Against the Carceral Logics of Schools: A Critical Ethnographic Study of Restorative Justice and Politicized Caring in a Black School

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Restorative justice has the potential to re-frame schools as caring and politically conscious educational spaces. As it moves to the mainstream, however, it risks being co-opted by the carceral logics that undergird the schooling of Black students in the United States. This ethnographic analysis interrogates how restorative justice provides opportunity to politicize care within the boys mentoring group at one predominantly Black high school. Specifically, the adults used the restorative circle to (1) express verbal and physical affection and (2) evoke and acknowledge shared emotions, while also (3) recognizing the positionalities and lived experiences of the Black boys in the circle and (4) co-constructing socioemotional and cognitive-behavioral tools to navigate the structures that surround them. We argue that this politicized caring is crucial to ensuring restorative practices optimize their anti-carceral potential.

Keywords: *Black education, equity, ethnography, politicized care, race, restorative justice, social justice*

I'm excited because I get the chance to see the face of every boy that I love, and I know you made it through the weekend. That's exciting to me. That's exciting to me. That I can look in the room and see faces that I love, that I've learned to trust my feelings with. 'Cause I don't do that. . . . and that's big because we are people. We have those [feelings]. We have those [feelings]. We hurt. We hurt. We hurt. . . . That's big for us to do that—is to trust our emotions and feelings with you. If we wouldn't do that, then it wouldn't be no relationship. So that tells you guys we desire a relationship with you. Today we're going to have a very powerful circle.

-(Mr. Lewis,[1] founder and lead mentor of Young Men's Mentoring Group, at the beginning of a restorative justice talking circle, Spring 2017)

Black boys are the center of the Young Men's Mentoring Group (YMMG), a school-based mentoring group run by a Mr. Lewis at "Local High School" (LHS), a predominantly Black high school in the Midwest. Mr. Lewis, a middle aged, Black religious leader in the community and founder of YMMG, organized a restorative justice talking circle for his students in Spring 2017, following the shooting death of their classmate. Thirty people attended, mostly YMMG students but also some school educators and invited community members. Mr. Lewis used a restorative justice circle to demonstrate to these young Black men that he cares, countering not only normative expectations around overt expressions of

care (*"I can look in the room and see faces that I love, that I've learned to trust my feelings with"*) but also recognizing the structural forces working on and through them as young Black men (*"I know you made it through the weekend."*). This "politicized caring"—or the strategic attention to the needs or desires of those who are traditionally marginalized—became a noticeable feature of the restorative justice circle that day.

Radical educators and students have used restorative justice (RJ) to engage in the messy process of reimagining schools as caring and liberatory communities (Knight & Wadhwa, 2014). RJ is a philosophical orientation and social movement towards community-building and wrong-doing (Zehr, 2015). In recent years, over 60% of schools in the US report using some RJ practice (Wang et al., 2022). With its increase in popularity, however, school-based RJ has come under fire for being coopted by the carceral logics of schools and for lacking the philosophical basis to provide structural critique and reform to schools (Lustick, 2022; O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020; Reimer, 2019). In other words, rather than being used as a radical re-imagining of schooling, RJ is being used as part of the larger landscape of punishment in schools. As school-based RJ continues to grow as a school practice, it risks becoming coopted by the carceral logics—or, the mindsets and ideologies that

prioritize controlling the bodies and behaviors of Black youth in American schools. How to prevent this cooptation from occurring is an area lacking empirical exploration. We argue that "politicized caring," when made a main characteristic of RJ practices, preserves their radical anti-carceral potential.

At the time of the YMMG circle, LHS was experiencing a cultural crisis, with feelings of fragmentation and mistrust permeating the administrative, staff, and student levels (Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2016, 2024). To move away from the heavy emphasis on controlling students' bodies and behaviors, stakeholders at LHS had newly piloted RJ practices throughout various school spaces, including within YMMG during regularly scheduled seminar times. Combining an analysis of a specific YMMG restorative circle with the broader ethnographic analysis of LHS, we interrogate how "care" was politicized in one RJ space within the school's efforts to disrupt the carceral logics of the schooling of Black boys. Specifically, our research question is: how did caring manifest and become politicized in one restorative justice circle in a predominantly Black high school? We then explore the implications of politicized caring on the anti-carceral potential of RJ practices.

Theoretical Framework: Politicized Caring

We frame this analysis through the concept of politicized caring. Noddings (2015) argues that caring must be conceptualized as a characteristic of a relationship, not an individual. If the cared-for does not feel or recognize the act of caring, then the caring does not exist. Further, the relationship must be characterized by the carer's "responsiveness" to the cared-for's desires. One cannot simply say, "I care," and therefore enact caring. It requires understanding and responsiveness to the cared-for's desires. A caring logic—inherently at odds with a carceral logics—is one that prioritizes the desires and needs of students above their bodily or behavioral control.

Caring matters for the individual to which it is directed—but it also matters for the institutions and structures surrounding that individual. There is a long tradition of scholars who conceptualize caring as a political theory and practice (e.g., Noddings, 2015; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017, 2021; Valenzuela, 2010). Scholars have documented how stakeholders have aimed their caring strategically at the "wrong subject" to disrupt larger systems of racialized oppression (Mansbach, 2012, p. 43; Valenzuela, 2010). While caring has value in and of itself, it is the focus on the "'wrong' subject" that brings ecologically disruptive power to it. In other words, while carceral communities focus on containing and controlling those seen as "wrong subject" (e.g., Black students), a politically caring community strategically focuses on the needs and desires of Black students to disrupt the status quo of power relations. By centering the needs and desires of those who are the most marginalized, communities can redistribute the social and material power in more equitable ways.

