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“Drop-Outs” and “Push-Outs”: Finding Hope at a School That Actualizes the Ethic of Care

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This study profiles a school that is committed to enacting the ethic of care with a population of underserved “at-risk” adolescents—students with a history of criminal activity and dropping out or being expelled from school due to troublesome and troubled behavior. This article gives voice to the narratives of administrators, teachers, and students as they perceive and actualize care in policies and practices. It documents the additive impact of the caring approach in fostering hope and building more promising futures for high-need youth.

Introduction

The positive social, emotional, and academic development of children and adolescents depends, to a considerable degree, on whether the contexts in which they develop, including schools, are reliable sources of caring relationships (Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002; Rauner 2000). Unfortunately, in today’s schools, caring is rarely placed at the center of policies and practices (Noddings 1995, 2002). Instead, educators are under pressure to increase students’ academic performance, as measured by high-stakes standardized tests (Kohn 2000). Finding spaces for caring is becoming increasingly difficult as administrators, teachers, and students are pushed toward preordained goals set by distant bureaucrats.

Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) claims that the need for care is universal and that young people suffer when schools become less caring places. Those most severely affected are those who can least afford to be in an uncaring environment, that is, those students whose social background and academic history put them at risk for school failure, or dropping out of school prior to high school graduation (Croninger and Lee 2001; Deschenes et al. 2001; Rossi and Stringfield 1995).

What constitute a caring school and caring relationships within schools?

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Until recently the discourse on caring was dominated by theory (Chaskin and Rauner 1995; Prillamen and Eaker 1994), with little attention being given to actual contexts of caring or to the voices of teachers and students (Cook-Sather 2002; Corbett and Wilson 1995). In this study we investigate a school that has been deliberately designed to be a place of caring for a population of students that is often marginalized in other school contexts—youth ages 12–18 who are called “troublemakers,” have a history of school failure and dropping out, come from difficult home environments, and are on probation for criminal behavior. Our investigation provides an opportunity to examine how the members of an intentionally caring community perceive and enact care and how students respond. We highlight the voices of the students as they explain their experiences at this school and the impact the caring environment has had on their lives.

Providing space for students’ voices supports Corbett and Wilson’s (1995) argument for greater attention to those who are supposed to benefit from school reform, that is, students: “The voices of students are rarely heard in the debates about school failure and success, and the perspectives of students from disempowered and dominated communities are even more invisible” (15). Giroux (1988) calls these youth “the silenced ones.” In our investigation, we empower students by authorizing their perspectives, and this can lead to more informed educational practices (Cook-Sather 2002).

Background

Caring and Schools

The current structures of schooling work against care, and at the same time, the need for care may be greater than ever. (Noddings 1992, 20)

The literature on caring and its importance to healthy development is extensive (e.g., Beck 1992; Chaskin and Rauner 1995; Mayeroff 1971; Noddings 1984, 1992, 1995, 2002; Tronto 1993). The conceptualizations of caring that inform

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this investigation portray caring as both a perspective and a practice, as well as a powerful catalyst for positive social, emotional, and academic development. According to Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002), two essential elements of caring for one another are “apprehending the other’s reality” (1984, 16) and being committed to caring action on the other’s behalf. For the caring relationship to be complete, care must be received; that is, the recipient of care must recognize, and in some way respond to, the care provided. If recipients of care, such as students, do not perceive that they are cared for, or if they claim that their teachers “don’t care,” then this is a sign that the caring process has gone awry.

Although it is individuals and not organizations that care, Noddings (1984, 1992) argues that schools can and should be organized in ways that support the efforts of teachers and others to care for children and adolescents: “The primary aim of every educational institution and every educational effort must be the maintenance and enhancement of caring. . . . [This aim] establishes a lens through which all practices and possible practices are examined” (1984, 172–73).

Since genuine caring is attuned to individuals and their needs, caring practices are necessarily variable rather than fixed or dogmatic (May 1992; Noddings 1984, 1992; Prillamen and Eaker 1994). An education with caring at the core gives students the capacity to become caring persons themselves, making education more than merely an academic pursuit (Noddings 1988). According to Noddings (1992, 1995, 2002), caring is cultivated when teachers and school administrators model caring, engage in meaningful dialogue with students, confirm and applaud caring, and provide opportunities to practice care. Noddings (1984) warns against institutionalizing caring according to fixed rules, for then “caring disappears and only its illusion remains” (26). In a similar vein, May (1992) advocates the notion of critical appreciation in advancing the well-being of others, or being able to discern the morally significant aspects of the effects of one’s actions on another. Mayeroff (1971) talks of wise action, of caring that is responsive as well as responsible.

In an approach that blends theory with practice, Rauner (2000) describes caring as “an interactive process involving attentiveness, responsiveness, and competence” (7). For Rauner, caring is not a mechanism but rather a context for healthy development, one that promotes social connections, creates possibilities for students, and leads to positive outcomes. She argues that programs based on principles of caring should be evaluated not in terms of particular learning outcomes but rather according to whether they have “succeeded in creating caring relationships between young people and positive role models” (89). Such connections help to buffer students (particularly at-risk youth) against what may be severe stresses in the family or community and act as a

“facilitating influence in learning, academic achievement and the development of other skills” (73).

Fisher and Tronto (1990) view caring as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible” (40). They note that genuine and effective caring depends upon the provision of adequate material resources, time, and knowledge and that the caring process can break down if those involved in making decisions about caregiving are removed from those receiving care, or if care receivers lack the means or the opportunity to confirm whether the care offered has been received and that it corresponds with their needs. Each of these conceptions of caring in the school context emphasizes the centrality of care in the educational process and in the healthy development of children, the need for perceptive and receptive interaction between the givers and receivers of care, close attention given to the needs of care receivers, and flexibility as to how care is enacted.

At-Risk Students and Care

Schools as presently organized are much better calibrated to serve privileged groups than groups placed on the margin. (Deschenes et al. 2001, 527)

In the literature related to the concept of risk as it pertains to education, students at risk of educational failure or dropping out of school tend to be viewed from either an individual deficit perspective or from a wider social inequities perspective (Cummins 1986; Deschenes et al. 2001; MacLeod 1995; Wotherspoon and Schissel 2001). The first perspective identifies the students themselves and their families as the source of risk (Deschenes et al. 2001; Wotherspoon and Schissel 2001). Students are seen as having a number of personal deficits that thwart their success, for example, learning disabilities, poor motivation, or low intelligence. Living in a single-parent home, coming from a family with minimal education, or being part of a cultural group that does not value education also are offered as negative factors that influence school failure. Because the problems stem from the person or the family, the proffered solutions lie in tackling these individual deficits rather than acknowledging the influence of broader factors such as societal or structural inequities (MacLeod 1995). Solutions generally involve providing the same kind of schooling that students are finding challenging but offering it earlier through early intervention strategies or offering more of it through on-task support and extra help. This approach is strongly rooted in North American ideology and has become internalized by students. As Deschenes et al. (2001)

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observe, “Historical and current constructions of success and of failure as individual problems have legitimized inequalities by teaching children to blame themselves for failure” (527).

