

Article

“College Material” Structural Care at a New York City Transfer School

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Abstract: Based on ethnographic research at Brooklyn Community High School (BCHS), a transfer high school in New York City I demonstrate that students narrate their educational histories in terms of their experience of care, or lack of care, from teachers. Contributing to research on student-teacher relationships, care, resilience and retention, I develop the concept structural care, arguing that teachers’ ability to demonstrate care for their students, and students’ ability to perceive that care, is enabled or constrained by larger, socio-structural forces such as the national educational policy landscape, widespread cultural beliefs about schools and students, and processes of racialization, criminalization, and marginalization.

Keywords: education; care; ethnography; pedagogy; student teacher relationships; high school; resilience; retention; students

1. Introduction

I invite Sam to meet me for a beer near the college where I teach sociology. I want to find out what he thinks about my nascent theory of structural care. Sam is a teacher at Brooklyn Community High School (BCHS, Brooklyn, NY, USA)¹ and a primary informant throughout my ethnographic research at the school. As I write up my interpretations and analyses of the data I gathered there, Sam meets me periodically to discuss my findings about students at BCHS. Described by one teacher as “the most at-risk of the at-risk”, most students have “dropped out” of several schools before finding their way to BCHS, a transfer school that achieves unusual rates of success with this population of students, comprised exclusively of poor black and Latina/o 17-to-21 year old students. Transfer schools are New York City’s publicly funded alternative high schools, set up to serve “over-age, under-credited” students, i.e., students not making typical progress through school. I studied BCHS because I wanted to know why it worked, particularly as described by the students themselves. My interviews were fairly open-ended as I asked students to recount their educational life histories. I wanted to see what I could learn from their accounts of how and why they left former schools, and what accounted for their retention at BCHS.

Sitting at the bar, Sam explains how caring for students is foundational to their eventual academic success,

[BCHS] is a place where young people of color from marginalized communities can come and be like, “Oh, I belong here”, which sets a foundation for other stuff to happen, in addition to being important in and of itself. Without students being able to feel like they belong, so much of the other stuff that we need to accomplish academically and

¹ The name of the school and the names of all participants are pseudonyms.

instructionally, is just spinning wheels. A student [must] feel that connection to the place as a school that sees them and allows them to belong. And I think there's a lot of threads that go into belonging, including the way that the school lays out and introduces students to our curriculum in a way that allows them to see themselves in it, and see the value in it, like, "This is gonna help me do things I care about". In my mind, [caring for students] is the groundwork for them to be able to see, and feel, and recognize, "Alright, this is a place that sees me, that I can belong in." and then when that is in place, so many other things can start happening. I see this as the foundation upon which you can build a school that works. It's not just what you decide to teach or not teach, it's how you're orienting and organizing; it's a whole set of considerations about how your school is going to work and the messages it's gonna send.

This conversation with Sam confirms a recurring and significant theme to emerge from my research: Students' perceptions and recognition of the extent to which school officials cared about them (or not). One student explains, "In a regular high school, you're on your own. [At BCHS] they help you a lot more. You can talk to any of the teachers and you feel like they will actually care for you." Another student says, "At BCHS they help a lot. Teachers aren't disrespectful like at my old school. They call me [on the phone]. I feel comfortable here. It's safe. Teachers are the main difference—their attitude towards teaching."

In my interviews with teachers, I sought to triangulate students' experiences of care and noticed that when teachers described caring for students, they never referred to themselves or other individual teachers, students, or relationships, but always to the larger structure of the school—its mission, policies, and practices. Teachers described caring for students as an explicit, intentional praxis, and a primary focus of school leadership, culture, and pedagogy. This structural conception of where care comes from and how it works diverges from the literature on caring in schools, which tends to operationalize care as an individual capacity or virtue.

This distinction has critical significance. Research clearly demonstrates that caring matters in schools, but how policymakers, administrators, and teachers conceptualize of where care comes from and how care works carries important implications for educational policies, pedagogies, and practices.

