Do No Harm: Strategies for Culturally Relevant Caring in Middle Level Classrooms from the Community Experiences and Life Histories of Black Middle Level Teachers

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Abstract
This qualitative study focused on the life histories of four female African-American middle level teachers. The findings illuminate how culturally responsive caring can and should be foundational to successful teaching that does not discriminate but instead uplifts every student and assures them that teachers will seek to know, understand, teach, and not degrade them. Elements of this caring framework include serving as students’ otherparents or fictive kin, taking time to know students without judgment, appreciating the knowledge in students’ communities, believing in students’ brilliance and holding them accountable in warm yet demanding ways, teaching racial history and teaching students to speak back to negative profiles that define them, and never sugarcoating injustices but teaching for success.

Keywords: culturally responsive caring, communities of Color, Black women teachers

In 2015, Shakara, an African-American teenager, was thrown across the floor by a school resource officer as she was holding on to her seat. The reason: She refused to put away her cell phone. At the same time, across the city, White undergraduates at a local university repeatedly used cell phones in class after being told many times to put them away. No violence was used to address the issue. Also in 2015, Ahmed Mohamed, a 14-year-old Muslim American student, was handcuffed when his homemade clock was assumed to be a bomb. When it is widely documented that African-American students are more likely to be suspended and expelled than White students (Self, 2016), one might ask if a White student would have been treated the same way. As Alia Salem from the Council on American–Islamic Relations said, it’s likely that “this wouldn’t even be a question if his name wasn’t Ahmed Mohamed” (Fantz, Almasy, & Stapleton, 2016). The examples go on and on. Overwhelmingly, more students of Color are suspended and expelled from preschool through high
school than their White peers for similar behaviors (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Morris, 2016).

These kinds of statistics underlie the criminalization of Black and Brown youth in schools, which is a foundation of the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012). While professional literature has urged teachers for decades to adopt culturally caring dispositions and practices, the reality is that this is not yet the norm in classrooms across the country. This article uses data from a study of four African-American middle school teachers to illuminate how culturally responsive caring can and should be foundational to successful teaching that does not discriminate, brutalize, or negatively profile but instead lifts up every student to know that they matter and that teachers will seek to know them, understand them, appreciate them, and teach, not degrade them.

Groups such as the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association echo this call for attention to cultural responsiveness and issues of diversity, social justice, and equity (Mertens et al., 2016). The group urges educational researchers to illustrate “interrelated connections between middle schools, communities, families, and students” and to investigate “the development of equity for marginalized populations” (p. 5).

This study contributes to literature that provides alternatives to dominant White, Eurocentric models of caring by offering the stories of four African-American teachers whose own home and community experiences illuminate caring strategies that can help overhaul narrow notions of caring in schools. I point toward the lives of four Black middle level teachers who represent voices rarely heard but critical to this work. Their examples call into question the centrality of White dominant views of caring and reposition definitions of caring from Black communities from the margins to the center. Without focusing on caring in these ways, educators will continue to relegate the same children to the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012) or, at the very least, a life of unfulfilled promise. This is evident in the way that much of the literature urges educators to adopt strategies such as flexible scheduling, unifying themes, cross-curricular work, and team-building activities (MacBain, Green, & Burtram, 2017) which, while laudable, continue to ignore the deeper issues related to the disenfranchisement of students of Color. The tenets of This We Believe (National Middle School Association, 2010) related to respecting and valuing diversity, equity, and community and supporting the success of every student require the field to seek wisdom from those who understand the rich history of caring that has supported students of Color for centuries. This means committing to seeking understandings beyond White, Eurocentric norms.

Toward that end, this discussion of caring suggests centering the wisdom of communities beyond merely those of middle class, European Americans and that hearing and heeding the stories of Black teachers can move the discussion forward in important ways. First, I share the literature that inspires and informs my thinking about caring for and teaching adolescents. Then, I describe the methodology used in the study of four teachers and present data around several themes that focus on caring as inclusive of: (a) otherparenting and fictive kin; (b) valuing students’ brilliance, teaching to high expectations, and demanding excellence; (c) being a role model; (d) being responsible; (d) honesty; and (e) developing loving relationships. These themes are derived from analysis of data that uncovered insights about caring as the four participants learned from their own families and used that learning to rethink supporting student learning. This section focuses on caring as an essential aspect of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. As educators set goals and expectations for their students, it is critical to reflect on the kind of caring community they provide for students and there is much that can be learned from the experiences of Black teachers to understand what culturally relevant and responsive teaching looks, feels, and sounds like.

