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'I Intend Not to Roll My Eyes When I Don't like My Partner': Fourth-Graders' Intentions to Care

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**"I intend not to roll my eyes when I don't like my partner":
Practicing Care Ethics in Fourth Grade**

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"I intend not to roll my eyes when I don't like my partner":
Practicing Care Ethics in Fourth Grade

Abstract: This self-study describes my yearlong investigation to create caring community in my fourth-grade classroom. In listening to my students' stories, I discovered that they took uncaring experiences as a taken-for-granted aspect of schooling. Caring for each other mattered to them; with open-ended experiences of dialogue over intention-setting, they took the initiative to learn to relate with each other. I learned that in a context of collective commitment to caring with opportunities for dialogue over their experiences, that my students could conceive of their own justifications and methods for caring for each other across differences such as ability, culture, language, and race. This study shows the possibilities and the need to address caring in school.

Keywords: care ethics; relational ethics; moral education, social emotional learning

Introduction: A Critical Incident

Ramona started fourth grade aware that everyone in the entire class except her was invited to a birthday party at a big park right by our school. When I mentioned this to the birthday girl's father, I was taken aback by his reply, delivered within earshot of his daughter and another friend from my class: "That girl is the most annoying kid I've ever met!" Ramona had attended a string of schools and her mom said she'd never made friends. She'd missed lots of school to undergo a series of surgeries to manage a birth defect that left her with a drool and scars across one side of her face. When she'd get approach others, sometimes she would make loud noises. Self-conscious about her appearance, when new people came to our door she hid under the desk. She would explain, "I can't smile." Her peers avoided and teased her.

My students had witnessed Ramona's exclusion and it had brought to the fore the perennial challenge to cultivate caring relationships in school. I started each year with classroom community building, and this year I wondered how to proceed. Organizing structures like our all-school rule, "include each other," seemed superficial and impossible in light of Ramona's exclusion. Having taught elementary school for a decade, I was convinced that relationships were all the more important in the current competitive and individualistic climate and needed to be a primary focus; further, as Noddings (2012) put it, they are "underneath everything else" (p.

772). To aim to create community for Ramona and caring relationships in our classroom, I decided to start with students' experiences through the lenses of an ethic of care (Noddings, 1988, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2012). I asked the question for research: What can I learn from my efforts to teach my fourth graders to care across differences?

Social and Emotional Learning

While I ended up focusing on the philosophical approach of care ethics, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) was the prominent approach recommended to me to cultivate relationships and community in my classroom. SEL's articulated relational and emotional dimensions are illuminating and have received considerable attention. They encompass the five inter-related categories described briefly here (see Casel): (1) self-management, (2) self-awareness, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making. *Self-management* and *self-awareness* relate to the capacities to recognize and mediate one's emotions, capture qualities related to long-term goal-seeking – like perseverance and resilience – and involve recognizing our own biases and the tensions between how we feel, think, and act. *Social awareness* is the ability to experience empathy and to recognize cultural wealth and strengths, and demands perspective-taking and reflective listening. *Relationship skills* involve building relationships across differences through communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. *Responsible decision-making* requires an understanding of the ethical dimensions of one's choices and how those choices impact others' well-being.

While these laudable dimensions of social and emotional life intersect with what it would mean for Ramona and my students to experience caring in their classroom, as a long-time teacher, I found the pre-designed programs with their assessments, specified performance measures, and individual aptitudes top-heavy for this situation. Aspects of their assessments and pre-designed lessons seemed reflective of our Neoliberal orientation toward individualism and competitiveness. In the literature, I found that SEL programs have been specifically critiqued for being insufficient to address authentic interpersonal conflicts and in particular, the intersections of racial identity (Simmons, 2019) and dis/ability (Cipriano et al, 2020), and as meritocratic practices that would sort and compare students' SEL skills (Williamson, 2019) within an underlying market focus (Belfield et al, 2015). I chose to put the heavy teacher's guides aside and to start with open-ended questions, such as: "What is your ideal classroom environment?" Nolan's (2015) comparison of care ethics to SEL captured my choice: "(Care ethics is) a student-

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driven practice predicated on a humanist model rather than a data-driven practice predicated on a productivity model" (p. 24).

