UC Riverside
UC Riverside Previously Published Works

Title

Love and Meritocracy: Culturally Affirming Care and Cheating at an Urban High School

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0tw9905b

Author

Kolluri, Suneal

Publication Date

2025

DOI

10.1086/733581

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Peer reviewed

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

Love and Meritocracy: Culturally Affirming Care and Cheating at an Urban High School

SUNEAL KOLLURI
University of California, Riverside School of Education

Purpose: Teachers who demonstrate authentic care make culturally affirming connections with students and critically consider injustice in student communities. Authentic care is distinct from aesthetic care that only emphasizes academic achievement. A full version of care—its academic, cultural, and critical components—expands opportunities for marginalized youth. Few studies have looked at authentic care partially applied. **Research Methods:** This ethnography of Sunrise High School, an urban school serving nearly all Black and Latinx students, analyzes the incomplete implementation of care. With more than 200 hours of participant observation and more than 50 interviews of students, teachers, and administrators, this study interrogates how care is understood and applied at Sunrise High School, and how students responded to the care they received from their teachers. **Findings:** Teachers at Sunrise were adept at building deep, culturally responsive connections with their students. These relationships manifested alongside powerful meritocratic messaging. The teachers' care for their students lacked a critical component and largely ignored the oppressions associated with their urban setting. In response to this partial application of authentic care, students felt at home in the care of their loving teachers and most regularly completed their assignments. However, students elevated work completion over learning with a larger social purpose, and cheating was rampant. **Implications:** The findings emphasize the necessity of the critical component of authentic care. In addition to caring for students, teachers should be encouraged to care about the ways oppressions associated with race and class affect students' lives and communities.

In a conversation with the working-class, Black and Brown students in her class about income inequality and college access, Ms. Clarke spoke in defense of wealthy parents. Private tutors and college counselors, she argued, did not endow affluent students with unfair advantages. These resources were provided free of charge for low-income students at their school. "Imagine if you spent a little more time going to tutoring," she told the students, chiding them for failing to get support when

Electronically published December 13, 2024

American Journal of Education, volume 131, number 2, February 2025.
© 2024 The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1086/733581

offered. She recalled that when she would offer to tutor history students after school, "I would be waiting here for 40 minutes . . . and people would not show up." Ms. Clarke enthusiastically emphasized the importance of seizing opportunities. "My mom taught me . . . in life, even if you're cleaning the toilet, you do it with pride and excellence," she said, her words tinted with a Jamaican accent.

Students listened to their teacher respectfully, nodding along. "That's why you inspire us," a young Tongan American woman responded warmly. "As an immigrant, as an African American who moved herself from lower class to middle class. . . . When I came to your class, I realized . . . what I'm doing isn't enough." Ms. Clarke's message was well received. "You gotta keep it pushin'," one student remarked, borrowing one of Ms. Clarke's favorite phrases.

In many respects, Ms. Clarke was an ideal teacher. However, her teaching emphasizes a tension that I explore in this article—caring deeply for marginalized students amid an ideology of meritocracy. Ms. Clarke was wholly committed to her students. She held high standards for academic success. She grew up in the same neighborhood as her students, and she was a proud Black immigrant, and she leveraged these identities to develop culturally competent relationships with her students. However, in her class, like many of the other classes at Sunrise High School, students cheated. In this environment of loving care, one might be surprised that students engaged so trivially in their schoolwork.

The importance of warm caring teachers is well established in educational literature (Delpit 2012; Noddings 2013; Valenzuela 1999). When a teacher can connect with the backgrounds of their students—as a person of color, as an immigrant, as working-class—the educational benefits to marginalized youth appear significant (Easton-Brooks 2021). For example, Black teachers (Walker 1996) and Latinx teachers (Ochoa 2007) can leverage their cultural knowledge and community assets to develop meaningful learning experiences for Black and Latinx students. With respect to cultural competence and personal warmth, Ms. Clarke was exemplary. She was kind. Her upbringing in a working-class, immigrant family of color aligned with the experiences of her students. She was engaging and had a knack for cajoling them to complete assignments. Ms. Clarke lovingly guided students toward academic achievement and demonstrated cultural competence. In the scholarly discourse on education, these are tenets of authentic and aesthetic care, a multilayered approach to schooling that has been

---

Suneal Kolluri is an assistant professor in the Educational Policy and Leadership department in the University of California, Riverside School of Education. Prior to earning his PhD, he taught in Oakland public high schools for 9 years. Leveraging his teaching experience, educational theory, and qualitative research methods, his research interrogates how ideologies and curricula in high schools shape social stratifications by race, gender, and class.

demonstrated to improve academic experiences and outcomes for racially minoritized students (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006; Curry 2022; Valenzuela 1999).

However, conceptions of care often include critical undertones to which Ms. Clarke did not subscribe. Drawing on scholars like Paolo Freire and Gloria Ladson-Billings, theorists of "critical care" (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006) emphasize care for its liberatory potential. They insist that care must extend beyond individual students and into the neighborhoods and communities in which they reside (Martinez and Ulanoff 2018; Rolón-Dow 2005). Care that Ms. Clarke was offering—like many of her colleagues at the school—was acritical. Her "keep it pushin'" vision of care was a version amenable to US capitalism and grounded in ideals of meritocracy. Here, I address the following: How can culturally affirming care and meritocratic ideals mix in an urban school setting? What are the benefits of culturally affirming care abstracted from an explicit critique of social oppressions?

I thus analyze care at an urban school by three distinct elements—aesthetic care, culturally affirming care, and critical care—and investigate a case in which two of three are applied. Understanding the ways that different elements of care shape student learning can deepen our understanding of care as an important tool for educational equity. At Sunrise High, a Southern California high school serving a student body consisting of nearly all Black and Latinx students, I mostly observed the failure of culturally affirming, acritical care to meaningfully engage students. In what follows, I consider theories of care in an ethnography of Sunrise High to delineate how care manifests at an urban school and how students responded to the unique context of care from their teachers.

Care and Meritocracy in Urban Schools

Nel Noddings pioneered a vision of care as essential to effective teaching. "Caring," Noddings writes, "is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling that makes people kind and likable" (Noddings 1995, 676). Rather, care is complex and necessitates perception and action. Ultimately, caring produces an "I and thou" synergy between the one caring and cared-for. In this process, an "ethic of caring," whereby teachers and students are receptive to the needs of the other, develops in the school community. Although Noddings's theoretical framing has been deeply influential to educational scholarship, some scholars have criticized her for neglecting to consider race as a foundational component of care (Patterson et al. 2008; Thompson 1998).

Later scholars have sought to incorporate concerns of race and justice more directly into Noddings's "ethic of care" in schools. For example, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) emphasizes the centrality of "Black womanist" caring for the success of Black women teachers. She emphasizes the cultural lens of Black women who adopt communal maternal practices, and she considers how the notion of "othermothering" and collective resistance to oppression shows up as care in classrooms led by Black women. Angela Valenzuela and, more recently, Marnie Curry have differentiated versions of care as being aesthetic or authentic (Curry 2022; Valenzuela 1999). Aesthetic care, they argue, is more traditionally applied in school settings, whereby teachers care for students' ability to meet academic expectations. The approach of aesthetic care is "nonpersonal" (Noddings 2013) but intends to promote individual advancement. Authentic care, meanwhile, is intimate and culturally sensitive, seeing the whole child and building strong relational ties (Valenzuela 1999). I emphasize two core foundations of authentic care as outlined in the literature: culturally affirming care and critical care. Whereas culturally affirming care establishes a space safe for culturally and racially marginalized groups in educational contexts, critical care directs education toward social change. Importantly, theorists of care have suggested that aesthetic care and their more broadly conceived vision of authentic care are both important for students. As Valenzuela (1999) notes, an effective teacher can demonstrate "a near perfect mix of aesthetic and authentic caring" (101).