Decades of theoretical work by Black feminist scholars and others (e.g., Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1994; hooks, 2000; Walker, 1993) have shown that pedagogies of caring have political and ecological implications for Black children. In another analysis of LHS, we found that one Black female educator operationalized politicized caring in ways that protected the Black girls in her mentoring program from the social control infrastructure of the wider school (Marcucci et al., 2024). McKinney de Royston et al. (2017, 2021) have also done considerable work centering the experiences and voices of Black educators to document how they enact a pedagogy of politicized caring to "nurture and protect" Black students. They describe (2021) how "a robust rendering of politicized caring links together the twin notions of nurturing and protecting" (p. 75) and later describe four components of politicized caring—(1) political clarity, (2) communal bonds, (3) affirming potential, and (4) developmental appropriateness—that facilitate these "twin notions of nurturing and protecting" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2017).

To date, we have not seen any theoretical or empirical work exploring the role of politicized caring in school-based RJ. Winn (2021) may imply an ethos of caring in her five pedagogical stances of transformative justice education (an approach to pedagogy rooted in restorative justice), particularly when she discusses the importance of Black children's future. That said, it is not an explicit feature of her groundbreaking theoretical work on RJ. Given the concerns about the carceral co-optation of RJ (Dumas, 2016; Lustick, 2022; O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020; Romano & Almengor, 2024), we need more empirical work understanding the potential theoretical interventions into RJ to preserve it as an anti-carceral practice. First, however, this analysis requires an understanding of two primary areas of literature: (1) the carcerality of American schools, particularly for Black boys and (2) RJ in schools and the tensions that have arisen since its adoption.

Literature Review

The Carceral Logics in the Schooling of Black Boys

We use the term "carceral logics" to refer to the mindsets, beliefs, and ideologies that focus on controlling students' bodies and behaviors, particularly those who are racialized as minorities in the United States context. These carceral logics are situated as part of the larger carceral turn in the United States starting in the 1980s (Gramlich, 2021). With the Reagan administration's focus on the War on Drugs, the hyper-incarceration of Black populations increased dramatically (Alexander, 2020). Soon after, policies of punishment and exclusion in schools started proliferating, predominantly

through the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, which were defended by the same racialized discourse of safety that perpetuated the rise of hyper-incarceration of Black individuals in wider American society (Irby & Coney, 2021; Wacquant, 2014). In our scholarship, we use the term "hyper-disciplining" (Marcucci, 2020), following Wacquant's (2014) use of "hyper-incarceration" to situate schools' carceral logics within these broader systems of antiblackness and punitive ideologies.

While many students experience the carceral logics of schooling, Black students—and particularly Black boys—are disproportionately exposed (Laura, 2014). Our focus on Black students is not to exclude narratives on Indigenous, Latine, and some Asian communities' interactions with the carcerality of American schools (Gage et al., 2021; Gion et al., 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019). It is instead to provide analytical nuance and sophistication in situating modern-day notions of carcerality within antiblackness orientations (Dumas, 2016; Lofton, 2023). Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled, even when controlling for rates of misbehavior or poverty (Skiba et al., 2014), than their peers. And while Black girls have the highest disproportionate risk compared to their White female peers, Black boys are the most excluded subgroup from schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Schools that educate predominantly Black communities are also less likely to rely on restorative approaches to discipline (Payne & Welch, 2015), more likely to rely on law enforcement and police officers (Irwin et al., 2013), and more likely to use metal detectors and other forms of surveillance technologies (Gastic & Johnson, 2015). Black students in restorative schools are even less likely to feel positive outcomes than their White peers (Davison et al., 2022). Ferguson (2000), in her foundational ethnography of Black masculinity in schools, even suggests that public schools create the forms of Black masculinity—referred to by Ferguson as "Troublemakers"—that they then later punish.

The Tensions of Restorative Justice in Schools

There are alternatives to this focus on punishment and carcerality, however. RJ is a philosophical approach to justice, community-building, and wrong-doing. Some scholars have identified its roots in indigenous epistemologies, including the Māori in New Zealand (e.g., Anyon et al., 2016; González et al., 2019; Lustick, 2017), though Tauri (2014), a critical indigenous scholar, critiqued this origin story for its commodification of "indigenous life-worlds" (p. 39). RJ is often described as a contrast to typical punitive justice found in many western, colonizing cultures—that which motivates the carceral logics of schools in the United States (Zehr, 2015). Whereas punitive justice focuses on punishment to ensure compliance to institutional rules, RJ focuses on maintaining and rebuilding relationships when conflict occurs. RJ

is a broad and diverse philosophical orientation, operationalized in community settings and justice settings and now being adapted to schools (McCold, 2006).

In schools, RJ is implemented through diverse restorative practices, including the canonical restorative circle. Since their introduction to American schools in recent decades, RJ practices have been on the rise. Now, more than 60% of schools in the United States report using restorative circles (Wang et al., 2022). Clear national snapshots of what types of circles and topics are the most common in schools do not yet exist, but numerous qualitative studies describe RJ circles. Lustick (2021), for example, described a principal who chose to hold a peacemaking circle between three female students who got in a fight outside of school hours because of an Instagram post. Kulkarni and Chong (2021) followed two elementary school teachers of color and tracked how they used restorative circles to support their students of color with disabilities. They noted that one of the teachers used "reset circles" to transition after recess, school breaks, and tense moments. The teacher would use consistent prompts so that their elementary students knew what to expect from these proactive circles (see supplemental file for full explanation of restorative practices).

