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RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Hearing to Understanding: Navigating Cultural and Contextual Differences in Listening with Care

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Abstract

This study utilised the theoretical framework of care ethics to investigate how cultural and contextual factors influence the ways educators from different global higher education contexts listen to students. The research was conducted by an international team of early- and middle-career academics from Canada, Australia, and China, each bringing diverse cultural and academic backgrounds to the inquiry. Two questions were explored using a qualitative reflective inquiry methodology: Why and how do we listen to students? Through a participatory process of inter-relational reflexivity, the authors analysed their listening practices to uncover individual (I-position) and collective (We-position) perspectives. Reflexive thematic analysis was used as an analytical tool, drawing on principles of care ethics theory to emphasise the importance of listening to understand rather than evaluating or comparing. The findings indicate that while listening is universally valued, its practice varies across cultural and institutional contexts. A range of I-positions and We-positions are presented and discussed across five themes: trust, cultural diversity, why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchy. The study concludes with a proposed framework that integrates care ethics into listening practices, aiming to enhance educational experiences and the ability to engage in cross-cultural scholarly dialogue for both students and educators.

Keywords: Care ethics, listening, cultural diversity, contextual influences, reflective inquiry, dialogue.

Introduction

The concepts of listening to the student voice and the value of student-centered approaches have become increasingly prevalent across higher education (HE) in the Global North over the past 25 years (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023). Incorporating the student voice as a central consideration in teaching and learning offers many benefits. These include supporting student success (Allen & Nichols, 2017), improving curriculum design (Brooman et al., 2015), setting a responsive vision for the future of universities (Speight et al., 2020), and assuring quality while enabling meaningful relationship-building between institutions and students (Louth et al., 2019). However, despite this focus on listening to the perspectives of students, both research and practice indicate that students are often not consulted in broad or authentic ways when it comes to institutional decision-making (Varnham et al., 2017; Naylor et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been argued that within the neoliberal HE context, the tendency to treat students as a homogenous group can result in approaches that, while claiming to give students voice, in fact deprive them of agency (Kane & Williams, 2021; Sabri, 2011). In addition, in educational contexts across the Global South, including China, research and discourse relating to student-centered approaches are at an earlier, more emerging stage (Briffett-Aktaş & Ying, 2025; Gao et al., 2025; Wei, 2016) and are often influenced in complex ways by cultural and power dynamics (Khohliso & Mphuthi, 2025).

These tensions are increasingly significant in the context of global HE mobility, particularly relating to the large numbers of students from China choosing to study in universities in a wide range of countries, including Australia and Canada. Depending on context and perspective, the way that students voice – specifically why and how students are listened to – is framed reflects deep and often unrecognised assumptions on the part of both educators and students. Given the potential benefits of listening to students and gaining insights from their perspectives, new research in this area is crucial for advancing HE practice. This research study responds to the need for greater critical attention to how and why HE educators listen to students in increasingly globalised contexts. Specifically, this study investigates how university educators conceptualise and practice listening to students across three culturally distinct contexts in Canada, China, and Australia, by exploring two key questions:

1) Why do university educators listen to students?
2) How do university educators listen to students?

This study was conducted by three researchers representing academic institutions in Canada, Australia, and China. We sought to examine and reflect on our subjective experiences as educators in listening to students in our respective contexts, using a qualitative reflective inquiry methodology.

Through a process of inter-relational reflexivity (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009), we aimed to uncover the complexities of our individual and collective listening practices. The methodology involved generating data through written transcripts and scholarly discussions, where we shared our perspectives on listening to students, analysed our responses collaboratively, and engaged in a participatory reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to deepen our understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Our study was informed by an overarching analytical framework

based on care ethics theory (Held, 2006; Tronto, 2010), which emphasises the importance of listening to understand rather than listening to evaluate or compare based on pre-existing assumptions (Noddings, 1984/2013).

As our findings indicate, we encountered clear agreements and disagreements as we navigated I-positions (individual perspectives) and We-positions (collective understanding) (Akkerman et al., 2006; Akkerman et al., 2012). Through this analytical process, which involved both inductive and deductive approaches to RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we developed five central themes: trust, cultural diversity, why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchy. The results of our analysis indicate that each of us listens through the lens of our own cultural background and professional role, shaping how we value, interpret and enact listening practices. The shared academic context shapes a common ground in which both tensions and points of convergence in listening practices can be surfaced and observed.

We conclude by discussing the practical implications of our findings for educational practice, underscoring the need to look at the act of listening from a cultural and contextual perspective in our daily work as educators. We also highlight the significance of this study in addressing a gap in the HE literature concerning differences in approaches to listening to students and conceptualising student voice across global contexts. Our collaborative approach, incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences within a relational dialogic space, responds to growing calls for modelling new approaches to criticality and engaging in scholarly dialogue across international and institutional educational boundaries (Mwangi & Yao, 2025; Hernandez et al., 2025).

Literature Review

The act of listening to students is an element in education that can easily be taken for granted or considered unworthy of critical examination. Our responsibility to our students and our commitment to their holistic development can encourage us to unreflexively assume that listening must be central to educational institutional agendas. Research indicates the importance of listening to students to gain insights into their experiences and learning differences (Cook-Sather & Schultz, 2001), to challenge educator's assumptions (Schultz et al., 2008), and to engage students in curriculum development and the learning process in ways that improve learning outcomes for students and staff (Brooman et al., 2015; Bovill et al., 2011). This further encourages the view that listening must be an essential pedagogical element since it has the potential to open spaces for a genuine dialogue between students and professors (Gutierrez, 2008) and contribute to greater equity in education (Cook-Sather, 2018).