Aesthetic Care

Troubling inequities in educational outcomes by race and class suggest that care in urban schools needs to be concerned with academic rigor. Ladson-Billings (1995b) asserts, "No matter how good a fit develops between home and school culture, students must achieve" (475). Without academic rigor, care becomes "soft" and inadequate. Soft care fails to prepare students for long-term academic success (Katz 1999). Rivera-McCutchen (2012), for example, distinguishes between personal and academic components of caring, suggesting that personal care without high expectations for academic excellence constrains educational opportunity. Care without an academic emphasis, for Rivera-McCutchen, is patronizing to marginalized students and counterproductive to their success. Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) label this approach the "*Ay Bendito* syndrome," wherein marginalized students are offered pity rather than academic opportunity—affecting their educational outcomes. As a component of her vision of "authentic cariño," Curry (2022) discusses "intellectual cariño," which includes the notion that "reading and writing is revolutionary," a saying borrowed from a teacher at a school effectively serving Black and Latinx students. Developing an ethic of care that can advance racial justice, these scholars of care suggest, necessitates an emphasis on academic proficiency.

Delpit (2006) argues that care for "other people's children" necessitates an explicit teaching of the basic skills for academic success. Academic skills—rooted in dominant cultural standards—represent the knowledge of the "culture of power" to which marginalized youth have been systematically denied access. Without explicit instruction around the grammar of standard English and the basics of science and math, the levers of opportunity that can alter marginalized students' social position will remain beyond their reach. Similarly, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) contends that caring teachers in the Black womanist tradition "still held [students] responsible for acquiring academic skills" (81). Care thus has an important academic component.

However, notions of "rigor" have been critiqued for their neoliberal foundations (Waitoller et al. 2019). The concept of rigor presumes meritocracy—those who endure the most rigor in their schooling will reap the capitalist rewards later in life. Admittedly, emphasizing "aesthetic care" as a core component of holistic caring is a bit of a departure. Prominent visions of holistic care often criticize care when it is exclusively aesthetic. I include it here because no prominent scholar of care denies the importance of academic excellence, and many note caring about academics to be central to caring about marginalized students. However, caring for students involves more than just caring about their academic outcomes. A more robust vision of care may be necessary to allow for the educational success of marginalized students (Curry 2022: Noddings 2013, Valenzuela 1999).

Culturally Affirming Care

In composing the concept of authentic care, Valenzuela (1999) leverages Mexican cultural ideologies and theories of social capital. She elevates the personally connected and culturally additive nature of authentic care against the exclusive emphasis on academic performance of its aesthetic counterpart. For Valenzuela, culturally affirming care is essential to student success. She writes, "U.S.-born youth, who hear in the demand to 'care about' school an implicit threat to their ethnic identity, often withdraw or rebel" (Valenzuela 1999, 24). Student engagement in urban schools, by this account, hangs by the tattered threads of culturally affirming care, and students would greatly benefit from a more robust fabric of institutional love and support.

Building familial trust in educational contexts necessitates cultural competence and personal connection. Too often, students of color negotiate contradictory worlds between school and home. Scholars have long asserted the variety of ways that classroom cultural mismatch can hinder educational opportunity for marginalized students (Ferguson 2020; Howard 2013; Mohatt 1994; Willis 1977). Carter (2005) finds that some students learn to negotiate between home and school cultures, but this requires adept cultural straddling that flummoxes many racially minoritized students. Paris (2012) contends, "Monocultural and monolingual curricula require that students of color lose their heritage and community ways with language, literacy, and culture in order to achieve in U.S. schools" (96).

Teachers who know their students' backgrounds can nurture them in a culturally responsive fashion and build family-like social networks. Valenzuela (1999) finds that when teachers demonstrate culturally aligned care and students feel connected to the school, students build networks of support that facilitate educational success. Athanases and Curry (2018) find assignments that encourage students to use their home language and to draw on familial knowledge create transformative learning opportunities for Latinx youth. A strong sense of cultural identity in schools has been demonstrated to matter for academic engagement (Cooper 2013; Nasir et al. 2009). Culturally affirming care elevates culture and connectedness in service of expanding opportunities for marginalized youth.

Critical Care

Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) also include "critical care"—"communal truth-telling" (Thompson 1998, 538) that engages students in analysis of social injustice within their communities—as an essential element of authentic care. "Critical care" links learning "to broader goals of community survival and betterment" (Antrop-Gonzáles and De Jesús 2006, 413). Critical care urges content be applied in ways that connect learning to significant challenges in working-class neighborhoods. This framing of care pushes teachers to "cultivate students' critical consciousness in an effort to resist and transform the dominant social order" (Curry 2016, 892). Lisa Delpit, an advocate of skills-based instruction, cautions against skill development without social critique. She explains, "Let there be no doubt: a 'skilled' minority person who is not also capable of critical analysis becomes the trainable, low-level functionary of the dominant society, simply the grease that keeps the institutions which orchestrate his or her oppression running smoothly" (2006, 19).

The significance of criticality to effective teaching and learning in urban contexts has also been emphasized by theorists of pedagogy for marginalized students. In Ladson-Billings's theory of culturally relevant pedagogy, she asserts that "sociopolitical" critique, along with academic skill and cultural competence, is one of the legs on the "three-legged stool" of effective teaching (2018). She argues that students must learn to "recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities" (1995a, 476) by inquiring into societal challenges in their communities and beyond. Perry and Steele (2004) note how this approach to pedagogy draws heavily on the foundations of Black learning during slavery, wherein learning to read was indelibly enmeshed in the promise of freedom. Enslaved people who learned to read did so under the perpetual threat of death or serious injury, but learning to read also offered the potential to movements toward liberation. Today, Perry and Steele wonder, if education is abstracted from freedom movements, “Why work hard at school, or anything else for that matter, if these activities are not inextricably linked to and address one’s status as a member of a historically oppressed people?” (2004, 19).

This vision of care draws heavily on Freire’s (1970) notions of praxis. Praxis is the intersection of theory and practice—to “read the word and the world.” Developing a critical analysis ties learning to collective rather than purely individualistic aims. Such an approach can encourage the development of students as politically engaged advocates for their communities (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008; Kolluri 2017). Also, an approach that elevates the collective in addition to the self may enhance academic motivation (Yeager et al. 2012). Without a community-oriented approach, students may be simply “doing school,” mechanically completing assignments while resisting deeper learning (Pope 2001). Thus, the holistic implementation of care necessitates a multipronged approach with aesthetic, culturally affirming, and critical components (Curry 2016; Valenzuela 1999).

Meritocracy and the Challenge of Critical Care

In the political context of US education, critical care represents a particularly challenging undertaking. Schools have long been imbued with individualistic, meritocratic ideologies that elevate individual success over collective advancement. With policies like No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and school choice, schooling has been construed in profoundly individualistic and competitive terms (Au 2016). This approach venrates market ideologies. As schools champion meritocracy in a race to ready students for “college and career,” their efforts may be detrimental to communal movements for equity and justice (Glass and Nygreen 2011; Kolluri and Tierney 2018). Schools may be in a uniquely poor position to offer critical care to their marginalized students. An “education gospel” (Cottom 2017) that elevates personal academic success as a cure-all for social ills precludes a critical vision of care attuned to political advocacy in marginalized communities.

Thus, strong pressures pervade the US education system to design schooling exclusively as a meritocratic means for individual advancement. As Labaree (1997) writes, “Public education has increasingly come to be perceived as a private good that is harnessed to the pursuit of personal advantage; and, on the whole, the consequences of this for both school and society have been profoundly negative” (43). In terms of care, educators face intense pressures to care for students as individuals, namely, to care for them in personal and aesthetic terms, but to care less for the oppressions that shape their communities. Thus, students likely experience critically unconscious care in schools, the repercussions of which are deserving of scholarly attention.

