Reconceptualising and recontextualising nurturance pedagogy in higher education

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Juliet Perumal’s career as an educator spans two decades. During this time she has taught across school and higher education levels. She has received several national and international research awards, scholarships and fellowships; and has published extensively in the fields of language and gender education, curriculum studies; and social justice education. Her work has also been presented at various national and international conferences. Her research interests include curriculum studies, critical and feminist pedagogies, language and gender studies, democracy and inclusive education and qualitative research. This article draws on aspects from her latest book, *Identity, Diversity and Teaching for Social Justice*, published by Peter Lang AG (2007).

Abstract

According to Gore (1993:68-69), authority in the construction of feminist pedagogy is addressed in at least three ways, namely: authority versus nurturance; authority as authorship; and authority as power. While authority as authorship suggests considering teaching as an enactment of a narrative in which authority refers to the power to represent and challenge versions of reality; authority as power interrogates the ideal of not replicating traditional conceptions of teacher as single-authority figure that mainstream patriarchal education has been critiqued for. In this paper I explore the theme ‘authority versus nurturance’, as it emerged from my study, “Enacting Feminisms in Academia”, which was conducted with educators teaching English from a feminist perspective at five universities in Southern Africa. Women dominate the teaching profession. However, despite the existence of various egalitarian policy transformation documents and legislation (especially within the South African context), that make provision for women to assume research and senior management positions, their roles and status continue to be tied largely to teaching and administrative duties. These roles inevitably activate and perpetuate patriarchally mandated scripts of women/female teacher as loving nurturer; emanating from the associative and traditional functions of woman as caregiver, and bounteous mother. The expectation for female educators to enact maternal roles becomes more pronounced within institutions of higher education, where massification of education, and substandard pre-tertiary education have seen an increase in the intake of students who arrive for university education with stymied literacy and conceptual skills. Thus, the discourse on nurturance versus authority emerges from attempts to interrogate and reconceptualise the feminisation of education. This paper explores the participants’ unanimous efforts to unhinge the female teacher from association with caregiver and intellectualised mammy, while simultaneously ensuring that she is not read as disconnected mother. It also presents the participants’ views about the need to recontextualise teacher-student interpersonal relations, to render them more appropriate for relating to university-age students.

Key Words: feminist pedagogy; higher education; nurturance pedagogy.
Authority versus nurturance

In order to understand the feminisation of teaching that occurred in Western societies during the 19th century, it is useful to identify those attributes of femininity and pedagogy that became associated with each other. During this period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, when women entered teaching as a way of fleeing domesticity, they were inducted into an institutional paternalism that expected them to assume responsibility for the moral fabric of the family. In commenting on the genesis of women’s entry into teaching, Grumet (1988:84) observes that:

Women were not asked to create this moral leadership in either the home or school, but they were expected to be the vehicles through which laws, rules, language, and the order of the father, the principal, and the employer were communicated to the child. Thus it is not surprising that the structure of the school replicates the patriarchal structure of the family. Women teachers’ own passivity was to provide the model of obedience for the young to emulate. The women who maintain daily contact with children and nurture them are themselves trained, supervised, and evaluated by men.

In elaborating on Grumet’s observation, regarding the implications of the roles women were expected to play in education, Walkerdine (in Mercer 1997:40-41) suggests that from the late 19th century onwards women teachers were exhorted to use their ‘natural’ talent for loving nurturance; an exhortation emanating from the associative and traditional functions of woman as caregiver, and nurturer. In addition, Walker (1983) points out that the symbolic maternal which is also embodied in the concept of ‘Alma Mater’, is discursively constituted on the relation between women and universities as maternal. The concept Alma Mater, which is variously translated as ‘bounteous mother’, ‘foster mother’ or ‘soul mother’, is also the name attributed to the Roman goddess of teaching, especially the teacher of the mysteries of sex. Ironically, maternal nurturance has been critiqued for ignoring female sexuality, and the sensual and sexual life of the women educator. The female teacher was expected to banish sensuality from the classroom and from her life, and this perhaps provides a convincing explanation for the Mind/Body split that regulates patriarchal curriculum discourses. Instead the association between sexuality, maternity and teaching was rendered invisible in favour of the benign and selfless maternal teacher. In this regard, the emergence of nurturance or maternal pedagogies remains one of the major discourses to develop within the ambit of feminist pedagogies, and is based on the caricature of woman as nurturer and caregiver. However, not only did many feminists embrace such conceptions of maternal pedagogies, but it was a particularly narrow version of the maternal that was embraced. In practice, there are a multitude of different ways of mothering, but one that has been perpetuated in much traditional feminist pedagogy, is that of the bourgeois, all-sacrificing, all-nurturing, well-resourced, power-sharing ‘good’ mother. Kirby (1994) is also perplexed as to why we have not overturned the apparent delusions of maternal stereotyping, which have resulted in the conflation of teaching with motherhood.

Within patriarchal society the notion of woman is laden with the traditional functions of caregiver and nurturer, thus apparently rendering it incompatible with the ability to exercise authority within public spaces. The perceived dissonance between authority and nurturance has become a recurrent theme within discourses on feminist pedagogy, the contention being that while women
are required to assume authority in educational and social spaces, traditional conceptions of women render notions of authority incompatible with the role of women as nurturers and caregivers.

