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Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom

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Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in School Psychology
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ABSTRACT

With a culmination of evidence suggesting the perception of caring relationships is associated with students' well-being (Natvig, Albrektsen, & Qvarnström, 2003; Siddall, Huebner, & Jiang, 2013; Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009), there is a need to better understand the ways in which care operates in the classroom. Further, there is a need to move beyond a prescription of caring behaviors to investigate the ways in which care, control, and conflict interact to impact classroom relationships. In the current study, I took a mini-ethnographic case study approach to investigate the concept of care within one fifth grade classroom. Assuming the role of a participant-observer, I observed and interviewed 17 students and their teacher about classroom practices, structures and relationships. I represent the data in a re-constructed story of the classroom in which normative assumptions about care are put into question. Specifically, students described the same classroom structures and procedures with differing perceptions of care based on the extent to which they believed the classroom operated in their best interests and how they were treated in comparison to others. Students’ descriptions of treatment aligned closely with mechanisms of control such that the more closely one adhered to classroom norms (e.g., positivity, productivity) and values (e.g., self-control, work ethic, integrity) corresponded with one’s social positioning (e.g., favorite, troublemaker) and perceived sense of being cared for in the classroom. Results of the study call for critical examination of ethical control within an ethic of care and an opening of dialogue between class participants to establish caring relationships that are mutually negotiated.
CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Schools are the opportunity contexts in which youth spend the largest portion of their lives outside of the home and are the de facto setting for mental health services for most school-age children and adolescents (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003). For elementary school students, time in school is largely concentrated within their respective classrooms. Borrowing Pollock’s (2017) ‘snowball effect’ analogy, “Like a tiny chunk of ice that rolls down a hill and accumulates in a giant ball, millions of acts in an opportunity context pile up to shape a child’s fate” (pp. 80-81). Through this interpretive lens, the daily interactions that take place within elementary school classrooms have the power to contribute to students’ early experiences of “success”- and as an extension- their early self-concepts and concepts of others. What is deemed success is a product of the current sociopolitical environment, including what makes one a useful or valuable citizen. From the lens of a school psychologist trainee, a comprehensive definition of success includes separable yet interconnected academic and social-emotional-behavioral domains (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). To support all students requires attending to a full range of needs. While universal academic and behavioral supports have become more common practice in schools, mental health promotion and problem prevention have been marginalized in school improvement policy and practice when considered an additional, siloed approach or initiative (Adelman & Taylor, 2012). One mechanism through which to promote the well-being of all students and create caretaking environments that allow students to overcome risk is
through building caring relations amongst classroom participants (Doll et al., 2008). However, adhering to a prescribed list of caring practices alone is insufficient in responding to the unique, context-specific needs of a classroom. Thus, there is a need to consider the many dynamics of the classroom that contribute to a culture of care, in which all participants are beneficiaries.

In addition to understanding how caring relations are formed and maintained, there is a need to understand how they withstand momentary conflict. Punitive disciplinary methods (e.g., suspension), while promoted as a means of controlling student behavior through deterrence, has shown to result in further exclusion with increased rates of future suspensions and drop-outs (Morrison & D’Incau, 1997). Most problematically, these practices have disproportionately impacted minority and indigenous students and students with disabilities (Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba & Peterson, 1999), restricting their access to education and limiting their potential. While evidence reveals that schools reliant on zero-tolerance policies may be less safe than those without harsh policies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999), there is also critical literature highlighting the ways in which modern forms of discipline (i.e., pastoral power) operate to more insidiously ensure obedience through internalizing fear, self- and peer-policing, and reinforcing conformity under the guise of care (Boler, 1999). In both cases, “the authority relationship that encourages obedience reinforces…powerlessness…or provokes rebelliousness” (Adams, 2000, p. 144).

There is a need to understand the ways in which efforts to maintain control are congruent and at odds with attempts to care.

Based on the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of punitive policies – particularly when compared against evidence that speaks to the negative impacts of such an approach – alternative ways of responding to conflict are needed to promote student safety and well-being in schools. One counter-discourse to that of a traditional discipline discourse, based
in zero-tolerance and other exclusionary procedures, is a discourse of peace. According to Cavanagh (2009a), consideration of a new discourse of peace provides an alternative way of approaching safety based on his developing theory of a culture of care in schools and includes a focus on building caring relationships, adopting a culturally-responsive pedagogy, and implementing a restorative response to discipline. While Cavanagh’s (2003) theory has been largely focused on creating a culture of care school-wide, he draws attention to the crucial role of the classroom in facilitating this process. Thus, an understanding of how constructs of care, control, and discipline interact and impact students in the classroom is essential to facilitating critical reflection on the part of educators on their own way of work. While students’ voices are central to the current study, I adopt a critical lens as a vehicle for moving beyond the surface to discuss the limits of promoting peace and attend to the implications of pastoral power.

As a construct, care is ambiguous. Research purports negative outcomes in its absence (e.g., dropping out; Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Comer, 1988; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Epstein, 1992; McMillan & Reed, 1994; McQuillan, 1997; Renihan & Renihan, 1995; Wehlage, 1992) and many benefits associated with its receipt (Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990; Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, & Birchmeier, 2009; Natvig, Albrechtsen, & Qvarnstrøm, 2003; Nie & Lau, 2009; Osterman, 2000; Shann, 1999; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). With a large majority of research on care being quantitative, questions remain of what it means to show care in schools – is it enough to assure students that they are cared for? What actions are perceived by students as caring? In what ways do needs to manage behavior and respond to conflict impact caring relations? Are there factors that contribute to a culture of care that are beyond a student’s conscious awareness? What are the different functions of care and whom are the beneficiaries? Schussler and Collins (2006) called for research that
systematically explores the presence of care in schools. In the current study, I investigated the dynamics that enabled and inhibited perceptions of care in one fifth-grade classroom, as well as the implications of this way of work.

**Purpose of the Current Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and construct a theory of how care operated within a fifth grade classroom. Investigating the ways in which care operates in a classroom is warranted considering extant research supporting the role of classroom support in facilitating students’ perceptions of security, belonging, and well-being. As students are expected to function better in contexts where their needs for relatedness are satisfied on an ongoing basis (Osterman, 2000; Ryan, 1995), there is a need to understand how responses to conflict and the exercise of control (i.e., the expression of power/authority) impact relations and operate within a culture of care.

The narrative I present of the fifth grade classroom under analysis is one example that illustrates, in a “specific, concrete, and vivid manner” (Goldstein, 1998, p. 8), the ethic of care in the classroom and the contributing features (e.g., of control and responses to conflict) that together offer a glimpse into the multidimensional nature of care in the classroom. My purpose was not to identify the classroom teacher as possessing the virtue of care (or not). Nor was it my goal to fit participant descriptions of care neatly into extant theory, including Noddings’ (1992) conceptualization of caring, Cavanagh’s (2003) interpretation of a culture of care in schools, nor others described in the following review. I approached the current study with knowledge of previously developed theory and thought with those theorists when interpreting the data. Meanwhile, I welcomed deviations that emerged from the empirical data as a product of the experiences of students and teachers in that unique classroom. As is a benefit of qualitative
research, obtaining data from multiple methods and sources across subjects and activities exposed me to the spoken and unspoken rules and ways of work of the classroom, resulting in a unique theory of care in the classroom. To focus interviews and observations and prevent the never-ending collection of unfocused information, I homed in on the interplay between caring relations, control, and responses to conflict in the classroom.

The declaration that one will establish a *theory of care in the classroom* comes with it the bold assumption that daily classroom life and the behaviors within it can be muddled down into some core themes or truths that together form the basis of a theory on care. Although my results include a bringing together of core themes, borrowing from Derrida’s way of thinking, I made efforts to avoid crude simplicity, or the idea that there is a clear, true way of performing care in the classroom (Bridges-Rhoads & Van Cleave, 2013). Rather, I discuss the factors that interact to enable and inhibit the perception of caring classroom relations and think with theorists to offer a more critical way of reflecting on care in the classroom.

**Overview of Methodology**

I adopted a qualitative approach to inquiry in order to gain insight into the contextual factors of the classroom and develop a more personalized experience of interactions among classroom participants. Through situating myself in the classroom, I was able to discern patterns or a ‘set of rules’ for how the classroom functioned (Goodenough, 1981). By engaging in interviews throughout my time in the classroom, I was able to bring together not only principles of action but of the teacher’s and students’ perceptions and beliefs. Taken together, I acquired a type of insight into participants’ conscious thoughts, feelings, and classroom behaviors, as well as more invisible, contextual dimensions (e.g., power dynamics) through adopting a mini-ethnographic case-study approach.
Reflexivity Statement

As I am a co-constructer of the knowledge that is the product of this study, it is important that I make known my position as a student in a school psychology training program, who at the initiation of this project was invested in how to promote the success of all students, and by the end was left contemplating what constitutes success and how that understanding impacts relationships. My attention to student voice in the study was an effort to raise up the evaluations of those for and about whom decisions are largely made without consult, thereby transferring power into the hands of the researched. However, the results are the product of my power as the researcher, creating knowledge within the academic institution embedded within my critique. As a school psychology trainee, I participate in a positive psychology research group where the focus is promoting student well-being through nurturing strengths as opposed to focusing on ameliorating deficits. In my critical interpretation of the data from the current study, I bring to light the potential harm in upholding the “positive” in such a way that silences less-accepted emotions and behaviors. This to say, with my critical interpretation comes no negative evaluation of the specific school or classroom teacher under analysis but rather of the structures that create the normalization (including for myself) of practices that have a hand in inhibiting caring relations. As a White woman who has benefitted from the status quo way of work in schools, I acknowledge how I am implicated in the system I critique. To address this, I attempted to redistribute power into the hands of the researched while checking my interpretations through thinking with theorists who critique a less-than-neutral system to deliver a more nuanced view of care in the classroom.
**Definition of Key Terms**

**Mini-ethnographic case study.** Also referred to as *microethnography*, the design of the current study is described by Fusch, Fusch, and Ness (2017) as “an ethnographic approach bounded within a case study protocol that is more feasible for a student researcher with limited time and finances” (p. 923). This blended approach enabled me to “explore the feelings, beliefs, and meanings of relationships between people as they interact within their culture” (p. 923), as well as study and generate theory in a real-world setting. This design allowed me to access the best of both ethnographic and case study designs, while bounding the research to a three-month duration in one classroom. Data collection methods within this design generally include fieldwork with a combination of direct observations, unstructured interviews, focus groups, and a reflective journal to allow for data crystallization—enhancing the depth of data collected (Denzin, 2009; Fusch et al., 2017).

**Care.** Goldstein (1998) positioned that “caring is mentioned so frequently and with such regularity that the term itself is beginning to lose its specificity and its power, becoming more of a platitude than a meaningful professional stance” (p. 2). I did not ascribe to one definition of care during the course of the study. Instead, I focused primarily on student perceptions of care, as teacher and classmate care needs to be perceived by students in order to exert influence on student outcomes. As stated by Noddings (2005), “No matter how hard teachers try to care, if the caring is not received by students, the claim ‘they don’t care’ has some validity” (p. 15). Caring relationships are both “interactive” and “subject to the interpretations of the people involved in those relationships” (Alder, 2002, p. 247; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings, 1992). In the current study, *care* was based in the assumption of symbolic interactionism (i.e., the idea that people construct
meaning through their interactions, which are subject to change with future interaction; Charon, 1992; Jacob, 1987). As such, I focused on students’ constructed meanings of care.

**Ethic of care.** According to Goldstein (1998), focusing on the ethic of care can be used to enrich concepts of what it means to be a ‘caring’ teacher. In that vein, the ethic of care is not a description of an attribute or personality trait, but of a relation – something in which one engages. Thus, a *caring encounter* involves both a person giving and receiving care. In the proposed study, the ethic of care will be constructed based on student and teacher perceptions of caring relations in the classroom as well as dynamics revealed through observations of the classroom.

**Culture of care.** The purpose of the proposed study involved constructing a theory of how care operated in one elementary classroom. The cultural interpretation I offer is the product of student and teacher perceptions, brought together with observations and theories of care, including attention to the ways in which control (i.e., issues of power and authority) and responses to conflict (e.g., traditional, restorative) contribute to and/or undermine caring relations.

**Research Questions**

1. How does care operate in the classroom?
   a. What factors enable and inhibit the perception of care?
   b. In what ways do conflict and control interact with care to impact classroom relationships?

   Rather than outline neat responses to questions 1a and 1b in a way that implies an arrived-at truth, I used the questions as a guide to bring together a story of the classroom that addresses different facets of care and implications that follow.
Contributions to the Literature

The belief that care is important is not new. Caldwell and Sholtis (2008) described it as a “hover word” (p. 89) that follows us around. However, school-based research on care is limited and often only tangentially addressed (Alder, 2002; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Schussler and Collins (2006) highlighted that even organizations (e.g., the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996, 2003) that place emphasis on caring as a primary goal (alongside being competent and qualified), omit analysis of what it means to be caring (while what it means to be competent and qualified are discussed). Further, caring is often described as a virtue, or innate quality, rather than a relation between individuals. Thus, while the assumption is that care is an understood concept, when investigated, oversimplified understandings are typically offered (Goldstein & Lake, 2000). A unidimensional conceptualization of care based in assumptions is insufficient for developing an ethic of care in environments as complex as the classroom (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008). Thus, while research has highlighted its importance, both in the eyes of teachers and for student outcomes (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Osterman, 2000), there is little understanding of what it means to care in context, or the multidimensional ways in which care functions in the classroom. Specifically, little attention has been given to what it means to care, how concepts of discipline and control fit into this conceptualization, and how caring relations are created and maintained within the organization of a school (Alder, 2002; Schussler & Collins, 2006). Schussler and Collins (2006) identified a gap in the care literature as it related to understanding how care exists in the school setting and the effect of its presence as opposed to its absence alone. More specifically, Alder (2002) called for future research related to the tensions between care and control in the classroom, and Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz (2015) called for more research on the link between disciplinary practices and students’ relationships
with their teachers. Through spending approximately 30 hours (with visits ranging from 10 minutes to 5 hours and 30 minutes) over the course of three months in one classroom, I was able to gain an understanding of the workings of the classroom in a way that would not have been possible through interviews alone. Through situating myself as a classroom participant and speaking with students and the classroom teacher about their experiences and perspectives, it is my hope that results of this study will help to fill the gaps outlined by Schussler and Collins (2006), Alder (2002), Gregory et al. (2015), as well as others to contribute to the how literature on care in schools and allow for reflection on the ways in which different classroom variables interact to create a culture of care.

This research required that I investigate and bring together constructs that have been reviewed in the literature as complementary as well as at tension with one another (e.g., care and control). Grappling with the confusion that exists between two ends of a spectrum is a state that Derrida claims one should be proud to know and visit (Thinking: Binary vs Holistic, n.d.). To uphold a clear-cut story is, according to Derrida, to avoid grappling with the complex, messy nature of reality (Thinking: Binary vs Holistic, n.d.). Thus, the current study adds to the literature through bringing to light key themes of care in the classroom, as well as contradictions and points for reflection.

**Delimitations**

Adopting a mini-ethnographic case study approach allowed me to gain an in-depth glimpse into the cultural practices of one classroom. With such a focused approach follows limitations of being bound by participants and location. In addition, results of the study are not generalizable to other classrooms in the traditional quantitative sense. Rather, results of the current study are “true” (based on my reconstruction) only for the classroom under analysis. I list
this as a delimitation to acknowledge the limits of findings; however, generalizability is generally not a goal of qualitative research. In conducting this qualitative investigation, I set out to adhere to good data collection and analysis procedures to assist with potential transferability and resonance, and to illuminate the findings in this context. The result is a thick, contextualized description of a topic that needed further explanation (Fusch et al., 2017). Additionally, I brought interpretations of the working of the classroom to more universal analysis of the ways in which classrooms are structured more broadly. Finally, adopting this study design was intentional in the way of limiting the time, scope, and resource-intensiveness of the project in order to fit the constraints of a graduate student dissertation. Selecting such an approach does not go without criticism in the literature as the lines between established approaches are blurred and the researcher is at risk of inappropriately claiming ethnography. To take into consideration this critique, while maintaining the focused nature of the study, I follow the suggestion of not claiming ethnography, but rather claiming an “ethnographic perspective” that utilizes ethnographic techniques (Green & Bloome, 1997, p. 4).
CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The primary goal of the current study was to construct a theory of the ways in which care operated in one fifth grade classroom based on my integration of participants’ perspectives, my own observations of classroom encounters, and previously established theory. As I set out to examine relations between teachers and students in the classroom, the following review of literature served as the theoretical foundation against which I approached the study and interpreted the data. As such, the following review highlights the interrelated areas of focus that served as my theoretical lens. I start by building a rationale for investigating care in the classroom through taking a broader look at the systems of care in schools, what is comprised within a definition of success, and how that impacts what is prioritized. Namely, I describe how students’ subjective well-being (SWB) fits into a comprehensive definition of student success, research that demonstrates the importance of attending to students’ SWB, and in what ways supportive classroom relations (particularly emotionally supportive, or caring) contribute to students’ SWB. I then turn to what previous literature says (and does not say) regarding how these supportive relationships can be built and maintained within a dynamic system in which conflict and other potentially relationship-rupturing events are inevitable. Finally, I address critical literature on care to shed light on the ways in which care can, despite good intentions, uphold hegemony and undermine caring relations. I conclude with the need to highlight student voice, as well as implications for school psychologists.
Defining Student Success

School psychologists define student success multidimensionally – encompassing academic as well as social-emotional-behavioral functioning (Suldo, Gormley, DuPaul, & Anderson-Butcher, 2013). While the primary goal of education has historically entailed a narrow focus on academic skills and performance, research supports the inclusion of efforts to attend to students’ social-emotional-behavioral health as a means of facilitating academic success, as well as promoting well-being and preventing exacerbation of existing mental health problems (Roeser et al., 2000).

As efforts to improve students’ academic functioning are of top priority in schools, evidence-based interventions delivered through a multitiered system of supports (MTSS) have become more common practice (Gresham, 2007; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). However, efforts focused on promoting psychological and behavioral success have just recently begun gaining traction through research that supports the interrelatedness of social-emotional-behavioral outcomes with students’ academic success (Masten et al., 2005; Moilanen, Shaw, & Maxwell, 2010; Suldo, Thalji, & Ferron, 2011; Valdez et al., 2011). While attention to behavioral indicators – including social competence and problems – has gained some momentum through Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2010) initiatives, an infrastructure for supporting students’ social-emotional functioning has lagged behind.

Traditionally, when mental health services have been provided in schools, attention has been placed on reducing symptoms of distress (i.e., psychopathology) as a means of reducing barriers to learning. However, an entirely reactive model of responding to concerns is costly in both time and resources for schools, as well as in actively engaged time for students whose academic success is impacted by emotional symptoms. Additionally, based on support for a dual-
factor model of mental health (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008), more modern definitions of psychological well-being include attention not only to the frequency or severity of internalizing or externalizing problems, but to indicators of well-being – including students’ appraisals of their quality of life (Howell, Keyes, & Passmore, 2013). Within a dual factor model, students with complete mental health have both moderate to high subjective well-being (SWB; an indicator of positive psychological well-being) and experience few to no symptoms of mental health problems (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001). Thus, a complete definition of student success includes attention to both academic functioning – including skills and enablers – as well as social-emotional-behavioral functioning – including attention to social competence and problems, and psychological (distress and SWB) functioning (Roeser et al., 2000). Attention to social-emotional factors, particularly to positive indicators, have lagged behind those of other domains, which may have implications for the well-being of students in schools today.

From a critical postmodern perspective, the relatively recent focus on emotional literacy in schools is not neutral but rather serves state and national interests by creating citizens with both the intellectual know-how and interpersonal skills for “smooth and efficient production” (Boler, 1999, p. 70). Thus, while promoting student well-being is an important rationale for attending to caring classroom relations in the current study (based largely on extant quantitative studies), I will discuss the ways in which selectively attending to students’ social-emotional-behavioral functioning can reinforce a neoliberal, humanist discourse (emphasizing self-control, individual choice) in which care is paternalistic, societal conditions are erased, and particular emotional behaviors are privileged as constituting the good citizen (Boler, 1999). Guided by Boler (1999), I will also address the potential of social-emotional-behavioral curricula for providing students the space to reflect on the range of emotional experience, their relations with
others, and how emotional rules (typically framed as “natural, private, individualized”) maintain social hierarchies.

**Rationale for Attending to Students’ Subjective Well-Being**

Attention to social-emotional indicators of functioning is warranted given the impact of positive and negative indicators of mental health on students’ physical, social, and academic functioning (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). According to a literature review by Suldo et al. (2014), mental health affects academic outcomes, academic achievement affects mental health, and focusing on each domain may be most appropriate due to their separability. For example, Masten et al. (2005) illustrated that externalizing symptoms in upper elementary years predicted worse distal academic skills in high school, which persisted into late adolescence and, in turn, predicted more internalizing symptoms in early adulthood. These findings were replicated with a younger sample (Moilanen et al., 2010).

In relation to positive indicators of mental health, compared to peers with low SWB (but similarly low levels of mental illness), students with complete mental health have been found to have better grades, test scores, attendance, and attitudes about learning (Suldo & Shaffer, 2008). Additionally, these students reported better social relationships and physical health, as well as stronger personal identities (e.g., self-esteem, involvement in meaningful activities). Further, a longitudinal study including measures of both psychopathology and SWB in a sample of middle school students revealed that higher SWB predicted better academic outcomes the following year (after controlling for initial levels of academic skill), the impact of which was greater than any negative impact of externalizing symptoms (Suldo et al., 2011). This study also revealed that those students with the greatest risk of academic deterioration were those students considered
troubled (low SWB and elevated psychopathology) in a dual factor model of mental health; thus supporting the need to attend to students’ complete mental health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 13-20% of school-aged children have a diagnosable psychiatric disorder, and only one fourth of these students are receiving therapeutic services outside of the school (Hoagwood & Johnson, 2003). Considering the number of students in need of mental health services, and the potential for schools to address needs that might otherwise go unmet, there is a call to maximize the delivery of social-emotional supports, such that all students’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000) are supported (Solomon, Battistich, Kim, & Watson, 1996). The current study focused on classroom-level support, including considerations for educators seeking to facilitate caring relations.

**Relationship Between Classroom Support and Students’ Subjective Well-Being**

Within a dual-factor model of mental health, complete mental health is comprised of low levels of negative symptoms (i.e., mental illness) and high levels of positive indicators (i.e., SWB; Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001). Extant research highlights supportive teacher and classmate relationships as factors that co-occur with and contribute to students’ SWB (and related indicators; Flaspohler et al., 2009; Natvig et al., 2003; Samdal, Nutbeam, Wold, & Kannas, 1998; Siddall, Huebner, & Jiang, 2013; Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, Minch, & Michalowski, 2009; Suldo & Huebner, 2006; Wingate, 2018). The following review of the literature on the impact of teacher-student and classmate relations on students’ SWB serves as a rationale for later review of theory on care in the classroom. Both elements provide a foundation for the proposed study.
**Extended attachment and self-determination.** Extended attachment (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, 1999; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997) and self-determination theories (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Ryan & Powelson, 1991) provide theoretical rationales for investigating caring relations in the classroom. Bowlby (1969) suggested that secure attachments formed at the beginning of a child’s life provide the child with an “external ring of psychological protection” that allows the child to seek out and build additional supportive relationships. Thus, environments designed to facilitate the formation of secure relationships characterized by feelings of emotional security are theorized to set the stage for the development of self-esteem and comfortability exploring one’s environment. In the classroom context, this translates to secure attachments with teachers and classmates as foundational to equipping students with the emotional security necessary to explore the learning environment and lead fulfilling lives. One study with kindergarten children provided empirical support for a positive link between teacher support and students’ emotional security, and for emotional security as a mediator in the relationship between teacher support and student engagement (Thijs & Koomen, 2008). Also of note, it may be that students who feel affirmed in their relations with others are more likely to engage in discussions that elicit discomfort or require critical self-reflection and reflection upon their ethical relations with others (Adams, Tormala, & O’Brien, 2006; Aronson, Cohen, & Nail, 1999; Creswell et al., 2007; Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Steele, 1988).

While positive teacher-student relationships support students’ school adjustment and stimulate learning behavior, negative teacher-student relationships are thought to engage opposing mechanisms that reflect a lack of security and ultimately interfere with students’ abilities to cope with demands in school (Roorda et al., 2011). From an extended attachment perspective, the affective quality of teacher-student relationships can be measured by the extent
to which the relationship is characterized by *closeness* (i.e., warmth and openness), *conflict* (i.e., discordant, coercive interactions), and *dependency* (i.e., clingy behaviors; Pianta, 2001).

According to self-determination theory, all people need to experience feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in order to experience ongoing personal growth, motivation, integrity, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Thus, environments that support these psychological needs naturally support SWB, while those that do not provide a stage for the fulfillment of these needs are associated with poorer outcomes, including lower levels of SWB. According to Roorda et al. (2011), teachers (and perhaps to some extent classmates) can support these needs through *showing involvement* (“caring for and expressing interest in students”), *providing structure* (“providing clear rules and being consistent”), and *supporting autonomy* (“giving students freedom to make their own choices and showing connections between schoolwork and students’ interests,” p. 495). The *showing involvement* affective dimension of relationships, intended to support students’ needs for relatedness, is considered the most important predictor of engagement and is tied conceptually to attachment theory through the mutual focus on emotional security (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Tucker et al., 2002). Overall, as stated by Nie and Lau (2009), “self-determination theory provides a psychological explanation for the beneficial effects of teacher care from the needs satisfaction perspective” (p. 186).

Prior studies support the relationship between feelings of relatedness and students’ SWB. For example, Myers (1992) reported that individuals who feel meaningfully integrated in the social networks in their lives also experience better mental and physical health outcomes. Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan (2000) used hierarchical linear models to examine the extent to which daily variations in fulfillment of the three basic needs predicted daily fluctuations in reported well-being, while controlling for individual differences, among a sample of 76 students,
ages 17 – 68 (86% below age 26). Results revealed that feelings of relatedness not only predicted well-being on a daily basis, but also that engaging in meaningful conversations, and feeling appreciated and understood by those conversation partners were the aspects of social activity that predicted the greatest amount of variance in an individual’s feelings of relatedness (Reis et al., 2000). These findings support the notion that bolstering feelings of relatedness, particularly those grounded in authentic interactions where one feels understood and appreciated, has the potential for enhancing SWB. The current study focused on relational dynamics within the classroom, including qualitative analysis of the aspects of relational interaction salient to students.

**Teacher-student relations.** Conceptualizations of high-quality teacher-student relationships often include a preponderance of positive characteristics—such as perceptions of closeness, warmth, instrumental help, relationship satisfaction, social support, nurturance, trust, and emotional security—and fewer negative features—such as conflict and excessive dependency (Ang, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Roorda et al., 2011). In one meta-analysis, Roorda and colleagues (2011) examined the impact of positive and negative teacher-student relationships on students’ engagement and achievement. Judging the quality of relationships requires attention to indicators of both positive (e.g., closeness) and negative (e.g., conflict) features, with some studies highlighting negative indicators as more influential to students’ school adjustment (Baker, 2006; Hamre & Pianta, 2001). In regard to negative aspects of teacher-student relations, Hamre and Pianta (2001) found the degree of conflict in students’ relationships with their kindergarten teachers predicted students’ grades, work habits, and disciplinary infractions through elementary school for both girls and boys, and through middle school for boys. More generally, results from Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) revealed bad experiences (in general) as more influential than good ones across various outcomes, including close relationship outcomes,
social network patterns, and interpersonal interactions. This evidence supporting the weight of negative relational experiences on students’ school adjustment provides further rationale for examining both ways in which responses to classroom conflict may impact relationship quality and how educators might go about navigating and exploring conflict with students.

Students’ perceptions of relationship quality may be compatible or incompatible with the perceptions of their teachers. One multidimensional indicator of teacher-student relationship quality that encompasses many of the positive characteristics includes students’ perceptions of teacher support, including *emotional support* (e.g., expressing care), *instrumental support* (e.g., delivering assistance), *appraisal support* (e.g., providing feedback), and *informational support* (e.g., offering advice; Tardy, 1985). Globally, supportive teacher-student relationships have been found to keep students interested in academic and social affairs, which consequentially positively impacts students’ grades and social relationships (Wentzel, 1998). Through the lens of a dual factor model of mental health, the perception of support from teachers has been found to correlate negatively with depression (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003), as well as enhance students’ academic performance, self-esteem, social skills, school engagement, and well-being (Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Chen, 2005; Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Suldo et al., 2009; Vedder, Boekaerts, & Seegers, 2005). Similarly, a positive relationship with a teacher may serve a protective function in decreasing externalizing problems (Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999) and enhancing behavioral adjustment for students with developmental vulnerabilities, according to prospective analyses (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Further, teacher support can be a significant predictor of school satisfaction across grades (King, Huebner, Suldo, & Valois, 2006), with some evidence suggesting that teacher support has the strongest impact (compared to parental and classmate support; Danielsen, Samdal, Hetland, & Wold, 2009; Liu et al., 2016),
and is associated with higher SWB (Suldo et al., 2009). Specifically, emotional forms of support appear to be the dimension of teacher support most salient to SWB among students in elementary school (Wingate, 2018) and middle school (Suldo et al., 2009), with instrumental support also serving as a significant predictor in the middle school population. Although individuals define care differently, the consistency in the literature for the benefits of emotional support (including perceptions of care, according to Tardy, 1985) and the drawbacks of negative relations provides further rationale for examining the ways in which care operates in the classroom, including the ways in which students perceive care, and a lack thereof. One study that examined the impact of classroom care on ninth grade students’ (N = 3,196) school satisfaction revealed that after controlling for students’ gender and socioeconomic status (SES), care was a significant positive predictor of satisfaction with school (Nie & Lau, 2009), providing further support for the relationship between teacher care and satisfaction with a contextually relevant indicator of well-being.

There is also theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that teacher and student characteristics can serve as moderators to the impact of affective teacher-student relationships on students’ learning. One such characteristic includes student age, such that younger children tend to be more strongly influenced by the quality of their relationships with adults than older students that have developed a stronger bond with peers (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Hargreaves, 2000; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). There are mixed results for the influence of gender on the school adjustment of boys and girls, such that some studies (Baker, 2006; Brendgen, Wanner, Vitaro, Bukowski, & Tremblay, 2007) support a stronger relationship for girls based on the gender role socialization perspective (i.e., girls are more likely to benefit from close relationships with teachers as closeness is consistent with gender norms for girls, while...
conflictual relationships are less accepted; Maccoby, 1998); some (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) support stronger associations for boys based on the academic risk perspective (i.e., relationships with teachers will have a stronger impact for boys who are at greater risk of school failure; Hamre & Pianta, 2001); and others report no gender effect (Cornelius-White, 2007; Garner & Waajid, 2008; Hughes, 2011; Stipek & Miles, 2008; Wentzel, 1998). From the academic risk perspective (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), teacher-student relationships are thought to be particularly important to the learning outcomes of students considered at-risk for school failure (e.g., ethnic minority students), as these students have more to gain or lose. Again, the research is mixed on this relationship, with some studies supporting the strong impact of teacher-student relationships on the outcomes of ethnic minority students compared to White students (Burchinal, Peisner-Feinberg, Pianta, & Howes, 2002; Pallock & Lamborn, 2006), while others reveal no effect (Cornelius-White, 2007; Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Vedder et al., 2005). Despite my goal of developing an overall cultural interpretation of the classroom, I still attended to patterns and/or deviations from patterns surrounding teacher and student ‘characteristics’ (in light of sociocultural principles) and their role in qualifying findings.

Across age, country, and culture, youth have indicated that school experiences, including access to schooling, personal performance, and relationships in the classroom influence their SWB (Suldo, 2016). Such malleable environmental factors as supportive relationships, that have been identified in the literature as significant contributors to students’ well-being, are ripe for professional development geared at critical reflection upon universal supports for promoting the complete mental health of all students. For schools to facilitate- and students to access- the benefits of high quality teacher-student relationships, there is a need to understand how these relations can be developed in the classroom, particularly in ways that are received by students.
Further, there is a need to extend findings (Suldo et al., 2009; Wingate, 2018) that elevate student voices on teacher demonstrations of support, to understand the ways in which students conceptualize and perceive of caring relations, the context in which these perceptions originate, as well as the consequences or implications.