Method—An Ethnography of Care at an Urban High School

The Research Site

As an urban school, Sunrise High School is almost a cliché.[1] Once a large, comprehensive school in an urban Southern California neighborhood, it has now become a small, comprehensive school amid the persistent stream of neighborhood families leaving for nearby charters. Approximately one-third of 700 students are Black, and two-thirds are Latinx. Nearly 90% of students are deemed socioeconomically disadvantaged by state data. The buildings are dilapidated. Classroom structures that might have looked bright and welcoming 30 years ago are now outfitted in fading blue and beige, whose tonal consistency has been undone by graffiti hastily covered with mismatched paint. Windows are darkly tinted and fogged over from years of disrepair. Airplanes fly low over the school to land at a nearby airport, making conversations momentarily inaudible. The principal tells me that the city has pledged to provide insulation upgrades to help with the noise, but she is not convinced that they will ever follow through. The municipal neglect and dwindling enrollment numbers at Sunrise are predictable subplots in the current narrative of urban education in the United States.

A lesser-talked-about feature of urban schools, however, is that beauty unfolds in ugly buildings. Administrators decorated with wide smiles greet students at the front gates. At lunch and after school, teenagers make their way to their favorite teachers' classrooms, forgoing the warm freedom of the outdoors for a chance to laugh among friends and mentors behind classroom desks. Students express a strong affinity for Sunrise despite derogatory framings from the world outside. The standardized test performance of Sunrise students was widely reported as woefully low (state documents report that students' averaged scores on standardized math exams were more than 150 points below standards, and 50 points below standard in English language arts), but nearly 90% of students graduated, a rate above the state average. To capture the complexity of the Sunrise landscape necessitates methodological tools able to navigate this jagged terrain.

Positionality

I begin by outlining my positionality to situate myself in the research context. I conducted this work as a man in my mid-30s from a middle-class background. Prior, I worked as a social studies teacher in urban schools for 10 years. I had no connection to this particular school, but I reached out to them because of my interest in urban schooling more broadly. My identities—personal and professional—inform this study in a number of ways. As a Brown, racially minoritized person, I was able to connect with participants who had experienced structural and interpersonal racism. Though I was significantly older than the students, my extensive experience working with youth helped me build rapport with them. As a former teacher, I was welcomed into the school as a tutor in the school's Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program (a college preparation program primarily intended for first-generation college-bound students) after meeting with the principal, and I could relate with staff regarding the challenges of urban teaching. Certainly, my outsider status and social distance from some of my research participants (age and class background) created a difference in perspectives. However, I sought to build rapport with the students, visiting them at home, getting to know their parents, and supporting them with the college application process.

To address how my positionality might be influencing my analysis of the data, I made sure throughout the study to follow the lead of students, asking open-ended questions and conducting observations in search of negative cases. I shared my final analysis through member checks with seven students and the school principal, none of whom suggested any feedback. Through extensive immersion, relationship building, and consideration of my positionality in data analysis, I developed relationships that allowed for what I believe is an authentic rendering of care at Sunrise.

The Ethnography

I conducted an institutional review board–approved ethnography of the junior class at Sunrise between October and May of the 2018–19 school year. The data here are drawn from a larger study about schooling for working-class Black and Latinx youth. I focused on the junior year because of its palpable sense of academic urgency—the final full academic year before college applications. The data collection included interviews and observations. I interviewed 40 juniors (out of approximately 170 total), 7 teachers, 2 administrators, and 2 counselors (see table 1). Some students were recruited to maintain balance by race, gender, and academic performance. Participants were a mix of young women and men, Black and Latinx, and they had widely varied levels of academic engagement. I asked the students about home environments, ethnic backgrounds, their academic focus, and their beliefs about Sunrise. I developed questions on my own, and they included general questions like "How would you describe Sunrise High School to someone who is not familiar with the school?" "What do you think of your classes?" and "What is your relationship like with your teachers?" I also interviewed faculty about the pedagogical ideologies.

Interviews, although useful at probing participant perspective and individual-level meaning-making, lack institutional and situational lenses (Lamont and Swidler 2014). The ethnographer, sitting on an observational perch or embedded deeply in these transactions, is better equipped to see unfolding institutional processes.

TABLE 1

Methodological Summary

Interviews	• 40 students (38 juniors, 2 seniors; 25 boys, 15 girls; 14 Black, 23 Latinx, 2 multiracial, and 1 Pacific Islander) • 7 teachers who taught advanced and nonadvanced subjects • 2 administrators (there are only two at the school) • 2 counselors (there are only two at the school)
Observations	• More than 200 hours of participant observation in the following settings: ◦ Classrooms ◦ Lunchtime on campus ◦ Extracurricular activities ◦ Informal settings off campus (neighborhoods, parks, homes)

Ethnographic methods allow a researcher to see participant behaviors in all their complicated and contradictory glory—to "witness the clash firsthand" and capture negotiations among differently positioned actors in a social sphere (Desmond 2014).

Ethnography necessitates cultural immersion—long and sustained engagement to decipher the nuanced cultural meanings and discern "winks" from "twitches" (Geertz 1973) at an urban high school. My engagement was thus that of participant observer. I spent more than 200 hours on campus—mostly in classrooms, observing and supporting students with their work. However, I also interacted with students and teachers before and after classes—at lunch and in club meetings or at sporting events. I visited students at home and accompanied them on neighborhood walks. The concept of care emerged from interviews and observations that happened iteratively.

I also checked for trustworthiness of data. I offer a thick description (Geertz 1973) of the research site and participants to convey richly the particular social context of these processes. Deep contextual understanding can suggest "transferability" (Guba 1981) of the data to similar schooling contexts. Also, I triangulated data from multiple sources. Data gleaned from one research session could be corroborated in another. Last, I conducted member checks with student participants. My sustained engagement at Sunrise High permitted a careful assessment of the accuracy of these portrayals.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic data collection and analysis happened concurrently. I typed up field notes and transcribed interviews within a week of conducting each. With respect to field notes, the objective was to write "lushly" (Goffman 1989, 131) to capture the performative nuances and subtle meanings of actors within a social world. I wrote analytic memos intermittently throughout data collection, and the memos suggested emergent themes that informed subsequent investigations. I coded inductively and deductively. Initial codes were grounded in theoretical frameworks of identity and curricular engagement, including authentic care. Subsequent codes were derived “in vivo” or created from my observations. I created a codebook of 14 codes—4 “parent codes” and 10 “subcodes”—which I used to code the remainder of the data. Some codes included “teacher warmth and support,” “completion-oriented pedagogy,” “structural oppressions,” and “illusions of diligence.” Finally, I organized data into themes. Combined, the themes detailed care and the process of academic engagement and disengagement for students at Sunrise High School.

Findings

Often, urban schools are portrayed as overrun by uncaring White teachers disengaged from students’ cultural backgrounds (Ferguson 2020; Valenzuela 1999). At Sunrise, this was not the case. The principal was a Black woman, the assistant principal was a Latina, and a significant majority of teachers were Black and Latinx. The students had teachers who looked like them from communities like theirs. The context was ripe for culturally competent, authentic care. Here, I first describe the elements of care at Sunrise High. I focus mostly on three Black teachers—Ms. Clarke, Mr. Patterson, and Coach Cooper—whose approaches typified a generally agreed-upon pedagogy at the school. They had cultural competence. They sought academic excellence. But they avoided social critique in its pursuit. Thus, they adopted two tenets of this framework of care but avoided the third. I focus on these three teachers because they were leaders at the school, they taught both regular-track courses and Advanced Placement (AP), and they welcomed me into their classrooms more than any other teachers at the school. I also include brief analyses of Latinx teachers to demonstrate that this approach to care was not specific to Black teachers. Next, I present the ways that students responded to the partial vision of authentic care. They were polite and respectful to their teachers but academically dishonest when the teachers looked the other way. I thus portray an academic world that intermingles frustration and hope, stagnancy and transformative potential as students and teachers negotiate culture, care, and curricular engagement.