The second perspective takes a wider social justice approach (Wotherspoon and Schissel 2001), reinforcing a “new paradigm of education that confronts and counteracts disadvantage” (335) and addresses pervasive and deeply rooted inequalities among social groups that affect children’s ability to thrive in school (Cummins 1986). This approach recognizes that difficulties experienced by individuals, families, and cultural groups are inextricably bound up with larger social inequalities of poverty, marginalization, and disadvantage. The school system itself may reflect these disparities through discriminatory school practices and formulaic school policies (Deschenes et al. 2001). Help for students who are members of disadvantaged groups must begin with recognizing the societal challenges they face and then altering the structural impediments in the community and in the school so that learners may thrive. This approach avoids “blaming the victim,” an implicit message associated with the deficit perspective (MacLeod 1995). Researchers such as Conchas (2001), Cummins (1986), Deschenes et al. (2001), Fine (1991), Toohey (2000), and Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001) write from within this social inequities framework. Fine describes how bureaucratic regulations governing schools pressure large numbers of students to drop out; she calls these students “push-outs.” Wotherspoon and Schissel (2001, 331) quote Gordon and Yowell (1994, 59) in describing schools as potentially “risk-inducing phenomena,” in that they sometimes fail to connect with the lives and worlds of the learners they are meant to serve. Toohey’s study shows how children from minority language groups suffer from the limiting identities constructed for them at school. Cummins argues that children of disadvantaged groups in all societies perform poorly in school in ways directly linked to the unequal social relationships in the society as a whole and that teachers can help redress these inequities by creating alternate situations in their classrooms that disrupt, rather than reflect, these dynamics. Conchas found that if bridges were built between students and successful adults and other high-achieving peers, these acted as “strong support mechanisms” (502) in helping Latino children succeed in school. His view is that, although schools tend to replicate existing social and economic inequalities, they can circumvent these patterns if students and teachers form supportive partnerships. Deschenes et al. (2001) insist that “the focus must be on what happens to the students who do not fit the mainstream academic mold and how school structures can change to meet their needs” (539). They point out that “as hard as it may be to change the school to match the student, it is a more promising strategy than trying to fit the student to the school” (541).

The school described in this article is rooted in this wider societal and structural perspective. Our investigation found that students’ inadequacies or

personal deficits were not a focus at this school. Students were not viewed as having a series of problems that needed fixing; rather, staff sought to build relationships with students and to develop their strengths and talents, as they walked alongside them into more positive futures. The school focused on creating a culture of care where each student would thrive, developed policies and practices that were in the students' best interests, and worked with the families and community to alter the environment outside the classroom.

Description of the School

Whytecliff Education Centre is an accredited independent school that has been in existence for 11 years. It is located in a suburb of a city of approximately two million people.¹ Students come from throughout the metropolitan region, traveling either by rapid transit or bus or being picked up by staff in vans at designated locations. The school is small, with 55–60 students.² Thirty-two students have been referred by the courts and probation for a period of four to six months, for offenses including attempted murder, arson, assault, breaking and entering, theft, and trafficking or possession of illegal drugs. The other 23–28 students are in the continuing program, having completed their court-mandated stint and applied to stay on or having come to the school through private referrals because of the school's reputation. Most students are between 14 and 17 years of age, although at least one grade level lower than students normally are at that age. Many students have diagnosed learning disabilities, some have mental health issues, most struggle with substance abuse, and all have been labeled as having a "severe behavior disorder" (the most serious conduct disorder) by the provincial education body. Students represent a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including aboriginal, South Asian, East Asian, African-Canadian, and Caucasian. Approximately 70 percent are boys. The school operates 12 months of the year to accommodate the continuous intake of new students.

Because the youth have complex and multifaceted needs, the founders set out to establish a program that was multidimensional, transdisciplinary, and integrated in its approach. This means that the teaching staff work as a team on site with family workers, who engage the youth's family in change, and youth workers, who seek to reconnect the students with the community and to build life skills. Students in the shorter-term court-referred program usually take four courses, each adapted to fit their needs: one humanities course (social studies or English), a math or science course, physical education, and Career and Personal Planning. If a student enters the continuing program, he or she must take all courses required for high school graduation.

The school has a high attendance rate and a high rate of course completion

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(Ministry of Education for British Columbia 2002), and it has been identified in a national study as an exemplary intervention program for at-risk youth (Shariff et al. 2000). Bertram Cohler (2001) commented, after visiting the school, that it incorporates many of the principles advocated by Bruno Bettelheim, founder of the Chicago Orthogenic School: “I have rarely encountered a staff so energetic and determined to be of help, and so sophisticated in their understanding of the educational, emotional and mental health needs of the young people.”

Research Methods

As an academic who had previously assisted the school with curriculum and staffing decisions, Cassidy (coauthor of the current article) was intrigued by, and felt drawn into, the ambience of the school, which exuded peacefulness and warmth. Students who had been labeled unmanageable, even violent, by former schools and by the justice system appeared happy and relaxed and were doing schoolwork. Cassidy was intrigued by questions like: Was the ethic of care, as described by Noddings and others, central to the school’s policies and practices; if so, how was it understood and enacted by staff? Did the students feel cared for (uncared for) at the school? How would they [the students] describe caring (and uncaring)? How did this school differ from their [the students’] prior school experiences? And in what ways did they [the students] think the school was impacting their lives? What were the school’s keys to success, and could this site provide insight for working with a similar student population in other contexts?

Recognizing that her own previous involvement with the school might affect what she as a researcher chose to document, Cassidy developed a research team that included herself and two research assistants, a former teacher/administrator and researcher (Janice Grout) and a (then) graduate student in education (Anita Bates). The two research assistants had no prior experience at the school. Their role was that of “observer as participant” (Merriam 1988, 93); that is, they were to spend time on site (on average once a week over a year) to document observations, meet with participants and conduct the interviews, interact informally with staff and students and engage in activities when requested, and contribute to the data analysis and report writing.

Cassidy’s prior involvement with the school permitted open access to the site (something often denied with court-referred youth), provided a basis for trust and open communication, and contributed a broader context for assessing the data (Scott and Usher 1999). Cassidy’s role in this project was to spend time on site (two to three days a month over 16 months), record observations, review all documents associated with the school, act as the liaison between

the research project and the school, and coordinate the data analysis and reporting.

Throughout the study, each researcher was cognizant of the need to maintain a degree of neutrality and to balance participation in activities with some distancing in order to observe and analyze each situation (Merriam 1988). Because this research involved a population of youth with limited trust toward adults, care was taken to choose research assistants who were unassuming and good listeners and who could interact in a friendly, nonthreatening way with the students. This choice of personnel reduced the power imbalance that Scott and Usher (1999) warn about in field study research.

We employed a qualitative case study approach that is situated in the ethnographic tradition of educational inquiry and individual interview methodology. The case study paradigm promotes discovery, insight, and interpretation in context, and, according to Merriam (1988, 3), "offers a significant contribution to the knowledge base and practice of education." We collected data through field notes extended throughout the duration of the study. We also examined all school artifacts, including documents produced when creating the school, reports to funding agencies, working files, school brochures, inspection reports by the governing educational body, curriculum resources, lesson plans, and individual education plans for students. We interviewed each administrator (three), each teacher (five), and a sample of students (14), as well as three former students.³

Interview questions were prepared beforehand and requested open-ended responses (Lancy 2001). The interviews were designed to last between 45 minutes and an hour. They were conducted one-on-one in a quiet, private area of the school and were tape recorded. At the start of each interview, each participant was asked to adopt a pseudonym, which was used throughout the study. Each interview began with an informal conversation to establish connection and to relax the interviewee (Douglas 1985). The interviewer maintained a neutral, nonjudgmental stance in regard to the content of each participant's responses (Merriam 1988).

Administrators and teachers were asked 30 questions, which included information about their background and why they came to the school, as well as questions about their vision, whether caring was central to the school and their work, how they would describe caring/uncaring, the philosophy and working principles that guide them, some concrete examples that highlight their work with youth, whether they would do anything differently, the impact they believe they are having on the youth, and other related questions. Questions were aimed at garnering participants' experiences, values and opinions, knowledge, and feelings (Merriam 1988, 78).

Fourteen students in the school were interviewed, about one-quarter of the student body. Students from the court-referred program and the continuing

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program were represented in the same proportion as their total numbers in the school. Although all students were invited to participate, some chose not to, while others did not return the parental permission form. Three former students who had been away from the school for two to three years were also interviewed to see if they had a different perspective. Students were asked to describe the school, what they liked and disliked about it, how it compared to previous schools, how they would describe caring (and uncaring), whether they felt cared for (not cared for) at the school, who cared for them, how they would improve the school, whether the school impacted them in any way, what advice they would give to beginning teachers, what they would say if they learned the school was being shut down, and other related questions.

