

## **Caring for Black Males in Schools: An Ethnographic Exploration of Educational Experiences of Black Males in a GED Program**

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*Black males are more likely than others to attend alternative education programs and schools (Howard, 2008; McCall, 2003). Alternative high schools and programs tend to serve a disproportionate number of male students, students of color, at-risk students, and economically disadvantaged students (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Watson, 2011). This ethnographic study focused on Black male students who have dropped out of traditional high school prior to attending an alternative GED program in a Northeastern city. The findings in this article are excerpted from the larger ethnographic study that addressed the following question: How do Black males' perceptions of caring and educational experiences in an alternative GED program differ from experiences in their former traditional high school? The ethic of care theoretical framework was used to guide analysis. Findings indicated that students experienced more caring environments in the alternative GED program.*

*Keywords:* Black males, alternative education, ethos of care

As the graduation rates for traditional comprehensive high schools have increased, the number of alternative completion programs has increased (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Trends suggest that the number of students in alternative settings will continue to rise over the years (Lehr, Tan, & Yssledyke, 2009). Black male students make up a large portion of students who do not graduate high school in four years; 52% of Black males had graduated within four years as of the 2009-2010 school year (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012). With such a large number of Black male students disengaging from high school, providing viable educational alternatives is essential to their success. Alternative programs serve a disproportionate number of male students, students of color, at-risk students, economically disadvantaged students, and others that have been disenfranchised from traditional schooling (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009; Watson, 2011). Therefore, this ethnographic study focuses on Black male students who have dropped out of traditional high school prior to attending an alternative education program in a Northeastern city. More specifically, this article examined the following research question: How did Black male students experience the elements of the ethos of care in an alternative classroom environment and how did their teacher embody the ethos of care with her students?

### **Literature Review**

Black males tend to face many challenges both academic and behavioral in educational settings (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2008). In addition, these students are more likely to score below proficient in key subject areas on NCES standardized tests (Howard, 2008) and are more likely to be placed in remedial and special education courses (Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009). This low achievement can lead to eventual departure and disengagement from schooling. Consequently, Black male students at-risk are more likely to attend alternative education programs and schools (Howard, 2008; McCall, 2003). According to Kleiner et al. (2002), the number of alternative schools in the United States rose from 2,606 in 1993 to over 10,900 in 2001. In addition, these schools are concentrated in high-poverty, urban, and minority districts. Given that the majority of students in alternative schools

are male, minority, urban, and high-poverty, there is a need to contribute more literature focused on Black male students in alternative settings in urban areas. Moreover, this research is important given the negative experiences that many Black male students encounter in schooling (Isom, 2007; Lynn & Jennings, 2009).

In the classroom, research has shown that teacher expectations and student perceptions of caring can have a positive or negative impact on academic engagement, academic self-efficacy, student behavior, and student-teacher relationships (Fowler, Banks, Anhalt, Der Hinrichs, & Kalis, 2008; Thomas & Stevenson, 2009; Tyler & Boelter, 2008), but that Black male students often face negative perceptions and lower expectations. If students do not believe that teachers care about them and their academic performance, then their likelihood of success diminishes (Noguera, 2003). In several studies focused on alternative settings, the theme of care was identified in student responses to how they felt about their alternative school in comparison to the traditional school. The students praised their alternative school for the caring environment and positive teacher interactions they experienced. Students described “caring” as teachers and other school administrators providing personal attention, inquiring about their out of school lives, and displaying concern about their education (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Watson, 2011). Therefore, examining care for Black male students in alternative settings can provide potential strategies to ensure that these students experience success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The ethic of care is based in Nel Noddings’ (1988) characterization of caring as relational ethics. The foundation of Noddings’ ethic of care consists of the notion that there is one who is cared for and there is one who is caring. The one caring responds to the needs and wants of the cared for, while the cared for acknowledges the caring and reciprocates. In the school setting the teacher becomes the one-caring and the student is the cared-for individual (Noddings, 1988). Teachers who possess an ethic of care feel that they are responsible for empowering their students. Teachers who create caring relationships produce students who respond in kind with care. These teachers believe that they have a duty to act for their students, and are charged with being personally responsible for their students (Owens & Ennis, 2005). The ethic of care is often defined by accountability and response, the responsibility of the caring and the response of the cared for (Noddings, 1988). Teachers should want to produce caring productive students; however, to mold such people, teachers must have a wealth of knowledge about students (Noddings, 1988). When provided with care, and the feeling that their teacher knows their needs, poor and minority students can become empowered and experience academic success after persistent failure (Rivera-McCutchen, 2012). Black students in particular benefit from an ethos of caring that is infused with culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Ware, 2006). In essence, the ethos of caring moves away from a theory devoid of consideration for culture, to caring that is culturally appropriate for the student population that the teacher is educating when culturally responsive practices are included.