Review of Related Literature

Caring is grounded in attitudes but must exemplify actions. In fact, attitudes without concomitant competence-producing actions constitute a form of academic neglect . . . [Caring teachers] hold [students] accountable for high-quality academic, social, and personal performance and ensure that this happens. They are demanding but facilitative, supportive and accessible, both personally and professionally. (Gay, 2010, pp. 55, 56).

Learning from ways that families and communities care for students has long been lauded as critical to successful teaching within classrooms (Gay, 2010; Noddings, 1992). Gay (2010) emphasized that teachers must pair high expectations with loving relationships, and she showed that teachers can learn much by tapping into characteristics of caring in Black communities. Howard (2014), in his study of the importance of attention to race
and culture in school, contended that the school’s ability to recognize families’ wisdom and learn from them to create caring classrooms leads to learning spaces where students are more likely to succeed. He wrote that in successful schools:

Parents were not seen as opponents in a tug of war for what was in the best interests of children, but were viewed and treated as equal partners working in collaboration with school officials to create optimal learning environments for students at school and home. (pp. 145–146)

Noddings’ (1992) classic studies describe caring as a “connection or encounter between two human beings—a care-er and a recipient of care” (p. 15). This giving and receiving of care equates to the relationship that can develop as teachers connect, person-to-person, with students. Goldstein and Freedman (2003) studied preservice teachers and their beliefs about caring and the nature of the interactions between the teachers and learners. They found that preservice teachers are learning to teach by watching their teachers (teacher educators). This creates another source for learning what to do and not to do as caring teachers.

According to Gay (2010), being connected in this way entails much more than merely emitting warmhearted feelings, but also (and foundationally) holding high expectations for students and taking action to teach and support in ways that make it possible for students to meet those expectations. Gay wrote, “Teachers who genuinely care for students generate higher levels of all kinds of success than those who do not. They have high performance expectations and will settle for nothing less than high achievement” (p. 49). This refusal to settle for less than success comes from a long history in the African-American community as young people are required to “rise to the occasion” (Cook, 2010) because their families, neighbors, and fictive kin will accept nothing less than one’s best effort. Siddle Walker (1996) demonstrated this idea through her account of teaching in a particular community before school desegregation. She noted the commitment of the community to the success of all children. Because adults understood that, to succeed in American society, every Black citizen had to demonstrate expertise far beyond that expected of White counterparts, they were focused in the community commitment to ensuring that such expertise was developed. From caring Black teachers, students learned not only academics but also strategies for thriving in a racist society.

Key to understanding how caring worked in these communities includes understanding concepts like fictive kin and othermothering. Fictive kin is a term that conveys the idea of brotherhood and sisterhood regardless of biological connection (Fordham, 1996). Ebaugh and Curry (2000) wrote about fictive kin as a source of social capital using examples from African-American communities where fictive kin is often referred to as aunt or uncle. Othermothering (also known as otherfathering or what I refer to now as otherparenting) also demonstrates a form of fictive kinship, defined as taking on a parenting role for a child, regardless of blood relationship (Cage, 1997). Fictive kin and otherparents are the people who take on the role of family members, caring enough to hold high expectations and work with young people until they meet those expectations.

**Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching**

Much of this work falls under the umbrella of culturally relevant and responsive teaching links culture and school for the academic success of African-American children and others who have not been well served in schools (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995). Culturally relevant teaching requires a focus on academic achievement and cultural and sociopolitical competence for all students (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Culturally relevant teaching is committed to collective empowerment and cultural integrity. Ladson-Billings’ (1994) study of successful culturally relevant teachers found that they embodied cultural understandings and ways of knowing the world reflecting the students’ homes, communities, and heritage and that they also instilled a strong sense of purpose to African-American students. Students in the study learned community and were taught to rely on and support one another.

Culturally relevant teaching is also critical to this work because it is transformative (Ladson-Billings, 1994). As caring relationships are built, teachers help students build skills academically, socially, and culturally. To do this, teachers seek students’ cultural and community knowledge so that they can integrate culturally relevant activities into the curriculum. Ladson-Billings (2014, 2017) later wrote again about culturally relevant teaching to focus on thinking from a new generation of scholars whose remix of her original tenets deepened the focus on the valued practices of communities typically marginalized and undervalued. This included a more explicit emphasis
on student and community agency as articulated in the work of Django Paris and Samy Alim who conceptualized culturally sustaining pedagogies (Ferlazzo, 2017).

Finally, studies of identity reveal that caring communities are those that build positive identities through high expectations and support for meeting those expectations whether those communities are neighborhoods, faith settings, homes, or schools (Gorski, 2013). Caring means finding out who students are and then valuing and respecting them for the strengths they bring to the classroom, “turn[ing] their personal strengths into opportunities for personal success” (Gay, 2010, p. 50). In these ways, much of the professional literature shows that young people develop a sense of who they are positively or negatively because of the supportive caring demonstrated by those around them.