After the interviews were transcribed, each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcript and to make changes if necessary, although only one staff person and one student chose to do so. Field notes describing observations, interactions with staff and students, the ambience and tone of the school, and other relevant factors were recorded during the site visits, and reconstructions of the visits were recorded after the fact (Lancy 2001). Time spent in the field allowed the researchers to experience the school (Lancy 2001), its policies, and its practices and provided a foundation from which to draw inferences about what was said in the interviews and to explore tacit understanding (Maxwell 1996). During the site visits staff willingly responded to questions, and they sometimes engaged the researchers in program activities, for example, making coffee, washing dishes, assisting students with their work, attending staff meetings, and helping with special functions like the Christmas party and Thanksgiving dinner. Some students initiated conversations, and a few expressed surprise that someone from the university was actually interested in what they had to say. Students generally were very open and forthright during the interviews, even when sharing negative life experiences.

The fieldwork and analysis phases of the research were undertaken recursively. Interviews were transcribed and reviewed during this period, and these informed the observations and data collection (McMillan and Schumacher 1997). Each set of interviews (students, administrators, teachers) initially was reviewed separately to determine salient themes that emerged from the data due to the number of times mentioned or the strength of the mention (Miles and Huberman 1994). Interviews were reviewed and re-reviewed, using a “backward and forward” motion to assess the appropriateness of the coding and descriptors (Glaser and Strauss 1967; McMillan and Schumacher 1997). Each set of interviews was then compared with the others to determine any overarching themes or differences. Findings from the interviews were compared with understandings and summaries gleaned from field notes and from the document review, and care was taken to only report findings that were supported through triangulation (Yin 1998). The dominant themes that

emerged from this analysis were then reviewed in relation to the ethic of care literature (e.g., Fisher and Tronto 1990; May 1992; Mayeroff 1971; Noddings 1984, 1992, 1995, 2002; Tronto 1993), including school-based studies of caring (e.g., Beck 1992; Bosworth 1995; Cassidy 1999; Courtney and Noblit 1994; Hayes et al. 1994; Rogers 1994). The approach taken was "bottom-up," working inductively to uncover themes and contribute to theory, rather than to apply existing theory as a predetermined frame for analysis (Jorgensen 1989; Miles and Huberman 1994).

Reliability checks and validation of the research occurred through local verification of the data with participants (small group discussions and one-to-one conversations), prolonged presence in the field, consultation among researchers on analysis procedures and findings, and comparison of researcher interpretations with participant interpretations of summaries of analyzed data (written feedback plus a series of small group discussions and two full staff workshops).

In this article, we highlight the voices of the interviewees (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), supplementing these with examples from field notes and documents, as we attempt to portray the school as experienced, described, and interpreted by them (Cook-Sather 2002; Corbett and Wilson 1995). It is the lives and perceptions of these interviewees that this research is designed to illuminate (Lancy 2001).

Painting a Picture of the School

As one enters the two-story, chamois-colored building located on a busy road in a business district, one is struck by how unlike a school it looks. A large fish tank, several tall plants, and a comfortable couch greet one in the reception area. The walls are painted in warm greens and gold, with blue doors and trim, and the floor is beech wood. A few pieces of art dot the walls, reflecting themes of hope, courage, serenity, and teamwork. The main floor houses the reception area, one large classroom for the continuing program, an art room that doubles as a science lab, a games room, a media room, two offices, and washrooms. The second floor includes two medium-size classrooms (one catering to humanities, the other to the math/science program); a small library; a larger open area with bookshelves and classroom resources; an intake room for meeting with new students, parents, and other agencies; the rest of the offices; and additional washrooms.

Everything is color coordinated, including the furniture. A large skylight floods the upper floor with natural light, and all rooms, except for the offices, are enclosed in glass to provide natural light and an open feel. Only incandescent lamps are used, and students sit at work stations around the perimeter

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of each classroom or gather in small groups around circular tables in the middle of the room. A computer is part of each work station, and some pieces of students' work are displayed on the classroom walls. There is an absence of clutter. There is no graffiti or evidence of vandalism. The space has the appearance of an upscale urban coffee shop or a “hip” modern office.

As students come into the school in the morning (either on their own or via the program vans), they typically stop to chat with the principal; hang around the kitchen area for 10–15 minutes to pick up a hot chocolate, coffee, or protein shake; and then head to their classrooms. Grout comments in her field notes, “I feel a tremendous sense of calm and peace [at the school]. . . . It's as if the place has something healing about it and that there is a calmness, no one is hurried, everyone is calm, no one raises their voices.”

Administrators' Conceptions of Caring

The three administrators who were interviewed include the school principal (Paul), one of the two founders of the school (Greg), and the director of the program (Barbara).⁴ The principal is an accomplished artist and former fine arts college instructor; his doctoral dissertation focused on the ethic of care in a postsecondary context. Both Greg and Barbara have graduate degrees in counseling and several years of experience working with youth and families.⁵ Each administrator came to the program with a strong commitment to serving disadvantaged children, a reliance on research to shape practice, and a preference for teamwork.

Despite their different backgrounds, Paul, Greg, and Barbara have very similar conceptions of caring. Although only the principal had read some of the care literature in education, all three defined caring in similar ways. Each saw caring as fundamental to their “being” and “doing” and gave similar examples of how they sought to infuse caring into the program. Each sought to model and practice care, to encourage others to care, and to cultivate the right environment to allow staff and students (and their families) to flourish.

Creating a Culture of Care

From the outset, the administrators sought to develop a school that was different from the norm, in order to engage at-risk youth and change their life trajectories (*Thrive* 2001). The principal described their motivation: “There's a lot of research that says that kids who do poorly in school do poorly in life. So we designed our school to be different from other schools.” The school's

vision statement, forged collaboratively with staff over a six-month period, describes the operating values.

We are a safe, respectful and nurturing community, sensitive to each person and his or her uniqueness. Within this community individuals have the opportunity to build their resources and develop new skills. These experiences encourage self-reflective behavior and a strengthened relationship to family and the wider community. Living these principles inspires hope and promising futures.

Although the word “care” is not used in their vision statement, Greg said that it “could be re-labeled our vision of caring. . . . [It is] our compass, a point on the horizon that [is] steady like the North Pole. . . . We’re all headed in the same direction.”

The administrators see care as being embedded in the culture of the school, and they frequently use the metaphor of “the soil” to describe an environment rich in nutrients that allows each youth to flourish. Their program, they say, does not focus on “pruning the plant,” that is, on fixing what is wrong with the student. As Paul explained: “We really look at the quality of the soil that we’ve created. Is it a caring environment? Is it a respectful environment?” Greg said that staff members are encouraged regularly to reflect on questions such as, “What’s going to maintain the soil at the correct pH level even if I feel toxic at the moment, or this youth is being toxic? How can I work to maintain . . . the soil where it should be so that kids can grow?”

The soil metaphor also extends to the way the program is structured. Family workers help “till the soil” in the home environment to bring about positive change, and youth workers help “cultivate” stronger links between the youth and the wider community. Barbara notes, “we really strongly believe here that we can’t successfully work with kids unless we’re working with their families, because whatever’s going on at home is affecting what’s happening here.” Parents are encouraged to “come aboard and be a part of whatever is going to happen.” Family workers get to know each family well, and they provide support and practical assistance where needed. “We make a lot of referrals, giving kids and families access to the communities, finding out in their community what’s available to them.”

The administrators talked often about the strength-based approach they take with students and of creating an individualized program for each youth based on his or her talents and aspirations, and not on perceived problems. The program is expected to adapt to each student, rather than the student to the program. The principal contrasts this approach with the students’ prior school experiences.

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Almost all of their experiences . . . have been that they don't really belong in school, they're not smart enough, they don't have the ability to sit still long enough, they don't have focus, they don't have the emotional capacity—all these things that they don't have. And so by creating an environment where they can succeed, if they can't sit down long enough it's not a problem, because this isn't a place where you have to be sitting all the time.

Some kids are ADHD or FAS, so we have to adapt to them and their needs. If we have an ADHD child, we don't tell them their behavior is bad, we tell them it's normal. There are certain behaviors that are normal for an ADHD person. It's just who you are. And that's the difference because then they stop feeling bad about themselves, which is really important.

