

“These are Our Children!” An Examination of Relationship-Building Practices in Urban High Schools

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Abstract This article examines a recent reform effort that has opened hundreds of small high schools in poor urban communities in New York City, The New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI). Founders hoped that the small schools strategy would create personalized environments where relationships could develop between teachers and students, leading to improved outcomes for poor students and students of color. Looking at three of the NCSI high schools in the Bronx, this ethnographic study reveals that small schools size does not always lead to relationship-building between teachers and students. Teachers need support and training which is currently missing from NCSI’s theory of action. The study suggests that NCSI can be strengthened with incentives and support for teachers to develop relationships with their students.

Keywords Urban high schools · School reform · Teacher-student relationships · Small schools · Caring

Introduction

This article examines a recent school reform initiative that has attempted to redefine the public high schools in New York City’s poorest neighborhoods by phasing out large high schools and opening hundreds of new small schools in their place. Called the New Century Schools Initiative, it is meant to address abysmal high school graduation rates, which average at around 50% in New York City¹ and are much

¹ Graduation rates are measured by the numbers of students in a given 9th grade cohort who graduate in four years. Five and six year graduation rates yield higher percentages, but there still remains a gap

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lower among poor students of color, at 30.1% for Latinos and 32.2 for blacks (Orfield and Lee 2007, p. 57). The reform's founders believe that large high schools were to blame for low achievement levels. Because they are big, large schools can be alienating places where students get lost and are not places in which students, especially poor students, can have academic success. Small schools, on the other hand, can create personalized environments and provide greater potential for students to achieve academically (Herszenhorn 2003; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2004).

To that end, the New Century Schools Initiative (NCSI) was created in 2002 through a partnership between the city's Department of Education, the Gates, Carnegie and Soros foundations, as well as New Visions for Public Schools, a nonprofit dedicated to the improvement of public schools. The basic reform strategy was to open hundreds of small high schools to create the conditions under which academic achievement might improve. Founders advocated this strategy on the strength of a body of research that claimed small schools are more likely to have environments in which students and teachers especially would get to know one another well (Gladden 1998). The familiarity created in small schools, they believed, would strengthen the academic support that the students have and will lead to better academic achievement.

The main problem with this strategy is that NCSI does not define what relationships between teachers and students should look like, nor does it offer support and training to teachers in relationship-building. In so doing, NCSI has left relationship-building up to individual schools. The aim of this article is to explore what the kinds of relationships developed between students and teachers in three new small high schools started by NCSI. Using data collected during a qualitative study during the 2005–2006 school year, including observations of classrooms and staff meetings as well as interviews with teachers and students across the three small NCSI high schools in the Bronx, this article argues that NCSI created the conditions in which relationships might develop by making schools small, but did not provide all of the supports necessary for teachers to form and sustain strong relationships with students.

This article adds to the series of larger studies of small schools that have identified problems with small schools (Lee and Ready 2006/2007; Kahne et al. 2006; Policy Studies Associates 2007; Schneider et al. 2007; Smylie et al. 2003), but have not been able to fully explain why the schools face particular challenges. By offering a detailed look at the quality of relationships that develop between teachers and students, the stumbling blocks to developing those relationships as well as the successes that some have had in strengthening relationships, this article also contributes to our understanding of the complexities in implementing a successful school reform initiative in urban schools. Finally, this article suggests ways to improve the effectiveness of this reform initiative so that strong relationships between teachers and students may indeed develop.

Footnote 1 continued

between whites and Asian-Americans, on the one hand, and African-Americans and Latinos, on the other. Greene and Winters (2005) corroborate these findings, although their analysis is at the state level.

Background

Small schools first appeared in New York City in the late 1960s and early 1970s as alternative schools, started by teachers and community workers who found that students' needs were not being met by large schools (Phillips 2000). By the late 1970s, more small schools opened in an experimental program in New York City's District 4 in East Harlem (Fruchter 2007). At this time, Debbie Meier, sometimes referred to as the mother of the small schools movement (Mendez 2004), opened and then expanded her well-known small school, Central Park East (CPE).

By the early 1990s, larger groups of small schools began appearing in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York City. Started by partnerships between private funders, city boards of education, and educators, by the mid to late 1990s, small schools started to gain some traction among researchers (Darling-Hammond 1995; Fine and Somerville 1998; Lee and Smith 1995; Wasley and Lear 2001). The structures of these small schools ranged from free-standing institutions to autonomous small schools located in the same buildings as large high schools. Others were schools-within-schools or large schools broken down into smaller "houses" (Raywid 2002).

Education researchers began to celebrate some of these small schools, not only because they were innovative, but because they graduated more students, had lower dropout rates, had fewer suspensions, and had improved overall performance for poor students of color (Ayers et al. 2000; Darling-Hammond et al. 2002; Gladden 1998; Klonsky 1995; Lee and Smith 1995; McMullan et al. 1994; Pittman and Haughwout 1987; Stockard and Mayberry 1992; Wasley and Lear 2001). Additionally, when accounting for lower dropout rates, higher rates of academic achievement, and higher rates of students going to college, researchers found that small schools were actually cheaper than large ones to run (Stiefel et al. 1998). Evidence also began to suggest that in small schools, teachers reported more collegial relations (Bryk and Driscoll 1988; Klonsky 2002; Wasley et al. 2000) and students performed slightly better on standardized tests than their counterparts in large schools (Bryk and Driscoll 1988; Fine 1994; Lee and Smith 1996; New York Network for School Renewal Research Collaborative 2001; Wasley et al. 2000; Wasley and Lear 2001). In small schools, researchers also found conditions which allowed students to feel more attached to and less alienated from school (Gladden 1998).