By definition, the word ‘nurture’ embodies the actions of feeding and protecting, supporting and encouraging, bringing up, training and educating. To nurture a person, therefore, essentially encompasses some of the basic functions of what a teacher does. Nurturance pedagogy finds parallels with maternal, connected, holistic, and empathic teaching, all of which are defined by the same basic characteristics. Nurturing in the theatre of pedagogic performance is defined in both positive and negative ways, and is related to the effectiveness of teachers’ impact and influence on student learning. Jarratt and Culley et al. (in Bell & Nugent, 2001), highlight the positive aspects of nurturance teaching, contending that helping a student become a better and more involved learner is an important issue when talking about nurturance teaching, because it exists as one of the ultimate goals of an encouraging and supportive teacher. Productive student learning, therefore, is an asset and a valued outcome of any positive and effective teaching method, including nurturance teaching. For the most part, a nurturing attitude is looked upon as a necessary element of teaching because it provides students with a safe environment in which their ideas can flourish.

Some scholars, such as Dorsey (2002), Eagleton (1998) and Mercer (1997), however, signal the drawbacks of enacting nurturance pedagogies, especially within university contexts. They argue that the definition must be expanded in the context of universities, where the nurturing teacher is meant to challenge and stimulate university age adults, and not merely foster simplistic growth. Essentially, they propose that at this juncture a more scholarly interpretation of nurturance be appended to the discourses, in order to strengthen the claim that it belongs in the realm of higher education. A nurturing educator may, in this context, be posited as one who creates a supportive, non-threatening and accepting environment; one that is discursive, interactive, yet challenging. Against this landscape of different views, the participants raised the following issues regarding the maternalisation of teaching; their conceptions revolved around:

- Language as Symbolic Order
- Teacher as Bounteous Mother, and
- Familial and Friendship Practices, Caricatures and Condescension

**Contextual and methodological issues**

The study upon which this article is based drew upon autobiographical essays, and 14 hours of interviews, which provided important sources of data from which to explore the construction and manifestation of nurturance authority at institutions of higher education. The study was conducted with five feminist educators, located at five Southern African universities, pseudonymously, Jennifer from the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria; Vijay, from what was formerly the University of Durban-Westville, Phumzile from the University of the Free State; Carol from the University of the Western Cape; and Thembi from the University of Botswana. While the participants spoke in general terms about the issue of nurturance authority, their more specific reflections were made in connection to the courses they were teaching at the time of my study.
I drew from the principles of content analysis, discourse analysis and grounded theory, and created an analytical toolkit to analyse the data. I worked discursively through the data according to the following three levels:

- First, I employed an **intra-comparative** process of analysis, during which process I examined each participant’s data set individually. An intra-comparative analytical process lends itself to employing discourse and content analysis, as well as grounded theory. The analytical process entailed reading through the autobiographical essay, and the interview transcripts of each participant, to identify, select and cluster themes that addressed similar issues; and to identify oppositional or contradictory themes or issues. Essentially, the process entailed reading through the data to look for similarities, differences, overlaps, recurrent themes, words and phrases and then clustering them.

- Second, I employed an **inter-comparative** process of analysis. This process is similar to intra-comparative analysis, except that it entails comparing and contrasting data across and among the data sets of all the research participants, so as to identify commonalities, and variances in issues pertinent to the study.

- Third, I employed a **theory-theory**, and **theory-data interplay** analysis. This entailed analysing the data against the literature reviewed, to see how it confirmed, and/or challenged existing views, or provoked new insights into the debates related to this study. The constant comparison and theory-data interplay corresponds with the principles of grounded theory, which are concerned with comparing data against received and established theory, for the purposes of concept exemplification, concept clarification and concept elaboration. The insights that emerge by virtue of differences in the researched and researcher’s positionalities, variation in time and context specificities, generate new, revised theoretical perspectives.

The above three levels of analysis created a **theory-theory/theory-data interplay** - a feature of grounded theory that I adopted as an analytical device to compare and contrast the participants’ espoused feminist and pedagogical theories with their theories-in-use. In employing the theory-data interplay as an analytical technique, my intention was to create a dialectic referential circle among the participants’ views and the body of received literature. In order to achieve this, I drew on my pre-understanding of concepts, which I had assembled into a theoretical toolkit and then employed them as sensitising agents against which to analyse participants’ views. In this regard, the relational value of the study emerged on three levels. First, in the utility existing theory has in informing data analysis, second, the power of data to challenge existing theory, and third, how personal theories can either legitimise or delegitimise received theories, and in so doing contribute to theory elaboration, theory recontextualisation, and theory reconceptualisation.

The relational value of the study emerged through methodological and theoretical praxis. Methodologically, this was achieved through staging a conversation among the various data sources. Theoretically, through permutations of theory-theory interplay, theory-data interplay and data-data interplay, the study created a dialectic referential circle to enhance multi-perspectival analysis and inter-relational understanding of the feminist teacher’s epistemological stances and her epistemological labour.
Theoretical and empirical understandings and experiences of nurturance versus authority

Language as Symbolic Order

In identifying the possible source for the conflation of female teacher with mother, Jennifer advances a psychoanalytic interpretation, which she argues is tied to the role language plays in configuring and conflating the female teacher with mother. She articulates the predominance of gynocentric conceptions of the teacher as follows:

… we create ourselves and are constructed by others in the medium of language, which has been called ‘the Symbolic order’ by psychoanalytical theorists such as Kristeva and Lacan. The Symbolic order, a linguistic realm characterized by difference and separation, is constructed upon the foundation of erasure of the maternal union with a child. In this dyad, boundaries are fluid, dependency is acceptable and even body spaces are permeable. In order for the child to enter society, s/he has to forsake the maternal and construct a sense of self that is premised on separateness. Language, therefore, is made possible by revoking union with the beloved other, whose very body encompasses all the infant’s desires. This, I believe, is a key aspect of what Kristeva means when she describes women’s position in society as primarily sacrificial. The element of choice enters in when the individual becomes aware of herself as gendered by others’ expectations and discourse and can then choose how to respond to that construction. (Essay).