**Methodology**

I came to this study as the mother of an African-American male in the first grade and a newborn African-American daughter. I embarked on this journey for them and for the many African-American students with whom I had worked and taught. Watching my son and daughter progress, I constantly grappled with the question, “Which of their teachers will care in ways that support them, love them, hold high expectations for them, and believe in them?” When my children entered kindergarten, I spoke truthfully to them about the stereotypes that society would place on them and how they would have to work extra hard in school so that they would not be labeled. I know these stereotypes lead to degradation and violence against Black students and have a devastating impact psychologically, emotionally, and academically. As a middle level teacher, I had the same concerns about my students who, at that point in their lives, had already experienced many of the micro- and macro-aggressions I feared would be inflicted on my own children. Understanding caring was certainly at the heart of the solutions to these systemic issues.

I designed a study of Black teachers because I wanted to learn from them about creating a caring classroom. The data reported in this piece are a part of a larger study that employed qualitative methodology to examine the identities and life histories of four female, African-American, middle level teachers (Table 1): Lauren, Savoy, Sheila, and Ginger. The research questions were

- How do the life histories of African-American middle level teachers influence their professional identity as teachers?
- What experiences do these teachers name as influential?

Life history methodology was particularly important to this study because it is anchored in providing means for individuals to share life’s narratives as a way to illuminate cultural practices that can lead others to better understand particular phenomena (Enciso, 2007; Foster, 1997; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). While the life histories in this study revealed a range of insights (Williams, in press), this paper focuses on insights pertaining to community and classroom caring as reflected in participants’ larger narratives.

As a former middle level teacher and current teacher educator working with middle level teacher candidates, I chose to study middle level teachers. I also recognized that middle level students, particularly students of Color, are often the most underserved and

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### Table 1.
**Participant Demographics.**

|               | Savoy  | Sheila | Lauren | Ginger  |
|---------------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| Years of experience | 12     | 26     | 11     | 16      |
| Grade and subject  | 8th grade algebra/science | 7th grade social studies | 6th grade language arts | 7th grade social studies |
| Education         | HBCU/M.Ed.  | HBCU/M.Ed. | HBCU/B.S. | HBCU/NBCT |
| Race             | African-American | African-American | African-American | African-American |
misrepresented (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005); therefore, I wanted to know more about how successful teachers demonstrate caring with this age group. The teachers in the study taught a range of subjects at three different middle level schools in the southeastern United States. To ensure that they were familiar with the classroom and had full exposure to teaching, I invited teachers who had been teaching for at least 8 years. After 4 years of working with the participants as a university liaison, I spent a great deal of time in their classes and I felt that they all displayed a culturally relevant style of teaching. They maintained genuine relationships with students and taught lessons with cultural connections. As is typical in qualitative research, the sample size was small so that the work could go deeply into participants’ thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2005).

Life history methodology was important to this study because it focuses on first-person stories in context and is guided by enduring elements and details that create vital links between individuals and the various roles they play in society (Atkinson, 1998). One purpose of this study was to understand what teachers learn from their own families and communities and how those experiences can be extrapolated to the development of caring classrooms for African-American middle level students. I used three semi-structured interviews to solicit stories and allow me to ask for clarity when needed. The first interviews were guided by preestablished questions (Table 2). The second and third interviews developed organically as I created the opportunity for participants to expand on, add to, or alter their responses to the first interview. I invited participants to read over transcripts from the first interview and provide oral feedback asking questions such as do the stories you told in the first interview make you think of further instances of impact on your own development and who are as a teacher today? I was also open to directions in which participants might take the questions on their own, particularly expanding their descriptions of ways that home and community experiences influenced them as learners and as teachers.

Analyzing each interview was an iterative process. I transcribed each interview and then considered next interview topics before I proceeded anew with each interviewee. I then repeated this process before I coded and reanalyzed the data for preliminary themes and findings.

To validate and explain the meaning of these stories, I constantly examined my role as a researcher and took an interpretive approach as I looked at meanings made by participants over time in specific social settings (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). This allowed me to construct portraits of the participants, doing my best to recognize and capture their perspectives (Atkinson, 1998). Data and my interpretations of data were returned to them in the form of member checking to ensure that my interpretations were accurate to them.

As a result of this study, I gained many insights that can help broaden views of what counts as caring in order to ensure that children are never again thrown across a room for talking on a cell phone or handcuffed because of biased suspicion leveled at students Color. Those insights are presented in the discussion of findings that follow.

