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Culturally Responsive Caring and Expectations for Academic Achievement in a Catholic School

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This article draws from a larger dissertation study that applied ethnographic and historical research methods to explore the intersection of culturally responsive pedagogy and Catholic schooling in immigrant communities. In particular, this article presents qualitative data analysis to describe student achievement expectations at a contemporary urban Catholic elementary school. By examining teacher, student, and parent perspectives on academic achievement, the article explores the degree to which the caring demonstrated at the school is/is not consistent with a notion of “culturally responsive caring” in the scholarly literature surrounding theories of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Introduction

The tension was palpable as students wrote furiously on the pieces of loose-leaf paper that Ms. Trinh¹ passed out. For the first time in the month that I had been observing eighth graders at Saints Joachim and Ann Catholic School (J&A), every single student was hard at work, pouring their hearts out onto paper. Armando was the first to finish. He punctuated his last sentence with a flourish, jumped out of his seat, and slapped the paper on the teacher’s desk. He wandered over to the window and stood, staring outside while the rest of the class finished.

The exercise Ms. Trinh assigned was unusual. She invited the students to share their feelings about an incident that happened early that morning, when the teachers searched the backpacks of all the middle school students. Apparently there was a problem with students bringing digital video games and mp3 players to school, and students were warned that these devices would be taken away if they continued to bring them. That morning, the teachers unexpectedly decided to enforce the ban, and the students were angry that their gadgets were taken away.

Ms. Trinh sensed the anger in the class and wanted to defuse it. When the eighth graders entered her room for class that afternoon, she decided to confront the situation head-on. She talked about the teachers’

1 All names of teachers, parents, students, and schools, are pseudonyms.

perspective on the incident, explaining that they only had the students' best interests at heart, saying, "We're only trying to protect your stuff so it doesn't get lost or broken." She then asked the students to take 20 minutes to write how they felt about the search, and then she collected the papers and led a discussion about the incident. After the students had an opportunity to air their grievances, Ms. Trinh offered them 30 minutes of free time, telling them,

I'll put on some music. We're both frustrated; we'll just relax and take it easy. You can complete a worksheet for homework, you can read, you can take out the newspaper, you can write a letter to me or to the teacher that you have trouble with. I think a lot was put on you today, so I want to give you a break.

Armando reacted loudly to Ms. Trinh's offer, and he was angry. He jumped out of his seat and shouted, "We don't need a break! You guys went through our stuff, it's not like we went to a funeral today! You give these guys 15 minutes to lay down, it's not going to do anything!" The teacher responded, "Well, maybe I need that break."

In my fieldnotes, I noted that Armando seemed to be resisting being condescended to, and that he seemed to want to be challenged more than the teacher was willing to challenge him. As the student who, until that point, had been the ringleader of the class when it came to steering a teacher off-topic or asking for free time, it was interesting to note that he refused free time when it was offered. Instead, he demanded that he be taken seriously as a student, and insisted that his teacher spend class time teaching.

Academic achievement and culturally responsive pedagogy

The first tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy demands that teachers maintain high expectations for student achievement. Culturally responsive teachers must "believe that all students can succeed" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 44). This conviction is rooted in a constructivist pedagogy that maintains "an overriding belief that students come to school with knowledge and that that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers" (p. 52). This knowledge students bring with them represents the students' funds of knowledge (Moll & Gonzalez, 2001), which are products of the students' home cultures and life experiences.

Teachers with culturally responsive dispositions view students as experts, “the primary source and center, subjects and outcomes, consumers and producers of knowledge” (Gay, 2000, p. 33). For these teachers, the goal of education is empowerment via achievement, and this goal is made manifest by demonstrating a caring disposition that conveys high expectations for academic achievement. Culturally responsive teachers must, above all else, care for their students, and this care takes “the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students’ human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities” (Gay, 2000, p. 45).

This article presents ethnographic research drawn from an ethnographic/historical dissertation study that considered the extent to which theories of culturally responsive pedagogy resonate with practices and beliefs in historical and contemporary Catholic schools. This article focuses on a major finding of that study, which relates to expectations for academic achievement in Catholic schools.