Structural care refers to both the social structural conditions that enable care to emerge, and care that takes a physically structural form, including the built environment, physical institutional arrangements, and other spatial means by which messaging occurs and meanings are transmitted. Structural care is mediated by macro-level factors including the national policy landscape and widespread cultural beliefs about schools and students. It is also mediated by economic conditions and processes of racialization, criminalization, and other forms of marginalization. Structural care operates at many levels of analysis. At the level of the school—which is necessarily and strongly influenced by the aforementioned macro-level forces—structural care is embedded within institutional priorities, policies, and practices that reflect commitments to regard students positively and to persuade students they can be academically successful, even before students have demonstrated success. Substantively, structural care includes all of the macro- and school-level factors that support, facilitate, and enable positive and productive micro-level interactions between school authorities and students.

In the remainder of this paper, I review the literature relevant to care and cultural capital as they particularly relate to transfer schools and this student population. I turn my attention to explicate my methodologies. After providing more evidence of structural care, I present my ethnographic data and themes through an exploration of the qualitative data. I conclude with a call to consider structural care in institutions beyond education.

2. Care, Poor Students of Color, and Cultural Capital: A Review of the Literature

Educational philosopher Nel Noddings' [1] (1986) oft-cited *Caring: a feminine approach to ethics and moral education* is hegemonic in the scholarly literature on teacher caring. Her work has led many researchers to begin from the assumption that care is first and foremost an individual, feminine

attribute [2]. Noddings [1] also defines care as a “virtue” —a capacity emerging from morally superior individual teachers. In her framing, there are good teachers—those who have this caring virtue—and bad teachers who do not care for their students. Noddings’ [1] distinction is one of personality and commitment, not determined by larger social and cultural forces. This interpretation of care is one I seek to disrupt through my analysis of seven years of qualitative research with BCHS students and staff.

Education researchers have established a strong positive correlation between teacher caring and improved student retention and academic success [3–11]. In the literature, and in my own operationalization, teacher caring includes getting to know students personally, providing them socio-emotional support, fostering a sense of belonging, attending to students’ physiological needs, and cultivating a sense of mutuality, connection, and desire to understand and help each other [3,4,10,12–18].

The literature on marginalized student populations and retention demonstrates that dropout rates are highest among black and Latino/a students with low socioeconomic status [19–24]. This persistent inequality is due to unequal distributions of resources across schools with disparate race and class compositions [25–27]. These resources include access to qualified teachers, small class sizes, and expenditures per pupil, among others [28–30]. Additionally, poor students of color come to school with less social and cultural capital than their middle and upper class white and Asian counterparts [31–33]. There is evidence that standardized tests have increased dropout rates because schools are incentivized by policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top to push “low performing” students out, boosting overall test scores and graduation rates [34–40].

Educational sociologists Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch’s [41,42] research shows that in terms of outcomes, care’s most important feature is its ability to provide students with cultural capital. Cultural capital as developed by Bourdieu and Patterson [43] describes non-financial social assets that promote mobility and allow for advantageous functioning in institutions like schools where some social attributes (e.g., loving reading) are positively sanctioned above others (e.g., the ability to change car oil). Cultural capital includes educational attainment, style of speech, skills, tastes, etc. Cultural capital confers power and status and finds expression in what Bourdieu [44] termed *habitus*, a system of embodied dispositions that organize how individuals perceive the social world and react to it. Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch [41] show that relationships mediate students’ acquisition (or lack thereof) of cultural capital. For poor youth of color, school culture and its facilitation of types of relationships, support, and care, enable, constrict, encourage, or block students’ ability to acquire and utilize cultural skills that allow them to academically function and succeed.

3. Data and Methods

My study relies on an extensive amount of ethnographic data. I collected 73 interviews in total: 26 interviews with teachers and staff, 27 with current BCHS students, eight with former BCHS students, eight with teachers or administrators from other NYC transfer schools, and four with long-time employees of the NYC Department of Education (DOE) who were able to teach me about shifts in alternative education in NYC over time. Additionally, I spent one academic year doing in situ fieldwork at BCHS.

