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Caring in a Small Urban High School: A Complicated Success

Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen[1]

Abstract

This article focuses on a small urban high school that developed a culture devoted to caring for their historically underserved students. Interviews with school founders, teachers, and alumni, as well as observations of classrooms and professional activities, revealed the high school attended to the affective needs of their students, which improved attendance and graduation rates, but often neglected to hold students to high academic standards, which led to future underperformance. The article concludes that, absent a fundamental belief that students are capable of high-quality work, other forms of caring are insufficient.

Keywords

caring, case studies, culture, low expectations, small schools, social context in education, urban

Introduction

Noddings (1992), Fine and Somerville (1998), Rolón-Dow (2005), and Ancess (2008) suggest that caring is a critical element in education. They argue that caring teachers and school environments provide students with academic rigor while supporting them emotionally. This is especially true in

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historically underserved schools located in poor and minority communities (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rolón-Dow, 2005). A caring education provides students who have a history of poor academic outcomes with an environment that is both emotionally nurturing and academically rigorous. Furthermore, caring academic environments provide these students with additional academic supports to remediate areas of weaknesses for students who typically receive little or no support. When students are sufficiently cared for, there can be a significant interruption of failure, and students can be empowered to become academically successful.

Ancess (2003, 2008) and Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) argue that this kind of caring can counteract the negative forces in communities where large-scale student failure is predictable. Caring education, they argue, can be a counteracting force. Rather than maintaining the status quo, in schools where caring is an integral part of the culture, educators work to understand the experiences of their students and their families and use the personal connections they forge to help students achieve academic success. Schools that care develop resources to support their students emotionally, socially, and academically, all in the efforts to graduate students and provide them the opportunity to achieve success at the collegiate level.

To better understand the dynamic of caring in schools, this research focused on one school that was devoted to caring for their students because their student population had been historically underserved. Bridges Institute was founded in 1994, in the wake of the restructuring of Presidential HS, a failing community high school in the Bronx. Presidential's final graduation rate in 1993 was 26.9% (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Ort, 2002). Bridges' founders deliberately recruited and hired experienced staff members from both the school that was phasing out and other NYC small high schools. According to Deborah Meier, the interview committee—which was composed of herself, a teacher union representative and the school founder—made it clear to all teacher applicants that a great deal of effort and commitment would be required of them. Meier recalls that the few teachers from Presidential who did express an interest in applying for a teaching position indicated that they were too far along in their careers to start all over again. Ultimately, Bridges' inaugural teaching staff was comprised of experienced small schools veterans.

Like the failing Presidential HS, Bridges accepted all students who lived in the Presidential geographic zone; there were no other admission requirements. In their inaugural class, 100% of the 61 students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 14% were classified as learning disabled. Bridges was designed to be a neighborhood school, and the founders were committed to

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creating a school that would do better than their predecessor. Bridges' founders were well aware of the dismal statistics of the failed high school, and they were also aware that the feeder middle schools had similar academic outcomes. When the founders conceptualized Bridges, they did so with an eye toward creating a caring school model that addressed the previous academic experiences of their students. Using Deborah Meier's renowned Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) as a model, Bridges' school was designed to leverage caring relationships with students to help them acquire the skills they would need to be successful in college. Like the CPESS staff, Bridges' founders sought to create a more personalized community of teachers and learners. Bridges' founders wanted to provide a rigorous education for their students through a caring school model. This research examines in what ways Bridges Institute's caring approach to education was successful. Specifically, how did the school's caring model adequately prepare students to be successful beyond graduation?

Literature Review

At the core of an effective caring pedagogical practice is the understanding that students, regardless of their life circumstances, must meet and exceed minimum academic standards. Katz (1999) argues that caring and high expectations go hand in hand; if you are going to demand high expectations, then you will need to have a caring environment. "High expectations without caring," she writes "can result in setting goals that are impossible for the student to reach without adult support and assistance" (Katz, 1999, p. 814). It is not enough to simply care though. "Caring without high expectations can turn dangerously into paternalism in which teachers feel sorry for underprivileged youth but never challenge them academically" (Katz, 1999, p. 814). As such, teachers who care must maintain high expectations of their students. In their work on caring teachers, Bondy and Ross (2008) note that "warm demanders . . . insist." that students perform to a high standard" (p. 58). "Warm demanders" are educators who push students to excel in a manner that conveys warmth and unconditional support (Bondy & Ross, 2008). Caring teachers encourage students to be ambitious, hard-working, and, ultimately, achieve academic success. In school contexts where students have historically been academically and otherwise disadvantaged, it is easy for teachers who care to coddle students, lowering expectations for them because of the societal challenges the students may face (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Katz, 1999). However, lowered expectations, for whatever reason, are the antithesis of an ethic of caring

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(Valenzuela, 1999). Lowered expectations not only affect academically successful students, but also affect students' perceptions of teachers. In fact, Alder's (2002) research suggests that students perceived that teachers who pushed them academically were displaying an ethic of caring. Although a more complete understanding of the whole child is critical, the literature suggests that caring teachers do not allow the legacy of inequity to serve as an excuse for anything less than academic excellence (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rolón-Dow, 2005). On the contrary, caring teachers understand the importance of demanding high-level work from their students, while providing a positive, nurturing environment (Valenzuela, 1999).