However, the act of listening is mediated by a myriad of variables including who is listening, why the listening is taking place, what context defines the act of listening, whose voices are amplified, and whose voices remain unheard. All of these variables can shape how educators conceptualise and approach listening to students in different ways. In this sense, the act of listening in an educational context cannot be fully understood without considering the context where the listening is taking place and the cultural and historical characteristics of who is listening (Leonard et al., 2024; Torres-Arends, 2023; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024).

The history and tradition of listening to students and adopting participatory approaches differs across countries and education systems (Skerritt et al, 2023). It has thus been argued that "student voice initiatives are necessarily grounded and sensitive to the local context" (Pearce & Wood, 2019, p.125). Given the importance of context, therefore, further research into listening to students across different educational contexts is needed. As an example, educational research and reform in Australia, the UK and North America have included a strong focus on the student voice and the democratic and emancipatory potential of positioning students as active contributors to education knowledge and reform (Cook-Sather, 2006; McLeod, 2011). In contrast, while research in the Chinese context indicates that the concept of student voice offers potential for more inclusive and socially just teaching practices (Gao et al., 2025), this research is at a more emerging stage. Given that most of the research on this topic stems from the Global North, applying this research in the Chinese context requires a more nuanced rethinking that extends beyond the current discourse (Briffett-Aktaş & Ying, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The importance of listening practices within universities is further highlighted when considered through the lens of care ethics theory, which provides the overarching analytical framework for this study. We have drawn on care ethics theory in response to research which indicates the value of care when it comes to supporting student success (Baker & Burke, 2023; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Lewis & Pearce, 2020; Torres-Arends & Jacobsen, 2024; Vázquez Verdera, 2019), as well as calls for further research into care in HE (Baker & Burke, 2023).

Research indicates that educators consider listening to students as key way to demonstrate care toward their students (McBee, 2007; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Listening to students as a way of both determining needs and providing care is particularly important within educational institutions, in which educators are often tasked with, or responsible for, assessing and responding to the needs of students. However, as Tronto (2010, p.163) remarks, needs are often "contested and unclear," and the politics of determining needs is deeply complex (Fraser, 1989). This is particularly the case as HE cohorts in Australia and Canada are highly demographically diverse, with large numbers of international students. In these two countries, Chinese students make up the largest portion of international students (Department of Education, 2024; Legusov & Jafar, 2022). Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach is not adequate to meet the needs of students (Snijders et al., 2020).

In this research study, which focuses on how we listen to students in different global HE contexts, we drew on four key principles of care ethics theory to inform the methodological approach and to enrich the analysis. The four key principles are relationality, receptive listening, attentiveness to needs, and the importance of context. In this section, we outline how these principles are conceptualised within care ethics theory and how we applied them in the research.

Originally theorised within second wave feminism (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984/2013; Ruddick, 1989), care ethics presents an academic theorisation of care. As an alternative to normative ethical theories, care ethics positions considerations of good care as central to decision-making and the functioning of society. Within early care ethics works, the

concepts of voice and listening in terms of who does the talking and who is or is not being listened to are critically interrogated. As an example, Noddings (1984/2013, p.1) challenges how ethics has been discussed "in the language of the father" and presents an alternative ethic of care based on a "feminine", later updated to "relational", approach. While the early works have been rightfully subject to feminist critique (Thayer-Bacon, 2021), they paved the way for care ethics to become a more mainstream area of research which takes a more critical intersectional approach to care (Held, 1995, 2006; Tronto 1993, 2010, 2013; Urban, 2020).

Care ethics theory is centered on the idea that humans are fundamentally relational, because we all either provide or require care at some point in our lives (Engster & Hamington, 2015). As such, the concepts of receptive listening and attentiveness to needs are central to the relational approach espoused by a care ethics theoretical framework. For Noddings (2012, p.780) "receptive listening is the very heart of caring relations", and it is through attentive listening, from a standpoint of acceptance, that we can understand and reflect on the needs of others and consider their realities.

Care ethics theory places particular emphasis on considerations of context and power dynamics when it comes to making decisions which centralise the concept of care. In particular, the work of later care ethicists (Held, 1995, 2006; Tronto 1993, 2010, 2013; Urban, 2020) argues that care must be understood in a political sense. These works emphasise the potential of care to flatten hierarchies in societies and institutions through prioritising the perspectives and voices of those who require care being typically those who have less power. As such, receptive listening, or a version of communicative ethics, is required to successfully navigate such cross-cultural needs for interpretation (Tronto, 2010) and to ensure the voices of people within large organisations are heard (Urban, 2020).

In applying care ethics theory to practice, students can be positioned as recipients of care, or the "cared-for", whereas university educators can be positioned as the "one-caring" (Noddings, 1984/2013). To successfully address entrenched hierarchies within HE institutions, and work to understand the needs of students, it is vital to listen to the perspectives of students. Through open dialogue, relational leadership, and administrative processes that consider different viewpoints and lived experiences, the practice of receptive listening within educational institutions can contribute to more equitable and caring experiences for students (Urban, 2020). However, what receptive listening means and how valued such listening practices might be is different in different contexts, meaning that such an approach is complex.