Discernible in Jennifer’s explication of the Symbolic Order is a push-pull tension. The ‘pull factor’, which signifies maternal presence, and entails drawing the mother and child towards each other, is captured in the acknowledgement that boundaries are fluid; dependency is acceptable and body spaces permeable [to] the beloved other; whose body encompasses all the infant’s desires. The ‘push factor’ which signifies maternal absence, repels the mother and child away from each other, and is captured in the phrases: difference and separation; erasure of the maternal union with a child; for the child to enter society s/he must forsake the mother … self is premised on separateness; revoking union with the beloved other. It is within this dynamic that we see the psychoanalytical theoretical exposition of maternal absence and presence. This oscillation between maternal absence and maternal presence becomes the basis for the child’s ego development. Grumet (1988:27) argues that it is only in the mother’s absence that the child begins to perceive his or her own selfhood so that their intermittent separation is the basis for the first identification of self. The converse is also true, in that the willingness and capacity for separation pivot on the prior and anticipated satisfaction of the child’s need for intimacy, dependence and nurturance, which are contingent on maternal presence. Thus, the developmental needs of both mother and child simultaneously sustain and contradict the concrete, symbiotic origins of their relationship.

In attempting to understand the applicability to education of mother-child relations of union and separation, Frank’s (1995:35) work has been useful in unraveling what goes on between teachers and students, and why. Using discourses of psychoanalysis, he examines the transference relation that persists between teachers and students, and concludes that the end of transference requires separation, which then allows the other to be perceived as someone else. When mirrored against the classroom context, a feminist epistemology reflects this dialectical dependence of subject and
object in teacher-student relations. Severed incrementally from the biological mother, the child (student) continues this psychosocial, bio-cognitive relationship, first with female schoolteachers who dominate early childhood learning, and often many students perpetuate the remnants of this pattern with female faculty in institutions of higher learning. In this regard, the feminist classroom becomes a fertile ground for the prolongation of mother-teacher/child-student relations, given feminist pedagogical preferences for connected learning, and recognition for women’s ways of knowing and being. Within the context of the university, the ‘pull’ dynamic between the teacher and her student is evident in at least two ways. The first refers to creating a conducive bio/cognitive environment for learning. This entails the teacher engendering a learning space that makes the student feel physically at home, and then drawing/socialising (‘pulling’) her/him into academic discourses. Second, once the teacher has succeeded sufficiently in socialising/drawing/pulling’ the student into academic discourses, the ‘push’ dynamic of challenging and reconceptualising pedagogic and educational knowledges is operationalised. This means that she discourages the student from uncritically consuming her views and that of hegemonic discourses, thus pushing the student away towards alternative ideas and knowledges. The mother/teacher push-pull/absence-presence equation is succinctly captured by Grumet (1988:20-21), when she relates this psycho-social-bio-cognitive arrangement to curriculum concerns, and suggests that the aim of the project of curriculum:

… is to claim the child, to teach him or her to master the language, the rules, the games, and the names of the fathers. Contradicting the symbiotic nature of maternity, the maternal project of curriculum is to relinquish the child so that both mother and child can become more independent of one another.

Examining the mother-child relationship from the perspective of the role language as Symbolic Order plays in defining relational dynamics, facilitates understanding its transference and replication in teacher-student relations. Furthermore, conceiving of language as symbolic order provides an explanation as to why students expect the teacher not just to assume the role of mother, but to play the role of the bourgeois, self-sacrificing, and bounteous mother, at that.

Teacher as Bounteous Mother

Jennifer's thesis regarding the gendered expectations of the sacrificial nature of women is clarified in Carol's observations regarding the roles female faculty are generally expected to perform in academia. In highlighting the consequences of operationalizing the teacher as mother personae in academia, Carol expands on the expectation of female educators to acquiesce to motherly and nurturing pedagogic performance as naturally inscribed in their social script. Carol writes:

... Women's tendency to pay attention to students' needs in line with their conditioning as women, particularly at a university like UWC, which serves a disadvantaged body of students, means they are not promoted as quickly. On the whole, men have a greater sense of their own worth, and a greater sense of entitlement to promotion and pay rises, than women. (Essay).

Carol elucidates Jennifer's comment that women's position in society is primarily sacrificial. While Carol does not offer any comment in her extract on the agential potential of women educators
to subvert socially gendered expectations of them, she does address the sacrificial ethic of women educators on two complementary levels, which may be explained by examining them in relation to the Nature/Nurture coupling. Generally, this coupling is presented within the reductive binary of the either/or logic. Within traditional debates, Nature is viewed as biologically determined, while Nurture is associated with cultural influences that shape the social actor.