In recent work, Marcucci (2021) has theorized that RJ practices have the potential to be impactful in schools because they shift the normative interactional patterns found in many parts of the neoliberal school regime. These shifts in interactional patterns produce short-term social-emotional outcomes for the participants in the RJ practice, which then reverberate outward toward the larger school community. These interactional and emotional changes ideally culminate in what Winn (2018) calls a "paradigm shift." This is confirmed with recent empirical evaluations. While research is still catching up to the pace of implementation of RJ practices, randomized controlled trials and other rigorous studies have shown that RJ practices have positive impacts on student and teacher reports of school culture (Augustine et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2020).

That said, RJ has not always been able to withstand the pressures of the carceral logics permeating schools with majority Black students. Some scholars, while finding some value in a restorative framework, have also found evidence in case studies that restorative practices are used as an extension of the carceral logics of schools (Reimer, 2019) and even coexist with the so-called antithetical exclusionary discipline (Lustick, 2022). Reimer (2019) argued that, "in schools where relational objectives are of social control, RJ is utilized to strengthen that control. Where relational objectives are of social engagement, RJ is utilized to strengthen that engagement" (p. 49). Most notably, critics have argued that leaders in RJ have not properly contended with the systems of power that surround and permeate schools (O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020; Vaandering, 2010). These critiques see RJ

as focusing too extensively on pathologizing individual behaviors, rather than structural concerns like anti-Black carceral logics. There is evidence to suggest that predominately Black schools are less likely to implement restorative practices, showcasing the interaction between structural racialized forces and the implementation of RJ (Payne & Welch, 2015). For example, in their edited volume centering the voices of restorative practitioners of color, Valandra and Hoksila (2020) write in the introduction: "rather than changing systems, RJ processes are called to 'patch up' the harms that racist and colonizing structures and institutions cause routinely" (n.p.).

Given these tensions, it is imperative for us to understand how RJ can preserve its radical anti-carceral potential. In this analysis, we look to politicized caring as one potential framework. Specifically, we ask, how did caring manifest and become politicized in one restorative justice circle in a predominantly Black high school?

Methods

Study Design

The larger project was guided by critical ethnographic study design. While traditional ethnography focuses on the documentation of sociocultural features of a society, *critical* ethnographic research identifies sources of oppression and seeks to transform them (Barton, 2001). As Barton (2001) argues, "at its core critical ethnography must be about documenting the nature of oppression and the process of empowerment" (p. 907). The overarching ethnographic project, which was developed in close collaboration with district and high school leadership, focused on identifying and transforming the cultural mechanisms that facilitated the hyper-disciplining of Black students (please see Table 1 for comprehensive data included in the data corpus).

This analysis focuses on an outlier case of one RJ circle in LHS. Analysis of an outlier provides important insight. We situate this approach to data selection at the confluence of quantitative outlier analysis (Finch, 2012), qualitative case study (Yin, 2009), and negative case analysis (Morse, 2015). It is a novel method to approach a complex ethnographic data set, providing a way to chunk off data into article-sized analyses. Rather than choosing the most representative case or conducting a systematic thematic analysis to understand broad trends (see Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2024 for those analytic choices), we chose an outlier case that has the potential to enrich our theoretical understandings of a social phenomenon. As Baskarada (2014) wrote, "case studies are particularly well-suited for naturalistic generalisations that are based on experiential transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge" (p. 4). In other words, we are seeking to transform implicit community knowledge that manifested in this particular restorative circle into established theoretical canon. We contextualize this outlier case within the larger critical ethnographic dataset throughout the results section.

Study Context

LHS is a small high school (roughly 700 students at the time of the featured circle) in a small municipality in a medium-sized urban area in the Midwest. Its student body is between 85–90% Black, and the majority qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. Despite some positive student-teacher relationships (Marcucci & Elmesky, 2023), the school culture at the beginning of our project communicated a deficit view of its Black students and their families and enforced a highly punitive and carceral culture (Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2016, 2024). Importantly, LHS leaders sought to enact change in their building. Administrators, teachers, and staff began to be formally trained in restorative practices and restorative circles. Some circles were piloted in out of class spaces and led by the principal. Other RJ circles were piloted inside of two classrooms (a World History class and Latin class) and were co-led by the authors and the teacher researchers. And most relevant to this article, RJ circles began to take place as part of programs like Young Men's Mentoring Group (YMMG), with adult mentors like Mr. Lewis (please see supplemental Methods file for additional study context).

Mr. Lewis, an African American middle-aged man, was the CEO of a non-profit known as Men of Courage, as well as a religious leader in the community. At the time, Men of Courage had recently entered into an agreement with the school district to provide support and mentorship to a select group of boys. The students were either identified by school administration or invited by Mr. Lewis to enroll in YMMG, which met weekly during "seminar period" (or what many American high schools call study hall). Between 20 and 22 students attended each week. In the 2016–2017 school year, he invited Rowhea (co-first author) to co-facilitate YMMG weekly. Importantly, Mr. Lewis was one of the earliest vocal proponents of RJ in the district. After bringing in training, including requesting a RJ workshop from Olivia (co-first author), Mr. Lewis was formally trained by the International Institute of Restorative Practices, funded by the district. He began to use restorative circles, during the YMMG group meetings, approximately once per month. By the Spring 2017, Mr. Lewis was regularly using RJ practices in YMMG; one circle, captured in a 65–minute video, serves as the primary focus of the outlier analysis here.