While the larger study explored several research questions, the central question guiding my observation of Armando’s class was, “What qualities of contemporary Catholic schooling are evident at J&A that resonate with culturally responsive pedagogy?” This paper focuses that question on one particular goal of culturally responsive pedagogy, asking “To what extent do teachers in this faith-based school hold high expectations for academic achievement for their students?”

In this article, I present qualitative data related to student achievement expectations at J&A that reveals student, teacher, and parent attitudes, beliefs, and observations about academic achievement. I found that the teachers I interviewed generally held students to high standards of academic achievement, and that these standards were motivated by a sense of caring about students’ future success and social mobility. Students evinced a desire to be held to high standards, as Armando demonstrated with the outburst described above. Students expressed a consistent belief that their teachers cared for them and they believed that teacher caring contributed to their academic achievement. According to the teachers, this caring for student achievement was inflected by the teachers’ religious beliefs and identity. There was one important discrepant case of a teacher who seemed to prioritize relationships with students over academic achievement, but overall the dominant themes among teachers, parents, and students reflected high expectations and caring for student achievement.

Project and Methods

The ethnographic portion of this study included more than 50 interviews with faculty, staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders of a parish school in urban Chicago, as well as nearly 300 hours of observation over an academic semester. Observations include recordings of classroom and out-of-school interactions with students as well as field notes, which were transcribed (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and coded using the grounded theory approach to open coding (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

I developed hundreds of open codes to organize more than 3,000 data points in interview transcripts, fieldnotes, classroom recordings, student documents, and historical documents. Because the data were being considered through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy, I organized the ethnographic data and open codes according to the ideological framework of the theory, creating axial codes that identified data associated with the three dimensions of culturally responsive pedagogy: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Several themes were identified in the data with regard to academic achievement, and this article focuses on a theme that points to an important point of intersection between culturally responsive pedagogy and faith-based schooling; namely, that teachers expressed care for students by holding high expectations for academic achievement, and they attributed their caring dispositions to personal religious identity and belief. Additionally, the data shared here highlight a tension that can arise between academic achievement and faith-motivated care for students.

Parent and student perceptions

Parents and students at J&A valued teachers with high expectations for academic achievement, in part because they linked academic achievement with social mobility. The parents I spoke with held high expectations for the schooling they expected at J&A, and they valued teachers who held their children to high expectations. Ms. Goya, a non-Catholic parent, emphasized that she expected Catholic school teachers to display a caring disposition, suggesting that the caring that leads to achievement is a function of the school's religious context:

I think the teachers in Catholic Schools are actually teachers, because they truly believe in education; they truly love to educate children. Not

just because of a paycheck. Not just because that's the only thing they can do. I think teachers in Catholic schools really, really, really care about kids.

She went on to suggest that teacher caring extends beyond the school day, in contrast to her experience with local public schools, where the teachers "don't care where they go." By contrast,

Here [at J&A] they pay attention. They pay attention who picks them up; they pay attention who drops them off. Their school work, their behavior, even the way they look, the way they dress. And they will talk to you about it all. Being really strict about it, they just care. Care enough that the kids, they actually be on vacation and they were excited to get back to school. That says a lot about the school.

It is interesting to note how Ms. Goya makes a connection between teacher caring and student concern about school. Because the teachers care about the students, the students in turn care about school, even to the extent that they are eager to return after vacation.

Students also echoed the notion that caring and high expectations enhance achievement. Juan provides an example, explaining that he liked his teachers because, in their care for him, they demonstrated a fundamental concern for his future; a concern that he says they enacted by providing him with extra attention and assistance:

They will help you achieve your goals no matter what. They will try to help you with any material that you really need help in. They will try their hardest so that you can understand and achieve your goals, and help you plan for the future.

For Juan, caring that leads to achievement is linked to social mobility. He explained how his teachers cared for him by making it clear that "they want you to learn the most as possible. For these years they want you to know in the future, you'll have a better job and other important things you need for life." Juan's statement is emblematic of another theme I observed at J&A—that schooling is linked to social mobility, and teacher care for students is a function of their concern for students' future success.