Although Carol disassociates herself from, and is highly averse to arguments that support women's instinctual or maternal nature, from the above extract, readers may erroneously interpret Carol's reference in the sentence fragment: *women's tendency to pay attention to student's needs* as connoting an apparently natural predisposition, a general course, a propensity, and inclination for women to attend to students' needs. Such an interpretation may obtain from the etymological association of the word 'tendency' to the family of words: 'tend' (which means to care for), and 'tender' (which means having or expressing warm feelings, being gentle and delicate, sensitive to moral and or spiritual feelings). Proponents who associate women with innate tendencies of caring and nurturing foster the expectation that women educators will respond to students' needs as a natural consequence of their essentially organic and 'true' natures. Furthermore, Carol refers to female teachers responding to students' needs *in line with their conditioning*. In this instance, she attributes women's attention to students' needs to Nurture influences, which shape and condition their behaviour. This tier of the binary coupling posits that the female teacher's maternal response to her students is as a consequence of socially created and environmentally engendered expectations of her. Thus, the Nature/Nurture binary summarises the social expectation of female educators to acquiesce to maternal and nurturing pedagogic performances both as organic and naturally occurring manifestations of their disposition, as well as culturally learnt expectations inscribed in their social script.

In addition, contained in the sentence segment: *particularly at a university like UWC, which serves a disadvantaged body of students*, Carol alludes to an intensification or extra appeal to maternalistic and nurturance pedagogic relations when serving a disadvantaged body of students. Dorsey (2002) has coined the adjective ‘intellectualised mammy’ to illustrate how students selectively and strategically expect female faculty to guide them towards intellectual growth, while also nurturing them. This is accentuated when female teachers have to work with students who hail from disadvantaged socio-economic and political circumstances. Often such students arrive at university with stymied conceptual skills and lacking in basic reading, writing and study competencies. Generally, substandard pre-tertiary educational experiences exacerbate the challenges these students have to endure when adjusting and acculturating to academia. This necessitates additional caretaking responsibilities, which as attested to by Carol, are taken up by female faculty, as they are cast into the role of intellectualised mammy. This expectation of maternal practice is poignantly captured by Mercer (1997) who describes the traditional mother-teacher as the:

… bourgeois all-sacrificing, all-nurturing, well-resourced, power-sharing ‘good’ mother. This mother has no desires of her own, no needs, no problems, no will of her own except to nourish and empower all her students/children, whom she loves equally and without reservation.
Central to Mercer's descriptions of teacher-mother, is the ineluctable sacrificial ethic that Jennifer identified in the mother-child relationship. Carol illustrates its consequences for women educators, when she alludes to the career mobility sacrifices female educators make as they are called upon to pay attention to students' needs. Given that the benchmark for upward career mobility in academia is tied to research and scholarly publications, Carol confides that female educators, by attending to students' needs in line with their conditioning … are not promoted as quickly. In addition, she points out that: women … work harder at proving themselves, often ending up doing much of the donkeywork. In this regard, Douglas (1977) also laments that the cruellest aspect of oppression is the logic by which it forces its objects to do the dirty work in their society. She points out that:

… women through our work as mothers, as students, and as teachers need to understand how we have contributed our labour to institutional and social organisations that have extended our own subordination and contradicted our own experiences of nurturance.

When female faculty resist or are genuinely unable to attend to students' needs they are criticised for being 'heartless bearded mothers'. In addition, locked into teacher-mother roles inevitably results in perpetuating the conflation of teaching with women's work, as opposed to scholarly research that faculty and students generally associate with men's work. Assailed with caregiving and care-taking responsibilities invariably eventuates in undermining the female faculty's scholarly abilities and contributions. The persistence of the teacher as mother image associated with a pedagogy of nurturance, caregiving and sentimentalism has essentially defined and confined the role women play in education and broader society. Grumet (1988:87) identifies the grim consequence as follows:

… many women, mothers and teachers, [live] through other people's stories. Having relinquished our own beginnings, middles, and ends, our stories of teaching resemble soap operas whose narratives are also frequently interrupted, repetitive, and endless.

Familial and Friendship Practices, Caricatures and Condescension

Vijay and Phumzile contend that there is a tendency for students and faculty to recreate familial and friendship patterns within the education domain. Vijay does not stereotype maternal/nurturance pedagogies as either essentially good or bad, but provides a balanced view on the debate. Vijay says:

… my students have taught me to interact at a more human level. Engagement for me has been highly politicised, because with my Department, the engagement is clinical. In a way that is satisfying to my feminist ideals because it engages, it nurtures, but it maintains a learning distance.

… A lot of people are looking for mother in the classroom, and unfortunately women academics get confused with mother. From my own experience it is a difficult one because if you buy into that then the student won't deliver and won't grow. At the same time you have to buy into it sufficiently to nurture, but you have to keep giving the student tough kinds of reactions. It's almost like the way a bird will push a fledgling out of a nest. Those are mothers. They are educators also, and it is around survival. I really don't want any of them dependent on me
because I am not going to be around all the time. I do have some good relationships with former students but with most of them I’ve had to take that trip down that road which said, ‘Excuse me I’m not your parent. Don’t keep feeding me this kind of crap’. It is that kind of thing where most of us need to replay those familial roles. But in the learning situation, there is a very fine line between dependency and developing a student who is strong, and confident. (Interview)

There are at least three important points that emerges from the extract. First, in arguing for the importance of connected teaching and learning, Vijay comments on the pervasive chilly climate that new student recruits to academia experience. She admits that feminist insights have taught her to interact with her students on a more human level. Her more connected interactions with her students have become politicized in the faculty she is attached to because, as in most other academic institutions, it runs against the grain of faculty-student traditions that tend toward clinical and aloof interpersonal relations. The sense emerging from Vijay’s view, positions nurturing teaching and connection to students as a meaningful intellectual activity that helps to fuse a bond between student and faculty. A nurturing attitude, from this perspective, serves teaching at university level in a positive way in that it demystifies teacher-student relations, and presents teachers as human beings.