In extant research, the impact of social support appears to be robust across a student’s educational career, with higher levels of life satisfaction co-occurring with greater perceptions of care and social support from teachers and peers in samples of elementary, middle, and high school students (Flaspohler et al., 2009; Natvig et al., 2003; Nie & Lau, 2009; Suldo & Huebner, 2006). The current study examined the interrelating variables that might underlie this relationship and contribute to perceptions of sustainable emotional support within a fifth-grade classroom.

**Classmate relations.** Although there is less extant literature on classroom support as a multidimensional construct, supportive peer relationships and otherwise high quality peer relations (characterized by high levels of closeness and support, and low levels of aggression and conflict; Brown & Larson, 2009) are empirically supported predictors of a variety of mental health outcomes. For example, studies have identified supportive peer relationships as negatively correlated with psychopathology (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003; Demaray, Malecki, Davidson, Hodgson, & Rebus, 2005; Kerr, Preuss, & King, 2006; LaGreca & Lopez, 1998); positively correlated with school achievement and self-esteem (Domagala-Zysk, 2006; Torsheim & Wold, 2001); a protective buffer to negative life events [Ezzell, Swenson, & Brondino, 2000 (ages 6-14); Wasserstein & La Greca, 1996 (grades 4-6)]; and a predictor of SWB [Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003 (middle and high school students); Suldo, Gelley, Roth, & Bateman, 2015 (high school students); Wingate, 2018 (elementary school students)]. In Wingate (2018), classmate
support was a significant predictor of the variance in students’ SWB, with classmate emotional and instrumental support standing out as unique predictors. If such environmental factors as classroom support (including both classmate and teacher support) have the potential to operate as protective factors for youth with few developmental assets in the home, important questions include how these relationships are facilitated and how they operate on a daily basis to promote the feelings of support linked to optimal outcomes. Although the bulk of literature on classroom care is centered around teacher-student relations, in the proposed study I will also attend to the ethic of care between students and any dynamics of power, control and/or responses to conflict that arise in the data.

**Sustainable Support: Theory on Care in Schools**

With an understanding of the multiple domains of functioning that interact to predict student success, the historical under-attention to promoting mental health in schools, and the protective and success-promotive benefits associated with positive indicators of mental health, there is a need to attend to students’ SWB in schools. However, in addition to differing ideologies surrounding what domains of functioning schools should and should not address, limited time, resources, and initiative-overload are practical barriers to successful adoption of new initiatives. Thus, to support all students’ SWB, systems must have the infrastructure to maximize service delivery through allocating resources in ways that ensure students are provided with foundational supports and skills. The ways in which that is achieved should be continuously evaluated. One way of approaching this goal is to consider (1) what can be done at the level of the classroom to support students’ SWB and (2) what are the wider social functions and interests of proposed approaches and initiatives. Cavanagh (2003) constructed a theory on a culture of
care in schools based on the building blocks of (1) relational ethics/the ethic of care, (2) a culturally-responsive pedagogy of relations, and (3) restorative practices.

According to Cavanagh, Macfarlane, Glynn, and Macfarlane (2012), creating a culture of care in schools involves equipping students with skills in conflict resolution and teaching students about non-violence on a global scale. In addition, focus is placed on creating classrooms where students and teachers work as partners in learning how to care for one another and create a safe space. Such *safe spaces* in classrooms that embody a culture of care are characterized by freedom from harm, as well as freedom to “maintain and enhance ethnic and cultural knowledge and identities” (p. 445). To illustrate this idea, Cavanagh and colleagues (2012) described the experience of Māori students, whose “cultural values, knowledge, and lived experiences…are regularly marginalized or invisible within the formal teaching curriculum [in New Zealand]” (p. 446). Through elevating students’ voices, the authors described students’ difficulties authentically engaging and participating in classrooms where they felt that their knowledge bases and cultural worldviews were overlooked and invalidated. Implicated in these statements is that the caring classroom moves beyond general expressions of care to include communication between teachers and students. This communication, according to Cavanagh et al. (2012), should be aimed at understanding and responding in ways that allow students to maintain their personal and cultural identities, as well as build students’ capacities for navigating conflict when it arises. Through asking students to describe how they know that their teachers and classmates care about them (including times when they don’t feel cared for), I was able to develop an understanding of how students perceived care within the classroom and the ways in which the same classroom practices were interpreted differently. Through observing the classroom during the course of
student interviews, I was able to contextualize student and teacher responses and see relations unfold in real time.

To bring together and make sense of the data I gathered while in the classroom, I ‘thought with’ those that have developed theories of care or critiqued care in a way I found meaningful to the current work. In his ethnographic work on creating a culture of care in primary and secondary schools in New Zealand, Cavanagh (2005, 2009a) identified four themes as central to a culture of care. Themes of building relationships, exercising holistic care, building capacity, and building trust, which were later narrowed down to building relationships and holistic caring (the latter two subsumed under the former), were identified and translated into Māori constructs of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga, respectively.

Whakawhanaungatanga focused on the importance of building and maintaining interconnectedness. Students reported wanting to have positive working relationships, as well as friendships, with their teachers, the result of which would ideally be enhanced learning. According to students, establishing a friendship required that teachers fostered classrooms characterized by trust and a sense of community. According to teachers, a sense of belongingness that mirrors family relations was central to building a trusting community. The latter term, manaakitanga, is used to describe total commitment or unconditional, active care for another’s health and well-being. In the classroom, teachers displayed this holistic form of care when they focused on promoting students’ health and well-being just as much as their learning and achievement. One form alone was not sufficient in the eyes of students to constitute true care. Acknowledgement and respect for students’ identities – as persons with skills and experiences brought from their homes and community cultures – was also critical to students’ perceptions of care. While these conclusions were drawn based on the experiences of minoritized Māori
students in majority culture New Zealand schools, further investigation is needed on the experiences of students of various backgrounds in U.S. schools, and the ways in which care operates in diverse U.S. classrooms.

**Care in the Classroom**

Although theory abounds on the constructs that converge to create a positive school climate (e.g., Anderson, 1982; Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996; Moos, 1987; Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D’Alessandro, 2013), less is known regarding how the classroom- a context in which relations are concentrated and ongoing- functions as a piece of that puzzle. This is particularly true when it comes to a comprehensive understanding of how various classroom goals (managing behavior, handling disputes, conveying support, creating community) are navigated and contribute to students’ perceptions of care.

According to a social psychological perspective, self-determination (i.e., individuals’ needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness) is most likely to be facilitated when students are provided the opportunity to “participate actively in a cohesive, caring group with shared purpose; i.e. a community” (Solomon et al., 1996, p. 241). Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, and Schaps (1995) suggested that school communities that foster feelings of acceptance and care may also prevent feelings of alienation, particularly for those students who may not receive warmth and support through other social forces in their lives.

Of relevance to the current study, Solomon et al. (1996) investigated how this sense of community may be brought about at the classroom level in elementary schools. Specifically, the researchers examined the extent to which certain teaching practices and classroom activities were related to students’ beliefs that their classrooms functioned as communities. They defined *sense of classroom community* as the extent to which students collectively perceived their classroom as
one characterized by mutually supportive relationships and where all members’ ideas were considered meaningful and valuable. Classroom observations were conducted to measure teacher behaviors, classroom practices, and student behavior, and a questionnaire was used to measure students’ sense of their classroom as a community. In a sample derived from the same dataset as Battistich and Hom (1997), Solomon et al. (1996) analyzed observational and questionnaire data from 232 classrooms (grades 3-5 in four districts; 4-6 in two). Questionnaires measuring students’ sense of community (e.g., “students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone,” “my class is like a family,” “in my class, the teacher and students together plan what we will do”) were administered to 5,143 students. Class-level data were analyzed based on a hypothesized path model including teacher practices (i.e., warmth and supportiveness, extrinsic control, elicitation of student thinking and expression of ideas, emphasis on prosocial values, encouragement of cooperation), student behaviors (i.e., engagement, positive behavior, influence), and outcome (i.e., sense of community). Results revealed a relationship between teacher practices (particularly warmth and supportiveness and encouragement of cooperation) and student behaviors in the classroom, the latter of which were associated with students’ sense of their classroom as a community (Solomon et al., 1996). While this study provides support for factors that may contribute to students’ sense of community across different classroom settings, there is also a need to take a closer look at how these behaviors are performed in the classroom. In the current study, I provide an overview of the local context, interpret the explicit and implicit rules in the setting, describe and discuss the interrelationships between variables of interest, and surface both consistencies and deviations across participants’ perspectives to create a comprehensive picture.
For the current study, I focused on the *what* (descriptive) components of the classroom culture and *how* (explanation) that culture was cultivated. I selected the classroom as the level of analysis for both feasibility and conceptual purposes. A mini-ethnographic case study design is characterized by an ethnographic approach bound within a case study protocol and tends to focus on a narrow area of inquiry (White, 2009). Intensive investigation, including data derived from multiple methods and informants, will allow me to gain the deepest understanding of relational dynamics in one classroom within the constraints of a dissertation study. Findings from Cavanagh, Vigil, and Garcia (2014) on authentic and aesthetic care in one U.S. high school indicated that the school needed to change at the level of the classroom. Although classrooms are nested in schools and thus classroom culture is impacted by school-level factors and vice versa, the current study is focused on classroom-level characteristics that inform a theory of care specific to the classroom under analysis, further interpreted and understood through existing theory on care. By taking an ethnographic approach to inquiry, I was able to generate a story of the classroom informed by participants and the context in which they were embedded.

**The Foundational Role of Relationships**

**The ethic of care.** According to Oxford dictionary, care (noun) is defined as “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something” and care (verb) “to look after and provide for the needs of.” As a popularized term, most individuals likely vary in their interpretation of what *care* means and how it functions in different contexts. Similar to Alder (2002), who investigated how caring relationships were created and maintained between middle school students and their teachers, I did not operationalize care in the current study. Rather, one of the intentions of the study was to construct an understanding of care based on participants’ perceptions of how care functioned in
the classroom. I preface that analysis here with how care has been explored in the context of schools to date. As summarized by Alder (2002), past conceptualizations of care include, but are not limited to, action (Tronto, 1993) or inaction (Mayeroff, 1971), an attitude and commitment (Beck, 1994; Noddings, 1992), a practice, process, an ethic, a combination of honesty and patience, trust and respect, humility and courage, experience of others, encouragement and devotion, and promoting growth including a sense of personal autonomy and inward sense of personal competence (Beck, 1994; Gilligan, 1982; Kohl, 1984; Macmurray, 1991; Mayeroff, 1971; Noddings 1992; Strike & Soltis, 1992; Tronto, 1993).

Cavanagh (2003) took Noddings' (1992) theory on the ethic of care in the classroom and applied it to the whole school, resulting in an emerging theory of a culture of care in schools. While I do not ascribe to one definition of care entering the proposed study, I, too, am guided by Noddings’ framework on the ethic of care. Different from an attribute or personality trait alone, the ethic of care repositions the concept of caring as rooted in relations; as deliberate, decisive acts; and something in which one engages (Goldstein, 1998). According to Noddings (1984), the deliverer of care provides full attention, with receptivity (feeling with the other) to the perspective and situation of the other. In such an interaction, the one providing the caring response provides not what they would want in that situation, but what the cared-for would want, through motivational displacement (i.e., stepping out of one’s own frame of reference and into another’s). Perhaps most importantly, the caring response is contextually specific and thus will be “varied rather than rule-bound;” “predictable in a global sense yet unpredictable in detail” (Noddings, 1984, p. 24). According to Noddings (1984), care is not about depth of feeling, but rather about being “nonselectively present” to the person with whom one is engaged (p. 180). From this perspective, the caring encounter is not completed unless the cared-for has
acknowledged the care received. As Noddings described it, the interaction can be made meaningful if the care is received, or conversely, can be diminished and made meaningless. Such a conclusion serves as justification for the need for dialogue between potential carers and cared-fors, to ensure there is understanding. Noddings (2005) acknowledged that in situations where the cared-for denies that he/she/they are cared for, the fault may not always rest on the carer. Rather, there are spaces in which it may be difficult for carers to establish caring relations with the cared-for, even when both parties are seeking to give and receive care. She proposed that changes in the structure of schooling may provide for a climate in which an ethic of care can thrive. In the current study, I attempted to bring together the different ways in which care was perceived by the teacher and students, the multiple functions it appeared to serve and the implications of various practices on caring relations in the classroom.

The link between supportive relations and outcomes such as SWB may not hold when attempts at emotional support are not felt. Thus, although I do not adopt a specific definition of care, Noddings’ (1992) concept of care as relational, rather than as a virtue, guided my interpretation. Within this framework, I considered the structural aspects of schooling and policies imposed upon the classroom that influenced the capacity and nature of caring relations. Also within this framework, care as a virtue is not ignored but requires a pattern of behavior where “it is not enough for someone to say, ‘I care,’ and work hard imposing her educational ideas on students,” but one must regularly succeed in establishing caring relations (care is received by students) in order to receive that designation (p. xv). According to Noddings (2005), viewing care first and foremost as a virtue of carers (as opposed to starting with care as a relation) assumes that carers are caring when they work from what they see as the best interests of their students, “without listening to the expressed needs of the cared-for” (p. xv). This
distinction was of interest to me in conceptualizing care in the classroom, as well as those factors that enabled and inhibited an ethic of care.

Similar to my intentions, Goldstein (1998) sought to move from global features of care ethics to more specific understandings of what it means to teach in a care-centered classroom. Working from Noddings’ (1992) conception of caring as a relation, Goldstein highlighted themes of *engrossment* (i.e., the opening up to the cared-for, characterized by complete attention and receptivity; Noddings, 2005) and *motivational displacement* (Noddings, 2005) as behavioral indicators of caring rather than propose a set list of caring behaviors. She also adopted guidelines outlined by Noddings (1984) when observing regular morning meetings in the classroom, taking note of instances in which actions were varied (nonrule-bound) and appeared likely to result in favorable outcomes for the cared-for.

For example, Goldstein (1998) identified emotional investment (revealed in observations and the teacher’s journal) as a form of engrossment critical to the teacher’s role in developing caring relations. Beyond identifying factors that appeared to enable caring classroom relations, she illuminated tensions at play between constructs. For example, she called attention to tensions between instances of motivational displacement and actions intended to lead to favorable outcomes; a tension Noddings (1984) spoke to as a complex form of care where “we cannot always act in ways which bring immediate reactions of pleasure from our children,” (p. 24). Other tensions included those between “pedagogical and managerial choices” and “not being willing to give primacy to students’ desires and goals” comparable to what some have described as a tension between care and control (e.g., McLaughlin, 1991) or conflict between what the cared-for wants and what’s in their best interests (Noddings, 1984). While this raises the question of who decides what’s in students’ best interests, Goldstein (1998) described the teacher’s
intentions as “clearly driven by her desire for her students to learn and grow” and concluded that caring encounters are variable in their composition with “the precise balance between teacher choice and child choice unclear” (p. 14). Ultimately, Goldstein (1998) asserted that a caring encounter is one that is situated and contextually specific. Like Goldstein (1998), my goal was to lean into and explore the tensions among constructs that interact with caring relations.

Another reason to explore classroom relations involves the potential impact of the perception of care on students’ moral development (Noddings, 2002, 2005). Namely, Noddings (2010) proposed that the components of moral education (i.e., modeling, confirmation, dialogue, and practice) are “activated within” and “depend for their success on the establishment of caring relations” (p. 147). She described modeling as having a powerful effect in both caring and uncaring relationships. Although a child that perceives a relationship as caring will likely experience the positive effects of that security, children who perceive relationships as uncaring may consciously reject the treatment while still internalizing the uncaring behaviors modeled for them. Thus, the consequences of modeling are largely contingent upon the relations of care and trust in which the modeling occurs (Noddings, 2010). Dialogue is open-ended and characterized by attention to the other. In genuine dialogue, both parties speak, listen, and work their way to the resolution of problems. The carer’s role is primarily to identify the needs of the student, learn what the student is going through and then work with the student to meet his or her needs (Noddings, 2010). Alder (2002) talked about dialogue as a way of “moving participants toward a sense of genuine connection and understanding” where true dialogue is seen as a shift away from the traditional view of teachers as “sole expert authority” and into “interactive relationships in which the student’s voice is heard and recognized as wholly valuable” (p. 244). Noddings (2010) offered that children should have opportunities to practice caring behavior themselves, and then
be acknowledged for that behavior (as opposed to rewarded). Further, when students engage in behaviors that could be viewed as uncaring or wrong, the teacher should confirm the best in the student. In other words, the teacher should credit students for any “admirable” motives that might underlie an undesirable act (e.g., cheating to please one’s parents). Confirmation also calls for additional dialogue to find the discrepancies between intention and behavior and is thought to “point a person toward a better self” (Noddings, 2010, p. 148). Of note, with discussion of care as a mechanism for promoting students’ moral development must come discussion of who decides what is moral and the extent to which critical discussions of what is moral and just are necessary conditions to care. Also of note, modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation are not intended as techniques or ingredients in a recipe of care. Rather, caring relations may be a necessary precondition to the effectiveness of the four components in that the educator must know (have personal knowledge of) the child to effectively find the best in them and identify motives that are true to the student’s sociocultural reality. In that way, forwarding an agenda to raise moral citizens may require first building caring relations with students. Developing a nuanced understanding of this precondition, in a way that acknowledges the social dynamics of the classroom, was a primary goal of the current study.

Caldwell and Sholtis (2008) described how students ranked and sorted research-based statements surrounding care ethics, including high school students’ perspectives of which characteristics most describe a caring teacher. In this study, conceptualizations of teacher care ranged from student-oriented care, including treating students with respect, openly and outwardly believing in students, listening to students, practicing patience, and encouraging students to think by providing the time, resources, and activities to tap into higher-order thinking; to work-oriented care, including adjusting grading and workload to consider students’ needs; to
engaging care, including helping students become independent, and providing opportunities for discussions; to active care, including being energetic and exuding a passion for learning, as well as making assignments interesting and having a sense of humor. In two middle school classrooms, Alder (2002) identified that teachers were viewed as caring in terms consistent with the student-oriented care described by Caldwell and Sholtis (2008) and Noddings’ concept of care (1992) in that students felt cared for when their teachers seemed to know them well. Additionally, the middle school students felt cared for when their teachers provided personalized leadership (“moving on after student is asked to take responsibility for less than honorable acts;” Alder, 2002, p. 259); engaged in behaviors consistent with work-oriented care (Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008) such as teaching to understanding and being academically helpful; and held high expectations for students both academically and behaviorally.

The role of control. A seemingly separate and even opposing construct to care, there is literature on the “tensions and connections of caring and controlling” (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 182). McLaughlin (1991) addressed the relationship between care and control through spotlighting the experience of Kerry, a student teacher. Kerry described feeling conflicted in her desire both to care and manage students’ behavior, expressing that she wished she had been “firm” with her students from the start because the “consequence of being nice was to end up being mean” (p. 188). Such sentiments reflect the tug between ideas of care as “niceness” and control as behavior management that ended up being a key theme of the study. McLaughlin (1991) summarized Kerry’s efforts to care in three key themes: “being real” or herself with students, establishing personal relationships (knowing and respecting students as people), and “altering the environment and curriculum to keep students engaged in learning” (p. 188). He also compared themes to Noddings’ (1984) framework, such that being real was conceptually related
to the presenting of oneself that is inherit to modeling, and establishing personal relationships and an environment and curriculum for learning to Noddings’ concepts of dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Kerry’s desire to care in this way was described by McLaughlin (1991) as at-odds with “hoping to control” (p. 188). For example, at times when Kerry attempted to “be real,” present herself honestly, establish reciprocal relationships with students, and be spontaneous (i.e., act in accordance with her ethic of care), to realize students “took advantage of her by getting out of control,” she would attempt to maintain her focus on “being real” and other presentations of care. At other times, her attempts at acting in accordance with her ethic of care gave way to added structure and attempts to control misbehavior. While certain messages appeared to suggest care and control as inhabiting opposing ends of a spectrum, McLaughlin (1991) also described the tension as a type of interconnectedness where “the form of control is transformed by the presence of care” (Bowers & Flinders, 1990, p. 15). In Noblit’s (1993) study of care in a second-grade classroom, the “ethical use of power” – operationalized as moral authority – was more closely related to caring than democracy. Taken together, with an ethic of care comes the need to examine ethical control, or the “establishment of caring relationships whose limits are mutually negotiated” as opposed to control based solely on unilateral decisions and/or behavioral reinforcement without acknowledging students’ roles in “conferring authority through negotiation” (Bowers & Flinders, 1990; McLaughlin, 1991, p. 193). During the data collection process in the current study, I was mindful of these proposed spectrums, tensions and forms of authority, resulting in a cultural interpretation that speaks to the influences of control on classroom relations including perceptions of care and the purposes it serves.

McLaughlin (1991) described “a teacher’s eagerness to learn from students and a willingness to explore the topics under discussion” as a prerequisite of care similar to that
articulated by Noddings (2010; p. 189). He referenced McNeil’s (1986) study to reveal the ways in which teachers might tend towards controlling the curriculum (and thereby students’ engagement with the curriculum) when uncomfortable with their own content knowledge or the potential consequences the use of innovative instructional strategies might have on student behavior. McNeil (1986) attributed this tendency towards controlling the curriculum to the prioritization of social control over education. McLaughlin (1991) discussed it also as a potential choice of controlling over caring.

Further highlighting the complexity of the relationship between concepts of care and control, Alder (2002) investigated what care meant to middle school students and how relationships were created between students and their teachers. Results of the study revealed that students perceived teachers as caring when they had control over the class, held high expectations, and challenged students to complete their work. Teachers who achieved control by yelling and “cracking on you” were perceived as caring when they were working in what students’ perceived were their best academic interests, when they were perceived to be “playing around,” or when they were getting disruptive students out of the classroom (p. 255). However, the same behavior was not perceived as caring when teachers were perceived to be pointing out poor academic standing or otherwise embarrassing students. Such qualifiers of caring versus noncaring control were also of interest in the current study.

In attempting to interpret students’ responses, Alder (2002) hypothesized that perhaps students perceived yelling and "cracking on" as a form of care due to (1) their view of their teacher as a moral authority (Noblit, 1993) who provided them with a sense of structure; (2) a perceived balance between care and control in the classroom (McLaughlin, 1991); (3) the belief that high demands are a signal of respect; (4) a perceived relationship between a calm classroom
(devoid of disruptive students) and their own academic success; (5) the perception that expressions of control are legitimate and beneficial when carried out by teachers they already regard as caring; or (6) students' culpability in their own oppression. This final hypothesis can be discussed in relation to the *virtuous carer* (Noddings, 2005)– one who works in accordance with what he or she perceives to be in the best interests of those for whom they care. When that is the primary model of care, Noddings (2005) described that sometimes we look back and appreciate the strict teacher for ensuring that we do the ‘right thing,’ while other times we might misunderstand what we need and erroneously thank that teacher for forcing us to do something that, in fact, wasn’t in our best interests. In the latter case, we noncritically misevaluate coercion as a good thing and continue imposing it upon later generations. Such reliance on care as a virtue to be imparted (driven by personal values within a dominant-culture worldview), rather than stemming from a relation (marked by motivational displacement and engrossment), could result in efforts that improve students’ lives, that “so alienate the cared-for that an objective outsider would have to say there was a complete failure of caring,” and that are “accepted to the unacknowledged detriment of the particular cared-for and future generations” (Noddings, 2005, p. xvi).

This potential for the latter consequence is related to Foucault’s discussion of the new era of controlling minds in place of physical punishment (West, 2018); where, just as prisoners are controlled through means of surveillance, normalization, and examination, students may also internalize a normalized standard of behavior given to them by those in power and learn to police themselves and others for how well they correspond to that norm (West, 2018). In this way, students may noncritically adopt dominant ideas of what’s in their best interests, as relayed and enforced by those in power. In the current study, I was mindful of different forms and functions
of control, occasionally moving beyond student and teacher perceptions to consider explanations offered by Alder (2002) and Noddings (2005), and power structures that may influence these perspectives.

In McLaughlin’s (1991) spotlight on Kerry, temporal, spatial, social, and societal structures interfered with Kerry’s effort to navigate care and control in the classroom. In the current study, I investigated the construct of control as it related to classroom relations, including its various forms and functions and the interplay between the intentions of individuals and institutional constraints.

A Critical Take on Care

While the perception of care has been found to be associated with positive psychological outcomes, there is a need to critically examine the functions of care in the classroom. Valenzuela (1999) described authentic versus aesthetic caring, the former of which requires that educators recognize students as “culturally-located individuals, with an emphasis on reciprocal relationships and interactions between these students and their teachers” (Cavanagh et al., 2014, p. 566). This differs from aesthetic forms of care that may serve as a guise for less socially acceptable emotions (Matias, 2013). From a critical perspective, expressions of care can take the form of superficial performances characterized by empty words without action (Matias & Zembylas, 2014). Although it may be unlikely that educators consciously engage in such superficial performances, according to Matias and Zembylas (2014) such “false-empathy” (p. 320) can be harmful (1) in the way it sentimentalizes the suffering of others without acknowledging the roots of that suffering, which often has a basis in violence, oppression, and poverty, and (2) in the way that empty expressions of care are thought to be sufficient responses to suffering in the face of systemic social inequality and racism. In other words, although care
tends to carry with it positive connotations, along with evidence for its essentiality in practice with students, it is not “exempt from the tentacles of power dynamics” and thus should not be accepted as “good” at face value without scrutiny of the ways in which cultural biases can be hidden beneath claims of care (p. 331). In the current study, I attempted to highlight both intentions to care and perceptions of care, while also examining underlying functions and the impact on classroom relations.

Noddings’ (1984) acknowledgement that “When we want to be thought of as caring, we often act routinely in a way that may easily secure that credit for us” (p. 24) serves as a framework from which to consider caring relations critically. With an understanding of the ways in which constructs such as aesthetic/false/empty care undermine students’ success rather than bolster it, educators may be able to better reflect and “depart from their penchant of aesthetic caring and embrace a more authentically caring ideology and practice” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 263). According to Delgado (1997), without acknowledging the false empathy commonly communicated by White educators aspiring to change the lives of the students of color with whom they work, there is a risk of instead harming those students in the pursuit of providing the student with what is assumed they really need. This assumption is connected to Noddings’ (2005) description of caring as a virtue, as opposed to a relation, in which educators draw from their own (typically dominant, White, well-intentioned) ideas of what is best for students. This idea was also described by Boler (1999) as “passive empathy” (p. xx). While empathy is generally described as the path to social change, a distinction between passive or false empathy (rooted in pity) and what Matias and Zembylas (2014) described as “strategic empathy” (p. 332) and “critical compassion” (p. 319) is important to cultivating authentically caring relations in the
classroom. Such distinctions are represented in my conceptual framework and served as a guide as I interpreted teacher and student responses and behaviors in the current study.

Most prominently, I attended to the roles that care played in the classroom. Boler (1999) spoke to the ways in which a pedagogy of love, headed by the nurturing woman teacher, is one modern-day method for maintaining social order. Empirical studies of care in the classroom also explicitly speak to the role of care as a classroom management strategy complementary to that of behavioral control (Nie & Lau, 2009). According to Nie and Lau (2009), external control pressures individuals into thinking, behaving, or feeling in certain ways through use of salient rewards and deadlines, while its conceptual opposite—autonomy support (a key component of self-determination theory)—is expected to facilitate experiences of volition, choice, and freedom (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). While external control is expected to thwart an individual’s sense of autonomy, behavioral control supposedly does not (Deci, 2008). Rather, behavioral control is focused on regulating students’ behavior through use of rules and expectations. Boler (1999) described this same process of regulating student behavior and maintaining an orderly environment through conformity to social rules and expectations as an exercise in pastoral power such that students internalize the “fear of being surveilled” (p. 21) and self and peer-police in order to conform. Nie and Lau (2009) use self-determination theory to discuss the internalization of social norms as a form of endorsement and thus conforming to these norms as self-determined in a way that maintains autonomy. In the current project, I discuss the implications of care as control, adopting a critical eye when examining how norms are internalized and behavior and emotions are individualized (located within the individual).

Of note, the focus of the proposed study was not to expose classroom participants for responses and/or actions rooted in passive empathy or forms of aesthetic care. Rather, I adopted
a critical lens when interpreting the different ways in which care seemed to operate in the classroom and the implications of different practices on classroom relations. By engaging in a microethnographic approach, I was able to bring together teacher and student voices, along with observations, and my own theory-driven interpretations in order to co-construct with participants the classroom culture of care.

Conflict and Discipline

To understand the functions of care in the classroom requires attention to the role of discipline and its impact on classroom relations. Historically, options for intervening in the face of deviant behavior have been limited to policy aligned with dominant models of juvenile justice (Ingram & Schneider, 1991). A brief historical view of approaches to addressing juvenile justice provides background through which to understand current practices.

**Interventionist lens.** One juvenile justice policy perspective is based on the view of the courts as a type of “substitute parent” that should step in and intervene when children engage in delinquent behaviors (Bazemore, 2001, p. 202). The assumption is that deviant youth are presenting symptoms of underlying psychological disturbance (Platt, 1969; Rothman, 1980) and that these issues can be most effectively addressed through clinical assessment followed by therapeutic or remedial intervention (Whitehead & Lab, 1996).

**Libertarian lens.** The “best interests” rationale associated with an interventionist lens was questioned in the 1960s and 1970s based partially on the harsh conditions that characterized the juvenile treatment facilities in which youth were being held. In response, those in favor of a libertarian perspective advocated for deinstitutionalization aimed at “reducing the court’s discretion and sphere of influence over young people in trouble” (Bazemore, 2001, p. 203; Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Through this lens, if youth that engage in deviant behavior are left alone,
free of stigma, they will naturally grow out of such behavior (Becker, 1960; Lemert, 1971; Schur, 1973), without any active intervention.

**Control lens.** In response to the perceived leniency of both an *interventionist* and *libertarian* approach to addressing youth deviance, advocates for tightening policy argued that these issues were a consequence of general permissiveness and a lack of discipline. This resulted in a *crime control policy* lens focused on suppression and deterrence (Regnery, 1980) that resulted in an unprecedented increase in incarcerations by the end of the 1980s. The agenda reigned dominant in the 1990s and resulted in a restructuring of the courts, along with new policies and procedures for transitioning juvenile cases to the adult courts (Butts & Mears, 2001; Feld, 1999; Torbet, Gable, Hurst, Montgomery, Szymanski, & Thomas, 1996).

**Restorative lens.** Although a traditional approach to punishing offenders still dominates the mainstream agenda, a shift in thinking about how to respond to youth crime and deviance has emerged, and with it, different visions for policy and intervention work (Zehr, 1990). While sharing some of the concerns of the dominant models (e.g., resistance to expansionist punishment trends characteristic of a *crime control* lens), a restorative justice ideology stands apart in the way it challenges these historical perspectives. One area of difference includes the outcome focused nature of a restorative approach, including attention to the extent to which damage is repaired and communities increase their capacity to respond to acts of deviance. Such an expanded framework moves beyond punishment and treatment as sole foci of intervention. In that way, a restorative lens is reminiscent of neither the soft on crime approach characteristic of *libertarian* ideology, nor the expanded punishment approach characteristic of a *crime control* lens. Although proponents of a restorative justice framework hold consistent beliefs to those of *interventionists* (i.e., there is a need to actively respond with evidence-based interventions), they
also advocate for the need to extend intervention beyond “offender-driven services and surveillance” alone (Bazemore, 2001, p. 205) and “focus on the strengths of offenders, victims, and communities that can be mobilized to rebuild or strengthen relationships” (p. 206). This alternative framework emerged in the mid-1990s based on research in the previous decade (Schneider, 1986, 1990), and by 1999, 35 US states adopted restorative justice principles and/or models in policy or statute, with 20 giving priority to the movement through alteration of juvenile codes. This is the point at which such restorative principles became part of the conversation on policy in schools.