Findings: Community Caring and the Middle Level Classroom

The communities in which this study’s participants grew up, lived, and worked were vital to their development as individuals and teachers and to their definitions of caring. In this presentation of findings, data reveal Sheila, Lauren, Savoy, and Ginger’s recollections about how community members—including parents, family, teachers, college professors, and church members—encouraged, expected, pushed, modeled, imparted values and emphasized the importance of education.

Table 2. Initial Interview Questions.

| What experiences led you to teaching? |
|--------------------------------------|
| What teachers made an impact on you growing up? Why? |
| What did you learn from them? |
| In what ways do you address the multiplicity of African-American boys’ schooling experiences in your class? |
| What events/experiences growing up have shaped you as a teacher? |
Listening to and validating their stories can help educators move beyond White dominant views of caring, a move that is essential to supporting students of Color whose behaviors are regularly misunderstood, misinterpreted, and violently responded to when viewed through a White lens. In this discussion, findings are represented as subheadings. While I separate them for the ease and clarity of telling stories, findings are interrelated as data support more than one finding in the exploration of caring and community in the lives of Black teachers and students.

Caring as Otherparenting and Fictive Kin
Participants regularly spoke of adults in their communities who assumed parent-like roles even when they were not biological mothers or fathers or when they were fictive kin—family members in every way except biology. For example, Savoy talked passionately about her kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Adams, who held a sleepover at her house for the entire class. It was one of her first memories of school that she valued. She explained, “I just remember that so vividly, the whole class had a sleep over at her house and that was about thirty years ago. I just remember that because it was like a family feeling.” In Savoy’s life at a young age, she was othermothered by Mrs. Adams who provided her with extra support and encouragement by simply opening up her home to spend time outside of school with her and the class. It is important to note that this teacher was from Savoy’s community. Savoy did not report this kind of experience from teachers not familiar with her community; thus, one element of caring in Savoy’s life was otherparenting that included deep knowledge of and appreciation for her community, a characteristic that any teacher can endeavor to develop. Further ways that otherparenting shaped these teachers’ caring lives are described in the following sections.

Otherparents form a village. Otherparents were influential in shaping Sheila’s life in a range of community settings: church, school, and home. Adults in these settings were active participants in her upbringing. Sheila explained how these otherparents formed a village of caring family whether they were biological family or fictive kin.

It takes a village. Even though we didn’t say it back then, but people looked out for you, disciplined you, took care of you. Your parents did but other people—all the people in the neighborhood, the church, everywhere else, you know—it was their responsibility as well as your parents; and we don’t have that anymore and I think that’s because we have moved away from the extended family.

Otherparents remind you that you are somebody and build on assets. This community sense of responsibility provided another example of otherparenting from which Sheila learned as a teacher. She explained that the community of otherparents built her confidence and validated the fact that she was valuable—somebody of worth. She explained how this characteristic was evident in the actions and attitudes of her first Black teacher after integration:

There was a Black teacher who was a social studies teacher and . . . she was just the epitome of what I thought a teacher was. When she had us in this class she would just talk to us and tell us about what we could be, you know she treated us just the same of course because she was Black too and all the other kids. She just made sure that we knew that we were somebody and you know that we were worth something.

In this way, othermothers cared for her by letting her know that she mattered. Rather than focusing on deficits—what the students could not do—teachers who were othermothers always pointed out what students could do and helped them build on assets and strengths.

Otherparents’ home is your home. Sometimes othermothering took the form of teachers inviting students into their home communities. Lauren recalled a kindergarten teacher who often took her home as a child afterschool. This made a positive impact on her—a teacher who cared enough to bring her into her home. While the teacher knew that Lauren had her own loving family and did not try to replace it, she also created a space in her own home to build that village of otherparenting support. Lauren explained:

Ms. Cabella in first grade, and she was like a mom to me. She would take us home because of the fact that my dad was in service so my mom was the only person there at the time and if my mom couldn’t get off work she would always tell my mom, “Don’t worry about it, I’ll take ‘em with me home,” and she would take my sister and I with her home and she would help us with homework.

Experiences such as this reminded Lauren to show the same care and genuine interest with her students. Establishing and maintaining relationships were a critical part of her pedagogy.
Transferring othermothering to classroom teaching. Representative of each of the participants in this study, Savoy explained how she took her own experiences of being othermothered to inform her relationships with students in her own classroom. “I guess I’m like Mama [to them],” she explained, “I’m a little sassy to them and I guess they need that.” Savoy recalls talking to a student and letting her know that not everyone is against her. “After a while, I had to tell her, you are doing it all wrong. People do love you, but you can’t slap them in the face because they’re trying to help you.” She recognized her role as “mama” to students in her class, respecting them and providing support and encouragement for them to see themselves as competent learners sufficiently prepared for the classroom challenges that they faced (Davis, 2003).