More recent research has been less favorable of the small schools strategy. Several studies have concluded that small schools do not necessarily lead to improved academic achievement (Lee and Ready 2006/2007; Kahne et al. 2006; Schneider et al. 2007; Smylie et al. 2003). Moreover, they studies have raised questions about relying on relationships as a single lever of change (Smylie et al. 2003, p. 101). Although relationship-building is an important aspect of improving academic achievement, especially among poor students and students of color (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Darling Hammond and Friedlander 2007), researchers have argued that there is no guarantee that strong relationships will develop at small schools (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007). At the very least, the mixed results of the research on small schools should caution reformers when deciding to invest in small school initiatives (McQuillan 2008).

Concurrent with small schools research was also a body of research that documented effective practices, particularly for poor students and students of color. The work of these scholars was similar to that of the researchers documenting the practices of small high schools in that they both argued that developing strong relationships between teachers and students would help improve academic achievement for poor students and students of color. However, unlike the small schools research, the scholarship on effective practices for poor students and students of color offered specific principles that were important for schools to incorporate in order to achieve this success.

Caring was one central feature in this set of practices. Grounded in Nel Noddings' foundational work (1984, 1992), there have been two main types of care discussed by scholars: *aesthetic care* and *authentic care* (see Fig. 1). Aesthetic care emphasized students' adherence to school policies and a visible investment in grades and academic achievement. Under this definition of care, teachers show care by praising their students for passing tests, coming to school every day, and obeying school rules. Students are thought to care about school if they are obedient and do their school assignments.

Authentic care, on the other hand, emphasized relationship-building between teacher and student. To engage in authentic care meant that teachers cared about their students' academic achievement, but that they also cared about who they were, and wanted to learn about their communities and their families. In doing so, they would build a community of trust between students, communities, and families (Valenzuela 1999, p. 269–271). Noddings and others (Valenzuela 1999) have observed that most schools engage in only an aesthetic form of caring which is problematic as Valenzuela (1999) has noted. Aesthetic care “shapes and sustains a subtractive logic which results in a process of cultural and linguistic eradication since the curriculum students are asked to value and support is one that dismisses or derogates their language, culture and community” (Valenzuela 1999, p. 61). Consequently, it is vital that schools, especially those that serve students of color, move to an authentic care model in order to ensure that their students feel part of a school community that respects and understands them, and that they are given the tools that will help them navigate in school as well as the world beyond school.

To enact authentic care in schools, theorists have suggested a series of specific practices. I have grouped them together in the following way: (1) Culturally responsive teaching, (2) Social capital development, and (3) Trust-building between

Aesthetic Care	Authentic Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Students do well in their academic classes -Students obey school rules - Teachers praise their students for adhering to school rules, and doing well in classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Reciprocal relationships exist between teachers and students -Teachers learn about their students' families and communities -Community of trust built between teachers, students, and families

Fig. 1 Examples of aesthetic and authentic Care

schools and communities. Taken together, these practices can move schools toward an authentic caring model.

Culturally responsive teaching is a practice in which teachers “respect cultural differences, believe that all students are capable of learning, create a sense of efficacy for students, incorporate students’ cultures into the curriculum, and recognize the cultural resources that students bring to class” (Irvine 2003, p. 74). Scholars have documented the success that teachers engaged in these practices have had with students of color (Delpit 1995; Foster 1997; Ladson-Billings 1994, 2002; Nieto 1999).

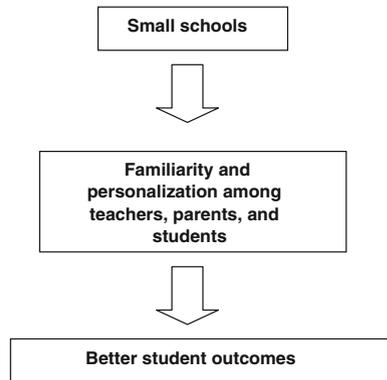
Part of culturally responsive teaching is to learn about the cultures from which the students come. Critical race theorists have suggested (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995) that in order for teachers to build *authentic* relationships with students of color that they need to understand not just the cultures from which students come but also the impact that the histories of racial injustice have had on communities of color. Rolòn-Dow (2005) has explained that teachers need to see students as young people shaped by socio-cultural and political contexts. In that way, they can develop a “critical care praxis,” (Rolòn-Dow 2005, p. 104) in which they show care by understanding the history of racial injustice that has influenced the lives of people of color in the present, learning from present-day communities of color, and viewing communities of color as resources and assets for schools rather than as deficits that needs correcting (Rolòn-Dow 2005). Their work is particularly relevant for urban schools where differential power relationships, racial and ethnic differences, as well as class differences can get in the way of building strong relationships between teachers and students (Pratt 1991; Sarason 1996).

Secondly, building social capital (Putnam 2000) is another strategy for engaging in authentic care. Noguera has explained that schools can build their students’ social capital when they cultivate relationships with parents and communities in order to support young people’s academic success. He has added that the benefits go beyond the school building, and enable poor students and students of color to build their social capital networks in ways that middle class families have, which supports the academic achievement of young people (Noguera 1996, 2001). Stanton-Salazar et al. (2001) has also found that building on students’ “help-seeking orientations” will help them to develop a network of adults to navigate their school and the world around them.

Finally, trust is a key element of building and environment of authentic care. Bryk and Schneider (2002) have found the tangible results of building trusting relationships between communities and schools, particularly poor communities and communities of color. Schools with strong relationships with communities, they conclude, improved academic achievement among their students.

Although personalization is at the center of the reform’s theory of action (see Fig. 2), NCSI did not define how teachers in small schools might effectively build relationships with students nor was their training on relationship-building. Consequently, we might wonder what kind of relationships have developed at different schools? Which schools have created strong relationships between teachers and students? What do those strong relationships look like? How were they

Fig. 2 New century schools initiative's theory of change



developed? What was the motivation for relationships to develop at one particular school and not another?

Method

Data for this paper comes from a comparative case study (Stake 1995) conducted during the 2005–2006 school year, the fourth year of operation, of three NCSI small high schools in the Bronx which I have called Team Academy, City Prep and Vision High School.² The study asked the following questions: What was the quality of the relationships between students and teachers? How were relationships developed?, What accounts for the variation in relationships in one school as compared with another?