A traditional discipline discourse. Although shifting [or swinging in a progressive direction and back, as described by Noddings (2005)], the dominant discourse in schools is still largely one that upholds the need for tough discipline that will control student behavior through the power of deterrence (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003). Under zero-tolerance policies that were the dominant approach to discipline for most school districts in the 1990s and continue today, “misbehavior” results in punitive responses (e.g., suspension) that remove students from the classroom and deprive them of learning. Such exclusion can lead to a weakening of relationships and sense of belonging that can eventually manifest in feelings of isolation (Hart, 2000). Students’ feelings of isolation may then lead to deflated emotions as a result of perceived rejection (DeWall & Baumeister, 2006), and have implications for public safety such that students are at increased risk for future acts of misbehavior (Bazemore, 1999). As such, emphasis on zero-tolerance policies- upheld and reinforced by a traditional discipline discourse and control lens- appears to contradict the goals of education and takes from students the ability to engage in a democratic society (Hart, 2000).
A new discourse of peace? As it relates to school more specifically, contemporary practices in school discipline outlined by Adams (2000) included a shift from corporal punishment (which lost its effectiveness with the baby boom and resulting increase in number and size of schools) to new disciplinary techniques including suspension and expulsion, in-school suspension, zero tolerance, as well as trends such as the medicalization of discipline. In response to the deficiencies of these previous systems, new perspectives emerged including a focus on conflict resolution and peer-mediated programs, the peaceable school movement, moral education, and a curriculum of democratic civility (constructivist approach). Adams (2000) discussed issues with each approach, including the ways in which approaches tended to either ignore larger structural issues or assume that by changing practices within schools, societal structures will follow. In the current study, I inquired about discipline in the classroom and incorporated responses in my overall conceptualization of how care functioned in the classroom. Specifically, I asked about classroom rules, consequences when rules were broken, and the impact of those responses on classroom relationships.

The social discipline window. Historically, “punishment” has been viewed as the most effective way for authority figures to reprimand those who deviate from authorized ways of behaving. The Social Discipline Window is one model that addresses the interconnectedness of support and control through combining the two continuums, resulting in four approaches to behavior regulation: punitive, permissive, neglectful, and restorative (Wachtel 1997, 2000; Wachtel & McCold, 2000). While a punitive approach is characterized by high control (clear limit-setting, consistent enforcement of behavioral standards) and low support (lack of encouragement, lack of physical and emotional nurturance), a restorative approach is characterized by high control and high support (active assistance, concern for well-being).
Similar to Noddings (2010) concept of confirmation, stakeholders operating under a restorative approach would theoretically handle conflict by disapproving of the harm committed while affirming the worth of the offender. McCold and Wachtel (2003) described the four approaches as linked to the words *not, for, to, and with.* Advocates of a neglectful approach would *not* do anything in response to misbehavior; those with a permissive orientation would do everything *for* the offender, leaving the offender with little to no accountability; and those operating under a punitive approach would react directly *to* the offender with disciplinary action. Consistent with the focus on relationships characteristic of a restorative orientation, stakeholders who adopt this approach engage *with* offenders and others to problem-solve collaboratively and devise a plan to activate a process of healing and accountability (McCold & Wachtel, 2003). The Social Discipline Window served as a framework that guided my interpretation of discipline in the classroom as it related to dynamics of support and control.

**Restorative Justice as a Relational Approach to ‘Discipline’**

One focus of the current study involved constructing an understanding of the ways in which issues of discipline, control, and care interacted in the classroom to impact classroom relationships. As adopting a restorative approach is thought to have implications for building communities and enhancing social cohesion (McCold & Wachtel, 2003), the spirit behind this approach was of particular interest in the current study. Broadly, repairing harm that results from conflict through soliciting active participation from victims, offenders, and those within victims’ and offenders’ communities of care is a core component that differentiates restorative justice from other juvenile justice orientations. According to McCold and Wachtel (2003), this requires that “secondary stakeholders,” or those more distantly connected to the specific victims and offenders, “must not steal the conflict from those to whom it belongs by interfering with the
opportunity for healing and reconciliation [through instituting procedural consequences]” (p. 12). Rather, “meaningful emotional exchange and decision-making” among the three primary stakeholders (victims, offenders, communities of care) is the defining characteristic of whether social discipline can be considered fully restorative (p. 13).

Although the literature on juvenile justice focuses on the harm committed by the offender and the reparations that must be made to heal the resulting damage, there is less focus on the interplay of relations between key stakeholders and the context of the incident. In other words, while there may often be an offender in school disciplinary cases, there are a number of factors (e.g., biases; McKinney, Bartholomew, & Gray, 2010) that contribute to the onset of the incident and identification of the offender in each given case. While a restorative practice may involve restoring the damage done in one particular incident, a restorative framework guides the ways in which a classroom functions on a day-to-day basis, including efforts to promote caring relationships, the establishment of which, theoretically, is incompatible with disproportionate, culturally-biased practices. I discuss efforts consistent with a restorative framework in the classroom under analysis, including variability in students’ perceptions of such an approach.

In addition to preventing and resolving conflict, a restorative system aims to reduce the impact of conflict by addressing emotional and relational needs in order to decrease potential feelings of alienation (McCold & Wachtel, 2001). Given evidence that highlights the negative effects of perceived conflictual relations, particularly for students in primary school (Roorda et al., 2011), as well as evidence suggesting alienation as a motivator behind school violence (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, and Roth, 2004), there is a need to better understand responses to conflict that maintain relations and promote growth and understanding among classroom participants.
Promotion, prevention, and intervention. Three guiding principles of restorative practices of which I was mindful entering the current study include engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity, where students are included in decision making processes, are provided with a rationale for decisions that are made and are made aware of behavioral expectations and consequences (Wachtel, 2012). Additionally, to be considered prevention oriented, Stutzman-Amstutz and Mullet (2005) suggested that restorative school environments promote an ethos of care and social emotional learning. One strategy to prevent infractions through relationship building includes proactive circles in which students and teachers engage in structured discussion and dialogue surrounding different topics (academic, emotional, classroom-specific) in a face-to-face format (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). The goal of these circles is to provide a forum for students and teachers to learn about one another (consistent with the ethic of care described by Alder, 2002; Caldwell & Sholtis, 2008; Noddings 2010), in order to build a community in which they can respond to one another more thoughtfully and effectively.

Responsive circles, on the other hand, are an example of an intervention strategy aimed at restoring the community though mending the breaks in trust that have resulted from an incident (Gregory et al., 2015). While at this level, emphasis is on managing conflict, restorative conferences are a means of responding to more serious conflict through systematically facilitating accountability in attempt to repair harm. In Chapter Four, I discuss similar practices that took place in the current classroom and their impact on classroom relationships and students’ perceptions of care.

Criticisms. Criticisms of restorative justice as a dominant framework are important to note. Arguments include the potential for restorative to blend into permissive, where high levels of support aren’t met with high expectations but rather with authority figures dismissing issues in
the name of care. This tendency can be explained through a “harsh-liberal cycle” of discipline in which systems move away from harsh punishment when exclusionary policies are ineffective, and instead swing to the opposite end of the spectrum (Buckmaster, 2016, p. 2). Once systems are operating under a permissive style of discipline, altercations are blamed on the lack of accountability, resulting in a pendulum shift back to a punitive approach (Wachtel & McCold, 2000).

Further, while the theoretical foundation of restorative practices is firmly rooted in relationships and community building, critics highlight a lack of strong cultural community as a barrier to the effectiveness of restorative practices. In one podcast, Ben Straight (2017) described the lack of strong cultural connection characteristic of individualistic cultures as a barrier to the successful adoption of a restorative framework. Straight (2017) is not alone in his hesitancy to overwrite past systems in favor of a restorative approach. The power of shame that is cited in the restorative literature has to do with the “badness” one feels for his or her wrong doings in a society where the individual cares deeply about others and those others care deeply for them [note: according to the literature, with the role that shame plays as a mechanism for change in a restorative approach, comes a process for helping the offender resolve that shame by making amends and reintegrating the offender back into the community in a way that intends to ward off stigmatization (Braithwaite, 1989; Nathanson, 1997; Wachtel, O’Connell, & Wachtel, 2010)]. Thus, as indicated by Straight (2017), the effectiveness of restorative practices would seemingly be contingent upon individuals feeling that they are stakeholders in the larger society- like what they said and did within the group mattered.

According to self-determination theory, we have a human need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). As humans we also function within different contexts and groups from which we
can access individuals, form bonds, and satisfy this need. Without any strong bond to my school or classroom community, for example, I might not feel the remorse necessary to want to right my transgressions in the community or might feel as though my transgressions were no worse than the ones carried out against me. Further, absent of caring relations [characterized by motivational displacement, engrossment (Noddings, 2005); students are recognized as culturally-located individuals; emphasis placed on reciprocal relationships and interactions (Valenzuela, 1999)] educators may establish personally and culturally biased expectations and respond to deviations in a biased, non-responsive way that further perpetuates inequities in schools. In the current study, I noted practices consistent with a restorative framework, analyzed their impact on relationships, and discussed critical considerations (e.g., for social stratification).

**Need for Student and Educator Voice**

Oftentimes in schools, we communicate in “scripts,” described by Pollock (2017) as the simplifying claims we tend to use when talking about students that rely more on “premade ideas about young people” than true facts about students’ lives (p. 20). One strategy to potentially counteract the use of these scripts is to elevate the voices of students under discussion. Rather than relying on underinformed claims at the truth, providing students a voice holds a microphone to their truth and the elements overlooked in the easily accessible, albeit fallible, script.

Pollock’s (2017) recommendation for “flipping the scripts” through countering misinformation is consistent with the concept of providing counternarratives to dominant narratives or the ones commonly perpetuated by those in power. For teachers, students, and peers to form authentically caring relationships requires understanding one another beyond the contents of a script, for example, of a ten-year-old Hispanic male. One way that this understanding can be facilitated is through giving students the opportunity to provide their
subjective interpretation of events. In this way, student voice research is one approach that allows for moving beyond assumptions and scripts and toward a more responsive approach. Adding an etic perspective (from the literature) allowed me to not only engage with student and teacher perspectives, but also with issues of care and control that underlie relations and as such were less likely to be identified in an interview context.

Research on care ethics in schools supports the need to attend to both student and educator voice. For example, Webb, Wilson, Corbett, and Mordecal (1993) found that students, teachers, administrators, and parents all reported caring about one another; however, likely in part because no group ever consulted the other, that care was not perceived by the receiving group. Battistich et al. (1995; grades 3-6) found a moderate but imperfect correlation between teacher and student perceptions of school community (r = .64, adjusted to r = .55, after controlling for poverty level of school). Thus, perceptions of relations in the classroom may not always align between stakeholders and as such both voices are needed.

In one qualitative content analysis of a reflective writing exercise intended to capture New Zealand students’ (years 7-10; N = 96) perspectives on school highlights, challenges, and what the school and teachers could do to improve their learning experience, Cavanagh (2009b) identified a central theme of relationships as the most important element of a student’s school experience. Given this opportunity to share their stories, students highlighted both positive and negative aspects of relationships, including those with both their teachers and peers. Students indicated that making, having, and learning with friends were critical aspects of the school experience, but that other students’ behavior can be a challenge to effective learning. In that regard, students saw it as the teacher’s responsibility to have control over the classroom, but to exercise that control through careful and culturally respectful leadership, as opposed to
leveraging personal or institutional power (Cavanagh, 2009a). Such nuances in how students construct meaning from their experiences were of similar interest to me in the current study, such that I was able to arrive at a comprehensive, albeit incomplete (Geertz, 2008), cultural interpretation of the complex, context-laden workings of care in the classroom.

As previous literature supports the perception of care as being most impactful to student outcomes (Noddings, 1984), and as students are the experts on their own experiences, student perceptions of care were particularly important in informing my cultural interpretation. That said, Boler (1999) quoted Foucault when she described the ways in which people’s perspectives are oftentimes grounded in dominant discourse and ideologies, acknowledging that “power becomes embodied within subjects of pastoral power’s governance” (p. 22). Thus, while the story and themes I offer in Chapter Four are largely built on students’ perceptions of teacher and classmate care, I also went beyond participants’ direct responses to discuss less visible classroom dynamics, such as modern methods of maintaining control (Boler, 1999).

**Implications for School Psychologists**

A research and professional development project based in New Zealand was focused on improving the outcomes (increased retention and achievement) of Year 9 and 10 Māori students who have historically been identified as at risk of early school dropout. In the case of these students, the intervention was to support teachers in building trusting, reciprocal relationships with their students in order to put teachers in a position to both teach and learn from their students (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2007; Cavanagh et al., 2012). Findings from this project (see the Te Kotahitanga project) supported the need for intensive professional development in order to provide teachers with the kind of “deep understanding of how and why each of these components of a culturally responsive, relationships-based pedagogy is crucial, and
how to introduce and sustain them in their teaching” (Cavanagh et al., 2012, p. 447). Also noted by Cavanagh et al. (2012), was the notion that schools will be unable to truly embody a culture of care of all students until cultural inequalities are addressed. In other words, schools can promote universal relationship-building practices and caring relations in the absence of a culturally responsive pedagogy, but truly supportive systems require both.

School psychologists need to be aware of a continuum of school-based practices that support a comprehensive definition of student success. For example, to support students’ mental health at the universal level, school psychologists must be aware of the ways in which classroom relationships, both negative and positive, contribute to students’ well-being. This includes attention to the ways in which students feel most supported in the classroom, as well as how control and responses to conflict interact with these perceptions and impact relationships. With this obligation comes the need to constantly evaluate and critique their practice in order to better meet the needs of all youth in the schools they serve. A failure to attend to students’ voices, and to the ways in which a school may be only truly supporting some students, may be in itself considered a form of passive empathy/care/support.

In line with the need to critique care as it functions in the classroom, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) released a position statement on racism, prejudice, and discrimination (2012) in which they stated, “Proclamations of support without a foundation of action undermine the work of social justice, rendering it meaningless” (p. 2). Thus, the issue of support and how to actively respond to the needs of all students, particularly those that continue to be marginalized, is an essential piece of a school psychologist’s role. In their position statement, NASP went on to describe school psychologists as change agents by promoting justice in support of students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. Part of this effort requires critical
reflection on the part of the educator and school psychologist on their roles in maintaining inequitable treatment in schools, including the extent to which their proclamations of care are received and meaningful versus void of substance and/or action. Without critical reflection, these issues go unnoticed and/or untouched and students suffer the consequences. Thus, I incorporate a critique of care in the current study not as a distraction from the goal of painting a portrait of care in the classroom, but as a necessary check on how care functions and is enacted in the classroom and the consequences. When schools prioritize the equitable treatment of students, critical reflection and action are a continuous element of practice. According to NASP (2012), school psychologists are charged with advocating for equitable practice and for working to reform policies and practices that contribute to inequitable outcomes. Pollock (2017) provided a simple check for thinking about the complex issue of equity in schools. She proposed that educators supporting equity must seek to remedy any situation where students do not have access to the full spectrum of support in schools. This initial reflection can be completed by asking oneself the question, “Does this [communication/action] help support the full human talent development of every student and all groups of students?” (p. 23). This is something school psychologists might ask themselves when evaluating the continuum of mental health supports in their schools and the extent to which universal practices are truly universal [received by all students].

**Summary**

Extant research highlights the benefits of caring teacher-student and classmate relationships. However, there is a need to understand how these caring relations are forged and how they exist in spaces where the need to control and respond to conflict is ever-present. In other words, there is a need to understand caring relations not in a vacuum, but in context. If negative relations can be more impactful on a student than good (Roorda et al., 2011), there is a
need to understand in what ways caring relations are navigated amidst issues of control and conflict. No one list of caring behaviors may be sufficient or generalizable for establishing caring relations across different groups of students. Rather, there is a need to understand the ways in which care operates in a classroom and the impact of various functions on relationships. This understanding is necessary in order for educators to critically reflect and assess the workings of care in their schools and classrooms.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHOD

I conducted the current study to focus on the impact that can be made at the level of the classroom. Specifically, I aimed to outline a cultural interpretation of how care operated in one fifth grade classroom that might serve as a point of reflection for educators seeking to forge caring relationships with their students. By adopting a mini-ethnographic case study design, I was able to explore the constructs under analysis within the confines of an approximately 30-hour period in one classroom. In this chapter, I provide a rationale for adopting a mini-ethnographic case study design, address my philosophical assumptions, review my interpretive and conceptual frameworks, and describe the procedures and analytical approach. I conclude with strategies for validating findings, anticipated ethical issues, and transferability.

Rationale for Adopting a Mini-Ethnographic Case Study Design

A qualitative approach is best suited for researching issues of culture, phenomena, structural processes, and historical changes (Grbich, 2013). Culture might include anything having to do with “the behaviors and rituals of a particular group of people in a particular setting,” (Grbich, 2013, p. 5) which, in the case of the current study, involved those behaviors and rituals relating to care in the classroom. The nature of the problem at hand and my interpretive framework guided my decision to engage in a qualitative approach to inquiry. Although the characteristics of qualitative research are conceptually similar, approaches to qualitative inquiry differ based on the goals of the study and the paradigm adopted by the researcher. Presenting a holistic view, including the structures impacting on a setting (e.g.,
policies, culture, situation, context), is an essential aspect of qualitative research (Grbich, 2013). As a holistic interpretation of care in the classroom is missing from the extant literature, I employed a qualitative approach to begin filling this gap. Adopting a mini-ethnographic case study design allowed me to capture and create this holistic interpretation, including cultural norms, values, and roles of participants in the classroom (White, 2009).

Although an interview-style approach is necessary for understanding the meaning individuals attribute to their experiences, it was insufficient for achieving the goals of the current study, which involved capturing the mental activities (ideas and beliefs expressed through language), material activities (how individuals behave in a group, expressed through actions), and context in which those actions transpire (hierarchies and interrelationships within, between, and among participants; Creswell, 2013). By adopting an ethnographic perspective, I was able to gain a better understanding of the subjective realities of the teacher and students, as well as how participants engaged in the classroom, through investing myself in the process and minimizing the distance or “objective separateness” between participants and myself (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). To broaden the methods through which I called for mental activities and to increase comfortability, I also offered students the option of engaging in participatory drawing, described by Literat (2013) as a sound research strategy that is particularly suited for work with youth across different cultural contexts as it allows for an analysis of images that, when complemented by subsequent discussion, has the potential to create more nuanced understandings of concepts and emotions in an expressive, empowering manner.

Considering my previous research on how teachers and students perceive care in the classroom (Wingate, 2018), I was interested in expanding understanding at that level of analysis through generating a theory of a culture of care in the classroom. The story I present includes a
focus on relational ethics and the influence of control and responses to conflict on caring relations. An ethnographic design lends itself well to investigations of “intact cultural or social groups” where the researcher is interested in “describing the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior, language, and interactions of the group” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016, p. 9). Also typical of ethnographic work is starting with a theory or broad explanation of what the researcher presumes they might find, that serves as the “basic building blocks” of the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 115). In the case of the current study, these include previous culture of care theory and related constructs (e.g., theory on the ethic of care, constructs of authentic and aesthetic care, forms of authority, responses to conflict) reviewed in Chapter Two. Due to the time- and resource-bound nature of the study, and the goal of creating a theory of relations at the level of the classroom, I utilized a mini-ethnographic case study design to guide data collection and analysis procedures. A mini-ethnography is also known as a focused or micro-ethnography and is used when “a field under investigation focuses on a specific or narrow area of inquiry (current study: caring relations), particularly when time or monetary constraints are evident” (Fusch et al., 2017, p. 925; Leininger, 1997; White, 2009). A case study design also binds the study to a specific time (current study: approximately 30 hours to allow for sufficient data collection across classroom activities until data saturation) and space (current study: one classroom), allowing for deep, rich description based on varied sources of information (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Utilizing grounded theory methodology (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), I identified patterns and constructed a theory that explains the actions, interactions, and processes that together characterized the culture of care in the classroom. Taken together, the design of the current study involved grounded theory methodology and ethnographic procedures bounded within a case study protocol.
**Interpretive framework.** Functioning from a relativist perspective, I worked under the assumption that knowledge is known through the subjective experiences of people, where constructions of reality are not “more or less true in any absolute sense but can be more informed or more sophisticated” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). I was a co-constructor of knowledge in the current study, resulting in a picture of reality that can be understood through Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) definition as “multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experimentally based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (pp. 110-111).

In conducting the study, I adopted a constructivist paradigm and incorporated critical theories of care into my conceptual framework. Although the research questions and conceptual lens I bring to the study are grounded in previous theory and research (as is typical of an ethnographic approach; Fetterman, 2009), my goal was to generate a pattern of meaning created both inductively (from the details) and deductively (from the literature), with both emic (participant) and etic (scientific) perspectives, to create a theory of care specific to the dynamics of the classroom in which I was situated.

**Conceptual framework.** In the current study, I drew from multiple interrelated theories in establishing what I thought might be the “basic building blocks” of the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 115). For example, the statement of the problem was informed, in part, by the failures of a traditional discipline discourse to promote students’ safety, address issues proactively, and build students’ and educators’ capacities to respond to conflict. A theory of a culture of care in schools proposed by Cavanagh (2003) provides an alternative discourse of peace in schools grounded in the ethic of care, a culturally-responsive pedagogy of relations, and restorative principles and practices. Within the key components of Cavanagh’s (2003) theory are
large amounts of overlap, as the constructs are all interconnected and grounded in building relationships. While there are consistencies in the literature on relational ethics, including forms of care commonly received and highlighted by students (e.g., taking time to really know students, helpfulness), how dynamics of control and responses to conflict interact and overlap with the construct of care have been framed as both complementary and at odds- with researchers citing the need for further research in this area (Alder, 2002). Namely, forms of moral, legitimate, institutional, and illegitimate authority have all been used to describe forms of control that influence perceptions of classroom care in varied ways, with some researchers theorizing that the form of control is transformed by the presence of care (McLaughlin, 1991). Further, how educators respond to conflict has roots in issues of control, varies from responses consistent with a traditional discipline discourse to those consistent with a restorative framework, and has unique implications for perceptions of care. Perceptions of authentic versus aesthetic or otherwise passive care have also been investigated in the literature. These theories and constructs were ones I suspected might be conceptually relevant prior to entering the fifth grade classroom. This framework evolved over the course of the study as my knowledge of the terrain improved (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I incorporated language from previous literature for consistency as it pertained to the current classroom.

**Role of researcher.** Utilizing a mini-ethnographic case study design, I took on the role of an observer-participant. In that role, I observed and spoke with students and the classroom teacher about their perspectives and beliefs related to real interactions both outside the classroom and in real time. Real time interactions, or an asynchronous interview style, allowed me to capture participants’ words organically as situations arose (Dowling, 2012; Salmons, 2011). Because in qualitative research the researcher is a primary research instrument, my role also
included bringing together the data I collected to *construct* or formulate a blueprint or set of rules in order to *attribute* culture to the group (as classroom culture is not *there* waiting to be discovered). As Patton (2002) attributed the credibility of a qualitative study to the credibility of the researcher, I made efforts to be transparent in my reflections throughout the study. This is particularly important in a constructivist study, where I constructed the subjective reality of care in the classroom together with my participants (Mishler, 1986). Thus, my role involved actively participating and engaging with students in the classroom, thereby allowing me to reconstruct participants’ constructions of how care operated in their classroom.

**Participants**

**Study context.** The study took place in one fifth grade classroom located in a suburban school district in a southeastern state. According to demographic information published in Profiles of USA Public Schools (2019), students enrolled at the partner school were diverse in terms of gender (54% male, 46% female), SES (63% eligible to receive school lunch at a free or reduced-price), and race/ethnicity (32% Black, 30% White, 29% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 4% two or more races).

**Recruitment of participants.** The partnering school was selected based on a previous partnership and working relationship between myself and the instructional support staff at the site. The specific classroom was selected based on recommendation from the school principal and consent of the classroom teacher. As the study was intentionally bound to one classroom to enable more extensive analysis in a feasible amount of time, I was limited to the contextual factors present within the selected classroom. Although the classroom in which I conducted the fieldwork was selected largely based on the principal thinking highly of the seasoned classroom teacher and that teacher’s willingness to participate, the partnering school site was selected based
on the diverse student population and positive existing relationships with staff members through prior and existing school-university partnerships.

In the initial phases of the recruitment process, I secured a letter of support from the principal of the partner school and submitted an Application to Conduct Research to the District Office of Strategy Management. I also secured consent on the part of the teacher (Appendix C). With the approval of the district, as well as the University of South Florida’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the classroom teacher provided all students in the identified classroom with a parent consent form (Appendix B) describing the nature of the study and seeking caregivers’ active consent for me to observe and conduct interviews with their children in the classroom. A small tangible reward (i.e., a variety of school supplies or the opportunity to select from the class treasure box) was offered to students who returned caregiver consent. Prior to seeking student assent (Appendix D), I made students aware of the purposes of the research, provided a description of what their roles would involve, how long the study would take, any foreseeable risks of harm as the result of study participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The description was presented (on the assent form and read aloud) in a conversational style to make more likely that all students understood the content of the message and students were given time to ask questions. As my goal was to reconstruct a cultural interpretation of the classroom based largely on the constructions of classroom participants, in sampling participants my goal was to recruit as many class members as possible, enabling a subjective reality that considered the range of realities at play. The classroom teacher told all 21 students in the classroom about the project just prior to spring break, and students were given four days to return consent upon return. The assent process began after parent consent was obtained. Students who did not return consent forms within the initial timeframe were given additional forms and time to
return consent. Students \((n = 4)\) who did not obtain written parent consent to participate in the study were not included in interviews or observations. A total of 17 students \((81\% \text{ participation rate})\) returned parental consent and subsequently verbally assented (individually) to participate. Of those 17 students, 65\% were male; for race/ethnicity: 47\% were White, 23\% were Hispanic, 12\% were Multiracial, and 6\% were Black\(^1\).

**Procedures**

**Data collection.** Methodology for a mini-ethnographic case study design typically involves fieldwork with direct observation, a focus group, a reflective journal, and unstructured interviews (Fusch et al., 2017). In the current study, I conducted structured and unstructured interviews (Appendices E-F) and observations, and recorded my reflections throughout. During this iterative process, I adjusted my questions and method of data collection in response to emerging issues (Grbich, 2013). In my second meeting with students, I offered them the option of engaging in participatory drawing to illustrate their perceptions of their classroom, as opposed to expecting students to communicate their perceptions through words alone. Although students expressed interest in this opportunity through requesting paper, few students had time to complete their drawings due to competing class activities, and no students brought these images with them to subsequent interviews. Student and teacher interviews were both synchronous and asynchronous; synchronous interviews including all participants at specified time points with slightly more structured protocols (Appendices E-F), and asynchronous questions woven throughout my time in the classroom. Although I considered interview and observation data

\(^1\text{Two of the four students without consent were Black, which may contribute to some differences in the racial/ethnic composition of my sample in relation to the demographic features of the school and classroom, although Black children comprised a small minority in both the classroom (14\%) and my sample (6\%).}\)
equally important, I prioritized the time I had in the classroom ensuring that I was able to speak with all participants so that each voice would be reflected in the narrative. I conducted observations at different times in the school day when not conducting interviews.

**Interviews.** Incorporating a certain level of structure in interviews is recommended for the mini-ethnographer whose time in the field is limited (Fusch et al., 2017). Sensemaking theorists suggest that “school and classroom culture, structures, and routines result, in part, from ‘micromomentary actions’ by teachers and other actors in the school…based on how people notice or select information from the environment, make meaning of that information, and then act on those interpretations” (Coburn, 2005, p. 478; Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Weick, 1995). To get at individuals’ sensemaking within the classroom, I conducted, audiotaped and transcribed one synchronous interview (ranging from ~14-47 minutes; average length = ~31 minutes) with each individual student, one focus group (~40 minutes recorded; Lasch et al., 2010; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010), and two interviews with the teacher (~53 and 40 minutes, respectively). In conducting interviews, I followed Schussler and Collin’s (2006) method of beginning with broad questions to glean an overview of students’ perceptions of the classroom, followed by more specific accounts of care (Spradley, 1979). Synchronous interviews took place outside of the classroom, in a quiet room connected to the school’s library to allow for confidentiality of students’ responses and audible recordings. Asynchronous interviews, or conversations with students, occurred spontaneously throughout my classroom observations, when appropriate, and were recorded with observation notes (not audio taped).

**Focus groups.** A focus group (see protocol in Appendix G) was completed to gather a good deal of data in a small amount of time (Fusch et al., 2017). This focus group began with willing participants (n =10) taking part in a group interview-style follow-up. Notably, the focus
group took place on a day when the teacher was absent from the classroom and the other seven participants opted to use the free time offered by the substitute rather than take part in the first portion of the focus group. The remainder of the focus group centered around a “design challenge” in which all students created their ideal classrooms in pre-determined groups based on a series of questions and shared out their designs to the class. Throughout my time in the classroom, students participated in design challenges that were a preferred part of the fabric of the classroom. Creating a design challenge provided a different forum through which focus group questions were answered, while allowing students creative voice in how they would create change. Despite class wide participation in the activity, only study participants’ (n = 17) responses were recorded.

**Direct observation.** This method was used to observe and interact with members of a shared cultural group (i.e., the classroom; Fusch et al., 2017). During observations, I took the position of an outsider who was seeing with naïve eyes. Using standardized attending, where I sought to attend to interactions pertinent to my research questions, I collected observation notes, including narrative running records and summary notes (Fusch et al., 2017; Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008). In addition to observation notes, I recorded three other forms of field notes described by Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2008) including methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010). I combined methodological and theoretical notes to include conceptual thoughts, or those ideas and questions with which I engaged during the research (Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2008; Sangasubana, 2011). Finally, I recorded personal notes, or my feelings about the research, in a reflective journal.
I typed all written observation notes for analysis and recorded methodological, theoretical, and personal notes in OneNote for ongoing processing and review. In presenting the classroom narrative, I maintain participant confidentiality through speaking of students generally and/or utilizing student and teacher selected pseudonyms in place of participant names where needed.

**Data analysis plan.** In line with Grbich (2013), I took an iterative approach to defining my questions, entering the field, examining my data, making necessary adjustments, engaging in preliminary data analysis (during which time I reflected on the current state of the data and attempted to make sense of them), and re-entering the field to strengthen findings and fill gaps. Once I determined that nothing new was likely to emerge through continued engagement in the process (data saturation), and that my research questions were addressed, I attempted to interpret the data in a way that condensed and recast an account of the classroom culture related to care as articulated by students and teachers and through my own observations. This was informed in part by my conceptual framework, but resulted in something new based on the particularities of the specific classroom.

My total time in the classroom was shorter than anticipated (original goal = about 50 hours; actual time = about 30 hours from March 14 to May 28, with a final teacher interview outside the classroom on June 6) due to blocks of time in which I was asked not to enter the classroom due to testing. While this caused some concern with regard to data saturation, I respected the request of the classroom teacher and adjusted scheduling to ensure all participating student’s voices were heard. In the final phase of data collection, I conducted a focus group activity that involved all students. Student responses during this process were largely consistent with those communicated through individual interviews and enhanced my confidence in data
saturation. In transcribing and re-reading transcripts, I engaged in a thematic analytic process of segregating, grouping, regrouping, and relinking the data in a way that shed light on patterns and created meaning. I followed a basic hermeneutic approach, utilizing ethnographic and grounded theory methodologies, to collect data selectively, compare and contrast different sources of data in search of patterns, seek out additional data to support, refute, or qualify these emerging pieces, and gradually draw inferences based on the links between newly collected data and preliminary themes. I compared inductive themes that emerged from discussions and observations with students and teachers against my conceptual framework for similarities, deviations, and qualifiers. While my conceptual framework was a driving force behind the study and a lens though which I saw the data, I was intentional about giving primary weight to participants’ voices in order to mitigate the risk of forcing the data into a logic that might be more orderly than the messiness of real life relationships (Miles et al., 2014). At times I expose my own reactions (maintained in a reflective diary) to make transparent my thought processes throughout the field experience.