Within this study, the care ethics principles of relationality, receptive listening, attentiveness to needs and the importance of context informed both the methodological approach and the analysis. In terms of the research design (detailed below), we adopted a collaborative, reflective approach which prioritised relationality and receptive listening, seeking to understand how and why we, as educators from different contexts, listen to our students and understand their needs. In providing an overarching analytical framework, these principles also informed our analysis through providing a lens of care through which to interpret our findings.

Methodology

Research Context

The three researchers – Julia (Hui), Jessica, and Irene - form a diverse, international academic research team of educators from China, Ireland, and Venezuela. At the time of the study, they were completing their doctoral studies at Beijing Normal University, China; Queensland University of Technology, Australia; and the University of Calgary, Canada respectively. Through a partnership between the three universities, the authors were brought together to participate in an international doctoral research seminar at the University of Calgary in October 2023. Research ethics approval for this study was provided by the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB), University of Calgary (ethics ID: REB24-1768).

Methodological Approach

The research utilises a qualitative reflective inquiry methodology that places, and prioritises, subjectivity at the centre of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) and argues that a value-free inquiry is not valuable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, it recognises diversity of thought and perspective as a valuable source of knowledge generation. The three researchers engaged in a participatory method of inter-relational reflexivity (Bargal, 2008; Gilbert & Sliep, 2009) to deeply examine the concept of listening across contexts and cultures. This involved a collaborative reflective process in which the research team first wrote individual reflections and then met to share these reflections through structured discussions. During these discussions, we considered our different perspectives and interpretations, focusing particularly on where and how our views converged or diverged and how our roles and experiences shaped these interpretations.

Our two overarching research questions were: Why do we listen to students, and how do we listen to students? To answer these questions, the three researchers acted as researcher–participants to generate data, creating written transcripts in response to question prompts regarding our individual approaches to listening to students. Following this, we held a series of scholarly discussion meetings to collaboratively analyse our written data and to deepen our understanding of one another's perspectives. During our scholarly meetings, we drew on key principles of Gilbert and Sliep's (2009) approach to inter-relational reflexivity as well as the four key principles of care ethics theory discussed above. These included acknowledging the critical importance of context, listening receptively and being open to ongoing testing of our individual assumptions and intentions, and allowing reflexivity to provide us with a "meta level of reflection" to "see beyond our own positions to those of others" (Gilbert & Sliep, 2009, p. 470).

Drawing on Akkerman et al. (2006, 2012), the concepts of I-position and We-position became important to this study because they allowed us to approach listening not as a neutral or universal practice, but as a dialogic process shaped by culture, professional experience, and personal history. This perspective helped us explore how our individual understandings of listening were socially and historically situated, while also examining how shared meanings could emerge through dialogue across difference, rather than seeking uniformity or complete consensus. In this sense, the use of I- and We-positions aligns closely

with the relational and receptive orientation of care ethics, enabling a collaborative approach that supports both context-specific and relational forms of critical inquiry (Groot et al., 2018).

In this way, our methodological approach guided us through an iterative process in which we started with an initial consideration of our individual positions regarding listening to students and then moved toward a collective appraisal of the similarities and differences in our approaches. By creating a space for genuine dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) and reflection, we were able to consider both individual ("I") and collective ("We") perspectives (Akkerman et al., 2006, 2012), working to "apprehend the reality of the other" (Noddings, 1984/2013, p.14).

To analyse the data from our written transcripts, we drew on Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach. As an analytical tool, RTA enables researchers to play an active role in identifying, interpreting and reporting themes within qualitative data, as well as supporting researcher introspection (Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Tuckett, 2005). This provided the flexibility and rigour needed to make sense of the data we generated through our participatory process and to navigate the complexities arising from the diverse academic roles and cultural backgrounds of the researcher–participants.

The Researchers' Positionality

As scholars who engage in reflective practices, we recognise that our different contexts and positionalities impact our approach to listening. In this section, we describe who we are regarding our academic backgrounds, positions and roles within academia, years of experience, student groups, and educational situations and problems we encounter.

Julia: I am originally from China, where I currently teach English to university students. I have 10 years of teaching experience, and I am currently engaged in teaching and preparing my doctoral dissertation. I have always lived, studied, and worked in China. I mainly teach Han students, as well as some minority groups from Xinjiang Province and Tibet, whose cultures are different from the Han culture.

Jessica: I am originally from Ireland and currently reside as an immigrant in Australia, where I work at a research-intensive university. At the time of this study, I was completing a doctoral degree in education at the Queensland University of Technology, and my research focused on the experiences of first-year university students. In my research and practice, concepts of equity, inclusion, and diversity are important.

Irene: I am originally from Venezuela and now live in Canada as a Venezuelan-Canadian immigrant. For the past seven years, I have worked as a professor teaching mainly international students in a private university in Canada. My academic background is in psychology and law. At the time of this study, I was completing a doctoral degree in Learning Sciences at the University of Calgary. Having studied abroad myself, I feel a strong sense of empathy toward my students' experiences as international learners.

