

FOREWORD

I've written in the last few years (2018, 2020) about a school district in Gainesville, Georgia, that has earned my admiration. Writing about schools for me has often centered on their emphasis on "accountability," with data, data, and more data serving as the means of informing teachers and students about their achievements. It's a discouraging, demoralizing, dehumanizing environment in general. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the problems originating in emotional trauma in many ways. School officials often care more about "learning loss" according to those accountability measures than about the health and well-being, including the mental health, of the people who occupy school communities. It does not help when citizens occupy school board meetings demanding that those weak-kneed teachers get back to work and stop whining about masks and vaccinations. And this Critical Race Theory business has got to stop immediately, because my kid feels bad about learning about racism. Who cares about how your kids feel when their lives are never included in the curriculum?

And then, to the rescue of my sensibilities, came Hall County, Georgia. Their district motto is "The Most Caring Place on Earth." The shocking thing is that it's not just a slogan. They really work at caring.

I learned of this unusual place through a former student of mine who is participating in longitudinal research covering nine years. She entered the study in her third year of college, when her teacher education coursework began. She then worked in two school districts that she found unsatisfying, with the second so oriented to corporate policies that she quit after one year and spent a year in the hospitality business. She finally ended up in Hall County, where she felt that her own primary orientation to students was matched by the district's philosophy and practices. When I wrote about it for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, I heard from people asking, how do I apply for a job there?! That essay continued to circulate

online for at least a year, occasionally getting new life and, for me, new inquiries about how to contact their administration. It's a place that teachers wish they could work, instead of the heartless, data-driven schools that employ them.

The question remains, then, what does it mean to care, beyond the slogans and pieties? Is hanging a poster of different-colored kittens snuggling together, accompanied by a "Celebrate diversity" slogan, sufficient? Or is caring more like hard work, undertaken in school contexts where the value is on outcomes, making care a quality that requires concerted attention and continual monitoring?

When my former student went to her first school orientation in Hall County, the district superintendent spoke about the importance of human relationships, above all else. Do not focus on test scores or real estate values tied to test scores, he urged the faculty. Focus instead, he said, on how everything educational follows from developing and fostering productive relationships within the district.

Kids in the district require care. It's not affluent or privileged. The city is home to many chicken processing plants, where immigrant workers pluck and slice poultry along with a native workforce. Both populations often have children who do not graduate high school. Many of the immigrant families are harassed by immigrant officials looking for someone to deport, and many families have been split up in the name of law enforcement. Poultry plant conditions have become especially dangerous during the pandemic, forcing employees to work at close quarters to maximize productivity. Some kids are homeless, some work multiple jobs before and after school, some have started families of their own. The district's test scores, as might be predicted, do not top the state's charts. But the superintendent, at the point of orientation, entreated the teachers to tune out the noise about test scores and focus on making the school feel positive to kids, teachers, counselors, principals. It sounds like a good place for the cafeteria staff, grounds crew, and custodians as well.

But that is not enough. The district isn't satisfied with verbal pleas. It works at the whole-school level to assess their students' emotional needs and do something to provide a nurturing environment to support them. Here's how one such initiative was described by a local reporter (Podo, 2019). The program was designed to make sure that the students' mental health needs are understood and addressed:

Step one started with listening to students. "A kid who's in their seventh house in the last three months and has a step dad that's beating them and a mother who's addicted, just doesn't care much about advanced algebra," Hall Superintendent Will Schofield said during a board meeting on Nov. 18. "It's not that they don't want to learn advanced algebra, it's not even on their radar screen." . . . "There are kids having issues with depression, different types of abuse, anxiety, divorce, sexuality issues, relationship drama — so many issues," Joy Schofield said. "It's just overwhelming to see the sheer number of issues our kids are facing everyday and see it all in one place."

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When schools like this one enroll a large population of students of color whose heritages get little representation in the curriculum, the students often feel alienated and estranged, and often drop out more for emotional and material reasons than academic shortcomings. Throw in the sorts of traumas described in the news report, and the feelings multiply. The Hall County mental health initiative begins with asking students what they think, what they have experienced, and what they need. It begins with their subjective experiences and not “objective” tests designed to determine their academic achievement.

Among the activities in the program was a sentence-completion task in which students were asked to complete the following sentence: “If my teacher really knew me, they would know...” Answers included: “If my teacher really knew me, they would know how much potential I have if someone just gave me the chance. I could help guide others in the right direction and also myself, but it’s hard when you lack hope.” Another wrote, “If my teachers really knew me, they’d know that I’ve been verbally abused all my life and treating me unfairly makes me feel like I can’t do anything.”

It takes a courageous administrator to ask kids what is wrong with the school. The students’ insights into the school’s operation might be embarrassing to leaders who often prefer to act as though their institution is run so well that complainers reveal their own character flaws, rather than problems in the institution. It then takes a visionary leader to figure out what to do with the information in sensitive, empathic ways.

Caring is complicated. Much of what is written in the name of care concerns nurturing of the sort I’ve reviewed, and I’m all for it. But there is also a need for some level of performance to be expected. In our research we have identified a common tension between *rigor and relationships*. We borrow “rigor” from our interviews, where teachers use it to describe high academic standards. These can come in conflict with the need to foster relationships, in that making demands on people often produces obstacles and frustrations for them as they push themselves into new levels of performance. This sense of academic standards can also be harsh and unempathic. It’s a difficult line to walk with sensitivity and appropriate attention to both rigor and relationships.

I’ll confess that my responses to my graduate students’ writing is, they tell me, quite severe. One noted that in her dissertation, my first nurturing comment came well after page 100. My follow-up question was simple: How many of your dissertation articles got published? The answer: All of them. I hope that the care I took in providing a demanding review outweighed any feel-good moment they might have experienced with lush praise of the sort that does little to advance the quality of the work.

And that complication, that tension between rigor and relationships, brings us to *Reconstructing Care in Teacher Education after COVID-19: Caring Enough to Change*. I have mostly talked about schools, the destination for candidates in teacher education. Teacher candidates who spend many hours in practica in

corporate-style schools are being socialized to those values, no matter what they hear in college classrooms. Often that dissonance between university ideals and school realities is the hardest part of their transition to full-time teaching.

Teacher education itself, then, must work hard to develop notions of care that both fit university ideals and are practicable in schools, or at least provide a way to try to reconcile the two. Promoting care in universities may be as challenging as it is in schools, given that universities are responsive to the same economic constraints, ideological battles, and growing neoliberal management as schools are. If anything, university traditions make “knowledge” the most important commodity available in college, one that allows for mammoth, alienating lecture halls, lectures in small classrooms, and a “no-excuses” perspective on students accompanied by a “no responsibility” view of faculty when it comes to nurturing the emotional life and mental health well-being of students. Many faculty regard students as impediments to their research, what with their neediness and growing pains. The broader culture of universities has little interest in or patience for students beyond their academic productivity. When neither the university nor the schools provide positive settings for promoting healthy emotional growth, it makes the task of encouraging care among prospective teachers a major challenge, one that cannot be achieved through slogans and posters.

Care comes in many forms, often within uncaring institutions. The editors and contributors have provided readers with a compelling set of chapters to consider in undertaking a care-driven education for teacher education students. The timing is ideal, given how COVID has amplified so many tensions and conflicts and brought mental health crises into focus for educators. This volume provides a variety of perspectives on care that the thoughtful teacher educator may consider in supporting students in such challenging times. I hope that it gets wide distribution and attention, and that the issues it raises become part of the discourse of education as the notion of care gets refined and applied in ways that benefit teachers, students, and anyone else involved in the educational system.

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