By engaging in a microethnographic approach, my major analytic task was to reach across multiple data sources (i.e., interviews, observation, field notes) and condense the data in a way that revealed an integrated view of the classroom culture of care as established through regular contact with the everyday setting of the group (Grbich, 2013). According to Erikson and Wilson (1982), microanalysis processes include “identifying the fundamental principles of social organization and cultural patterning of that organization, according to which people make sense of the actions they and others take in the conduct of everyday life” (p. 43). Thus, my focus was on both typical everyday processes, as well as underlying processes that may not have been brought to light through brief observation alone. In my results, I begin by describing the culture-
sharing group (participants: students and teachers in one classroom; Miles et al., 2014) then move into a story of the classroom to capture issues pertinent care, conflict, and control, and conclude by rendering a theory of cultural behavior or painting an overall picture of the group (Fetterman, 2009).

I begin by providing *description* in order to enable higher level analysis and interpretation (Miles et al., 2014). To create a description required that I engage in a series of analytic episodes where I continued to condense the data into a coherent understanding of the *what so* that I could set the foundation for further questions (Wolcott, 1994). To facilitate the creation of the narrative, I included a conceptually clustered matrix that allowed me to bring together major roles and variables tied to my research questions for an “at-a-glance summative documentation and analysis,” enabling me to generate meaning more easily (Miles et al., 2014, p. 173). Investigating variability in responses prompted me to consider why the variability existed in the data, what conditions might have influenced the variability, and in what ways the variability might have influenced and impacted other consequences and outcomes (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, I employed quotes and poems “to create mental images that bring to life the complexity of the many variables inherent in phenomenon being studied” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016, p. 16).

In addition to elevating participants’ spoken words, I attended to those things left unspoken. According to Pollock (2017), “Just like the things we say about young people in schools, the schooltalk we don’t hear is predictable and patterned too” (p. 5). Boler (1999) also spoke to the ways in which emotions are disciplined and privatized in education through blocking and silencing. Thus, I followed the recommendation of Grbich (2013) and made note of what went unspoken. Data were stored using OneNote, Microsoft Word, and Excel.
Strategies for Validating Findings

Following the guidance of Cavanagh and colleagues (2012), I prioritized forming trusting, respectful relationships with my participants as a foundation for ensuring the trustworthiness of findings. Additionally, evidence for trustworthiness of the data was sought through consultation with committee members, both conceptually and in relation to methodology.

With an accumulation of data, there is the potential for becoming overwhelmed and losing the bigger picture in the weeds. In order to stay on top of ongoing data collection, I engaged in occasional synthesis and summary and employed different methods of documentation recommended by Miles and colleagues (2014). I kept a data accounting log to document the types of data collected at each site visit as well as occasional contact summary forms to document the most salient data from site visits. Composing an interim case summary allowed me to process through a draft of the work, including a first attempt at creating a coherent account of the case in a written report.

Despite any preconceived ideas based on my training and review of the literature, I aimed to honor the uniqueness of the classroom and embedded member checking within interviews to ensure that I properly communicated the perceptions of both students and teachers. By reaching across several sources of data over a series of months, verifying my comprehension of participants’ responses through asking clarifying questions, and engaging in consultation with members of my committee, I made efforts to enhance the credibility of my findings.
Ethical Considerations

As the proposed study involved students and teachers sharing their perceptions and experiences, a variety of ethical issues required attention. Prior to conducting the study, I secured local and IRB approval. Next, I made efforts to be sensitive to students’ needs and minimize researcher-imposed pressure for students to participate in the study. I attempted to address these issues through thoroughly informing participants of the purposes of the study and obtaining parental and student consent/assent. When analyzing the data, I resisted the urge to privilege positive results by making sure to report multiple perspectives, including contrary findings, and made efforts to respect the privacy of participants through asking they assign themselves pseudonyms. While I wanted to be sure to report results beyond those viewed as positive, I also wanted to ensure that I did not disclose any information that might be harmful to participants. To address this issue, I used composite stories to the extent possible to prevent participants from being identified. Finally, I had an ethical obligation to continually consider whether I was attempting to forward my own research agenda at the expense of the classroom community. In response to this obligation, I offered assistance in the classroom at different times throughout the research project, including serving as a familiar face on days in which students were scheduled to have a substitute, and otherwise taking time to build relationships with students throughout the field work. At the end of the project, I gave each student a handwritten thank you note (enclosed with candy) to express my appreciation for their time and openness. To the teacher, I gave a gift card to a book store to expand her collection.
Transferability

In qualitative research, generalizability is not a primary concern. Rather, the concept of generalizability is local, conceptual, and should be accompanied by a depth of context (Grbich, 2013; Stake, 2006). As opposed to focus on the quantitative ideal of generalizability, I focused on the extent to which my findings are transferable to other schools and classrooms. Namely, a theory on the classroom culture of care may resonate with other teachers and classmates in pursuit of forging caring classroom relations. Further, it was my intention that the results of this research might facilitate open, honest reflection and dialogue amongst educators about the processes and procedures within the classroom and the efforts being made to build caring relations with students.

Emphasis in the field of school psychology upholds Best Practices as the gold standard way of work. While these practices are grounded in research and as such can be regarded as nuggets of truth that are generally in the best interests of students, overreliance on Best Practices (or differentially, assumptions about the ways in which students will best be served) without consideration of context-specific needs can result in non-culturally responsive forms of care (e.g., aesthetic care, false empathy). In the current study, I aimed to construct a context-specific theory of care in the classroom.
CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

In this chapter, I start with a broad description of the school and classroom under analysis, followed by a description of the classroom teacher and students whose interactions and perspectives were my primary interest. Subsequent to a description of the site and participants, I present a narrative description of the classroom that is the result of transcribing, re-reading, integrating, and condensing interview, focus group, and observational accounts. In my process of re-reading, I created a conceptually-clustered matrix, including a summary of individual interview responses by participant related to the various perceptions of control, conflict, and care, and the factors that enabled and inhibited those perceptions (Appendix H). Creating this table helped me in bringing together different voices to tell the story of the classroom that I present in this chapter. The following narrative is my representation of care in the classroom largely as it seemed to be defined and enacted by the classroom teacher and students. I more fully interpret and critique this narrative in Chapter Five.

Context

School. Although the focus of the current study was at the level of the classroom, I also considered the larger culture of the school to provide context and acknowledge the layers of influence on the functioning of the classroom. Fox Hill, the false name I assigned to the actual school, is a public elementary school located in a suburban area in a southeastern state. Although interviews with administration and observations of other classrooms were outside the scope of
the current study, review of the school’s mission provides important setting details for the classroom of interest. The culture of a classroom is not the product of a teacher’s individual creation but is rooted in interaction and situated in embedded contexts (organizational and societal values and traditions) that shape norms, routines, structures, priorities and appropriate responses. Reaching beyond the school, the district in which Fox Hill is housed described its values and strategic priorities on the district website as focused in part on building a proactive, safe environment grounded in communication and strong relationships. Fox Hill’s stated mission was to provide students with opportunities and resources to become self-fulfilled, productive citizens that both live in harmony with self and others and challenge the future. Of note, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports were implemented school-wide, and students referred to elements of this system (e.g., school bucks to reinforce desired behavior) during interviews.

Also important for providing a context from which to interpret data in the current study is the timeframe in which I conducted the field work. Namely, I entered Fox Hill for my first meeting with the nominated fifth-grade teacher in mid-March 2019. Statewide assessments took place beginning in April and continued through mid-May. Despite the classroom teacher’s insistence on maintaining her teaching philosophy and routines during testing season, I noted the ways in which “external accountability often supersedes everything else, including a school’s mission and values” (Schussler & Collin, 2006, p. 1463). It was evident, both through talking to the teacher and students, and through my inability to spend time in the classroom for pockets of time during the spring semester, that testing was a top priority. Thus, the timing of the fieldwork may have contributed to the functioning of the classroom and should be acknowledged as a relevant contextual factor.
No interviews were conducted with administration or other classroom teachers.

Regarding student perception of overall school climate, one student participant who described feeling particularly supported stated,

I’ve never had to experience a learn, test, result. I’ve always had a teacher that’s learn, help, help, test, still kind of help, and then result. Which I feel lucky for that, but if I ever had a teacher like that, I would definitely not consider them one of my favorites… And then I also think that’s to [the principal], like she cares for my education and she wants a teacher that is – that will fit just right for me… I think she knows me well enough to know, ‘okay if he’s in this class, he might struggle a little bit with that. If he’s in this class, it might be too easy for him. I’m gunna put him in this class – it’s a challenge but this teacher will help.’

In confirming that he felt like the principal was looking out for him, he stated, “I think everybody at this school’s just looking out for everybody.” Of note, though this perception was not shared by all participants, it was foundational to this student feeling that he was part of a community that cared about him and his education.

**Classroom.** I first entered the fifth-grade classroom in mid-March for an initial meeting with the classroom teacher. Prior to entering, I was greeted by an award on the door making guests and passersby aware that this classroom collected the most box tops in a school fundraiser. Once inside, I was surrounded by four enthusiastic walls the teacher described as needing a refresh. In colorful writing with carefully placed accent points at the end point of each line or curve was the day and date in both words and numbers, followed by the learning targets for the day in each subject area. Beside it was a written schedule of the day with ten timeframes outlined in black and corresponding activities presented in a non-repeating color. A large sticky
note hung just below presented *Using Phrases to Add Sentence Variety*, and neighboring work on *Unlocking the Problem*. Resting on the board were a variety of books on creativity and being human, along with signs displaying words like “integrity” and messages like “you can learn something new every day if you listen.” A poster of *Common Themes* included decorated messages of “respect, kindness, honesty, acceptance, courage, be responsible, compassion, never give up, and friendship.” Beside a *Mighty Math* board was a call to “please be P-,” with each letter a different color and pattern, and a list of five words including “polite, prepared, positive, productive, and proud.” Below the board were student sticky notes posted on a poster board asking, “How will you demonstrate…Self-control” alongside a quote describing self-control as a key factor in achieving success. A similar poster board hung nearby with sticky notes responding to the prompt, “After learning about the tragedy of September 11th, describe a life lesson you’d like to live by to make our world a better place.” A word wall, shout outs (i.e., notes posted by students describing how another student was kind, set a good example, or otherwise deserved a shout out), and countless posters concealed any hints of remaining wall space. Desk arrangements changed approximately four times during my time in the classroom, including both table cluster and row designs with varying groupings of students.

The Friday of my first visit with students to introduce myself, collect parental consent, and ask for verbal assent, students were seated in rows in preparation for testing. I noted repeated reminders by the teacher to students to “own your learning” and students’ thoughtful questions about how the study would work (e.g., *You may have already said this, but what types of questions will be asked? How realistic do our fake names have to be? What if we need to ask you something but you’re busy? Will we do the interviews in the classroom? Will you tell our teacher what we said?*). I followed students to their music class before returning on Monday to present
an optional opportunity for students to illustrate their classroom. During this brief visit, I interrupted students writing good luck letters to a peer in preparation for the following days’ assessments, an activity representative of others I would witness throughout my time as an observer-participant in the class.

Following a reminder about the purpose of the study and recording preferred fake names, I asked students in individual interviews about how much time they spent in their classroom and how they would describe it to someone who did not know it like they did. Responses varied from classroom aesthetic to emotional reactions, with varying degrees of satisfaction I felt would be best represented positioned against one another. Although responses moved beyond setting features to relational dynamics, I present verbatim segments of responses to that initial question here, compiled together in poem form, to capture what first came to students’ minds, begin bringing students’ voices to life and foreshadow the story to come. Statements are pieced together, with one student’s statement ending in a period before the start of a statement made by another:

A nice environment to be in.

Our teacher works a lot to get us well educated in a fun manner.

It really feels like I’m at home

with tons of other people.

Our class is like a family.

Ms. Schmidt² and all my other classmates-

I know they’re just there for me – every time. And…

It’s nice. Being there.

² All names are pseudonyms
Colorful and educational.

Too colorful.

All of the things on our walls have like a meaning to them.

It’s a bit much.

Almost extra.

It’s not just a boring class…

It’s like our class is one of those types of classes that’s just like you’re going to learn everything.

You have to give like your all like 100 percent of the time.

You can’t like slack off.

We always work together in groups.

We’re showing teamwork and they’re always showing integrity.

They’re always positive.

Ms. Schmidt lets us move away if we’re going to get distracted.

Also she brings problems to life.

She kind of likes surprises.

It’s exciting.

Fun and unique.

The downside is we barely go to recess.

I’d describe it as different from other classrooms…

because there’s like some people I’ve never like ever met that’re different than people I’ve ever met because they’re a little more loud…
and not well behaved.

I don’t like, like how, like the classroom setting of like…

how it is.

We have to use signals.

…I feel like that’s like for kindergarteners.

Well like, if you come in a few times like you did,

you would probably think it’s all fun in there

but sometimes it kind of scares me…

just like ‘we don’t do that, we don’t talk about that’

and…it made me really sad…

but I tried not to show it because I feel like in class everyone’s so

judgmental.

Friendly people.

Friendly teacher.

She adores some people.

Of note, students frequently viewed their classroom in ways consistent with their view of
their teacher. For example, one student reported that his classroom was fun and unique “because
Ms. Schmidt is a unique teacher because she does these raffles and she’s fun because she does
these little games every once in a while. But the downside is she barely goes to recess.” In that
way, students extrapolated perceptions of their teacher to their current school experience at large.

Another student reported that she would come to school every day, including summers, if she
had a different teacher. The extrapolation of teacher-student relations to experience of the
classroom and school more generally provides further rational to critically examine classroom relationships and the factors that influence classroom dynamics.

Participants. In addition to introducing the concept of a pseudonym to protect confidentiality during my initial meeting with students, I set aside time at the start of each individual interview to ask students, referred to by their teacher as “scholars,” for a preferred “fake name.” After the initial conversation, some students came prepared with a name or prepared one at the start of the interview. Other students requested additional time for brainstorming and I returned to learn their chosen name at a later time. This was also true for the classroom teacher, who selected the name Ms. Schmidt during the course of the study.

Ms. Schmidt’s Fifth Grade Classroom

In transcribing and re-reading transcripts that became representations of my interactions with the classroom teacher and students, I was mindful of the ways in which individuals (e.g., classroom teacher, students, myself) are embedded in contexts with cultural and organizational norms that influence interactions and shape what are considered appropriate questions and responses. Thus, I acknowledge my own influence on participants’ responses, including the questions I chose to ask and the effect of my presence and background on what might have been considered acceptable to share. The narrative I present highlights core practices and procedures of the classroom and interacting dynamics that contributed to relationships and perceptions of care. To arrive at a theory of classroom care, I sought to let the data guide a telling of the classroom story including participants’ beliefs, attitudes, values, and explicit ideas and ideologies surrounding care, as well as classroom structures, behavior patterns, actions and events that influenced these perceptions (Grbich, 2013). I start by providing an account and theory of the classroom that I further interpret in Chapter Five.
Classroom Philosophy

Background

In my interviews with Ms. Schmidt, I came to understand the ways in which her previous experiences influenced her teaching philosophy and practices within the classroom. In presenting her teaching history and talking through decisions she had made in her career, it was evident that Ms. Schmidt placed substantial value on establishing a “strong class culture.” She described “always advocating to teach self-contained classes” in which she taught all subject areas “because I like how you can integrate content areas, and I also like how when you have a group of students all day long, you can really build up the class culture.” In both interviews and in interaction with Ms. Schmidt, she provided a research base for her beliefs and practices and demonstrated thoughtfulness in her approach. In the case of teaching self-contained classes, she shared “there’s just so much research that supports how at this developmental age, it is beneficial to give students that consistency rather than have several transitions throughout the day.” In selecting school sites, she based her decisions on factors such as the positive reputation of the principal and assistant principal, and opportunities to mentor early career teachers. Outside influences that impacted the approach Ms. Schmidt brought to her classroom included family members who were educators and past bosses that helped her grow professionally. She described an intended restorative approach to care and control (Wachtel & McCold, 2000) that was informed by seeing other educators set the bar high, but also show respect and love for students.

In addition to outside influences that consciously contributed to Ms. Schmidt’s teaching philosophy, she also spoke to experiences that helped define her current approach through clarifying what was most important to her. Specifically, she described the role of leadership and how:
“Unfortunately, you encounter leaders along the way who aren’t always the best advocates for students. So, I think while I might not share the same philosophy as some of those leaders, I think it has taught me what not to do and inspired me to continue to go above and beyond to hopefully make an impact not just on a student’s academic life but also their character. And just the values that they have. So, I wholeheartedly believe that trying to establish good citizens is more important than establishing the perfect student. You – eventually content will click and even if it doesn’t, that – oftentimes what students have to learn in school does not apply to the real world and the profession that they would end up in. So, teaching respect, teaching empathy, compassion, all of that is beyond important and if the pressures of testing is something that seems to be the number one priority for a leader, I just try to remind myself of what my personal philosophy is and while I’ll do my best to prepare students for all of these assessments, at the same time I need to make sure I’m continuing to teach empathy, compassion, respect – all of the strong character traits, strong worth ethic – that my parents taught me. Um, and that my [educator family member] modeled, that my boss from mentoring modeled. That you know, I just need to continue to live by that philosophy.”

Interviewing Ms. Schmidt about her teaching philosophy and how she came to develop that philosophy provided me with insight into the sensemaking through which she explained her intentions and the workings of the classroom. Ms. Schmidt’s reasons for entering the field and the philosophy she developed that guided her work, including emphasis on advocating for students and building strong character, was based at least partially on her cultural values and interaction with others, including family members and working professionals. Of note, her embodiment of best practices placed her in the position of a “model teacher” at Fox Hill
Elementary School at the time of the study, where she served as a coach to other teachers on her team who would observe her instruction. My representation of the philosophy, social structure, routines and relations that made up the classroom in this study are based on personal accounts of classroom participants and observation of micromomentary actions grounded in participants’ and my own meaning making processes. The sections to follow highlight the ways in which the classroom philosophy and ideals, informed by cultural and personal influences, were observed, recognized and discussed by classroom participants.

**Collaborative Learning**

A component of what Ms. Schmidt described as her teaching philosophy, several students mentioned opportunities for collaboration as a favorite part of their classroom. In one example, Jacquelin described,

> When it’s science and we do like these projects and we have partners with it. I would think that’s the best idea because if it’s a partner, and like a kid you like don’t talk to much in the classroom, and you’re partners with that person, you could interact with them more and then probably once in a while become friends with them.

According to Jacquelin, opportunities for collaboration brought with it opportunities to develop working relationships with classmates that sometimes helped in establishing or maintaining relationships outside of assigned academic work. In Ms. Schmidt’s interpretation, students engaging in discussions with peers rather than with textbooks was a way of making learning enjoyable and a deviation from the sit-and-get she was accustomed to as a student. She described collaborative learning as an active encounter with material that fits within a gradual release of responsibilities such that it breaks up whole group instruction and individual application of learning. In my initial observation in the classroom, students were returning from
the playground where they were spending time with their kindergarten buddies. Ms. Schmidt explained that the class had been reading *The Girl Who Could Fly* just prior, where the protagonist was in need of a friend. Upon returning to the classroom, students sat scattered around the room for partner reading. After seven minutes, Ms. Schmidt facilitated a group discussion of what it looked like to have a productive discussion and what questions one would ask in a “productive partnership.” In a display that appeared to involve some relinquishing of control and distribution of power, Ms. Schmidt gathered student input using a method she referred to as “casting off.” Students used an attention getter script, “all eyes on me,” to call classroom attention and share their thoughts before *casting off* (i.e., transferring the privilege of sharing one’s thoughts after being called on to speak) to another student. From here, the class moved into a larger group discussion surrounding the emotions brought about by the text. After stating expectations, the teacher called for students to “raise your hand to make your voice heard.” Collaboration in the classroom permeated most class activities, a foundation for how to be collaborative was to some extent negotiated and discussed, students were consistently in practice, and they reflected upon the status of their partnerships. Collaborative small group discussion shifted naturally to whole group in such a way that students were constantly engaging.

A system of feedback was also present, including teacher feedback to students, as well as peer to peer feedback in which Ms. Schmidt called for students to name “what did this scholar do that you’re proud of.” Although not directly observed during my time in the classroom, Ms. Schmidt also described shout-out and spy report practices designed to facilitate positive feedback among peers. The collaborative climate appeared to enable students’ perceptions of care in the classroom such that some students described knowing their teacher cared for them based on her efforts to make the classroom fun, bring learning to life, and create learning through interaction.
rather than through a textbook. Students also described the receipt of care from classmates as enabled by collaborative work through student attempts at inclusivity and working to each other’s strengths in coaching each other through difficult work. For example, when asked the ways in which he received care from his classmates, Chicken McNugget described, “Well when someone is struggling or asking a question. Like, some kids, like me and like when they finish something, and they’re good at that subject and someone has a question, they will coach them to give them…like tips.” Bob A. described this helping as “cool because usually you can just like read a book if you want to but they just help.”

During interviews, almost all students described the collaborative climate as something they enjoyed about their classroom, as it provided them opportunities to talk with different students and engage in fun activities. However, P.J., who was observed to frequently work alone, offered a challenge to engaging in group work commenting that he was fine working in groups with “intelligent people,” but that he did not like when he had to work with students that “aren’t really good because they’re always disruptive.” In a different example, Mr. Unknown, one of many students who described feeling cared for by classmates when they welcomed him into their group, described feeling conflicted about how often he received this form of care. When asked to describe his classmates, Mr. Unknown offered that they were nice, funny, did not leave anyone out and showed integrity. He later described that he felt cared for by some people in his class, but some kids I can’t really tell because if they really cared about me, they wouldn’t leave me left behind. Like if I’m working alone…Or they would probably watch out for me…I mean, if someone really did care, they would probably let me join their group. And there are a couple of people – I mean some groups who let me join.
Nexus, another student, shared this sentiment saying, “sometimes they say we don’t want…we don’t want you here.” Thus, while the collaborative structure of the classroom appeared to create the conditions for the formation and maintenance of relationships among students who felt included and were judged by others as capable of worthy contribution, this potential appeared limited to those that fell within this categorization and less accessible to those that fell outside the bounds of a desired (i.e., intelligent, non-disruptive) partner.

Life Lessons

In addition to and consistent with creating a collaborative learning environment, another element of how Ms. Schmidt described her teaching philosophy included incorporating “life lessons” into the curriculum. She described these lessons as arising naturally, as well as through engagement with materials outside the formal policy system that she intentionally brought to the classroom. Students were reading The Girl Who Could Fly throughout my time in the classroom, a review of which includes, “The Girl Who Could Fly is an unforgettable story of defiance and courage about an irrepressible heroine who can, who will, who must…fly” (Good Reads, 2008).

Ms. Schmidt also described bringing in podcasts, as well as other materials she gathered through following sources of inspiration online (e.g., Dave Burgess’ work related to making learning engaging). She described hoping that these pieces of work conveyed messages of:

- acceptance, being tolerant of other people’s differences, trying to view things from multiple perspectives rather than your own, trying to advocate for what’s right in peaceful, respectful ways, messages of courage and how courage can look very different, um, and of course empathy.

I observed naturally occurring “character lessons” surrounding what it looks like to show integrity and self-control, as well as more explicit conversations around respect and empathy.
For example, in my observation of the collaborative conversation surrounding emotions evoked in *The Girl Who Could Fly*, the conversation developed to consider how “gentlemen” should treat “ladies” and under what circumstances. Playing on conflictual emotions brought about by the book, the space was opened for discussion. After giving students the opportunity to share their views, the conversation was neatly resolved as a lesson in respect, such that the gentleman should respect the lady, even if the lady “wasn’t acting like a lady.”

In another observation of a classroom discussion, Ms. Schmidt called on students to consider what it would be like as the main character in the book, undergoing a “dangerous journey” and the thoughts and feelings that the character must have experienced. At the conclusion of this discussion, she had students reflect on how that understanding would improve their personal character moving forward and the life lessons they would gleam from the conversation. After providing students the opportunity to share how they as individuals would change as a result of empathizing with the character, Ms. Schmidt summarized that it is important to “make the best of moments with family because some are separated” with the lesson being “not to take things for granted.” Towards building character, she encouraged students to “stop negative thoughts and put a smile on” and to “be grateful” as was consistent with their classroom norms of positivity.

*Learning Brought to Life*

In my first interview with Ms. Schmidt, she described that “I love to bring the learning to life.” In subsequent student interviews, several students used this language to describe their classroom and teacher, as well as the role this philosophy played in protecting against some relational damage. For example, when asked about his teacher, Brandan Joseph described,
I like how Ms. Schmidt brings learning to life. She – she’s really funny. Whenever we have discussions, she teaches why it’s important. Like today, with *The Girl Who Can Fly*, um she was – before that, we had little buddies. And she was saying how social skills is a big part of elementary school and everything. So I like how she brings everything to a life lesson that we can all learn from. ‘Cuz that proves to show that school isn’t just a place where you sit down and read a textbook. It’s also a place where you could interact and learn other life skills that you never thought you could learn in school…She said a couple times, I never think learning in a textbook is fun, that’s why I try to do all these design challenges and these hand-on equations.

This component of Ms. Schmidt’s teaching philosophy also showed up when I asked a student about times he may have felt less cared for in class. Chicken McNugget described, “sometimes when it’s like…some people get called on twice and I haven’t been called on even once. And I feel like, she just was like…Just looking over me. Thinking, ‘oh, he’s probably already done it ‘cuz he’s that kind of…person.’” Regarding how feeling overlooked impacted his relationship with his teacher, Chicken McNugget described the impact as short-lived, just with the sense that you never know what’s going to happen in the classroom…like you’re doing research and then she – because we’re focusing on the water cycle and we were just looking through a text – she was like, ‘if you were wondering why there were bottles on the counter it’s because we’re doing a design challenge.’

Classroom observations revealed ongoing collaborative conversations, as well as active learning, including a lesson on the food chain. Ms. Schmidt prefaced this activity as an opportunity to “bring to life the science standard and practice showing positive interactions.” To bring to life the ways in which different organisms are connected, students each received a string that was one of three colors. Depending on the color of their string, students were assigned the
role of a mouse, snake or hawk. To demonstrate how energy is transferred from one animal to another, students participated in a game in which ‘mice’ raced to fill their bags with popcorn dumped haphazardly by Ms. Schmidt onto the field behind their classroom. On Ms. Schmidt’s call, snakes were released to pursue (tag) mice, who were both preyed on by hawks upon their release. Prior to the start of the activity, Ms. Schmidt fielded questions from the group and discussed how to participate once tagged out. Specifically, Ms. Schmidt instructed students to coach one another and provide support, including further examples of what support might look like. In this example of learning brought to life, students were exposed to the curriculum in such a way that got each student actively involved, as evidenced by participation and asking questions; created opportunities for interaction; and incorporated a lesson on what it might look like to show support. Students described forms of active learning as core and preferred features of their classroom reflective of their teacher’s assumptions that learning should be engaging.

Consistent with collaborative learning, activities created opportunities for interaction foundational to establishing and maintaining classroom relationships.

**Structures and Practices**

*Behavioral Reinforcement*

At the start of each interview, I asked the classroom teacher and all students to describe their classroom. The unique qualities of individuals within the class were often recalled in providing this description. For example, Ms. Schmidt described a “quirky group of individuals” with “unique personalities.” She continued to describe students’ personalities stating,

Many students have a, um, kind of dry sense of humor, so they appreciate sarcasm, they don’t take offense to it. Um, but then there are students who need to be nurtured and they
might not understand some of the humor that other scholars use so they just need more of that confidence building and the support that will help them reach their fullest potential. One student reflected on the ways in which classroom reactions seemed to be differentiated by those traits. Melody noted,

It’s weird because like there are other kids who make like funny comments and Ms. Schmidt laughs about it like ‘oh, I love your sense of humor,’ but when someone like me who makes a comment that’s like supposed to be funny and we don’t normally tell jokes in front of the class like that, she just doesn’t like connect with us like she does with the other people.

In addition to a focus on an individual’s personality traits was a focus on emotional control residing within the individual. Specifically, the need for one to harness the self-control, work ethic, and integrity within them in order to be productive and successful became clear through my observations and speaking with Ms. Schmidt. In interviews with students, it became clear the ways in which students viewed adherence to these principles as natural and located within certain classmates to the exception of others, providing grounds for differentiation and stratification.

Classroom observations revealed mechanisms through which students learned how to separate individuals into categories—observation of (1) who was consistently recognized as emulating control and discipline, and (2) who was reprimanded. For example, of the former group, students were explicitly rewarded both by their teacher and peers for their work ethic. In one observation, I entered the classroom as students were engaging in collaborative conversations with their peers. I learned that students were in the next stage of a process they began two days prior, at which time they received eggs with the name of an animal and a number
inside. Initially, students were placed in homogenous groups based on ability groupings from which they moved into more random, heterogenous groups and shared in “civil discussions with other scientists.” Reflected in the activity was inspiration from popular media sources that Ms. Schmidt sought out to bring learning to life. In a whole group discussion, Ms. Schmidt asked for students to call out what made them proud when it came to the work ethic of another student during the activity. Students were reinforced with raffle tickets if their name was recognized and Ms. Schmidt reinforced behavior mentioned by students such as “[Student] never got off task” with comments such as “It takes a lot of self-control to always remain on topic.” This observation was one example of the value and reward placed on work ethic in the classroom. In other observations, students were thanked for their “strong commitment,” recognizing that it is “difficult to show stamina” and to ensure “nothing is taking away from focus,” further reinforcing the individual’s ability to rise above distraction and deliver focus.

This focus on the *worth ethic and controlled behavior of the individual* permeated transcripts and observations. In describing her concern about how her teacher responded to students, Melody highlighted that her teacher may not know “who’s emotional and who’s strong,” implying a binary opposition such that a person is naturally one or the other and one would need to discipline his or her emotions to be considered a strong person. Although the emotions of characters in stories were centered in classroom discussions, to receive care (in the different forms described by students) in the classroom seemed tied to the individual’s ability to embody prescribed behavior, putting into question the bounds of ethical control in some ways exemplified in other classroom practices (e.g., casting off so peers can make their voices heard).

*The 5 Ps (Polite, Prepared, Positive, Productive, and Proud)*
Behavioral control mechanisms were evident in the classroom expectations, norms, and practiced systems. When asked to describe the rules in their classroom, students and the teacher made clear that they didn’t have a traditional set of *rules*, but rather were expected to adhere to frequently referenced expectations and established norms. Bob T. Builder described,

They’re more like norms than rules. They’re like just expectations basically that you should always respect your teacher, you should always not talk when the teacher’s talking, give eye contact to others…oh! I forgot. So, we call it the 5 P’s in our classroom and it stands for…I’m trying to remember. Be positive, polite, productive, proud, and…I’m trying to remember um…I might have to tell you when we get into the classroom because it’s like this poster board that we have in the classroom.

All students described the classroom norms as being created by their teacher, with some students noting their role in the process. For example, Bob T. Builder described that the class reviewed norms at the beginning of the year and that their teacher “gives us a bunch of opportunities to um… let our thinking be heard so we can also help to figure out what we want to do during the school year.” When asked about her thoughts surrounding the norms, Bob T. Builder indicated,

Sometimes we bring them up during class like if we’re having a discussion like the one we had in class…and we connect it to other things that we’re learning and that’s how they come – but I think that they’re…yeah they’re effective but sometimes not so effective because as you can tell there’s a lot of drama going on in our class.

As mentioned by the student, the 5 Ps – polite, prepared, positive, productive, proud – were often referenced in class, with students given opportunities to describe ways their classmates were demonstrating one or more of the principles. Many students reported thinking
these were reasonable expectations and provided responses that reflected they had internalized the norms. To the contrary, Baxley described use of the 5 Ps as a way of wielding power and controlling individual actions. Specifically, she described them as,

I don’t want to say like blackmailing us, but it’s like she’s holding them against us like whenever we do something like the littlest thing wrong – like I like my book box on my desk. She doesn’t want it on my desk because apparently it blocks what I’m doing. I like it blocking what I’m doing so she doesn’t stare me down and like so other people…so I can focus and then she’ll come and put it on the floor. And that makes me literally so mad. It makes me like want to put it back on my desk but I don’t because that’d be disrespectful and then we’d all get yelled at for not doing the 5 P’s and practicing doing so and so.