Data Collection

The data collection involved several key activities and meetings which were mostly conducted online given that, for most of the study, we were based in different countries: China, Australia, and Canada. We encountered significant challenges sharing documents and accessing necessary software. Specifically, our researcher in China was unable to access to certain software and platforms that were regularly used by our researchers in Australia and Canada. Conversely, the researchers in Australia and Canada were unfamiliar with some of

the software our colleague in China used. What we anticipated to be a simple aspect of our collaboration became a considerable barrier that we had to overcome. These challenges highlighted the importance of not underestimating technological and access differences in international research teams, emphasising the need to anticipate and address such limitations when planning global collaborative projects.

The data collection process involved the following stages: a) designing the data collection process, b) collecting/creating the data, c) analysing the transcripts of pair dialogues, d) group conversations, and e) identifying and creating themes. Table 1 outlines our schedule of meetings during which we worked through these stages.

Table 1: Schedule of Research Meetings

Date	Activity
Oct 23–27 2023	Initial research discussions
Nov 20, 27, 2023	Scope research topic and research questions
Dec 18 2023	Finalise questions for responses
Jan 5, 22, 29 2024	Return and distribute individual transcripts, discuss thematic analysis approach
Feb 6, 15, 19, 27 2024	Discuss and share initial outcomes of thematic analysis approach
March 5, 18, 19, 26 2024	Coding and thematic work
April 1, 9, 15 2024	Share and revise coding and thematic work
May 13 2024	Review data analysis
May 13, 20 2024	Paper design and paper writing process
June 2024 – Nov 2025	Writing and revision process

Designing the Data Collection Process

This stage of the research involved multiple meetings and discussions in which we grappled with the challenge of generating relevant and methodologically rigorous data. As the focus of our investigation was our own subjectivity, we sought to design a data collection

system that could capture the complexity of our subjectivities while maintaining systematic, verifiable, and analysable standards. We drew inspiration from the work of Lorenzetti et al. (2022) and Akkerman et al. (2006, 2012) to create a data collection process that was methodologically sound and flexible enough to account for our similarities and differences. Therefore, we decided to design a set of questions that each of us would answer, making our responses the central axis around which the research would revolve.

Collecting/Creating the Data

The data collection was guided by the following seven questions:

- What is the context of my workplace?
- Who are my students?
- What does "listening to students" mean to me?
- How do I collect students' feedback and what is the underlying purpose?
- When do I listen to students?
- Has my approach to listening to students evolved over time?
- What challenges do I face in listening to students, and how do I address them?

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, we drew on Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as an analytical tool to analyse the written data obtained from our transcripts. As an iterative process, our scholarly discussions further informed and developed our analysis process. This approach was selected for its flexibility in handling qualitative data and its recognition of the researcher's subjectivity as a strength. Listening to students requires us to reflect critically on how we listen, what listening entails, and our positionality within both our individual and collective research and professional contexts. Given these considerations, adopting a reflexive analytical perspective was the appropriate approach. As an analytical tool, RTA is flexible and allows for "the experiences, perspectives, and meanings of the participants" to be prioritised through inductive, data-driven coding and theme development (Braun and Clarke, 2021, p. 56). At the same time, RTA is also a theoretically flexible approach to data analysis which allows for deductive, theory-driven coding and theme development, enabling us to analyse the data through the lens of care ethics to gain conceptual insights.

Our approach to RTA was rigorous and involved each team member completing individual analyses and engaging in pair dialogues across the dataset. After this step, we exchanged and reviewed each other's coding before combining all the codes into a master codebook. To support reflexive dialogue and the collaborative development of themes, we held eight meetings to discuss the coding process and develop the themes by creating, refining, defining, and naming them. At this stage we focused mainly on an inductive coding approach. As an example, some of the data-driven, inductive codes we used include "partnering with students", "limits to listening", and "listening to gauge understanding".

Transcript Analysis and Pair Dialogues

We worked iteratively through the phases of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), including data familiarisation, coding, and creating and developing themes. To collaboratively conduct RTA,

each of us answered the seven questions, and the responses were randomly assigned, resulting in the following distribution:

- Julia read Irene's manuscript
- Jessica read Julia's manuscript
- Irene read Jessica's manuscript

Each researcher was responsible for reading the responses assigned to them and initiating a dialogue, which could involve requesting clarifications or even sharing different perspectives. Once the initial conversations between the pairs were completed, each researcher proceeded to code the text inductively (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Pairs of researchers then engaged in dialogues to discuss and refine the initial codes, fostering deeper insights and understanding through collaborative analysis**.** When the conversation at this stage was exhausted, we moved on to a group discussion during which all the researchers could access all three sets of responses. This pair-based review fostered in-depth dialogue, expanding to group discussions (see Figure 1). At this stage, as a group we were able to discuss deductive coding based on our interpretation of the dataset through the lens of care ethics theory. As an example, some of the theory-driven deductive codes we used include "value of relationality", "responsiveness", and "receptive listening".