Caring as Being a Role Model
Being a role model was another characteristic of caring revealed in this study. Ginger provided the example of one of her 8th-grade teachers who was influential in moving her toward a teaching career as a strong role model in her life. Reflecting on this teacher helped Ginger understand her own modeling role and how it might manifest in the lives of her students.

I remember she took a lot of time out with me. When she looked at me, or when she called my name, she looked me in the eye. It’s not like, “Ginger you need to do this.” She just had—she was a compassionate person . . . I haven’t talked to her since this day but I wish I could find her . . . I don’t even know if she’s still living . . . but she was a role model for me. But see that’s the thing . . . I know I’m a role model to a lot of my students but they might not even realize that I’m a role model [now]. They might not realize until years later like, “Oh, I remember Mrs. Hill. I would love to tell her what she did and she doesn’t even know it but it did, it made a difference, it really did.” Yeah, matter of fact, I think she was my only Black teacher . . . no I had one in high school.

Sheila also talked about her responsibility to be a role model. Connecting her role to that of those who influenced her, she worried that post-desegregation, young Black Americans did not learn about their worth and their history in school. When those students become the young teachers of today, Sheila worried that they might not be able to support their students effectively.

I’m in a position to be a guiding force, an influence—hopefully a positive influence on some people who maybe don’t have that in their lives. The longer I teach the less of that guiding influence I see in people’s lives. There are two or three other [Black] teachers in this building. [We] talk all the time. They are also like near the end of their career . . . We always say, “What is going to happen to these kids when all of the people who started with us, when this generation starts to retire?” What happens? Because as you can see, even in this building, the younger ones that come in they have a whole different mindset. They either just only here for a while because they see exactly what teaching is like so they going to do it for a while until they move on or . . . they have grown up in a different environment—which they don’t really know that they’re Black and so—you know what I mean? They don’t feel that responsibility; they don’t feel that because they’ve always been in that other environment, because integration was a wonderful thing but then it was not. It was not. So they don’t know that it’s part of their responsibility ‘cause they’re going to see themselves as being that.

Caring as a Sense of Responsibility
The community support that the teachers in this study felt in their own childhoods led to a sense of responsibility for their own students. For example, Lauren recounted that a difficult transition during the middle grades was an actual benefit for her because it provided demonstrations of adults who cared enough to really get to know her as a student trying to fit in with friends rather than being an out of control. This experience allowed her to have the same compassion for her students. She said, “I feel that I am a major part of their future or their upbringing and I feel that I have to steer them or guide in the right direction and with education that is definitely helping them.”

Responsibility to confront stereotypes. Sheila’s sense of responsibility included her focus on confronting to stereotypes, particularly about Black males as being predators, dangerous, or uncaring. Having a son of her own certainly strengthened that focus. In a sense, her son became a teacher to her and prompted her to take responsibility for helping her Black male students create counternarratives to dominant negative stereotypes. She explained:

I feel that I can’t sit back knowing what it is that they need to do and knowing what I expected of my own children and what was expected of me, and I can’t really sit back and say, ‘Well that’s just what they’re going to be.’ I do feel a sense of
responsibility for that because, as I was telling Ms. Owens the other day when I said, “I know I’m hard on a lot of these kids, particularly the Black male students [but] when they start talking about Black males just as a group,” I says, “My son is included in that group . . . It just bothers me that through no fault of his own he’s just lumped into that.” So I do feel like I do have a responsibility to try to guide them out.

Responsibility grounded in religious faith. Ginger also talked about feeling responsibility to care in effective ways. She explained that her drive comes from values transferred to her through her Christian faith that she put at the forefront of her teaching.

My sense of responsibility, it comes from, I tell you I’m at a loss for words but, it comes from within, I mean. I was raised this way, very traditional family. When you do something, you do it right and when you do it, you take it seriously. Whatever you do, it represents yourself, it represents your family, it represents who you are, what you believe. And that’s my drive. And the biggest thing is that being that I am a Christian woman, anything I do now I have to do it through prayer so what I do I have to do to please God and when I please Him, it’s glorifying Him.

Caring as Honesty
Honesty—letting students know exactly what they are up against as they go on to high school and into adulthood and what they needed to do to succeed—was another critical characteristic these teachers learned from community caring. For example, Sheila identified with a teacher who validated her as a student, but who was also very honest with her about what she needed to do to succeed and the realities of a world often stacked against her as a Black student. Sheila recalled:

She was Black and she would sit down and she would talk to us about college and one by one individually. She didn’t do this group thing and she would talk about college and going to college and SAT scores and making sure your grades were up.