Teacher perspectives

Ms. Holohan, like nearly all the teachers at J&A, believed she held high expectations for her students. A teacher for six years at two other Catholic schools prior to coming to J&A, Ms. Holohan was the fourth grade teacher at J&A. According to one parent, Ms. Holohan represents the “ideal teacher” because she has such high expectations for student achievement. The parent described her, saying, “She’s very tough, but yet sensitive, and it’s very hard to get away with anything with her.” In particular, she valued Ms. Holohan’s academic expectations, saying, “[I] love the homework. [My middle son] had her last year and I was very, very pleased with her.”

Ms. Holohan suggested that she considers challenging students with high expectations to be part of her responsibility. Challenging students in this way requires extra effort on the part of the teacher. In order to successfully challenge students, and not merely frustrate them, teachers at J&A consistently recognized that they need to spend extra time with each individual student. In order to promote academic achievement, teachers recognized the need to develop personal relationships with students. In interviews, teachers identified the development of these personal relationships with students as a highlight of teaching in a Catholic school.

Ms. Finnegan, the third grade teacher, described the caring disposition that she felt was critical to her teaching. When asked what “caring” means in her classroom, she provided extensive detail about how caring relates to academic achievement, community building, and values transmission. She explained that caring “kind of goes back to...their academic success.” She elaborated that “when kids don’t feel safe they don’t learn well and they don’t generally behave well, and I think when kids know that you care about them they’re going to feel safer.”

Ms. Finnegan acknowledged that she sometimes tells children point-blank that she cares about them, though she indicated that she hopes they know she cares by the way she treats them. While she says, “I tell them I love them,” she prefer to model caring for her students, as she believes values are best transmitted by modeling the valued behavior. Ms. Finnegan summarized her notion of caring in the classroom as the creation of an environment of caring:

I guess just that whole environment of ‘I’m cared for here.’...[There is an] old saying: Kids don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. I feel like it’s lame, but it’s sort of true that they’re

not going to—they're going to be so much more open to what you have to teach them if they know that you care about them.

When asked to describe how she cares for students, Ms. Finnegan focuses on how she demonstrates care for their academic achievement. She suggested that she conveyed her high expectations in personal moments with students, by devoting extra time to them and by holding them to high standards. When asked to elaborate, she explained:

I try to have high standards for them and I will respond to their work and I will get excited about their reading or writing progress and I'll share that with them. I'll tell them, "Oh my gosh, you know, you're improving so much!" I think they see that I care. I tutor a lot after school...I feel like I take a lot of time and effort and to some extent, even though they're eight, they have to see that...I'm staying after school to help you so you must know that that's important to me.

Culturally responsive caring

For most teachers at J&A, the high expectations that they maintained for student achievement are the product of this holistic sense of caring for the students' well-being. This caring does not demand that teachers say "I love you" or "I care for you" as Ms. Finnegan might do with her third graders. This sort of caring does not even require what Mrs. Gallagher, the seventh grade homeroom teacher, characterized as "a huggy type of person." Instead, the caring that teachers embrace at J&A requires personalized attention focused on student achievement, or as Ms. Finnegan says, it requires demonstrating concern for "their academic progress." This sense of caring resonates with the type of caring that Gay calls for in her explication of culturally responsive pedagogy. This type of caring, according to Gay, "is manifested in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behavior about students' human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities" (2000, p. 45). This caring prioritizes student potential and academic achievement. Mrs. Gallagher described a similar sense of caring, explaining that, for her, caring is

Not trying to be their best friend. It's more trying to...see lots in the parent type of perspective. One of the things that I really want to see is

that whatever I would expect for my kids, I want to see the same things provided here.

As Ms. Finnegan explained above, holistic caring of this sort is enacted by teachers when they spend extra time before and after school working with students, a phenomenon I witnessed every single day of my observations. Mrs. Gallagher described her fellow teachers well, saying, “We’ve got people staying after school, people coming in before school, people that put in all kinds of extra time.” At different times in the semester, I observed each of the middle school teachers staying at school to work with students until after 5 o’clock, and most days Mrs. Gallagher, Ms. Trinh, and Ms. Wilson were available for early morning and late afternoon tutoring before and after school.