Culturally Affirming Care

On the morning of Valentine’s Day, students overwhelmed the two auditorium entrances, and many clogged the aisles to chat with friends. When most students had found their seats, Assistant Principal Shaw got on the microphone. Mr. Shaw had light skin and wore his hair in short, tight curls. He appeared racially ambiguous. “We have a treat for you guys today,” he announced. He explained they had invited a singer who had sung at a ceremony with Presidents Obama and Clinton. His enthusiastic introduction of Marjorie Jackson, a 17-year-old from Anaheim, was met with half-hearted applause from students skeptical of the "concert" they were about to witness in the aging auditorium. Three young, Black women then strutted onto the stage in sparkled shirts and matching tricolor black, white, and pink pants. They broke out into an upbeat rhythm and blues (R&B) number, skillfully choreographed. The energy of the students rose to meet the bouncy movements and bright rhythms emanating from the auditorium public address system. The lead singer's lack of vocal polish did not bother the students, who danced in their seats and cheered loudly after every song. The students' skepticism had given way to unrestrained celebration.

After the opening number, Marjorie and her dancers passed out roses to many of the young women in the audience. She announced that she did not have a Valentine and was looking for one among the Sunrise High School boys. The crowd roared; hundreds of young men jumped out of their seats pleading to be chosen as her Valentine. She chose among them and serenaded one smiling young man with a passionate love ballad. Students in the audience waved their phone screens in the air to the beat, cheering enthusiastically. The administration had gifted their students a thrilling Valentine's concert.

The concert, as an expression of love and a connection to Black culture (R&B music has a rich and robust history with Black performers and audiences), was typical for Sunrise High. The staff was attuned to local cultural styles, they spoke readily with students about race, and they were unabashed in demonstrating affection. They shared a deep sense of cultural connection. Racial awareness, familial warmth, and culturally affirming care were central pillars of the pedagogical approach across the school.

Ms. Clarke, for example, described her pathway into teaching in racial terms. As a high school student in the area, she recalled to her students that she was the only Black student in her AP classes. "I realized in my mind . . . How am I going to help people who look like me," she told her class. When teaching, she spoke fluidly about issues of race in history and the present day and moved effortlessly between Black vernacular and "academic" English when she did. In one such lesson, she lectured on the ties between skin color and the durability of slavery as an institution. She explained that White indentured servitude was hard to maintain without visible markers of difference between the indentured and nonindentured population. "It is easy to identify them on the street," she said, pointing to herself. "I cannot pass for white no matter how hard I try. And I wouldn't try. I love my beautiful black skin."

Alongside an openness about race, Ms. Clarke described herself as motherly. She said, "I call my students sweetie," and I saw her do so many times. When Simon, a Black boy, was getting distracted, she reprimanded him softly, "Simon, you're having a little side conversation again, sweetie." Simon expressed appreciation for Ms. Clarke's approach. "Our whole class love her," he told me. "She don't let you fail." Another student agreed. "You see how she teaches. She likes to teach." Ms. Clarke was eager to support her students in any way she could—in and out of the classroom. I watched her mediate quarrels between students. When two cousins vying for the Associated Student Body (ASB) presidency ended up angry and not talking, Ms. Clarke was their mediator. She fielded teary-eyed grievances with grace and understanding. "Every teacher should be like Ms. Clarke," a student said.

Perhaps less effusive, but no less keenly felt, was the love expressed by Mr. Patterson. During advisory periods and after school, I watched his concentration remain unbroken on his computer while young men reached from behind him for awkward, unreciprocated hugs. Mr. Patterson appeared to me as woefully unhuggable, scowling more often than he smiled. A Black young man echoed others who described Mr. Patterson as a "serious man, but he's a good man. . . . He cares for you. . . . He just treat you like you're one of his kids." This young man was in the Alpha Gentlemen, Mr. Patterson's on-campus fraternity. They had grown close. His mom invited Mr. Patterson to his birthday party at Dave and Buster's. Mr. Patterson insisted on paying for the party. "I didn't invite him to pay for anything, but he split the bill," the young man's mom said. "He made it his business to be there on his off day to . . . dedicate his personal time to these boys, and it means a lot."

Mr. Patterson founded the Alpha Gentlemen in connection with the historically Black fraternity at his alma mater. In the first Wednesday Alpha Gentlemen meeting I attended, I sat in the back of the room next to the recently opened boxes of broccoli beef and Kung Pao chicken. The food remained untouched, however, as the young men crowded around Mr. Patterson talking on his mobile phone. On the other end of the call, a young man's voice shook. He told Mr. Patterson that he was just "banged on" by some local gang members when getting off the bus. "Sounds like nine-oh!" one student remarked, hazarding a guess about which gang it might be. Two students eagerly suggested that they go pick him up. Mr. Patterson motioned to them to do so while calming the young man and telling him to go somewhere safe. With his car keys already out of his pocket, a Latino male left the room with another student close behind. Minutes later, the boy from the phone call was in the classroom, unharmed and sharing in the Chinese takeout Mr. Patterson had purchased for the group.

Racial advancement and culturally affirming care were at the core of Mr. Patterson's efforts with the young men. The club's mission statement explicitly targeted Black and Latino men, and the club drew on the cultural strengths of Black communities. The young men were given space in the meetings to be themselves. They traded verbal jabs over food. They discussed young women and talked basketball. They developed elaborate step routines performed during school rallies. In these performances, the young men deftly stomped and clapped in front of the entire student body, their shouts and rhythms filling the gymnasium. Black cultural forms—like stepping—were elevated through the fraternity.

Similarly, Coach Cooper, the eleventh-grade English teacher, viewed his educational efforts as firmly grounded in a cultural connection with students. "When I got here in 2005, it was more even, probably more African American students than Latino students at the time," he told me in his calming verbal manner. "I didn't see many male teachers on campus. I had just come out of college. I got my bachelor's in psychology. I played sports. . . . When I didn't see any African American males teaching, I thought, 'Hey, well, maybe this is my calling.'" Coach Cooper drew on his experiences as an athlete of color to connect with Sunrise students. He used to coach basketball at Sunrise, but he had since moved to coach at a private school that paid him better. His new team beat Sunrise High School's team by about 40 points, and he did not hesitate to remind basketball players of the thrashing when he saw them. He still went by "coach" with the students.

Coach Cooper's room was another hangout for many Black students throughout the day. They joked with one another and Coach Cooper, often boisterously. Before his class, I watched a group of Black girls converse loudly. When their discussion got particularly noisy, Coach Cooper jerked his head in their direction. Raising his voice above the commotion, he yelled, "Hey! Why y'all always turnt up!?" They were stunned into a silence, but only briefly. A young Black woman stood to return fire. "Why you always turnt down!?" she shouted back, matching his gusto. Coach Cooper laughed with the students and returned to preparing his whiteboard. The girls returned to being loud.

Ms. Clarke, Mr. Patterson, and Mr. Cooper were all representatives of a teaching staff connected with the cultures of their students. The Latinx teachers also drew upon local cultural repertoires through their instruction. They alternated fluidly between English and Spanish. I watched the Latino physics teacher playfully call a misbehaving young man a *payaso*—a clown. They drew on immigrant narratives in motivating students. The cultural competence, for Black and Latinx students, helped students feel at home on the Sunrise campus. As one student explained, "I appreciate every teacher. I look up to every one I have." Although not all teachers were equally appreciated by all students, a sense of cultural love and affirmation was palpable in my observations of the classrooms at Sunrise. However, as I describe below, though teachers were culturally adept with Black and Latinx students and readily mentioned race—to connect with students personally and authentically—discussions of racism as an oppressive social reality were almost entirely nonexistent at Sunrise High School. The focus instead was on academic excellence.