In that way, Baxley described the perceived need to suppress her feelings to conform to expectations and prevent redirection and potential class-wide consequence. In describing the consequence for resisting established structures, Baxley highlighted the class-wide response also described by other students such that the teacher will call the attention of “Scholars,” reminding them,

‘We have to practice the 5 P’s and I know some of you’ and then she’ll stop and she’ll stare me down…so like everyone will look at me and everyone will know that I did something wrong. Which – I don’t think that’s fair…I was on task. I was doing my work and then she screamed at us…because I put it back on my desk so I can continue. Which apparently that broke one of the 5 P rules so.

Beyond guiding norms, other classroom systems were in place to maintain a sense of order and facilitate productivity. Students described hand signal systems in which the
expectation was for students to raise a pre-determined number of fingers to request access to “get up and do something.” For example, students raised fingers to request permission to (1) go to the bathroom, (2) get a drink of water, (3) get a fresh pencil, (4) and get a tissue.

Other forms of control were evident in student monitoring of other students’ behavior. Almost universal comment on the types of students within the classroom and the desire for certain types of students to fall in line was demonstrative of some of the more implicit behavioral control techniques operating within the classroom. The social stratification that resulted from internalized norms and policing impacted relations within the classroom both among students and between students and their teacher. P.J. described that “certain friends aren’t allowed to be together because they’re a bad friendship.” He described the “bad friendship” as one in which two students talked to each other all the time. Despite the expectation that they were supposed to stay separated, P.J. reported “recently they’re really like – this is the line, this is [student] and this is [student]. Right next to each other. And [student] wasn’t even inside the line, just beside it.” Through raising the issue, P.J. demonstrated the implicit learning of what constitutes a “bad friendship” and his monitoring of the students’ behavior.

Ironman, along with others, described his approval and appreciation of the norms and procedures saying,

What I think about it is that they’re like great rules because like some people like um just… like I don’t want to be rude, but like, like some people… like my teacher thinks that some people are just going to get wild so she put [the 5 Ps] up. So, she just wants us to follow it. That’s the good thing.
He further described the rules as being good for the class and connected the rules to his teacher’s drive to “prepare us to like… all the way to college. Because she wants us to be really good and able to succeed.”

When asked to describe her classroom to someone who didn’t know it well, Melody, who reflected on seemingly differentiated responses based on personality traits in the classroom, expressed concern regarding responses to actions that fell outside classroom expectations. She began by describing her classroom saying,

Well if you come in like a few times like you did, you probably would think that like it’s all fun in there, like some mishaps, but I kind of…it, well, it’s like Ms. Schmidt, a lot of people think she’s like the nicest teacher ever, but sometimes it kind of scares me, I don’t know about the other kids, but she just like blows up on us. And it’s – well today, um, I made a…comment and it wasn’t like a mean comment. It was just like I said something looked like something else – it wasn’t anything mean. And she kind of, not really yelled at me, but like just like ‘We don’t do that. We don’t talk about that.’ And…it made me really sad because I never really get in trouble and I kind of cried…but I tried not to show it…because I feel like in class everyone’s always so judgmental.

Positivity, as a classroom norm, revealed itself as a defining characteristic of the way the classroom was intended to run and a standard against which to judge behavior. According to some students, deviating from expected behavior was grounds for redirection and judgement. Melody later described concern that attempts to restore relationships might be inhibited by the fact that “she wouldn’t know [she hurt someone] because we try to hide it from her.”

One student was resistant to discuss anything negative about his classroom. When asked what happened in the class if a rule was broken, Ironman described,
Well sometimes we have rough times but like, um, like if you’re not following it and you break the rules because like, I don’t think no one wants to get in trouble and no one wants to break the rules. Well I don’t think they mean it, but they just probably don’t know, so if they just – she puts the [5] Ps up there. Yeah so um, I think that’s it.

When asked what he would change about the classroom, Ironman indicated, I just wished some people would like follow the rules and they be good. Because some people just – sometimes they break the rules, sometimes they be good. I don’t think they mean to break the rules on little purpose so, so, I just wish they’d always be optimistic.

Again, which is positive and that’s part of the P rules.

The felt need to eschew negative emotion in favor of “putting a smile on” and remaining positive may have been considered necessary to enable the productivity needed to execute the day’s plans by controlling behavior and the environment. Ideals of productivity, also a class norm, impacted the way the classroom was structured, students’ perceptions of the classroom, and relationships. When asked to describe his classroom, the first sentiment conveyed by Bob A. was “Well, basically our class is like – you have to give like your all like 100 percent of the time. You can’t like slack off on an assignment.” Jimmy stated, “…she pushes us really hard. Like that’s how I think she cares about us.” Austen Griebmann also spoke to this point saying,

If I could change something… probably going outside more. We haven’t gone outside that much, like ever, in this class…we just don’t usually have that much time. Like I would, if I had one wish to change the class, I wish we had like…more time.

This student figured that if they were given more time outside, it would provide an outlet for energy that would allow for more focused class time with less talking. Baxley’s interview responses reflected frustration with the classroom system that could be traced to an underlying
discontentment with the prioritization of productivity in a way that infiltrated her perception of her teacher and classroom overall. In describing what care meant to her, she noted, there’s like – the right amount of care in between doesn’t care and cares. Like right in the middle there, there’s like you do your work, you get it finished, you succeed, and then you get a break. Like you get that time where like you can kind of like (sighs) breathe out. Instead of when we’re with Ms. Schmidt, she’s like (breathes in) and you never get to like breathe out of relief. You’re just like – you keep going and going and going and like there’s never like a breath where she’s not like telling you not to do something or you’re not doing it right or you’re not doing this. There’s never like that breathe out like a break.

According to some students, a class culture of productivity was created in part through making students’ performance public in order to enable an audience-effect for self- and peer-policing of performance. Ashley described feeling angry and hurt when she said like my grades were going down…And like when she said that in front of everybody like that hurt my feelings. Cuz that was kind of annoying…And it’s not just me – she said it to a couple other people before. It’s just like…it’s her way of getting like – you need to stay focused cuz your grades are going down.

During observations of group reading, Ms. Schmidt had students “get pencils ready to track the text.” She read aloud and praised students for showing stamina saying, “Thank you to readers who aren’t getting distracted. You’re showing stamina. We talked about task avoidance this morning,” providing further example of the ways in which productivity enablers that reside within the individual were primary targets for praise in the classroom.
‘Restorative’

In my first interview with Ms. Schmidt, she described different aspects of her teaching philosophy, including the need for high levels of structure, “but they also need to know that they are loved.” This combination of high control and support is characteristic of a restorative approach (Wachtel & McCold, 2001). Student and teacher descriptions of the structure of the classroom and responses to conflict aligned to some extent with a restorative approach, particularly as it related to active assistance and concern for student well-being. I observed universal structures (e.g., engagement, explanation, expectation clarity; building skills in working together; classroom conversations) somewhat consistent with a restorative approach; Ms. Schmidt described engaging in class-wide and individual conferencing when issues arose, in which either she or a student “owned their mistakes” in student-teacher conflict or she helped students build competency in expressing empathy and mediating student-student conflict; and some students reported that their teacher tried to understand their point of view and gave them chances. Infrequently, although occasionally, did secondary stakeholders (i.e., administration) “steal the conflict from whom it belongs” and take away from meaningful exchange by interfering with procedural consequences (McCold & Wachtel, p. 12). Of note, responses to “wrong doing” varied, as did students’ interpretations of these practices.

Rather than a consequence for a “broken rule,” “It’s not like that,” Ms. Schmidt and students described responses ranging from warnings, being given the choice to move away within a flexible seating system, being told to move, shifts in seating arrangements, and “if it’s getting way too big, then she’ll have to get the principal. But it was really bad yesterday, so I mean it was pretty expected that she was gunna do that.” Conflict between students, often
described by students as *drama*, would sometimes be addressed with class discussions described
by one student as a preventative way to mitigate future issues. Brandan Joseph stated,

> It sends out the message that – let’s say I see someone else do it then I start doing it and
> then I get in trouble to where if we just had that class conversation *be-fore*, then that
> could have prev- stopped other people from doing it which would not have a lot of
> conflict.

Of note, according to students, these class conversations appeared geared toward
understanding an issue and re-focusing students on class principles. The active process of healing
harm (damage) to relationships and affirming the worth of those who committed classroom
offenses may have been attempted in the classroom; however, students’ interview responses
revealed confirmation of worth limited to classroom ideals and unresolved relational damage
(i.e., relational rupture evident in moments students described feeling as though members of their
class did not care about them and the lasting impact of that feeling without intervention).
Although attempts were made to bring “communities of care” (McCold & Wachtel, 2003, p. 13)
into class-wide discussions of conflict, the lingering perception of groups of students as “bad”
called into question whether the resolution of conflict could be considered fully restorative.

In addressing the different ways in which conflict was handled in the classroom, many
students spoke to their limited time outside. While all students reported being frustrated by this,
students’ reactions varied with regard to where to place blame. Bob T. Builder, referred to by
others as the teacher’s favorite, attempted to explain the situation by saying,

> Sometimes, um, hmm well Ms. Schmidt…um, sometimes she’s…one thing that I just
> wish…don’t prefer about her is sometimes she…although she sometimes forgives it,
> sometimes, like some things that are going around…like we barely get…like today was
probably one of the best days because we got to go outside, but most of the time we don’t
go outside because people are being not well behaved, so it’s like sometimes she’s
punishing everyone for what other people are doing. But other times she’s not.

Almost all students reported frustrations with the frequency of teacher response to student
deviations from class expectations. Although some students perceived care in the way issues
were addressed broadly to prevent future conflict and that their teacher took time to understand
them and “give chances,” other student-student and teacher-student relationships were damaged
(i.e., students reported rupture or distance) by the nature and frequency with which redirection
was utilized and with whom.

Respite (and Resistance)

In describing his perspective on classroom rules, Jacquees Gilbert Watterson noted that
he didn’t mind the rules of the classroom so long as he wasn’t ignored. Specifically, he described
the hand signal system used to request access to the bathroom, pencils, and other activities that
require leaving one’s seat. Jacquees Gilbert Watterson felt it would be fair for his teacher to
ignore his request to go to the bathroom if he was going to “do something bad,” but “if I need to
go to the bathroom, please don’t ignore me.” Something “bad” that some students did was “get
their phone and stay in the bathroom for like 30 minutes, play and text on their phones in the
bathroom. It’s basically like a sanctuary.”

Other students described and further explained this “bad” behavior as a way to create
respite from work not otherwise available to them through “being funny and causing a bit of
laughter.” Baxley described that “it’s not like we’re trying to – I understand she may perceive
it…or like take it as like, we’re being annoying and being disruptive but really we’re just like –
we’re trying to have fun.” Jasmine confessed to her own creation of respite describing,
Some people...sometimes me...go to the bathroom, they take their phones, stay in there not too long, probably like five minutes and just play on their phones and use the bathroom because we know we’re not gunna have free time like the other classes... and then they also get recess. We just don’t like how it is. We feel like because it’s our last year, it’s our last year playing in the monkey bars, playing outside in the field, we just feel like we need free time.

Jasmine described “breaking” or resisting other classroom expectations through “[going] behind the desk. She doesn’t really like us there but we kind of do it anyway...because during the day we can’t talk so we’re texting during class a little bit, but not mostly.” She explained, I do understand that we are doing our work, but say we finish early...she says read it again and when we kind of already did and says don’t talk to the person. But we’re all done and finished with it and like I don’t like when she does it.

The small group of 4-5 students that described needing to create respite expressed exhaustion and frustration with the current classroom system and perceived over-care or over control. Students who described feeling cared for by their teacher and nice classmates and irritated by their rule-breaking peers had accepted the 5 Ps, hand signal systems and where to place their book box as directives from their teacher who held an assumed position of power. Although care was “received,” it may not be considered reciprocal in that authority was not conferred by all. Those that sought to negotiate the terms that led them to feel “not blackmailed, but like she’s using them against us,” “like kindergarteners,” “borderline bored” and as if they couldn’t “breathe out” grew frustrated when denied a part in decision making or reciprocal care. Control without the conferral of authority left some students feeling “we don’t really like how it is,” demonstrating the need for a more thorough examination of ethical control within an ethic of
care, or “establishing caring relationships whose limits are mutually negotiated” (McLaughlin, 1991, p. 193).

*Layers of Control*

Many of the classroom structures in place appeared consistent with ideals of a democratic classroom in which students “cast off” to other members of the class to “make your voice heard” and “make your opinions known.” With prompts, students provided feedback to one another, sometimes with little teacher intervention, and they utilized flexible seating to choose where they felt comfortable working in the class. The teacher’s well-intentioned efforts at relinquishing and redistributing power to students (to make decisions and raise opinions) were at times in tension with the push for productivity and efficiency such that when the established order was threatened, the need for social order again became paramount. When asked what she would change about the classroom, Baxley described wanting to incorporate breaks or social time; eliminate systems she perceived to be childish and insinuate a lack of trust, such as the hand signal system; and limit classroom disruptions, not through changing students’ behaviors but through limiting the number of redirections “for every little thing that we do.” Specifically, she wished her teacher would talk to students individually and pick battles selectively rather than “have the class stop, stare at one person, know what they did wrong, and go back to work.”

Although Ms. Schmidt and students described responses to conflict largely consistent with a restorative approach, or at least one in which situations were resolved in the classroom, they also described principal involvement in more “severe” situations. Baxley described an example of the progression of responses during a situation she perceived to be funny. In response to breaking a classroom expectation and passing notes with two other students in the class,
Ms. Schmidt puts us across the room from each other so we can’t pass notes down the aisles to each other. So we balled them up and throw them to each other and catch them, right? It’s just how we communicate because we get no social time and we’re completely just borderline bored. Like we have nothing better to do than throw sticky notes with messages. And so literally Ms. Schmidt asked for the sticky note (laughter) and I ate it. And everybody laughed. And because everyone was laughing, Ms. Schmidt got mad and was like ‘you go to the principal’s office, you go to the principal’s office, you go to the principal’s office…’ And Ms. Schmidt got really mad, because some people were laughing, and gave us a consequence…Which I understand. I ate a note. It’s funny. I mean of course she didn’t think it was funny because apparently it caused a disruption to her class.

This student’s perception of the situation highlighted the layers of control in the classroom such that while control may have undergirded all daily practices through normalization (of what it means to be the good student: the 5 P’s, life lessons) and examination (praising behavior deemed appropriate; students’ internalization of and expressed identification with classroom values; and policing of others that deviate from the standard), more repressive forms of control were necessary when social order was threatened. Baxley described,

You get really shaky and like you’re scared because it’s the principal’s office. You’ve been taught like it’s bad, like you don’t want to go…So like the first time I went, it was scary. It was scary. But like, I’ve been there quite some time sometimes and I’m just like eh about it now. Which I feel like it’s not like they should increase the punishments…it’s just like for the things that we get in trouble for…She might have perceived [eating the sticky note] as being disrespectful, probably perceived it as disrespectful, okay? But
because of other people, I got in more trouble. Which isn’t fair…She should have like
gotten mad at me, yes…and she probably would have yelled at me like normal if nobody
would have laughed. If nobody would have laughed, I would have got told off and like I
would have swallowed the sticky note and I probably wouldn’t have written any more
notes that day.

Baxley’s focus on the laughter highlighted her perception that the consequence she
received had less to do with her initial behavior and more with the reaction it elicited and the
need to re-establish order. In a classroom with clear messaging surrounding what is considered
acceptable and good, students actively participated in maintaining order through self and peer
judgement against that standard. Autocratic control, typically hidden behind democratic-like
procedures, surfaced in these moments. From Baxley’s perspective, the paradox at play was that
some relinquishing of control (e.g., removing formal structures like hand signals, adding break
time) would prevent disruptions both in student-felt need to create social time through
“disruptive” behavior and teacher-felt need to respond.

Ashley described these more explicit displays of autocratic control, or their teacher’s
administration of more public punishments to set an example, as a counter-productive approach
to maximizing productivity in a class where work ethic and production were paramount,
describing “Like every single second, like something goes wrong, she’ll make it like a five
minute lecture and that’s why we get no work done.” The perception of over-control in the social
domain also led to more strained relationships such that attempts to learn more about students’
lives were perceived as over-the-top when they included inserting oneself in free spaces like
recess and attempts to be privy to classroom drama in order to intervene. Ideally, Ashley would
want a teacher that was nice, chill, explained things, gave free time, and “wanted to know stuff
about us, but not like *everything.*” In many ways, the extent to which students’ perceived classroom systems and practices as conferred or of benefit to them impacted students’ relationships with peers and their teacher. On the other hand, students who took issue with “how it is” and felt underacknowledged relative to the “favorites” perceived a sense of over-control not felt by those in the privileged group. In that way, perceptions of care transformed perceptions of control and vice versa.

**Relations**

*Speaking Directly to Care*

Although I theorize the ways in which classroom practices and structures contribute to an ethic of care in the classroom, I did not enter the classroom with a definition of care against which to judge participant action. Rather, I adopted Noddings’ (1992) conception of caring as a relation, in which attempts at care must be received by the cared-for to complete a caring encounter and form the basis for caring relations. To understand participants’ interpretations of caring relations, I asked for students and the classroom teacher to provide their interpretations of the word *care* and how they felt it applied to their classroom.

Collectively, students described caring as equality of treatment and a “lifting up” of those who are down through feeling empathy, standing up to bullying, asking if others are okay, showing compassion, and reminding people that it is okay to make mistakes. Some students offered an element of sacrifice in their interpretation such that to receive care required both being noticed on the part of the other and the other’s willingness to sacrifice (e.g., time, money) on their behalf. Bob T. Builder noted that in receiving care, one feels important, admired and protected. Regarding caring relationships, some students described care as enacted among friends or “someone trusted.” Jacquees Gilbert Waterson offered that care requires “they are self-
aware about you” and the nature of your relationship. He described how, “like colleagues,” one may not be best friends with the other (as marked by birthday party invitations), but there is a type of understanding where “if you ask a favor for them, they’ll probably do it; if they ask a favor for me, I’ll probably do it;” a way of work that allows for care to transcend beyond the bounds of “the real friendship relation.” Baxley explicitly described a nuanced interpretation of care, also addressed more subtly by others, including caring about students and their learning; caring “too much” in hyper-teaching and controlling; and not caring or allowing respite, particularly after intense bursts of testing. She laid out an equation such that both Care Part A (about what one is doing and wanting them to succeed) and Care Part B (about allowing one to have a break) are necessary components to a caring relation.

Students also described recognizing care from their teacher through her acts of generosity; how she distributed power through allowing students to “cast off” to one another, went out of her way to make learning enjoyable through creating fun activities and pushing students hard to ensure they were prepared, acknowledged good work, reminded students that everyone is human, checked in on students, and provided privileges and treats to those that followed expectations. Ironman mentioned knowing his teacher cared because she served as a “mentor” to him through teaching him what he didn’t already know, providing guidance and picking him up when he was down. Chicken McNugget described a time when his teacher offered emotional and informational support through empathizing with his nerves before a speech and giving him guidance on his approach and how to alleviate nerves. The student described by others as the classroom favorite mentioned feeling confirmed in the way “she always recognizes me as like a good person, like a good scholar or role model.” From Ms. Schmidt’s perspective, she tried to demonstrate care to her students through “being real,” adding
humor, spending time with students during lunch, providing messages and gifts during testing and the holidays, reaching out to parents, and generally practicing in line with her teaching philosophy.

In describing how their classmates demonstrated care, students recalled times when their classmates coached them through challenging work when they could have been doing something else, thereby sacrificing their time. Many also described being welcomed into group work or into conversation generally and feeling as though people in the class looked out for one another.

Groups

Throughout interviews with students, and most notably when students were asked to describe their classmates, the theme of groups became apparent. The following poem is the juxtaposition of segments of students’ verbatim responses to that question. I included these statements in the form of a poem to distinguish them within the broader narrative in a way that reflected how they cut across student interviews and stood out to me. Any phrases added to increase flow are differentiated by brackets.

Some nice, some neutral, and some distractive

Fun, exciting, sometimes stupid, some of them not aware about their surroundings

Some friendly, some not so much

And some sassy

very sassy

It’s a really good class of students

One of my favorite classroom communities I’ve had

There are a lot of people in our class who are really nice

Some pretending to be cool kids and stuff
Half that, half nice

Other people
very sensitive

Other people
fight a lot

Other people
very quiet

It doesn’t work!

There’s a lot of interruptions in our class

There’s always that certain time where our whole classroom just comes together as one

But still
some people are clashing together

And on the other hand
there are a few that I’m just like…

I’m not going to be near them

Bad influence

My parents always told me like, always stick around with
good people

There’s the girls and then you have the boys

There are the boys that care
for their education and everything

And then the boys that just

Goof off
Others will think that nobody’s watching and don’t show integrity

She gives warnings, but they don’t usually listen to warnings

Cliques

There’s one girl in my class…she’s the favorite

She does everything correct

She’s never wrong really

Ms. Schmidt just loves her

Kind of makes everyone else a bit jealous

Sometimes there’s kids in the class that aren’t that good

There are some troublemakers

They’re very – like troublemakers kind of

Troublemakers

Talk back

Get in trouble

Takes away recess

That’s why we barely have recess

They sometimes get in trouble in lunch and in the classroom

Sometimes get lunch detention

It’s bad

I don’t like them much

I don’t want to be like that

Not at all

[I fall into the group of]
The boys that care about my education

Friendly and probably helpful

Definitely

The use of descriptors to delineate “types” of people within the classroom came up across student interviews. Even those students that didn’t fall into black or white categories of good/bad, friendly/unfriendly, nice/troublemakers, sassy/quiet, were described as “neutrals.” Chicken McNugget explained that “the neutral people talk to the mean people and the nice people, but they don’t get influenced by the mean or the good. They just stay – their own path.” Brandan Joseph described that despite the groups, “there’s always this certain time where our whole classroom just comes together as one. And I feel like it’s one of my favorite classroom communities I’ve had. Because of that.” However, he also described a group of students as bad influences. When asked to describe what he meant, he spoke to outside messages about what constitutes “good” and will be most beneficial to his success stating,

My parents always told me like, stick around people with like, good people. And they said how they liked my friend choices. So I’m basically thinking ok, who are friends that are like my other friends that would never like… not…that would never…that almost they don’t want me to succeed. And don’t care…about me.

With students’ descriptions of their classmates came a sense of otherness found in how they perceived themselves in relation to those they hoped would change to better the class. Implicated in that separation were normalization messages about what it looked like to be a good and successful student. Brandan Joseph, who described groups of boys and girls, where the boys’ group was “broken up into like the boys that care for their education and everything and then the boys that just goof off,” indicated that he fit into “the boys that care about my education.
Definitely.” He differentiated the groups by examining students’ behavior, response to that behavior and its comparison to the established norms. Brandan Joseph described,

Like a couple people, um like in this past week had to go to [the assistant principal’s] office because they weren’t paying attention and everything. So, I just do it by looking through how they act in the class. Now, yes, I do sometimes get off topic, but then I’ll get back on topic. Being like ok, I need to focus on what I’m learning, I don’t want to get in trouble. Where others will be like – think that nobody’s watching and don’t show integrity.

Brandan Joseph had internalized the classroom norms and language and observed the consequences of deviating from that standard. Like his parents had taught him, he wanted to associate with those that fit the standard of good, not those that might impede his success.

Over the course of interviews, it became apparent that the labels students carried were associated with the perceived ratio of praise to redirection they received and their perceptions of their teacher. For example, Walter DuCastle described his teacher as a fun, nice teacher that engages in “smart word play” and gives them gifts like bunnies because “some bunny believes in you.” He acknowledged that not all students in his class held this perception, but attributed this deviation to characteristics of the students stating,

I know some people think that she’s mean, but I feel like that’s only because they’re not that good of students in a way…like they’re always talking, reading out loud and distracting people. And those are the kind of people that think she’s mean. And it’s only because they get on her bad side.

Similarly, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson described Ms. Schmidt as fun, but that “not a lot of kids appreciate it.” These were the students, he described, that “are kind of really bad and
stupid.” He explained this labeling saying, “I only say that – it’s like sometimes they get in trouble by her or like she gives, like we’re not allowed to play at recess or stuff like that.”

Students that were perceived by others as those that “just don’t really care,” as evidenced by “just like slacking off and like…they don’t really like listen, really. And they don’t really do homework if we do and stuff like that,” are those that operate in direct contrast to how some students described the core of the classroom (i.e., “you have to give like your all like 100 percent of the time”). In this way, students categorized their peers based on the extent to which they conformed to the set standard in the classroom. Those that deviated were more likely to be considered troublemakers or those that simply did not care about school or their education.

Almost all students described “Crazy Schmidt,” a version of their teacher that came out when she needed to reestablish control. Several students noted that if they could change one thing about their classroom, they would change other students’ behavior to prevent the emergence of this version of their teacher that they otherwise found fun and thoughtful.

Students’ varying perceptions of their teacher, classroom, treatment, and the best point of intervention for reducing the incessant redirections and classroom discussions appeared to correspond with “group membership” (e.g., good student, troublemaker, quiet) described by students.

Treatment

In describing the different types of students in their class, students distinguished the ways in which rules applied broadly across students, but responses appeared distinct. A general consensus seemed to be that all students in the class were treated with respect and kindness. All students described class expectations, as opposed to rules, that were applied across students without distinction. However, students noted a pattern in the students that were complimented
for adhering to expectations versus those that were “called-out” or “redirected,” leading to the perception of favored students. Favored students fit nicely and were given passes for the occasional disruption, whereas “whenever she talks about serious stuff like ‘oh, stop talking’ and stuff, she looks at the people who usually talk often. But not look at the people that like sometimes talk, but they’re really good.” When asked what she would do with the power to change one thing about her class, Melody described wanting all students to be treated the same. In addition to perceiving the favorite as more likely to be recognized for good behavior, she believed troublemakers were treated “as if they’re always troublemakers, like they’re gunna do something wrong.” Some students named who they believed were preferred students as evidenced by their constant recognition in class. One student described that these students didn’t go above and beyond other students, but were higher achieving (i.e., higher reading level). Jacquies Gilbert Waterson extended this perceived distinction in treatment based on merit to compliance describing how in the classroom “some kids are treated more well than others because like they do well in school and like they’re not…they don’t have an attitude. Like not, well a reaction.”

Students spoke to the ways in which their teacher used differential reinforcement to praise desired behavior (i.e., displaying good work ethic) and redirect nonpreferred behaviors. In describing this process, they identified the groups that were praised and those that were redirected. Students’ observation of this process appeared connected to their perceptions of others and reactions to the classroom in general. In one example, Melody described that her friend was ‘the favorite,’ “but at times it just really annoys people because Ms. Schmidt treats her different…I know she doesn’t like being treated as the favorite and – I still get mad because like I don’t say anything but I still get mad inside…” This student, who considered herself to fall
into the “quiet” group, repressed feelings based on perceived differential treatment that, unaddressed, left her feeling like she had less of a “connection” with her teacher and some frustration with a friend.

Ironman, who seemed particularly loyal to the classroom system, describing peers and his teacher as his “classroom family,” hesitantly mentioned,

Some people just like, um, wander around. And some people do their work, so… I mean maybe like there’s a higher chance of other people that are good getting [a raffle ticket/school buck]… I’m not saying that like the people that don’t have a chance are not good, it’s… I try to be good… because I don’t want to be like, I don’t want to be rude, so yeah that’s right.

In this way, the student carefully, and with seemingly conscious attempt not to overgeneralize, described that those who complied were the ones rewarded, both with tickets and through the designation of “good.” Other students described the ways in which this designation in turn led to a cycle of reward in which good students continued to gain privilege.

Melody indicated that, on some level, she understood praising students for their work, But sometimes because like the favorite students…it sometimes feels like you have to live up to them. Like it’s always a race like who’s best or who’s gunna win or like prizes for the winners…And some people like want to be the favorite so they’ll try to think that maybe Ms. Schmidt likes what [the favorite] is doing so maybe I should do what she’s doing.

For those that didn’t join the race to reach that standard, Melody described, “if they aren’t like…like if they’re a little bit from the complete opposite, she will like go off on them… like ‘silent lunch!’ which means like stay in the classroom by yourself.” Baxley, who described
getting in trouble in the past noted, “I’ve never gotten like ‘(gasp) Great job, I love how you’re working, it’s so amazing (high pitched).’ It’s always like ‘great job so and so and so.’ Like it’s never me. It’s never some other people. It’s just like…eh.”

Similarly, many students’ perceptions of care appeared tied to the group in which they found themselves. Namely, those students who placed themselves within the “good” group of students who never got in trouble were more likely to perceive that their teacher cared about them and viewed their classroom more favorably. Although other students recognized similar class structures to these students, they found flaw in outcomes. For example, those students that self-identified and/or were recognized by others as a “favorite” or preferred student named classroom disruptions caused by “troublemakers” as the worst part of the classroom. Other students, who spoke of the favorites but did not label themselves a troublemaker, named some disruption as a necessary way to inject social time and humor into their day. They attributed constant disruptions to their teacher’s constant redirection. Multiple students communicated that perception of the classroom was contingent upon the type of student one was. Those students perceived to be “distractors” or “troublemakers” were thought to view Ms. Schmidt less favorably and elicit “Crazy Schmidt” more readily. Evoking this reaction from their teacher created further divisions between students as evidenced by comments of wanting to change those “troubemaking” students’ behaviors to change the classroom environment.

Bob T. Builder described the care she felt from being recognized by her teacher “as like a good person, like a good scholar or role model,” while also acknowledging that others didn’t necessarily feel that way. When asked about treatment in the classroom, Bob T. Builder noted that the class perceived there to be favorites and that the favorite was her. Both Bob T. Builder and others described that Ms. Schmidt frequently went out of her way to gift the favorite things
related to her interests. During a teacher interview, Ms. Schmidt described recognizing students’ interests and highlighting those interests as a way of showing care through demonstrating that students weren’t just a number. Although Bob T. Builder described differential treatment, she also described “a good thing about it is that even though [Ms. Schmidt] might have tension with someone else, she’ll give them another chance and the next day she’ll act like a fresh start.” Left to question was whether the “fresh start” was reciprocated and adequate for tensions with underlying discontent.

Exemplifying that discontent, Jasmine recalled a time in which students were expressing grievances regarding Bob T. Builder’s undue receipt of a reward for behavior. According to Jasmine, when Bob T. Builder overheard students’ comments, she indicated that the teacher did not favor her. Students became more frustrated with the situation when their teacher asserted that the student was not her favorite, the others just needed to act with integrity like Bob T. Builder. Comparison to this standard lead the group to feel “furious at that point and we didn’t like how that was, and we just feel like we need to get treated like everybody else does.” The concept of respite also emerged in conversation with Jasmine as she described leaving the classroom as an opportunity to spend time with other teachers that “love us like everybody else.”

Of note, students provided insightful responses when asked to speak to whether they felt they could be themselves in their classroom. Walter DuCastle, who implied his categorization as a good student who viewed the classroom favorably, identified this question as a difficult one to answer, as it would require him to speak to who he felt he was and speculate as to which versions of himself would be considered acceptable to others. Specifically, he responded,

Yes…but that’s kind of a difficult answer to say…when referring to who myself is.

Because I take ADHD medicine. Because I do that. So I can focus better. And when I’m
off it, I’m kind of crazy I guess. My mom says I bounce off the walls. And I don’t know if I could just one day go off the pill and react the way I do when I’m off the pill. But I can be myself when I’m on the pill because the pill just takes away my energeticness and a couple other stuff.

While providing his response, the student seemed to wrestle with what type of student could be themselves in the classroom – with what would be permissible. He continued, “I don’t know if anything would really be different at all. I’m not sure if my friends would see me in different ways without the pill and that kind of makes me nervous.” His uncertainty seemed to reflect the power of the social structures within the classroom, the need to conform to a standard to be perceived by others as “good” within that social hierarchy, and thereby receive the treatment prescribed for that label. From that vantage point, he could continue to perceive of the class as a caring, supportive environment.