In the same way, Sheila demonstrated caring through honesty with her own students. In one example, she described her decision to be forthright with a group of African-American girls in helping them understand the negative images they were projecting.

I think this was my first year in the trailer . . . and here comes this crew. I would stop them on that ramp before they got in and I’d say, “Ok guys, you know you can’t do this because it’s all about perception.” I said, “I know you don’t mean me any harm and I know you’re not going to do anything but imagine somebody looking at this from a distance and this is all they see, is a group coming towards them and you’re walking and you know you got the posse,” and I said, “It’s all about perception, you have to know.” I just talk frankly with them. I said, “You have to be aware of how other people perceive you . . . you’re just perceived differently.” And they understood that, you know.

These candid and honest observations are characteristics of caring that inform students about the realities they face. Often these are unjust realities when compared to the way White students might be perceived in similar circumstances, but they are a part of the strategic lessons the teachers felt that their students must learn.

In much the same way, Lauren said that she did not “sugarcoat” realities when talking to her students. She was adamant about letting the students know what was expected with regard to academics and its importance. Lauren maintained that being candid with students was a way that she cared for them while “toughening” them for realities they would face. All of the participants in this study were dedicated to “keeping it real” about their behaviors, attitudes, and academics because they had someone in their own younger lives who cared enough to be honest with them.

Caring as Knowing Students Well, Believing in Them, and Holding Them to High Expectations
The teachers in this study learned from their own community the importance of believing in students’ brilliance and holding them responsible for exemplary work and behavior. This was an especially important element of caring for these teachers. As Sheila described, they started by getting to know the students well and giving them the benefit of the doubt as they struggled often with difficult situations a home.

I try to understand them and where they’re coming from, I think that’s number one just to find out their situations. You know a lot of their home situations are not the best situations, and I find out what they’re lacking at home and I try to give that to them as a teacher.

Because Sheila knew students well and valued who they were, they responded better to her than to other
teachers. She explained that when they got in trouble in other classrooms, they were often sent to her room.

Their teachers would actually let them come you know . . . they would call me, “Hey, so and so needs to come up, can you make sure they get their work done?” . . . I had several boys that would actually do that a couple times a week, just to come, and they would get their work done and stuff so I think that just that. Like I said, just finding out what they need and trying to give it to them.

However, getting to know students well and believing in them was not enough. Each teacher in this study described how their own community and family members and teachers expected a lot from them but also held them accountable for meeting those expectations. Savoy talked about this style of teaching as connected to the influence of her teachers.

My English teacher, tenth grade year, she was just no nonsense and at the time it was like, “Dang, she’s mean. But she’s no nonsense.” And the thing about that, I try to be like that now I mean I’m a little hard in the classroom. But it worked for her we were all—we walked that line. We walked the line every day in her room. And she was a little small lady [but] she didn’t take no mess: “You’re going to do what I said to do, close your mouth.” So we did and I remember that because she didn’t play any games.

Critical to this ability to push students to meet expectations and expect no “nonsense” was students’ respect for teachers, but teachers also found out whether or not students actually understand the expectations their teachers put forward. Sheila talked about this as an eye-opener—realizing that teachers may express expectations verbally but not realize when they are being unclear or ambiguous. Sheila recalled a conversation with her students one day after lunch:

[One of my students] said, “You know I don’t—sometimes we just don’t understand what’s expected of us, you know in certain classes that we do certain things in and other classes where we can’t, we just kind of get mixed up and find it hard to move from that setting to the next,” and she said “and you just get mad, we get mad and when you get mad we get scared.” And it was a real learning experience for them and for me.

Lauren also taught from an ethic of caring that included high expectations along with support for students to meet those expectations. She was worried about the Black males in her advanced language arts class who she had to “push harder” to complete the work because they felt isolated in a class with very few Black male peers. When messages were sent to them in society and in other spaces in the school that they were not as good, smart, or capable as their White peers (Noguera, 2009), an important aspect of caring for Lauren was letting them know that they were capable and she pushed them accordingly. She had to let them know that they were smart and then push them.

I push them harder. I’m like you’re in this class for a reason; you’re in here because you can do it, you’re smart [but] sometimes when you get in groups you want somebody that looks like you and you don’t have that . . . They know they’re smart but sometimes they don’t want to feel smart because they don’t want to be in that class.