Care Ethics

Philosopher of education, Nel Noddings, posited *care* as a fundamental human need; thus, being in caring relationship would motivate us to learn to relate (Noddings, 2002). Care ethics developed against the backdrop of traditional moral education grounded in justice-based norms abstracted from context and laid out in developmental stages (Gilligan 1982). Instead of duties, care ethics focuses on experiences in enduring, reciprocal, and responsive relationships (Gilligan, 1982). In a competitive and individualistic society, care ethics' interdependence and intersubjectivity goes against the grain. Care ethics calls for a moral ecology; as Noddings (2006) puts it: "(H)ow good I can be depends at least in part on how you treat me. Possibly no critical lesson is more crucial to moral life and happiness than this one" (p. 118). The one-caring experiences engrossment in another's needs and moves to act on their behalf. Nonformulaic and particular, ethical caring recognizes the power of the cared-for to interpret the one-caring's actions as merely patronizing or authentically caring.

Rather than teaching specific pre-determined content and skills, care ethics focuses on open-ended relational experiences through which we learn to care: modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation. We 'model' care, craft opportunities to 'practice' caring, engage in 'dialogue' where the interlocutors are more important than their arguments, and we can discern an underlying best possible motive for even our least seemingly social actions, Buber's notion of 'confirmation.' Noddings (2005) describes confirmation: "Here is this significant and percipient other who sees through the smallness or meanness of my present behavior a self that is better and a real possibility" (p. 25).

Critical Care Ethics

Initial conceptions of care were critiqued for their colorblindness (Roberts, 2010). Ethical caring is determined in relationship and empirical research has shown that intersections of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, linguistic background, dis/ability and each person's humanity in a given situation factor into how we care (Valenzuela, 1999; Roberts, 2010; Rolón-Dow, 2005). Power and how it plays out across differences must be recognized in order to care (AUTHOR, XXXX; Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006). Valenzuela researched relationships from a care

ethics perspective in a predominantly Latino secondary school, and she drew the distinction between 'aesthetic caring,' which limits what's worthy of caring-for to fetishize the institution of schooling thereby objectifying students, and 'authentic caring,' which requires engrossment in students' lives toward a view of the moral grounded in culture and community. In studies and theoretical reflections on caring in an African-American context, culturally relevant and critical care required political clarity - recognizing the necessarily political context in which we relate (Roberts, 2010), a focus on classroom climate as family (Howard, 2001), and a core dimension of a social justice agenda (Gay, 2019; Nieto, 2005).

Care Ethics in k-12 Classrooms

Pedagogies focused on caring have been found to be critical from a moral perspective and related to student self-efficacy, appreciation for content, retention, teacher evaluation, motivation, moral development (see for example, Battistich et al, 1997; Lewis et al, 2012) and in rare quantitative studies, positive student learning outcomes (Battistich et al, 1997; Muller et al, 1999) particularly for at risk students (Muller, 2001). In their review of the research, Velasquez et al (2013) found that care ethics amplified sociocultural perspectives undergirding current understandings of teaching and learning, such as motivation, dialogue, reflection, collaborative learning, and teacher presence.

Although the large majority of the research addresses secondary and higher education, and specifically teacher education, care ethics has been explored in the k-12 context. Across phenomenological studies, teachers perceived care as student-centered, culturally responsive, dialogical, and asset-based (see for example, Bondy & Hambacher, 2016; Haskell-McBee, 2007; Velasquez et al, 2013; Quigley & Hall, 2016; Zhu & Peng, 2019). Teachers said that they cared by sharing their own counter-stories of persisting to develop relationships with students (Zhu & Peng, 2020; AUTHOR, XXXX). Students described caring teachers as those who know them well (Alder, 2002), held high expectations for each student (Jansen & Bartell, 2013), and provided chances to succeed (Garza, 2009); however, students' interpretations differed with their positionality (Hayes et al, 1994).

Studies also address the integration of caring within specific disciplines in k-12 practice. In classroom environments, care ethics departs from rule-based discipline to focus on teaching students in trusting relationships and community (Watson et al, 2019; AUTHOR, XXXX; AUTHORS, XXXX). Recent studies in language learning contexts have found that caring

demanded teachers uphold translanguaging stances (Dávila & Linares, 2020) and respond to students' anxieties when learning a second language (Gkonou & Miller, 2019). In math, Hackenberg (2010) found that teachers perceived as caring decentered their own mathematical thinking and mirrored both students' excitement and discouragement as they faced math problems.

Studies have found care ethics to be challenging to understand and enact (Goldstein & Lake, 2000; AUTHOR, XXXX; James, 2012; Watson et al, 2019; Jones & Lake, 2020). In a study of teacher candidates' perceptions of caring, despite their awareness that their lessons would be analyzed by researchers, they perceived themselves to enact caring more than they actually did, in particular with students they perceived to be low achievers (Jones & Lake, 2020). In a yearlong narrative inquiry, James (2012) found that teachers who claimed to know students well actually held fixed conceptions of caring across contexts. Watson et al (2019) found that teachers struggled to enact relationship-based classroom management, which would require coming to know and trust students' innate desire to relate and teaching them to do so. Sociologist Luttrell (2013) surmised that the challenges to understand care ethics are related to our Neoliberal context and individualistic socialization; in a rare study of children's perspectives, she found that in contrast to adults, children readily understood care ethics. The children in her study photographed images of their conceptions of care, documenting caring as collective, taking place in communities rather than individual and private, and learning to care was a collective responsibility of upmost importance.