Another qualifier to students being themselves offered by Jacquees Gilbert Waterson was that he couldn’t react “physically” to being upset in the classroom because then “everyone else is gunna know, huh this guy has…emotions….And they’re all gunna be like ‘aw, are you okay’ and I think they’re gunna be like ‘oh this guy…this guy cries about stuff.’” He described that because some students didn’t like when other students outwardly showed emotion through “causing an act” (i.e., causing a scene), he perceived the need to control his emotions to an accepted level. He described the way students perceived others in a fixed manner, requiring him to flex his personality to maintain good favor. While other students in the class were perceived in such a manner that “some kids in my class are like ‘Oh, she. did. do. that’ or like ‘He. did. do. that,’ [they react to me getting in trouble more as] ‘he didn’t do that,’ but I’m more liked in the class.” To achieve this good favor, he noted “I put on different acts for different things. Like, if it’s
something bad like we have homework, I’ll say ‘yippee, homework!’ in a sarcastic way. But not that sarcastic because that looks bad.” In another example, he described,

I wait until Ms. Schmidt takes a breath when reading and like I barge in right there so that I can put my thought in…to make the class go faster…And then Ms. Schmidt is like ‘yeah, that’s right.’ And she’s not going to interpret it as rude and I’m just trying to say something because she’s done talking. And I have to think if Ms. Schmidt was mad earlier, I have to think when is the right time.

In this way, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson described ways in which he manipulated his behavior to be acceptable to all members of the classroom. To entertain himself and help class pass more quickly, while maintaining his good standing (i.e., find acceptable respite without being re-grouped and sacrificing treatment), he needed to navigate the rules in such a way that he couldn’t be found guilty. By controlling his emotions and aligning his behaviors to those considered desirable by different groups, he was able to permeate different groups and gain their acceptance, similar to the crafty “neutrals” that “don’t get influenced by the mean or the good” but rather “stay their own path” described by Chicken McNugget. When asked if he felt like he could be himself in the classroom, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson described that “at school I’m always like a little bit hop – hoppy, bubbly, but not that bubbly that it looks stupid.” In that way, he described the bounds within which he could behave in a certain way without sabotaging the appearance that allowed him to maintain good standing in the classroom.

From a similar standpoint, Mr. Unknown described that “I can’t be myself because some people won’t like me in the class. They don’t really like who I really am. And I could – when I’m not really myself, some people usually like me.” In describing the reactions he elicited from
students when he acted in certain ways, he spoke to a learned understanding of how to behave to be granted acceptance in the classroom. He described,

When I actually become really funny, they start laughing and I said I don’t know why they like me now for some reason and they start going to me and talking to me, which I hate doing that. I hate trying to act funny. Because I really don’t – I’m not supposed to do that. And, um, sometimes I also try to act like I’m...I have to act like I’m really cool to get friends now cuz coolest kid in the class gets the most friends.

To be cool, “you gotta be bad” and “get in trouble with the teacher so many times...But I don’t do that.” Jasmine expressed concern that “I just feel like if I were myself, I would get yelled at more and she would not really like me.”

Of note, Ironman was quick to say he felt comfortable being himself in the classroom. When asked what made him feel that way, he referenced the 5 Ps and said, “I just do that. And just do normal things... And like follow my teacher’s directions.”

In describing the difference in treatment between groups of students that have strong, average, and “I don’t like you, but, you know, I’m gunna have to” relationships with Ms. Schmidt, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson determined that it wasn’t necessarily that students were treated differently by Ms. Schmidt, but rather the nature of relations differed significantly amongst groups of students and “the reaction they put on to Ms. Schmidt.” During the focus group, students mentioned that the connection they have with their teacher can impact the teacher’s ability to understand their needs and attend to them accordingly.

A focus on the ways in which student behavior impacted relationships and in turn students’ learning was also prominent during the first phase of the focus group. Specifically, Bob T. Builder described, “sometimes when someone is not behaving, um, good, she’ll become Crazy
Schmidt and yell at us. And that might affect, um, us because we’ll waste all our time on lectures instead of learning.” When asked to describe what was meant by “not good” behavior, students jumped in to offer “talking, it’s like troublemakers, talking back, yeah, wasting time, if someone is like…if someone like destroys materials or something sometimes, like sometimes people break off the erasers and throw them, throwing them across the room…” In this way, students who opted-in to the first phase of the focus group described a process in which students who deviated from classroom norms and expectations, through talking back, wasting time, and otherwise being a troublemaker, provoked “Crazy Schmidt” to further waste time lecturing the class, thereby taking away from learning. Students also described benefits of a connection with their teacher being a greater willingness to speak out and take risks with participating. Notably, these benefits were described as being dependent upon feeling as if one has that connection. Interviews with other students and classroom observations revealed that those students who did not report such connections were less likely to raise their hands and more likely to report grievances with favoritism and the need for respite.

Finally, despite fear that their classmates might not accept their “true selves,” students in the first phase of the focus group spoke to the importance of having relationships with students in their class. For one, having friendships opened up the range of peers to whom one could turn for help. They described having close friends in the class as critical to feeling included in general and when working in cooperative learning groups in particular. Namely, in their classroom,

Ms. Schmidt tends to have us partner up a lot, and if you didn’t have a close friend in the group, you would feel kind of left out because everyone, when she asks people to pair up, everybody runs to their close friends, and if you really don’t have one, you’d feel left out and go with someone that wouldn’t really benefit your learning.
Trust

Foundational to establishing a strong class culture according to Ms. Schmidt, trust functioned in some form to alter classroom relationships and students’ perceptions of their classroom. Multiple students named the best thing about their classroom being the responsibility and trust granted to them through mechanisms like kindergarten buddies (i.e., a partnership, facilitated by the classroom teachers, between each fifth grader in Ms. Schmidt’s class and a kindergartner). Other students spoke to a longing for trust they perceived to be restricted by highly structured classroom procedures. When asked what she would change about her classroom, Baxley called for the elimination of “childish” systems that insinuated a lack of trust, reaching for the autonomy she perceived to be squandered through job cards and hand signals. Thus, classroom systems both enabled and inhibited the perception of caring relations through creating or restricting the perception of trust.

With personal and cultural distinctions, trust was either granted to the authority figure or needed to be established. For example, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson described how the rules of the classroom were created by his teacher and followed by stating, “I just trust her. Like, I’m like you’re my teacher. My parents told me to trust you so I’m just gunna trust you.” With trust influencing the perception of caring relations, means of not only establishing but maintaining and restoring damaged trust may be a critical point of intervention in repairing classroom relationships.

Drama

Descriptions of conflict in the classroom were often subsumed under the label of drama. Bob T. Builder, who noted that she was never involved in the drama, indicated that it tended to take place “when people are frustrated either with the teacher or with a different student.” She
described that she tended to witness the drama during independent work when people would talk back to the teacher, occasionally evoking Crazy Schmidt, or during lunch when students were yelling at each other. According to Bob T. Builder,

> Ms. Schmidt is probably one of my favorite teachers I’ve had so far, but it’s hard because there’s other people who are kind of ruining it…it gets ruined because then she shows like anger and then there’s all this time in class that’s just wasted because of that.

Jacquelin also noted that if she could change something about her classroom, she would change the drama. According to this student, “some are just silly fights, but some are just like weird, awkward ones. They usually like lead from the lunchroom to the classroom.” In order to “finally have no drama” and “just have peace” in the classroom, Jacquelin indicated that she would need to “probably just like try to convince the troublemakers to just like stop.” Similarly, P.J. described the drama as “people just yelling all the time” and “it’s the main reason why we don’t go to recess or do any fun games.” Because P.J. perceived that certain students fueled the drama fire, these students were less preferred.

Jasmine linked drama to treatment and spoke to the ways in which drama entered and exited the classroom. For example, she described that some students were assumed to be instigating drama and were questioned about their engagement in drama, whereas other students were assumed to be behaving appropriately. She also described a cycle of drama in which students in conflict would call one another out in the class, eliciting consequences that perpetuated tensions. In such situations, she indicated that “Sometimes [Ms. Schmidt] handles it where [a group of boys] sit out, but now we’re towards the end of the year, it’s the whole class doesn’t get [recess] because of them.” In this way, drama that originated on social media, and other forums extending beyond the context of the classroom, played out in the classroom and
responses within the classroom context further impacted relationships. Specifically, Jasmine spoke about self and peer policing, including the worry and guilt that students feel “in our stomach…where you feel sick and like they’re gunna tell on you…but necessarily you weren’t wrong, you were doing the right thing.”

Notably, classroom relationships exist beyond the bounds of the classroom and with the expansion of technology, students are in near constant communication. In speaking with Jasmine about the drama in the classroom, I commented, “It sounds like with the drama and all that’s going on, it sounds like it’s not just in person at school, but a lot of it starts- [Jasmine: texting] texting.” Starting in elementary school, students are motivated to establish and maintain relations both in person and virtually. Jasmine described a time outside of school in which students in the class spent time together and “we just enjoyed being together.” She expressed frustration that “we don’t get to talk” in the classroom and used that as rationale to make her own time to communicate with peers. In other classes, she noticed that students got down time when they finished their work, whereas in her class she felt “pushed way too much. We don’t get outside time anymore. And we never really did. And we don’t get to go on our phones.” Also notable, the student spoke in “we,” stating throughout the interview that “we just don’t really like how it is anymore.” With relationships evolving outside of the classroom, educators are challenged both

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3 Although there appeared to be variability in the extent to which teachers enforced the school policy on cell phone use, that policy is as follows: During school hours and while on the bus, cell phones and other electronic devices are to be used under the supervision of district staff for educational purposes only. Students must comply with the directives of school/district staff regarding when and where electronic devices can be used. Devices may only be used in approved areas and students must comply with the directives of school/district staff regarding when and where electronic devices may be used. Cell phone conversations during the school day are prohibited unless under the supervision of staff/school personnel.
to address conflict among individuals appropriately, but also address grievances within the
classroom that may impact relationships on a broader scale.

Damage

While many students described the classroom as a fun, exciting place to learn, a
sentiment underlying other students’ interview transcripts was a theme of exhaustion that
stemmed from the perception of over-control paired with lack of respite that ultimately caused
tear in their relationships with members of the classroom. A feeling that they were older,
deserved the autonomy and trust stripped from structures like symbol systems and specified
areas for materials, and overworked without respite accumulated to produce resistance to the
classroom. Baxley, who transitioned to another classroom for part of the day to participate in the
academically gifted program, described the way her other teacher, Ms. Smith, “cares in ways, but
like doesn’t really care.” In describing this nuance, she referred to this classroom as “a break…or
else I think I would go insane.” More specifically,

On Monday, we finished the week of testing. We had math, math, we had two – math
part 1, part 2, science part 1, part 2. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. And so
then we were exhausted on Monday. Yesterday, [Ms. Smith] let us take our phones
out…we got to go on our phones and we got to talk with each other and she didn’t care. I
walked back [to Ms. Schmidt’s class] and I felt really bad because I just got to like go on
my phone, chat with my friends, and they had been in here doing more science review
even through science was over. And we were like ‘I can’t wait until [the state assessment]
is over’ because we thought we would just be doing chillax stuff, but no, we’re still
getting ready for sixth grade.
On the day to which this student referred, I entered the classroom at the time students were watching a documentary on owls. When I asked Ms. Schmidt if they were watching a movie, she reported that they never just watched movies, but this was in preparation for an owl pellet dissecting activity. In speaking with Ms. Schmidt more generally about how her approach compared to other teachers at the school, she described a “very different” process, taking a moment to strategically arrange her words. She shared,

The majority of my colleagues on my current grade-level team rely on teaching from the textbook, um, rely on lecturing, rely on giving students a worksheet and having them work independently without collaboration, without even providing teacher support, and my philosophy is completely different from that.

She described that regardless of what grade level she was teaching, I would still use the engagement strategies that I employ to show equity of voice…to challenge student thinking, to put the majority of the learning on the students, but yet still being very present as a facilitator to ensure that the discussions are heading in the right direction… So, I think I was kind of the outcast on my team because I do things so differently…I don’t think trying to establish a strong culture and teach character, um, lessons, is nearly (laughter) as much of a priority in my colleague’s classrooms.

Taken together, some of the damage to relationships described by a group of students appeared to come as the result of feeling over-worked due to the variety of different priorities in the classroom (e.g., testing, standards, life lessons) along with the perception of stringent procedures and lectures in place to maintain order and enable the variety of priorities of the classroom. Baxley described that even “like the people who actually try to do their work…like
they do their work and they’re not like…bad…they don’t talk” have severed relationships with their teacher because

Whenever somebody does something wrong, she interrupts everybody’s work and focus to call out or stare down this one person and make it a class thing. Like say somebody dropped their pencil and another person kicked it and like one person laughed. She would call everybody out. For the littlest thing.

Thus, further exemplifying the ways in which the push for productivity and efficiency appeared to influence layers of control in the classroom that interacted with perceptions of care.

**Future vision**

Beyond individual interviews and classroom observations, students worked in teams I assigned to illustrate their vision of their ideal classroom as part of a design challenge that served as the second part of the focus group. In creating their visions, I asked students to be creative, while addressing the roles of teachers and classmates in the classroom, how the class would run, the rules if any, how the rules would be enforced if at all, what relationships would look like between teachers and students and among students, and how damage to relationships would be handled. Through the design challenge, students presented visions that included ways of addressing current concerns while maintaining preferred elements of their current classroom.

For example, students described incorporating additional free time (e.g., recess, extended snack time) and access to their phones; limiting “lecturing” (i.e., redirections) and shifting to individual conversations to handle broken rules if necessary; and adding time for physical activity. They described an essence of McLaughlin’s (1991) description of legitimate authority (i.e., grounded in conferred authority or reciprocal caring) such that students paid attention and showed respect while passionate teachers took more of a back seat, created a fun learning
environment and an open space for conversation between students and teachers. Some groups presented more radical shifts, while others’ visions reflected more subtle changes to the status quo.

For example, another group shared a classroom similar to their own in which they had opportunities to sit by new people\textsuperscript{4} to “form closer bonds because maybe if you sit by other people and talk with them, you could end up being friends with them and have collaborative work with them;” along with expanded freedom (e.g., more flexible seating and free time); and a space in which “people would give you a second chance and understand…where people would make you feel comfortable so you can open up and be yourself and not hide yourself from people you care about.” Students in one group went back and forth in sharing whose ideas most heavily contributed to their final product. In their vision, the teacher should teach and be understanding of students’ points of view. They continued,

Brandan Joseph: How will the class run day to day, Jacquees Gilbert Waterson?

Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: Um, how Bob and Brandan want it to run, it’s like um-

Bob T. Builder: All of us want it to run! (laughter)

Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: No, I just did what you guys told me to do.

Bob T. Builder: What! (laughter) No!

Brandan Joseph: You were the-

\textsuperscript{4} The seating arrangements changed about four times during the period the classroom was observed. Students reported that the table groups seemed to stay the same until problems were noted, at which times the teacher implemented a change. The changing classroom structure was something this small group liked about their class that they would emulate in an ideal classroom.
Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: Ok so what, what WE wanted to do – you guys good with that? (Bob. T Builder: Yes!) We wanted to, um, draw. So, I’ve been wanting to have recess all day-

Bob T. Builder: Not all day! Every day! (laughter)

Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: Recess every day. Um, so Bob, Brandan, Mr. Unknown, AND me would all like to have the teacher have like stricter punishments but also not take it out on the whole class. Another one is that whenever some kids are good, um, I don’t know you say it! [group discussion]

Brandan Joseph: Raffle tickets for good behavior. And our RULES, because we do have them, and Bob decided to make- (Bob T. Builder: Not me!) Yes! Ok. We all agreed on making it a cool little idea of spelling out RU L E and having each letter…So R is Respect Authority. So let’s say Ms. Schmidt says ‘Ok guys, do your work,’ to not, you will not ignore it and you’ll actually do your work. The U is Understand the Subject (Bob T. Builder: What! I didn’t do that. Jacquees changed the word). It was Understand all Stories (Bob T. Builder: What!) Right? Wasn’t it? It was to understand stuff and then the L is always Listen and Follow to where, um, and whenever Ms. Schmidt says do your work, don’t just be like, like you actually show that you’re listening and then you’ll actually show your work. And then the E is Expect the Best, so don’t go into class and be like ‘today’s gunna be a horrible day’ like it should be the best day ever. And Mr. Unknown wanted to do ‘how will students learn?’

Mr. Unknown: No, I wanted to do the rules.

Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: Um, so for punishment, me and Bob said that (Bob T. Builder: All of us!), fine (Brandan Joseph: All of us agreed, Jacquees is making stuff up),
ALL OF US agree that kids who get in trouble and don’t do their work, a lot, should get punished, a lot.

Brandan Joseph: And, with the, Jacquees I just remembered MEDIA SOURCES.

Jacquees Gilbert Waterson: Oh yeah and then media sources because we all want to incorporate technology to like the school so what we thought was like we should bring like technology and media sources instead of like reading from a textbook.

Summary

Various factors enabled and inhibited the perception of care in the classroom. I used a variety of analytic techniques to investigate the ways in which students’ perceptions of what enabled and inhibited care in the classroom had common threads or patterns. I was also interested in the ties between care, control, responses to conflict, and classroom relationships.

Bringing together observations and interviews, care appeared to operate in such a way that enabled a dynamic and collaborative classroom, characterized by elements of ethical control and a restorative approach to conflict, which in turn fostered the perception of care between students and their teacher and enabled caring relations between students. Care also operated in relation to control such that students who exemplified and conformed to the values and standards of the classroom were praised and rewarded to serve as an example to other students. Those that fit this mold were explicitly and implicitly granted the label of “good” or a model scholar, formed stronger teacher-student connections, and reported feeling cared for and supported. Those that deviated were labeled “troublemakers,” perceived and policed by other students as caring less about their education and disrupting the order. Taken together, a cycle ensued in which some students felt as though they needed to fit themselves to a standard to reap the rewards and connection that followed, and others became exhausted by what they perceived as
relentless productivity and non-reciprocal caring. Resulting disruptions and departures from ethical control to regain order created further social divisions and hierarchies that, without reparation, left some students “not liking how it is anymore.” Finally, care conveyed through the explicit teaching of life lessons raised questions of how students are taught to care for the other.
CHAPTER FIVE: 
DISCUSSION

Despite research support for the benefits of care and educators’ belief in the importance of caring relationships (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Osterman, 2000), there is limited research investigating the nature of care in the elementary classroom context. The present study aimed to fill this gap through exploring how care operated within one fifth grade classroom, including ways in which efforts to care were interrelated with classroom dynamics of control and conflict, and how classroom structures and practices influenced students’ perceptions of their classroom and their relationships within it.

In this chapter, I offer interpretations and implications that follow the narrative I created from the 19 individual interview accounts (17 student and 2 teacher interviews), focus group transcript, and classroom observations. I present an interpretation that might fuel critical reflection on the ways in which educators might organize classrooms to enable ethically caring relations. Cannon (2018) wrote that she intended to “produce knowledge that is partial and prismatic…that admits its failures and opens up new ways of thinking” (p. 5). This study allowed me to investigate the workings of a classroom, including students’ experiences and perspectives, and complicate normative assumptions surrounding care in a way that may expand educators’ thinking. One important message that may resonate with educators was the way in which students’ interpretations of care in the classroom varied and was dependent upon how they perceived different experiences. If the perception of care can serve as a protective factor that facilitates learning and enhances students’ well-being, while the lack thereof is implicated in
feelings of insecurity that can interfere with coping and ultimately lead to dropping out (Altenbaugh et al., 1995; Epstein, 1992; McMillian & Reed, 1994; Osterman, 2000; Renihan & Renihan, 1995; Roorda et al., 2011), the nuanced ways in which students interpret care is critical to explore. Throughout my discussion, I emphasize that any critique I offer is not of participants in the classroom under analysis but of “how school practices are embedded in larger discourses that do warrant concern” (Boler, 1999, p. 91). To move beyond the individual or any indication of personal indictment, I use the terms teacher and students rather than pseudonyms throughout this section. Through the lens of a school psychology trainee, I present implications for practice and research pertinent to educational researchers and practitioners.

**Individualism and Individuality**

Individualism is a seemingly commonsensical American value. One might interpret a focus on individualism as foundational to understanding student differences and responding to unique needs. Particularly for individuals entrenched in Western culture, one may be less inclined to reflect upon the implications of a classroom culture grounded in individualism and the way it permeates classroom activity. Both in the classroom and in the culture at large, we commonly use language (e.g., self-control) to locate emotions within the individual, rendering emotions as natural, private phenomenon the individual must learn to control. Similarly, one’s ability to achieve is decontextualized and attributed to a set of personal attributes (e.g., work ethic). Within this culture, one’s worth is judged in part by individual achievement and achievement becomes a basic condition of acceptance (Purpel, 1989).

When emotions are discussed in schools, it is often for the purpose of maintaining social control through promoting individual disciplining techniques. Although this would not be the explicit intention of the teacher in the current classroom, who brought emotions to the public
realm with the goal of developing good citizens, interviews and observations revealed the control mechanisms operating within intentions to care. The current classroom operated under different forms of modernistic thinking including a focus on individualism and rhetoric consistent with a democratic classroom. Similar but distinct from individualism is individuality, a theme perhaps more reflective of the current classroom in that students perceived as hardworking or making substantial progress were recognized in addition to the highest achieving.

Although seemingly natural, Boler (1999) described the way a “universalized portrait of the individual as a bundle of impulses allows for an extraordinary decontextualization of actions, events, and choices” (p. 94). In the case of the current classroom, students were continuously called to demonstrate self-control and maintain strong work ethic. When asked to describe their classmates, most students separated their peers into groups by labels. Noblit et al. (1991) described the ways in which labels provide a language through which the actions of individuals can be interpreted by society. In the classroom, these interpretations were created in comparison to internalized norms and values presented as universal, neutral and desirable. Consistent with Foucault’s concept of bipower (i.e., a way of controlling groups through regulating communications that direct thought and desire), students came to identify the “troublemaker” as a student who behaved badly by deviating from outlined classroom norms and values (e.g., productivity, positivity, strong work ethic, self-control).

Philosopher John Dewey viewed individualism as an ethical problem. From the lens of classical liberal individualism, “the individual is an independent entity in competition with other individuals,” with the social world as a landscape for competitive pursuit of self-interest (Festenstein, 2019). In contrast, Idealists argued that only when social life was understood as “an organism in which the well-being of each part was tied to the well-being of the whole” could
individuality be realized and sustained. Regulating communications including class norms and life lessons with morals focused on self-control and work ethic were intended to foster caring relations, but also created a system of policing and social stratification that created barriers to reciprocally caring relationships.

**Productivity + Emotional Quotient**

Beyond explicit control structures in the classroom, Kanpol (1999) described the ways in which schools exert control through the external pressures of the government, parent and teacher expectations and “a values orientation that constructs our reality for us, all in the guise of creating democracy” (p. 49). Control over ideas and values is more insidious than explicit control mechanisms in the way it engenders acceptance of these ideals and stifles creative thinking.

One deeply entrenched part of the classroom culture was productivity, a classroom norm. Results highlighted the ways in which a push for productivity impacted relationships through pressure to cover multiple priorities and the need for a structured, smooth flowing system to successfully achieve these ends. The classroom teacher described priorities of preparing students in school and in life through incorporating activities and challenges aimed at mastering content, learning life lessons and developing skills in working with others. Highly invested in her students and their success, the teacher found it necessary to put “strong procedures in place” to prevent disruptions that would interfere with mandates and her goals. Actively engaged in best practices, when asked to comment on other fifth grade teachers’ practices, she described key distinctions, particularly as it related to facilitating collaboration, establishing a strong culture and teaching character. For some students, however, the classroom in which students were given time on their phones and to engage with their friends, absent of productive ends, was the one in which “I would come to school all year and skip summer [to be in].” An evaluator or otherwise
outside observer might be impressed with the structure of Ms. Schmidt’s classroom, the ways in which she managed to bring life to content and facilitate interaction among students. Less immediately observable would be the exhaustion and subtle rebellion of students whose perception was one that it could be “too much to handle…because it’s just a lot, a lot, a lot of work,” contributing to less favorable views of their classroom and frustration with their lack of genuine choice in day to day procedures.

When asked about outside forces that impact the functioning of the classroom, the teacher discussed events that competed with instructional time, of which she indicated there was never enough. Thus, an individual critique is not warranted, but rather broader consideration of the ways in which cultural and political values and mandates seem to necessitate unwavering productivity, the impact on teachers’ instructional decisions, and what is gained (e.g., a highly productive few) and lost (e.g., stratification of individuals into good and bad, comparison, exhaustion, withdrawal, strained relations). By upholding and promoting self-control and work ethic as natural and trainable skills, framed as objectively good without further examination of social and political agendas, a risk is run of masking political interests in social control and conformity and of creating a narrow, ‘commonsense’ definition of the good student.

In addition to the value placed on academic productivity, the classroom teacher focused on building strong character through life lessons. In many ways, the classroom in this study could be considered exemplary insofar as positive behavior supports, social and emotional learning, and cooperative learning were embedded throughout the school day. Through my observations, it was clear that emotional literacy was as much a priority as academics, as it was woven into lessons and class conversations. Boler (1999) described concern that “curricula in emotional literacy now taught in hundreds of public schools are in large part behavioral
modification programs that employ sociobiological discourses to authorize which emotional behaviors constitute the good citizen.” Although likely not the intention in discussions of emotions and character, throughout the project, students referred to themselves and others as “good,” “troublemakers,” and other labels that provided a marker of character. In situations where perceived favoritism was brought to light, explanation surrounded the ways in which one student better demonstrated the class value of integrity and other students should strive toward that standard. Those students that did not conform as neatly were left feeling underpraised, over-reprimanded, exhausted, and searching for something different. Those students that met the standard felt challenged, cared for, and good. The range of what was authorized as good was influenced by dominant culture norms that were reflected and emphasized in the context of the classroom.

One example of an intended life lesson was the class conversation of how “gentlemen” should treat “ladies.” As the observer, it appeared to me that the intention behind the conversation aligned with the teacher’s goal of building character as it related to showing respect. Specifically, that one should respect another regardless of behavior. In this case, the gentleman should respect the lady, even if the lady “wasn’t acting like a lady.” In the conversation leading up to this conclusion were elements of what Boler (1999) hoped an explicit conversation around emotions would look like, including a collaborative, self-reflective analysis of emotions. The teacher created a space in which students could share their potentially competing thoughts as it related to a point of tension in their book. By pausing to reflect on a socially and culturally relevant question of how one should treat another and under what circumstances, the teacher used her power to invite attention to the issue. While showing respect was the decided conclusion, lacking from the conversation was a critical analysis of power,
gender, what it meant to “be a lady” and who decided. Thus, while a value of respect may have been transmitted, a perpetuation of gender roles and stereotypes seemed wrapped in the same package. Absent was further critical examination of how people are taught different rules of conduct for emotional behavior according to their gender. This is reflective of Boler’s (1999) concern that when emotions do enter public discourse, they are absent of socio-cultural and political analysis. The situation also mirrored an observation made by Boler (1999) in which she noted that the sophistication of an emotional literacy lesson she observed was in no small part due to the skills of the teacher she was observing. She also observed at this time that “even highly skilled teachers easily slip into arbitrary assertions of their own emotional rules and values” (p. 101).

In the observation held four days later, during which the teacher called on students to discuss the “dangerous journey” of the main character, how the discussion would improve their character and what life lessons they would take away from the conversation, the teacher concluded that it was important to “make the best of moments with family because some are separated” with the lesson being “not to take things for granted.” Again, a space was provided for discussion that called for students to “own your learning and make your voice heard” and evoked an empathic response. Of note, the conversation reflected some of the risks Boler (1999) outlined associated with teaching emotional literacy including the imposition of “emotional rules or prescriptions, stemming either from particular values embedded in the curricula or the teacher’s own arbitrary emotional values” (p. 82). In this case, the call for students to “stop negative thoughts and put a smile on” and “be grateful,” without consideration of larger social, political, cultural or historical factors, reinforced passive empathy – of putting oneself into the shoes of a de-contextualized, distant other that one cannot directly help – and reduced emotional
literacy to advocating for self-directed behavior of controlling negative emotions and remaining positive as it aligned with classroom norms and upheld dominant culture interests of social harmony. Although discussion of emotional literacy in any form may be considered part of the progressive classroom that moves beyond standard curricula, one shortcoming of such an approach is the lack of critical reflection on how one might be implicated in the social forces that create that reality for another. In the conversation at hand, there was a call for “reversibility” (Rawls, 1972) – swapping positions and evaluating the situation of another. Without moving beyond the individual to the social and situating oneself in the problem, students were reminded to be grateful they were not in such a situation, limiting further conversation on how one can take action on part of the other instead of pity.

This raises the question of, when enacting and modeling care through imparting life lessons, what is gained and lost by advocating for empathetic responses targeted toward the self rather than toward the other. In some ways, the practice of reading and stopping to consider critical issues is the first step in the type of “testimonial reading” described by Boler (1999) that espouses responsibility in the reader. Taking a step further than digesting the experience of another for a sense of perspective, educators may use this practice as an opportunity to present challenges and foster collective educational responsibility. By allowing for some discomfort in this process, a deeper care may become operant through constructing new emotional understandings that fuel ways of living with rather than in sympathy of others. The situation also brought to mind the principle of sacrifice found in some students’ definitions of care, such that with the passive empathy of noticing the experience of the other, must come an element of active compassion found in sacrificing something on the other’s behalf for the well-being of the whole – a caring sacrifice.
Taken together, the class spent much of their time either developing intellectual know-how or interpersonal skills that could be framed as necessary to forward “smooth and efficient production” (Boler, 1999, p. 70). As mentioned, the critique here is not of the current classroom but of the larger systems that impact the functioning of classrooms, what is prioritized, in whose interests, and with what impact on students.

In addition to considerations of how to model and facilitate care beyond the self, educators might critically reflect on what constitutes “good character,” who decides what is considered good and what is confirmed as good. In the above scenario, the teacher continued to read with students, having them pause to reflect on reactions, phrases that were alarming to them, and “what is the point the author is trying to get across that will make you a better person.” Again, without critique to having students reflect on self-improvement, other considerations for educators seeking to create a culture of care in their classrooms may be: who decides what is good, what are the implications of delineating what is good in narrow terms for students, and what is the impact of individualized reflection without analysis of larger implications beyond the self.

Of note, I offer no specific critique of teaching and praising productivity, integrity, positivity, gratitude, empathy, or compassion. To the contrary, there is research to support positive outcomes associated with practicing most, if not all, of the listed targets. The critique offered is one geared to the implications of, and control mechanisms associated with, focus on individual adherence to these principles including evaluations of individual worth, access to caring relationships, and ability to move beyond the individual to the social and care for the other.
Control and Policing

In many ways, the classroom teacher’s passion, investment in her “scholars,” and adherence to best practices created a learning environment in which students were actively engaged and constantly interacting. Rather than reject innovative instructional strategies in favor of controlling curriculum and behavior, the teacher put “high procedures in place until the last day” to avoid what McLaughlin (1991) described as a choice that some teachers make of social control over educational goals that “might also be conceived of as a choice of controlling over caring” (p. 189). In a classroom where educational goals and social control were of high priority came students who were excited, appreciative, exhausted, surveilling and questioning.

Beyond explicit structures such as hand signals intended to maintain control in the classroom, social control was maintained through biopolitics and the self-policing of encouraged emotional rules. Defined by Francois Ewald as “the industrial and controlled production and reproduction of the living” (p. 8), biopower is a way of defining a shift in control from sovereign (absolute) power to regulatory power in which regulatory technologies are used to control student thinking (Wittman, 2006). Namely, through advocating self-control, work ethic, and emotions that uphold harmonious relations, all subsumed under strong character, students were taught to self-police their emotional experience and reduce it to a private concern individual to them. Boler (1999) described how in these less explicit, modern forms of control “‘skills’ are emphasized, often in combination with particular cultural values such as respect, care, tolerance, democracy” and in this way “self-control and self-policing are hallmarks of the modern ‘virtuous’ individual” (p. 88). Ensuring students that she did not have a favorite, but rather that students should embody the integrity modeled by another student, was one example of the ways
in which the classroom teacher taught students to individualize and compare “skill level” with regard to selected values.