Given these questions, it was important to select NCSI schools which were actively engaged in implementing the theory of change requiring that relationships be built between teacher and student (see Fig. 2). Additionally, it was vital to have schools which had success in improving students' academic achievement. As a result, the three schools were selected based on these criteria, what Patton (1990) has described as purposeful sampling strategies.

As with many case studies, I collected data using ethnographic methods of observation and interviewing (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). The bulk of the data for this study came from classroom observations, observations of professional development and staff meetings at the three schools, and focus group interviews with students from each school to understand their experience with instruction (see Table 1). Throughout the 2005–2006 school year, classroom observations were conducted with 5 teacher volunteers from each school. Since the teachers volunteered, they may have been the strongest teachers at the schools, but observations indicate that there was a range of teacher skill levels. I conducted five observations with each teacher throughout the school year.

I also observed a six week cycle of professional development/staff meetings (all staff meetings were called professional development but they often were meetings

² Pseudonyms.

Table 1 Data collection

Participants	Data collection method	Description of participants	Number in group
Teacher leaders	Semi-structured interviews with each teacher, informal conversations, and observations of staff meetings and other professional meetings	Teachers who were the union chapter leaders at the three schools in the study	3
Teachers	Three classroom observations with NCSI teachers in varying subject areas and grade levels using a rubric to evaluate the quality of teaching in the classrooms	A range of teachers from each school representing a mix of subject areas, grade levels, and experience	15 teachers total, 5 from each school
Students	One focus group interview with each group of students at three NCSI high schools	A random sample of students, ranging in grade level, from each of the three schools in the study	30 total, 10 students at each school

to deal with school wide concerns) at each individual school. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with three teacher leaders as well as conducted three focus groups with students from each school. Finally, I reviewed student transcripts and school-level data, including attendance rates, standardized test scores, suspension rates, course pass rates, graduation rates, college acceptance rates, and demographic information including poverty rates measured by the percentage of students receiving free lunch. I contrasted this with the data from the large high school that the small high schools replaced to see the degree to which students are performing better at the small schools than they were at the large high school.

Interpretation of the data involved methods of inductive analysis used by most ethnographers: reviewing collected data from field notes and transcripts of interviews and focus groups, coding the data using themes that emerge from that data, finding patterns and drawing conclusions (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 1994). I looked at the ways in which the schools themselves had interpreted NCSI's call for building relationship between teachers and students, and how that played out at each school. This analysis draws from grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) which has an epistemological approach of letting the data define the conclusions drawn in the study.

Research Sites and Participants

In the fall of 2002, three high schools, all at about 300 students each, moved into the building as the last class graduated from Bronx High School (BHS): Team, City, and Vision. The students who attended the new schools were from the surrounding neighborhoods in the South Bronx, among the poorest congressional districts in the United States. The first 9th grade classes were recruited by each principal from the area middle schools in May before the schools opened, but by the end of the first

school year, they would target students from those middle schools in 7th and 8th grade by going to the schools and meeting with students, teachers and school counselors. Following those meetings, students ranked the schools that they were interested in attending in an intense application process that began in October of students' 8th grade year and culminated in May of that year.

By the time the schools were open for a couple of years, recruitment also happened through word of mouth. This was especially true at City Prep whose principal was a long time resident of the neighborhood in which the school is located. Many people knew her and her family and were eager to send their children to school there, which contributed to the school's success. Students with a particular interest in sports chose Team Academy, which had a particularly strong and well-known athletic program. Vision was less successful in establishing a reputation and students reported a range of reasons for attending that school.

Team Academy

Team Academy was the brainchild of a leader of a local nonprofit who had wanted to start a school dedicated to sports back in the 1990s. When NCSI started, there was an opportunity to start that school. He worked with the last BHS principal to write the proposal for the school, with the idea of having him become Team's principal. When NCSI started and the city reorganized, the BHS principal was asked to become an administrator for the Department of Education. He agreed to take that position and solicited a former math teacher, who worked under him at a small high school, to step into the position of principal. That school remains partnered with the original nonprofit, Urban Effort, and is dedicated to providing an athletic program to its students as well as an introduction to careers in the field of athletics, like sports journalism and sports medicine, through an internship program.

City Prep

City Prep started very differently. It emerged from what was seen as an unfulfilled need. City Settlement (CS), is a service organization that had served the Bronx's poor communities for decades had scores of programs for youth, dropout prevention, tutoring, college preparation and trips, internships, and leadership development. For them, having a school allowed them to increase the intensity of their work and actually provide more than peripheral programs for young people. They wanted a school so that they could provide strong preparation to poor students who wanted to go to college. The principal, a former elementary school teacher and staff developer at CS who was from the neighborhood in which the school was to be located, was part of those initial conversations. The leadership at CS asked her to step into the position. The school did not draw on the pool of candidates from BHS, unlike the other two schools, and maintains a strong partnership with CS who devotes staff, funding, a commitment to youth development as well as leadership to the school.

Vision High School

Vision High School was founded by teachers at the former BHS who were dissatisfied with the limits of teaching in a large school. They were interested in starting a new school that allowed them to be creative, to engage students in project-based learning, and to have long blocks of time to work with students on these projects. The principal emerged from the team of teachers as the only one who showed an interest in the job; it was she who wrote the proposal for the school. She was the least experienced among the team, but had the desire to be an administrator. She helped secure a partnership with an organization that teaches film and video production to young people, consistent with the original vision for the school.

Summary

Table 2 shows the composition of each school's founding team, the driving concept behind the school, and the number of students that were in the first 9th grade (see Table 2). Each school is quite different in concept. City Prep came from a community organization whose explicit mission is to ameliorate the effects of poverty through improving education and providing social services. They hoped to improve outcomes for poor students by sending them to college, while Vision High founders simply wanted to find a way to engage students more in the curriculum. One commonality that they all had is that none of the founding partners, principals, or teachers had experience in working in small schools. Moreover, none of the principals had experience as school leaders before. This did have an effect on the ability of each school staff to build relationships with its students.