### **Methodology**

#### **Ethnographic Methods**

This study used ethnographic methods to examine the research questions. Ethnography is an interpretation of how people make meaning, what they say, and what they do. This idea is guided by the concept that culture exists within groups (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). In providing a definition for qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that it is “a situated activity which locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). In ethnography, the researcher

studies people and things in their natural setting in order to make sense of how people make meaning of their worlds. The primary goal of this study was to understand Black male students' educational and caring experiences in their alternative program. In turn, the best methods to gain access to this information are those that provide the most insight into the way students make sense of their world. The use of qualitative ethnographic methods of interviews and observations allowed me to understand the way that Black male students in this particular setting make sense of their lived reality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

### **Research Site and Participants**

AchieveEd provides basic literacy and math skills, post-secondary preparation, workforce preparation, and a GED upon completion. AchieveEd is 98% Black, and almost half of the students are Black males. AchieveEd serves predominately poor and working class students with 100% qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. The ten male participants for the study were previous traditional high school attendees between the ages of 19 and 21 years old. The teacher observed, Ms. Skye, is a Black woman in her late 30's who has worked with disadvantaged youth for over a decade. The age range of students was bounded because according to AchieveEd enrollment, 96% of students in the program are within this range.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Fieldwork was conducted at the program from January 2014 until June 2014 in a Career and College Readiness class for two hours twice per week. Field notes were written and class sessions were audio recorded for each observation period. Formal semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with students and their teacher. Version 3.7.1 of HyperResearch (ResearchWare, 2015) qualitative software was used to code field notes and interview transcripts. During the coding process, I began with codes that were descriptive, describing exactly what seen and heard, and others that were analytical and drawn from the literature regarding the ethos of care. These were used to create analytical categories for interpretation. From there I moved on to interpreting the different abstractions and themes associated with care. Codes and themes from the literature included: teacher care and student teacher relationships. Emergent codes and themes from fieldwork and interviews included: cultural responsive care, race/gender specific care. From the 49 codes created, those that belonged to the same thematic area were combined. Themes that were irrelevant were discarded during analysis.

### **Findings**

The young men interviewed in this study were Evan, Karim, Harry, Jared, Seth, Peter, Jeff, Steve, Bob, and Walt. The findings provide evidence of the importance of care for Black male students, as well as the role of cultural context for the ethic of care in the student-teacher relationship. The findings are consistent with previous literature that indicated students' feeling of more caring relationships within alternative school settings overall (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Saunders & Saunders, 2002; Watson, 2011). In contrast to the feeling of care students expressed feeling at AchieveEd, in their discussions of their former high schools, there was an absence of care from their point of view. Students included teacher incompetence and lack of expectations as examples of the lack of care.

### **Lack of Care in Traditional High Schools**

Experiences of care were not abundant for students in their past high school experiences. One form of lack of care was students' perception that teachers were unable to manage student behavior in the classroom in order to teach effectively. Jared provided an example of this when asked about the environment at his previous high school:

Teacher can't get nothing done. You in a classroom, you trying to learn but the background, everybody, like majority of the class, on the phone, listening to music, loud and obnoxious so the teacher can't say nothing. He barely can't say anything, without talking over the class.

Jared felt that the teachers' inability to control the students in class led to his and others inability to learn content in their classes. Further, it showed that teachers for those classes did not really care if the lesson was completed because the students behaved poorly while the teachers were explaining the lesson and the teacher did nothing in response. This is important to note because research has shown that student productivity is low and engagement is negatively affected when there is a lack of emotional involvement from teachers (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011). Further, the ability to keep student behavior within appropriate norms or to be a warm demander in order to ensure a productive learning environment (Ware, 2006) is often seen as a form of teacher care by Black students. This was not present for Jared in his previous high school.

Perceptions of indifference from teachers and lack of expectations were other indications of lack of care that students articulated. Students believed that when they were not engaged in their work, their teachers did not find strategies to engage them nor did they have expectations for them to complete the work. The perception of low expectations of Black boys is a common narrative found in research on student teacher relationships that Black boys encounter (Rowley et al., 2014). The response of my students was to fulfill the expectations of the teachers in some cases. When discussing the classrooms at his traditional high school and teachers approach, Harry felt that teachers just did not care if he did work; he said, "I really think they didn't care. I never really had no teachers, like how the teachers are here [at AchieveEd]. It was just ... if you didn't want to do the work [at previous high school], you just didn't do the work in high school. They [teachers] just leave you alone". Harry believed that if he did not show he wanted to work then he was left alone and isolated from the lesson in the classroom. Harry felt that overall the teachers in his school and the entire city school district did not care for students. He said:

The school district, they really don't care, like the teachers. They really don't want to teach, for real, and they give up on you fast.... Like they don't push you to, to do better. They just give up on you. Here they, they try to help you out. They really push you."