The school is guided by the principles reflected in the vision statement, and therefore there are no rules for behavior nor does the school punish students. The administrators explained that rules only trap them into a rule-consequence escalation and that this diverts their attention away from helping students and understanding the multidimensional causes of behavior. Sometimes, they say, students act out when they start to feel safe or, at other times, in response to external stimuli. When a student does something disruptive or negative that requires an intervention, they focus on creating a positive solution. They try to understand the context of the issue, and they respond within the vision statement. Here is an example taken from the field notes:

Today when I arrived at the school, I noticed a hole in the wall. When I asked about it the principal said that a boy the day before had become very agitated and had kicked in the wall. So, I asked how the staff responded. He said that the youth worker took the boy for a walk, and then they went to the local hardware store to pick up the products to repair the wall. After school today they planned to do the repair together, while casually discussing alternative ways of getting rid of anger. The principal explained, “Here we don't tell a student if he did something bad on Tuesday that he can't play basketball on Friday. We try to respond in ways that are linked and that arrive at a positive outcome.” (Cassidy)

Staff members are encouraged to “interpret the vision statement into every situation” and to ask themselves what would be a really caring or respectful response. This appears to play out in practice. Grout reflects in her field notes:

One of the things that I'm noticing is that while there's tremendous consistency with regard to the vision statement and the ethic of care, I don't sense any orthodoxy. . . . While each individual seems to have

such a genuinely well thought out set of beliefs about learning and change and growth and caring . . . they are so able to see the youth first and before all that. . . . The environment invites the knowledge (of the youth) to be present . . . and creates a field of empathy that you don't see in most other school situations.

Steve Shafer (2005) observed, following his visit to the school:

In an essential way, your approach strips away the many mechanisms most agencies use to insulate themselves from adolescents. The plethora of rules and categories and phases serve nicely to keep "them" at a distance. . . . Not so with your program, which avoids breaking people up into pieces, even the "strengths" and "needs" pieces. That's why when I visited, kids and staff smiled and laughed. Healing was actually happening. . . . You work with what is true now, with this person, in this place; somehow your staff have learned to use their own being to enable a healing process. They work from a vision informed by tested principles rather than rules. The kids wind up valuing themselves instead of spending time testing the rules. It's pretty amazing stuff.

Building Relationships

The administrators highlighted the importance of "caring for the staff in a way that we want them to care for the students," noting that when staff members feel cared for, they give back by embracing the vision, developing caring relationships with students, and supporting administrative decisions. The school becomes like a family rather than simply a place to work. The administrators talked about meeting staff members' needs and being accessible, teaching them to focus on the "positives" and "finding the successes," and helping them to "interpret the vision statement" in daily actions.

Despite the complexity of the challenges students face and the explosive (or noncommunicative) behavior the students sometimes exhibit, the administrators strongly emphasized their belief that every youth can learn, can succeed, and is worthy of the school's commitment. Barbara talked about her experiences caring for some of the most troubled and challenging of the youth. She said she finds it "easy to care in spite of the behaviors that they exhibit. . . . I've been called every name in the book. I've been threatened, and it doesn't change the fact that I care about the kid . . . because I realize how much need there is."

When Paul was asked if there were some students he had trouble caring for, he said, "There has never been a kid in this program that I would not have done whatever I could for. I know about them, so how could I not care

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about them?” Greg talked about how he wanted students to feel respected and valued:

So the youth would come in [to my office]. . . . I would not be meeting with them in the kind of a traditional . . . role where you’re there to say, “These are the rules, you need to follow them or else we’re going to have to let you go.” (It’s) not that kind of a place. . . . But more that “This is a respectful, caring place and we really want it to be that for you . . . but is it your vision of what the place is like?” And almost without exception, the kid will say, “Yeah!” And then I could ask them, “How can we work together? Are there ways that we can support you?”

A “Whole Child” Perspective

The principal and the director are part of the intake process for each new student, and they maintain daily contact with each youth as he or she proceeds through the program. Part of their time is also spent addressing the particular challenges a given student might be facing. During our time at the school, we noted that one student came home to find his mother’s partner dead from a drug overdose, another found his mother trying to saw her leg off while high on crack cocaine, a girl found out she was pregnant, one student was regularly forced to sleep in the greenhouse on his family’s property so he wouldn’t mess up their designer house, one student came to school with choke marks around his neck where his father had tried to strangle him, a family was evicted from their home, a youth’s parents pawned their belongings for drug money, and several youth were parenting younger siblings. Each administrator we interviewed talked about the importance of caring for all aspects of the youths’ turbulent lives, not just their academic needs. We saw evidence of this:

Today I was meeting with the principal in his office, when a girl about 16 came in, asking for Blackie’s leash: “I’m here to take Blackie for his walk.” “Good boy,” she said as she ruffled the dog’s bushy hair. After she left, Paul explained that this girl had a history of hunting and killing animals. With the approval of the girl’s psychologist, Paul decided to see what would happen if she got to know his dog. So he started bringing Blackie to work. Later, I learned that the girl got a dog of her own, but had to give it up because she couldn’t afford to look after it. (Cassidy)

I remember driving four students home one night, and coincidentally three had birthdays in the same month. One boy was bragging that he would probably get a lot of presents. When I let this boy off, one of the

Cassidy and Bates

other boys said he never got a card, let alone a present, ever. Right then, I drove into the Safeway parking lot, bought cards, a cake, plates, candles, and pop, and we had a party in the parking lot. One of the young men kept saying over and over again, "This is for the books." (Paul)

One boy was described in the court records as a cold youth with no feelings because he did not cry when he learned his mother died. I did a little searching and found out where she was buried and arranged for a friend to make a beautiful cross with her name on it. I then went to the graveside with the boy and we planted the cross. He cried for a while, and then vowed he would keep the grave tidy and bring flowers regularly. It wasn't that he was cold and heartless but rather nobody had given him a chance to grieve. He simply did not have a relationship with an adult who could be trusted enough for him to be vulnerable, and I was lucky that he chose me to be that person. (Paul)

We observed other incidents of practical helping: taking a girl to the clinic for a pregnancy test, taking a boy to get a haircut, collecting furniture from staff for a family who had nothing, and cooking special Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners for the students. The principal explained, "They know I'm their friend in the sense that I will do what I can to make their life better and happier, to get them on the right road." Field notes record Paul buying an alarm clock for a student so he wouldn't be late for school. He also personally paid the first month's rent on an apartment of a former student who had not yet received his first paycheck. Every Tuesday he gave each student a handwritten note of praise, decorated with his artwork. He says, "These small things are all about making them feel worthwhile. It really always comes back to us saying, you are worthwhile, you are meaningful, and this is your place."

Today I participated in the program's Christmas dinner celebration for the kids. One boy arrived two hours early, hair combed back, and wearing a tuxedo. I said to him, "Wow, pretty snazzy!" The boy replied, "Yeah, well, I've never had Christmas dinner before." After the turkey dinner, one of the staff dressed as Santa came in and called out each student's name and presented him or her with a small gift along with a card with personal comments written on it from each staff member. I was sitting next to a boy who did not seem that interested in his gift (it was a coffee mug), but was totally enthralled with his card. He kept reading and rereading the comments, angling the card to read the inscriptions, seemingly oblivious to everything that was happening around him. Sitting next to him I felt the intensity of his emotion and had to leave the room as my eyes filled with tears (Cassidy).

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Teachers’ Conceptions of Caring

[Caring means] being attentive to your students. It means being open to them and listening to them. It means seeing them as important and having a lot of potential and realizing how important it is. (Dana)

The five teachers, Doug, Terri, Adam, Dana, and Matt, shared similar conceptions of caring: creating the right environment, building relationships, showing respect, adapting the curriculum, being empathetic and nonreactive, and working in the youths’ best interests. The teachers ranged in age from their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, and each was relatively new to the teaching profession. All five teachers shared a commitment to working “outside of the box” and to helping students who “didn’t fit.”