Teachers who care must also develop an acute understanding of the sociocultural and political contexts that have an impact on the lives of their students. For students of color especially, Rolón-Dow (2005) argues that teachers "must seek to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities" (p. 104). That is, teachers who care must understand that for students of color living in poor communities that are politically disenfranchised, are the victims of inequitable resource distribution (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Unlike the more affluent and White communities where the parent demands lead to more material resources and better prepared teachers for their neighborhood schools, high-poverty communities of color often do not have the necessary political clout to amass the resources needed to adequately support student growth. With respect to Latino/a students, Rodriguez (2012) argues that school practitioners must apply "Contextualizing Recognition," to understand the broader contexts that directly impact their learning experiences. That is, there must be a consideration of the

> social, political, historical, and economic conditions that low-income, linguistically diverse, Latino/a youth face in the school and social context. Since the social context directly impacts school life, contextualizing recognition challenges institutions and educators to examine how various factors impact student learning, student engagement, and opportunities to learn within and beyond the school context (Rodriguez, 2012, Contextualizing Recognition section, para. 1).

Without understanding the ways in which these conditions affect how students interact with and engage in school, a teacher's ability to care for their students is limited (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). Gomez, Allen, and Clinton (2004) suggest

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that caring is filtered through one's own cultural frame of reference. Therefore, without an "explicit focus on the cultural and institutional contexts" (Gomez et al., 2004, p. 477), a teacher's pedagogical approach to caring may be framed in a manner that is not suited to his or her students' needs. Teachers may lower standards for their students because they are unaware of the sociocultural and political contexts and the consequences that lowered standards can have for students of color, in particular.

In pedagogical practice that incorporates a caring ethic, teachers maximize opportunities to know their students, families and communities. As Gonzalez and Ayala-Alcantar (2008) argue, "students and their families [must] be perceived as worthy of the time and energy needed to optimize educational outcomes" (p. 133). By using the student's home and community as a starting point, caring teachers identify ways to "instruct students that fit in with and build on the patterns and norms of their community" (Beyer, 1998, p. 260). By valuing and tapping into their students' family and community funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992), caring teachers work to bridge students' home knowledge to more standard forms of knowledge as well as use the parental relationships to leverage student success. Teachers who care, as Ladson-Billings (1995) writes, "utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning" (p. 161).

To facilitate student success, teachers who demonstrate an ethic of caring explicitly communicate standards to their students, helping students both navigate those standards and develop critical consciousness about them as well. As Christensen (1990) writes, students need to be taught the "language of power." That is, students need to be taught to communicate and become conversant in the standard forms of each discipline. Delpit (1995, 2006) argues that students who are not a part of the majority White culture should be taught to value their own norms for speaking and writing, while learning how to switch "codes" to communicate using the language of power, which is valued in broader society. To withhold that knowledge would "handicap students by limiting their opportunities in education and their mobility in society" (Jackson, 2009, p. 40). However, teaching students the standards is not enough. Christensen (1990) notes that "asking [her] students to memorize the rules without asking who makes the rules, who enforces the rules, who benefits from the rules, who loses from the rules, who uses the rules to keep some in and others out, legitimates a social system that devalues students' knowledge . . ." (p. 40). Caring educators help their students develop a "critical consciousness" around standards and other "cultural norms, values, mores and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162).

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For teachers to care, they have to fundamentally believe that their students are capable of succeeding. Educators who care have to have a "belief that all students can be successful learners" (Dillon, 1989, p. 254). Bondy and Ross (2008) argue that in caring relationships, teachers must have "a belief in the [student's] capacity to succeed" (p. 55). Furthermore, they contend that students must be convinced that their teachers believe in them.

Teachers who demonstrate an ethic of caring provide their students with emotional support, "approaching their students with unconditional positive regard" (Bondy & Ross, 2008, p. 58). In authentic caring relationships, students "know they're valued irrespective of their accomplishments" (Kohn, 2005, p. 22). Caring teachers make an effort to "make [their students] feel recognized and supported" (Smith, 2000, p. 63), and, consequently, students are motivated to be more successful (Noddings, 1992). In fact, several studies suggest that the unconditional emotional support of teachers often makes students capable of accomplishing academic success (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Kohn, 2005; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995). This is especially true for students of color, for whom "supportive instrumental relationships" (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006, p. 413) with teachers are critical to success (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Valenzuela's seminal study of U.S.-born Mexican youth underscores the importance of authentic caring in supporting student achievement and growth. She argues that in an authentic caring model of schooling "the material, physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of youth will guide the educational process" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 110). When students are a part of culture that authentically values them and that is more responsive to their needs, they are more likely to succeed.

In conjunction with emotional support, however, caring teachers must also provide students with academic supports to ensure success. Alder (2002) argues that educators who demonstrate care for their students "make it their business to be aware of the particular learning styles of all students and then gear their curriculum and instruction." decisions accordingly" (p. 246). Furthermore, caring teachers are proactive about supporting their students academically before the students experience failure. In practical terms, teachers who care view "teaching as a matter of specifying what students must know, subtracting what it is that they already know, and teaching them the rest" (Jackson, 2009, p. 105).

Six basic categories of behaviors emerged from the research literature on care theory, and studies of caring school environments and teachers, and they formed the conceptual framework for this research. The behaviors include providing emotional and academic support (Ancess, 2008; Fine & Somerville,

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1998; Noddings, 1992), expecting a high level of work from students (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Katz, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rolón-Dow, 2005), valuing parents as resources (Beyer, 1998; Gonzalez & Ayala-Alcantar, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al., 1992), having an understanding of the sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that shape students' experiences with education (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Larson & Ovando, 2001; Rodriguez, 2012; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999), communicate standards (Christensen, 1990; Delpit, 1995, 2006), and having a belief that students are capable of academic rigor (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Dillon, 1989). These behaviors provided the framework that guided the analysis of the data collected for this research.

Method

To better understand the dynamic of caring in schools, this research focused on one school devoted to caring for their students: Bridges Institute, a small 500 student 9-12th grade high school in an urban environment with a 64% graduation rate. I used a qualitative grounded theory approach to gather and analyze the data (Foss & Waters, 2007; Glaser, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Magaldi-Dopman, Park-Taylor, & Ponterotto, 2011).