Data & Analysis

Rowhea attended approximately 25 YMMG weekly mentoring sessions during the 2016–2017 school year and

TABLE 1

A selection of data collected as part of the critical ethnography

Source of Data	Description	Quantity of Data	Dates Collected
Administrative records on discipline	Administrative disciplinary data (stripped of identifiers) were shared with the researchers	4,000 disciplinary referrals recorded and corresponding data	2012–2013 school year; 2013–2014 school year; first half of 2014–2015 school year
Community member focus groups	As part of the initial culture study requested by then-Assistant Superintendent and then-high school vice principal, the researchers engaged in a series of community member focus groups	1 focus group with administrators (n=4); 6 focus groups with teachers and support staff (n=34); 2 focus groups with students (n=13)	Spring 2015
Images of signage around high school	Researchers and then-vice principal walked around the building and took photos of all signage posted in the hallways, offices, and other public spaces of the building	132 images	Fall 2015
Teacher-Researcher Residency	Three teachers were invited to attend workshops to be trained in and support co-analysis of the original stakeholder focus group data	4 three-hour long workshops	Summer 2016
Classroom videoing	Two of the teachers from Teacher-Researcher Residency agreed to have one of their classes videoed for their own professional development and for research purposes.	12 class periods videos; 5 student-researcher reflection meetings	Fall 2016
Classroom co-teaching	Researchers co-taught one course with one of the teachers from the Teacher-Researcher Residency. Participant observations and co-facilitation of the class occurred.	29 class meetings; two student focus groups	Spring 2017
Participatory observations of YMMG group meetings	Rowhea was invited to co-facilitate the boys' mentoring group sessions throughout the school year; some sessions were videoed	25 group meetings	2016–2017 school year
One-on-one interviews with YMMG students	Rowhea engaged in a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the YMMG students	8 interviews	2016–2017 school year
Participatory observations of girls group mentoring	Olivia was invited to co-facilitate the girls' mentoring group throughout two school years; photographs of sessions included	40 group meetings; 41 additional events related to the girls mentoring group; 57 photographs	2017–2019 school year; 2018–2019 school year
One-on-one or small group interviews with stakeholders from the girls mentoring group	Olivia engaged in non-formal or semi-structured interviews with one or a small group of girls mentoring students or co-facilitators.	13 interviews	2017–2019 school year; 2018–2019 school year
Restorative Justice Institute	A small group of students (n=6) were invited to attend workshops to learn restorative justice facilitation skills and qualitative data analysis skills; all groups meetings were videoed	3 three-hour workshops; 2 30–minute follow-up meetings; 2 1.5–hour workshop (total of 10 hours, 40 minute of video)	Spring 2018–Winter 2019
Student Wellness Advisory Group	The principal requested that we run a student advisory on wellness during remote learning (n=12).	5 50 to 80–minute meetings (over zoom)	2020–2021 school year
Community advisory board	Researchers invited to be part of an advisory board with the high school principal, organized by a collaborating non-profit. Advisory board meets quarterly each year to review school data and major events.	14 60–minute meetings	2020–2021 school year; 2021–2022 school year; 2022–2023 school year; 2023-2024 school year (up to article submission)

TABLE 2

Adult participants in Simon's circle

Pseudonym	Role at time of circle	Race	Gender
Mr. Lewis	Head facilitator of YMMG; CEO of school-based non-profit that runs YMMG	Black	man
Officer Pika	School Resource Officer at LHS	Black	woman
Mr. T	Foreign language teacher at LHS; co-facilitator of YMMG	White	man
Aimee	Facilitator of girls mentoring group run by Mr. Lewis's non-profit	White	woman
Olivia	Research team member of larger LHS ethnographic study	White	woman
Rowhea	Co-facilitator of YMMG; PI of larger LHS ethnographic study	Biracial (Black-Middle Eastern)	woman
Mr. Sanchez	Religious leader in local community	Afro-Latino	man
Dr. Samson	Assistant Principal of LHS	Black	man
MSgt. Harris	Head of JROTC at LHS	Black	man

conducted eight semi-structured and unstructured interviews with students in the group. With the full consent and assent of all students and educators in the group, Rowhea blended the role of participant observer and co-facilitator of YMMG, following Winn's (2011) embedded ethnographer model. She would occasionally plan activities for the group meetings; however, most of the time she supported the activities planned by Mr. Lewis. This was true the day of the restorative circle that is the focus of this analysis. Rowhea was not a part of the planning process nor did she facilitate this circle. Instead, she took part in it as a participant. The restorative circle came a week after the shooting death of Simon, a Black boy who had been enrolled in the high school the semester prior but who at the time attended the alternative high school in the district. Simon was shot and killed during the day, about a five-minute drive away from the high school, during a drive-by shooting.

Mr. Lewis designed a 65–minute restorative circle during YMMG's regular meeting time to help the students process Simon's death. He invited select adult participants to participate in the circle and support the YMMG students in this moment (for a full list of adult participants, please see Table 2). Notably, Mr. Lewis asked us to video the circle. Since we had videoed other portions of the YMMG in the past, students were familiar with the cameras. That said, we were particularly concerned about the ethics of videoing such a sensitive moment in this community. All the students assented/consented and were active participants in the ongoing research project, having interacted extensively and in vulnerable ways for the school year with Rowhea. All students and their parents knew of their right to withdraw their data from any aspect of the study, without impacting their engagement in the group or class. This decolonial approach to research ethics (Paris & Winn, 2013) was and continues to be the top priority in any research project for both authors. Because of the potential power to understand and expand restorative practices within the district and beyond, Mr. Lewis felt strongly that this circle should be videoed. Following his leadership, we agreed to video record this circle.