I was very quickly aware of the extent to which high schools tend to be institutions, education factories, and there was more emphasis placed on crowd control, often, than there was on having students strive to learn and grow. And I think that in some situations you can teach efficiently that way, but the students that I found that I was most successful teaching [as a practice teacher] were the students who didn’t succeed well in the regular public school. (Doug)

The principal said that he looked for teachers who “have the highest teaching skills and love of learning, and also the moral and philosophical values that we cherish. They must have the ability to let every day be a new day, to bring to each youth care, acceptance, and love.” He said that they also needed a sense of humor, because the students will target their “special” characteristics; for example, students call him “baldy” for his lack of hair, and another teacher was told he had gotten “fat” over the winter. The students “say what they think; they have no filters.”

Creating the Right Environment

We have created an environment that is going to be safe and nurturing, and that’s our intention, that’s what guides us. And when the students come, we . . . relate to that student as a human being and we respond to that student. (Adam)

The teachers see caring for students as enmeshed in, and enabled by, the school’s philosophy of providing a safe, respectful, and nurturing community. They say that this unites all staff members in a common purpose to care for

students who have been unsuccessful at other schools because “they don’t fit into the typical mold, and I think it’s a shame because they could fit into the mold if the mold was flexible, but it’s a rigid mold.” These teachers value being part of a team because they feel cared for and supported by others who share the same vision. The team approach also allows for more effective care for each youth. As Terri explained:

It’s a huge team effort for caring. . . . You may have students come in and you have no idea what happened to them the night before. The youth worker knows because he or she phoned them. . . . It’s a holistic approach to their lives, you know, you need to know things about their family, and you need to share things with their family.

Terri went on to say that each student’s learning in school is interconnected with other things and that when she drives to work, she is thinking about “the kids’ lives. Not so much [about] the book they need to read or the poetry they need to complete, but where they’re at that day.” Dana explained that academic goals often need to be set aside in favor of resolving a crisis in a student’s home or personal life.

A good thing about this school is that it acknowledges the fact that you can have a student who’s supporting a crack-addicted mother and parenting siblings, and . . . you can’t really expect the student to be making academics their primary focus.

The student referred to here ended up completing his courses, but school-work was never the primary goal. Dana notes, “For [him], coming to school was an important part of his normal life, to create structure and balance in his life and to be given an academic goal every day. . . . And he did grow academically . . . but we all recognized that that wasn’t what we should be worried about.”

Centrality of Relationships

Teachers perceived their role as flexible and expansive. “We’re kind of a cross between a teacher and a counselor, a motivator, a mentor, a leader, all at the same time.” We are “a listener and a caregiver in a sense in dealing with social issues and life skills . . . as opposed to the educator that is separated from the students’ lives. . . . We take on a more personal role.” Teachers talked about “sharing their lives” with students, “being there” for them, and appreciating them as unique human beings. They said that this expanded role

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encouraged the growth of positive and responsive relationships essential to facilitating students' healthy development. The most important difference between this school and others is “the relationships that teachers and staff are encouraged to have with the kids. . . . The number one thing is the relationships.” Caring is fundamental to these relationships. “It’s the caring that helps develop the relationships. And relationships are paramount to . . . change.”

Showing Respect

Respect for students came through repeatedly as a key factor in the development of close, trusting relationships. Teachers viewed their students not as problems but as survivors worthy of respect, as people for whom “anything is possible and . . . [who are] resilient. . . . I really believe that kids need to be accepted just the way they are at the moment. . . . Every youth has a strength.” The teachers stressed that what is important is not students' respect for teachers and other staff, but rather the reverse, staff members' respect for each and every student. Respect for students is given unconditionally and is not based on accomplishments, good behavior, or compliance, but simply as a response to “their individuality. . . . They may be a drug addict and that doesn't mean they're less deserving of our respect.” “It's not necessary for them to make changes based on what we thought was appropriate . . . in order to give them our respect.” The teachers operated on the principle that if they treated students with respect from the outset, “their respect for us will come later.” Teachers also commented that if they treated each other and guests who entered the building with respect, then students would learn from these nonconfrontational interactions: “That's a major benefit to students, to see that two people can talk without yelling at each other.”

Adapting Curriculum

Another important dimension of caring is adapting the curriculum in ways that enable every student to succeed. An individual educational plan is developed for each student, tailored to that student's interests, talents, prior knowledge, abilities, and goals. As Doug explained:

You have to view each student as an utter individual, and after all these years of working here I've maybe developed a certain repertoire of strategies . . . but each student is always completely and utterly unique, and my strategies are always altered for every single student.

Doug went on to say that when he teaches English, he uses what is most engaging for students first before moving on to other topics.

It's all different, all the trends students are involved in, but at present a really successful assignment is to do a hip-hop poetry anthology, so they'll get their rhymes from their favorite rappers, and include some of their own poetry. And right now that's really positive or successful because the students are enthused about it.

Other examples were recorded in field notes. One boy who resisted reading literature was interested in obtaining his driver's license. The teacher used the driver's handbook as the basis for his English curriculum until the student was interested in moving on to reading novels and short stories. Another boy, of First Nations' heritage and a talented artist, used art as the basis for successfully completing his social studies course. The following conversation occurred with a boy who wanted to complete his English course, but who was adamantly refusing to read or write anything.

Student: Just because you are from the university, it doesn't mean you can make me read or write.

Researcher: I'm not here to do that. By the way, did you know that at the university we learn that English isn't really about reading and writing? It's about something bigger. Like understanding how people think and why they do and say the things they do, and about learning to communicate.

Student: Huh, so?

Researcher: Do you have a favorite movie or TV show?

Student: I don't go to movies, but I like *The Simpsons* and the Comedy Channel.

Researcher: Well, *The Simpsons* is all about life, people's decisions, and communication. What if your teacher videotaped these shows and asked you questions on a tape recorder, and you answered on tape?

Student: And I'd get my English?

Principal: Sure, we could start there and move on to other shows and media.

Student: Well . . . okay.

Researcher: [Two weeks later, I returned to the school and observed the boy reading and writing with other students. He looked a little embarrassed, and said, "Yeah, I'm doing this now! It's okay."]

The use of flexible, individualized programs enables the teachers to let students take the lead in their learning. Matt commented, "I let the students lead. I think that's one of the biggest things because it's an issue for at-risk youth if they feel like someone's forcing them to do something. . . . They

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want to be their own leaders.” Care is taken so that students do not feel embarrassed by their learning difficulties, as illustrated by this example:

I can think of a girl last week who can't read, and obviously, she wouldn't want anyone to know, and based on that . . . caring perspective, we made sure right away that when it was time . . . for her to read a book, and this was planned out long before she got here, a person would take her away from the group, in private, and read with her . . . so she wouldn't feel humiliated. (Terri)

Empathetic and Nonreactive

The school's commitment to care influences how teachers and other staff members respond when students are upset, acting out, or being disruptive. The teachers look beyond the students' behavior to uncover underlying problems or triggers. “That's one thing I've learned, that the most hostile student, their hostility becomes more a scent of something else, and you're able to take it as such and not be personally affected by it.” If a student is unable to be in the classroom, the teacher leads the student to a quiet place, or asks the youth worker to take the student for a walk or for coffee. If there are issues that require further intervention, staff members meet later to help find an appropriate solution.

Teachers react calmly and quietly even when students are extremely disruptive. Their nonreactive manner seems to have a calming effect on the class. For example, we observed an altercation between students, where one student started yelling and pushing another and the other student shoved back. The teacher walked over to the students and stood in the middle, holding the arm of one and talking quietly to them. Gradually each student backed off, and the teacher was able to diffuse the situation.

Swearing is not an issue with the teachers (or other staff). “We don't sweat the small stuff,” they say. Teachers regard inappropriate language as symptomatic of other issues, or as vocabulary common in students' households. Terri described one of her students as “overexposed to adult knowledge,” and, she observed, “swearing wasn't the issue . . . but rather . . . a sign of something else.” Teachers said that swearing was more common with the newer students and that it often dissipated when they got to know the staff. As researchers, we often heard one of the longer-term students saying to a newcomer something like “Hey, cool the language, you're around (Paul [administrator]/Terri [teacher]), you know!” One of the students explained to Grout:

You know, if you swear at a teacher here it's not a good thing . . . but no one pays attention to it, they just leave it alone. . . . You know, if we can do stuff like that then it just lets off steam, and then we don't have to do anything worse . . . the bigger issues don't come up.