To collect data on the perceptions of caring and instructional practice, I conducted semistructured interviews with a total of 24 individuals (see Table 1). Interview participants were selected using convenience sampling with an effort to achieve wide representation across founding, veteran and novice staff, as well as nonpedagogical staff. Participants included seven founding staff members and leaders, five of whom were still at Bridges at the time of the research. In addition to the founding staff members, I interviewed three teachers who, at the time of this research, had been at Bridges Institute for more than 9 years, a science teacher who had been at Bridges for 4 years, and a humanities teacher and a teacher's aide who had both been at the school for 1 year. I also had several informal follow-up conversations with all of the participants who were still working at Bridges throughout the course of the study. Veteran teachers were selected for participation because they were most likely to have internalized the caring approach that was adopted by the Bridges at its inception. More novice teachers were selected to identify the extent to which newer staff members internalized Bridges' caring approach. In addition, to get the administrative perspective, I interviewed the former Department of Education Superintendant of Alternative Schools, as well as Deborah Meier, a prominent advocate of small school reform, and a key figure in the formation of Bridges Institute.

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Table 1. Interview and Focus Group Participants

Participants	Title
Founder of CCESP	
Deborah Meier	Small school reformer
Former district-level personnel	
Orin Rogers	Superintendent of alternative high schools and programs
Founding administrators/staff	
Phillip Wagner	Teacher leader
Mary Jones	Principal
Beth Martin	English teacher
Roberto Rodriguez	social worker
Barbara Michaels	Special education teacher
Linda Johnson	Art teacher
Maria Perez	Parent
Current administrators/staff	
Beth Martin	Founding teacher/current principal
Roberto Rodriguez	Social worker
Barbara Michaels	Special education teacher (1994-present)
Linda Johnson	Founding art teacher
Maria Perez	Founding parent/parent coordinator
Carolina Gutierrez	Humanities/history teacher (1997-present)
Natasha Franklin	Science teacher (1995-present)
Hannah Olsen	Science/math teacher (2002-present)
Diane O'Conner	Humanities teacher (2005-present)
Liliana Hernandez	Alum/teacher's aide (2005-present)
Former staff	
David Drucker	Principal (1998-2002)
Ursula Lewis	Humanities teacher (1999-2004)
Allison Engle	Humanities teacher (2000-2004)
Former students	
Michael Banks	1997-2001
Jasnira Vásquez	1998-2002
Wanda Colón	1998-2003
José Rojas	1999-2003
Liliana Hernandez	1997-2001
Robert Ramirez	1998-2002
Anthony Rodriguez	1998-2002

Note: CCESP = Central Park East Secondary School. Aside from Deborah Meier, all participants' names are pseudonyms.

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I conducted one interview with each participant, lasting between half an hour and an hour. To increase the academic success of their students, Bridges Institute used a caring approach to education. Open-ended interview questions focused on the ways in which participant's descriptions of the school's success did and did not invoke caring in a manner consistent with the literature.

To get the students' perspective, I facilitated a focus group of four alumni, as well as interviews with two alumni who visited the school while I was conducting research, to collect data on their perceptions of the impact Bridges' caring model had on their schooling after graduation. The focus group questions were open-ended and focused on their experiences with and their attitudes about caring at Bridges Institute. As noted earlier, one Bridges' alum also worked in the school at the time of this research; she was interviewed and shared her unique perspective as a staff member and former student. All interviews and the focus group were audiotaped and transcribed.

Through observations of classes, professional development activities and meetings, I collected field notes about the habits and behaviors related to caring at Bridges Institute. I observed four teachers' classes three times over the course of a semester. Of the four teachers, three had four or more years of experience in the school. The 4th was a 1st-year teacher. All teachers observed were also interviewed as part of this research. Although an observation protocol was developed for the classroom observations, it ultimately was not an appropriate fit for this research. Instead, I collected field notes that documented observations of behaviors and attitudes that related to literature on caring.

In addition, I observed professional development activities and staff meetings on a weekly basis during the school year. Professional development activities included curriculum and lesson planning, and reviews and assessments of student work. Staff meetings that I observed generally focused on grade-level logistical issues, including scheduling issues, parent notifications, and conversations about the progress of specific students. Similar to the data collection resulting from my classroom observations, I recorded field notes of interactions and behaviors that related to concepts reflected in the literature on caring during each observation, and I added reflections to these notes every evening on returning home.

I collected and hand coded archival documents that shed light on the school's founding principles and organization, including original reform plans, brochures, professional development agendas, and meeting minutes. These documents shed some light on the school's original design around the ethic of caring. Additional documents that highlighted the school's

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commitment to this ethic, including comprehensive educational plans, annual school report cards, agendas and personal communications were also reviewed. All of these documents helped to round out and corroborate the narrative created by the interviews, as well as to inform additional data collection.

As noted earlier, a review of the research literature on caring in education produced six basic categories of behaviors: (a) provide emotional and academic support, (b) expect high level of work from students, (c) value parents as resources, (d) have sociocultural and sociopolitical knowledge, (e) communicate standards, and (f) believe that students are capable. These six categories formed my start list of codes (Glaser, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that guided the data analysis. Using the frequency or intensity of units of analysis (here, the examples where caring was present or absent in stories about a student's success), I first coded all of the gathered data. After coding, I cut all of the relevant occurrences of each code and sorted them into like piles. Each pile was then rechecked to ensure that the data were, in fact, related to the assigned code. Once the data within each code were confirmed, the piles were arranged to form a larger exploratory framework that explained how caring was and was not evident at Bridges (Foss & Waters, 2007).