It is, however, important to note that Vijay’s view is fraught with the push-pull dynamic and the notion of separation and difference enunciated in psychoanalytic theory, and in Jennifer’s elucidation of language as symbolic order. Vijay captures this repeatedly in statements such as:

… it engages, it nurtures, but it maintains a learning distance;

… you have to buy into it sufficiently to nurture, but you have to keep giving the student tough kinds of reactions;

… It’s almost like the way a bird will push a fledgling out of a nest. Those are mothers. They are educators also, and it is around survival. (Interview).

The push-pull dynamic between teacher and student is inextricable from the logic of fundamental pedagogic philosophies, which portray the more experienced adult leading the child towards self-actualization. This process requires that the teacher remain in touch with the emotions, confidence levels, intellectual growth, and social dynamics that the student has to deal with, without negating the importance of argument and critical engagement. Given that the project of education aims at developing students’ intellectual, cognitive and social survival strategies, means that parochial images of maternal pedagogies inclined to sentimentalism and protectionism are more than likely to stunt students’ emotional, psychological and cognitive growth. Fostering sentimentalism and protectionism in and of itself would be antithetical to the mission of teaching and learning. It is against this backdrop that Vijay asks her students: Can’t I treat you like adults? She then proceeds to declare: You are adults. Embodied in her question and answer is a desire to believe that at university level students have indeed entered the portals of adulthood, and from henceforth she need not relate to them as children, neither should she be expected to entertain infantile patterns of behaviour, and a dependency syndrome. The paradox of parental (teacher) presence and absence is summarised in: I really don’t want any of them dependent on me because I am not going to
be around all the time. The crux of the educational project is summarised in the paradox that, while students will graduate out of her physical presence, she will remain present symbolically in their lives as they assimilate, adapt, challenge and change the various ideological, sociological and psychological views that she has shared with them, as their teacher. Just as the mother’s biological genetic material remains embodied in the child even after separation, so, similarly, the student will carry the educational and ideological ‘genetic’ influences of Vijay, their teacher, long after they have graduated out of her class.

Second, Vijay also points out that: … A lot of people are looking for mother in the classroom … and women academics get confused with mother. Inferred in this statement is the tendency for some students to operate from the belief that female faculty are supposed to be open to intimate, even familial relations with their students as a necessary counterpoint to patriarchal tradition. An area already fraught with interpersonal tensions then becomes the site for students to act out childish patterns of interaction with maternal figures. Good teachers do nurture their students, encourage independent thought, and help them improve academic skills. There is, however, a distinction between nurturance and intellectualised mammy work. Thus, while acknowledging the need to be supportive of and nurturing to her students, Vijay reminds them: Excuse me I’m not your parent. Don’t feed me this kind of crap. In these statements, Vijay introduces the third point regarding the modelling of pedagogic relations on a nuclear family paradigm. The ideological configuration of school management structures is continuously legitimated by presenting the triad of teachers, management, and pupils as essentially homologous to the family structure. In other words, the school structure replicates the patriarchal structure of the family, with female educators cast in the role of mothers, and men administratively and procedurally managing the school, and invariably taking responsibility for training, supervising and evaluating, playing the role of the proverbial ‘head of the family’, and in combination within this institutionally heterosexual sanctioned marriage, jointly performing parenting roles to the children / students. Mercer (1997:42) ponders:

… why should teachers be modelled on either mothers or fathers? Why not develop an ethic of teaching which steers well clear of any romantic, version of the nuclear family?

Gatens (1994:13) also ponders the impediments circumscribed by the imposition of a familial psychoanalytic model onto pedagogical relations, and what happens when those relations are re-imagined outside of those traditional roles? In responding to what could possibly transpire when familial roles are re-imagined in the class, Grumet (1988) points out that women teachers’ own passivity is largely meant to provide the model of obedience for students to emulate. Expanding on how she discourages developing parent-child relations from being inappropriately replicated within pedagogic relations, Vijay comments on the concept of obedience and its manifestation in teacher-student relations:

… it is this obedience thing. I really don’t want them to do something for form sake, and because she wants it, and because it is going into the register. I want them, even when they are doing their notes, to pick up what is relevant and meaningful to themselves, and to not give it back to me like good children – I’m saying to them, ‘Can’t I treat you like adults? You
are adults. Don’t pander and patronise me in the kind of stuff that you give me, because that is not what tertiary education is about’. (Interview).