Each of the students praised the personal attention and extra time teachers spent with them, and all of the teachers expressed and demonstrated a willingness to work with students outside the classroom. One eighth grader, Abel, linked the extra attention he received from teachers to a sense of being cared for when he told me that the thing he liked best about J&A was “the attention teachers give you,” because the attention demonstrates that “they care about you.” In particular, it was important to Abel that teachers recognized and valued his own ambitions and aspirations, and he valued that “they want you to go to the next level.” Abel recognized that everyone at the school seemed to care, not just the teachers, telling me, “The staff even...they care about you.” Abel saw connections between the care he experienced at the school, his learning, and his prospects for social mobility:

It’s just like, they’re trying to push you to the next level, and trying to set up the best possible layout for you to continue your life, go the right...go toward the right way, the way you want, to be successful in whatever you do.

For Abel, the experience of being cared for meant that teachers shared his desire for social mobility and success at “the next level.”

Another way that teachers conveyed holistic caring was by explicitly expressing high expectations for achievement. Mrs. Gallagher explained that she communicates high expectations precisely in order to convey that she cares for her students. When asked how students know she cares, she said her care is represented by “expectations for me.” She explained, “I think that if they’ve got the ability to do something...we try not to let them get away with

sloppy work or poor work, and [we] call the parents if they're not behaving." This type of care might not feel good to the students, but for Mrs. Gallagher, "That, to me, is kind of caring, you know?"

In this statement, Mrs. Gallagher reflects the type of caring described in the literature by Noddings (1992), and she exemplifies the stance described by Gay (2000), in which culturally responsive teachers are defined by a way of caring that holds students accountable for achievement. Gay calls this "culturally responsive caring," which demands that teachers be "tough" and "intractable" in terms of having "high performance expectations and diligence in facilitating their achievement" (p. 70). Gay argues, "genuinely caring teachers are academic taskmasters" (p. 75), and research suggests that even students themselves recognize that the teachers who care most for them are those with high expectations for academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1994), much like the effective teachers of Athabaskan students that Kleinfeld called "warm demanders" (1975, p. 335).

Mrs. Gallagher noted, however, that the high expectations at J&A represented a relatively new paradigm for the school. She said, "I think that the expectations have grown a lot for a lot of the kids. They have some trouble meeting them." Teachers referred to this shift frequently over the course of the semester. While there was a consistent pattern of teachers holding high expectations for student achievement among current faculty, there was also frequent reference to the administrative transition that the school recently experienced. Many teachers, parents, and students favorably compared the environment of high expectations to the expectations under the previous principal, Sr. Jeanette. Sr. Jeanette was a member of the religious community that established the school in 1903, and she was principal of J&A for more than twenty years. In 2005, when her community reassigned her to a different school, J&A hired its first lay principal, Mr. Monroe. At the same time, the teaching staff experienced significant turnover, and by the time I visited a year later only four members of the faculty remained who served under Sr. Jeanette. The frequent references to the Sr. Jeanette era at J&A represent important disconfirming evidence that must be considered.

Disconfirming evidence: The school in transition

All of the teachers had some understanding of the dynamics of Sr. Jeanette's administration, via word-of-mouth from either the four teachers still at J&A who taught under her or from parents, students, and other staff. According

to the faculty who taught for Sr. Jeanette, the primary difference between the old administration and the new was the level of expectations for academic achievement. Mr. Owen, the development director and computer teacher, taught a variety of grades and subjects for Sr. Jeanette. He summarized her administrative approach as one of incomplete caring, saying, “Not to knock [Sr. Jeanette]—but kids got lots of love but not enough education” during her tenure. He believed that Sr. Jeanette’s care did not extend to students’ academic well-being, saying, “She really loved the kids, but at the end of the day she didn’t educate anyone. She didn’t educate them. They left here with a lot of her comfort,” but not much academic preparation that would help them in high school and beyond.

Mr. Owen concluded with a harsh judgment, “That—I think of that as just a complete failing of her duty.” He suggested, however, that things were heading in the right direction at J&A: “Now, there’s a lot of love in the school, and there’s also a lot of education. So kids are finally learning stuff.”

In his judgment of Sr. Jeanette’s type of caring, it is interesting to note that Mr. Owen seems to have an internal, self-developed sense of what Gay calls “genuine” care for students. The type of caring that he witnessed under Sr. Jeanette, on the other hand, failed to meet the standards of true caring, which demands that teachers must care about academic achievement if they claim to care about student well-being.