Results

Although Bridges performed caring well in several of the six categories that emerged from a review of the literature, the absence of sociocultural and sociopolitical knowledge and an absence of a belief that students were capable of meeting high academic standards created a culture of low expectations of students. Though teachers, staff, and students reported that students were given a great deal of emotional and academic support, in the end, absent the belief that students were capable of meeting high academic standards the Bridges' model of caring fell short of its intended goal of providing students with a rigorous education, leaving their students ill-prepared for college.

Provide Emotional and Academic Support

Alder (2002) reminds us that caring teachers must provide both emotional as well as academic support for their students. Caring for students emotionally involves valuing students unconditionally, regardless of students' accomplishments, to motivate them to be successful (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Kohn, 2005). At the same time, Jackson (2009) and Alder (2002) argue that teachers

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who care must provide students with appropriate academic supports or they risk failing to prepare students to succeed academically in the long run. At Bridges Institute, there was a fair amount of emotional support, but there was significant lack of academic support that scaffolded student acquisition of high-level skills. Consequently, students were often underprepared to meet the challenges in college.

Participant interviews indicated that emotional support in the form of encouragement, modeling behavior and nagging were important positive features at Bridges, but I rarely saw teachers push students to become more responsible for their own learning. For example, the parent coordinator at the school indicated that encouragement was often critical for students in a time of personal crisis. She recalled,

> We had a boy here, around the same time that my son was here, and he was going to give up. His mother and father never showed up. You know, and I kept pushing him. I said, "You know, you've got to keep trying. You've got to keep trying. You're so close. . . ." And he was thinking of giving up several times. But he did, he graduated.

Although this student had no parental support, the emotional support, the encouragement of the parent coordinator and other staff at Bridges Institute enabled him to graduate. As the caring literature suggests, students receiving emotional support are motivated to achieve academically (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Kohn, 2005; Noblit et al., 1995).

The parent coordinator recounted another incident where a student's personal issues threatened to interfere with his academics:

> . . . his girlfriend became pregnant. And he was going to give up, because he said, "I have to put . . . you know, I have to buy diapers and everything." And everyone here was pushing him, starting, I think, from here in the office. We were always right behind him.

Rather than allow the student to drop out of school to work, the coordinator and other office staff members were successful in encouraging and pushing him to continue in school. Liliana, a former student working at Bridges as a teacher's aide, explained that staff members often provided motivational support when students could not find it within themselves to be self-motivated.

Teachers at Bridges also supported their students emotionally by nagging students "to death," as one participant stated. Carolina, a veteran Bridges teacher, recalled,

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> We would call up parents, I would tell kids "you have to stay after school and get your homework done" and they would say "Oh I'm not staying." I'd go, "Yeah, you are." And you know you just make them do it. I think after a while they go to realize that they had to do it, because I remember the second year, in the ninth grade when we talked about community service, there were kids saying, "I'm not going to community service" and the kids in the tenth grade said, "Oh yeah you are! They're gonna make you go!"

Persistent nagging pushed the students to do the work they needed to do. Furthermore, it created a culture where upperclassmen would help socialize underclassmen.

After convincing students to stay in the school, teachers needed to support students through modeling, working with them step-by-step.

> And even for kids to see that you're really persistent-like we have a kid that wouldn't produce anything last year, and we got this kid doing projects and writing. And it's because we're not shutting him out, we're not saying "Oh well." We're saying, "*sit down,* and we're gonna do this together."

Rather than simply asking students to complete tasks, Bridges staff members guided students through the process, supporting them through to completion.

Although many faculties provided emotional caring and further supported students nagging and guidance, at times, other teachers I interviewed questioned their ability to reach out to students personally. For example, veteran teacher Carolina noted that there were limits to the kinds of emotional support students could be provided.

> You know teachers don't have the tools to deal with that. [I'm] not a psychologist! Teachers are not psychoanalysts or anything like that! We cannot give medication. I can only deal with you on one level: your intellectual level.

Carolina, like several other teachers, stressed that there were areas where teachers could not support students. In fact, she stressed that as a teacher she could only interact with students intellectually. This sentiment is contrary to the notion that caring educators should operate with an understanding of the importance of providing emotional supports for students in the service of academic support. Given some teachers' resistance to reaching out to students

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on a personal level, Bridges was able to demonstrate some emotional support, but only on a limited basis.

In addition to providing emotional support to students, the literature says that caring teachers need to know specifically how to provide students with academic support in areas where students are struggling (Alder, 2002; Jackson, 2009). At Bridges, one approach to support student academic development was to scaffold the teaching and learning, so as to gradually build students' knowledge. Natasha, a veteran Bridges teacher, explained,

> We design our assignments, projects and homework so that we start at the bottom with a basic or simple assignment and it will increase in its complexity in the weeks that follow, yet we will double back to make sure that the skills we taught in the beginning are not lost, and move on.

Natasha emphasized that ongoing reinforcement of learning was an integral part of the teaching practice at Bridges. Although this was the rhetoric that was espoused by this teacher and others at Bridges, it is important to note that observations of this particular teacher indicated that she had very low standards for her students and spent very little time on meaningful classroom instruction. For example, when asking students to complete a lab experiment she did not push all of her students to finish the task; rather, she performed the experiments for some of the students and gave them the answers to the lab questions. With respect to meeting Bridges Institute's goal of providing students with a rigorous education, it is uncertain if the rhetoric of academic support was in fact a reality. As in Natasha's example, "scaffolding" of learning was often undercut by the lowered expectations for students, thereby limiting the students' academic growth.