Vijay conceives of student obedience in two ways: first, students engaging in learning activities for form sake, and/or because it is going into the register, suggests that students indulge pedagogic routines out of a sense of formality, and have no real interest in its educative value. Probably, if students know that the work will be recorded in a register, this acts as a monitoring, surveillance and control measure and they conform to the teacher’s technologies of micro power as a way of satisfying administrative requirements. Second, students may perform obedience rituals because she wants it, thus they may oblige learning as a way of humouring, or appeasing the teacher. Evidently, students adopting such strategies do not impress Vijay, since she is more interested in their not attempting to win her favour or approval by reproducing what they imagine might be pleasing to her. Essentially, she discourages students from indulging in narcissistic teacher reproductions and reflections, hence she implores them not to pander and patronise her like good children. In a further attempt to discourage ritualistic obedience pedagogies, she tells her students not to give back notes to her like good children … Can’t I treat you like adults? You are adults. Contained in these statements is her desire to relate to them as adults; adulthood, in this instance being associated with critical thinking - a by-product of independence and cognitive maturation.

In addition, some students, who deviate from construing the female teacher as mother, generally opt for the teacher as ‘big sister’ or friend. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Phumzile: So you would have Black students coming for one thing and then two hours later they’re still there and you realise they’re just lurking. I mean there was an academic issue to be dealt with, but also there’s some other function that you’re serving which goes beyond the immediate material that you’re teaching and a kind of fascination because there are so few Black lecturers on campus. ... You can understand me being read as a kind of a big sister in some ways - which is fine for me as long as that does not mean that you expect certain privileges, or certain allowances because of that. (Interview).

Phumzile posits that if students are given the impression that the feminist teacher overtly and covertly sympathizes with them, or suggests that she understands them and identifies with them based on racial and/or gender similarity, we should not be too surprised if in trying to make sense of themselves students become bound up in the teacher, either in excessive admiration tied to a kind of fascination, or unrealistic expectations that certain privileges, or certain allowances will be made to accommodate them. Choosing to identify with a Black woman in authority is a manifestation of a positive self-identity, especially, in the minds of young women who live within a society that regularly endorses negative and dysfunctional images of Black females. Aware of this state of affairs, Phumzile does not object to being read as ‘big sister’ but inserts the proviso: as long as that does not mean that you expect certain privileges, or certain allowances because of that. Implied in Phumzile’s statement is the forewarning that her potential acquaintance with the student’s personal problems or circumstances should not be interpreted that she will entertain substandard work, grant concessions about deadlines or extend special privileges to them.
Students’ endeavours to recreate familial and friendship relations with female faculty, may be attributed largely to the expectation that: teacher=family/ friend=emotional blanket. Many young students still dwell in the realm of the familial, thus when translated to classroom practice they expect female teachers to primarily concern themselves with student casualties, and function in the capacity of emotional blanket, on whom they can rely upon for rescue and support. This is elucidated in the following episode Vijay provides regarding a bulimic student seeking her out to discuss a personal issue:

One of the students had come to tell me that she was a bulimic, quite early in the year. I barely knew her. She clearly needed to talk, and engage with a woman in authority, or a teacher. I couldn’t figure it out whether it was gendered or not. I have to practice a thin line there where you both have to comfort, but you can’t get confused with mother. (Interview).

In highlighting her unfamiliarity with the student, Vijay signals that generally people confide highly personal matters, not with strangers, but those with whom one is acquainted. This draws attention to yet another variety of invisible labour that female faculty perform, and relates to Bartky’s (1990:102) Marxist interrogation of women’s emotional labour – an activity with whom many female teachers are familiar. Family, motherhood, and sisterhood can be quite complicated relations, and have the potential for conflict, as well as support and connectedness. A feminist pedagogical strategy that encourages students to draw parallels between family and friendship relations runs the risk of tapping into tensions rooted in dynamics that may be less benign than envisioned by a more expansive vision of such relations.

Finally, another reason for female educators distancing themselves from being construed as teacher-mother relates to the nurturing mother being associated with the imagery of food. By definition, ‘to nurture’, embodies the actions of feeding and protecting. While feeding and protecting are generally regarded as positive behaviour in society, the image of feeding take on fewer positive connotations by Vijay and Thembi in relation to teaching and learning. For example, Vijay’s comment: *don’t feed me this kind of crap!* While there are several meanings that could be attached to the word *crap*, it may be safe to extend its association with regimes of knowledge regurgitation. If interpreted in this light, it could find support when read in the context of Vijay’s statement: *I want them, even when they are doing their notes, to pick up what is relevant and meaningful to themselves, and to not give it back to me like good children.* Her call for students to engage their education in a critical and informed way highlights the important discussion on knowledge production and reproduction as taken up by feminist and critical theorists. (See Weiler, 1988).

Continuing on a parallel trajectory, Thembi sustains the imagery of food and nurturance by introducing the metaphor of spoon-feeding. In doing so, she demonstrates the agential potential female teachers possess to transcend parochial associations of mother-teacher with nurturance and nourishment. Thembi declares:

*Spoon-feeder. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be looked at as one who spoon-feeds or an uncommitted teacher.* (Interview).
Through the food image, Thembi proceeds along a related but tangential trajectory to that of Vijay, in her emphatic disassociation from images of the teacher-mother as nourisher. Through her double denunciation to be construed as a *Spoon-feeder. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be looked at as one who spoon-feeds*, Thembi emphasizes the negative stereotyping that occurs when teachers are perceived as spoon-feeders. Her spirited and repeated disassociation from this metaphoric image of spoon-feeder can also be traced to teaching and learning paradigms Freire (1968) critiqued for bearing the marks of banking/transmission systems of education. Traditional pedagogies have been critiqued for spoon-feeding and even force-feeding students. Notorious for undermining both students and teachers’ critical propensities ‘spoonfeeding/transmission pedagogies have come to be associated with teachers and teaching philosophies that reduce students to empty receptacles into which teachers pour received, scared knowledge which parade as universal truth. A transmission mode of education is at odds with Thembi’s and Vijay’s stated objectives to provoke their students to engage in critical thinking.