### **Feeling Cared for at AchieveEd**

The ethic of care in this study was reflected through words and actions of students and teacher. A poignant example of Ms. Skye's care was shown when she demonstrated her responsibility for the success of her students. She believed that it was her responsibility to ensure that students passed the GED and gained employment or pursued post-secondary education. The following is excerpted from field notes on January 27th: "We [teachers] gotta step up as teachers to make sure y'all are ready. I have to step up my game to make sure you're ready to take the exam and equally ready to get a job. When I let you do baby work, I fail you." She reiterated that her role was mentor, and caring but firm supporter during her interview. From the student perspective, the care that students felt was best conveyed by Peter when he said "I feel like the teachers, they really care about us and...they really focus on our education. It's just; it's a different environment from like a regular school. That's what I like."

In addition to being cared for and valued, students experienced an ethic of care that was culturally responsive. Culturally responsive pedagogy is "an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18 as cited in Ware, 2006, p. 447). The students were building positive and meaningful relationships with Ms.

Skye and other teachers because the teachers found ways to connect, communicate, and value students through their culturally responsive pedagogy. Culturally responsive caring entails teachers providing an environment of encouragement and a rigorous educational learning environment for Black students and others outside of the cultural norm. Culturally responsive caring is an ethos of care that is culturally appropriate and authentic for the students.

The following discussion began during a lesson based on choosing occupations. Ms. Skye demonstrated a level of familiarity, knowledge of neighborhoods, and speech patterns in talking with Evan regarding the safety of using unlicensed auto mechanics. Ms. Skye then gave examples of several occupations that will not be disappearing. One of the examples is car mechanic. According to field notes from May 19<sup>th</sup>, Evan disagreed, saying that all cars are computerized now, so jobs will begin disappearing. Ms. Skye said, “but there will always be hoopties in the hood! Somebody is always gonna drive a squatter!” Evan said that you can just get a fiend [crack addict] to fix it for \$10 [laughing as he said it] and Ms. Skye said “No way! I will never have that... coming near me in my house, no way!” Ms. Skye shared in a hypothetical situation with Evan and also demonstrated that she knew cultural idioms. By knowing the environment that Evan is familiar with, she showed that she has learned about his background and is building a relationship with him. Although the conversation ended with humor, the dialog was still centered around the lesson. Therefore, Ms. Skye used culturally responsive caring when discussing the subject matter in order to continue to a build relationship with her student.

### Discussion

This study provided evidence of the ethos of care that existed for Black male students at one alternative GED program, and their perspectives of lack of care in previous traditional high school settings. The lack of care came in the form of poor classroom management, pedagogy that lacked engaging strategies, and perceptions of indifference. The ethic of care took the form of motivation and encouragement from teachers. To establish a successful ethic of care relationship between teacher and student, several characteristics must be present in the relationship. According to Noddings (1984, 1992), the one-caring teacher must be engrossed in their student, committed to their student, and experience a shift from a focus on the self to a focus on the student. The students’ role in establishing the ethic of care relationship is that they must be receptive and open to the efforts of the teachers, and respond in a caring way (as cited in Owens & Ennis, 2005). The Black male students in this study demonstrated the reciprocal nature of the ethic of care, and Ms. Skye demonstrated the engrossment and commitment that the students’ previous high school teachers did not. Caring and supportive relationships are essential for Black males to flourish in schools (Corprew & Cunningham, 2012; Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz & Watson, 2014; Milner, 2007). Ms. Skye went beyond the ethos of care by incorporating culturally responsive caring with her students. Educational strategies based in an ethos of care were used in the classroom with my students, and these strategies were conducted using culturally responsive pedagogy resulting in culturally responsive caring relationships (Jackson et al., 2014; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). Ms. Skye and her students demonstrated the ethic of care and culturally responsive caring in their interactions and in the classroom, thus providing evidence for the ways this theoretical concept is enacted.

### Implications

Caring is not a one-way relationship with the teacher providing all of the care while the students is the passive recipient (Jackson et al., 2014). The students gave their opinions of care, and Ms. Skye, as well as the students, demonstrated their caring relationship. Several studies present the aspects that create caring and culturally responsive caring environments (Alder,

2002; Gay, 2002; Jackson et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Noddings, 1998; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012; Weinstein et al., 2004). However, as Milner (2007) and Jackson et al. (2014) note, care and culturally responsive care are especially beneficial for Black male students. These findings are important to consider, as including the ethic of care as we prepare teachers to teach our most vulnerable youth will be essential. Information regarding care in action is provided by this study as it begins to tease this out by documenting Black male students' feelings of lack of care in their old high school settings, and then comparing it to the care that they felt in their current alternative setting. The importance of care for Black male students is reflected in the words and actions of these students. Future research examining the ethic of care and culturally responsive care from the Black male student point of view is important in order to go beyond the concept to provide concrete examples of what these students mean when they say they felt care.

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