When I began my research in 2010, there were 48 transfer schools in NYC (at the time of this writing, there are 52). Initially, I wrote to all 48 transfer school principals, telling them I hoped to find a transfer school where I could do sustained ethnographic fieldwork with students. Five of the 48 principals responded, and I visited each of those five schools and interviewed each of those principals. All five were receptive to my research agenda but I chose BCHS for my fieldwork for a few different reasons. BCHS enrolled the students who were the most behind in school, and it had a record of success with them. BCHS was also the most receptive to me, wanted me to research their school, felt extremely proud of the work they were doing, and wanted it to be documented and shared as a resource. BCHS faculty saw me as a potential advocate and that excited them.

All five principals, of their own volition, described a problem where—even though Transfer Schools are explicitly set up to help students who are behind in school, get on track—many transfer

schools were not able to admit all of the students that they usually would because of the way those students would affect their outcomes data, thus affecting their teacher evaluations, school evaluations, further affecting the policies that governed their schools and the funding their schools received. This is a general and well-documented problem with the way No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top function [34–40].

BCHS refused to turn students away and so it had become the only school where certain students would be admitted—in particular, 17-to-21 year old students with no high school credits and no completed Regents (i.e., standardized state exams). The initial principals I interviewed knew this, expressed deep respect for BCHS, and suggested that it was probably the best place for me to do my research.

In general, and overwhelmingly, students attending transfer schools are poor and black and/or Latina/o. These students experience many challenges and interruptions to their schooling, including homelessness, incarceration, immigration, parenthood, drug use, financial hardship, and caring for sick or dying family members, among others.

BCHS is located in an impoverished neighborhood whose residents are largely recent immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. About 300 students are enrolled, 65 percent are Latina/o, 33 percent are black, and they all qualify for free lunch, a proxy for poverty. There are 24 teachers: 13 are black, eight are white, two are Latina/o, and one is Asian.

Walking from the subway to the school, I noticed the post-industrial feel of the neighborhood: Its streets lined with corner stores and churches, auto-repair shops and dollar stores, construction zones and apartment buildings. The school is housed on the third floor of a five-story brick building shared with a middle school. Inside, the energy is frenetic and infectious. The walls are painted yellow and orange, and lined with student work. The hallways bustle, loud with laughter, chatter, and clanking locker doors.

On my first visit, I passed through security, saying I had a meeting with Principal Ronna. The students were between classes and as I walked down the hall, I passed a young math teacher who was standing just outside his classroom, encouraging students to get to class on time, yelling, “HOLLER, SCHOLAR! MOVE IT!” I would come to learn that he did that every day between every period, a ritual most found amusing.

I peeked into Ronna’s office, a large room with a wall of windows, a large round meeting table, several desks and bookshelves. Books, folders, notebooks, and loose forms and flyers crammed into every space, stacked all over the place. An electric coffee pot sat on a cart near the door.

Ronna—a woman whose vivacious, powerful personality was immediately evident—boomed, “C. Ray! Come in!” She greeted me with a big smile and firm handshake, inviting me to sit with her at the meeting table. As I reached into my backpack for paper and a pen, Ronna regarded me warmly, as though we knew each other already. Abuzz with an enlivened demeanor, fast-paced speech, and the palpable anxiety of a person in a high-stress work environment, she launched into descriptions of BCHS, beaming with simultaneous pride in, and concern for, her students, teachers, and school.

Ronna told me she had arranged for me to meet with three others: The two school Deans, Tadaaki and Esty, and the Data Specialist, Sam, who was in charge of understanding State and Federal funding policies and tracking student data. She walked me down a jaunt of hallways into an otherwise empty classroom, where the three were waiting, each seated in a student desk, arranged in a circle, with an empty fourth desk for me. I did not know this meeting had been arranged and felt both taken seriously and intimidated, encouraged about entrée, and concerned I may be unprepared. During our meeting, Sam, Tadaaki, and Esty asked about my interest in BCHS and my research agenda. From the outset we achieved an enthusiastic rapport facilitated by similar vocabularies, references, and goals. I nodded and smiled as Sam rolled his eyes about “the neoliberal turn in education policy,” when Tadaaki referenced educational sociologist Pedro Noguera, and when Esty said her commitment to social justice “probably has roots in having been raised by union organizers.”

