

Track 4: Sustainability, Just Transition and Educational Responses, and Educational Equity and Inclusion

Title:

From Care to Practice: Applied Lessons from a Blended Distance Teacher Education Programme in an Emerging Economy for Sustainable Future Learning

Research Overview

This paper, situated within Nodding's (2013) ethics of care framework, employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with purposively selected 263 postgraduate teacher education students. Instruments included survey, a paired interview and individual interviews. Findings revealed a blended programme demonstrates notable strengths in modelling and confirmation; however, gaps were identified in dialogue and practice.

Purpose of the study

Through Noddings' (2005, 2012) framework, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which care pedagogy is embedded in the teaching and learning of a postgraduate distance teacher education programme in an emerging economy. Integrating technology into education may not necessarily lead to the envisaged human-focused sustainable society (De Villiers, 2024). Therefore, digital transformation, digital literacy and creative thinking in response to students' learning needs should be paramount (Tavares, Azeredo & Marques, 2022).

Research Methods

The sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design, which combines quantitative and qualitative methods, was adapted. Data collection involved convenience and purposive sampling. Participants were from an uneven technological landscape; majority was middle-aged and were registered for a blended programme. The learning management system (LMS) supports the blended mode. For the survey, a sample of 263 students was selected from a population of 1 800 using the table of Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Based on this table, a sample of 317 is required for a population of 1 800. However, only 263 of the 330 questionnaires were returned. A Google survey form (with closed and open-ended question items), guided by the components of Noddings' pedagogy of care theory composed four biographical question items and 22 questions. SMS messages were sent to students to prepare them for their participation. They also received the survey link via SMS. The data collection adhered to institutional ethical guidelines. Google analysed the close-ended question items presented in descriptive statistics, while the open-ended questions, and the interviews and focus group discussion transcriptions were analysed thematically. Both codes (S – survey, with the number of the participant, e.g., S1) and pseudonyms were used to report the findings.

Results and Discussion

The demographic findings (25–34 years, 43.3% (113); 33.7% (88), 35–44 years; 18.8% (49), 45–54 years; less than 2%, 18–24 years, 55–64 years and 65 years and older) showed that the students currently enrolled for the BEd(Hons) programme are younger, with a tendency to be more open to the use of technology (Aluko, 2021). The findings are discussed in terms of the four elements of the Noddings' pedagogy of care theory.

Modelling refers to a lecturer's ability to serve as an example of care. Most of the respondents agreed that the module coordinator had taken the time to plan the module. However, the negative responses showed not all the respondents enjoyed care in the module. An expression such as *"There is not much care and support shown to distance education students"* (S170) was concerning. Nonetheless, most of the respondents felt welcome. They also found the tutors helpful and supportive. The researchers also wondered why 14.9% (39) of the respondents claimed recorded lectures were not available on the LMS, which was found to be false. Research (Aluko & Ooko, 2022; Anderson & Rivera-Vargas, 2020) indicates diverse reasons for this in the study context, among which could be the laggings. This could be an early indication of non-completion, which has plagued this mode of learning.

Dialogue refers to engagement with students, including personal communication opportunities (on administrative and academic matters), prompt responses to emails, and feedback on various course elements, nurturing a feeling of care (Kızılcık & Dewan Türüdü, 2022). Generally, although the institution has made diverse forms of support available, about a third of the respondents were yet to maximise these. The findings also revealed that a number of respondents did not use the discussion board or used it sparingly, which appears to be a trend in the institution's distance education programmes. Conversely, non-usage could be due to technological challenges as indicated by a respondent (S83): *"Use of technology? To be honest, I'm not good at it, I would prefer hard copies"*. However, Burke and Larmar (2020) emphasise the need for academics to be intentional in module planning to integrate prospects for dialogue.

Practice refers to opportunities created by the module coordinator to allow students to interact with other students, tutors and their learning materials. This creates connectedness, which is important for practising and reflecting on care (Noddings, 2005). The respondents were given opportunities to practise care, thus switching roles and becoming carers to understand, share and support others (Kızılcık & Dewan Türüdü, 2022). Again, there were respondents who never availed themselves of these opportunities. Reasons may be related to technological challenges.

Care can be shown through *confirmation*, which motivates students (Rubie-Davies & Hattie, 2024). While the findings show much confirmation by the tutors in the module, evidence from the open-ended responses illustrated an encounter with *"rude tutors"* (S101). There was also the question of feeling isolated. A comment such as *"lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and classmates exacerbate feelings of isolation. This emotional challenge further impacts motivation and time management"* (S20) was worrisome. While technological advancements

provide affordances to mimic face-to-face care pedagogy, the literature confirms they work differently online (Henriksen et al., 2022). This necessitates ongoing training and support for users. Furthermore, the problem could be a lack of access to technology, as exemplified by this statement: “*Living far away and lack of technology resources and no data...*” There is evidence that emerging economies need to do more to improve connectivity (Tian, 2025), while institutions should be more innovative.

In conclusion, although findings show the programme mostly aligns itself with the elements of Noddings’s pedagogy of care and Society 5.0, the shortcomings do not entirely demonstrate a desirable way of caring for others (Noddings, 2005). In distance education, a student can represent a substantial number of students due to the large numbers enrolled in a programme. Therefore, negative views should be taken seriously.

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