The notion that the school raised its standards and improved achievement since the transition was echoed consistently across respondents, suggesting that the high expectations evident in the parent, teacher, and student data are not endemic to Catholic education or faith-based schooling. Parents, students, and teachers all echoed Mr. Owen’s claim that the school raised expectations in the past two years. Several students affirmed Mr. Owen’s description of pre-transition J&A. Armando suggested that the lack of concern for student achievement led to a more widespread feeling that the faculty was disinterested in students. He said that, under Sr. Jeanette, “teachers didn’t care what you did” in class. In particular, he noted that “everybody passed,” even when they did not do their work or make good grades. He said that it was frustrating for him to be in a school where “they didn’t help—they didn’t really try to help.”

The teachers, parents, and students who described the school prior to the transition, suggest that J&A represented, for perhaps two decades, a Catholic school that held its students to low standards for academic achievement. Had this study been conducted two or three years earlier, this theme, that teach-

ers care for student achievement, might not have been present in the data I would have collected, and I may not have identified any resonance with this major dimension of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Disconfirming evidence: Superficial caring

During the time I spent at J&A, one other teacher seemed to exhibit a different variety of superficial care for students. This teacher talked at length about her care for her students, but the variety of caring that she demonstrated was not consistent with the type of caring described by Mrs. Gallagher above or by Gay (2000) and Noddings (1992) in the literature. While Ms. Smith clearly valued personal relationships with her students and seemed to feel that she had her students' best interests at heart, in interviews and through observations, the evidence suggests that her concern for academic achievement was less important than personal relationships. Instead, the caring demonstrated by Ms. Smith often fell under the category Mrs. Gallagher criticized as "huggy" and "trying to be their best friend."

The relationship between this teacher's style of caring and academic achievement emerged explicitly when talking about curriculum. When asked how she decides to divide her time with students between religion and language arts, she offered that sometimes she prefers to "just talk...about life and stuff." She said:

With the [my class], I feel like they get more where we just talk, as well. So I don't stray off, but in a way, I kind of do. 'Cause they'll just kind of ask about life and stuff. And I think it's important to teach them, yes, the curriculum, but at the same time, you know, be open. So I kind of answer what they need to get answered. And I feel like when we're alone and together, they're very open and comfortable. And yeah, they can be loud sometimes, they're very intent on listening when it comes to that stuff more than, you know, 'What are the four functions of a sentence?' Do you know what I mean?

In an early analytical memo, I flagged this moment because I recognized as a pattern this teacher's insistence that she teaches best when she is alone with the students, suggesting that the absence of other adults enabled her to maximize her student-teacher relationships. Initially, I coded instances representing this pattern positively as "seeks personal relationship with students."

After repeated observations in class and in light of discussions like the one cited above, I began to question the focus of the personal relationship. In particular, I noted how the teacher privileged the personal relationship-based discussions about “life and stuff” over the “four functions of a sentence” and other curriculum. While the teacher emphasized the importance of student-teacher relationships, she seemed to be doing so at the expense of academic achievement rather than in service to it.

When asked to describe the ways in which she cares for students, Ms. Smith provided a number of details that reinforced my questions about whether her central concern was for student achievement. Ms. Smith did not link caring to achievement in the same way that Mrs. Gallagher did. Instead, she said that, for her, caring “means being open and vulnerable to [students], kind of trusting them.” Indeed, she revealed that she shares much of her personal life with her students, telling me, “I feel like I tell all the eighth grade a lot of stuff that I would never tell even closest friends.” For Ms. Smith, care for students seemed to be about letting students get to know her personally.

Ms. Smith enjoyed the affection and devotion that students expressed for her, and she indicated that she believed that students responded to her as a teacher because she made a practice of demonstrating affective concern. She told me that she knows students look up to her and feel close to her. She elaborated, saying, “I think they know that beyond being a teacher, beyond knowing my content, beyond teaching and stuff, I really care for their emotions as well.”

Ms. Smith described one of her favorite moments of the year, when a student approached her and asked if “it’s okay if I come back and ask you for advice in high school? Do you think it’s okay if I could call you up? Are you okay being my friend? I feel like I could trust you with anything.” She suggested that she enjoyed developing friendships with students, telling me that she and the eighth grade girls “listen to the same music together.” She said, “We’re almost like girlfriends,” but, she added, “They still have that level of respect for me, which is good because it’s not, like, totally overstepping the line or whatever.”