I would later learn that Tadaaki and Esty had founded the school together, about twenty-five years prior. They had incredibly working chemistry, loved the school and the students deeply and relentlessly, and were each incredibly charismatic, in very different ways. Tadaaki was taller than

most men, had dark black skin, waist-length dreadlocks, and a loud, booming voice, perfect for projecting in a boisterous high school setting. Tadaaki also had an intense presence and gentleness, a way of being attentive that was unusual and special. In (somewhat comical) contrast, Etsy was white, shorter than most, and has more energy and more passion than most people I have met.

After that initial meeting in March 2011, I left the building feeling excited and hopeful. Ronna emailed me the next morning to tell me that in their staff meeting they had discussed my research and that they were happy to invite me into the school. My fieldwork began on the first day of school the following fall, after receiving permission to conduct my research from both the Department of Education and my university's Institutional Review Board.² Throughout the year, I spent three days per week at BCHS (occasionally fewer, when other responsibilities interfered). I observed students as they came to school, attended their classes, met with counselors, and socialized with each other.

In the first weeks, I enthusiastically introduced myself to classrooms full of students and hung bright fliers on the walls, inviting them to “participate in a study about youth!” In the beginning, my purpose seemed strange and elusive to students. I would explain, “I’m a sociologist trying to understand the experiences of students like you,” and they would furrow their brow and say, “A what?” Over time, students got to know me and understand what I was doing at their school.

In addition to regular school hours, I attended student events after school, like “Teahouse Maleke” (akin to Open Mic Night) where students would rap, play instruments, sing, and read poetry. This student-centered environment was more of a Goffmanian [45] “back stage,” where I could observe them in a setting where they were more empowered, natural, and usually a lot of fun.

I worked to become integrated in the life of the school, trying to find my ethnographic stride.

Critical Social Psychologist Michelle Fine [46] documents the silencing of student voices in educational research, drawing attention to the gap in critical perspective this silencing produces. For this reason, even as I collected data from school officials, parents, and people outside BCHS, I consciously pursued and prioritized students and their subjectivities and narratives. Many students agreed to make time to sit down with me for a formal interview.

As a qualitative sociologist, I rely on immersion in my data in order to familiarize myself with emergent social phenomena. Committed to grounded theory and an inductive research process, I began by conducting unstructured life-history interviews, with a focus on students’ educational histories. I took notes constantly and I recorded every conversation and interview that was consented to. I transcribed all of my own interviews, a process that required me to spend countless hours with my data.

Sam became a main informant because of our easy rapport and his interest and support of my research. As the Data Specialist for the school, and a Science teacher, Sam liked research in general and enjoyed talking to me about mine. For part of the school year Sam was on paternity leave, and on several occasions I spent days with him at his home, with him and his new baby, as he explained the complexities of bureaucratic systems that I struggled to understand, for example, how the DOE functioned as a whole, the Transfer School landscape and the differences and similarities between them, and how education policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTT), as well as State- and City-level policies affected BCHS specifically.

I also attended three meetings with Regents representatives and government officials when they came to visit the school, and some of the student’s parents. I deeply wanted to gather as much data as possible without probing in any particular direction, allowing themes to emerge after I felt I had reached data saturation. Thus, for the first half of the school year, I deliberately did not create any formal categories of analysis. Instead I focused on being at the school as often as possible, trying to absorb every situation and interaction as data. I focused on talking with the students, teachers and staff, conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, writing field note observations, and keeping a

² All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York as well as the New York City Department of Education (IRB Number 11-07-172-0135).

journal. After conducting interviews, I transcribed and read and re-read my interview transcripts many times.