High Academic Expectations and the Absence of Social Critique

After the surprise Valentine's Day concert, Ms. Clarke was less than pleased. "I teach. I don't have time for that mediocre crap," she told me, flashing her characteristic smile.

For Ms. Clarke, college readiness took precedence over all else. She did not take kindly to interruptions. "I believe that during advisory, the kids should have the opportunity to practice SAT prompts or the math portion of the SAT or work on, you know, homework or various things that they're struggling with."

For Ms. Clarke, like other teachers at Sunrise, cultural connections with students needed to be accompanied by rigorous academic preparation. Ms. Clarke facilitated focused study sessions in advisory almost every day. Often, they prepared for the SAT. One morning early in the year, a few students entered without immediately grabbing SAT books. Instead, one Black male sat at a table to laugh with a few peers. "I suggest you get up and get your book," Ms. Clarke told him sternly. He did immediately. She quickly refocused her frustration on a Latina young woman. "Linda, you've been running your mouth all 5 minutes!" she said. Linda quickly stopped talking and turned her head to her book. "I'm not one of those nice, sugarcoating teachers," she told them. "You're young adults . . . don't get it twisted." She told them that they needed to learn to behave or "society is going to teach you how to behave." Carrying a book from her desk, a young woman complained, "This book is heavier than me!" "I know," responded Ms. Clarke. "Imagine how much knowledge you can accumulate."

To inspire academic success, Ms. Clarke drew on examples of successful entrepreneurs. One of these entrepreneurs was Ms. Clarke herself. She spoke frequently about her thriving real estate business. She advertised that she made more income in real estate than she did teaching. Her financial success was the result of overcoming early challenges. "I went to Washington High School in the hood. I was a slow reader. . . . I still am a very slow reader. . . . It hasn't hindered me from getting a master's degree . . . but you have to put the work in." She was an immigrant who believed in the promise of the United States. In an interview, she said, "Every time I leave and come back, I hear the song in my head 'Proud to Be an American.' . . . No place else, I think, allows you the opportunity to change your economic status. I'm just being real about that."

She also shared rags-to-riches stories of prominent billionaires. In a video, "The Greatest Success Story," Alibaba.com founder Jack Ma told his story of outworking his competition alongside a sprawling orchestral melody. Ms. Clarke also shared about Oprah Winfrey. She explained to the students how someone told Oprah she was "too ugly for television." Nonetheless, Oprah succeeded, "because she is not a victim," Ms. Clarke said. "A survivor mentality only leaves you doing the minimum."Ms. Clarke urged students to learn from Jack Ma, Oprah Winfrey, and her own hard work and reject a "victim mentality." If these exemplars could rise from poverty, so could her students. "We don't lack resources, we lack resourcefulness," she said to students, repeating a favorite saying she picked up from a fellow real estate agent.

Her cheerleading for the financially successful occasionally descended into pathologizing the poor. Discussing Enlightenment philosophers, she commented on economic equality. “If you a lazy bum . . . I personally don’t think you should take from me and give to someone who stays at home and does absolutely nothing,” Ms. Clarke told students, unironically touting a conservative talking point. “Economic inequality often comes from somebody not doing their part.” Messages of meritocracy pervaded her lessons. People who worked hard got ahead. Those who did not had themselves to blame. “Many people want to pass the buck to the school but I’m sorry the foundation is at home,” Ms. Clarke said in an interview. She genuinely loved her students and wanted them to succeed. But she framed that success as unquestionably bound to the ideals of US capitalism—hard work, individualism, and meritocracy.

Mr. Patterson had similarly high academic expectations. In an early Alpha Gentlemen afternoon meeting, I watched him stand in front of the room as the students silently awaited his words. “How is it possible to fail advisory or PE?” he asked them, his voice giving away his frustration. The students prepared for a sharp reprimand. Mr. Patterson then announced each student’s grades to the group. A handful were failing physical education (PE). One had a D in AP Biology. Another had a D in AP Spanish. A Black senior who was on track to be the school’s valedictorian was reprimanded for dropping to number 17 in his class. Aside from one, every student in the fraternity was failing a class and received a harsh admonishment. When students attempted to explain a less-than-stellar grade, Mr. Patterson did not let them. He was uninterested in excuses.

Mr. Patterson announced that these were the worst progress reports he had seen in more than a decade advising the club. They were all on probation, and they would be removed from the group if they did not make satisfactory improvements in 2 weeks. The next day, I asked one student how he took the scolding. “That’s what he’s supposed to do!” he told me. The young men appreciated Mr. Patterson for holding them to high standards. Two weeks later, no students had been expelled from the fraternity for poor grades. “They all got ’em up,” Mr. Patterson told me, allowing the slightest of smiles to grace his normally stoic expression.

Students credited Mr. Patterson for academic success. “He’s made a great impact into my life, and he’s told me to take a lot of challenges in school,” a Latino Alpha Gentleman told me. “I feel like he’s the one who pushes me into taking all these challenging things and being successful.” When the young man recently fell off the honor roll, Mr. Patterson offered a sharp reprimand. “He probably saw a future in me,” the young man supposed. “Since my freshman year, he’s been telling me to be ASB VP [Associated Student Body Vice President]. . . . It’s like he had a whole plan for me.” Mr. Patterson’s rigorous academic expectations and intense demeanor were all part of a focused effort to improve academic outcomes for young men of color. Mr. Patterson bragged, “Over the years, everyone that has actually graduated from Alpha Gentlemen has gone on to a 2-year or 4-year college and some to the military.”

Like Ms. Clarke, Mr. Patterson guided students to trajectories of professional success. Academic achievement was emphasized; social critique was not. The Alpha Gentlemen were to become functional cogs in the system, not to fundamentally change it. The group's mission included six objectives:

1. To teach young men how to become productive men
2. To strengthen family values, and how to become an asset to society
3. To deter young men from joining gangs and using drugs
4. To increase the number of college-bound young Black males
5. To expose them to life
6. To serve the community

Academic excellence for young men was couched in terms like "productivity" and "assets." Though they were to "serve the community," often as tutors at a local elementary school, there was far less emphasis on reimagining it. They were to develop themselves to achieve individual success in college and beyond. In the end, they would be prepared to strive for excellence within existing social hierarchies.

Coach Cooper's curricula also avoided a critical social analysis. He favored a basic skills approach to English instruction. Coach Cooper's curricula, even in AP, was heavily grounded in technical skills of grammar and syntax. "As your English teacher, it's my job to make sure you get the foundation," he told his class early in the year. After multiple diagnostic exams, Coach Cooper determined, "Something as simple as parts of speech. My kids were not doing so well at it . . . so we started from the basics. Like the ground," he told me, moving his hand toward the floor for effect.

Midway through the year, it was not clear the students had risen above the grammatical ground of English language arts. In one class well into the second semester, grammar took up more than half of a class period. Coach Cooper passed back quizzes based on the questions from the textbook about subjects, verbs, predicate adjectives, predicate nominatives, direct objects, and indirect objects. Coach Cooper called on students to read the sentences along with the answers. The students did so dutifully. "Number 1: Native cactuses in the Southwest are endangered." "Number 2: Some species are already vulnerable to extinction." "Number 3: Cactuses are being threatened by landscapes, tourists, and collectors." And so on. After the quiz, the students returned papers to their owners. This ritual—a quiz identifying parts of an arbitrary sentence, graded by a peer and entered into a gradebook—was a central component of the eleventh-grade English curriculum at Sunrise High.

When students sought writing assignments about their communities, they were rebuffed. One brisk morning, a young woman was irritated by the district-controlled air conditioner spewing cold air into an already cold classroom. She suggested to Coach Cooper that they "write to the district about changes" as part of the class. Coach Cooper was sympathetic, but he disagreed, arguing that her idea would be a good assignment for their advisory class but not English. Another AP student asked if they could do a research paper in the course. Coach Cooper declined because "that's not pertinent to our exam." Social critique, research, and discussion were not part of the curricula. "We have been trying to debate for so many months, but he won't let us," one young woman told me. "I really want to debate!"