Goals: In the Child's Best Interests

The teachers' goals for the students center around valuing them for who they are, providing a place of healing, helping them discover their talents, providing them with skills for life, and giving them hope for the future. These teachers see their role as being different from that of the "typical" teacher who, they say, is primarily concerned with students' academic success.

We've had students who have had really bad school experiences and really traumatic personal lives, and I think we can give them a place where they can regroup . . . where they can grow and develop and be happy. . . . The healing aspect is just huge. . . . It includes a person gaining confidence in themselves and being able to achieve as a result and . . . seeing themselves as worthwhile. (Terri)

Students' Conceptions of Care

[The school is] more smaller, more caring. I think the teachers here actually, like, want you to succeed.

The students who participated in the interviews differed in many ways: age (from 14 to 20), ethnicity, geographic location, length of time at the school (from two weeks to two years), criminal offenses, and the types of challenges they faced in their lives. Yet there was remarkable consistency in the kinds of things they said about the school and staff and how they described caring, the impact the school had on their lives, and what they would tell teachers who teach "kids like us." They were forthright in their responses and seemed pleased to be asked for their opinions.

Feeling Welcome

Students describe the school as a place where they feel comfortable and welcome. One student said, "Like they understood me before I even came to the school. Everything was the way I would want the school to be." Students commented on the small class size, the casual atmosphere, the use of first

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names, and the fact that the school had a kitchen and a games room and that they did interesting activities outside the classroom. Students talked extensively about feeling safe at the school—psychologically, emotionally, and physically. This was interesting to us since many of these youth had been labeled as disruptive or violent at other schools—as the ones causing others to feel unsafe. Students said that they felt safe to be upset if they had problems at home. They felt safe to ask for help. They also felt safe from adults who labeled them and who yelled at them. Several students noted that at Whytecliff the adults do not overreact, are there for them, and resolve issues quickly. “What I like about the school is how it runs, you know, everything calm and smooth. And if there’s a little ripple, it’s fixed, quick.”

Being Acknowledged and Understood

The students placed a high value on being acknowledged and understood. They said that the staff at this school understands them, in contrast to the staff in previous schools.

Other principals just judge me and my life. . . . The principal here, he understands. He knows what’s going on. . . . And the teachers here, they’re just funny, and they understand you more than anyone else does, and they actually talk to you about what’s going on, while other teachers are just like, “whatever, just do your work.”

Students said that at other schools, they were viewed as “troublemakers,” as “kids who didn’t care,” as “little punks,” and the schools were happy to get rid of them. The students regard themselves as “different . . . not from the white picket fence kind of environment . . . a bit like rebels,” but at Whytecliff this is “no big deal.” The teachers at Whytecliff know how to “deal with kids like us,” and when a problem occurs, teachers “react calmly” and “make everything small.” At other schools, students said that the staff’s lack of understanding of them and their problems led to conflicts with school authorities and disruptions in their education. “At regular schools, you slip up just a little bit, you know what I mean, and you get in so much trouble, so much trouble. You’ve got to see the principal, and you’ve got to have a meeting with your parents, and this and that and the other thing, before you can even go back to class.” Teachers at Whytecliff are seen as actively working to understand them. “[Doug] is just like, if I don’t want to work, if I’m getting frustrated or something, he’ll just sit down, talk to me, just see what I do and all that. Like, he wants to know about me.”

Feeling Respected

Students see their teachers' respect for them as key to their success at school. At previous schools, they said, respect was something that they were required to show teachers, and it was not reciprocated. "Because at other schools . . . you're forced to respect the teacher. If she's mean to you, you still have to respect her. But here you gain the respect of those people, and people here, they gain the respect of you. So it's a two-way thing, and not a one-way." Students' responses confirmed the staff's view that if respect was shown to students without it having to be earned, then students' respect for them and others would follow. For most students, being respected by an adult was a novel experience. "For a long time I haven't respected anyone and I haven't received any respect back, but then I started being respected as soon as I got here, so I started respecting other people." One student talked about how a respectful tone pervaded the school. "Well, like we respect them and they respect us. Everyone's nice to you but no one will come up to you and be like 'your hat's ugly' and stuff like that. I mean everyone's cool about that. Everyone's friendly to each other and respecting each other."

Students also associated respect with teachers encouraging them, rather than forcing them, to do their work. They said that their cooperation was more likely to be forthcoming if it was not forced. "Like at other schools, I tend not to want to listen to authority 'cause it's the whole respect thing. Being forced to do something I don't want to do. . . . Here I'm not forced to do anything." This student went on to explain that at Whytecliff, if his teacher asks him to work "and I don't feel like working, that doesn't mean that I'm not going to work. I'm going to work because the teacher asked me to out of respect of him being a friend." Being treated with respect also reduced potential acting-out behavior; as one student explained, "It makes me feel that you don't need to prove yourself . . . like if you act out here, you just make yourself look dumb."

Receiving Needed Help

Students see care in a very practical way: "You always have help when you need it." Help with schoolwork is highly valued. Students reported that at previous schools they routinely had had major difficulty in understanding course content and teachers' explanations and in getting the help they needed. "They [teachers at previous schools] don't listen to you as much . . . like I'll ask for help . . . sometimes they just totally ignore you. . . . The teachers here, like, actually want you to succeed, they'll actually help you out." Students also said that, when they didn't understand the work, the teachers at Whytecliff

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would keep trying different approaches until they understood. And their explanations made sense.

Like some of the teachers [at previous schools] would come in, and they didn't even know how to explain it. They explained it in a way that I didn't understand, and he, [Adam] did it, like, he didn't stop trying to teach me 'til I caught on, and then we'd figure out what I needed to learn, kind of thing. It was good.

Help with their personal problems is also an important component of being cared for. Students spoke of being able to approach any staff member for help. Many spoke of the helpfulness and availability of the principal. “If I'm in a problem of any sort, I can go to him and he'll help me out with advice.” “He's very human, he's always worried about kids, you know, like, if there's something troubling them, whether drugs or family or whatever, he's willing to sit there and listen. You know, and try and help you out through your problems. And that's all somebody can ask for when they need help, is help.”

Being a Friend

Students commented that this school was “not like a school,” that they didn't “feel like a student,” and that the teachers were “not like normal teachers,” but rather “kind of like a group of friends.”

Student: A teacher can care. And if a teacher's your friend, then they care. If someone actually worries.

Researcher: Can you give me an example of a time you felt cared for?

Student: Mm, the whole time.

Researcher: Just the whole thing?

Student: Yeah, cause they don't act like teachers; they act like, kind of, friends and stuff.

One student explained that he saw the teachers as “more personal, straight up, interactive. . . . They care about my health. They care about my well-being, you know. They care about how I'm doing and stuff like that, and that's what I like about it actually. They're in it for us.”

The Impact of Caring

Attitude toward School and Learning

Each student interviewed said that his or her attitude toward school had changed. Students said that they felt safe to ask questions, to take chances, and to share their inner thoughts in creative writing and other forms of expression. One student said that when his teacher gave him books that matched his interests, his reading “skyrocketed right off the roof.” Another student said he felt safe enough to make a mistake and to admit his lack of knowledge: “It makes me more comfortable, the environment. Some things . . . you’re supposed to know, but you just don’t. Like something simple, like which side your heart is on. Like some people don’t know that I guess. I think it’s on your left side.” Creative writing allowed another student to express parts of his life that he had to suppress in the past: “It’s easy for me and it’s a way that I can express part of myself. It doesn’t seem like work, it’s just putting down my thoughts on paper.” At previous schools, things were different: “Well, they called it creative writing, but a lot of times the teacher would say ‘okay, it’s creative writing time and here’s your topic, write.’ I don’t think that’s really creative writing; that’s writing about an idea that someone else gave you.” Students also liked the fact that at this school they could laugh and that fun was infused into the learning: “That’s the way the school goes. You say something, and then someone else says something, and then everybody will laugh.”