This study is relevant given the dearth of research on caring with younger children's perceptions. Self-study afforded me the opportunity to elevate the voices of my young students as I explored my attempts to facilitate experiences to cultivate caring relationships among them.

Methodology

In this self-study over the course of one school year year, I sought to learn from my endeavors to cultivate caring in one fourth grade classroom. Self-study has been shown to support teachers' capacity to work for social change, social justice, and equity (Gebhard, 2002; LaBoskey & Richert, 2015). In particular, the approach, relational teacher education (RTE), although conceptualized for higher education, was helpful here to me as a teacher approaching learning from self-study with a focus on relationship. RTE focuses on growth and learning as relational, and self-study relationships as characterized by vulnerability and non-judgmental receptivity

(Kitchen, 2005a, 2005b). A relational teacher (1) understands their own personal practical knowledge (2) to improve their practice in the context of (3) an understanding of the landscape of student learning, (4) respecting and empathizing with students, (4) conveying that respect and empathy to students, and (6) helping the students address a problem in a state of (7) receptivity to growth in relationship.

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a small, diverse, urban, K-8th grade elementary school 5% were African American, 20% Hispanic or Latino, 50% Asian, 15% White/Caucasian, 8% Filipino, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2% Pacific Islander. As a teacher in the school, I had relative freedom to make curricular choices, such as choosing not to engaged in an SEL program and instead to conduct self-study from the stance of care ethics. We referred to our "school family," practiced mindfulness during morning meeting, and engaged in whole school projects related to the arts; this was a school in which Ramona's exclusion stood out.

Data Collection

In approaching data collection, I drew on LaBoskey's (2004) characteristics of self-study as self-initiated, self-focused, improvement-aimed, interactive, drawing on multiple qualitative methods, and demonstrating validity through trustworthiness. Data collection was iterative and included:

(1) Recorded and transcribed recordings of pre and post recess and morning meetings

(2) Students' writing and drawings: self-portraits, journals, writer's workshop stories, and essays: When my students' work involved writing, I encouraged students to draw if they chose. Drawing as self-study data has been shown to elicit ineffable meanings in relationships with children, their perspectives and lived experiences (LaBoskey, 2004; Luthuli, Phewa, & Pithouse-Morgan, 2020).

(3) Dialogue game conversations (described in detail in a prior study; see AUTHORS, XXXX)

(4) Monthly anonymous surveys of all students (See Appendix A for protocol)

(5) Parent conferences (observation notes) and surveys (See Appendix B)

(6) Teacher's journal (observation notes and daily after-school 5 minute reflections): I kept 4 small notebooks for my own observations so I could jot down noticings and snippets of dialogue.

This project was limited to studying what I did with my class so they might experience caring, so they could learn to befriend Ramona as she learned to befriend them. Of course, much more transpired than I could capture. At my school, the teachers were aware of Ramona's story and our lead teacher, my mentor and a critical friend for this study, would practice roleplays over social communications. While these experiences were foundational to Ramona's development and capacity to creating relationships, my own teaching responsibilities prevented me from capturing these processes in my observations and this study focused on the whole-class work I did with my students in my classroom setting.

My data collection methods began with recording morning meeting experiences at the beginning-of-the-year as we co-constructed a classroom 'constitution,' an alternative to the all-school rules. At our first meeting, I said, "We get to spend the year together here. What do you want your classroom to be like for you?" I charted everyone's responses. Throughout the week we added to our list. I asked open-ended questions, such as: "What's one thing that would make you want to come to school again tomorrow?" Students shared their ideas; for example, "school should be fun"; "I would be liked," and, "People would ask me to play." In the second week, I began our meeting with the question, "since we are the only ones here, could we be willing to do something to make this list happen? In other words, if we want to be liked, who is here to like us!?" Students came up with a big list of actions that would operationalize their wishes, we categorized and synthesized them, and then voted on a "class constitution." Our "agreements" were such that if we could practice them Ramona would have gone to the party: "be a friend," "listen to each other," "have fun," and "include each other." Rachel said, "I'm not sure these are really doable." Like Rachel, I, too, was concerned that the constitution would just solidify the gap between our agreements and the party that started the year.