In June 2006, Team, Vision, and City had their first graduating classes. Table 3 shows the racial composition of each school and the percentage of students entitled to free lunch, an indicator of poverty. The data show that the majority of students at each school were poor students and students of color. Their teachers, on the other hand were mostly white at two of the three schools (see Table 4). Interestingly, the students at these three schools were doing well on some outcome measures, specifically graduation rates and state exam³ pass rates (see Tables 5 and 6).

Findings

Findings from this study showed considerable variation in the quality of relationships both in each school and among the three schools. The successes and challenges pointed to the difficult nature of enacting a practice of authentic care, especially in schools that serve mainly poor students and students of color. In the end we learn that much more support is needed for teachers in order to ensure that small schools are places where relationship-building practices are implemented.

³ These exams are called the Regents exams in New York State.

Table 2 Description of three new century high schools

	Team Academy	Vision High	City Prep
Founder(s)	Urban Effort, a nonprofit that started 18 NCSI schools dedicated to fostering career/college aspirations of students	Five teachers from Bronx High School dissatisfied with large-school model	City Settlement, a social service agency working in the Bronx with poor people for 80 years
Concept for school	School has a sports theme; on top of their regular requirements, students take courses on careers in sports, like sports medicine and sports journalism, as well as have internships in sports-related industries	School was founded on notions of a particular kind of teaching called the “Workshop Model”; engages students in film and video projects in classes	School has no theme; It came out of City Settlement’s desire to have more of an impact on students’ academic achievement; Goal of school is to prepare all students for college
Principal	A former math teacher and math specialist for the Bronx, he was asked to step into the position	A former ESL teacher at Bronx High School	A Latina and former elementary school teacher and staff developer at the founding City Settlement
Community partner	Urban Effort; one UE staff member works at the school	Neighborhood Filmmakers, a nonprofit dedicated to teaching students film and video production; two staff members work at the school, one full time	City Settlement; five CS staff members work at the school
Founding teachers	Founding teachers all from Bronx High School asked to come and help form the new small school	All founding teachers were former teachers at Bronx High School	All founding teachers were new to the school, but had some experience prior to coming to the school
Students in first 9th grade class	91	87	81

Small School Size and the Limits of Aesthetic Care

The main way that NCSI schools aimed to cultivate personalized relationships among parents, teachers and students was by keeping the student body small. Schools were capped at 400 (Policy Studies Associates 2007). The size of the school was a significant factor in students’ reported attachment and persistence in school. In focus group interviews, all the students mentioned how much being at a small school meant to them. Students explained that it was comforting that at a small school the staff members were very understanding of different circumstances in life. For example, two students said that they got pregnant during their junior year, but were able to make up work and get back on track toward graduation. Another said that her parents were incarcerated when she was in 9th grade and that her teachers helped her to catch up when she returned to school. Additionally, many students reported that they would not be in school or would not be graduating if it had not

Table 3 Demographic data from three new century high schools

School	Race and ethnicity of students ^a	Free priced lunch eligibility of students ^b (%)	Total number of students
Team	African-American 33% Latino 66%	69	303
Vision	African-American 35% Latino 63%	78	332
City	African-American 36% Latino 64%	72	328

Note: Data collected from annual school report cards publicly available at schools.nyc.gov

^a Data excluded the “White” and “Asian-Pacific Islander” categories since the numbers are so negligible. At City, there are no white or Asian-Pacific Islanders, and at Team and Vision, the numbers fall below 1%

^b There was also a percentage of students who were eligible for reduced-priced lunch at each school (approximately 12% at each school), bringing the percentage of low-income students slightly higher than is indicated in the table

Table 4 Race and ethnicity of teachers across three new century schools

School	Race/ethnicity of teachers ^a
Team	African-American 20% Latino 26.7% White 46.7%
Vision	African-American 26.3% Latino 5.3% White 47.4%
City	African-American 22.2% Latino 38.9% White 16.7%

Note: Data collected by Columbia University’s Teachers College National Center for Excellence in Teaching

^a Data excludes Asian and Pacific Islanders as that category included such a small percentage of the staffs

Table 5 Comparison of regents pass rates across three new century high schools^a

Regents exams	Team (%)	Vision (%)	City (%)
ELA	90	81	77
Math	90	65	69
Global	91	72	73
US history	81	72	63
Biology	86	68	73

Note: Data taken from NYC Department of Education Annual School Report Cards

^a Data from Bronx High School taken from the 2000–2001 school year right before the school closed

Table 6 Graduation and college rates across three new century high schools

School	Graduation rate (%)	College acceptances ^a
Team	86.8	44 of 62 students were accepted at two- and four-year colleges
Vision	91	30 of 54 students were accepted at two- and four-year colleges
City	86.7	50 of 56 students accepted at two- and four-year colleges

Note: Data collected from annual school report cards from the New York City Department of Education

^a College acceptances include community colleges and non-competitive four year colleges

been for a small school. This is consistent with earlier findings on small schools that show when students feel known, they are more attached to school (Gladden 1998). Moreover, they also feel safer (Gladden 1998). Students at the three schools in this study also consistently mentioned how safe they felt at school. As one student said, “If I went to a big school, I would be getting jumped every day.” Another student commented, “At a big school, I would have gotten into a whole lot of other issues, in fights and everything.” Many of them concluded that the safety was connected to the fact that everyone knew each other at the small schools. One student added, “At my sister’s school [a large comprehensive high school], she was out for a week and no one called, when I am absent after one day they call. They care about what happens to us.” This evidence suggested that students felt cared about, but the emphasis on safety and on school attendance pointed to more of an aesthetic form of caring, which emphasized pathways for students to perform well in academic classes, not on building reciprocal relationships.