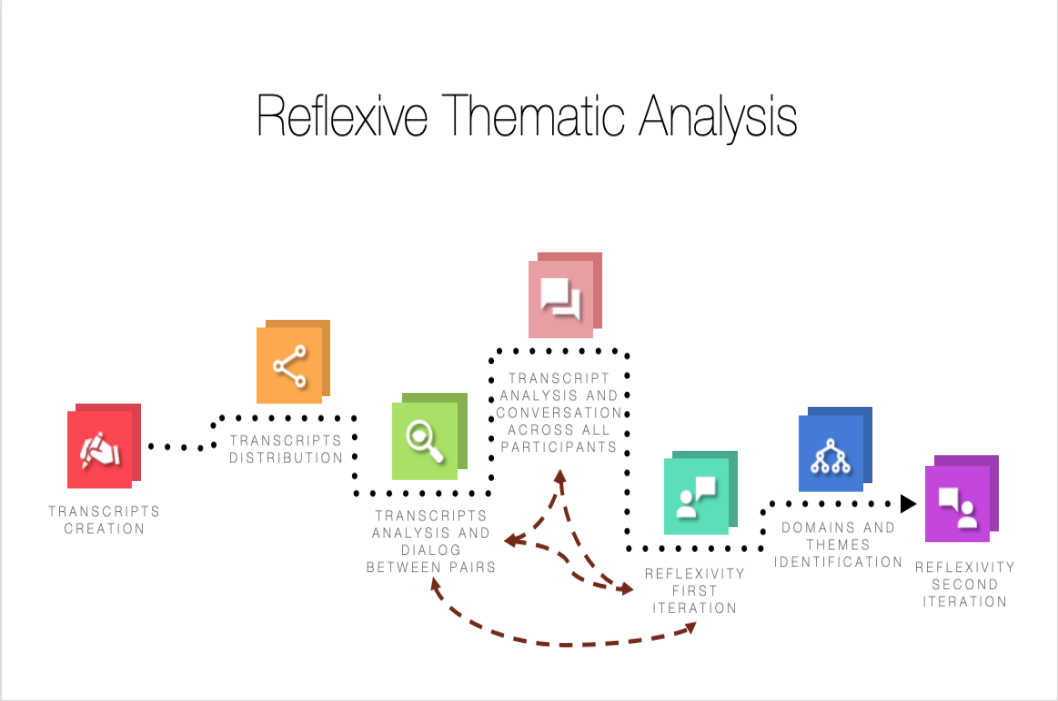
Transcript Analysis and Group Conversations

At this stage of the analysis, the researchers had the opportunity to engage in further discussions and through a collaborative coding process, which resulted in 49 codes, we were able to develop and identify common themes and particular perspectives. These 49 codes were organised into five themes: trust, cultural diversity, why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchy. This stage of the analysis was characterised by a reflexive process that allowed us to contrast our ideas and review and reconsider initial thoughts.

Theme Identification and Creation

Reflection was central to the process, allowing us to develop five key themes and consider differences in how these themes were understood. Coding the transcripts, followed by subsequent dialogues in pairs and group discussions, created the space to allow us to identify these themes as well as particularities in their meanings. While we agreed on the main themes, how we understood and interpreted them sometimes differ significantly, influenced by our individual perspectives and experiences.

Figure 1. Team's Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process. Adapted from Braun & Clarke (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process.



Findings

This study aimed to explore how three scholars conceptualise, approach, and enact practices of listening to students in their respective educational contexts. Rather than focusing on potential disagreements or the need to reach a consensus, our primary purpose was to create a trustworthy dialogic space where participants could share their insights without fear of judgment (Bakhtin, 1981). To do this, we drew on the work of Akkerman et al. (2006) to create a dialogic space where both individual (I) and collective (We) perspectives were made visible and valued (Akkerman et al., 2012). Within this paradigm, the I-position examines our individual differences within the context of our shared understanding, while the We-position highlights the shared dimensions of our listening practices.

A We-position refers to a collective perspective where a common understanding is shared, even though individuals may articulate or practice it differently (Akkerman et al., 2006). In contrast, I-positions refer to the individualised, context-specific perspectives that individuals hold within a collaborative setting. These differing positions are marked by differences in how people interpret and respond to shared themes or issues, influenced by their unique backgrounds, roles, and experiences (Akkerman et al., 2012). Considering these different perspectives from the care ethics theoretical framing is central to the research in two main ways.

First, in terms of our research design, we were guided by four key care ethics principles - relationality, receptive listening, attentiveness to needs, and the importance of context - as critical elements (Engster & Hamington, 2015). Through our data collection and analysis process, we aimed to pay attention and listen deeply to each other to understand each other's realities and perspectives, which at times have been very different. The method of developing seven questions, taking time to write our answers, and taking time to review,

reflect on, and discuss our answers in an iterative fashion provided us with space to reflect and consider these different perspectives. Taking time to understand each other and build our relationships was crucial to gaining deeper insights into how and why we listen to students and what impacts this might have on our research and practice. In this way, our approach can be considered an example of "slow pedagogy," which is closely aligned with care ethics theory (Mountz et al., 2015).

Second, in terms of our approach to analysis, we argue that our care ethics theoretical perspective closely aligns with Akkerman et al.'s (2006, 2012) I- and We-position model. Through a focus on I-positions, we were able to consider our individual, context-specific approaches and underlying values related to listening to students. Focusing on We-positions, we prioritised the relational aspect of care ethics and considered the ways in which we shared approaches and values. This required careful listening, being receptive to very different viewpoints, and working through these viewpoints to reach consensus while respecting dissensus regarding our different I-positions. This dual model approach allowed space both for differences and for building shared knowledge. In addition, care ethics theory pays particular attention to how notions of hierarchy operate within institutions (Urban, 2020; Tronto 1993, 2010), which also informed our analysis.