Thembi’s refusal to be seen as one who spoon-feeds or as an uncommitted teacher combines an unconventional binary, that of the spoon-feeder and the uncommitted teacher. Her use of the either/or binary is an unusual departure from the way binaries operate. Generally, in a binary the first component of the coupling is elevated and privileged, while the second is devalued and disprivileged. In setting up the binary *spoon-feeder/uncommitted teacher*, Thembi disassociates herself from the entire binary because each entity in the coupling has come to be associated within educational circles as unscholarly and lacking in professionalism. The negative consequences of acquiescing to spoon-feeding pedagogies court the risk of earning the educator a reputation for being unscholarly, theoretically uninformed, and an uncommitted teacher, who is merely a conduit for cultural reproduction and cognitive cloning. Aware of the possibility for women educators’ to be undermined, it is likely that, against this backdrop, Thembi attempts to steer clear of reproducing the caricature of the uncommitted teacher among her students.

Insofar as Thembi’s objective is aligned to the food for thought maxim, as opposed to spoon-feeding pedagogical practices, she echoes Grosz’s (1989:124-125) stance that teacher-student relations should be understood as active subject-to-subject exchanges, during which:

... the mother must give the daughter more than food to nourish her, she may also give her words with which to speak and hear. The gift of language will always be reciprocated, as food can never be: it is ‘returned’ to the mother ‘with interest’, in the daughter’s new-found ability to speak to rather than at her mother.

It may be surmised that this is at the heart of what Thembi hopes to achieve in her teaching relationships. Her preference to subvert traditional gynocentric pedagogies point to broadening portrayals of female teachers. Imagining the teacher’s role as providing a ‘gift of language/discourse’ not only reinvests the concept of ‘mothering/ teaching’ as positively enabling, but also displaces the hierarchical model of teaching as knowledge transference into a more interactive and dynamic relationship.
Synthesis

From the insights that have emerged from an investigation into the authority versus nurturance debate, the participants collectively acknowledge the narrow conceptions in which female teacher identity has been defined. They point to significant departures from this staid image that has come to dominate the discourse. Each provides possible reasons for the existence of these limiting conceptions, and explains her personal responses to the teacher as mother cult phenomenon. Jennifer submits that psychoanalytic analysis offers a convincing explanation for the transference of the mother-child union being mirrored within patriarchal education system. Carol, Vijay and Phumzile indicate that in various guises, students attempt to forge familial relationships with their female teachers, either casting them in the role of benevolent mother, sister, or friend. While the participants acknowledge the need for students to form close pedagogic connections with their teachers, they also signal the setbacks that arise when mother/parent/sister patterns are performed in educational domains. In synthesising discussions around authority versus nurturance, the following key points emerge:

The first relates to Gore’s (1993) formulation of the theme authority versus nurturance. Gore suggests that authority in the construction of feminist pedagogies is addressed in three ways, namely: authority versus nurturance, authority as authorship, and authority as power. We notice that her identification of the authority versus nurturance framing highlights an important departure from the way she frames the two other themes, namely: authority as authorship, and authority as power. In the two latter themes, authority is not set up as binaries, instead authority as authorship and authority as power are presented as forms of authority not in opposition to another category/concept. In presenting authority versus nurturance as a binary, Gore highlights the either/or oppositional logic that frames the debate. The participants instead confirm that authority is neither oppositional to nurturance, nor inconsistent with the personae of the female teacher. Critical incidents in Vijay’s, Thembi’s and Phumzile’s extracts illustrate the impetus not to ignore the tensions created in the classroom by their female bodies. While willing to engage connected learning paradigms in their feminist classrooms, they do not shy away from stances that subvert maternalized, personalized and ameliorative conceptions of the female educator. For example, Vijay pointedly reprimands her students telling them not to feed her crap, and she reminds them that she is not their parent, and they are not her children. Such exchanges with students shatter assumptions of both herself and her students and provide a space for the development of their personal independence, and independent knowledge constructions. This is an especially important message for students who are likely to interpret female teachers’ caring, connective and emotional support as an end in and of itself, rather than as a means towards achieving independence and development.

The second point that emerges from considering the authority versus nurturance delineation, relates to the notion that the classroom replicates the familial drama and functions as a foundational understanding of the educational dynamic. Miklitsch (1994) considers the difficulty students are likely to experience when attempts are made to disrupt familial patterns/models within schools. He acknowledges that if the female teacher cannot assume traditionally respected male or paternal authority, and the authority of the feminine becomes a denigrated configuration of the maternal,
this forecloses the space for articulating a productive female pedagogy. He also concedes that all teaching attempts to alter students in some way and students may be assumed to understand that change is an integral aspect of the educational experience. Miklitsch is, however, wary about a radical shift (change) in primary assumptions regarding the replication of familial patterns in educational contexts. He contends that ideology is not simply an intellectual matter, and that:

... if ideology, like hegemony, is primarily an unconscious process, critical pedagogy must engage affect and intellect, emotion and cognition if it is to be persuasive, which is to say transformative.