Structures for Relationships-Building: A Failed Attempt at Authentic Care

Team, Vision, and City, like many other NCSI schools, attempted to cultivate personalized relationships through advisory systems. In these systems, every teacher was an advisor to 15 students with whom they met regularly. Advisors were expected to be the main contact to students’ families, to help students to keep track of their academic assignments, to tutor them on occasion, to engage the group in community-building activities, to plan field trips, and to be the students’ touchstone at the school. Advisors were also asked to reach out to parents and to develop relationships with them in order to reinforce academic achievement in school. Teachers, therefore, were asked to engage in practices of authentic care.

However, not every staff member was comfortable being an advisor, and without consistent training, advisory varied widely at each school and within the schools. At City Prep, teachers had regular training from a youth development nonprofit to become better advisors. Those teachers wrote an advisory curriculum which they presented at a professional development conference, and they were the most effective advisors. Even with the training at City Prep, though, some staff members struggled with the role of advisory. Through discussions, it became clear that the advisory system was not functioning as well as it might because not every teacher was clear about the role of or wanted to be advisors to students. At a meeting dedicated to evaluating the advisory system:

The advisory system, set up to support students academically and socially, was not functioning that way in every advisory. Some teachers were unsure of how to facilitate conversations with their students and were not calling parents regularly. Advisory only met once a week for 11th and 12th graders, and teachers complained they did not get to know their students as well enough, and 9th and 10th grade advisors felt that their groups needed to meet more than twice a week. Teachers said that they needed more help, and the assistant principal agreed that they underestimated the degree to which teachers needed professional development to become advisors. (Field Notes 1/21/06)

City Prep struggled to find more time to train their teachers, and they did provide more than the other schools. Yet, they found that there were so many other things that they needed to do, there was not as much time as they would have liked for the training.

At the other two schools, teachers did not have explicit training on advisory, and their advisory systems were idiosyncratic. Some advisors were strong and others were not. Predictably, students at Team and Vision said that advisory was not a place where the relationships between students and teachers developed. Rather it was that their classes were small enough that they felt known and received help when they needed it. They said advisory was a place where they got to know other students better than their advisors. At City, students talked much more fondly about their particular advisor.

Building relationships is not easy, but it was exacerbated by the fact that many of the teachers, especially at Team and Vision, did not share the same cultural backgrounds as the students and had never been to the neighborhoods in which they lived. There were stark differences between the teaching staff and the student bodies at the three schools (see Tables 3 and 6), raising problems if the schools were going to engage in more authentic caring.

One place these problems revealed themselves in “KidTalk,” which was a weekly grade-level meeting at each school dedicated to strategizing about individual students who struggled academically and to support students who were succeeding. It was an opportunity for teachers to talk formally about their students, and was a space in which teachers’ attitudes about their students were made public. Facilitated by the social worker or special education teacher at each school, many KidTalk meetings were spent discussing the degree to which, as advisors, they should engage in behavior modification strategies with their students. Focused solely on their students’ deficits, relationship-building was relegated to the margins. In a particularly poignant example of a KidTalk meeting of 10th grade teachers at Vision High School I observed the following:

Throughout this meeting of 10th grade teachers, the social worker tried to get teachers to identify specific behaviors that could be improved, but the teachers wanted to vent. The comments on each student included:

Student 1: Too much talking, too little work. Fine in first period. Mother has come in. Referrals needed to document behavior. Shows no initiative and “can be belligerent.” Parent will be called again.

Student 2: On suspension list. Seems withdrawn. Science teacher said “wishes she was withdrawn.”

Student 3: Nothing is getting through, he does not understand the work. He came to tutoring last year. Advisor has tried to contact parent, but has failed. In the one attempt he made, the student said that he almost “had his ass kicked.” Science teacher said, “That is the problem, he needed to have his ass kicked.” (Field notes 1/5/06)

The social worker who facilitated these meetings would pose questions to the group like: “Who knows this student best?,” “How can we get the student interested in the class?,” or “Is there a teacher who would like to meet with the student to improve the situation?” She never told the teachers that they were being negative or not focusing on the practices that might engage students more. In a private conversation, she acknowledged that

Teachers needed to vent, sometimes but KidTalk sometimes becomes that place and teachers end up talking negatively about students. It’s not my role to confront them though. Maybe I can have the meetings less often or change the format. Something needs to change.

This example was crucial because it revealed the complexity of creating caring relationships with students when there is no explicit support for teachers to help understand who their students are. In their meeting, teachers expressed anger at students for not complying with their directives, and spent no time trying to figure out solutions. Parents were not seen as resources for helping their students either.

With a great deal of pressure on them from New York City’s Department of Education to get all of their students to pass courses and state-wide exams,⁴ non-compliant students were obstacles, problems to get rid of. Complaining about them was supported by already-existing stereotypes about the students as deficient and under-achieving. Making matters worse, the social worker facilitating did not feel powerful enough to interrupt this kind of dialogue about students or to confront teachers. She only acknowledged the problem with the way the teachers talk about their students in private, allowing the teachers’ comments to go unchecked.

This was not an isolated example and illustrated the multiple obstacles to promoting authentic care at the small schools. First, it suggested that teachers needed support to help them understand their students better and to develop reciprocal relationships with them. Second, school staff needed help facilitating the conversations with teachers which would have led them to understand their students better. Third, the problems of cultural mismatch suggested that teachers needed more support to understand who their students were and attention to hiring would also have helped in order bring teachers in whose culture matched that of the students. Left to their own devices, teachers engaged in aesthetic forms of care in which they valued student compliance with their teachers, effort in academic classes, rather than building relationships with students and their families.

⁴ All New York City schools were mandated to meet certain benchmarks. At NCSI schools, the city expected to see a 80% pass rate in classes.