Sheila also pushed and required students to develop motivation as learners. She felt that it was a more honest approach to requiring excellence than providing external rewards. Her approach was to say:

You know what you’re supposed to be here for; you know this is your job, you know I’m not here to play with you, I’m not here to give you candy because you got something right. And you know, they learn early on that I won’t be passing out stuff just because they got a right answer. [In a] conference, this kid asked me, “Well, what are we going to get when you do this?” And I said, “The satisfaction of knowing you did a job well done,” and that was the end of them speaking about that.

Caring as Building Loving Relationships
Each teacher in this study felt strongly that caring was about establishing genuinely loving relationships with students. While committed to this, in reaching out to students, each of these teachers had no idea of the depths that their relationships would reach. Savoy, for example, worked for many months to develop a loving, trusting relationship with a student she initially described as a “train wreck.” Savoy recounted their first meeting:

[Tameka] failed sixth grade and I got her at seventh grade; and I mean she was a wreck, a train wreck, and nobody could deal with her, she was always cursing, screaming in the hallways and I got her in my class . . . and she was just, “Arghhh”
[animated and angry expression] all the time. [She was a] Black girl very low socio-economically, very low . . . My principal I think had this idea that I’m Black, she’s Black . . . But long story short, you know, I did find a liking to her.

The student’s behaviors caused other teachers to put their backs up and get in power struggles with her. Savoy’s relationship with Tameka flourished into a “success story” as Savoy employed a few important strategies. First, she was very straightforward when she spoke with Tameka. She provided Tameka with structure and set limitations while pushing her to succeed. At the same time, she let her know that she cared about what happened to her. After connecting with Tameka, Savoy’s sense of commitment to ensuring her success became a priority, and she explained how she employed specific strategies as consistently as possible:

Wow, she’s listening to me maybe I can keep her if I am just consistent with her. So then I felt responsible, I felt like I had to do it, I had to keep on. ‘Cause if there was another person in her life that had went by the wayside that, for one or two months was in her face but then cut her loose, that’s all she knew.

Savoy was ultimately able to say about Tameka, “She’s a sweetie and I love her to death. I’m glad that I had the chance to bond with her, she’s a sweetheart.”

Ginger experienced a deepened relationship with one student, in particular, that helped broaden her view of professionalism to include relationships that go beyond the curriculum. Ginger described Angel as the first student with whom she developed a personally caring relationship—the first time that Ginger allowed herself to display caring and a concern for her student beyond academics.

For some reason [Angel] became attached to me and I became attached to her. She ended up being in a car accident with her mother um, her mother was driving drunk, 90 miles per hour, throwing wine bottles and all this stuff out the car. They crashed. It almost killed both of them. Well the first person when Angel was in the ambulance the first person she wanted to call was me. So, she called me before she called any of her family members and I thought “OH MY” . . . that’s when I kind of step out of that teacher role and I become actually more of who I am which is a compassionate person who’s going to go all out of the way to address the needs of my students. Really the only thing she wanted from me was to tell me what happened and then of course I went to see her that evening.

Ginger explained how the relationship with Angel impacted her in profound ways. Prior to her relationship with Angel, Ginger did not allow her emotions to control the way she interacted with students. She preferred to keep the personal and professional emotions distinctly separate. She explained the change in one of her interviews:

Ginger: I like to be compassionate now that Angel has taught me this other side of me.
Toni: She’s broken you down?
Ginger: Yes she has and I realize that if I if I step down a little bit to their level, I can know them on a different level where as otherwise it’s going to be strictly business.
Toni: Now does that surprise you?

Ginger: Yes it surprised me but I think a lot just has to do with who I am . . . but I do find I have more fun . . . it’s a different type of interaction, but they got to be ready to change when I’m ready to change [laughs] that’s the part I have to make clear with them and that’s why I really don’t like stepping down because they don’t know how to turn it off like I can so it is protection for me.

Ginger talked about building bonds with students as an important part of her professional role and an element of her growth:

Now I’m sort of defined you know, I want to be that person who’s willing to really help that child who’s struggling, you know whatever issue it is. I mean it may not be academically, it may be socially but I want to be there to help that child or be the one who encourages that child to keep going or you know even if it’s just asking them how they’re doing—you’d be amazed at how many students who just love the idea that you’re appearing to know how they’re doing that day . . . you know it’s those little things or just even that smile or just even that compliment or just you know letting them know that, “You can do it!”