Our analysis identified multiple We-position and I-position perspectives across five themes of trust, cultural diversity, why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchy. Although these themes reflect important shared elements of our work as educators and indicate areas of collective concern, we found that genuine We-positions emerged only in relation to the themes of trust and cultural diversity. In contrast, our perspectives differed significantly in relation to the themes why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchy.

Through our analysis, we uncovered that our individual perspectives and understandings of each theme were shaped by our unique cultural and educational backgrounds, our professional roles in academia, and our personal contexts, leading us to varied interpretations and approaches to the five themes. In the section that follows, we present our findings by examining points of convergence and divergence across our perspectives within each of the five themes. In doing so, we discuss both we-position and I-position interpretations. This includes the shared we-positions we were able to articulate for the first two themes, as well as the individual I-positions that emerged across all five themes.

Theme 1: Trust

We-position: We all agree that trust is a crucial component in listening to students, although we each hold individual views on how trust is understood, developed, applied, and maintained. This shared recognition of the significance of trust enabled us to articulate a unified we-position. We hold a collective commitment to trust as a core value, even if our specific strategies for cultivating it differ. This reflects the idea of "unity in diversity," where there is fundamental agreement on the value of trust, but it is expressed and practiced in diverse ways (Akkerman et al., 2012).

Our I-positions, expressed below, outline our differences in how we conceptualise trust:

Julia's position: Julia acknowledges the importance of trust, retaining a strong emphasis on traditional roles and authority within the teacher–student relationship. Trust is seen as something that develops within the bounds of recognised authority, maintaining a

clear distinction between teacher and student roles. The boundary is negotiated rather than crossed. Julia's perspective suggests that trust can coexist with authority, but it requires a careful balance where roles are clearly defined.

Jessica's position: Jessica emphasises collective recognition and the reciprocal relationship between teachers and students. Trust is co-constructed through the mutual understanding of needs and the involvement of students in the educational process. Jessica's view demonstrates boundary work, where the traditional boundaries between teachers and students are crossed to create a more democratic and participatory learning environment. Her belief that students will trust teachers once their needs are respected represents a shift away from traditional hierarchical dynamics.

Irene's position: Irene focuses on building trust through shared experiences and empathetic connections, which indicates a relational approach to trust. By sharing her experiences as an international student, Irene aims to foster a sense of community and shared identity. The boundary crossing occurs as Irene blurs the lines between personal and professional, using her own background to create an environment of trust and confidentiality. This approach reflects the complexity of trust-building, where personal narratives become a tool for collective understanding and trust.

Theme 2: Cultural Diversity

We-position: Cultural diversity emerged as a significant theme in our data analysis and discussions about how we listen to students. For all of us, this theme highlighted that our listening practices are closely intertwined with the cultural backgrounds of the students we work with. Our shared recognition of this enabled us to articulate a unified We-position, in which we agree on the critical importance of centering cultural diversity in our listening practices. However, the reasons supporting our positions differed, reflecting the unique perspectives and experiences each of us bring to our educational practice, and further reflecting the concept of "unity in diversity" (Akkerman et al., 2012).

Our I-positions, expressed below, outline our differences in how we conceptualise cultural diversity:

Julia's position: Julia's experience is situated within an educational context in which she primarily teaches Han students along with smaller numbers of students from Xinjiang and Tibet. Her perspective is influenced by China's collective culture and the hierarchical structure prevalent in the education system. Julia acknowledges the cultural differences among her students but views diversity within a delimited framework, influenced by the dominant Han culture. Her approach is focused more on integrating individual needs with collective group needs, reflecting the collectivist culture in which she teaches.

Jessica's position: Jessica's experience is shaped by her professional and academic experience. She emphasises the national, cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population in her context. Her own Irish background adds another layer of cultural complexity to her perspective. Jessica views diversity as an essential element, seeing each student as unique with individual needs. Her broad approach to diversity reflects her multicultural environment and experience, and her belief in recognising and valuing each student's individuality.

Irene's position: Irene's Venezuelan background and her role as both a doctoral student and professor in Canada, where a high percentage of her students are international,

deeply influence her perspective. She shares a personal connection with her students, as she has also navigated the complexities of studying abroad. For Irene, diversity is not just an abstract concept but a lived experience. Her sympathy with her students stems from shared experiences of cultural complexity, which informs her teaching and listening practices. She sees diversity as a foundational element that shapes her interactions and helps her connect with students on a deeper level.

Theme 3: Why We Listen

Our third theme - why we listen to students - emerged as central to our discussions because our I-positions on the reasons and motivations for listening to students vary significantly. These differences are shaped by our distinct roles within academia and the cultural contexts and backgrounds shaping our perspectives. On this theme, we were unable to form a unified we-position, and outline our I-positions below:

Julia's position: Julia views listening as an essential communication tool in the teacher–student dynamic and believes that students' needs must be assessed for their validity in the collective context. Julia's approach to listening is evaluative, reflecting the influence of hierarchical and collectivist cultural norms. She emphasises the need to balance individual student needs with the collective good, suggesting a more cautious and selective listening process.