Teachers adopted a pedagogical approach that was centered on academic excellence for marginalized youth but was disconnected from the challenges that marginalized them. This was not exclusive to these three teachers at Sunrise. Other teachers I observed overwhelmed students with lectures, notes, and worksheets, making scant connection with student lives. One student could recall discussing issues of race and justice in the community only when a nearby National Football League team hosted a conversation on race. "I really appreciated that. Because we don't do that over here like that. We don't sit here and talk about racism and inequality," he said.

Only once did I see a teacher incorporate a community challenge into a lesson. In the spring, a prominent local rapper was murdered near the school. Ms. Clarke invited a conversation about the event in her history class, tying the rapper's lyrics to the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and the challenges of urban communities. Given the opportunity to discuss community violence, the students were sharp, and their conversation was vibrant. One young man, profoundly disengaged throughout most of his classes, shot his hand in the air after many of Ms. Clarke's questions. Sometimes he could not wait and blurted out answers before being called on. "I had a lot to say, I just wanted to say it all," he told me after. The conversation, he said, was relevant to his community. "I don't live in the safest neighborhood. There is some violence going on; drugs is everywhere." Another young man said, "I feel like we should talk about it everywhere until it gets solved. Because the more it happens, the more we die." Neither of these students, however, recalled talking about community issues in any other class. Despite the life-and-death urgency of social injustice, students were offered scant opportunity in school to develop critical analyses of inequity and oppression.

Student Response to Acritical Care: Relational Warmth and Cheating

In response to culturally affirming care without critical consciousness, students were polite and relationally warm but academically disengaged. They carefully crafted the illusion of diligence to satisfy beloved teachers and earn passing grades. As one young woman, a well-respected leader, explained, "We care more about the grade than we do about learning. And that kind of sucks." The vast majority of students I interviewed were profoundly appreciative of their relationships with teachers but were woefully uninspired by the work they assigned.

Ms. Clarke elicited the most widespread admiration. Ms. Clarke "has no filter and I really enjoy it," a student announced to her classmates. Her caring, if brutal, honesty was partly why students believed they could lean on Ms. Clarke for support. Students who needed advice, academic or otherwise, sought her out. Her students were hardly ever rude or disrespectful. Her reprimands were often met with a "my bad" and a quick redirection of focus. I watched one student offer a public apology to everyone in Ms. Clarke's room after being chastised for inappropriate language. Her culturally affirming kindness was reciprocated by her students.

Students also developed deep ties with Mr. Patterson. Many went to his house on the weekends to play video games or basketball in his backyard. One explained to me, "Like this weekend I'm going to go there. . . . We just show up. [He holds his hand up to his ear, simulating a phone.] 'Mr. Patterson is you going to be home? All right. Imma come over.'" Mr. Patterson abstained from basketball or video games, but he watched from the sideline. "He talk mess to us . . . that we can't shoot. But we just have fun," the young man said. Multiple students shared that Mr. Patterson was "like a dad" to them.

Although students did not enjoy as deep of relationships with Coach Cooper as they did with Mr. Patterson and Ms. Clarke, he was held in high regard. He asked students to share personal news at the start of each period. Multiple student hands shot in the air nearly every time to commence short, friendly conversations about their lives. One student described an eagerness to join Coach Cooper's AP class. "He's a really cool guy and I have noticed it ever since ninth grade. In a way, we really have the same personality because we're both just very laid back, chill." Coach Cooper endured few public displays of disobedience. Students responded to their teachers' cultural competence and care with warmth and congeniality.

Teachers had students' respect, and they leveraged that respect to encourage work completion. In turn, students prided themselves on their ostensible diligence. "I do my work" was a familiar refrain across student interviews. Despite some procrastination, one told me, "I eventually will get the job done." "Just stay on your grind," another advised her peers. For some, classroom efforts were explicitly tied to future financial success. One student told me, "I keep to myself, do my work, make sure I graduate. I want to make money. I don't want to be at where I'm still at today. I want to prosper." Students occasionally parroted individualistic messaging that emphasized the importance of work completion. "Once you get out of here nobody will care for you but yourself. If you don't care for yourself, I don't know who will care for you," one said. Teachers' advocacy of work completion as an avenue toward academic success largely succeeded. Students had received the message. Doing work was the key to future success. The vast majority passed their classes. Graduation rates were very high.

Whereas submitting one's work was highly valorized, working strenuously was less so. Despite open access to AP and a young Latino male counselor who eagerly urged students to try AP classes, fewer than a third of students opted into an AP course. "What do I need that for?" one student asked me. Another student explained, "I don't like doing all that extra work. For me I don't feel like it's necessary." Students failed to see how the assigned work was meaningful to their present circumstances. They knew they needed it to graduate and go to college but failed to see any other purpose. Classwork was an unfortunate necessity, to be endured but not enjoyed. Doing one's work mattered; doing it with intellectual depth did not.

Students' efforts were half-hearted at best and entirely dishonest at worst. In an AVID class discussion, Jennifer, a young Latina, laid the facts bare. "We prefer to have that A. Sometimes we don't—" she paused with the intent of choosing her words carefully, but she ultimately decided against censoring herself. "We cheat! We cheat, OK!? . . . I feel like a lot of people don't want to talk about it . . . ever since we were small, we've had it embedded in our brain that we had to go to college." Cheating, she said, would help them get there.

Cheating was widespread at Sunrise, and no classroom was immune. In Ms. Clarke's class, as students prepared for a test, I watched one cover his entire palm in facts about the Articles of Confederation. When he ran out of space on his hand, he lifted up his sleeve to write on his forearm. By the start of the test, the young man had converted much of a limb into a detailed reference guide. "I do the work, but it's not legit," he later told me. Another young woman whispered to him during the test to get answers from him. "She always asks me for answers," he told me, and he always obliged. In Coach Cooper's class, as students answered textbook questions about Emily Dickinson, one student snatched another's paper. "I'm going to copy it," he matter-of-factly told her. "You better hurry up," she responded. He quickly snapped a picture with his phone and began transcribing her paper onto his. A similar exchange occurred in multiple other groups of students in the class. During lunchtime hangouts in Mr. Patterson's room, I watched students copy homework rapidly before an upcoming class. Surprised at the ubiquity of copying, I asked a student if "like 90%" of them copied their work. "It's more like 99%," he told me. Convinced by their respected teachers of the need to complete their work to get ahead, the students completed it. Unconvinced by the value of the work itself, they did so with minimal effort.

Often, cheating on tests allowed students to quickly move on to tasks they deemed of greater urgency. The student who cheated on the Articles of Confederation was busy at home that week working on getting an internship to become a police officer. After copying the work on Emily Dickinson, the young man quickly returned to searching for videos about the new Raiders football stadium in Las Vegas on his phone. Many of the students spent a lot of their time practicing sports. “Sports wise, I’ll push myself,” one young man told me. “Academics wise,” he did not. The students found meaning in many parts of their lives; they found little if any meaning in the academic work they were assigned.

Thus, Sunrise students responded to cultural care and an apolitical, meritocratic approach to academic achievement with kindness and copying. They were respectful to their teachers. They built close relationships and felt safe at their school. Yet they resisted authentic academic engagement. Instead, they constructed an illusion of diligent work completion, answering questions by transcription, not thought. Through cheating, they could spend their time in ways they thought would be more valuable to their lives. In sum, the students demonstrated almost no contempt for their teachers, but they expressed an abundance of contempt for the work their teachers assigned. Teachers’ love and cultural affirmation were not enough to overcome the disconnected curricula they were asked to endure.