Boys' Advisory: An Example of Authentic Caring

Although they had their struggles as well, City Prep's strong commitment relationship-building through advisory meant that they continued to offer youth development training to their teachers, and advisory functioned particularly well. They used advisory as it was meant to be used, to build reciprocal relationships with students. When confronted with the problem of a group of boys who were constantly facing disciplinary action and who consistently failed classes, the City Prep principal and staff of City Settlement responded by setting up an advisory just for these boys. Motivated by a desire to engage rather than punish students, the principal in conjunction with the City Settlement (CS) staff did what was common practice in CS's programs for disengaged youth. They developed a way to bring them in and motivate them. Observers saw the advisory as innovative, but this idea came directly from their years of experience with disengaged, at-risk young people.

The boys' advisory was facilitated by adult men of color as role models who facilitated a conversation with the boys about their struggles. They always had an agenda and wore professional clothing. Students got rewards for doing "good." If the students did things like dressed in dress code, helped others, asked for help in class, or did well on an assignment, they would get the signature of teachers, immediate feedback as well as recognition from the facilitators, and even movie tickets or certificates of recognition. Many of them were nominated for "student of the month."

The facilitators, also men of color who had struggled to meet their educational goals, set the tone by creating an atmosphere of confidentiality and trust. "Nothing leaves the room," said one of the facilitators. Students' interests became the topics for conversations. One facilitator likened the conversations to a dam breaking, students gushing and sharing so much with them. This was a place for the students to share and the students were really happy with that. Other students are trying to get into the group. The boys even played leadership roles in the group as well, facilitating conversations.

The principal and other teachers noticed changes in the students' behavior since this started. "They smile," the principal noticed, "and say hi to me." At a meeting of the facilitators and the principal, they reflected on the influence of the boys' advisory group:

They started doing better in their classes. One student passed the science practice Regents and was invited to bring it in to show the group. They ask for help in classes. The principal noticed one student in math class asking for help with math who previously used to disrupt and do anything but math. They ask for recognition in their classes, are observed to be trying. One student, the principal noticed, broke the code of silence that students have not to snitch on one another. He came forward and admitted wrong-doing in an incident where there was a fight with a student from another school. In this investigation, the principal got a name from the dean who she was sure was innocent in the situation and rather than go on the dean's word did her own investigation and that is when this student came forward. (Field notes, 5/11/06)

In this example, teachers took a different approach to failing students. They learned from them. The goal of the advisory in this case was to find out what the boys were going through outside of school and how that impacted their lives inside of school. The boys' advisory was an example of authentic caring in that teachers were teaching and learning from students, finding ways to help them because they were worth helping and supporting. Their ultimate goal was to build relationships with the students, to understand their struggles, and to help them improve their achievement in school.

Cultural Mismatch: An Obstacle to Authentic Care

Although there are many obstacles to building relationships between teachers and students in urban schools, cultural mismatch seemed to have the largest impact on the developing a practice of authentic care. This was especially true at Team and Vision where the largest mismatches existed. In the individual schools, cultural mismatch had a significant affect on the ability of teachers and students to develop relationships. For example, some teachers found it disappointing to come to terms with the fact that students were not like they, themselves, had been in school. One Vision High School teacher lamented, "I wish it was like it was in Michigan (a white community), 30 students all sitting in their seats on time." In another case a teacher was frustrated and did not understand why students traveled with their families during the school year. As she expressed in a meeting of her colleagues:

During a planning meeting a group of teachers joked around about students who did nothing in each others' classes, and the art teacher said sarcastically that each student had his own learning style. The group then moved onto the projects they were working on in class. One teacher said that her students had to hand in papers early if they were going away before the Christmas break. She went on to say that some students have already left to go to Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic. The science teacher continues, 'Or Africa or wherever they're from.' Another white teacher says that she was never allowed to miss school. (Field Notes, 12/19/06)

This teacher's attitude toward her students was condescending and expressed a disinterest in understanding an important aspect of her students' lives-close family members outside of the United States, which would clearly prevent her from getting to know her students deeply and developing a caring relationship with them. It also is the opposite of authentic care practices, and suggests a rejection of students' cultural norms and values.

Connected with this theme were staff member conversations about inherent deficiencies among their students. One teacher said that the only way to improve student achievement was to spend 24 h a day with the students. He said, "That's the only way they will learn." He suggested going to their homes, telling them when and where to study. "They need a life coach," he added. Another teacher said, "We still have not brought the parents in, and we're still not connected and connecting the home to school. We're still not truly engaging the students. You know, it's hard because academics are not supported outside of the school" (Field notes, 3/10/06).

This deficit view of students was articulated by many teachers. Other teachers even expressed a paternalistic view of students. As one Team teacher said succinctly, “I really believe that we have to be as teachers, you know, like physicians. You have to try to help your patient get well.”

This collection of examples pointed to the impediments to engaging in authentic care. In spite of the conditions in a small school in which teachers were able to get to know their students well, deficit views, condescending and racist attitudes persisted suggesting a more explicit attempt to train teachers to build relationships was necessary. Professional development grounded in caring theory, cultural relevant instruction, and studies of relationship-building practices would have been essential to changing the attitudes among teachers.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Practice: Engaging in Authentic Care

A key strategy to relationship-building, especially when there are cultural differences between teachers and their students (see Tables 3 and 4) is culturally responsive pedagogy (Foster 1997; Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 1999; Jordan-Irvine 2003). Many of the teachers I talked to were unaware of its existence, and most teachers I observed did not use culturally responsive pedagogy. However, there were a few teachers, mainly teachers of color, who did actively engage in culturally responsive teaching, even if they did not call it that.

One City Prep English teacher, who described her work as “a profession, not just a job,” said to her class, “I love you guys, but I need to call you on things” (Field notes, 11/21/05). In her class, students had time to do independent reading in which they were able to read books that appealed to them. These included *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *El Bronx Remembered*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. This same class also read canon literature as a class. The teacher provided room for students to connect their own experiences to the class, but the teacher also exposed the students to new things. She explained to her class that they cannot just read “urban fiction,” as the students called it. “In college, you need to be exposed to certain books. You need to have an opinion about literature. My job as a teacher is to expose you to that literature,” she explained (Field notes 11/10/05).