During the winter break, between the first and second halves of the school year, I began to code my data. I reread all of my notes and transcriptions, re-listened to parts of interviews, and broke the data up into codable chunks—discrete pieces of ideas or stories. This coding process was constant and recursive [47]. Although I did not use computer software programs to analyze my data, preferring to do it myself in order to maintain an intimate connection with my data, I had been trained in Atlas.ti and Dedoose, and used some of the logics of those programs as I organized, reorganized, coded and recoded the data.

As is the case with immersive fieldwork, I began by over-coding my transcriptions, making marginal notes about as many themes I could find in the data. For example, in one section of an interview transcription, a participant may be talking about federal education policy, family dynamics, and drug use at the same time. Themes like “student-teacher relationships,” “care,” “solidarity,” “community,” “love” were noted in several places on the pages. I then re-read through these codes to sift them into more manageable themes. I began to read the extant literature on these themes. Through writing analytic memos, I found that while there was resonance with the educational scholarship on care, something was missing, or at least undertheorized. There began my nascent theory about the structural aspects of care.

When the school year ended, I remained in contact with some informants as I transcribed interviews and analyzed data. This was very helpful because I could check my interpretations with participants. Several of the teachers read countless drafts of manuscripts and met with as I puzzled through the data and worked to make sure that my theories held up. These relationships continue into the present.

Ethnographic research at BCHS allowed me to access the institutional strategies that foster resilience in an extremely marginalized population of students.

4. “Girls Like Me”: Structural Determinants of Meaningful Interaction

“The advice I was given by my counselor is that girls like me should just drop out because girls like me end up having babies and being mothers.” Xiomara, a graduate of BCHS, explained how she was “kicked out” of her former high school. When I asked what her counselor meant by “girls like [her],” she said, “I don’t know. Just girls I guess. That is what was expected of girls—to drop out of school and have babies.” Xiomara did not have a baby, but she did follow her counselor’s advice to drop out. She never went back to that school.

I began every student interview by asking, “How did you end up at BCHS? What were the series of events that led you to this school?” Students possessed exceptionally high degrees of individual responsibility. Their ability to articulate their own decision making and choices as leading to certain outcomes demonstrated a clear sense of personal awareness. A majority of students explained their leaving former schools—expressed as “I got kicked out.” or “I dropped out”—as resulting from their own actions. The students shared how they got worn down by the everyday real lived experiences of their former schools and became alienated. Students recounted “mean” or “disrespectful” teachers, hallways fights, and apathetic students. One student explained, “My other schools were very crowded. It was hard to get help. Teachers were so overwhelmed with everybody, they couldn’t care about us.” Another student said,

[At my former school] there wasn’t anyone to connect to, so I kinda fell through the cracks. I started to do what everyone else does—hang out in the hallways, go to the cafeteria, do whatever. There wasn’t anyone there to stop us.

There is a distinction being made between these students’ former high schools and their experiences at BCHS. There is clearly something different about BCHS that enables students to stay engaged. Notably, when I asked students why they stayed at BCHS, they spoke of their interactions with teachers but with a different emotional valence,

[At BCHS, the teachers] were more serious and more caring about students. You know how usually you call teachers by their last name? At BCHS you call teachers by their first name. They are your brothers and sisters, you feel like you've known them for a very long time.

Another student said,

[BCHS teachers] Tadaaki and Esty helped me realize I should go to college, that I deserve the right to go to college. I didn't get that anywhere else. No one said to me, "You deserve the right to go to college. You deserve a better life." Everyone pretty much said to me, "Dude, you really don't deserve much. You're a piece of crap and that's all you're ever going to be."

Upon noticing this pattern of students' decisions regarding schools as contingent upon interactions with teachers and counselors, I returned to their stories. I found that their narratives recounting the interactions that inspired them to leave or stay were stories about types of practices and policies.

Contrasting with traditional framings of care as primarily determined by individual virtue, my data reveal the significance of the structural forces that intersect with teachers' time, priorities, and ability to provide meaningful connections with students. These forces enable or constrain possibilities for care to emerge. This is not a story about caring versus uncaring teachers. Rather, this is a story about the strong relationship between institutionally embedded prioritization and practices of care, and the effects of this care on student retention, graduation, and aspiration, as described by the students themselves.