In addition to scaffolding learning for students, David, a former Bridges principal, noted that they tried to redress particular areas of weakness for Bridges students. For example, David realized that students where struggling in the area of English Language Arts (ELA), so he sought to get a staff member trained. He noted:

> And part of what I also felt strongly was that the kids were in such bad shape that we needed to put a tremendous amount of emphasis on reading and writing. So Laurie got sent to all sorts of training, so that Laurie could basically learn some of the techniques for doing that.

Understanding and targeting areas of student need is a critical part of providing academic support in a caring framework. Although Bridges staff members recognized an area of need for students, beyond training, it was not

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very clear what impact this had on the rest of the staff in terms of teaching and learning. Although there were several areas of need identified for students, training ultimately seemed to have a limited impact on student achievement.

Another way that Bridges staff tried to support students academically was by providing them space to get their work done.

> If you look at the after-school program we built, a major focus of it was to give kids the academic support. However, if you look at most after-school programs, the kids aren't there. So what we did was we built a structure where at the end of the school day, the kids would go for tutoring, or some sort of academic support, following that were the fun activities that they wanted to do. So basically, at the end of the school day, we fed the kids, we moved them into something academic for an hour, and then we followed it with something very enjoyable. And there were days we had over 100 kids there.

Bridges was strategic about delivering academic support to students outside of their academic classes. By structuring the after-school day with food and recreation, they were able to embed the academic support. Advisory, a class period devoted to supporting the academic and social needs of students, was another structure that provided a space for students to do work with the support of a teacher. Furthermore, as advisory teachers worked closely with their students, they could often coax students into staying after school to complete any unfinished work.

Bridges staff members often articulated the importance of giving students both emotional and academic support to achieve their goal of providing a rigorous education. In some cases, staff members were able to give credible examples of providing students in crisis with emotional nourishment, suggesting that their support was a catalyst for students' completion of high school. Furthermore, Bridges' staff was able to create structures within their programming that provided space and time for students to be supported. However, these structures alone were insufficient supports to meet the academic needs of the students.

Expect High Level of Work from Students

High expectations are a crucial aspect of a caring education. Caring without expectations of achievement can be paternalistic and lead to lowered outcomes for students. At the same time that caring teachers push their students

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to meet high expectations, the Alder (2002) suggests that they must do so within the context of a nurturing environment that is supportive. Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) argue that students who are pushed academically by teachers translate these higher standards as caring. At Bridges Institute, there were a number of examples of caring infused with high expectations.

One veteran teacher noted that from their first year, students had to be pushed to undo bad academic habits learned in previous school settings.

> One of the first struggles we have with kids coming here is that, "Um, no, the homework isn't just practice, we're going to use it tomorrow. And if you don't have it done, you can't participate fully." So the students have no idea what you're talking about. It's like the first year we call it housebreaking them because they're learning all these things that just weren't expected of them junior in high school.

New students in Bridges came from academic settings where very little was expected of them, including staying in their classrooms. This teacher noted that early on, Bridges staff members worked to undo these habits and hold students to higher expectations.

There was strong consensus for high expectations around writing and revision skills. One teacher noted, revision was often used to improve the academic acceptability of written material

> So a student could get a satisfactory minus on the assignment when they were in their class. And that's fine, they're still passing the assignment barely. But in order for that sucker to go in the portfolio, they had to revise it, revise it, revise it. Until the classroom teacher said it was at least minimally acceptable. . . . So they could still pass the class with like a "Satisfactory-minus," right, but when it came down to do that portfolio they knew that their Satisfactory-minus work there no way that thing was getting in there and so it really made kids understand the idea of doing your best work, and understanding the expectation that we had of them as thinkers and as writers.

Although students were able to pass their classes with minimal grades, there was an expectation within the Bridges community that portfolios, a benchmark for passing into the next grade, held higher standards. Liliana, a former student, recalled her own experiences with portfolio revision at Bridges:

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> It was a long process: revision, revision, revision. You have to rewrite, it was a lot of work. Like what I mentioned before, "The Genetics, Space and Science," I had to work on that piece over a year to get it right. Not that it wasn't right, but to get it correct. And that happened with a couple pieces, the autobiography piece, it was not correct. It had to be done over and over again until it was right.

As this alum suggests, the expectations of Bridges faculty for the revision process was more than superficial corrections. One former teacher described it as asking students to consider, "Did something that someone said or something that you've studied make you think about these ideas a little bit differently? Or how do you reorganize it so that it makes sense?" Caring teachers at Bridges pushed their students to revise their writing for improvement and, in this respect, met their goal of providing students with a rigorous education.

Although writing and revision was something that caring teachers at Bridges' expected from their students, there were other areas that lacked this push, falling short of the goal of providing students with a rigorous education. One such area was math. In interviews with alumni, they repeatedly noted that their math instruction was lacking. One alum was emphatic:

> Math. Math. Math! Like, you don't even understand, like I went to college thinking I knew how to do something—I didn't know how to do algebra, I didn't know how to do any of that stuff correctly. We had the worst math department in the world. It took me like two semesters to get out of the remedial math. It was really, really hard.

In fact, all of the alumni interviewed who had attended college at some point were required to take remedial math, and they all reported that they struggled. It wasn't just the students who reported a problem with the math standards, though; the lead math teacher echoed her concern with the way math was taught:

> I don't agree with the way that we teach math. I think that it needs to be a little bit more traditional. And that there's that feeling of 'Oh, our kids don't succeed in a traditional math learning environment,' well, do we really know that. . . . And I've actually found that when you teach them some very specific skills and then go back to it on a daily basis and say let's do some review, when they finally get it they are happy. . . .So it's one of those feelings of, I would want to teach at a

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> school where I would want my child to go. And I wouldn't want my child to go here. That's horrible to say but I wouldn't.