TABLE 3

One-on-one interviews of YMMG students. All students interviewed also took part in Simon's circle

Pseudonym	Grade	Race	Gender
Trayvion	10th grade	Black	boy
DeShawn	10th grade	Black	boy
Elijah	9th grade	Black	boy
Amir	10th grade	Black	boy
Jacob	9th grade	Black	boy
Jeremiah	9th grade	Black	boy
Isaac	9th grade	Black	boy
King	9th grade	Black	boy

In addition to the focal circle, this analysis explicitly draws from eight one-on-one interviews that Rowhea conducted with YMMG students in February 2017 (please see Table 3). They were recruited to minimize disruption to the community: Mr. Lewis invited certain students to speak with Rowhea one-on-one during one of the group meetings. The boys spoke with Rowhea for 15 to 30 minutes. The semi-structured protocol included questions like "How would you describe your relationship with the other boys [in YMMG]?" and "When you think back to the experiences [in YMMG] you've had so far, could you talk to me about which ones worked really well for you and why you think they worked well?" Importantly, all eight of these students who were interviewed took part in Simon's circle.

The findings in this article rely on an abductive approach to data analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). We iteratively reviewed the restorative circle and interviews with students. During the review, we memoed significant moments. From the memos, the idea of emotional vulnerability and caring inductively arose. For example, an early memo written in response to the opening quote said "We see overt expressions of love IN CONCERT [emphasis in original] with recognizing structural racism. Also connects it with emotional expressions. With emotional hurt. When thinking about the lived experience of students in

schools, where else do they hear adults talk like this?" After Olivia conducted iterative viewings of the outlier circle and corresponding student interviews, she shared the analytic memos with Rowhea. We then engaged in an interactive, iterative co-analysis of the circle videos and transcripts, including putting the inductively derived memos in conversation with established theories and concepts, particularly theoretical conceptualizations of politicized caring. This included co-analysis sessions where Olivia presented a theoretical interpretation (i.e., McKinney de Royston et al.'s four-pronged categorization of politicized caring), which was then problematized, nuanced, questioned, and otherwise interrogated by the authorship team. This abductive approach is a common pragmatic approach to qualitative coding, often used, though only occasionally named (e.g., Azano et al., 2017; Dorner et al., 2022). The abductive approach to the generation of new knowledge allows space for in-depth qualitative data to both produce its own emergent findings and speak to ongoing theoretical discussions in the literature (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; please see the methodological supplementary file for a fuller explanation of the study context, research partnership, and trustworthiness quality checks, including positionality statements).

Results

In our ethnographic analysis, we found that this restorative circle gave opportunity to not only "nurture" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021) these boys—via (1) expressing affection and (2) acknowledging shared emotion—but also to "protect" them—via (3) recognizing student positionalities and (4) co-constructing tools to engage with the world.

On a spring day in 2017, Rowhea was entering LHS for a meeting, when news of the shooting death of Simon, a sophomore who had recently transferred to the district's alternative high school, started trickling through the building. Simon, a Black boy just like the YMMG students, had been shot and killed in a drive-by shooting during the school day, just a few minutes away from the LHS building. As Rowhea walked into the main hallway, she saw students hugging and crying and felt a palpable sense of unease and grief. Later after the hallways cleared, a student walked with an adult, repeating over and over, "*I'm so scared. I'm so scared.*"

At the time of Simon's death, LHS had been working to shift towards a restorative logic and away from the historic presence of carceral logics noted in prior analyses (e.g., Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2016, 2024). YMMG was one of the first spaces in the school to engage actively with RJ. Each week that school year, Mr. Lewis, Rowhea, and the boys met during Wednesday morning seminar period for some combination of lecture, restorative circle, or activity, all focused on development of social-emotional and professional skills. At times, however, even within YMMG, restorative circles would be dominated by the adults. While students were always given opportunities to share during restorative circles, adults would at times use the circle to impart their wisdom at length, violating some of the typical expectations of democratic turn-taking of a restorative circle (Pranis, 2005).

The week after Simon's death, however, during the next YMMG meeting, Mr. Lewis held a restorative talking circle to give the students space to process their experience with Simon's death. In preparation for the circle, Mr. Lewis, along with Mr. T (a foreign language teacher and co-facilitator of YMMG), had invited Officer Pika (the school resource officer), Aimee (the head of the school's girls mentoring group), Mr. Sanchez (a religious leader from the community), Dr. Samson (one of the assistant principals), MSgt. Harris (the head of the Junior-ROTC), and Rowhea and Olivia (co-authors, collaborative research partners to LHS) to join the session. All the adults had previously been guest speakers or involved in group meetings with YMMG in some capacity.

On the day of Simon's circle, Mr. Lewis had set up the room with 30 navy plastic chairs in a large circle. As the boys and invited adults trickled in, Mr. Lewis greeted people by name and with light banter. When the passing bell rang to signal the start of the period, students and adults alike took their seats in the circle, and Mr. Lewis began the circle. As Mr. Lewis began, the tone of the room was somber. No one was smiling, and almost everyone was looking down at their laps or at Mr. Lewis. No one was having side conversations. There was a sense of seriousness and emotional weight as the circle began.

How Caring Manifested in a YMMG RJ Circle

Experiencing the circle as participants, we felt an intrinsic shift in the tonality of this circle from others that happened in YMMG and the broader community. That experiential difference caused us to revisit it as an important outlier in the data that might provide unique insights. After iterative viewings of the circle, putting it in conversation with the wider ethnographic dataset, we found that Mr. Lewis and others used this RJ circle to express care towards the students in two distinct ways: (1) expressing verbal and physical affection and (2) evoking and acknowledging shared emotions.

As he started the circle, Mr. Lewis said:

> *I'm excited because I get the chance to see the face of every boy that I love, and I know you made it through the weekend. That's exciting to me. That's exciting to me. That I can look in the room and see faces that I love, that I've learned to trust my feelings with. 'Cause I don't do that. . . . and that's big because we are people. We have those [feelings]. We have those [feelings]. We hurt. We hurt. We hurt. . . . That's big for us to do that—is to trust our emotions and*

feelings with you. If we wouldn't do that, then it wouldn't be no relationship. So that tells you guys we desire a relationship with you. Today we're going to have a very powerful circle.