Jessica's position: Jessica's approach to listening is grounded in the idea of being open, understanding, and responsive to students' needs, which she believes are sometimes overlooked in the context of large universities. She actively practices receptive listening, guided by the ethics of care. Jessica emphasises the importance of listening as an active and responsive process. She believes that good listening involves hearing, understanding, and valuing the perspectives of others. Her approach is informed by her desire to enhance the experience of studying and working within universities.

Irene's position: Irene's listening practice is shaped by her students' cultural diversity. She focuses on making sense of their communication from their cultural perspectives and strives to listen, acknowledging her cultural biases. Irene's listening is culturally sensitive and involves translating cultural complexities. She believes that effective listening requires a deep understanding of her students' cultural–historical contexts, ensuring that her responses are appropriate and respectful of their backgrounds.

Theme 4: Listening Practices

Exploring our listening practices was another focal point of our reflections, revealing that we approach the act of listening and practice listening in distinct ways. The way we listen is fundamentally shaped by our respective roles, whether as professors, staff, or researchers and by the contexts within which we engage with our students. Again, on this theme, we were unable to form a unified we-position, and outline our I-positions below:

Julia's position: Julia expresses dissatisfaction with her listening practice, citing frustration and feelings of burnout from unsuccessful interactions with some students. Her experience highlights the complexity of working with a culturally diverse student population within a structured, hierarchical system. Her negative view stems from the challenge of aligning student needs with her own expectations, while also managing the pressures of maintaining authority in the classroom.

Jessica's position: Jessica views her listening practices positively, seeing them as enriching her academic work and benefiting her students. Her reflections are generally positive, highlighting how her receptive listening has led to meaningful academic and personal growth. She sees her listening practice as a continuous process of adaptation and learning for herself and her students.

Irene's position: Irene views her listening practices positively, noting that they create a valuable feedback loop that benefits her teaching and research. Irene's reflections underscore the integration of her research activities with her teaching strategies, including listening practices. She recognises her mistakes as essential learning experiences that have enhanced her ability to effectively listen and respond to students' needs.

Theme 5: Hierarchy

Hierarchy emerged as the deepest and most complex theme in our discussions, on which we did not reach a unified We-position on. Each of us - Julia, Jessica and Irene - approaches the concept of hierarchy in unique ways, reflecting the influence of both historical and cultural contexts on our views of power dynamics in education. Our I-positions are outlined below:

Julia's position: Julia upholds a traditional hierarchy between teachers and students as deeply ingrained in her cultural context. She believes that this hierarchy is necessary for effective teaching and learning. Julia's view of hierarchy is traditional, reflecting the collective and authority-driven culture in which she operates. She sees the teacher–student hierarchy as essential to maintaining order and ensuring that educational goals are met, even as she tries to be responsive to students' needs within this framework.

Jessica's position: Jessica is critical of the hierarchical structures in education and strives to flatten them by actively listening to students. Jessica's perspective on hierarchy is informed by her awareness of historical and institutional power dynamics. She seeks to question these hierarchies through her listening practices, advocating for a more equitable approach to education.

Irene's position: Irene perceives a latent hierarchy between domestic and international students, often reflecting broader societal attitudes toward diverse cultural backgrounds and students' needs. Irene's approach to hierarchy is subtle, focusing on the implicit biases that exist within the educational system. She aims to counteract these biases by emphasising the value of the skills and perspectives that international students bring, challenging the deficit view often imposed on them.

Discussion

In our analysis, we identified two key spaces of influence: the cultural backgrounds that shape our individual differences and which explain our I-positions, and the shared academic context that creates common ground and forms our We-position. Our shared spaces of similarity in the We-position provide a collective understanding of how we approach listening practices within our educational roles.

The central research question guiding this study was as follows: How do different contexts impact how the three researchers, each working in different universities in Canada, China, and Australia, listen to students? As we worked through the different stages of the RTA process, our analysis focused on individual and collective perspectives. As such, our analysis considered two sets of different perspectives: the "we-perspective," in which we worked together to consider shared ways and conceptualisations of listening acts, and the "I-perspective," in which we considered how we might individually differ in our thinking about listening.

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) allowed us to explore these interactions by coding data inductively and deductively, revealing both data-driven and theoretically-driven connections between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Trust and valuing cultural diversity emerged as two central themes, representing two values that all three educators agree are essential in the process of listening to students. Our We-positions on these two themes represent the foundation for understanding how we navigate the complexities across all five themes of trust, cultural diversity, why we listen, listening practices, and hierarchies within our educational practices.

Through our approach, we ensured a robust and nuanced analysis that captures the complexities of listening to students in diverse educational contexts. Through this rigorous process, we developed a framework that was informed both by our understanding of care ethics theory and the insights generated through the identification and analysis of I- and We-positions. This framework, informed by care ethics theory, is intended to help educators approach the act of listening to students and colleagues in inter-cultural contexts by acknowledging the following elements as relevant in the act of listening:

- **Contextual Understanding**
  Contextual factors can influence how educators and professionals listen to students. This includes understanding students' and educators' diverse academic and cultural backgrounds.
- **Cultural Differences**
  Cultural differences in communication and listening practices offer the opportunity to explore the act of listening as a cultural construction.
- **Reflexivity as a Tool**
  Applying reflexive practices is useful in the critical examination of listening strategies, in which a continual self-interrogation process is central.
- **Dialogic Spaces (Listen to Understand, Not to Respond)**
  Creating dialogic spaces where genuine dialogue and an exchange of perspectives can occur facilitates a deeper understanding of listening to students.
- **Listening as an Evolving Practice**

> The nature of a person's listening practice naturally evolves, influenced by ongoing reflection, feedback, and educational contexts.