The reason it matters to understand that care is structurally produced is because it exposes the ways policies attempt to produce "good" and "bad" teachers as a way of solving educational inequities. My conceptualization of structural care is in stark contrast to the dominant prevailing logic that purports there are good and bad teachers who can be hired and fired and shuffled around. This is the kind of logic that produces organizations like Teach for America, which assumes that you can train good teachers, take them out of that training context, and parachute them into struggling schools.

Research on care shows it is highly correlated with educational, emotional, and physical development (whether in school, family, health, etc.) [48,49]. Given these correlations, it is convenient for educational policy and investment (i.e., the state and capital) to define care as an attribute some teachers have and others do not. This understanding makes the management of caring in schools as easy as hiring and firing respectively caring and uncaring teachers. Alternatively, a perspective on teacher care that prioritizes institutional and policy-level factors provides fresh insight for thinking about where care comes from and who is responsible for cultivating it.

Through talking about the firing of Troy, a former BCHS teacher I never met, Sam explained the consequences of failing to recognize the structural determinants of good teaching,

[Troy] was one of the best instructional leaders in the city, but on paper it looks like the DOE has removed another ineffective teacher. On paper it looks like they're taking out bad teachers and putting in good teachers, but they're not. They're driving effective teachers out of the building as fast as they can, but the thing is that they don't care, and I mean that, because they don't understand what's happening in the school, they don't understand what difference it makes, how invested the teachers are in the school. They don't understand the spirit of volunteerism that drives the camaraderie at the school. They see teachers as workmen working in their shop with steel, and if you're good you can build a thousand cars in a minute, and if you're not as good you can only build a hundred cars, and we're all dealing with the exact same raw materials and we're all working independently and therefore we can all be measured independently. It's impossible.

BCHS teachers shared so much about how their ability to care for students relied heavily on their staff-wide commitment to facilitate and develop relationships with students. It was an enormous part of what they thought about and talked about in the daily life of the school. They had regular

professional development meetings on the topic of supporting students. They knew the literature better than I did. So it is not just that my training as a sociologist allowed me to see the structural component of care, but that when I asked teachers about their caring relationships within the school, they regularly pointed back to their mentors, the larger community of staff, grants they had written to develop themselves, and/or Ronna's purposeful hiring of teachers who were on board with this mission. The teachers, as indigenous knowledge producers of how they work, taught me that care was a structural phenomenon. Again and again, they reiterated that without the proper supports, individual burnout was inevitable.

5. "College Material": Future Orientation

Students at BCHS learned they "deserved the right to go to college," but not because of one or two exceptional teachers who believe in the potential of their students. Rather, BCHS students learned they could go to college because of a set of explicit staff policies. The possibility of high school graduation and college readiness is literally structurally built into the facade of the school. Painted by a former student, a mural adorns the front of the school and depicts a larger-than-life black youth in a cap and gown, jumping with a big smile in the celebratory moment of graduation, his right arm outstretched at an angle reminiscent of black power, his fist around a diploma. In large, south-Bronx style graffiti lettering across the bottom is BCHS's slogan, "ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE." It is an inspiring depiction of a BCHS student, sending the message that graduation is in reach and is an occasion for joy and celebration.

Furthermore, during the first week of school, every student is given a t-shirt that says "COLLEGE MATERIAL" across the front. When I asked an English teacher to tell me about the shirts, he said

So many students get taught they're not college material, but we need to make them believe that they are college material. We have to counteract the negative messages they've gotten—implicitly or explicitly—from most people in their lives.

I do this exercise with my students at the beginning of the year. I ask them, "What are Dominicans known for?" They come back with all the standard stereotypes—it is always baseball or cooking. Then I say, "No way! Dominicans are really good at writing novels! Everyone knows that!"

Inevitably a Dominican kid is like, "I have been in a Dominican family my whole life, and no one has ever said that." And then I tell them about Junot Diaz and I tell them that Junot Diaz is the best writer in America, and he is Dominican. You see their minds start to change—they start to be able to think about how people like them do things like write books."