Discussion

With respect to a vision of authentic care with robust “aesthetic,” “culturally affirming,” and “critical” components, Sunrise teachers were a strong two for three. First, many teachers fostered student achievement. They explicitly taught the “culture of power”—basic skills, dispositions, and knowledge connected to future academic success (Delpit 2006). They taught academic skills, urged college-going, fostered cooperative learning environments, and held rigorous standards of behavior (Morrison et al. 2008). Their care was not “soft” (Katz 1999). Rather, it was imbued with high expectations for the Black and Brown students of Sunrise High School (Rivera-McCutchen 2012). Although this more academic vision of care is occasionally derided as “aesthetic,” caring about academic success is a fundamental component of many holistic visions of care (Curry 2022) and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995a) for racially minoritized youth. The teachers at Sunrise worked diligently to build an academic foundation for future success. Through grammar instruction, expecting students to attain high grades, and encouraging them to take advanced courses, teachers at Sunrise exhibited aesthetic, academically driven care that mattered for student success.

The teachers also modeled cultural competence and care with their students. They spoke openly about race and racial pride and understood the cultural realities of the students they taught, strategies that matter for connecting youth of color to their classrooms. Student cultures were validated in classroom interactions and collective celebrations. Students had numerous opportunities to express themselves in ways that were well aligned with home cultures—in language, step performances, and conversations. Affirming students’ cultural identities is another essential component of care that can support racially minoritized youth in school (Cooper 2013; Curry 2022).

Despite being academically oriented and culturally adept, however, the teachers largely ignored social issues in the classroom. Aesthetic care (wherein teachers focused exclusively on academic success) and cultural care (wherein teachers honored students' cultural heritage) were delivered alongside a firm belief that social systems in the United States were fair. As many scholars have emphasized, critical care is part of a holistic vision of classroom pedagogy that can effectively serve racially minoritized students. Its absence at Sunrise High School would likely have repercussions for students. The approach of critical care recognizes the necessity to care beyond the individual academic success of marginalized students and to also care for the communities in which they live (Antrop-González and De Jesús 2006). Classrooms that consider the struggle, resistance, and collective uplift in students' home communities can better engage students in learning (Ladson-Billings 1995a). At Sunrise, though, students were not often taught to develop social critique or an analysis of the marginalized position of their local communities. Instead, they were served up meritocratic platitudes about work completion as the key ingredient of future success. Critical care was thus largely absent from the care offered by teachers at Sunrise. How did this partial enactment of care shape student engagement at Sunrise High School? With their teachers, students were comfortable and compliant. With the curriculum, they were resistant.

Students with Their Teachers: Comfortable and Compliant

The findings at Sunrise High School reinforce the notion that culturally affirming care matters in school. The family-like love and cultural competence expressed by teachers established a culture of warmth and respect. Students conveyed adoration for their teachers. They interacted playfully with them and were rarely defiant when asked to focus. They felt comfortable. Though teachers in urban neighborhoods often experience misbehavior and blatant defiance (Ferguson 2020), at Sunrise, open disrespect was rare. Students were enveloped in the care of loving educators who could speak to their cultural realities as Black and Latinx students from an urban community.

Teachers' love and warmth were accompanied by an emphasis on work completion and meritocracy, and the students responded by parroting these ideals. They expressed a prideful "I do my work" philosophy that emphasized assignment completion and the maintenance of passing grades. The work was submitted obediently and done in service of long-term goals of financial stability—"to make money" and "to prosper." The teachers made scant explicit connections to students' lives and communities, and the students, who respected their teachers, did not either. They were compliant and entirely bought into the framing of education as a means for individual advancement. Work at Sunrise was to be endured and not enjoyed.

Students with the Curriculum: Cheating

In the absence of deliberate interrogations of social inequity, students struggled to find a purpose for their work beyond individual advancement. "Doing one's work" was interpreted as worksheet completion rather than deep, engaged thinking. Ultimately, if they turned in a high enough percentage of their assignments, they could become future "rags to riches" exemplars like Jack Ma and Oprah Winfrey. Students were "doing school" (Pope 2001); they constructed an illusion of diligence to satisfy their teachers and get passing grades on assignments. "We cheat" was a regular admission I heard across classroom discussions and private conversations. The copying, half-hearted efforts, and avoidance of academic challenge were tied to a genuine inability among students to understand the relevance of learning beyond notions of future opportunity and wealth accumulation. The students explicitly cited this as the reason they cheated—college aspirations were "embedded in [their] brain," and they saw little value in the work beyond individual advancement. The partial implementation of authentic care led to half-hearted academic effort.

Nonetheless, in this neoliberal, meritocratic framing of education at Sunrise, completing assignments—even if they were copied—was viewed as a success. Students conceived of submitting work as the goal and copying the work as a viable means to that end. Over a year at Sunrise High School, I never saw a student reprimanded for cheating. The students never deeply considered the ethical implications of copying assignments. How students completed work was not a topic of conversation with teachers. In meritocratic neoliberalism, the work itself had no inherent purpose. Its sole purpose was to be done. When students did it, grades were entered, and success was assumed.

Thus, the absence of social critique presented challenges for students in search of meaning for their assignments. Of course, social analysis of oppression is not the only means of increasing students' academic interest. The math teacher who designs a perplexing word problem or the social studies teacher who vividly retells a historical narrative can motivate students to complete work without copying. In line with other studies, however, a community connection to academic work does seem to be an important tool for engagement (Yeager et al. 2014) and, as such, an indispensable component of authentic care. The data here suggest that the success of authentic care necessitates a critical application.

This piecemeal expression of authentic care left students caught between academic engagement and apathy. On the one hand, they appreciated their teachers and sought to please them. On the other hand, the work seemed entirely irrelevant to their lives. In this educational context of interpersonal connection and curricular disconnect, students were simultaneously at home and at sea. They were comfortable, but they were uninspired. Without an opportunity to interrogate the day-to-day realities within their marginalized communities, they completed work quickly and without thinking. They often copied. Without the critical component of authentic care—an educational approach that aligns with meritocratic ideologies that shape schooling (Au 2016; Labaree 1997)—the students' engagement was mostly an illusion. Teachers collected copied assignments, and students happily amassed credits for their academic transcripts. "What do I need that for?" was an essential question with no clear answer.

Limitations

This study is not without important limitations that can inform how the findings might be understood by scholars and practitioners. The goal of qualitative methods is to explore phenomena within the particulars of a social context. The concept of "particulars" engenders some important challenges. First, the ethnographic method is particularly sensitive to the perspective of the researcher. As a critical educator who saw a lack of criticality at the research site, this finding may have been salient to me in a way it would not have been salient to other researchers. In addition, the way care was employed and received in the Sunrise context is likely distinct from how it is employed and received elsewhere. Though findings are certainly not generalizable to all contexts, I urge researchers to leverage the concept of "logical generalizability" (Luker 2009) to consider what aspects of this study might reasonably have implications for other schooling contexts of interest.

Implications

Given the above limitations, the implications of this study for racially minoritized students are abundant. Scholars have long established the importance of care in schools (Noddings 1984; Valenzuela 1999). Indeed, few teachers get into the teaching profession without caring about students. However, care is complex and multifaceted. This study can inform educators and researchers on the repercussions of choosing meritocratic ideology over the critical component of care. Without such care, even in the most culturally affirming contexts, students may not engage meaningfully with curricula. Educational leaders and teachers concerned with low student engagement, cheating, or individualistic student cultures might look to foster critical care to address these challenges. Conversations about real-life issues in their communities can invigorate student engagement. Further research might consider how to recruit and develop teachers who enact critical care. Support for teachers to care critically—from teacher educators, educational administrators, and teacher coaches—is essential. In urban schools, care without criticality is incomplete.