Representing the nuance in how care operated in the classroom, discussions of life lessons and emotions that reflected care beyond academics were also implicated in inhibiting extension of these conversations and potential broader impact. By limiting what was acceptable to discuss, feelings were left unresolved, a personal issue to reconcile. Boler (1999) warned,

As long as we continue to embody with docility the norms that appear so innocent and ‘apolitical,’ we offer students no better vision of how to transform either their own pain and rage or how to enact upon the world the alternative visions each carries. (pp. 149-150)

Just as McLaughlin (1991) hypothesized students’ culpability in their own oppression as a justification for their desire for classmates to experience harsher punishments, student members of what some described a “classroom family” in the current study hoped for similar “stricter” consequences for troublemakers. One focus group team even added “Respect Authority” and “Listen and Follow” as rules in their ideal classroom. One risk of democratic and community rhetoric promoting the “classroom family” is the way in which control is masked and students believe they are active participants in shaping their moral world. Students’ contemplations of who they could be in their classroom while maintaining good standing, and many students’ desires to promote interests of control, revealed the ways in which students were governed by and came to embody the norms delivered to them in a way that maintained homeostasis within the classroom (Fielding, 2000). According to Bourassa (2011), biopower “achieves its aim of homeostasis through techniques of regularization and invariably mechanisms of exclusion and containment” (p. 7). Through the control of students’ minds, broader discussion of emotion and
alternative visions of the world were restricted and students that challenged the system were reminded of what they were to think and how they were to behave to maintain social standing. Without room for negotiation, protective care is administered and conformity it prioritized to discussions of ethically caring relations.

Students policed their own behavior as reflected in responses to the question of whether they could be themselves in the classroom. Payne and Smith (2012) connected this reaction to more subtle forms of control and its impact on relations stating, “Ubiquitous messages about who youth are allowed to be limit possibilities for how peers can relate to one another [and] the kinds of difference that are acceptable in the school social scene” (p. 188).

The surveillance described by some students as calling attention to “every little thing that we do” is often framed as a caring, paternalistic protection. In the classroom under analysis, this method of surveillance was effective not always in limiting disruptions but in creating an efficient peer policing system in which students faulted others for disruptions (Harden, 2012). In the context of dynamic collaboration and engagement where students made their voices heard was an imposed moral code or regulating technology through which responses were directed and surveilled for the extent to which they embodied the prescription. Important goals described by students were to avoid judgement and the perception of one as emotional or not strong.

Thus, in thinking about the interrelationships between care, conflict and control in the classroom, in many ways they were overlapping constructs. More traditional forms of discipline, including removing students from the classroom to receive a disciplinary placement determined by administration, were rare in this classroom. Rather, the class relied primarily on Foucauldian biopower or a type of caring control that systematically instilled in students a self and peer policing system. Only at the limits of biopower (i.e., when the regulation of the classroom broke
down), did the classroom teacher rely on more traditional forms of discipline. A consequence of this modern form of pastoral control was the passing down of hegemonic ways of thinking and behaving that are considered good versus bad.

If given the power to change something about their classroom, approximately half of students indicated they would decrease disruptions and/or drama. Those students who described class norms and structures as being for the good of the class were more likely to report a caring relation with their teacher and target deviant students as the reason for disruptions. In addition to naming peers as the problem, peers were the point of intervention, with students calling for harsher individual punishments for troublemakers. Those that felt overworked and found class structures overdone – “I don’t want to say like blackmailing us, but it’s like she’s holding them against us,” – and indicative of a lack of trust, insisted that disruptions were an attempt to find amusement in a day without breaks and that the true disruption was the number of redirections delivered indirectly (i.e., a stern look without name during an incriminating class-wide address, according to some) to the same group of students. Of note, those students reported that praise and redirections seemed to be targeted to certain groups of students such that a “favorite student” could do no wrong (even if engaging in an inappropriate behavior, would not be "called out"), whereas another student, who got in trouble more frequently, would be called out for the same behavior.

By locating rule-breaking behavior as a trait within the individual, students across transcripts came to describe their peers as “bad” or “good” based on this standard. The bad kids or “troublemakers,” were the ones that didn’t follow the rules. Following the rules in this classroom was critically important as without disruption, productivity could go uninterrupted and positivity maintained. A microcosm of the larger society, this is desired in the school system and
the compliant are “good” and “successful.” Institutionalized success and well-manneredness supports social positioning practices that privilege conforming behaviors. While following the rules may benefit students in school and the larger society, the delineation of students as “bad” or “good” based on this standard created divisions and othering as reflected in transcripts where the bad kids were “they” not “we” nor “us.”

Students spoke to the ways in which good students were privileged in the classroom as a result of their compliance. Consistent with national interests, schools often reward students for behaviors that maintain social order. Those that deviate are punished, if not administratively, socially, through rupturing their relations with others. Although rewarding desired behavior is a research-based behavioral strategy that is encouraged in schools, one consideration as a result of this study may be attention to the range of praised behavior and to whom praise is most likely to be delivered.

Social Stratification

In the school setting, it is understood that a certain level of control is necessary for a classroom to function and for students to learn. When care serves as a control mechanism such that students are given approval for conforming to school rules, students internalize what is considered good and bad behavior. Although this may be considered desirable in the school setting, implications include social stratification such that students are grouped by “naturalized” traits of good and bad based the extent to which they fit the expectations in the school environment. Described by Payne and Smith (2012), “Young people’s attitudes about difference are partially formed in a school based social scene that rewards conformity, and school is a primary cultural site where youth learn rules about who men and women are supposed to be” (p. 188).
Stratification within the classroom was created in part by the spoken (e.g., integrity, work ethic) and unspoken (e.g., competition, success) values and norms passed to students as common sense. Resulting labels, such as the “troublemaker,” exemplified the subtle subordination of those that did not live up to unquestioned values and actions. Multiple students described the need to adjust themselves to fit into a mold that would be accepted by others in the classroom. The acceptance of socially constructed terms of the good, bad, and cool student stifled movement and the potential for other constructions of meaning.

Levi (1988) described the way in which,

Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichean tendency…the need to divide the field into ‘we’ and ‘they’…which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts. (pp. 36-37)

One student described the classroom as fun, exciting, wonderful and boring. He explained one reason being that he was the “second-best child there.” Duncan (1999) provided a context for such statements indicating, “In the norm-bound social confines of the school and classroom, the comparative and competitive ethic propagates an informal peer rivalry: the rush begins to stake a claim on being normal.” Thurlow (2001) described one of the ways in which that was achieved as “the continual, vocal branding of Other” (p. 26), a process through which “students establish their own position within the social hierarchy by marking others’ positions as higher or lower than their own” (Payne & Smith, 2012, p.189).

Several times throughout the study, I questioned the extent to which I was over-problematizing what could be considered normal workings of the classroom and life. Of course there is a need for control in the classroom, of course there is a standard of behavior most conducive for learning, of course students are going to watch one another, judge, and form
groups. Payne and Smith (2012) explained the ways in which “Lines between ‘normal’ and ‘Other’ are embedded in culture—and serve as tools for placing self and others within various social hierarchies” (p. 188). I began to question “normal;” how, why, and for whom it exists, and the ways it has been maintained over time through gradually more discrete, modern forms of control. In speaking specifically with the LGBTQ population in mind, Payne and Smith (2012) suggested, “schools need to understand the cultural beliefs they are promoting, how they are teaching these values to students, and how peer-to-peer [policing] actually serves these cultural beliefs. Sustainable change cannot occur without this cultural awareness” (p. 188). In the case of the current study, the divisions among students based largely on deviance from classroom norms is reflective of divisions based on other cultural norms (e.g., of heteronormativity). As students in the classroom grow older, and expectations for conformity intensify, they are at increased risk for policing peers’ behavior, rewarding those who conform and marginalizing those who do not (Horn, 2007; Payne, 2007; Shakib, 2003; Wyss, 2004). Points of reflection for educators seeking to create a caring environment for all students, then, necessarily include investigating “how youth discursively construct and maintain social categories and how they attribute social power to some categories and subordinate others” (Payne & Smith, 2012, p. 189).

To overstate, this study presents no critique on an individual or teacher. The critique I offer in response to the data lies in what educators, as influenced by cultural and societal values, teach and praise in the good student to the exclusion of all else and the implications that creates for division, feelings of acceptance and worth. Results that revealed fragmentation in the ‘well-behaved’ and the other, the ones who felt supported and the other, call into question the standard created; implicit permission to police proximity to the standard; and resulting restriction of emotion, relations, and perceptions of care.
Modeling, Confirmation, Dialogue, Practice

Noddings (1992) proposed that caring teachers “model caring behavior to their students, engage students in dialogues that lead to mutual understanding and perspective taking, and expect as well as encourage students to do the best they can given their abilities” (Wentzel, 1998, p. 412). One notable way in which care operated in the classroom was through the culture of interaction created by the classroom teacher to allow for the ongoing practice and confirmation of care among students. This way of work served to enable caring relations as many students perceived their teacher’s role in creating this environment as a form of care, and other students’ willingness to engage with them and sacrifice their time to provide coaching and assistance as caring.

Noddings (2010) also described confirming the best in students as a critical element in a caring relation. One student, described by herself and others as the teacher’s favorite, recalled the way her teacher made her feel cared for by recognizing her as “good,” and as a role model. Several observations revealed the teacher’s use of positive behavioral supports through prompting, encouraging and rewarding desired classroom behaviors. Findings from the current study provide evidence to support ongoing reflection on the various forms confirmation can take, the range of emotions and behaviors deserving of confirmation, a second look at what is considered “deserving” and why, and a third look at distinctions in whom is being confirmed and for what reasons. By reflecting upon the more implicit value systems observed and internalized by students, teachers may choose to include practices designed to confirm the value of students beyond their ability to conform to desired classroom behavior.

In genuine dialogue, both parties speak, listen, and work their way to the resolution of problems (Noddings, 2010). Several students praised the way in which their teacher gave them
chances and attempted to understand their perspectives. Outside of classroom conflict, the teacher called attention to moments of conflict within students’ academic reading and facilitated open discussion as students worked through their reactions. In a classroom with many priorities and some dissatisfied students, problems that remained under the surface may have been brought to light and addressed collaboratively through seeking student input and opening the stage for that dialogue.

Finally, the classroom embodied a collaborative learning environment in which students were constantly learning together, reflecting on their partnerships, and confirming the best in their classmates. Classroom discussions that move beyond the individual to consider the well-being of the whole may provide further opportunity for students to practice critical compassion for the other.

**The Progressive Classroom**

The classroom under analysis may have been considered progressive in many ways. Students were participants in a collaborative learning space in which the teacher stretched the curriculum to include engaging activities and design challenges. Students were reminded to raise their voices and make their opinions known before themselves “casting off” to hear the perspective of another. The teacher took time away from traditional instruction to delve into issues of character. Even students resistant to classroom procedures, which, from their perspective were too stringent for fifth graders (e.g., use of symbols, where to place one's book box) and overdone in color (decorative walls are “in your face”) and vocabulary choice (too much “high word choice”), agreed that their teacher put in unique effort to bring learning to life. Some even attributed newfound enjoyment of learning to these to opportunities to engage in projects and design challenges.
Within the progressive classroom was a need to maintain maximum productivity to accomplish all ends, a focus on values that reinforced those ends through modern forms of control, and the perceived need for the classroom teacher to re-assume her position of power when productive flow was threatened. In a space where the teacher was committed to raising critical issues, the content of discussion was ultimately limited to fit a system where politeness and positivity reigned. Without placing judgement on the importance of being prepared, productive, and proud (to conclude the list of 5 Ps), I wondered if there were times when not following a P would be normal, expected, honored or forgiven. When I asked the teacher this question, she assured that the 5 Ps were simply a guide. During classroom observations, I found myself still contemplating exceptions for not always being prepared, times when being polite or remaining positive might promote complacency or inhibit action toward change. Although my time in the classroom was limited, I never ran into a discussion of these questions. I did run into consistent referral back to classroom norms (another best practice). Instances that stood out to me included ones in which students were advised to always be grateful and stay positive, in one example as a response to those separated from their families, further exemplifying the overlap between messages of care that operate more subtly as control even in the progressive classroom. Thus, while emphasized to some extent in the progressive classroom, critical thinking was bound by control. As someone who has taught lessons of gratitude in schools, my critique is not on the value of being grateful itself, but rather on the ways in which even progressive lessons fit within existing structures to promote individualism, social order and harmony.

Regarding conflict in the progressive classroom, responses were described by the teacher and some students as handled with understanding and perspective-taking, an approach described by the teacher as grounded in a balance of structure and emotional support. Noted by students,
however, was how any deviation indicative of greater disruption (e.g., if other students exacerbated disruption by laughing) became grounds for a more punitive style. Thus, even in the progressive classroom, ethical control had limits, or was inhibited by broader structures necessitating productivity. Just as students were encouraged to make their voices heard within the bounds of politeness and positivity, express emotional reactions to a passage insofar as they could be transformed to messages of gratitude, and have discussions surrounding emotions primarily as they related back to the importance of self-control, the progressive classroom stretched the bounds of the traditional classroom just far enough to remain comfortable.

Another question I asked myself is for what purpose would an educator facilitate conversation surrounding times to deviate from the classroom standard. To whose benefit would it be to have conversations surrounding when being polite may not be a top priority when that won’t prevent disruptions that interfere with learning? Or that it is okay to be upset or even outraged by injustice if that is going to deter from strong work ethic or create chaos. It could be argued that in these cases, control supersedes care in a way influenced by powers beyond the individual educator. That being, larger systems and structures motivated to maintain cultural hegemony seem to exert control over the progressive teacher in ways that limit the educator’s scope.

Deskilling and Reskilling

The priorities within the progressive classroom were many, as the teacher attempted to create an environment in which students got to engage with material and one another, while learning life lessons, building “strong character,” and mastering standards. In our initial interview, the teacher communicated the ways in which she adhered to the standards while incorporating her teaching philosophy stating,
I think that will kill a student’s love of reading if you’re telling them, ‘flip to that page in the textbook’ and kind of – the way that we might have been taught. I really try to go out of my way to find literature that is relevant and that they can connect to and that hopefully teaches some kind of life lesson so that – to me that’s more important. Students who are gaining some type of life skill out of what’s happening in the classroom. So, that’s not to say I- I certainly still teach to the standards, but you don’t have to rely on the few resources that are provided through the district. There’s – with the technology out there – there’s just so many ways you can try and make learning a bit more enjoyable.

By the final interview, she communicated a weariness that lead her to pursue a new site within a charter school setting in which she anticipated a greater level of empowerment to carry out her mission. Specifically, she shared,

Honestly, I- I feel like some of my joy disappeared this past school year because of all of the pressures that were placed upon teachers and because if there isn’t always – some of our top leaders aren’t devoting as much, nearly as much time or effort to impacting students as some of the very hard-working teachers at our site and that takes a toll on the culture, um, so I think while it was very difficult for me to say goodbye to colleagues, families, students, I do feel as if a change is necessary in order for me to keep feeling joy in my profession and to feel as if I’m still going to keep growing professionally because I don’t want to become stagnant.

To ensure that all priorities were addressed required maximizing time such that each spare minute was used in the pursuit of some goal, whether that goal was to build character, teach a life lesson, or ensure academic mastery. This persistent and passionate push resulted in some students’ equally passionate push to get a break or seek respite. Underlying these dynamics
was a *deskilling*, or outside forces controlling the happenings of the classroom (Kanpol, 1999; Wong, 2006). The difficulty of merging her personal philosophy with outside demands from administration (stemming from accountability efforts) was clear in the final interview with the teacher. She spoke to “blanket statements” made by administration including, “‘You all are amazing; you’re working so hard’” followed by “grade level meetings with administration and feeling as if the data isn’t good enough and why isn’t it good enough and rather than ‘what can we do to support you and our scholars,’ just putting all of the blame on teachers.” In that way, the outside control mechanism that is the deskilling of teachers served as one inhibiting factor to the perception of care in the classroom when combined with other classroom factors (e.g., teacher philosophy).

Highlighting the complicated interrelationship between care and control, the classroom teacher assured me of the need to maintain strong procedures throughout the end of the school year to ensure students’ success, and more than one student described knowing that that their teacher was only strict because she cares about their success. Beyond strong procedures, the theme of over-control played out when biopower and efforts at distributed power were abandoned in favor of reigning in threats to productive order. It seems misplaced to critique an individual for wanting her students to be successful and for doing what was in her power to create the conditions to make that possible. By making teachers accountable for promoting competency-based education, they are controlled insofar as they can deviate from the state’s definition of success without putting themselves and their students at-risk. The classroom teacher described priorities of using engagement strategies to “show equity of voice…to challenge student thinking, to put the majority of the learning on students, but yet still being very present as a facilitator.” Thus, in question was not the teacher’s intention to care, but of the larger systems
that influence the activity of the classroom, what is considered “success,” the impact that has on students who feel exhausted and compared, and what educators can do at the level of the classroom to combat these institutional issues through an ethic of care. To reskill oneself requires a critical consciousness paired with “goals of transforming values that oppress, alienate, and subordinate people” (Kanpol, 1999, p. 39).

**Implications for Practice**

Although the importance of classroom relationships is often highlighted in preservice trainings as well as in graduate education for school mental health professionals, often minimal time is given to explore what it means to care in practice and to process through meaning with colleagues in a way that is necessary for a change in practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002). As a setting that functions beyond a “knowledge delivery system” to a “human social institution in which people influence one another’s lives” (Lemke, 1989, p. 32), it is essential to consider the different dynamics at play that impact students’ perceptions of their classrooms and those that occupy it as they move beyond that setting into life. Results of the current study may resonate with educators and facilitate reflection as they navigate the functioning of their classrooms. Critical reflection may then lead to the creation of intentional strategies educators may enact in their classrooms to facilitate, maintain and restore ethically caring relationships with and between students.

While a list of universally applicable strategies may undermine the complexity of creating and maintaining caring relations with students, professional development may include frameworks for thinking about relationships such as the establish-maintain-restore (EMR) method (Cook et al., 2018). In brief, EMR is a framework that outlines ways of cultivating positive relationships with students, sustaining the quality of those relationships, and

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intentionally re-connecting and repairing harm to relationships that have turned negative. This is a potentially promising practice relevant to the findings in the current study as it not only provides strategies for developing relationships with students but for seeking input from students and starting dialogue that makes more likely the reciprocity of care. School psychologists may be influential in providing professional development and consultation to enable an environment in which school professionals engage in collective sensemaking and critically conscious conversations about care.

Ultimately, the conclusion of the study, for me, is not for educators to avoid having favorite students or promoting positivity, but rather to more closely examine to what are we showing care, in whose interests are those selections made, what are the wider social implications with regard to classroom relations and beyond, and how can I develop an ethic of care in which limits are mutually negotiated. In other words, perhaps the results of the study will serve to stimulate a sort of critical consciousness that lends itself to thinking at the level of greater impact and stimulating change at the level of the classroom. Consistent with Berman’s (1987) notion that knowing and caring are related and McLaughlin’s (2001) belief that “teachers and students ought to be engaged in a shared construction of knowledge, which is marked by reciprocal listening and questioning,” educators may reflect on what they confirm in students, for what purpose, how narrowly, and what can they learn from their students about strengths and values. More specifically, professional development might include time for educators to interrogate their concepts of care, including the ways in which efforts to care and control currently operate in their classrooms. Through raising a critical consciousness, educators may reflect on the ways in which care can function to oppress students and reimagine ways of care functioning in the classroom to enable active empathy and critical compassion for others.
Embedded in this critical reflection should include a discussion of the values that have gone unquestioned in the classroom and the perhaps commonsensical definitions of success (e.g., well-mannered compliance that enables academic competence) that privilege these values. Challenging that which seems commonsensical creates a space in which consequences of modern forms of control can be critiqued and modes of behavioral management transformed in a way that moves beyond a neoliberal definition of success; creates a stage for self-determination; and expands what and whom is considered “good,” strengths language used within the classroom (e.g., identifying and calling attention to character strengths demonstrated by all individuals in the classroom; Quinlan et al., 2019), and ideas of how time should be spent (e.g., creating respite in line with a definition of success that prioritizes students’ emotional well-being). Further reflection may include ways of restoring rather than bandaging relational damage.

In addition to students labeled “troublemakers” due to their deviating from expectations, some students presented challenges to the dominant values of the classroom in interviews that moved beyond deviance to resistance. They described feeling as though there is a race to live up to the character of the favorite student, a standard of the good student that moved beyond good behavior to academic achievement, a silencing of emotion such that it was only okay to reveal a certain level of feeling, and a push for productivity that both restricted their sense of autonomy as fifth graders and limited time to enjoy their last year on the playground. A group of students in the classroom expressed how they “just don’t like how it is anymore” regarding exhaustion and grievances with the structure of the classroom. These frustrations, untouched, led to discontent with the classroom and ruptured their relations within it. Lemke (1989) indicated that changes in social relations and increased student and teacher power might arise from teachers talking
frankly with students about what they do or don’t like about school, procedures in their classroom, and alternatives.

To move in this direction requires a sense of critical empowerment. While traditional empowerment is functional in the way of promoting autonomy, critical empowerment involves transforming the culture of a classroom through conscious reflection on activities completed within a school day. When a student attempts to question and push against the structures of the classroom (e.g., through putting a pencil box on her desk rather than the ground, eating a note), nothing is transformed; rather, what may be considered an alternative form of knowledge backfires on the student. Educators, however, may attempt to understand and counter forms of oppressive values. In the current classroom, the teacher described ways of learning beyond textbooks and alternative forms of assessment beyond tests that reflected questioning of their structural weaknesses. From a critical postmodernist perspective, educators may begin to transform their classrooms through continually considering questions such as: Whose knowledge is being represented and whose reality is this form of assessment constructed for? (Kanpol, 1999). From considering such questions comes the opportunity to change classroom structures in a way that addresses the questions and answers.

Educators may find ways to challenge control mechanisms within the confines of bureaucratically granted authority through creating a classroom climate that invites open deliberation of the teacher-student relationship. Creating limits for behavioral control may be a task in which teachers and students share decision making. To undercut the negative aspects of individualism and competition, cooperative learning environments similar to the one in the classroom under analysis may be cultivated, with opportunities for students to share their voices. Future participatory action research (PAR) and youth participatory action research (yPAR;
Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, & Morrell, 2017) may call on indigenous knowledge and desire for action to explore avenues that allow for this form of democratic control.

In practice, school psychologists might support educators in collecting data similar to that collected in the current study regarding students’ perceptions of the meaning of care and use those interpretations to facilitate class discussion. Conversations might serve the purpose of developing understanding and critically assessing and addressing divisions. For example, one student in the current study described that in receiving care, one feels important, admired and protected. In a restorative circle or other class format, students may be given the opportunity to speak to whether this feels true for them or move to a part of the room to indicate whether the workings of the classroom facilitate that sense of empowerment. Divisions that become apparent through the activity may expose some of what was exposed in the current study, creating an opportunity for understanding and the active empathy necessary to change relations within the classroom. To create a classroom culture in which ideals of negotiation and dialogue produce more ethically caring relations, educators must extend critical consciousness raising to students who may otherwise be culpable in their own oppression (McLaughlin, 1991; Shahsavari-Googhari, 2017). By bringing forms of control to light, teachers and students might discuss strengths and values that extend beyond those typically upheld within a neoliberal discourse in a way that disrupts the social stratification that inhibits ethical care. Beyond facilitating training and consulting with educators, school psychologists might also consider the implications of this study when promoting social-emotional learning and other school-wide efforts to enhance relations. Namely, by critiquing consequences of promoting the individualism inherent in lessons that teach students to suppress emotion to maintain self-control; to tolerate difference rather than accept feedback and sit with discomfort; to remain polite, positive and respectful without
interrogating the bounds of their utility or the control functions they serve, we might begin to
create schools and classrooms in which to care requires moving beyond reversibility (Rawls,
1972) and passive empathy to act on behalf of others.

To borrow from Festenstein (2019)’s paraphrasing of John Dewey on the nature of
inquiry,

The goal of an inquiry is not to arrive at a certain picture of the nature of things, but to
come up with an inevitably provisional solution to the practical and intellectual problem
that sparked it – to resolve problematic situations. Inquiry should be understood as part of
our struggle with an objectively precarious but improvable environment. Inquiry is
demanded by what he calls an ‘incomplete’ or ‘problematic’ situation, that is, one in
which our inherited habits and standard ways of doing things run into trouble, perhaps
through our actions having unexpected consequences, through new needs and desires, or
through conflict with others. These challenges prompt us to step back, identify the
problem we are confronted with, and reflect on what to do next…Inquiry as practical
judgment involves reflecting on, and revising our ends, in the light of what is involved
for us in achieving them, and this often leads us creatively to transform our values and to
develop new ends.

**Limitations**

Several limitations to the study are important to consider. For one, findings in this study
come from a single classroom context. Multiple students in that class described a neighboring
fifth grade classroom they would prefer to their own. One student spent time in this classroom,
while others based their preference on report from peers. One student, whose interview and
participation in the focus group reflected the most discontent with the way of work in her current
classroom, stated that she would happily attend school year-round were she able to be a member of the neighboring class. When asked to compare her approach to that of other fifth grade teachers during the second teacher interview, Ms. Schmidt laughed (as if to suggest, “where do I begin”) as she tried to summarize the distinctions. Considering the divergent views of a teacher asked to serve as a model from which other teachers might learn and students favoring the practices of other teachers, exploring the workings of other classrooms such as the neighboring classroom would have been insightful. Interviews with administrators and teachers outside the current classroom, as well as observation of other classrooms may have contributed to a more comprehensive picture of school priorities, the school culture, and the culture of other classrooms such as the neighboring one referenced by child participants. Although classroom culture is created in part by micromomentary actions on the part of the teacher and students within the classroom, these actions are situated in embedded contexts. Despite my attempt to address some of these factors in interviews through asking about outside influences that impacted the inner workings, by not observing the larger context and talking to other stakeholders outside of the classroom, some of the impact of the broader context on classroom culture was lost.

Another key limitation involved the student voices that were left out of the conversation. Specifically, in student interviews, students commonly referred to the four classmates who did not obtain consent to participate in the study, preventing inclusion of their perspectives. Considering the context in which these students were often addressed, their lack of voice is a clear limitation to how well the presented narrative taps into the reality of the classroom.

Other limitations include the extent of time I was part of the classroom. The narrative and interpretations I offered were derived from snippets of time in which I was able to observe the
classroom, as well as from the teacher and students’ conscious insights. I attempted to make claims and critiques that moved beyond the individual classroom under analysis; however, it should be noted that the classroom continued in my absence and there was much I did not see that is not reflected in my interpretation.

In addition to limits surrounding what I was able to observe and the students I was able to interview, the nature of content discussed in interviews was limited to my chosen line of questioning. Specifically, the targeted questions I asked may have limited the conversation to the responses I received and then extrapolated to broader conclusions. While I take responsibility for my role in influencing the trajectory of interviews, I believe the trustworthiness of results is enhanced through the bringing together of interview and observation data to create the larger picture. While a different line of questioning may have elicited other considerations or intentions on the part of the classroom teacher, student perspectives and observed workings of the classroom were most critical in informing conclusions.

Regarding the subjective experiences gathered through interviews, Walford (2007) described how:

The interviewee will always have subjective perceptions that will be related to their own past experiences and current conditions. At best, interviewees will only give what they are prepared to reveal about their subjective perceptions of events and opinions. These perceptions and opinions will change over time, and according to circumstance. They may be at some considerable distance from ‘reality’ as others might see it. (p. 147)

By speaking to all consenting students and the classroom teacher, as well as conducting classroom observations, I took steps to move closer to a conception of “reality” influenced by my own experiences and what I considered important for answering my research questions. I qualify
the evolving subjectivity of experience as a limitation with understanding that the perception of care has meaningful influence on student outcomes and thus matters outside intentions and “true” reality. Further, by bringing together voices and observations rather than focus on a single response, I was able to discuss what came through as a group and how that was situated in literature on care.

Conclusions

An investigation of care in one fifth grade classroom revealed factors that enabled and inhibited the perception of caring relations, as well as ways in which care operated in relation to conflict and control. Specifically, definitions of care differed among students and their teacher. Classroom structures and practices that were consistent across students served to enable or inhibit students’ perceptions of care depending on the extent to which students were willing or able to fit into a prescribed standard of behavior. To perceive care from others appeared directly connected to students’ beliefs that they were treated well within the classroom way of work and approved of its operations. Many students found the collaborative classroom environment an exciting deviation from working out of a textbook where they could connect and develop relationships with their classmates. Some students perceived this practice as opening the door to create and develop relationships with their classmates through inclusivity and coaching. It also served to deepen distinctions among students considered bad (deviated from class norms) or not intelligent who did not have access to the “welcoming” quality of collaborative work described by others. The classroom teacher and some students perceived of life lessons as a way of moving beyond academics to discussions of character in a way that exemplified holistic caring. However, with resolutions limited to self-control and more passive forms of empathy, opportunities to further explore how to ethically care for the other within and beyond the bounds of the classroom
were lost. In these ways, students’ perceptions of care were influenced by how they felt they were treated and the extent to which they had power to change those conditions.

Methods of control included both explicit structures (e.g., the 5 Ps) and practices (e.g., hand signals), as well as more pervasive, less visible systems of biopolitics (surveillance, normalization, examination) and an invisible curriculum located in life lessons and what was confirmed in students. While a restorative intention to addressing conflict was evident in interviews, in times where classroom order was at risk and more efficient forms of surveillance were insufficient (e.g., students laughing at the rule-breaking of another), order was restored through a more explicit wielding of power or institutional authority.

Rather than exist in opposition, results of the current study supported a transactional relationship between care and control consistent with that described by McLaughlin (1991) such that care and control were mutually transformed or connected. Students who perceived of classroom practices as in their best interests were likely to comply with procedures and receive the rewards associated with aligning with pre-determined values and actions. These students were perceived as “good” by others and reported positive relationships with their teacher and other good peers. Without the conferral of authority over class values and actions, other students felt burdened by class procedures and wanted change. They engaged in acts of norm-deviance that labeled them “troublemakers” through a peer policing of internalized notions of good, self-controlled behavior while students simultaneously self-policed their own emotions to maintain their good status and rewards that followed (good relationships). Although given second chances according to some students, troublemakers or otherwise non-favorites’ relationships with their teacher and classroom were strained as evidenced by “not liking how it is anymore.” If control is transformed by the presence of care (and vice versa), then to create a culture of care necessitates
an ethic of control in which dialogue and negotiation are key instruments. Results of the study call for critical examination of ethical control within an ethic of care and an opening of dialogue between class participants to establish caring relationships that are mutually negotiated. School psychologists have a professional obligation to promote the well-being of all students and are well-positioned to support educators in developing critical empowerment and challenging assumptions about care to create truly safe and supportive classroom environments for all.
REFERENCES


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Figure A1. Conceptual framework from which I entered the study.

APPENDIX B:
PARENT CONSENT FORM

Study ID: Pro00039673 Date Approved: 3/10/2019

Parental Permission for a Child to Participate in Research
Information for parents to consider before allowing your child to take part in this research study
Title: Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom
Pro # 39073

Overview: We are asking you to allow your child to take part in a research study. The following
information is being presented to help you and your child decide whether or not your child should
participate in a research study. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the
study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Emily Wingate who is a doctoral student in the school
psychology program at the University of South Florida (USF). This person is called the Principal
Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Shannon Saldo.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at Hunter’s Green Elementary School. The purpose of
the study is for the researcher to create a theory of the classroom culture of care. The researcher’s
goal is to understand the parts of the classroom that contribute to students feeling like others care
about them. Results of the study will be used to help educators better understand the ways in which
students feel care in the classroom.