The teachers at BCHS are starkly aware that there are profound obstacles to the work they do. Despite these obstacles, the teachers make it clear that there is a sense that going to college is an achievable and desirable outcome for the students. As Esty told me,

We take kids nobody wants and we turn them into kids going to college. The education system in this country is unfair, unequal, and debilitating. The kids get punished for that. I have always been aware of that. I came from [teaching in] one of those schools. I feel really proud that I and other teachers make connections with kids who feel disconnected and disenfranchised. I love that. I feel really proud when I see kids transform right before our eyes. I feel really proud when even against all odds, in this building, we see love between staff and students. I just feel really proud that we've created a school where kids feel safe and comfortable, and can learn and transform.

Structural care is evidenced by policies requiring teachers to visit students in their homes and call or email them to check in. These actions establish a baseline or a foundation from which to build trust and secure relationships to convince students they are college material. It is a staff culture where teachers support each other and are supported by school leadership in its commitment to care. It happens when students are unwaveringly told they can graduate and accomplish whatever post-graduation goals they have, including going to college.

6. “It’s Hard for a Brother to Kill a Brother.” Teaching Caring Language

Another example of structural care at BCHS is the school’s aggressive prohibition of use of the word “nigga,” and policy of referring to one another as “brothers” or “sisters,” which is actively and constantly modelled by all teachers. I learned this rule with the incoming students on the first day of school. That morning, I sat at a desk in the back of a large classroom, eagerly waiting for student (and ethnographer) orientation to begin. A fresh legal pad rested on my lap, ready for notes. About 80 new students sat in desks strewn about the room. Backpacks and hoodies abounded. As a group, the new students presented as dissenters being forced to sit in a disciplinary space. Their bodies—slouching, sighing, eyes rolling—communicated they did not want to be there, but behind their fronts, I sensed a nervous, attentive curiosity.

During an explanation of school rules, Tadaaki stood in front of the room holding a yard-length ruler in his right hand, slowly tapping the other end into his left palm. His theatre of power was captivating. Before speaking, he let a long moment of silence fill the room, performing his ruler. After a noticeable crescendo of quiet, Tadaaki boomed, “I want everyone to close your eyes! I’m serious! Everyone! Close your eyes! I’m going to say something and I want you to close your eyes and picture the word I am saying to you!” Tadaaki waited as students looked around, finally acquiescing to close their eyes. I closed mine too. He let a few more moments of silence generate anticipation within the room and then yelled “NIGGA” over and over again, each time in a different tone, volume, pitch, and pronunciation, conjuring images in my mind of various types of speakers. Some imitations of the word made me laugh, some scared me, some made tears well up in my eyes.

NIGGA!	NIGGA!	NIGGA!	NIGGA!
			NIGGA!
	NIGGA!	NIGGA!	
NIGGA!		NIGGA!	

“Now,” Tadaaki said, in a new, quieter, gentler voice—his authentic voice rather than the voices he had just performed—“open your eyes.” He looks calmly, slowly around the room, making eye contact with individual students, and asks, tenderly and rhetorically, “Who did you imagine when I said that word? Who did you see speaking? Did you see a doctor? Did you see a lawyer? Did you see your mother? You might’ve seen your father.” He lets that sink in. “There’s a reason we don’t say ‘nigga’ in this school.”

Tadaaki went on to deliver a moving lecture about use of “nigga” to address peers in communities of color. His take-home was this: You might think saying “nigga” is harmless. You and your friends might use it to refer to each other. One might identify as a “nigga,” but as demonstrated by the exercise, when asked to imagine a “nigga,” one does not picture an educated, respected, or loved person. “I am asking you to respect each other,” Tadaaki said, “and that is why at this school, we call each other ‘brothers’ and we call each other ‘sisters.’”