The findings here underscore the inadequacy of half-loaf measures at enhancing care in urban schools. Recruiting teachers of color and preparing all teachers to be fluent in the cultural repertoires of marginalized students certainly can help students connect to school. But it is not enough. High expectations can encourage students to take their academic futures seriously. But they are not enough. Without cultivating a sense of critical social urgency—a pedagogy that draws on the day-to-day challenges of marginalized urban contexts—students may politely go through the motions of academic engagement. In so doing, they will not engage in ways that are likely to be transformative for themselves and their communities, a significant missed opportunity for pedagogy in marginalized contexts (Freire 1970; Ladson-Billing 1995a; Perry and Steele 2004). The ambitious vision of authentic care (Curry 2022; Noddings 1984) will, in the end, remain woefully unrealized.

Notes

The author would like to thank William Tierney, Adrian Huerta, Joseph Kahne, and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful contributions to this article.

1. All names are pseudonyms.

References

Antrop-González, Rene, and Anthony De Jesús. 2006. “Toward a Theory of Critical Care in Urban Small School Reform: Examining Structures and Pedagogies of Caring in Two Latino Community-Based Schools.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 19 (4): 409–33.

Athanases, Steven Z., and Marnie W. Curry. 2018. “Framing Literacy as ‘Revolutionary.’ ” In *Schools of Promise for Multilingual Students: Transforming Literacies, Learning, and Lives*, ed. Althier M. Lazar and Patricia Ruggiano Schmidt. New York: Teachers College Press.

Au, Wayne. 2016. “Meritocracy 2.0: High-Stakes, Standardized Testing as a Racial Project of Neoliberal Multiculturalism.” *Educational Policy* 30 (1): 39–62.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. 2002. “A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers.” *Urban Review* 34:71–86.

Carter, Prudence L. 2005. *Keepin’ It Real: School Success beyond Black and White*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cooper, Kristy S. 2013. “Safe, Affirming, and Productive Spaces: Classroom Engagement among Latina High School Students.” *Urban Education* 48 (4): 490–528.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2017. *Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy*. New York: New Press.

Curry, Marnie W. 2016. "Will You Stand for Me? Authentic Cariño and Transformative Rites of Passage in an Urban High School." *American Educational Research Journal* 53 (4): 883–918.

Curry, Marnie W. 2022. *Authentic Cariño: Transformative Schooling for Latinx Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Delpit, Lisa. 2006. *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. New York: New Press.

Delpit, Lisa. 2012. *Multiplication Is for White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*. New York: New Press.

Desmond, Matthew. 2014. "Relational Ethnography." *Theory and Society* 43:547–79.

Duncan-Andrade, Jeffrey, and Ernest Morrell. 2008. *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools*, vol. 285. New York: Peter Lang.

Easton-Brooks, Donald. 2021. "Ethnic-Matching in Urban Schools." In *Handbook of Urban Education*, ed. H. Richard Milner IV and Kofi Lomotey. New York: Routledge.

Ferguson, Ann Arnett. 2020. *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Freire, Paulo. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Geertz, Clifford. 1973. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic.

Glass, Ronald David, and Kysa Nygreen. 2011. "Class, Race, and the Discourse of 'College for All.' A Response to 'Schooling for Democracy.'" *Democracy and Education* 19 (1): 7.

Goffman, Erving. 1989. "On Fieldwork." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18 (2): 123–32.

Guba, Egon G. 1981. "Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries." *ECTJ* 29 (2): 75–91.

Howard, Tyrone C. 2013. "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Black Male Students, Schools, and Learning in Enhancing the Knowledge Base to Disrupt Deficit Frameworks." *Review of Research in Education* 37 (1): 54–86.

Katz, Susan Roberta. 1999. "Teaching in Tensions: Latino Immigrant Youth, Their Teachers, and the Structures of Schooling." *Teachers College Record* 100 (4): 809–40.

Kolluri, Suneal. 2017. "Politicizing Pedagogy: Teaching for Liberty and Justice at Urban Schools." *Phi Delta Kappan* 99 (4): 39–44.

Kolluri, Suneal, and William Tierney. 2018. "College for All in Capitalist America: The Post-Secondary Emphasis in the Neoliberal Age." *Tertiary Education and Management* 24 (3): 242–53.

Labaree, David F. 1997. "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals." *American Educational Research Journal* 34 (1): 39–81.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1995a. "But That's Just Good Teaching! The Case for Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *Theory Into Practice* 34 (3): 159–65.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 1995b. "Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (3): 465–91.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. 2018. "Who Will Survive America? Pedagogy as Cultural Preservation." In *Power/Knowledge/Pedagogy*, ed. Dennis Carlson and Michael Apple. New York: Routledge.

Lamont, Michèle, and Ann Swidler. 2014. "Methodological Pluralism and the Possibilities and Limits of Interviewing." *Qualitative Sociology* 37:153–71.

Luker, Kristin. 2009. *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Martinez, Elizabeth, and Sharon H. Ulanoff. 2018. "Latino Parents and Teachers: Key Players Building Neighborhood Social Capital." In *Family, School, Community Engagement* *and Partnerships*, ed. Reyes L. Quezada, Viviana Alexandrowicz, and Sarina C. Molina. New York: Routledge.

Mohatt, Gerald V. 1994. "Cultural Negotiation and Schooling: New Idea or New Clothing for an Old Idea?" *Peabody Journal of Education* 69 (2): 172–85.

Morrison, Kristan A., Holly H. Robbins, and Dana Gregory Rose. 2008. "Operationalizing Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Synthesis of Classroom-Based Research." *Equity and Excellence in Education* 41 (4): 433–52.

Nasir, Na'ilah Suad, Milbrey W. McLaughlin, and Amina Jones. 2009. "What Does It Mean to Be African American? Constructions of Race and Academic Identity in an Urban Public High School." *American Educational Research Journal* 46 (1): 73–114.

Noddings, Nel. 1984. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Noddings, Nel. 1995. "Teaching Themes of Care." *Phi Delta Kappan* 76:675–79.

Noddings, Nel. 2013. *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ochoa, Gilda. 2007. *Learning from Latino Teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Paris, Django. 2012. "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice." *Educational Researcher* 41 (3): 93–97.

Patterson, Jean A., Jenny Gordon, and Paula Groves Price. 2008. "The Color of Caring: Race and the Implementation of Educational Reform." *Educational Foundations* 22:97–116.

Perry, Theresa, and Claude Steele. 2004. *Young, Gifted, and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African-American Students*. Boston: Beacon.

Pope, Denise Clark. 2001. *"Doing School": How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rivera-McCutchen, Rosa L. 2012. "Caring in a Small Urban High School: A Complicated Success." *Urban Education* 47 (3): 653–80.

Rolón-Dow, Rosalie. 2005. "Critical Care: A Color(full) Analysis of Care Narratives in the Schooling Experiences of Puerto Rican Girls." *American Educational Research Journal* 42 (1): 77–111.

Thompson, Audrey. 1998. "Not the Color Purple: Black Feminist Lessons for Educational Caring." *Harvard Educational Review* 68 (4): 522–55.

Valenzuela, Angela. 1999. *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Waitoller, Federico R., Nicole Nguyen, and Gia Super. 2019. "The Irony of Rigor: 'No-Excuses' Charter Schools at the Intersections of Race and Disability." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 32 (3): 282–98.

Walker, Vanessa Siddle. 1996. *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Willis, Paul E. 1977. *Learning to Labour: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Yeager, David S., Matthew J. Bundick, and Rebecca Johnson. 2012. "The Role of Future Work Goal Motives in Adolescent Identity Development: A Longitudinal Mixed-Methods Investigation." *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 37 (3): 206–17.

Yeager, David S., Marlone D. Henderson, David Paunesku, Gregory M. Walton, Sidney D'Mello, Brian J. Spitzer, and Angela Lee Duckworth. 2014. "Boring but Important: A Self-Transcendent Purpose for Learning Fosters Academic Self-Regulation." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107 (4): 559–80.