This teacher suggested that the math instruction at Bridges was actually devoid of rigor or substantive skills that students would need. According to this teacher, Bridges altered the curriculum away from a traditional approach only because students did not succeed there.

This sentiment was echoed by the former superintendent of Alternative High Schools, Orin Rogers, who came into his position in Bridges' 3rd year. He recalled that the school staff seemed to care about the students, but that the caring lacked the substance needed to produce academically successful students. He noted that abandoning a skills-based approach left everyone with less:

> I just expected more. . . . It's the ability to say that you as a teenager, 16, 17, 18 years old, are being equipped with the best tools that you can possibly get and use when you leave this place. And I don't care if you tell me that the skills driven approach is not what you're looking for. I might buy it if you tell me that what you're doing is heavily content driven, but when you're doing neither; when you are weak on the skills and weak on the content . . . what am I getting? What are these kids getting as a result?

Rogers argued that although Bridges positioned itself as a school that was focusing on depth in subject matters, this was not actually the case. More importantly, the present focus was not adequately preparing students to be successful beyond the school. Several of the alumni who went on to college after Bridges noted how underprepared they felt for college-level work.

Liliana, the alum who worked as an aide at the school, lamented the coddling that seemed to be replacing high expectations around deadlines.

> I can't speak for other classrooms, but, we give them too many chances. "Okay, you don't got it today, bring it tomorrow . . . you don't got it today, bring it tomorrow." And it's to the point where it's like when is it enough? . . . so far my experience is that we give these kids a long period-of-time to do their work. And they have more than enough time to get it done. If it's not done than it's not done you know.

She noted that students had more than enough time to do work, but they were given too many additional opportunities to do work that should have

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been completed already. The work ethic pushed by "hard" caring was often absent in Bridges. This was also evident in various observations of classes and discussions among staff. In many classes, students were often blatantly off-task or copying work from their peers with impunity. Rather than leverage their caring relationships to demand high expectations, teachers often seemed reluctant to confront their students. For example, while discussing a possible grade for one student's portfolio work, one teacher said that he did not "want to have to deal with the emotional clean-up if it's a 'Satisfactory'" (rather than a higher grade).

The lowered expectations evident at Bridges were not lost on the current principal, Beth. She encouraged her teachers to push the students. In one meeting I observed, Beth told one teacher that he had to hold students accountable for their work. She said,

> There has to be a system whereby the kids are accountable for daily activities. That's the only way this kind of thing works. Intensity only comes from pressure. Letting people work at their own pace doesn't always work. You may feel horrible about it, but this is welcome to parenting in preview form. You may feel guilty about doing it this way, but there's no way to avoid the guilt when they don't graduate in June.

In this example, the principal highlighted a key challenge of the caring dynamic at Bridges: teachers have to find a way that supports students while at the same time holding them accountable. A Bridges' teachers seemed to push students academically in the area of writing and revision, the rigor was often absent in other areas like math. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that students were often not held to high standards when it came to meeting deadlines. As Bridges held firm on one standard but allowed exceptions on others, the faculty sent mixed messages to students. Though faculty insisted that they wanted academically prepared students, the evidence shows that the faculty provided emotional caring without consistent expectations of rigor. This created a student body that felt good about themselves but ultimately felt underprepared for further studies.

Value Parents as Resources

Gonzalez and Ayala-Alcantar (2008) advise us that caring teachers take the initiative to engage their student's parents to on a personal level, and by so doing, maximize the support that students have at home and at school.

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Bridges Institute staff members made a critical effort to engage parents in the school experiences of their students. In doing so, Bridges' parents helped foster a safe environment for the students, thereby creating ideal circumstances to increase learning outcomes. However, because Bridges teachers' expectations for students were fairly low, they failed to capitalize on the parental relationships they had cultivated to create a stronger academic environment for their students. One former principal recalls how he involved parents:

> I really wanted to get my hands on parents, to talk about their concerns, and what we needed to do to make the building safe. Parents went to visit people at the Department of Education. Parents went to visit people at school construction. I mean, I had parents all over the place having conversations about what we needed to do, to make this a safe building.

Because of efforts like these, parents felt genuinely welcomed at the school. The same former superintendent who was critical of Bridges' instruction and rigor was quite impressed with the schools ability to engage the community. Rogers noted:

> You don't have what I used to call the neighbor mentality where I see you on the street and say "Listen, don't send your kid to Bridges, my kid went there, it's messed up, she's not doing good in college," I used to get that stuff all the time. But what they're saying is, "Yeah, get your kid into Bridges, they stay connected with you and keep you informed, they work with you," and all that stuff.

Bridges staff members made significant efforts to keep parents informed of their children's progress. However, caring teachers must go beyond simply making connections with parents; they must seek to create relationships with parents in an effort to harness the families' existing funds of knowledge as a building block for more traditional forms of learning. This was not evident at Bridges Institute.

Have Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Knowledge

Caring educators have to be aware of the sociological, cultural and political contexts that impact students' lives (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Katz, 1999). This is especially true for poor students

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of color; teachers who care are aware that this subgroup is more likely to have had subpar educational experiences (Rodriguez, 2012; Rolón-Dow, 2005). Only a few of the teachers and staff at Bridges noted their awareness of these contexts and the impact on their students. As Rolón-Dow (2005), Valenzuela (1999), and Rodriguez (2012) caution, teachers' failure to recognize the sociological, cultural, and political contexts that affected Bridges' students' experiences with schools negatively influenced their long-term academic outcomes.

