cognizant of ways they can help their students gain encouragement from many different areas to help them succeed on their own terms. I desired to show care for my students by stretching their vocabularies and asking them to expand their thinking to a new perspective. I worked with Dr. Kathy Wilson of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to review the vocabulary and details of my plot for age appropriateness and clarity. She felt that my plot was appropriate for second and third grade classrooms. This helped to guide my plot to further development as I observed the second and third graders that I taught. I wanted my book to be accessible to all because my idea of care dictates that everyone should be given many different ways of understanding something. So, I worked with Miss Katlin Leonard toward making a video recording of me reading the book. This resource would help students who were struggling to read the book to hear it aloud. The video would also benefit visually impaired students who may be unable to enjoy the book without an audio recording. The video would also be accessible to all of my students with Internet access through links on my website and on my YouTube channel.

An important aspect to education is understanding theory in practice. While many of the theories expressed by multiple experts in various fields seemed logical for application in the classroom, I also wanted to work on my own self-reflection to add another layer to the *Spring Squirrel* plot. As I entered the classroom full time in my last semester as a college student, I began to test the theories and reflect often upon whether or not these theories had a logical place in the classroom.

The Teacher:

As I commenced my student teaching experiences, I had the marvelous chance to put all of my research into practice. My student teaching experiences took place at Pound Middle School in Lincoln, Nebraska and Beattie Elementary School in Lincoln, Nebraska. The first half of the semester was spent at Pound Middle School teaching all three grade levels art, and the second half of the semester was spent at Beattie Elementary School teaching all six grade levels art and technology. Throughout this semester, I was able to work with students from kindergarten to eighth grade. According to the Lincoln Public Schools website, at both of these schools about one in five students is a minority, around one in ten students qualifies as special needs, and one in four students are eligible for free and reduced meals. This broad range of ages and backgrounds helped me to understand students at numerous developmental levels and how to interact with each group in an appropriate teaching manner. Despite the large age differences, I learned that a few key classroom practices prevail no matter what the age of the student.

Overall, my goal as a teacher is to help students understand their strengths, skills, and worth through an artistic experience. Much of teaching is interwoven. Many educators feel that subject matter and the hidden curriculum can be divided into separate entities, but, in actuality, the hidden curriculum is everywhere.

Building a relationship with students begins before the students have even met the educator. The teacher must work to make their classroom environment one in which learning is efficient and encouraged through the set up and organization of the room. The educator should take the time to research a little bit about each of his or her students before they arrive. If students require extra attention, the educator should look into finding out more information from the student’s individualized education program (IEP) coordinator or from other school resources for how to best interact with the student to gain maximum learning through possible accommodations and modifications. These small steps can help to start the care relationship process. Through speaking with the coordinators of many of my students’ with IEPs I was able to instruct my students with special needs with a greater knowledge and a more supportive attitude.

A rapport with students begins when the students first set foot in the classroom. Much of how the class will go for the time the student is in the classroom is defined by the first days. The teacher should start the day off with clear expectations for both behavior and academic performance. High expectations as well as consistency from the teacher show the students that the educator believes in their ability to be responsible for their own behaviors and performances in the classroom. The teacher has shown that he or she believes the students can perform their best each day and gives the students the confidence and the responsibility to hold themselves accountable for their actions. I very clearly remember an interaction with a young girl who struggled with focus and completion of academic tasks as she worked on a drawing. She told me she thought the drawing process was much too difficult. I simply responded with, “Aren’t you glad I believe in you?” We were able to complete the task with a great degree of success once she knew I was there to be her advocate.

As the school year wears on, students have a tendency to act out, and much of the time the students who act out are students facing difficulties like Spring. The educator must have a consistent plan for how to discipline students, but the educator must also be able to understand some of the reasons why a particular pupil has behaved in a certain way. This is where the teacher-student bond becomes crucial. The teacher must have built a rapport with the student through small interactions in instruction where the educator expresses a belief that the student has value and worth.

In order to empower students, the teacher must instruct in a way that helps students to feel knowledgeable of the subject matter and able to independently work at their task. The educator must exude patience and a desire to help the student solve problems no matter what the issue may be. When a student feels frustrated, the educator must show consistent care and support by showing the student that he or she believes in the pupil’s ability to succeed through the use of critical thinking skills and creative processes. Even when the student seems to think an issue cannot be solved, the educator must continue to encourage, motivate, and support in multiple ways. As an artist, my background in brainstorming and creative problem solving helped me when working with students to find multiple solutions to issues and to teach to a variety of learning styles.

The frustrated student must feel that the educator is there to help him or her rather than harm him or her. Short greetings with students as they enter the classroom were often the small communication measures needed with my students to help them know I felt they were important and had a role to play in the classroom community. Further care can be expressed by reaching out to the student’s support systems such as a parent or guardian or another trusted educator. These supportive mentors can help the educator gain valuable information for how to interact with students who have difficulty in class and outside of class. These are just a few small steps to begin building the teacher-student care relationship. Care continues to grow with time. A person who has a consistent, bi-lateral care interaction over a long period is able to feel more and more empowered in the learning environment with an educator. I feel that I am at a great advantage as a specialist because I will have the great joy of watching my students grow and develop throughout the years as they enter my classroom.

Teaching is a multi-faceted profession with so many different layers and interconnected areas, that I often felt unable to express my thoughts coherently as I reflected upon my days of student teaching. While reflection at the end of each day is important, interaction with other colleagues adds the final critical piece to the teaching equation. Learning is about community, and educators greatly benefit from using the ideas and the advice of other educators to help them grow in their practice. I feel that building relationships with students, support systems, and colleagues is necessary to the continuation of care in the classroom.

Conclusions:

In essence, the process of creating *Spring Squirrel* led me to a deeper understanding of how I express and embody care as both a person and an educator. Experiences in each individual’s life helps one to interpret and understand the world. These experiences lead to an expression of personal perspective. My expression is often through the medium of storytelling whether it is written or visual. All strong stories begin with a solid foundation. This foundation came from my thorough research to best express the ideas stated within the story. Finally, my practice as a teacher in a real classroom setting helped to inform my message. All of these elements helped me to exemplify the a/r/tography process and re-examine my personal meaning of care relationships in my profession.

Learning about the experiences of others can help educators to gain a deeper perspective of their profession. My intent is that this analysis brought many ideas to light for educators who are building philosophies. In addition to these ideas come more questions for each individual about how to implement these ideas in one’s own classroom. Artistic practice is about asking more and more questions and searching for multiple solutions. I leave the reader with the following queries: How do life experiences inform educator practice? How do the norms created by society send messages to youth? Is the society and culture of our school systems one of acceptance and care, or one of little tolerance? Do these views change from school to school? How can schools work towards a care ethic for all teachers and students within the learning community? How can we, as teaching artists, educate our students in care and bi-lateral relationships? How can teaching artists create a community of care in their classroom to meet the learning styles of all students? How can we foster the minds of the Spring Squirrel’s and Kyle’s of the world?

These questions and more can be answered and used as a contribution in the a/r/tography community. This analysis is my philosophy and perspective, however, ideas of the world continue to evolve and change similar to the way artistic expression is constantly in a state of transformation. In the end, our greatest strength as educators is continuing with our research, reflection, and creative expression. We must continuously grow in our experiences as teaching artists.

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