He overtly expressed love to the boys (*"I get the chance to see the face of every boy that I love"*) and reaffirmed his desire to be in a community with them ("*that tells you guys we desire a relationship with you*"). He additionally pulled the group together at the level of common humanity (*"we are all people"*) and emphasized a shared emotion of pain in response to Simon's death, repeating "*we hurt*" three times, pausing purposefully between each utterance. He repeated at other moments of the circle, "*we're in a safe environment, and there's a lot of love in here.*" While Mr. Lewis had a natural practice of overt displays of care and affection for the students—which many boys confirmed in one-on-one interviews, calling him "*a second father*"—not all adults are at LHS school were naturally affectionate nor did the institution always allow time for such displays of affection. This circle protected time during the day for educators to show affection towards their students, in the emotional aftermath of Simon's death.

Not only did the circles protect time during the school day for adults to express affection toward their students, but the students themselves reported a strong community of care with each other, in part because of their joint experiences in restorative circles like these. When students were asked to reflect on YMMG, during interviews, many used descriptors indicating a close-knit set of relations among their peers and emphasized how YMMG, including the piloted restorative circles, facilitated these connections. Multiple students referred to each other as "brothers." Trayvion expressed:

Before this program, some of them boys in there, I didn't even talk to, it was just associates. Now we joined this program, I don't know, it's almost like brothers. We see each other in the hallways, we get handshakes, stuff like that. We got each other's back . . .

Jeremiah shared, *"I've known all of them, before we got in [YMMG]. It was easy for me to get more close to them, now that we're in this program."* Isaac also expressed his perspective, saying, *"I like my brothers so I treat them like family."* When Rowhea specifically asked some students about the restorative circles during YMMG, DeShawn said, "*I feel like I'm able to open, be open up more, and share my feelings.*"

Importantly, this RJ circle provided opportunity to express care through (1) verbal and physical affection, but also through (2) the evocation and acknowledgement of shared emotion. Mr. Lewis started off the circle by saying "*we hurt*" three times, referencing Simon's death. Other participants used the circle to open up about other moments of grief in their lives. For example, about halfway through the circle, Mr. Sanchez, a Latino man who was a religious leader in the community,

took the talking piece and began sharing a story about his brother. His brother had been shot during a drug deal and eventually died due to complications from a lodged bullet:

I'm trying not to be emotional. It's kinda hard for me. But the reason why I said that I really want to make an impact with you guys is because growing up I saw a lot of people get killed, make bad decisions. I'll use my brother for example [tears up and pauses.] My brother chose a life to sell drugs. And he went to Miami to pick up some drugs and they tried to cheat him out of it, so my brother got shot pretty bad . . . And you know, he still made it. He still lived after it for a while. Got a chance to get married and have a kid and stuff and—but there was one bullet that they couldn't get out. And right in the prime of his life is when that bullet decided to mo– [tears up and pauses]– to move . . . I do this [youth development work] because I want to see you [tears up and pauses] make a choice. You got people who care about you—you can make a choice. This program is not just the average program. It's a chance for you to have someone to talk to.

Although only four minutes in length, Mr. Sanchez's story evoked overt displays of emotion among those present. Some teared up. Mr. Sanchez's modeling of emotion created an opportunity for the boys to connect with adults in the school building and nurture them during this intense experience of losing a peer to gun violence. Bearing witness to each other's grief was a critical feature of this circle. During Mr. Sanchez's story, Mr. Lewis reached over and placed his hands on the shoulders of the young men on both sides of him, a sign of physical affection. Interestingly, a minute after sharing his story, Mr. Sanchez left the circle, seemingly overcome with emotion and needing to take a break from the space. One of the older YMMG boys followed him out. While we were not privy to their exact conversation, the moment of shared emotion during the restorative circle prompted follow-up caring and relationship-building, initiated by the YMMG student. Following Mr. Sanchez's story, other adults and students shared stories of grief, family, and friendship throughout the circle, prompting further alignment of emotional experiences.

How Caring Becomes Politicized in an RJ Circle

Importantly, our initial analysis of this circle revealed care in terms of expressions of verbal and physical affection, as well as the evocation and acknowledgement of shared emotions, neither of which are likely (or some may argue, even possible) in schools governed by carceral logics. The interviews with YMMG boys indicated that the care experienced in YMMG and in circles like this was counter to their typical experiences at LHS. Student data from other parts of the project revealed a pervasive and competing fixation of controlling student behavior and bodies. This pattern was first illuminated within the descriptive data analysis of 4000 discipline referrals documented in the two and a half school

years prior to the research study beginning (Fall 2012–Fall 2014). The top three categories of disciplinary infractions were all related to behavioral and bodily control issues where students were "written up" for "refusing staff requests or directions," "class disruption," and "class cutting." Early qualitative data from focus groups also confirm that students felt this level of hyper-controlling. One Black student recounted being punished for returning from the nurse's office without a pass ("*You can be in the nurse's office because you, [but] the teacher be like, 'Oh, well, you were skipping my class. I'm about to write you up'*"), while many others talk about the school's "*hall sweeps*," where teachers would systematically lock their classroom doors and any student outside of a classroom without a pass would be rounded up and given detention. While it is outside of the scope of this analysis to fully prove the carceral logics of LHS at the time, this analysis builds on others that did extensively explore the connections between antiblackness, disciplinary cultures, and the carceral logics at LHS (Elmesky & Marcucci, 2023; Marcucci & Elmesky, 2016, 2024). That said, YMMG—and this circle particularly—provided a departure from the students' typical interactions with the carceral logics in LHS as the school, institutionally, became committed to making such a shift.