In a City Prep 10th grade social studies class, the teacher regularly praised her students even if they did not see positive qualities in themselves. In one class on the Crusades:

Teacher: Make a prediction about what the next part of the passage will be about.

Student 1: Invasions!

Student 2: You are good today.

Teacher: She is good every day.

Student 1: Miss, I only failed English because I refuse to write essays.

Teacher: You can write essays. You are not a failure. I see something better for you.

(Field notes 12/14/05)

The teachers engaging in culturally relevant practices were teachers of color, in most cases, who reported that they had grown up in neighborhoods similar to that of the students (see Table 4 for a breakdown of the race/ethnicity of the teaching staffs). Although they did not identify their practice as “culturally relevant,” these practices incorporated students’ cultures into curriculum, encouraged and acknowledge students’ abilities, and taught students new content that will include them in the “culture of power” (Delpit 1995), all of which are elements of culturally responsive teaching.

These examples were in stark contrast to other classrooms, which were teacher-centered and content-driven. For example, in one 9th grade science class at Team Academy the students were learning about taxonomy. The teacher was so intent on delivering the content that she silenced students. She shouted several times during class, “Stop talking while I teach.” She insisted that she needed to get through the lesson and threatened students who disrupted with detention. During her lecture, she declared, “You don’t have to understand what taxonomy is. You just have to understand how to do the Regents⁵ question.”

The wide variation in teaching practice suggests that there was not necessarily any support for or training in a specific kind of teaching practice, nor one that was grounded in authentic care. This is supported by observations of weekly professional development meetings which focused on everything from student discipline strategies to planning upcoming school-wide events to examining modes of assessment, indicating a dedication to more aesthetic care. Even at City Prep, where youth development was a core of the professional development training, there was no explicit attention to culturally relevant pedagogy. This was problematic since the literature draws such a strong correlation between culturally relevant practices and increased achievement among students of color (Foster 1997; Ladson-Billings 1994; Nieto 1999; Jordan-Irvine 2003), but suggests a clear path for improvement in professional development.

Teachers Building Relationships: Engaged Spaces of Authentic Care

As a counter to the examples of lack of care expressed by teachers, there were several teachers (many of them at City Prep) who were guided by care in what they did and prioritized relationship-building. These teachers, frequently people of color from the same or similar neighborhoods as the students, saw their work as an opportunity to give students like themselves the help they had as young people. They engaged in practices of authentic care in that they made effort to find out who their students and their families were, valued their lives outside of school, and believed in their abilities to be academically and socially successful, creating strong bonds between them and their students.

Sometimes this was an uphill battle as a teacher at Vision, a Puerto Rican woman, who felt isolated among the faculty said in an interview:

⁵ The Regents are the battery of state-run standardized tests that students must pass to graduate.

After the most recent scholarship report, I started to worry about student failure, especially in the 10th grade. The staff is becoming apathetic and burnt out. They are not really making an effort to understand students, understanding them as children, what their lives might be outside of school, or trying to engage them. There is a gap between the teachers and the students, and they blame the students too much. These are our children!

She had a difficult time convincing her colleagues that they needed to change what they were doing to improve student achievement. A similar example was a teacher at Team Academy, who was also among the few teachers of color and teachers who was dedicated to building caring relationships with her students said,

Many of these kids started out behind the eight ball. Understanding that, understanding where I work, understanding the population I deal with, I know the challenges they're going to have to face firsthand, but it does not have to stop them from ascertaining their dreams.

In both cases, teachers showed a desire to get to know their students and to connect with them, especially by trying to understand who the students were in order to get them to improve academically.

Unlike at Team and Vision, at City Prep, a drive for improving relationships with students was top priority. The principal, a Puerto Rican woman, consistently pushed her staff to believe that the students were capable. As she declared to her staff at a meeting, "Even though these students do not know how to express it, they are beautiful" (Field notes, 3/20/06). To meet the academic needs of students, the principal said that her teachers need to believe that "everyone is a potential genius, because I do. So, if I detect that they might believe that some people can make it but not everybody, then that's problem." At the end of the 2005–2006 school year, she asked two teachers to leave who did not believe in the "genius potential" of their students. One was a science teacher and one was a math teacher. These are hard-to-staff areas, especially in the Bronx, but she was serious about having teachers at the school who believed in and would work with students regardless of their skill level. This set a tone at the entire school in which faculty were expected to have a high regard for their students and to build relationships with them.

Her teachers took this very seriously, as one Afro-Puerto Rican staff member put it

I grew up in housing projects in the Bronx, dropped out of high school in 9th grade and got left back three times. So, finally I got my GED and went off to Binghamton and now I have my master's. I've done inspirational talks throughout New York City and plan to do that here too. Maybe they'll be able to relate and say, 'Man, if you can do it, I can do it.'

Several staff members thought of themselves as role models, and made building relationships with students central to their teacher practice.

Another way that the staff showed care was by acknowledging poverty-related obstacles to academic achievement and dealing with them, while holding students to high expectations. The principal provided financial assistance, and made concrete

attempts to provide mentors to students, and attempted to reverse the views that school staff typically have of poor students and their families.

Understanding the difficulty students face in their daily lives, a staff member explained how they help students:

We have one young lady who has been in and out of the foster care system who just started bawling because she couldn't find the \$60 for senior pictures. We are coming out of pockets paying for that. And we do it for as many students as needed. Each of us will probably take responsibility for one student. We do it every day. We give them lunch. They'll say, 'What's that you're eating?' You give them money to go to the corner store and eat."