This is a sentiment to which most participants are sensitive. While they are keen to acknowledge psychoanalytic notions of separation and difference, they are aware that oscillation between proximity and retreat is often present in the feminist classroom. The task remains holding in creative and constructive balance the push-pull dynamic of teacher-student relations. Good teachers do nurture their students, encourage independent thought, and help them improve academic skills, however, the participants stress that a distinction be made between nurturance and parental condescension/ intellectualised mammy work.

Third, participants critique traditional feminist scholarship that overlooks the possibility that a female teacher is perceived as a manifestation of maternal authority rather than as someone with no authority at all. A feminist pedagogy that stands in opposition to the patriarchal model denies the maternal as a particular kind of authority. This denial according to Jarratt (1991, in Bell & Nugent, 2001) highlights:

... the deep ambivalence toward and repression of the mother in our culture. A focus on male configurations of power situates the female always in relation to the male and represses the understanding that within the confines of her own classroom, constructions of female authority dominate. While, for the feminist teacher, attaching negative connotations of authority with the male may valorize a facilitative or nurturing stance, the female teacher cannot assume patriarchal authority, so there is no need for renunciation of that role. The presence of a female body in the classroom denies that possibility.

Cumulatively, the strong sense emerging from an exploration of nurturance versus authority is the participants' unanimous efforts to unhinge the female teacher from association with caregiver and intellectualised mammy, while simultaneously ensuring that she is not read as distant, superior and disconnected, bearded mother. To this end, the participants display features of what Eagleton (1998) alludes to when he proposes the notion of ‘impersonality’. Eagleton suggests that ‘impersonality’ may serve as a strategic interpersonal pedagogic relational practice, which combines an ethic of care and connectedness while maintaining a critical distance that encourages students to come into their own intellectual and emotional maturity and independence. The participants give substance to the notion of ‘impersonality’, in their attempts to enact female teacher personae that favour a recontextualised and reconceptualised notion of female and feminist educators.
A *recontextualised* notion of the female teacher involves engendering interpersonal relations that are appropriate for university age students. This suggests that the understanding of being a nurturing teacher needs to be expanded in a university context so that the nurturing female educator is recognised as one who creates a supportive, non-threatening and encouraging environment that is discursive, and sufficiently challenging to risk a pedagogical ‘politics of disappointment’ (Jones, cited in Lather, 1998). Such a self-consciously contradictory pedagogy is sensitive to interpersonal ideological differences, but is courageous enough to generate disconfirmation and unease, when, for example, students enact/express prejudiced worldviews.

A *reconceptualised* notion of the female teacher expands on the recontextualised notion of the female educator. It suggests recognising the woman teacher as female but non-maternal. It conceives of the female teacher as supportive, committed to improving students’ academic prowess, and promoting independent, and critical thinking. It, however, cautions against her being misconstrued as an unscholarly, emotional safety net. It urges that the female teacher not be stereotypically read as better suited to nursing students’ emotional casualties, since such conceptions mask her scholarly and academic competencies and astuteness. Thus, rather than become repressed into teacher-mother/intellectualized mammy figures, the participants in my study urge a recontextualised and reconceptualised understanding of the female teacher; an understanding that foregrounds their capability of offering critical intellectual nurturance.

Recontextualised and reconceptualised understandings of the female teacher correlate with the processes of transference and counter-transference. The notion of transference and counter-transference, encapsulates the oscillation between proximity and retreat (the push-pull contradiction) that is often present in the feminist classroom.

Another critical point that emerged from an examination of *nurturance versus authority* is related to the participants directing their pedagogic energies towards reading the texts of educational experience and practice as semiotic as well as symbolic systems. This translates to conceiving of curriculum as a project of *transcendence*, which suggests that while both teachers and students are immersed in biology and ideology they are also able to transcend biology and ideology. Thus, rather than enact their female teacher identity in relation to reductive and repressive expectations that associate their female bodies with ideological reproductive mother-teachers (consonant with spoon feeding/banking education), within their practical teaching spaces, the participants enact transformative/transcendent pedagogies. In so doing, they refuse to be conduits for the reproduction of discriminatory knowledge systems. Their teaching and theorising propose political and epistemological educative and pedagogic agendas, which aim at developing in their students’ resistance, project identities that subvert and sabotage socially unjust practices.

Finally, presenting nurturance in confrontation to authority invites the charge of being caught in a false binary between connection versus disconnection, mothering versus managing, and healing versus empowerment. A considerable body of feminist pedagogical theory would persuade us to move towards some more satisfactory third term, by incorporating our contradictory claims into a higher level of theory. Walsh (1996:192-193) argues that feminist teachers should resist binary and hierarchical demarcations by embracing feminist pedagogy’s ameliorative, inclusive and healing function by recontextualising it within a discourse of empowerment, thereby reconciling
the apparent contradictions between feminist teaching as therapy and politics. If feminist teachers are rejecting the image of the traditional maternal role as paralyzing for students and teachers then their teaching bodies could also be configured as female and non-maternal. While not articulating their conceptions of what it means to exercise nurturance and authority as stridently as Broughton (in Broughton & Potts, 2001) who writes: “I would rather be disliked, resented, and extruded from the scene of learning than enmire my students in a minefield of mother–daughter relationships, or worse still, in my own neuroses, my own fantasies of friendship and/or feminism” - the participants in my study, nonetheless are also wary not to replicate teacher-student relations that are likely to be counterproductive to the education enterprise.

References


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