Participants: Your child is being asked to take part because your child is an important member of the
classroom in which the research will take place.

Voluntary Participation: Your child’s participation is voluntary. Your child does not have to
participate and may stop their participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits
or opportunities if your child does not participate or decides to stop once he or she starts. Your
decision to allow your child to participate or not to participate will not affect your child’s student
status, course grade, recommendations, or access to future courses or training opportunities.

Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if your child will receive any benefit from their
participation, other than some extra support when the researcher is in the classroom. There is no cost
to participate. Each student who returns this permission form will receive a small gift, such as a
school supply, that is valued under $5. Your child will not receive money for their participation. This
research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks
your child faces in daily life.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your child’s
information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your child’s records must
keep them confidential.

Why are you being asked to take part?
Care is a familiar word that we use often in our day-to-day lives. However, there is less known about what it means to care in the classroom. Students tend to feel happier and more engaged in school when they feel that their teachers and classmates care about them. Thus, there is a need to understand those things that make students feel cared for and what interferes with their feelings of care.

**Study Procedures:**

Students who participate in the study will be asked to participate in 1-2 (15-20 minute) individual interviews and 1-2 (30 minute) group interviews with the researcher over the course of the spring 2019 semester. In the interviews, students will be asked to talk about their classroom. This will include talking about their teachers and classmates, what they like about their classrooms, and what they would change. It will also include describing what makes them feel cared for versus feeling as though others don’t care. All individual and group interviews will take place at a time agreed upon by the researcher and the classroom teacher (e.g., lunch, independent work, teacher-directed PE) and responses will be audio recorded so the researcher can keep them for her notes. The researcher will also conduct informal interviews (less than 5 minutes each) throughout her time in the classroom during which she will take hand-written notes. Additionally, the researcher will spend time observing the classroom to better understand how the classroom works. Students’ identities will be kept confidential in both interviews and observations. The researcher will ask students to select fake names that the researcher will use to protect their identities. The goal of the research is to describe relationships in the classroom, not to share your child’s answers alone. Your child’s responses will be combined with other students’ responses to contribute to this understanding. The state, district, school, classroom, and all people will receive fake names in this study, so no responses can be traced back to your child.

**Total Number of Participants**

Your child’s teacher and approximately 20 students will take part in this study if all students in the classroom agree to participate.

**Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal**

Your child does not have to participate in this research study. Your child should only take part in this study if he or she wants to volunteer. Your child should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. Your child is free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits your child is entitled to receive if he or she stops taking part in this study. Your decision to allow your child to participate or not to participate will not affect your child’s grades.

**Benefits**

We are unsure if your child will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

**Risks or Discomfort**

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what your child faces every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.
Compensation

Your child will receive no payment for taking part in this study. He or she will receive a small reward (e.g., a small school supply) for returning this form, regardless of whether or not you agree to allow your child to participate.

Costs

It will not cost your child anything to take part in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do our best to keep your child’s records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your child’s personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your child’s study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your child’s records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your child’s rights and safety.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your child’s name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who he or she is.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Emily Wingate at (240) 449-5688. If you have questions about your child’s rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent for My Child to Participate in this Research Study

I freely give my permission to let my child take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to let my child take part in research. I have received a signed copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study

Date

Printed Name of Parent of Child Taking Part in Study
Printed Name of the **Child** Taking Part in Study

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research participant speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research participant has provided legally effective informed consent.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
APPENDIX C:
TEACHER CONSENT FORM

Study ID: Pro00039073 Date Approved: 3/10/2019

Informed Consent to Participate in Research Involving Minimal Risk
Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Title: Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom
Pro # 39073

Overview: You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this document should help you to decide if you would like to participate. The sections in this Overview provide the basic information about the study. More detailed information is provided in the remainder of the document.

Study Staff: This study is being led by Emily Wingate who is a doctoral student in the school psychology program at the University of South Florida (USF). This person is called the Principal Investigator. She is being guided in this research by Dr. Shannon Suldo. Other approved research staff may act on behalf of the Principal Investigator.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at Hunter’s Green Elementary School. The purpose of the study is for the researcher to create a theory of the classroom culture of care. Results of the study are intended to increase educators’ (e.g., teachers, student support staff, administrators) awareness of the factors that contribute to students’ perceptions of care in the classroom, in order to inform how they might go about cultivating care in classrooms at their own schools. Students who participate in the study will be asked to participate in 1-2 (15-20 minute) individual interviews and 1-2 (30 minute) formal focus groups with the researcher over the course of the spring 2019 semester. In the interviews, students will be asked to describe their classrooms, including their teachers and classmates; what they like about their classrooms and what they would change; and what makes them feel cared for versus feeling as though others don’t care. All discussions during the interviews will be audiotaped for later transcription. The researcher will conduct informal interviews (less than 5 minutes each) throughout her time in the classroom during which she will take notes. Two formal teacher interviews (30 minutes) will take place over the course of the research project. Teacher interviews will include questions surrounding a description of the classroom, how the teacher conveys care to students, and perceived barriers to conveying care.

Additionally, the researcher will conduct weekly observations in the classroom, across a variety of activities, to get a better understanding of how the classroom works.

Participants: You are being asked to take part based on administrative support for the school’s participation in the study and your role as a fifth grade teacher in the school. The researcher wants to better understand the functions of care in one fifth grade classroom.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There will be no penalties or loss of benefits or opportunities if you do not participate or decide to stop once you start. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status, employment record, employee evaluations, or advancement opportunities.
Benefits, Compensation, and Risk: We do not know if you will receive any benefit from your participation. There is no cost to participate. You will not be compensated for your participation. This research is considered minimal risk. Minimal risk means that study risks are the same as the risks you face in daily life.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your study information private and confidential. Anyone with the authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

Why are you being asked to take part?  
Care is a familiar word that we use often in our day-to-day lives. However, there is little understanding of what it means to care in the classroom and the different factors that influence students’ perceptions of care in this context. Considering students tend to feel happier and more engaged in school when they feel that their teachers and classmates care about them, there is a need to understand exactly what this looks like in the classroom, including those things that make students feel cared for and what interferes with their perceptions of care.

Study Procedures:
During the study, students and teachers will participate in interviews and observations. All standard classroom activities will take place as scheduled. On days in which the researcher is on site, students and teachers will be part of classroom observations and may be asked to respond to questions regarding the dynamic of the classroom. Some days, students and teachers will meet with the researcher for more formal interviews (1-2 per student, 2 per teacher) and focus groups (1-2 with students) during which they will be asked questions about their definition of care, how it is conveyed in the classroom, and what enables and inhibits this interpretation of care. Structured interviews will be recorded and transcribed and take place during pre-approved times that least restrict students’ learning. Study visits will take place over the course of approximately 50 hours during the spring 2019 semester, with visits taking place approximately once per week.

At each visit, you will be asked to:
- Allow the researcher to observe the classroom.
- Participate in approximately two interviews.
- Collaborate with the researcher regarding appropriate times to meet with students individually and in groups.
- Allow for audio-recording of structured interviews – the contents of which will be destroyed five years after the conclusion of the study.
- Respond to informal questions throughout the course of the researcher’s time in the classroom, responses to which will be recorded as written notes and included as data.

Total Number of Participants
You and approximately 20 of your students will take part in this study if all students agree to participate.
Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal
You do not have to participate in this research study. You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your job status.

Benefits
We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

Risks or Discomfort
This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation
You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Costs
It will not cost you anything to take part in the study.

Privacy and Confidentiality
We will do our best to keep your records private and confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Certain people may need to see your study records. These individuals include:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator and other research staff.
- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.
- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).
- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, and staff in USF Research Integrity and Compliance.

Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. Students will be reminded to respect the privacy of their fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.
You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints.
If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Emily Wingate at (240) 449-5688. If you have questions about your rights, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the USF IRB at (813) 974-5638 or contact by email at RSCH-IRB@usf.edu.

Consent to Take Part in Research

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

Signature of Person Taking Part in Study

Date

Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent and Research Authorization

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I confirm that this research participant speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in their primary language. This research participant has provided legally effective informed consent.

Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent
APPENDIX D:

STUDENT ASSENT SCRIPT

Dear Student:

My name is Emily Wingate and I am a graduate student at the University of South Florida. I’ll be doing a research study in your classroom called “Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom” (Pro#: 39073) and want to know if you are interested in being a part of the study. The goal of the study is to learn more about your relationships with your teacher and other students in your classroom, what makes you feel cared for in the classroom, and what things stand in the way of you feeling cared for. This is important because students who feel like they have people in their classrooms that care about them tend to feel happier and more engaged while they’re at school. It’s also important because your voice matters and should be heard. You are the expert on what makes you feel like others care about you and what makes you feel like people don’t care. I am interested in how your class works and the meaning you make from your experiences. I think that I could learn that best from you. To do that, I will need to talk with you and watch how things go in your classroom. You are being asked to participate in this study because your classroom was chosen for the study and you are an important member of the classroom. Your parent/caregiver has already said it is okay for you to take part in the study, but you also get to choose.

To participate in this study, you will be asked to do one or two one-on-one interviews with me over the next few months, as well as one or two group interviews. These interviews will be recorded and won’t last any longer than the length of one lunch period. I might also ask you questions here and there while I’m in your classroom. I’ll ask you these questions to get a better idea of how things work here and what you think about how things work. If you’re comfortable with it, I may even have some of you interview each other. Everything you tell me will remain private. You will help me come up with a fake name for yourself that I can use for my research so that no one is able to trace your responses back to you. If you decide to be a part of the research study, you still have the right to change your mind later. No one will think badly of you if you decide to stop.
APPENDIX E:
SAMPLE STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe your classroom to someone who knows nothing about it?  
   (Opportunities to draw: Draw what comes to mind when you think of your classroom)
2. Please describe your teacher(s).
3. Please describe your classmates.
4. What is the best thing about your classroom?
5. What is one thing you would change about your classroom?
6. What does the word “care” mean to you?
7. What kinds of things does your teacher do or say that make you feel like he/she cares about you?  
   a. What about X makes you feel cared for?
8. What kinds of things do your classmates do or say that make you feel like they care about you?  
   a. What about X makes you feel cared for?
9. Tell me about a specific time when you felt like your teacher cared about you.
10. Tell me about a specific time when you felt like another student in your class cared about you.
11. Tell me about a specific time when you felt like your teacher did not care about you.  
    a. Do you still feel that your teacher doesn’t care? Why/why not?
12. Tell me about a specific time when you felt like a student/students in your class did not care about you.  
    a. Do you still feel that they don’t care? Why/why not?
13. How does your relationship with your teacher impact the way you feel inside and outside of the classroom?
14. How do your relationships with your classmates impact the way you feel inside and outside of the classroom?
15. Tell me about the rules in your classroom?  
   a. How do you know those are the rules?  
   b. Who came up with the rules?  
   c. What do you think of the rules?  
   d. What happens when you follow the rules?  
   e. What happens if a rule is broken?  
   f. What do you think about X consequence?  
   g. Are there times when people receive X consequence without breaking a rule?  
      i. What happens in those situations?
16. Are all the students in your class treated the same?
   a. If not – What’s different?
   b. Are the rules the same for all students?
      i. If not – What’s different?
   c. Are the consequences the same for all students?
      i. If not – What’s different?
17. Have you ever gotten into an argument, disagreed, or felt unhappy with a student in your class?
   a. What was the argument/conflict about?
   b. Are you still in an argument/conflict?
   c. What changed?
18. Have you ever gotten into an argument, disagreed, or felt unhappy with your teacher?
   a. What was the argument/conflict about?
   b. Are you still in an argument/conflict?
   c. What changed?
19. Do you feel like you can be yourself in your class?
   a. What makes you feel that way?
APPENDIX F:

SAMPLE TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe your classroom to someone who knows nothing about it?
2. How would you describe your teaching style?
3. You mentioned that promoting and maintaining a strong classroom culture is something of great importance to you. Can you tell me more about that?
4. What does the word care mean to you?
5. What is your belief on the role of care in the classroom? In other words, is there a place for a focus on care in the classroom, and if so, in what ways?
6. In what ways do you try and communicate to students that you care?
7. Is it ever difficult to show care as a teacher?
   a. In what ways?
8. What is your style for addressing behavior in the classroom?
   a. *Probes:* What are the rules in your classroom; how were those developed; how are they enforced?
   b. How do you navigate student-student conflict in the classroom?
   c. How do you navigate teacher-student conflict in the classroom?
      i. *Probe:* Do you have a procedure for responding to conflict?
      ii. To what extent are your responses to conflict in the classroom based on your teaching style and to what extent are there outside forces that impact your responses?
9. Are there any barriers that you feel stand in your way of conducting your classroom in the way you would want?
   a. Tell me about those.
APPENDIX G:
SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

1. What helps you learn best in your classroom?
2. How much time do you spend with the other people in your class?
3. How would you describe your relationships with your teacher(s)?
   a. How do your relationships with your teacher(s) affect how you learn?
   b. How do your relationships with your teacher(s) affect how you feel?
4. How would you describe your relationships with other students in your class?
   a. How do your relationships with your classmates affect how you learn?
   b. How do your relationships with your classmates affect how you feel?
5. How do you show your teacher(s) that you care about them?
6. How do you know that your teacher(s) cares about you?
7. When are times when you’ve questioned whether your teacher(s) cares about you?
8. How do you show your classmates that you care about them?
9. How do you know that your classmates care about you?
10. When are times when you’ve questioned whether your classmates care about you?
11. When you get upset with your teacher, what do you usually do about it?
12. When you get upset with another student in your class, what do you usually do about it?
    a. How does your teacher get involved when you’re upset with another student?
13. I saw X in your classroom. Tell me more about how you felt when X occurred.
## APPENDIX H:
CONCEPTUALLY-CLUSTERED MATRIX

Table A1

*Comparison of Interview Responses: Factors Influencing Care*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant: Teacher</th>
<th>Care Defined Philosophy: Showing that you value others</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Classmates Classroom structures: Peer feedback (e.g., “what did this scholar do that you’re proud of”; shout-out wall; spy reports)</th>
<th>Control School mandates/decisions: Time allocated to other things (e.g., field trips) and interruptions (e.g., teacher coaching) influence functioning of classroom</th>
<th>Conflict Work refusal: Maintain calm, give choices (relocate, break), check for understanding, determine triggers/needs, parent contact to understand outside factors</th>
<th>Enabler (+)/Inhibitor (-) + Teacher philosophy and classroom structures enable student-student interactions +/- Role of administration - Focus on test scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rashell Schmidt</td>
<td>Bring learning to life, develop good citizens (life lessons), create collaborative learning environment, set high expectations Feedback: Verbal and written; positive Interpersonal: Being real, adding humor, spending time during lunch, messages/gifts</td>
<td>Philosophy: Classroom structures: School structures:</td>
<td>Classroom structures</td>
<td>School structures: Classroom structures</td>
<td>Work refusal: Maintain calm, give choices (relocate, break), check for understanding, determine triggers/needs, parent contact to understand outside factors</td>
<td>Teacher-student: Class discussion – either teacher or students own up to mistake</td>
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### Table A1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant:</th>
<th>Care Defined</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Classmates</th>
<th>Control</th>
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<th>Enabler (+)/Inhibitor (-)</th>
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<td>Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>during testing/holidays</td>
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<td>interview); negative influence of accountability movement (final interview)</td>
<td>Student-student: Express empathy, attempt mediation/build student competency in responding, separation</td>
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<td>Outside</td>
<td>messages/best practices: Praise for desired behavior, class norms (5 Ps: polite, prepared, positive, productive, proud)</td>
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<td>Philosophy:</td>
<td>High support/high control (restorative)</td>
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<td>Classroom</td>
<td>systems: Tickets paired with labeled praise for class raffles, proximity control, brain breaks, private conferences for students that need to be redirected</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>Chicken McNugget</td>
<td>Standing up for someone who’s been threatened or whose feelings have been hurt</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Generous (items, chances) <strong>Behaviors</strong>: Gives us things (e.g., mints) <strong>Emotional</strong>: Gives advice/support (e.g., imagine the audience is your family/classmates) to reduce stress</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Some nice, some neutral, some distractive and not very helpful; some friendly, some not so much; some sassy <strong>Classroom systems</strong>: Peer coaching to assist others</td>
<td>Classroom <strong>systems</strong>: Hand signals for permission; class raffle <strong>Teacher traits</strong>: Crazy Schmidt when need to re-establish control; if could change one thing, would change seating arrangements so friendly people could overpower and “turn” distractible people, preventing emergence of Crazy Schmidt <strong>Treatment</strong>: Rules are the same for everyone; stricter for those that don’t pay attention as much</td>
<td>- Feeling overlooked based on perception has it under control (because I’m that...kind of person) + Bringing learning to life philosophy keeps classroom exciting; easy to get over feeling overlooked + Peer coaching - Other students’ behavior</td>
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| Walter DuCastle | To feel empathy for somebody; treat others equally to show you actually do care; asking if someone is okay; helping others | **Traits:** Fun, nice philosophy: Works a lot to get us educated in a fun manner  
**Behavior:** Gives us things (bunnies because some bunny believes in you); goes out of way to facilitate fun activities and make learning enjoyable  
**Perception by group:** Some people think mean, but only because not good students | **Bond:** Nice to have at least one close friend that’s a familiar face  
**Behavior:** Asking if I’m alright and being a friend  
**Distinction:** Not all classmates care because not all classmates are friends; don’t want to be friends with some because of how they act | **Teacher traits:** Crazy Schmidt when need to re-establish control; even when mean, she’s nice; if could change one thing, would have students recognize what they’re doing to get on teacher’s bad side | **Teacher:** No conflict  
**Classmates:** Some disagreements, no arguments  
**Distinction:** Treatment by teacher and students differs by individual student’s behaviors | + Not learning out of textbook; fun activities and partner work  
- Other students’ behavior |
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| Bob T. Builder | To show compassion for someone; if you feel cared for, you probably feel important, admired, or protected | **Traits:** Generous **Behaviors:** Gives prizes, brings treats  
**Relation:** Recognizes me as a good scholar, person, or role model; recognizes and helps when others are upset  
**Perception by group:** Some students don’t have this relationship; feelings toward teacher differ | **Traits:** Some really nice; some pretending to be cool, laughing when teacher’s talking, fighting; some half that, half nice; some sensitive, quiet  
**Behavior:** Comfort, praise and applause | **Classroom systems:** Norms, expectations, 5 Ps; warnings, privacy folders to block distractions, move away within flexible seating; not always effective hence drama  
**Behaviors:** Sometimes teacher punishes group for actions of few (no outside time) | **Drama:** Student-student; teacher-student; students bring out Crazy Schmidt and ruin class  
**Discipline:** Desire for increase in discipline/strictness for bad students | - Drama  
- Lack of acceptance among students  
+ Teacher conveying a positive perception (belief that student is a good person) through smiling, recording, telling student she’s proud  
+ Classroom feedback structure (students and teacher give feedback about what they like about students’ work) |
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<tr>
<td>Brandan Joseph</td>
<td>Caring for my education; caring that I do better and that I’m succeeding in life; prevent me from doing something bad</td>
<td><strong>Philosophy:</strong> Brings learning to life; brings everything to a life lesson we can learn from</td>
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<td><strong>Traits:</strong> Funny <strong>Behaviors:</strong> Helps me grow – (reaches out, warns about grades, asks about needs rather than leaving in dust) <strong>Role of administration:</strong> Principal cares for my education and wants a teacher that will fit right for me</td>
<td><strong>Bond:</strong> Knowing previous classmates that will be there for me are in class is comforting</td>
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<td><strong>Behavior:</strong> Stood up for me in face of bullying so know I can trust them</td>
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<td><strong>Bad influence:</strong> Hang out with most classmates; others are bad influence and don’t care/want me to succeed</td>
<td><strong>Student-student:</strong> Clashing <strong>Response:</strong> Class conversation</td>
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<td>+ Bringing learning to life and incorporating life lessons makes learning fun and broadens the range of what learning can be</td>
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<td>+ Having familiar faces is comforting</td>
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<td>- Put downs</td>
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<td>Melody</td>
<td>Everyone treated the same; feeling like have a connection; engaging directly with students as opposed to with whole class, particularly when upset</td>
<td>Traits: Sweet and sour (the nicest then will set people off)</td>
<td>Traits/type: Favorite, trouble-makers, quiet Reactions: Judgmental</td>
<td>Standard: Race to behave in manner consistent with model student</td>
<td>Response: Teacher goes off on class; group punishments (takes away recess, silent lunch)</td>
<td>- Responses/treatment contingent upon group/connection + Having friends in classroom</td>
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<td>Austen Griezman</td>
<td>Thinking of someone in a positive way; helping up when hurt</td>
<td>Traits: Fun, can be strict Behaviors: Helps with things (e.g., fund $2 extra for shirt)</td>
<td>Traits: Nice, talkative, smart, fun, athletic, into things Behaviors: Lack of exclusion, welcome classmates into groups</td>
<td>Classroom system: 5 Ps; when behavior guided by Ps, more likely to maintain friendships</td>
<td>Distinction: Teacher seems more likely to get more frustrated with some students compared to others Response: Remember your Ps; other students may not want to work with you if can’t engage in respectful partnership; try to work through disagreements</td>
<td>+ Fun activities + Opportunities to serve as role model to kindergarten buddies + Inclusivity - Lack of time prevents going outside</td>
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<td>Jaquelin</td>
<td>Cheering people up or helping them out when down or hurt; helping and learning from others</td>
<td><strong>Behaviors:</strong> Says good morning and goodbye in happy/exciting way</td>
<td><strong>Traits:</strong> Some not that good, (trouble-makers), some energetic, some sleepy</td>
<td><strong>Classroom systems:</strong> Table jobs (leader, encourager, assistant)</td>
<td><strong>Drama:</strong> Student-student Response (unfocused): Shift in table assignments Response (trouble-makers): Lunch detention Response (drama): Take students out of room to discuss and calm; call in principal if needed</td>
<td>+ Science projects with partners create opportunities to interact with less familiar classmates and opens door for relationships - Drama - Troublemakers’ behavior - Testing environment with no opportunities for questions + Always something happening (class activities, interactions between students) + Adjusting emotions and behavior in the classroom leads to desired treatment</td>
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<td>Jacquees Gilbert Waterson</td>
<td>Supportive; collegiality where may not be best friends, but still help each other out</td>
<td>** Traits:** Fun <strong>Behaviors:</strong> Gave gift; noticing (greeting, acknowledging good work) <strong>Perception by group:</strong> Under-appreciated by classmates who get in trouble or who are upset by recess being taken</td>
<td><strong>Traits:</strong> Fun, exciting, sometimes stupid, not aware of surroundings <strong>Behaviors:</strong> Initiate conversation with him; don’t try to harm him</td>
<td><strong>Typical rules:</strong> Raise your hand, don’t talk while teacher is teaching, stay on-task <strong>Opinion:</strong> Rules are fine as long as not ignored</td>
<td><strong>Response:</strong> Get in trouble when don’t follow rule – threaten or make parent phone call <strong>Opinion:</strong> ‘Extra’ but ultimately more effective, if not desirable; don’t want to get in trouble, but don’t care if others do</td>
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| Mr. Unknown | Most trusted, best friends; watching out for each other, not leaving behind  | **Traits**: Nice, funny, show integrity  
**Behaviors**: Gives second chances | **Traits**: Nice, funny, show integrity  
**Behaviors**: Don’t leave people out; check in when feeling left out; ask if ok | Classroom systems: Treats for following 5 Ps; school bucks or raffle ticket for ‘being good’ (following directions, making voice heard) | Response (left out): Class-wide conversations about working together as a classroom family/not leaving people behind  
**Response (broken rule)**: Second chance; proximity control (moving students away from those making ‘wrong choice’)  
**Really drastic**: Principal involvement (detention, suspension) | + Not getting in trouble for wrong answers; teacher helps so can improve  
- Gossip- everyone could make fun of you  
- Unfair treatment by classmates toward students that are different (e.g., make noises, cry, physical appearance) |
| Baxley     | Two part: Care about what you’re doing and want you to succeed +  
Allow breaks/unproductive time | **Traits**: Peppy, excited, over the top  
**Behaviors**: Uses advanced words | **Preferred**: Some students feel preferred in extent to which they’re recognized  
**Classroom systems**: Rules and structures (table jobs, assigned areas for items, hand signals for permission, 5 Ps, vocabulary walls) remove autonomy | Classroom systems: Treats for following 5 Ps, directed at individual’s behavior | Response: Class-wide address to scholars to practice 5 Ps, directed at individual’s behavior | - Over the top in appearance; classroom systems that remove autonomy (sense of responsibility/trust); high word choice; constant work without break |
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<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Understanding that everyone makes mistakes, providing comfort and letting others know that everything will be okay, even if they did something wrong</td>
<td><strong>Traits:</strong> Nice; can be sarcastic; serious during reading, math, science but makes it fun during unstructured times &lt;br&gt;<strong>Behaviors:</strong> Decorates; knows when fake reading; gets mad when students talk but gets over it &lt;br&gt;<strong>Messages:</strong> Reminds students that everyone is human</td>
<td><strong>Friends:</strong> Students that are friends can be relied on for help when needed</td>
<td><strong>Classroom systems:</strong> Have to use hand signals, go to carpet for reading &lt;br&gt;<strong>Expectations:</strong> Be nice and respectful; if someone is feeling down, always bring them back up</td>
<td><strong>Understanding:</strong> Attempts to gather different students’ points of view &lt;br&gt;<strong>Drama:</strong> One student instigates drama, perpetuated by teacher involvement &lt;br&gt;<strong>Response (individual):</strong> One-on-one conversation &lt;br&gt;<strong>Response (class-wide):</strong> Statement about being disappointed, class apology, consequence (e.g., silent lunch) without follow-through &lt;br&gt;<strong>Response (deviating from expectations):</strong> Big lecture, gets over it</td>
<td>+ Gathering students’ points of view &lt;br&gt;- Classroom systems like hand signals are childish and students are often ignored due to assumption they will take advantage (stay in bathroom too long) &lt;br&gt;- Perceived infiltration in all classroom affairs (e.g., little things that go ‘wrong,’ student drama, free spaces like recess) &lt;br&gt;- Being called out for poor performance in front of class</td>
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<td>Bob A.</td>
<td>When people notice what you do well and are willing to sacrifice (e.g., money) for you</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Nice; not strict, but strict in way that uses high vocabulary even when mad <strong>Behaviors</strong>: Gives us treats; when people are following expectations, gives privileges (e.g., go outside, treat) <strong>Emotions</strong>: Gets mad when people press her buttons (e.g., talking over, not paying attention)</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Some really want to follow directions, some don’t really care <strong>Behaviors</strong>: Those that don’t really care slack off, don’t listen or do homework; show care by sacrificing time to help others with work once completed an assignment (when could be doing something else)</td>
<td><strong>Slacking</strong>: Class-wide statement that there are students in jeopardy of failing <strong>Expectations</strong>: Not rules, but expectation that students listen and follow directions <strong>Classroom systems</strong>: 5 Ps; praise for those who are following directions</td>
<td>+ Characteristics of people in class (e.g., funny, serious) - Having to comply with classroom structures (e.g., when reading, have to follow text with pencil) that are non-preferred (make things confusing) to avoid getting in trouble</td>
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| PJ      | To be treated with respect (e.g., helping people with work; offering to be partners with those that don’t typically have one) | Traits: Unique, fun, serious  
Behaviors: Created class structures (raffles, kindergarten buddies), games every once in a while; but barely allows recess | Traits: good (nice)  
Behavior: Some of them misbehave | Rules: No talking/screaming in line; productive groups only; stay focused  
Classroom systems: Raffle tickets and school bucks for those that follow rules | Student-student: Bothers by others’ lack of focus  
Response (broken rule): Get in trouble (e.g., don’t get to go to recess, stay at recess, go to kindergarten buddies) or let it slide a few times | + Opportunity to serve as kindergarten buddy  
- Students being unproductive and causing class to miss recess |
| Ironman | To support someone, not be a bystander | Traits: Helpful, optimistic  
Relation: A mentor to me  
Behaviors: Teaches and checks on me/helps lift me up  
Philosophy: Creates fun projects; brings science to life; puts in time for us  
Messages: Wants us to be really good and able to succeed | Traits: Helpful, positive  
Behaviors: Help each other up like a family/look out for each other; have fun together | Classroom systems: 5 Ps; tickets for students who are being good (focusing and doing work, being positive) | Response: T puts up 5 Ps to prevent bad times | + Projects, raffles  
+ Staying positive  
+ Feeling seen/checked on |
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<tr>
<td>Jimmy</td>
<td>Doing something to benefit others (e.g., stick up for them) other than distract them</td>
<td>Traits: Nice, strict in a good way that gets you into shape/prepared for next grade.</td>
<td>Traits: Nice, calm, not easily aggravated. Dynamic: Drama that people easily get over.</td>
<td>Rules: Don’t distract people, talk while teacher is talking, talk when assigned a task, get out of seat without using a signal; addressed every other day because people break them. Classroom systems: Sometimes get incentives (i.e., get stuff for being good in class).</td>
<td>Response (drama): Teacher takes time out of learning to get mad at students because they’re not doing right thing. Response (not being good): Get sat out of event. Levels: Tell students to stop engaging in behavior (e.g., talking/disturbing people), give two more chances, move back to seats (i.e., remove flexible seating), bring in AP (i.e., remove students).</td>
<td>+ Surrounded by nice people. + Everyone is appreciated, regardless of differences. - Distractions are the number one thing that gets people off task.</td>
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<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Behaviors: Gets us things for tests and holidays</td>
<td>Distinction: Adores certain people</td>
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<td>Student-student: Drama/spreading rumors</td>
<td>+ Flexible seating</td>
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<td>Student-student resolution: Damage repaired over time with participation in collaborative class structures (e.g., groups together, book club)</td>
<td>- Perceived teacher preference for certain people that are consistently called out for being good and appear protected from negative consequences</td>
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<td>Class-wide response: Small group used to lose recess, now whole class</td>
<td>+ / - Social media enables further development of classroom relationships and creates opportunities for rumors/conflict</td>
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<td>Repair: Attempts to move past conflict and show positive attention not received when perceived as disingenuous</td>
<td>- Lack of free time to talk with peers</td>
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<td>Control</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Care: Enablers (+)/Inhibitors (-)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nexus</td>
<td>Being nice to others</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Very nice; can be a little strict when we don’t follow directions <strong>Behaviors</strong>: Verbally affirms that people in the classroom care</td>
<td><strong>Traits</strong>: Some can be mean and don’t know why <strong>Behaviors</strong>: Exclude (sad); check on (happy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>+ Bring learning to life - Feeling excluded + Feeling checked on</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I:

IRB APPROVAL

March 11, 2019

Emily Wingate
Educational and Psychological Studies
Tampa, FL 33614

RE: Expedited Approval for Initial Review
IRB#: Pro00039073
Title: Care in Context: Constructing a Theory of Care in One Fifth Grade Classroom

Study Approval Period: 3/10/2019

Dear Ms. Wingate:

On 3/10/2019, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and APPROVED the above application and all documents contained within, including those outlined below. Please note this study is approved under the 2018 version of 45 CFR 46 and you will be asked to confirm ongoing research annually in place of a full Continuing Review. Amendments and Reportable Events must still be submitted per USF HRPP policy.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
Study Protocol_Version 1_1-28-2019.docx

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
SB Adult Minimal Risk_Version 1_2-8-2019.docx.pdf
SB Parental Permission_Version 1_2-8-2019.docx.pdf
Child Verbal Assent_Version 1_2-7-2019.docx

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent documents are valid until the consent document is amended and approved. Please note, the Child Verbal Assent is not a stamped form.

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that: (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve
only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Research Involving Children as Subjects: 45 CFR 46.404: Research not involving greater than minimal risk to children is presented.

Requirements for Assent and/or Permission by Parents or Guardians: 45 CFR 46.408 Permission of one parent is sufficient.

Assent is required of all children.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB via an Amendment for review and approval. Additionally, all unanticipated problems must be reported to the USF IRB within five (5) business days.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subjects research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Melissa Sloan, PhD, Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board