Implications for a Framework of Caring in the Middle Level Classroom

The demonstrations of caring shared in this paper represent loving examples of “passing it on.” The teachers in this study learned from their caring communities and, in turn, used that learning to support
students in their own classrooms, doing so with great success. This tells me that there is much that can be learned from the way Black communities support children as they grow into adulthood. Consolidating findings into the list below, the power of these modes of caring is clear and moves our thinking beyond what is currently proposed in the field of middle level education as foundational to creating caring relationships with middle level students. Other work suggests that middle level teachers can demonstrate caring by showing empathy, learning to take the perspectives of others, getting to know students in and out of school, encouraging students, instilling confidence, being flexible and adaptable, and sharing themselves with students (Williams, 2012). However, Lauren, Ginger, Savoy, and Sheila provide community-based wisdom that undergirds and expands those demonstrations of caring. Findings from this study suggest that a framework of caring is grounded in the following foundational elements as teachers (a) serve as otherparents or fictive kin; (b) become role models giving time, compassion, and teach racial pride; (c) accept responsibility for speaking back to stereotypes and address inequities; (d) teach honestly in terms of systemic injustices; (e) know, believe in, and showcase students’ brilliance; and (f) commit to genuinely loving relationships defined by high expectations, straightforward loving talk, and support.

This study suggests that caring teachers are those who not only serve as otherparents or fictive kin but also those who work with other teachers, families, and students as a village dedicated to the students. Being a part of the village will help students embrace the idea of working together to build and maintain connections through shared responsibility as a way of reminding students that they are somebody.

Furthermore, in this study, teachers portrayed caring as role models who took time to listen to their students with compassion and engage in meaningful dialogue with them. They demonstrated caring through the sense of responsibility that they had for confronting stereotypes about Black boys. All four teachers exhibited caring by grounding their pedagogy in personal convictions to equity whether they were from religious foundations, family teaching, or other sources.

Caring teachers demonstrate honesty by letting students know what they are up against in as they grow up and move into high school while teaching them strategies to succeed. Never sugar-coating realities of injustice but teaching for success within and beyond injustices the teachers in this study were devoted to caring by knowing their students well. They believed in their students and held high expectations of them by pushing them hard and holding them accountable. Finally, the teachers demonstrated care because they were committed to building loving relationships by being straightforward and providing structure and limits for student success. The dynamic impact of the cultural values learned from the community, ultimately portrayed in the professional lives of the participants.

Conclusions: What If?

When I was growing up it was like teaching was one of those professions in the Black community where it was very respected. You know people always looked up to teachers and people just treated them well within the environment.—Sheila

Delpit (2006) wrote that teaching is all about the “significance of human connectedness” (p. 95). The teachers in this study demonstrated the importance of connectedness with every pedagogical move they made. Learning from caring teachers and community members in their own personal lives, these teachers came to understand a particular kind of caring that served them well in their professional teaching lives. This idea is foundational to a framework of caring to guide middle level education. From Savoy, Ginger, Lauren, and Sheila, middle level educators can learn about a kind of caring that is about knowing students well and encouraging, expecting, loving, and believing in students’ brilliance. Educators can learn how to deepen their ability to serve as role models, otherparents, and support systems for learning to thrive in a biased world.

These learnings connect back to the stories of Shakara, the teenager who was thrown across the room for refusing to put down her phone; to Ahmad, who was handcuffed because his carefully constructed clock was assumed to be a bomb; and to countless students of Color who experience what Love (2016) calls “spirit murder” when they are disciplined and expelled at higher rates than their White peers or when they are referred more frequently to special needs classes and less frequently to gifted programs (Codrington & Fairchild, 2013; Ford, 2013). How would their stories have been different if their teachers had learned from the kind of caring that the teachers in this study exemplified? This is at the heart of this study: learning from regularly silenced or dismissed voices of
teachers of Color to better understand what culturally relevant and responsive caring might look like, sound like, feel like. The examples of Savoy, Ginger, Lauren, and Sheila raise many questions: What if Shakara’s teacher had worked to know her well, sought her brilliance and celebrated it, let her know that she has much to offer? What if Shakara’s and Ahmad’s teachers had learned to speak back to stereotypes of the “angry Black female” or the “Muslim terrorist”? What if those teachers served as role models who took time with their students, who had high expectations but taught in ways that built trust and desire to meet those expectations? What if they took responsibility for teaching racial pride and strategies for overcoming injustices? What if they let students know that they were committed to their success and then acted in ways that back up verbalized commitments? What if they made it their business to learn from their colleagues of Color to better understand what caring can look like that is culturally responsive and relevant?

The answers to these questions seem obvious, yet we lose high numbers of students of Color year after year because of teachers who consider themselves to be caring and yet react as did Shakara and Ahmad’s teachers. We must do better. At the very least, we should do no harm by learning from caring Black teachers who learned about caring in their homes and communities.

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