The principal and community partner, City Settlement, had a consistent view. They understood that expectations needed to be high for poor students and students of color, but they both saw that getting students to reach those high expectations required recognizing the difficulties that poverty brings and agreed that the role of the school was to help students address those difficulties. At a poetry event at the school,

The 10th graders read poems that told tales of drugs, violence, pregnancy, cops arresting too many people in their neighborhood and AIDS. They read to thunderous applause, even the students who were too nervous to read. At the end the principal got up and congratulated the students and talked about trying to solve some of the problems they see in their communities together. She then gave hugs to several of the students. She said that she was so proud of the students, some of whom have never read anything in front of anyone before. She said to the staff later that she hopes that they believe what they are hearing and that the students' lives are genuinely difficult. (Field notes, 5/19/06)

She and the community partner maintained that the job of the school is not to ignore students' lives outside of school, but to understand their lives and to create an environment that addresses their needs. She wanted the staff "not to put barriers between themselves and the students, but to find ways to create and develop relationships with students." Additionally, the principal and community partner organized monthly town hall meetings, where there are speakers and performances, whose backgrounds are similar to the students'. They try to inspire and motivate them to persist through school.

The students had a deep appreciation for the teachers who believed in them and held them to high standards. As one student who described a teacher who held him to high expectations said, "I was not good at math, but Ms. S just wanted me to get it. She did not give up on me and I got it." Another student spoke about a teacher who had high standards for all students. About her, students said,

Ms. B did not give up on us. If there was a school spirit it would be because of her. There were times when she would stay working here until midnight. She really cared about us. She is the hardest working teacher here, making us do our work, right then and there. Even when she was sick, she was still sending emails and calling from the hospital. We are so very grateful to Ms. B.

Students spoke about another teacher who pushed them to “shoot higher.” She shared her personal experiences with the students. This meant a lot to students, who said, “She did not want us to sell ourselves short.”

The difference in City Prep was its principal. Dedicated to developing caring relationships, she valued the culture of students and made it clear to staff that the expectation was that they did the same. It is significant that the principal was Puerto Rican and a long-time resident of the neighborhood in which the school was located. She was a presence in the community, and families of her students knew her. In fact, City Prep students reported that this was a central factor in enrolling in the school.

Although City Prep had its challenges, its explicit attention to understanding the students, building relationships with them, and valuing their cultures them made an impact on the students. Of the three schools, more students from City Prep reported feeling comfortable and valued than at the other two schools. As one student said, “The principal wants us to be the best.” Another echoed this sentiment:

I never thought I would be graduating, but the teachers here care a lot... My parents got locked up when I was in 9th grade and I started to do bad in classes, I got kicked off softball team and everything. I told one of the teachers who gave me a chance. He gave me time to make up work and helped me. He didn't judge me.

These students clearly have felt cared about by City Prep staff. Care was not limited to concern over whether the students attended regularly, did well in their classes or stayed out of trouble. For City Prep staff, care meant understanding students' lives outside of school, seeing their communities and families as assets to the school, and creating relationships that “removed barriers” between teacher and student. Moreover, they did not pity the students for the difficulties they faced in their daily lives, nor did they lower their expectations for them. These practices built social capital and trust among the students as well as reciprocal relationships, which are all key elements of authentic care.

Discussion

NCSI made an effort to create the conditions under which relationships might have developed between teachers and students by creating small schools. However, this study has shown that without training and support, there were many obstacles to developing relationships and in engaging in authentic forms of care. Interestingly, despite this, academic achievement met the expectations of city officials (see Tables 4 and 5).⁶ The schools were under enormous pressure from the New York City Department of Education to improve outcome data which became the priority for some NCSI schools, which made relationship-building a casualty of a narrow focus on improving quantitative data.

⁶ The schools were praised for their strong showing especially among their first graduating class at the end of the 2005–2006 school year. Their 2006 graduation rates were over 80%, which was far above the 50% city average. Shiller ([forthcoming](#) in 2009) has shown that despite the improved outcomes, academic standards were quite low.

Despite the pressure put on schools to improve outcomes, there is much we can learn about building relationships within this context from City Prep. Valuing every student was very important to the school's principal who pushed her staff to find ways to engage every student. This stemmed from her work for an organization whose mission was to help the most marginal students from poor communities of color. As a staff developer, she was able to train others in how to teach and work with struggling students. Bringing that background to her work as principal, she created a vastly different culture in the school than at Team or Vision. Moreover, she was from the same kind of community that the students were from and had strong passion for improving life for the students and families living there. In contrast, the principals at Team and Vision cared about their work, but did not have the personal connection with the communities that their schools served. This suggests that hiring school staff, and especially school leaders, who are able to connect with the communities they serve is an essential component to improving engaging in authentic care practices in schools.

Another important implication of the findings was that much more attention and resources needed to be devoted to training for all teachers. Professional development would need re-visioning as a space for learning about students' cultural backgrounds and histories, seeing them as assets and resources from whom teachers could learn. From there, teachers might see their own practice as responsive and accountable to the communities that they served. In that context, training for advisory or Kidtalk conversations, and training in culturally relevant teaching practices would make sense. Taken together, these practices would lead more schools to engage in authentic care.

Conclusion

NCSI had the noble goal of creating small schools in which teachers and students could build relationships with one another and should not be lost. This study suggests that the NCSI's theory of action needs to be strengthened with professional development and support for school staff members. It also suggests that strong leadership is essential to implementing authentic care practices.

As it stands, NCSI has left relationship-building up to the idiosyncrasies of individual schools, forcing teachers and students to battle alone through the asymmetrical power relationships, cultural mismatches, and class differences that inevitably exist between teachers and students in urban schools. Adding to that a highly pressurized context of improving outcome data, schools had little incentive to focus on building relationships, and had even less incentive to work with students who are struggling academically.

Just because there are problems with this initiative does not mean it should end, but rather it needs to be strengthened. Improving schools' relationship practices will in turn lead to, not detract from, improving academic outcomes as well. There is an added benefit in that schools can be more than places in which get good grades, but that help young people become caring adults because they have been able to cultivate relationships and have had a strong sense of community.

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