While the initial analysis pointed to care in the forms of affection and shared emotionality, a secondary layer of analysis of this circle led to an understanding that care was being communicated to these boys that was more than just nurturing. The shared discourse that unfolded in the circle also communicated care with a different purpose—that of protection. The circle put forth a clear recognition of the Black boys' racial identities, collective experiences, and societal barriers, and the need for skills to successful navigate these social realities. That is, this restorative circle gave opportunity to not only "nurture" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021) these boys—via (1) expressing affection and (2) acknowledging shared emotion—by also to "protect" them—via (3) recognizing student positionalities and (4) co-constructing tools to engage with the world.

In Simon's circle, the adults' political clarity around the YMMG students' experiences as Black boys was a central, defining feature of this RJ circle. The caring that Mr. Lewis, the other adults, and even at times, the students expressed towards the YMMG community was expressed *because* of the students' positions as Black boys in an anti-Black and carceral society. In his opening statement in Simon's circle, Mr. Lewis recognized the structural forces at play in these boys' lives ("*I know you made it through the weekend*") and because of those forces, he targeted his expressions of love and care toward them. In another example towards the end of the circle, Mr. Lewis explicitly named race and gender when creating an opportunity to reflect on Simon's death:

I know some of you in this circle hurt from what happened to [Simon]. I know some of you have tried to process it and to ask the one thing that is hard and difficult: Why? Why? . . . I just want you to speak to maybe how you may feel as far as being a student at [LHS] or just being a young African American Black boy and seeing this much crime going on over and over again.

Mr. Lewis specifically situated the students' experiences as "*African American Black boy[s]*" as important. He honors their experiential knowledge as raced and gendered individuals, while simultaneously expressing attention to the boys' emotional experiences ("*I know some of you in this circle hurt*").

This circle was not the only restorative practice in YMMG to be explicitly contextualized within the positionalities of the students it served. In fact, Mr. Lewis's non-profit was founded specifically to support Black men in the community. In the same school year as Simon's circle, he planned other circles that specifically supported Black boys in the context of the carceral logics. In one, he invited police officers—Officer Pika (the school resource officer who also participated in Simon's circle) and a community police officer (a White man). In one-on-one interviews, Isaac, a YMMG student, explained that the circle with the officers gave him tools when the officer "*goes straight to aggression,*" including getting the badge number and reporting the officer. In another circle earlier in the year, two YMMG students had been suspended for drug-related infractions. Mr. Lewis planned a re-entry circle when the students returned to YMMG for the first time. Rather than allow the suspension to fracture these two students' relationships with their YMMG "*brothers*", Mr. Lewis used a restorative circle to address the harm that occurred from the suspension and to welcome both the two suspended students back into YMMG.

Recognizing students' lived experiences as Black boys is an essential but ultimately insufficient step towards disrupting the carceral logics of schools. Building upon this recognition of positionality, the restorative circle specifically gave space to co-construct toolkits to cope with the structural forces these students deal with as Black boys. For example, during the RJ circle about Simon's death, Mr. Lewis asked Aimee, the White facilitator of the girls mentoring group, to share some concluding thoughts. While she did not explicitly mention race or gender, she made connections to her own Black son and then provided advice to the boys about how to come out of high-risk situations "*alive and well*":

Everything we work on in [YMMG] . . . is about having tools, so that you can succeed in the situation that you are put in. So, if you have communication skills—those are tools. If you have conflict resolution skills—those are tools. And when you are in a high-risk, challenging situation, you can open up your toolbox and have what you need to fix the problem. Because when you get in those tense moments—those high-risk moments— . . . we can use our

communication skills, we can use our conflict resolution skills, and come out alive and well.

Her comments came a few minutes after Mr. Lewis's explicit mentioning of "*African American Black boys.*" She spoke about the "*situation[s] you are put in,*" which, given the context of Simon's death, implicitly recognized the structural forces at play that may push a Black boy into life experiences intersecting with the carceral state. Even without the explicit discourse on race and gender—something rare given the de-racialization of American discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2015)—her comments communicate political clarity and recognition of the socioemotional and cognitive behavioral tools to deal with both peer-to-peer and police interactions.

The restorative circle also gave opportunity for the boys themselves to co-construct anti-carceral toolkits. Three students in the circle, who unfortunately were not interviewed one-on-one, gave advice to their peers, after reflecting on the circumstances of Simon's death. Tyriq said, "*Watch who you hang with. You ain't gotta change all of your friends but take some of your real friends and be with them. Don't get lost in the street life.*" Another student, Jeremy, referring to the drive-by shooters who killed Simon said, "*That coulda been anyone of us in the car . . . Go with what your heart say. It ain't worth it.*" These are practical pieces of advice, given from peer to peer, given in the context of the complexity of social life structured by antiblackness and carceral logics. The advice focuses on what is in control of the students themselves: their peer relationships and who they hang out with. It communicates an ethos of protection and care by offering practical socioemotional and cognitive-behavioral tools—i.e., evaluation of peer friendships, focus on professed values, etc.

Discussion

There are three major takeaways from this analysis. First and foremost, the RJ circle featured here maintains its anti-carceral potential by enacting and politicizing care toward the students that participated in it. Second, the RJ circle protected time in an otherwise carceral school—though one attempting to transition away from carceral logics—for community members to care for each other by (a) providing opportunities to express verbal and physical affection and (b) evoking and acknowledging shared emotion. Finally, these operationalizations of care were politicized in this RJ circle because (c) it recognized students' lived experiences and positionalities as Black boys and (d) it gave space to co-construct socio-emotional and cognitive-behavioral tools to negotiate the world in those positionalities.