I thought about how the beginning-of-the-school-year set the tone; it was a "new year"; across cultures, people mark a new year with rituals and customs. Setting "intentions" was a tradition that persists in western folklore despite the fact that crowds in the gym thin in February. "Intention" seemed fluid and thus more authentic and relevant than a "goal." Intentions could be a structure to afford my students space to remember their own agency. I focused on teaching one

constitutional agreement weekly; for example, for "be kind," we would start with asking, "What is being kind?" We'd also guess each other's agreements with charades, and act out examples. Then I asked students to come up with their own "intention" to practice an action that they could take related to any of the agreements; an early intention was "I intend to try to get to know everyone in the school." Within the first month, I anonymously surveyed my students to see if they would choose to continue to do the intentions, and they did; I describe this in the findings below.

I invited students to share their intentions in morning meeting and to reflect on them before and after recess and other activities and recorded and transcribed these discussions. I modeled this with my own intentions based on what I learned about my students' needs, wrote these on our daily schedule, and sought students' feedback. Listening was a frequent theme in mine because it was core to model caring, an authentic challenge for me, and students could weigh in about my fidelity or lack thereof: "Even when I'm busy and you can see that my papers are messy, I try to remember why I'm busy. It should be for you, so listening to you is most important: I'll pause and listen to you:"

The data represented what I could capture related to our focus on our intentions during morning meeting discussions, my observations jotted in my teacher journal (daily and during parent/teacher conferences), and students' work and surveys.

Analysis

Analytic phases took place monthly. I examined the data sets and conducted inductive interpretive coding to identify emergent themes, highlighting phrases, sentences, and longer excerpts. I employed a priori interpretive categories within care ethics: caring, modeling, practice, dialogue, and confirmation and I focused on emerging themes (Merriam, 1998). I engaged a teacher at my school, the teacher educator, Dr. X, in a teacher-action research group named [insert name], in member-checking initial interpretations of themes.

Findings

Ramona did make a friend; and she was included in games on the playground. The process was not always smooth and I couldn't pinpoint a turning point, but the first direct reference in the data was a conversation from one morning meeting two months into the school

year. The students described their initial prejudice dissolving through shared experiences. They explained that friendship necessitates learning to accept differences. All names are pseudonyms.

> Priya: When Ramona first got here since she was different, everybody thought that she must be really mean or something like that. Now I know her and she's one of my best friends.
>
> Teacher: Why do you think we do things like that?
>
> Rachel: Because we are prejudiced. They way someone looks.
>
> Teacher: How did you learn to play with her the way you do now?
>
> Lola: I think talking really helped. I can feel like I don't like someone and then I hear them talk and say they feel left out and they are sad and I begin to think I really should include them, but it takes time.
>
> Freya: A thing we learned through talking was how imaginative she is… Ramona. I'm sorry about how it was at first.

Overall, in the findings, as Lola said here, the students often described listening in dialogue as key to developing relationships across differences. Also, students said that the group's participation made caring possible; their descriptions reflected the interconnectedness of a moral ecology. I learned that at first students frequently stifled their experiences of a lack of caring at school. However, my students taught me that with dialogue and the pedagogy of intentions, students' aims in their relationships, they took the agency to cultivate a caring environment.

"Telling kids to be nice will never be enough:" A Taken-for-Granted Lack of Caring

Before analyzing my students' initial intentions, I assumed I knew more than I did about their pressing relationship concerns. The teachers at my school took students' relationship issues seriously, embraced a whole-school rule, "include each other," and practiced restorative justice. Any student could procure a teacher's willing ear. Still, the intentions revealed I needed to do more to prevent my students experiencing a lack of care. The intentions afforded them a venue that revealed the meanness, microaggressions, and teasing that my fourth graders deemed too small to ask me, their teacher, to help them address or as part of a taken-for-granted dearth of caring. Comments like, "they will insult me less," embedded in Mia's intention revealed meanness that she faced at school: "I intend not to insult people. People will get more friendly to me. They will insult me less." Further, students' options for responding seemed narrow. As Tim put it in his journal, "Telling kids to be nice will never be enough." Rachel could feel mad "for a

very long time" if someone treated her cruelly: "I intend not to decide to be mad at someone for the rest of the day or week or a very long time if they are mean or impatient with me."