Liliana, a staff member and alumna of the school, noted the importance of being familiar with students' background:

> And that idea that, through education, these kids from this area that we come from, a lot of them are troubled, a lot of them have problems at home, whether it's alcohol abuse, drugs, that they need the most. And I felt like, coming from a similar setting, why not come back? Not that everyone in the school struggles with it, but they need to know there's more out there.

Liliana felt strongly that being personally familiar with the context allowed her to be an example for the students. In fact, her decision to come back to work at Bridges was a deliberate move to highlight the possibilities the future held for students from the area. However, neither she nor any other faculty member articulated how this stance might translate into providing students with rigorous academic instruction.

Although some teachers were knowledgeable of the sociocultural and political contexts of their students, they were unable to connect this knowledge with their instruction in meaningful ways. In fact, Phillip, the founding principal, highlighted the disconnect between the state-mandated curriculum and their students' realities:

> "What does that have to do with me? What does that have to do with my life, what does it have to do with the gangs that are on my block, what does it have to do with the fact that my kid brother and I have asthma, what does it have to do with any of the realities of our existence?" The answer was it had nothing to do with any of that. And you have teachers who are being forced to teach to an examination that was driving students away from the schools and destroying the possibilities of creating a curriculum that had any real value for young people in the schools.

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Ultimately, Phillip could name the issues students faced and the frustration that teachers felt only because the curriculum was not reflective of those issues and experiences. Although Bridges' administrators—and several other similar schools—successfully challenged the state testing mandate, there was no evidence of a sustained dialogue among staff members or the students about how issues of race and class shaped the academic experiences of students. Without a deep understanding of the inequity that contributed to the students' underpreparation to begin with, teachers often lowered their expectations of students. Consequently, they adopted a paternalistic stance toward their students rather than create scaffolded learning experiences that expected their students to reach rigorous goals, while providing them with the support to persist.

Communicate Standards

Ladson-Billings (1995), Christensen (1990), and Jackson (2009) argue that teachers who care understand the importance of not only communicating to students the standards to which they will be held but also helping students to develop a critical consciousness that enable students to understand the power dynamics underneath those same standards. This aspect of caring was not evident at Bridges Institute at all. Consequently, Bridges students were ill-equipped to effectively analyze and challenge the power structures to which they were being held accountable. Even though Bridges Institute belonged to a consortium of schools opposed to the standardized NYS regents exams, for example, the faculty and staff were not able to articulate their opposition in any meaningful way. Respondents often noted that the regents were not valid measures of student ability but rarely were able to highlight examples of more reliable measures in their own curricula. One former Bridges teacher noted,

> We weren't trying to get the kids to pass with 90's in the regents. We were like, "just pass," so we can get it over with. Because, even now, there's no conscious belief in the value of the regents. So it's not like teachers were like, "Oh, we really need to get kids to ace this test." No, no one here is like that. Everyone is like "It's really a stupid test, we just need to get kids to pass it so it can be done with, and it has no real value."

However, there is no evidence that the faculty tolerated the regents exams without really believing in the exams' importance was explicitly communicated to Bridges students. The implicit message students received about

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the regents exams was that they were accurate measures of their ability. Furthermore, as teachers provided students minimal preparation for these exams, the other message students got was that they were incapable of earning higher scores on the exams. In fact, Bridges students generally earned low passing grades, and consequently, all graduates earned local diplomas, the lowest designation possible. Bridges staff members neither did effectively communicate the standards for the exams to students nor did help students develop a critique of the power structures that undergirded the exams.

Believe that Students are Capable

Dillon (1989) and Bondy and Ross (2008) advise that teachers who care fundamentally believe their students are capable of success. In schools where students have historically been underprepared, teachers need to believe that students are capable to bridge the gap between where students are and where they need to be academically. Bridges faculty occasionally reported having this belief in their students but usually expressed skepticism about students' abilities to reach grade-level standards. Not surprisingly, this skepticism often led Bridges teachers to lower their expectations of their students, failing to provide them with rigorous instruction.

One former teacher, for example, recalled that the staff believed that "kids can learn and we were going to work in groups and do interdisciplinary curriculum and stuff like that" to get students to standard. More significantly, however, there was evidence that teachers struggled to believe in students because they were missing fundamental skills. In many staff meetings I observed, content-area teachers often noted that student skills were so low they could not work with them. One former teacher wondered:

> Can you take these kids from really coming in 3, 4, 5 grade levels and we're not even talking about testing, we're talking about grade levels below reading—and get them into a college?

This was a fundamental question that came up often in conversations about Bridges students, and it underscored the underlying belief that students were not capable of achieving high standards of work. For example, in one staff development meeting I observed, a group of Bridges teachers were looking at samples of student writing. The facilitator asked teachers first to identify the student's thesis, and then to discuss the quality of the student work they were reading. Most of the teachers had strong critiques of the

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student work; these critiques included, but were not limited to, a lack of a coherent thesis, insufficient evidence to support an argument, and no opposing viewpoints. Still, when the facilitator asked the teachers to rate the papers using a rubric, none of the teachers indicated that they would have asked students to revise. When I noted my surprise at the outcome, after the meeting finished, the facilitator's response was that she believed teachers approached student work using a model of deficit model. She believed that teachers lowered their standards for their students because they perceived that the students were incapable of doing better. Absent a belief that students were capable of meeting high standards, Bridges inevitably fell short of its goal of providing students with a rigorous education.

Discussion and Conclusion

Schools that care have to attend to both the affective needs of students and their academic needs. This research demonstrates that Bridges Institute was effective at attending to the affective needs of their students, but too often neglected to expect rigorous, academic performances from the students, which resulted in short-term successes including increased graduation rates and increased student engagement. However, students reported that long-term improvements, such as college readiness skills, were neglected.