O'Brien and Nygreen (2020), Lustick (2022), and Romano and Almengor (2024) warn of the cooptation of RJ by mainstream, hegemonic forces, like carceral logics

and antiblackness. RJ as a model has limitations, particularly in the implementation process: it often ends up just another feature of the social control infrastructure of schools (Reimer, 2019). Because it is a dynamic and democratically constructed model, there are many opportunities for restorative practices to be diluted or coopted. This analysis provides a potential antidote to that cooptation: RJ circles, viewed as opportunities for politicized caring, can optimize their anti-carceral potential. Whereas RJ has typically been seen as a space for resolving conflict or building connections/rapport/relationships, the analysis finds that RJ circles and restorative communities, like YMMG, can be venues to engage in pedagogies for politicized caring. While some of the politicized caring is a natural by-product of Mr. Lewis's youth development, the formalized use of restorative circles allowed other adults and Mr. Lewis to protect space within the school day for the caretaking of these Black boys.

Further, this use of RJ has ecological implications for the carceral logics of the institution. When gun violence occurs, like the shooting death of Simon, in communities and near schools, particularly in predominantly Black communities, schools often respond with a "hardening": the intensification of surveillance technologies like metal detectors (Johnson & Jabbari, 2022; King & Bracy, 2019). While Mr. Lewis's circle did not directly block any hardening responsive policy of LHS (and we have no ethnographic evidence to suggest there was any official hardening as a direct response to Simon's death), Mr. Lewis's circle focused first and foremost on the "twin notions of nurturing *and* protecting" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021, p. 75) of these Black boys. While surveillance proponents (i.e., those that advocate for metal detectors, SROs, etc.) may desire the safety and protection of students, they ignore the equally important "twin notion": "nurturing." Although there are some reasonable critiques of Mr. Lewis's facilitation style, he focused on caring for his students in a politically conscious way.

Importantly, the politicization of caring happened through (a) explicit recognition of the students' positionalities and lived experiences and (b) the co-construction of socioemotional and cognitive-behavioral tools to navigate that lived experience. Davis (2003) has theorized on the "ideological work" needed to maintain the status quo, like the carceral logics of schools. This circle showed how RJ practices can "protect" (McKinney de Royston et al., 2021) the YMMG students by educating them about the racialized structures that surround them—i.e., countering that "ideological work" that creates hegemonic carceral logics. The circle also gives students agency by encouraging them to work together to co-construct tools to successfully navigate the world with these specific positionalities. In this circle, some tools that emerged included communication tools, self-assessment of peer relationships, and conflict resolution ideas.

Noddings (2015), a foundational scholar of caring in schools, suggests that context matters: even when a carer and cared-for want to engage in a caring relationship, context may prohibit it. Given the re-entrenchment of the carceral logics of schools, it is reasonable to think that opportunities to cultivate caring relationships—and politically conscious caring relationships—are becoming fewer. Our analysis—and others from this ethnographic context—shows that pedagogies of politicized caring can exist even when institutions are ambivalent towards it (Marcucci et al., 2024). Mr. Lewis and the students were RJ trailblazers within the district, which even now works in non-linear progress toward the restorative ideal. While Mr. Lewis had more freedom than a traditional academic classroom with assessment pressures, he nonetheless worked within the context of a school grappling with a racialized and punitive culture to carve out this restorative and politically caring space.

Limitations, Future Research, & Conclusions

While we include triangulating data from other parts of our ethnographic engagement in YMMG, we lack the specific participant reflections on the circle featured in this analysis. This is a limitation of the analysis as it does not allow for student perspectives supporting or discounting whether they perceived the communication of care in nurturing and protective capacities. However, the totality of the data collected across the school, and in the YMMG context, indicates the boys' recognition of a difference in experiences. Further, there is reasonable critique of critical ethnography as a research design, particularly by those who ascribe to positivist notions of scholarly inquiry (Schrag, 1992). Yet, we argue that the embedded and catalytic nature of critical ethnography maximizes research impact while still generating new knowledge, transferrable (or at least, catalytic to change in) other school communities. Because of our methodological approach, we were able to develop research questions as unique data points, like Simon's restorative circle, emerged.

This analysis, in fact, opens new pathways for future research. First, this analysis focused on a Black-run space within a Black school. Politicized caring further has a deep intellectual and practical history in Black feminist theory and action (hooks, 2000; McKinney de Royston et al., 2017) and restorative practices has roots in indigenous ways of knowing and ways of being (Hand et al., 2012). Considering that most teachers in the United States are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), this analysis raises questions such as: 1) What are the different manifestations and ethical requirements of White educators engaging with politicized caring in restorative spaces in schools? and 2) Is it helpful or distracting to label the actions of White educators in the same way as actions of Black or other educators of color? Additionally, while we predominantly focused on the actions of Black and other educators of color within the restorative community, the analysis also indicated that students also played an important role. Future research may ask: 1) How can students be cast as leaders either in RJ movements or be agents of politicized caring themselves? and 2) How can the role of students be understood within these democratic movements?

Despite the carceral logics of American schools, many educators, often Black and other educators of color, politicize their caring towards Black and other marginalized students. As a movement to reimagine schools, RJ has the potential to support this type of pedagogy of politicized caring. While at times it may be co-opted by the very anti-Black carceral logics it aims to disrupt, RJ in schools has the potential to re-imagine schools as politically conscious, caring learning communities. This article is dedicated to the memory of "Simon," a Black boy whose life was taken too soon. We owe it to him, to his peers in the LHS district, and to all Black students in schools across America to create schools that nurture and protect them.

Authors' Note

The authors contributed equally to the manuscript.

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Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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