Students said that they felt they had a chance to succeed at this school and that they were not judged according to their past files or history. Each day was a fresh start. One student said that he had been expelled from a previous school, not because the incident was serious but because of his reputation and history.

Like I have a violent history right? If I fought in public school, you know, I was gone that year, not even a second thinking about it. “Bye, see you later,” just because of my history. Where at this place they don’t judge you by your history, they judge you on your act, how you react to things, and how much you take responsibility for it.

Another student talked about the huge file previous schools kept on him. He stated that at this school he had no file: “Maybe my name and that’s about it.” Students experienced success at Whytecliff and were enjoying it.

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I accomplished something. I got my report card just recently. I got 89 percent on my English. . . . Whoa! . . . [I was] really happy like, satisfying myself like that, it's like a drug I can't buy, and I love it! You know it's cool. And, it's addictive, but in a good way. In a positive way, that everyone can relate to.

When asked to list four or five words that described the teachers at Whytecliff, one student (who had been expelled from a former school) said that he needed only one word, “Perfect!” When the researcher responded, “That’s pretty high praise,” the student replied, “They’re perfect to a point. They’re perfect on what they do for their jobs. They’re perfect on working with kids. They’re perfect, they’re perfect, it’s hard to explain them, like, they’re perfect.”

Emotional Issues

Students view the school as helping them cope with their emotions. They reported being less volatile and angry and said they felt better about themselves. Students attribute these changes to the calm, nonreactive manner of the staff, being able to talk about their problems, and feeling that they could succeed in school. The word “mellow” surfaced in many interviews as the descriptor for the way students now describe themselves.

Student: At regular schools I'd get my teachers pissed off so easily, but here the teachers don't get mad. They know how to control their anger.

Researcher: So what effect does that have on you?

Student: It makes us a little bit more mellow.

A few students used the word “happy” to describe their demeanor: “Like every morning, when I get up, you know, if I’m not working and I’m going to school, I’m happy. . . . Like you know, knowing that I accomplished something, like two chapters in a book today, I’m happy.”

We observed one girl who had been a member of a gang and wouldn't speak to anyone when she first came into the program. She stared straight ahead and glared at anyone who looked at her. The staff gave her space and had her work ready on her desk at the start of each day. Every Tuesday (along with other students) she picked up her handwritten note from the principal, with a positive message written on it. We observed that on the days when hot chocolate was served, she would take a cup. Then one day, about a month after she arrived, she turned to the principal and said: “I like marshmallows in my hot chocolate.” The principal later said that this was the first time she

had volunteered a comment and that this was a turning point. She ended up graduating from the school and is now in an honors university program.

Perceptions of Others

Students reported that their perceptions of adults had changed and that they now saw them as being more caring and more respectful. As one student put it: "There are people that care about you, not just in this school but in my personal life as well. I kind of realize that some people care about me more than I thought." Students also said that they have become more tolerant and respectful toward others. They are less likely to judge someone based on external impressions and more likely to reserve judgment and try to get to know that person. A student with a very troubled past who had been a drug dealer said, "Now when I meet somebody . . . I don't just look at them and label them. I actually talk to them and you know, label them from the inside."

Caring for Self

A few students described how they started to care more for themselves as a result of the care and attention they received from the adults at the school.

When I first started at this school I would slack off a lot, and after a while I had a meeting with [Paul] and . . . my family worker, and they were telling me about how they care about me, how they want me here, and me here makes the school a better place, kind of thing. And that's when I felt that I really cared, and ever since then I would come to school as much as I can. I only missed it once in a while, like if I was sick in the morning. But besides that I'm always here. Like, I love this place.

Another student said:

One thing I've learned in this school is that to love something or somebody, you have to love yourself for who you are. . . . My mom, you know, she's never really been around for me, and neither has my dad. . . . I used to blame my mom and my dad for my dangerousness and stuff . . . but since coming here . . . I've taken responsibility for my own actions, the pain that I've caused. . . . I've learned from my mistakes, and I've moved on . . . and this is what the school has taught me. You know, today is today . . . tomorrow is tomorrow.

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Improved Futures

Prior to coming to the school, each youth was involved in criminal activity and most were part of destructive peer groups. In many cases, their perceptions of their potential success in life were unrealistic or skewed; for example, one student thought he would become a self-made millionaire, and another thought he could only succeed by increasing his criminal activity. Even those students who had been at the school for a short time reported a change in the way they made decisions and in their outlook on life. Many said that they were more likely to consider the consequences of their actions and to discuss alternatives with teachers and others before making decisions. They also reported changes in their thinking about what they could do and hoped to do, and they were more optimistic about their futures. One student observed, “Going to [this] school made me realize . . . I can get back into school and I can help out and be a normal person.” Another student said, “I’ve always hoped for the best. I think going to this school changed my perspective of what’s the best and what I would want to do.” When asked what that was, the student replied, “start a small business.” Another student talked about moving away from “dead ends, like criminal activity . . . the people here are always like, you can do whatever you want. Now I think I can be a doctor.”

What Makes a Good and Caring Teacher?

At the end of each student’s interview, we asked what advice he or she would give to a group of beginning teachers. Many of their comments had to do with caring for students like themselves. They wanted teachers to listen to them, to be a good person and a friend, to take a personal interest in them, to treat students with respect, to help them succeed, and to show care. One boy said, “got to have personality and an open personality, ’cause every kid is different; gotta have respect; just gotta care about kids, about their well-being, how they’re doing.” One girl wanted “someone who looks out for you at the school. Someone who doesn’t accuse people, they find out what really happened. Someone who listens.” Another student said, “I’d tell them that [a good teacher] is someone that is caring and actually asks the students how their day was, and was a lot more personal with the students, more laid back and doesn’t force the students to do their work, but asks them and reminds them.” Students concurred that showing care was an important part of being a teacher. One boy said that the greatest thing a teacher can do is “to care . . . to understand. You’ve got to go beyond the boundaries of what you’re supposed to be doing as a teacher to help the person learn. Because if not,

the kid will say, 'Oh, they're giving up on me, so I might as well give up on myself.'"

Discussion of Findings

Whytecliff Education Centre was established to meet the multiple needs of a highly vulnerable population of youth at risk of dropping out or being pushed out of school. The school was designed according to a collaboratively constructed ethic of care, which continues to guide every aspect of its operation. In this investigation, we examined administrators' and teachers' conceptions of care and how care is enacted in the school. As well, we asked students how they described care, whether they felt cared for, and the impact the school had on their lives.

The perceptions of caring and its enactment differed in some ways according to the lens of the participant group, as might be expected given the different roles and responsibilities of each. The administrators talked most about creating the right environment and embedding care in school policies and practices. The teachers focused on building relationships with students and developing a flexible and responsive curriculum that allowed each student to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. Students talked about caring in relation to their own life experiences and needs—of wanting to be accepted, understood, respected, and helped.

At the core of all three groups' perceptions of caring is the importance of building respectful, responsive, and supportive relationships and, through these relationships, meeting the needs of children in flexible and insightful ways. All three groups compared the school to a home or family, where the young and vulnerable felt safe and were nurtured and where the adults worked in partnership to provide positive emotional, social, and academic growth for each youth. The school's vision statement, which is used as the guide to practice, frequently discussed with students, and prominently displayed throughout the school, is key to the cohesiveness of the school as a caring community and to the similarity of conceptions of caring among community members. Rather than being dogmatic or doctrinaire, the vision statement is lived out by staff members and interpreted in the context of each unfolding day.

The ways teachers and administrators perceive and enact caring at the school are consistent with the literature (e.g., Beck 1992; Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002; Prillamen and Eaker 1994; Rauner 2000; Witherell 1991). Caring is seen as embedded in relationships, as needing to be recognized by the receivers of care, as individually focused, and as being variably responsive to students' needs as whole beings. Staff members at the school seek to model

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and practice care with each other and with students, to make care central to their dialogue, and to confirm caring practices when observed in others (Noddings 1992, 2002). Staff take time to listen to students, do not overreact when students' behavior is challenging, and work toward the other's well-being (Beck 1992; May 1992; Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002; Rogers 1994; Tronto 1993). The metaphor of the soil is indicative of the staff's attentiveness to creating the right environment to allow young people to flourish.