Specifically, the staff at Bridges knew their students on a personal level and extended emotional support to students. Staff members were able to articulate that students needed these supports because of the personal challenges the students often faced in their communities and their homes. Furthermore, Bridges alumni noted that the school staff "nagged" them to push students to complete tasks and, in one case, to arrive at school on time. In some cases, Bridges staff members supported students by giving them the physical space and time to complete work. This was especially important as many students did not have home environments that were conducive to academic work.

However, while Bridges staff members were responsive to their students' emotional needs, there was little evidence that the staff fundamentally believed that students were capable of meeting high rigorous standards. Staff members often remarked that students' skills were too low for them to be helped. Furthermore, rather than holding students accountable to deadlines, teachers often allowed students to hand assignments in late. Although it is possible that teachers believed that the students' poor academic skills called for more flexible deadlines, there was little evidence to suggest that teachers believed students would ultimately be capable of meeting standards without the additional leniency. Absent this belief, teachers were not going to be able

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to provide the "hard" caring that would set appropriate expectations for college level work. As some alumni mentioned, when they went on to college, the expectation that professors would be flexible with deadlines worked against those students. Rather than getting the kind of "soft" caring they were used to getting at Bridges, these students often received failing grades.

These lowered expectations were not a recent development at the school. In fact, it was a persistent problem that persisted since the early days at Bridges. In a letter to the staff written shortly after his retirement, the founding school leader wrote,

> Students need to get into the regular habit of doing work and being held accountable for it. We should teach up to our students. They are capable of doing more than they (or in some cases we) can imagine. We cannot afford to allow students to "get away" with not doing their work. There are effective ways to deal with this, but we have to be persistent and tough enough to carry them out, whether that means keeping students after class, bringing them in early, keeping the building open, with supervision, until 5 p.m. every day, holding regular family conferences, or whatever.

This excerpt underscores the challenge to provide a caring education for students even in a school that was found on these principles. For some teachers, allowing students to "'get away' with" missing deadlines or submitting substandard work may feel as though they are being supportive of the students—as if they are caring. In fact, if high expectations are missing, students ultimately suffer and are less likely to succeed in the long run. Unless there is a fundamental belief that students are intellectually capable of meeting rigorous standards, other forms of caring will not work. Teachers may believe that lowering standards for students is caring when, in fact, they are inadvertently holding students back.

Although some might argue that resources at schools like Bridges are not available to provide the kids with the kinds of support needed to remediate deficiencies, the evidence suggests a larger problem: If teachers do not believe that students have the capacity to become academically successful, there is no conviction to push for those resources. If, in the teachers' view, students really are not capable of achieving higher standards, why should those teachers expend the energy and effort to fight for resources that are not going to make a difference?

The lesson Bridges teaches us is that teachers who are "caring" have to believe that their students have the capacity to learn and to reach high

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standards, even if they have historically been unsuccessful in school. In other words, providing students with emotional support is important but not sufficient. Without a fundamental belief that students are capable, the other qualities the literature identifies as part of a caring framework, including valuing parents and communities as resources (Beyer, 1998; Gonzalez & Ayala-Alcantar, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll et al. 1992) and being knowledgeable about the sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts impacting their students (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Katz, 1999; Rodriguez, 2012; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999), are ultimately secondary. Qualities like these lead to the creation of trusting relationships between teachers and students. This trust lays the foundation for a powerful platform on which schools can create strong and rigorous learning environments. At Bridges, they were successful at reengaging students who had previously been disconnected from schools; however, because the teachers did not believe their students were capable of doing rigorous academic work, they were unable to invest these trust relationships into long-term academic gains.

Teachers who do not believe their students are capable of meeting high expectations may continuously extend deadlines to help students who have challenging home lives, or inflate students' scores because they tried hard, even if they did not meet standard. They may dedicate extended time and energy to develop lessons and other supports for their students, however, their students become accustomed to the lowered standards and recognize that the teacher does not typically demand more from them. Therefore, the quality and level of their work is consistently reflective of the teacher's expectations. This creates a dangerous self-fulfilling cycle: Rather than seeing that the quality of student work is a reflection of their own expectations, the poor quality reinforces the teachers' beliefs that students simply are not capable of meeting rigorous standards. This cycle further manifests itself in the destructive behavior of teachers inadvertently ignoring students. If a teacher, for example, ultimately does not believe students are able, that teacher is far less likely to dedicate energy and time into accelerating students' learning.

School leaders and staff need to engage in ongoing reflective practice that questions their own beliefs about their students' capabilities. They need to challenge each other to articulate and examine their expectations for their students. Furthermore, they need to create a school environment where practice and standards that are not rigorous are publicly surfaced and interrogated. Unless teachers can adopt the critical belief that their students are capable of rigorous work, they are not caring for students at all.

Although this research is limited in that it focuses on a single case with a small population, this limitation is countered by the in-depth nature of the

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study in which I collected multiple forms of data, including interviews, observation and archival documents, over a prolonged period of time. Findings from this research highlight the need to further investigate the extent to which teachers believe their students are capable of meeting high academic standards, both in schools that are similarly organized and in other school models. The research literature suggests when caring educators have high expectations of students they are likely to perform better (Alder, 2002; Bondy & Ross, 2008; Katz, 1999). If this quality was lacking in a school organized on the premise of providing a caring approach to education, we should be concerned that it may be too easily overlooked in schools that have not been designed with caring in mind. Bridges did find success in reengaging students who had historically been marginalized. Unfortunately, they were unable to build on this success, not able to go beyond providing emotional caring, which left them without high expectations for their students. Until we have a better understanding of the extent to which both the emotional caring and academic caring are applied with equal emphasis, students like those at Bridges may continue to achieve some procedural success in high school, only to meet academic failure in the long term.

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Bio

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