Ms. Smith’s style of caring for students seems centered on developing friendships with the students and connecting emotionally. At times, it seemed that the goal of these interactions was not to learn more about the students’ home lives but instead to reveal more about her own family and personal life. This self-oriented caring struck me as distinct from the student-

centered caring that Gay (2000) describes as characteristic of culturally responsive teachers.

My point is not to judge Ms. Smith personally, but to emphasize that the data suggest at least one teacher in the school cared for students in a manner that deviated from the variety of caring emphasized by theories of culturally responsive pedagogy. While most teachers seemed to reflect the sort of caring that focused on academic achievement, at least this one teacher seemed to openly prioritize personal relationships over student achievement. More significantly, other teachers and administrators seemed unaware of the relationships Ms. Smith was developing in her classroom, and she was free to embrace and enact this sort of caring. As a result, it must be noted as disconfirming evidence, because it suggests that the caring at J&A, even after the transition to new leadership, did not universally or systematically resonate with theories of culturally responsive pedagogy.

Caring as a function of religious identity and belief

When probed about the motivation behind the caring dispositions that students recognized, teachers usually suggested that their care for student achievement was related to religious identity or belief. Ms. Finnegan, for example, linked religion and caring explicitly:

I think it's very important for students to feel supported and cared for. And so when I can tell them, 'I love you and I pray for you,' I think, in some ways, that helps them know, very directly, that they are cared for and, you know, loved in this place.

Ms. Finnegan suggested that she saw caring for students' achievement and well-being as a part of her job "as a role model," which, she believed, enhanced her students' sense of self-worth. She said, "To see that someone they know and they get to know really well over the course of the year has this big part of their life and that's part of the reason I'm here. As a result, she felt compelled to act in ways that resonate with the values she sought to teach, telling me, "Most of my actions are really how I teach, you know, being Christian, being Catholic."

For Ms. Finnegan, the caring that promotes achievement is rooted in her religious identity, belief, and practice. She suggested that her educational philosophy is grounded in being "a Christian role model" for her students.

She went on to link achievement with a sense of being cared for as she talked about how she enacts a caring disposition:

When kids don't feel safe they just—they don't learn well, and they don't generally behave well, and I think when kids know that you care about them, they're going to feel safer, and I guess the way they know that [I care] is not just because I tell them, you know, 'Oh, I care for you. I love you,' or whatever, but what I hope is it comes across in how I treat them.

This claim—that kids who do not feel safe do not learn—echoes the claim made by Ms. Trinh in the previous section, who argued that students need to feel cared for in order to focus on learning.

The principal affirmed this connection between religious identity and caring when asked about the value-added that a Catholic school offers. He argued that caring was a disposition that teachers should both demonstrate themselves and work to instill in their students. He pointed out that the primary goals of schooling are shared by Catholic and public schools, which are to “prepare these students to be successful later on in life.” Both Catholic and public schools “want to just give [students] the basic skills of survival, of being able to adapt to society.” He added, however, that Catholic schools have additional goals that are not necessarily shared, at least not explicitly, by public schools:

I guess the overall goal is to prepare these kids for society but also to give them a sense of caring for their fellow person, to act in just and respectful ways, and to respect all that Jesus has created, all God has created.

Here, Mr. Monroe articulates a few themes that were consistently present in the data at J&A. First, he explained that he imagined the goal of education to be one of preparation for future success, with educational attainment and social mobility as important goals for the students. Next, he centralized the transmission of a caring disposition as the goal of Catholic schooling, and he identified that caring disposition as an identifying feature of Catholic schooling that distinguishes it from public schooling.

Instilling that sense of caring for others is central to the educational philosophy of some of the teachers as well, and indeed, it seems to be a central

feature of the teachers' shared approach to the classroom. Ms. Jasper, the kindergarten teacher, explained her understanding of the goal of Catholic schooling in precisely that way:

I would hope that kids are taught to care for one another more than in a public school. I would hope that character education and the faith formation behind it are a big part of what we're doing here, that we teach that we give to others and we care about others. We ask people how they're doing. We say sorry when we hurt somebody. And that there's a teaching going on throughout the years, you know, in kindergarten and all the way up through eighth grade that this is what Christ taught us, this is the way Jesus wants us to live and this is the kingdom that we're after and that we're trying to make here on earth.