"It's just what School is": A Taken-for-Granted Valuing of Individualism & Intellect over Affect

My students' intentions revealed to me how deeply inured values related to neoliberalism, such as individualism and competitiveness, permeated their experiences. At my school, despite how we valued thinking over regurgitation, diverse aptitudes through Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and growth mindset – self-criticism based on yardsticks of speed and right answers still loomed in my students' imaginations. Rachel journaled repeatedly about competition in various contexts. Her descriptions revealed the competitive subtext I hadn't interrupted in her classroom: "it (math) can seem nice" but it "hurt." I asked her to share about this in our morning meeting and the following is an excerpt from our conversation:

> Rachel: I will have a bad time in a conversation or in math when it can seem nice.
>
> Teacher: Is there some more you want to add there, Rachel?
>
> Rachel: Well… someone just says, "I got the answer" to a math problem you're doing. Like someone is happy about a math problem that is easy for them and it's hard for me. That has happened to me. I would say if you really want to burst out and say how easy it is it can hurt, so think about it before you say it. This is not something I would ever tell the teacher. So I'll intend not to shout from the rooftops like that.
>
> Samantha: No, I wouldn't tell the teacher… no. It's just what school is like.
>
> Teacher: What do you mean that school is like this?
>
> Sam: It's harder for me sometimes and so I just would rather not try it at all in those times.
>
> Teacher: Hm. So it's hard at times. We each struggle at times in math, we also get excited when we solve something, and it seems like we compare ourselves. What can we do?

As the discussion continued, we took up self-talk as a potential way to interrupt the impact of comparing ourselves in school – and how we could use intentions to practice replacing our self-sabotaging voices with encouragement. I would remind mathematicians that loud excitement can be discouraging when you are still working on a math problem. On a deeper level, I shared that my intentions would include renewed efforts into disrupting the connection between speed and smarts.

In another example of a deeply inured conception of school values, Raja used a metaphor of competition, to "get ahead," in his intention related to our agreement to, "Have fun": "I am aiming at really focusing in class. It will be less fun, but I might get ahead in life." I responded in his journal, "Raja, is it possible to have fun and focus, too? Are there times where I can encourage both? You know, I actually try with writer's workshop pairs; if that would be fun and focused, let me know. What are your other ideas?"

While my students' intentions showed their own personalities and propensities, I think that underlying their articulations of their ideas was the perceived incommensurability of our aims in school to cultivate intelligence and character. Reflecting a false dichotomy of affect and intellect, intellect wins in school. By focusing on caring at school, we were valuing affect and students' intentions sometimes referenced this as a tension. Eliot, who I'd never noticed bragging, wrote:

> I intend not to brag about anything. Not even something like making a shot from 50 ft. away. I think I brag waaay too much. I think choosing this will make me more approachable. If I do this I might lose a rank in society. That is a small price for more and better friends.

His thoughtful reflection indicates how carefully he interacted with others at school. It was interesting how he distinguished between excelling versus losing rank to be friendly. Students voiced the challenge to balance things like waiting for each other versus winning, etc., in their intentions. Their insights in their intentions reminded me of the movie, "Little Miss Sunshine," when heretofore silent character Dwane finally speaks to compare life to a beauty contest. The intentions offered a medium for students to grapple with and sometimes even interrupt the at-times inevitable experience of school-as-contest.

"It's really good with the intentions": A Pedagogy for Care

A month into the school year, via survey feedback, my students chose to continue the "intentions" over other ubiquitous (and often extrinsically motivating) activities that they'd experienced before (such as classroom economies) as a pedagogy to "make our constitution more than decoration," as one put it. When asked why, students noted their future plans: "I have more I need to focus on" or "I want to do one on…" Intentions focus on students' agency; as a pedagogy, the experience was lightly scaffolded (only the prompt, 'I intend to…'), low stakes (I didn't specify ways to meet writing expectations), could be private (between myself and the

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student), and was driven by students' own purposes. While they did choose intentions as an approach, I think that they knew that I would insist they do something to create community so it was intentions over other tasks rather than for their own sake. Also, my own enthusiasm likely colored my students' engagement; thus, self-study practices were key to seek disconfirming evidence – through weekly anonymous questionnaires, I was able to ask whether or not to persist with these practices and to explicitly ask students to articulate the downsides and outliers. For the most part, the students chose the intentions seemingly enthusiastically; however, each survey showed a few nonplused: "I'm willing to do the intentions over the other things." When asked why, one wrote, "I'd do the classroom economy because I love to compete, but in a way it's not going to help with why we are doing the intentions, like with friendliness. I just like to try to be the best."

The majority of the students chose the intentions and many asked me for more time to discuss them. Many students made requests like the following noted in my observation journal during one recess: 'I have something more to share about my intention and it can't wait till the next morning meeting.' I had initially allotted half of our thirty-minute morning meeting. To make more time, I invited students to integrate their intentions-setting into daily journal, essay, and story writing. Explicitly optional, many took me up on this and by the end-of-the-year I had reams of data about the intentions; I did not face as many typical I-have-nothing-to-write comments during journal time; this project, which could be perceived as a distraction from academics, ended up inspiring lots of writing.