Guided by care ethics theory, our reflexive inquiry was guided by the importance of carefully listening to each other's positions. This approach did not involve evaluating whether one position was more appropriate or acceptable than another. Instead, we focused on listening and seeking to understand. This does not mean that we did not have different positions - we certainly did. However, the listening exercise proved to be enriching, both in terms of changing our ideas in some instances and in recognizing that our positions are not merely our own but are shaped by the historical–cultural contexts that define us. Listening to each other through our similarities and differences as scholars also offered an opportunity to reflect on the practice of listening itself. Listening is a skill that can be learned and is particularly relevant for us; only when we learn to listen to each other with openness and respect can we learn to listen to our students respectfully.

While the care ethics framework provided valuable tools for listening to one another to understand rather than judge, it is essential to acknowledge that applying this theoretical framework to our diverse I-positions may not be adequate. For example, while Jessica and Irene primarily view receptive listening as a way to understand the needs of students, Julia acknowledges the limits of listening within a hierarchical context between teacher and student and views listening to students primarily as a way to make professional judgements. In this way, while the care ethics framework guided us throughout this research project, its use within our individual research and practice differs. An attempt to suggest otherwise risks reducing the act of care to a set of predefined attributes, potentially overlooking the nuanced and context-dependent nature of both caring and listening practices.

Although some researchers have argued that care ethics can provide a "transnational feminist politics" (Robinson, 2015, p. 294), others have critiqued the theory for its limitations as a Western-influenced feminist theory, including claiming that it is incompatible with Confucianism (Star, 2002; Yuan, 2002). While acknowledging complexity and difference, Sander-Staudt (2015) argues that the collaboration of care ethics principles and Confucian principles can provide mutually beneficial insights. In our research, we found that our most significant learning emerged from these mutually beneficial insights, which is that we care for students through our unique ways of listening to them, and our listening practices are profoundly shaped by our cultural and contextual backgrounds. This insight challenges common assumptions about listening in education by indicating that caring practices are not uniform but are instead deeply influenced by the listener's cultural identity and professional context. Therefore, listening as an act of care must not be seen as a universal standard but as a culturally and contextually mediated practice that varies across educational environments. Highlighting the centrality of context further supports the argument for the prioritisation of teaching and learning approaches grounded in care, particularly across different paradigms (Baker & Burke, 2023; Gravett, 2022; Schultz, 2022).

Limitations

The limitations of this study relate primarily to its size and scope. The research involved a small sample of three researchers from three different countries and should therefore be understood as exploratory. While the findings are not intended to be generalisable, we anticipate that readers may recognise potential similarities or learnings with their own experiences.

Conclusion

The act of listening to students is a complex process that cannot be fully understood without considering the cultural and contextual backgrounds of the listeners. Our analysis reveals that listening is not a neutral or straightforward activity; it is deeply influenced by the cultural diversity of the listeners and the academic contexts in which they operate. The I-positions we hold, shaped by our unique cultural backgrounds, highlight the diverse ways in which we approach listening - whether it is to understand, translate, or evaluate student needs. However, these individual approaches are interwoven with shared We-positions, which act as unifying themes across our diverse practices, showing the complexities of bringing cultural and contextual differences to a common space of analysis.

While understanding how we listen to our students and why we listen to them is central to our research, it was equally significant to recognise that this reflective exercise also led us to listen to each other. We came to understand that listening to understand is a complex practice that confronts us with different ways of perceiving education. In this process, agreements may or may not find a place. Through this mutual listening, we acknowledged the diversity in our perspectives, allowing us to bridge cultural and contextual differences. This practice of listening, not only to our students but also to each other, highlighted that listening is inherently relational and transformative.

The interplay between culture, context, and trust underscores the complexity of listening. Listening is not just about hearing words: it involves navigating power dynamics, recognising cultural nuances, and fostering a sense of trust that can bridge differences. The dynamics of how these factors interact –how our cultural backgrounds inform our listening practices and how the academic context shapes our shared values – add layers of complexity to the act of listening. Therefore, understanding the act of listening requires acknowledging this complexity and the need for a nuanced approach that considers both the individual and collective dimensions of listening. We can only fully grasp the depth of what it means to truly listen to students in diverse educational settings by appreciating the dynamic interaction between culture, context, and trust.

Listening to students and to each other must be understood as a complex act in which the listener listens based on who they are and the context that defines them. In this sense, the dynamic between the listener's cultural background and their role in academia shows us that the boundary between the ways that context and culture influence the act of listening is porous. It may be less important to identify which of these elements is the most influential and more crucial to recognise that what is most relevant is to understand that culture and context shape the way we listen. It is this understanding that can support us to listen and engage in critical scholarly dialogue across international and institutional academic boundaries.

In conclusion, through critically examining how pedagogical listening practices are shaped by identity and cultural context, we present a significant contribution to the broader discourse on the role of listening in education. By highlighting the need for a nuanced approach that considers the intersection of culture, context, and care, this research presents insights that can inform professional practice in ways that enhance the student experience across contexts.

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Ethics

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest regarding this publication.

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