Another teacher, Cornell, chimed in from the side of the room, “We live in the terms that we speak in. If I call you ‘brother’ or ‘sister,’ it means something. It’s easy for a nigga to kill a nigga, but it’s hard for a brother to kill a brother.” Tadaaki elaborated Cornell’s point, telling the students that “language has an unconscious,” that “there are messages about how we think of ourselves and each other contained within the words we use to refer to each other.” He said that when people refer to each other as “niggas,” it is because “they have internalized the views of their oppressors.”

Tadaaki’s performative exercise and subsequent lecture acknowledged the ways students spoke. By saying “nigga” openly, blatantly and loudly, he normalized and disarmed the word while infusing it with a new kind of power. He not only instructed students not to say “nigga,” he also instructed them to refer to each other as “brothers” and “sisters,” acknowledging the need for a racially specific mode of reference for self and other. Tadaaki told students that the use of “nigga” in poor communities of color is culturally important, significant, and meaningful and the “brother” and

“sister” alternatives draw upon another tradition of raced, classed reference, offering an alternative but still culturally relevant mode of address.

Tadaaki’s lesson is a powerful example of structural care in action. This was, of course, not the first time he had given this lecture. It was conscious, deliberate, practiced, and the result of years of teachers working together to think about the role of “nigga” in their students’ lexicons and lives.

7. Conclusions

I began this paper with a quote from Sam about the importance of establishing belonging in schools. During that conversation at the bar, I asked him, What are some of the ways that belonging gets produced? Are there concrete activities, policies, or lessons? His reply references an earlier draft of this paper,

You got to see our orientation right? I was reading what you attached in that last email, and you talked about orientation a bit. I think you picked up on one of the things that we [BCHS teachers and staff] talked about, which is how you can see in peoples’ [i.e., new students’] faces when they first walk in the door like, “Alright, my guard is up. I’m going into this new place, I’m going into a school” — which in many instances has meant not good things for students especially students coming to a transfer school — “so my guard is up, I’m walkin in, I’m putting on my mean mug, don’t try to get close, don’t try to connect to me.”

The success of orientation is measured by how much that guard gets let down over those next couple of days, and I think it comes down by talking real talk about how school sucks, and in many places school is set up so that you are not going to succeed because it is not seeing you, and it is not trying to help you reach the type of success that you want to see for yourself.

I think for many students that was a new message that sort of resonates with some latent feelings and impressions of school, and I think feeling that connection is part of what can crack through and be like “Oh wait this is a little bit of a different place [i.e., BCHS].”

Then it needs to be followed up on, obviously, every day. It is not the kind of thing there is a quick prescription of “do this and this” and this and your students will feel like they belong, but more of this ongoing process of really genuinely caring and listening to students and being open to the different ways that they might see school and learning and classrooms, and trying to connect and drive forward based on that interplay that they are a part of, instead of [teachers] being like, “Here’s my class. Here’s how I teach. Get on board or get the fuck out.” Who’s gonna belong in that?

But this must be played out day by day by day. I guess it is more of a teacher mindset kind of thing than something that you can write down or something that you can describe prescriptively in any one moment.

Structural care is consistently embedded within practices, actions, and institutional routines that occur “day by day by day.” It is through repetition. As my analysis demonstrates, BCHS is a place where structural care can lead to outcomes that transgress previous expectations.

Throughout this essay I claim that while structural care emerges from my data, it has theoretical use value beyond schools and students. Structural care, in its broadest conception, has particular relationships to time, space, and language that distinguish its degree of presence or absence and range of variation.

Conceptually, structural care has myriad applications outside educational contexts, for example, in families, medical practices, and social service organizations. Additionally, structural care need not be felt to be effective—most parents could generate endless examples of ways they care for their children that children do not experience as care. I offer these conceptual caveats because here I am only addressing structural care as it occurs at BCHS—care that is both intended and experienced—but my aspiration for the concept is that it be useful beyond the present analysis.

Structural care’s primary location is the institution—the school, hospital, welfare office, psych ward, and so on. It is communicated through language when interlocutors speak in a cultural context

where meaning is co-constructed, where caring is structurally buoyed, and is capable of being internalized by the cared for in ways that enable self-actualization and possibilize improved life chances.

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