As a pedagogy toward care, I learned that the statements of students' plans afforded me a window into their perceptions about their relational struggles, as all the things that aren't "big enough deal to tell a teacher." The intentions and the dialogue over them seemed to carve out agency and possibility for students in relationships. In a mid-school-year survey, for example, Lola wrote:

> The intentions and the talking helps because if somebody has been excluding me but it's
> not a big enough deal to tell a teacher about it then when we have the group conversation
> I'll say it really hurts someone's feelings and I'll give the example in the abstract – or
> like as my own intention – and then you're saying it without blaming them or making a
> big deal and over time they realize. And then most of the time they change, but it's hard.

By mid-year, I noticed less allusions to underlying meanness, exclusion, or microaggressions, and my students seemed to express optimism regarding their relationships – despite it being

"hard." In the mid-school-year parent surveys, they remarked that they noticed their children articulating solutions for relational issues at home. One wrote, "Rio and Rewa no longer argue the way they used to because Rewa's got everyone focused on better ways to relate. She is convinced that we can each plan to be kinder with each other and she reminds us. Please keep doing these intentions."

"Not a big enough deal to tell a teacher": Self Study and Intentions as a Medium to Understand How to Care

Students' struggles to relate with care were idiosyncratic and self-study practices afforded me ways to understand and support them in their relationships. As Noddings (1988) put it: "(M)oral education cannot be formulated into a course of study or set of principles to be learned. Rather, each student must be guided toward an ethical life – or, we might say, an ethical ideal – that is relationally constructed" (p. 222). The following is a brief window into Priya's story. Her mother said she worried Priya "never had any fun" and that she had internalized the gender roles from her Indian culture. At school, I noticed she took on responsibility to corral and quiet her peers. Her intentions seemed self-abdicating, always focusing on "compromising:"

> This week I'll compromise. For example, if I don't want to play what everyone else is playing, half the time I could play what I want and the other half of lunch I could play what everyone else wants to play. No one will feel upset, and there won't be a big drama.

I wrote to her in her journal, "This involves more than your cooperation. There are always dramas and they can't possibly all be any one person's fault, right?" And she wrote back to me, "But isn't it my fault if I can't stop it?"

> I observed on the playground. Priya was quiet and when she spoke it was only to check on friends, and she asked if they were okay. I asked her friends who tended to choose or lead in their games and no one named Priya. She didn't seem to be playing. I wrote her and asked, "What do you think might require compromises on the playground?" She responded that she had an idea for an elaborate game with dragons and unicorns; her classmates figured in the background stories. Several months into the year at this point, Ramona was included in games but often in notably minor roles, such as someone else's kitten. I noticed that in Priya's game-plan, Ramona would: "be a unicorn and use her really good imagining to think of a fantastic way we'd escape from the dragon…."

I suggested Priya come up with an intention related to sharing her game: I said this could be related to several of their agreements, such as to "have fun" and "be a good friend." A few days after she shared in morning meeting, in her journal she wrote, "We are actually playing my game and everyone knew what they wanted to be!" Arguments ensued to distribute roles and I was brought in to mediate. A new game takes time and cooperation and extended recess time at first helped; given Priya's reticence I'm not sure she would have faced causing a "compromise" or voiced her ideas. Yet her game became a medium for play among her friends. Throughout the rest of the year, Priya's game plotline featured in her own, Ramona's, and others' journals - with drawings of imaginary creatures as metaphors for specific classmates' qualities. Her mom said she was having fun. In the classroom fray and bustle, without the attention of self-study to students' and parents' perceptions and experiences, I am not sure I would have noticed that Priya was not playing.

"If people didn't listen to each other, everyone in the world would be fighting": Listeningß in Dialogue over Intentions

From students' end-of-the-school-year surveys and discussions, I learned that they valued their time for dialogue over their intentions and their relationships and thus I continued to carve out time for this. When asked, "How would you describe the intentions project to the incoming fourth graders?", Raja said, "You'll learn that it's important to listen to people and to tell your friends what's going on or they will never know. If people didn't listen to each other, everyone in the world would be fighting." The students referred to their own reasons for listening – as opposed to a classroom rule that might only imply compliance. While the classroom rules might have supported students at the beginning of the year, I found that they had endless ideas for intentions that could cultivate caring. Sam shared the benefits of talking to learn to cooperate: "If you don't cooperate with each other by talking, you are just always going to have somebody doing something to you. And you couldn't tell them how you felt about it." The students pointed out how listening can lead to understanding how to be a friend. In an anonymous survey to the same question another student wrote:

> If you listen to people when they say what's happening - how you've affected them - then you can change your actions but if you looked off and stared at the ground then you'll miss knowing how to be a friend and they are going to think this is pointless and I might as well not tell her how I feel and then they aren't going to want to be your friend.