Noddings (1984, 1992) argues that caring is not complete unless recipients recognize that they are being cared for and respond in some way to that care. Tronto (1993) observes that caregivers who make decisions about caring need to be in close proximity to care receivers in order for care to be genuine, effective, and received. Students at Whytecliff spoke fervently and unreservedly of the care they received from teachers and administrators who were accessible and open, and of the difference caring made in their own development, schoolwork, and overall well-being. As researchers we were surprised by the strength of the positive feelings that each student had for the staff and the school, even the one student who had been in the program for only two weeks and the three former students who had been out of the program for two to three years. Not one staff person was singled out as being a problem, even though the researchers gave the students ample opportunity to be critical and students knew their answers would remain anonymous. Nor did we observe, while we were on site, students saying negative things about the staff, or vice versa, staff about students. Many of the students felt especially close to the principal, and former students said they frequently kept in touch with him by phone or in person. One former student said that he would definitely be coming back soon so that he could cook the principal a vegetarian meal.⁶

Another finding was the staff members' genuine affection and high regard for the students (Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002; Rauner 2000). Despite the fact that the students had been involved in criminal behavior and had come to the school with files labeling them as troublemakers and having a “severe behavior disorder,” the staff held them in high esteem, viewing them as “survivors” with whom they were privileged to spend time. Staff sought to develop students' talents and interests, focusing on the positives in their lives rather than the negatives. This approach allowed the staff to look holistically at the multiple influences on the lives of these youth and to work toward moderating these, rather than to focus on the problems or deficits that needed rectifying (Cummins 1986). Using the soil metaphor, the staff concentrated on getting their own houses in order—developing structures and practices that allowed each “plant” to thrive and to grow in his or her own way (Prillamen and Eaker 1994).

The school staff gave students a voice in decision making about curriculum, built friendships with students, expanded the curriculum beyond the classroom

walls into the community, worked with students' families and their peers, and, as such, provided students with a positive and supportive learning environment that was poles apart from the social and economic marginalization they experienced in the wider society (Cummins 1986; MacLeod 1995). The school was designed to adapt to the needs of each student rather than to ask the student to adapt to the expectations of the school (Deschenes et al. 2001). The staff at Whytecliff believed, just as Noddings (1984, 1992, 2002) and others have expressed, that if they modeled care, provided opportunities for all to practice care, made care central to dialogue, and confirmed care in each other and in students, this would have a powerful positive influence on the youth. Because care was central to the vision, policies, and practices and was played out contextually each day, there was no need for rules to regulate students' behavior. Staff members were given the freedom to focus on building relationships with each other and with students and on implementing care in a flexible and context-specific manner (Noddings 1984, 1992; Prillamen and Eaker 1994).

Bridges were built between the students and the staff (Conchas 2001), and family workers and youth workers forged links between the school and the home, and between the home and the community. The caring culture of the school was extended through the partnerships created among the students, staff, parents, and community (Epstein 1999).

The staff's high regard for each student and absence of negative judgment was highly salient to students. Accustomed to being treated as troublemakers and stereotyped, students were encouraged by the staff's different view of them at this school. It was as if their past did not exist and a fresh start was possible each day. There was a sense of forgiveness. One student summed up this perspective when he talked about how he is treated by the principal: "He treats me, he treats us like human beings, instead of just a place where he works."

We were struck by the fact that the students were able to enter into caring relationships so quickly despite their troubled histories. Several students indicated that they had never before felt cared for by a teacher or a school principal, and some not even by their parents. Yet all recognized caring when it occurred and responded openly and appreciatively when it was offered (Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002). Further, caring, as it was manifested at the school, seemed to make an immediate impact on the lives of the youth and their perceptions of self and others (Kozol 1995). This suggests that there is something fundamental and perhaps instinctive about caring and the ability of humans to recognize and participate in caring relationships, even without prior experience (Noddings 1984, 1992). It may also suggest the vulnerability of each of the students, despite a hardened exterior—that each is reaching out to be cared for and to care.

It appears that this school, which makes caring central to what it does, has had a powerful impact on the lives of high need youth, even those who attended

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the school for only a short time. Our findings suggest that the founders and staff of the school have been successful in their goal of creating a “safe, respectful, and nurturing community”—a place of caring for students who, in other educational contexts, were at risk for “dropping out” or being “pushed out.”

Implications for Schools in General

Although Whytecliff is small in size with a low student-teacher ratio and a dedicated focus to a particular student population, making it therefore atypical in comparison with most schools, this study offers insight into practices that engage “troubled” and “troublesome” youth. The study reinforces the notion espoused by Greene (1991) and by Noddings (1988) that care, if implemented, will break apart existing structures, policies, and practices and manifest itself in less hierarchical and more student-centered ways. The staff’s focus on creating the right soil for students invites educators to examine whether there are policies or practices in their school that could be changed to permit this student population to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically. Jackson et al. (1993) describe how even the little things in a school communicate moral messages to students about their worth, acceptance, and potential for success.

This study shows the impact one small school can have on the lives of some of the most challenging adolescents in the school system. Each student interviewed sang the praises of the school. Yet these same students had only negative experiences to report regarding their previous schools. They said that there they felt unwanted, misunderstood, labeled, blamed, pressured, and yelled at. The obvious question to ask is, Why did these students have this perception? Was it that the teachers and principals at their former schools tried to care but that their actions were not recognized as caring or that the care was not received by the youth (Noddings 1984, 1992, 2002)? Or was it that these highly vulnerable students had special needs that were not perceived or acted upon, and therefore they did not feel cared for (Beck 1992; Greene 1991; Noddings 1992)? The students reported that they wanted to be listened to, given choices, respected, and helped with schoolwork. Tronto (1993) notes that “care as a practice involves more than simply good intentions. It requires a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and of all of the actors’ situations, needs and competencies” (136). Or, did the students’ former schools lay the foundation for the students’ success at Whytecliff? Greg, one of the Whytecliff’s founders, said that their program stands

on the shoulders of the work that has been done in the past with the individual and that . . . developmentally we never know when the kid

is going to get it . . . the light switch comes on and suddenly they understand for the first time that they have value. . . . We're privileged to see a lot of kids make those big steps with us.

Educators in schools today are pressured to teach to a standardized curriculum and to improve test scores (Kohn 2000). Is this drive thwarting teachers' desire or ability to care for all students, especially the more challenging ones (Noddings 2002)? Hayes et al. (1994) found, in their study of middle school students' perceptions of caring teachers, that students wanted most to be responded to as individuals, helped with their school work, and given encouragement to succeed, which included respect, praise, and instilling confidence. These are the same things the nonmainstream population of students described in our study sought from their teachers.

The challenge for school administrators and teachers is to perceive opportunities to care, to find ways to enact care so that caring is received and benefits the receiver, and to do this in an era of competing expectations and pressures. How to balance these demands, in various educational contexts, is a topic that merits further study.

Notes

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1. Since this study was completed, a second school site has opened closer to the urban core, serving a similar student population. The school hopes to further expand into other locations and to include more students who are not involved in criminal activity but who need a similar kind of educational experience to thrive.

2. The numbers described here represent what we found at the school at the time of the study, but they are also typical of the school at any given time.

3. We also interviewed the youth workers and family workers at this school, as well as several parents; this portion of the study will be reported in a separate paper.

4. The names of the administrators and teachers have been changed for purposes of this article. In some instances, a quotation is attributed to a particular administrator or teacher. In other instances, where a quotation is more generic and similar to statements made by others, no name is attached.

5. The other founder of the program has a doctorate in clinical social work and several years of experience developing research-based, community-focused programs for "at-risk" youth.

6. This student made this comment because he said that he was impressed that the principal, a vegetarian, would often barbeque hamburgers for the students.

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