This passage demonstrates explicitly how Christian language is firmly embedded in the teacher's sense of her responsibility to care. The notions that teacher should model "Christ-like" behavior, transmit "Gospel values," and "teach as Jesus did"—all frequently-used phrases in the teachers' lexicon at J&A—are bound up with their ideas about what it means to care for students. For teachers like Ms. Jasper and Mr. Monroe, caring and religious belief are tightly inter-related. Ms. Jasper also argued that caring for students should "definitely" be a central part of any teacher's job description. Mr. Vatzke, the instructional coach, also centralized caring as critical to the mission of teaching in a Catholic school. He addressed both the academic and personal support necessary for culturally responsive caring, saying:

I think teachers who care are teachers who I think are empathetic and they give their students extra help, extra support. They see if the students as being humans—not just numbers in a classroom—and that they just—I think they're out for the best welfare of the kids. We want them to succeed.

Here, Mr. Vatzke talks about teachers providing extra help as a function of their care for students; he discusses that care explicitly; and he relates that care to concern for academic achievement and future success in life. He described a holistic form of caring that includes "caring about their academic success" as well as "caring about their faith," which he suggested is "obvious" in the context of a Catholic school. This religious, value-laden dimension of

caring does not involve “forcing my faith or my views on them” but instead is a process of “really giving them options.” He explained that the religious identity and beliefs that are central to the school’s mission provide the equivalent of a different lens with which the teachers view the educational project. He said that engagement with religion

Kind of gives us another outlook on problems and on stuff like that. It’s—I just think the vision is that we’re concerned for the students’ total educational and faith well-being. And not to force our faith on them, but give them the opportunities to explore their faith.

Here, Mr. Vatzke contends that the mission of Catholic schooling is essentially a mission of holistic, “genuine” caring for students’ well-being, and he suggests that, for him, that mission is inspired by religious belief and identity. Indeed, concern for students’ academic achievement is bound up in concern for their “faith well-being.”

Conclusion

In this era of accountability, the central question asked of all educational initiatives is, “Does it work?” Through ethnographic analysis and quantitative data collection, the larger project from which this article drawn (Dallavis, 2008) illustrates in more depth how students benefit and are challenged by the culturally responsive aspects of the J&A experience and how that experience shapes their long-term aspirations and school achievement.

The accountability movement equates success with high scores on achievement tests, and this project does consider quantitative data related to student test scores, graduation rates, and high school attendance rates in order to provide some limited descriptive measures of achievement. Certainly the administrators, faculty, and parents at J&A expect improved test scores as a result of their educational approaches, but test scores only partially reflect the goals of holistic approaches to education like culturally responsive pedagogy and Catholic education. Students, parents, and teachers in the school often recognize indicators of “success” beyond test score data, and the ethnographic approach taken in the larger study provides the members of the community with the opportunity to describe “success” in their own words. The larger project also explores the development of cultural competence and the formation of sociopolitical consciousness, other core tenets of culturally

responsive pedagogy, and discussions of those topics have been published elsewhere (Dallavis, 2011, 2013).

The data discussed in this article offer insight into how academic achievement expectations are communicated in the J&A community, and the themes that emerged from the data begin to describe a pattern of high expectations for achievement present in this community. The discourse of academic achievement in the J&A community is marked by parent and student desire for and teacher claims on high expectations for academic achievement. These expectations are linked to the enactment of a caring disposition on the individual teacher's part, and teacher caring for student achievement is perceived to relate to actual student achievement by teachers, parents, and students. While the larger dissertation project provides some evidence related to actual achievement, more longitudinal research is needed to determine the effect of expectations on performance among J&A students. Finally, at J&A teacher caring is considered central to the educational mission of the Catholic school, as is the enactment and transmission of a caring disposition, and this disposition is expressed using religious language. While it is important to note the presence of disconfirming evidence, both in recollections of the school's recent past and in one teacher's classroom, where "culturally responsive caring" focused on academic well-being was not the norm, the dominant themes among teachers, parents, and students reflected high expectations and culturally responsive caring about students and student achievement.

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