Toward the end-of-the-school-year, I no longer needed to ask students to share in the morning meeting; they were in the habit of initiating sharing. This contrasted with the several times I'd needed to encourage them in the beginning-of-the-year or Priya's case. Early on, the students would frequently write about their uncaring experiences as "too-small-to-tell-a-teacher," and as something you had to take-for-granted as a necessary evil at school. Most importantly, this implies that the students no longer decided their trouble was unimportant or that nothing could improve. This interest in dialogue over relationships reflects the underlying claim foundational to care ethics – we are inclined to learn to be in relationship and to care (Watson et al, 2019; Noddings, 2005).

"I learned that friends are not me": Student Agency in Relationships across Differences

In end-of-the-school-year surveys and morning meetings, students shared their own reasons for and ways to include one another, and their understandings of friendships. Here I learned the power and potential of giving students the opportunity to derive their own understandings. They described valuing differences in friendship and their descriptions exude sense of empowerment in their relationships; in this case, Samantha said even with a "fight… you can get your friendship stronger":

> And at school I've learned that you can't say I only want a friend who is a certain way. And if someone was exactly like me it might even be kind of boring. If someone is different you can probably learn more with them. And if you have a fight in a friendship it's not a bad thing because you can get your friendship stronger because you'll know more about the person.

Like many students, Rishi described his awareness of his actions and while this study obviously cannot purport causal connections, he attributed his understanding to our intentions, "The intentions make me think about my actions more because the littlest thing that I might think is nothing can hurt others." One of the "littlest" things was teasing each other; while I did not track teasing over time, students said their intentions helped them recognize or remember others' feelings. In particular, during morning meeting after we discussed it, Rishi referenced recalling the feelings that the phrase, 'that's stupid,' could incite.

> It's really good with the intentions. I hadn't just thought of teasing anyone when they make a mistake. I used to do that a lot. When somebody says something silly I wouldn't

> say, 'that's stupid.' When we do the intentions I think about how it might hurt someone's
> feelings.

Rather than me, as the teacher, saying, "don't tease," which might work in front of me, here Rishi has been convinced by learning about his impact on others through dialogue. Along with figuring out how terrible teasing is, most importantly, the students often described the power they realized to name their feelings and share their experiences to solve problems. For example, Lola said: "I wanted to tell about how I used to always have friends who I'd get mad at and now I don't get mad without telling them how I feel and working it out." Lola was still embroiled in dramas, but she seemed to write and draw about them from a stance of increased agency.

Along with power in their relationships, the students also described managing their expectations of friends, which opened up possibilities for confirming each other and friendship across differences. In his description of friendship, Eliot loosened his "strict guideline for people"; Eliot was interested in speed and now he could make friends fast:

> I learned to be much more accepting to others. I've gotten many more friends in a shorter
> time than I ever had before. School is better for me in general now. It's helped me to
> understand that people I can't expect everything from a person to qualify as a friend. It
> used to be that I had a strict guideline for people that I want to be my friends and now I
> see everybody as a friend in one way or another.

In another characteristic example, Lilly also addressed learning to change her expectations. An aspect of this shift for many of the students relates to the need to practice confirmation, assuming the best intentions, when a friend doesn't do what one "wants to expect":

> I learned that friends are not me, they are different from me, and that I learned not to
> expect everything what I want to expect in my friends. That they are different than me
> and sometimes what I want to expect I can't cause they have things they can do and
> things they can't even when they are trying their best.

These reflections on our yearlong exploration express dimensions of what it might mean to care and aspects of social and emotional learning, such as social awareness and management of emotions. The students described their propensity to pause and remember their peers' perspectives; to consider the potential impact of their actions; to express their needs in an arguments; and, to manage their expectations of friends within a perspective spacious enough to recognize we value our friends because they aren't us.

"If I do make people happy the happiness can spread": Moral Ecology

I assumed that the group's importance would be related to a tendency to emulate others or groupthink; however, I learned from my students that it was easier for them to treat each other well if their peers were trying, too. This was not merely quid-pro-quo; Instead, my students seemed to express the idea, when I feel cared-for, I feel good enough to care.

> Rewa: If just one person is doing something kind, they may not get far, but if every kid in the class is doing something for someone else in the way that works for that other person, everyone will be happier and that's when you can do it, too, because it takes really figuring all that out.

In another example, Wanda wrote in her journal that she was aware that she could be "mean," but that if she was happy it would "spread":

> Sometimes when I feel mad at the world I frown at everyone and I say mean things. This can cause other people to be mad too. My intention this week is to try and make someone smile or be happy so that they can feel better enough to listen to each other and be friendly then it will keep on going and make the class happy and then it's way easier not be mean. If I do make people happy the happiness can spread maybe bit-by-bit we can make everyone happy.

While Wanda and Rewa were friends and they seemed to have dramatic altercations throughout the whole year, they said they feel better about their friendship. Rewa said, "My friends and I get along better in and out of school. I think when people are nice to other people it rubs off on everyone else around you and inspires them to be kind to others."

In general, the students said that it was easier for them to "do good deeds" for one another and to get along with one another when they were happy and that happiness was contagious. Noddings (2003) argues the value of happiness as an educational aim: "Happy children, growing in their understanding of what happiness is, will seize their educational opportunities with delight, and they will contribute to the happiness of others" (p. 261). While the students and I were of course not always happy enough to be caring, the simple student-driven intentions reminded us that we can act in ways that make happiness and care a bit more possible.

Implications

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Through this yearlong exploration, I discovered that my fourth-grade students were inured to uncaring at school, such as "small" cruelties like someone rolling one's eyes when partnered. In a larger context of competitive and individualistic values, perhaps it might seem utopian to try to cultivate caring. Yet the larger purposes of schooling have always been in part to educate the feelings and to cultivate the "better angels of our nature." And I found that my students did care about relationships and kept many of their troubles to themselves. It took starting with my students' ideas for creating a caring classroom, through the year-long integration of the - intentions' related to our 'constitutional agreements,' for my students to derive their own justifications and methods for caring for each other across differences of ability, culture, and language. The students ended up including Ramona, which I questioned at the beginning of the year. They articulated deep learnings about relationships, such as the need to moderate their expectations of others. They found ways to be friends across differences. These learnings reflect social and emotional learning. As one put it to me on the playground, "You know the books about the unlikely friendships between the animals? Well, that's like me and Ramona because right now I'm a red dragon and she's a purple unicorn!" My students described how learning to relate was more possible within a context of collective commitment to caring – a moral ecology – through the intentions they crafted related to their classroom agreements and dialogue over their experiences practicing caring.

Most studies about care ethics in practice, especially in early childhood, illuminate perceptions of teacher caring, and self-perceptions have been found to be overly optimistic (Jones & Lake, 2020). This study affords a window through the lenses of care ethics into pedagogical practices from the perspectives of students' experiences as well as myself as the teacher. Priya's story illuminates how much I as a teacher learned by listening to students; I believe that I would not have had as much time and space to listen if I was following a pacing guide. Ramona's story reveals the possibility and accessibility of inclusion. Since the time of this study, I've shifted to the role of teaching teachers and while I have conducted other studies related to care ethics, I frequently refer to this one in my teaching for its grounding in practice. Perhaps even more important in the current context of competition and individualism, the students' initiative to learn to relate with each other suggests the promise of cultivating caring communities.

This study shows how self-study methods afforded my students and I agency; students constructed their own reasons and methods to care; they surprised me with how much they

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learned from dialogue over this open-ended process of intention-setting. As the teacher, I was able to draw on my own practical knowledge, listen to my students, and move to respond in a way that I thought best in the moment to meet their needs (Kitchen, 2005a, 2005b). Self-study afforded me data to show why I made pedagogical decisions and this, in turn, afforded me the power to choose.

At the end-of-the-school-year, Ramona drew a new self-portrait; she said, "I figured out a way to show that I can smile." She wrote this caption for it:

> In fourth grade, I think I've realized that I used to think that caring about people and being nice to people and having more friends and making friends and all that just came naturally and that some people were just better at it than others. But I learned it is something you really have to learn and it's something that really makes a difference if you can learn it.

Figure 1: Ramona's end-of-the-year Smile

Appendix A: Interview/Survey Protocol

- What do you recommend we do to help us get along? Why? Along these lines, rate each activity from 1 – 5 and suggest other ideas for making your classroom the way you want it to be. (The activities represent activities the students said they experienced prior, such as the classroom economy and others: school rules, table points, classroom economy, intentions, morning meeting, books about friendship.)
- How are things going with your constitutional agreements?
- What would school be like without your intentions?
- Describe what third graders need to know about fourth grade.
- Describe what you think I should focus on in morning meetings for next year's fourth graders.

Appendix B: Survey Protocol

- How is your child doing in school? Do they want to come to school? Why or why not?
- If your child mentioned the "intentions project," please share your impressions.

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