

Children's Counter-narratives of Care: Towards Educational Justice

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The paper draws from a longitudinal ethnographic study of a group of diverse children growing up in an urban, low-income, predominantly immigrant community in the northeastern United States, who were given cameras to portray their everyday family, school and community lives. It analyses the images, narratives, activities and intimacies of their care worlds in light of neo-liberal policies of disinvestment in education and family care. The children tell and live stories that recognise and place value on caring as a relational activity and collective responsibility rather than an individual, private matter, thus challenging the logic of neo-liberal market politics. © 2013 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and National Children's Bureau.

Keywords: educational inequalities, children's care worlds, politics of care, disinvestment, visual research.

Introduction

These are the five B's – be here, be ready, be safe, be respectful, be responsible. Without them the school would be a mess. And people would be running around and could hurt themselves. It shows that we care for each other. (Riva, age 10)

Riva is a participant in my longitudinal research, *Children Framing Childhoods*, which engaged children in photography as a means to explore their evolving identities and visions of growing up in urban, low-income, predominantly immigrant communities of colour (Lico and Luttrell, 2012; Luttrell, 2010, 2012; Luttrell and others, 2011; Luttrell and others, 2012). Riva explained a photograph (Figure 1) she had taken of her school's motto, concluding, 'it shows that we care for each other'. This theme of care – in school and at home – and the value the children placed upon it, proved to be central to their representations and identities. The children's images and narratives run counter to dominant cultural storylines about care giving and care receiving which is the subject of this paper. In it, I analyse the children's 'counter-narratives', defined as 'stories people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives' (Andrews, 2004: 1).

This paper considers children's own perspectives on matters of care and love, topics we know little about from the perspective of young people themselves. When they speak of care, it does not lie in the hands of individuals, but is distributed across social units, including family and friendship networks, schools, churches and other institutions. The children's vision of their care worlds weave together the material, emotional and collective practices through which children and adults together create and recreate daily life. Given the neglect of care and love as subjects that deserve political attention and scholarly focus (Lynch and others, 2009; Lynch, 2007), it would appear that the children are ahead of many social theorists in what they give prominence.



Figure 1. The Five B's, Riva.

The children tell and live stories that recognise and place value on caring as a relational activity and collective responsibility rather than an individual, private matter. In the context of a dismantled welfare state and neo-liberal policies that reinforce competitive and individualist approaches to children's education and welfare, the children's counter-narratives suggest an alternative economy of value within school that reach beyond performance measures and test scores that have become the sole calculus of learning and success. Moreover, woven into the children's counter-narratives are valued activities of childhood that cannot be easily accounted for by prevailing discourses of 'children as human capital and social investment' that imbue neo-liberal market politics (Kjørholt, this issue).

Equality studies framework

The aims of my longitudinal research with children are grounded in a social justice and equality perspective offered by Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh (2004). I draw on their framework for three reasons. First, because it emphasises the interlocking and reinforcing social systems – the economic, political, sociocultural and affective – that together conspire to (dis)advantage and (dis)empower people. In the case of educational injustice, there is an interplay between economic structuring (i.e. from how schools are financed and resourced, to wage structures and workplace policies that enable some parents but not others to actively participate in children's schooling); political structuring (i.e. laws and policies that determine who can claim basic entitlements to education, health care); cultural structuring (i.e. how parents and children are received and treated in schools – who is marginalised, segregated, discriminated against); and an affective structuring (i.e. the means through which we develop a sense of self-regard, importance, worthiness and sense that we 'matter' and are valued by others that is central to educational well-being, and who is assigned/obligated to do this work and with what rewards and costs).

Second, the framework is useful because it highlights the affective domain which is crystallised in the children's counter-narratives of care. Love, respect, recognition, solidarity and a sense of identity and belonging are all the products of care; indeed, the basic condition of humanity, its daily maintenance and generational reproduction depend upon systems of care that are fundamentally unequal (Lynch and others, 2009). Patterns of care inequality are shaped by interwoven global and local forces. For example, global economic restructuring has resulted in international 'care chains' wherein women of the Global South receive less than a living wage to care for the young, disabled and elderly of the Global North at the expense of the care

of their own children and families (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). At the local level, opportunities for and access to care depend upon an array of resources. These include whether a family has income available for market-based services (e.g. like child or elder care); what kind of workplace flexibilities and benefits are afforded (e.g. health care, vacation and family leave options); workplace schedules; access to transportation, to name a few.

Finally, what is useful about the framework drawn up by Baker and others is that it calls for action across all four systems as the basis for creating an egalitarian society and care-ful education system (Lynch and Baker, 2005).

Children framing childhoods: a brief description

The project took place in a public school in Worcester, MA, a post-industrial city in the northeastern United States known for its diverse immigrant population. At the time of the study (2003), the school enrolled 370 students, 92% were eligible for free school lunch; 37% were White, 10% were Black, 18% were Asian and 35% were Hispanic.¹ The teaching staff of 26 was predominantly White and female.

Thirty-four children, at age 10 and then again at age 12 participated in the study. They were a racially and ethnically diverse group of boys and girls selected by the fifth grade teachers, principal and technology teacher. Half were children of immigrants from Latin/South America and Asia, with one child from each of the following countries: Kenya, Haiti, Albania, Iran and Yemen. All the children spoke English fluently, with the exception of the child from Iran who was learning English during her first year in the project. Of the other half, six children identified as White (of Irish and Italian heritage); three as Black; and eight as Puerto Rican, Dominican or of 'mixed' Latino heritage.

The children were given disposable cameras with 27 exposures and 4 days to photograph their school, family and community lives and 'what matters most'.² After the pictures were developed, research assistants and I interviewed the children individually about their pictures, what they were meant to convey, why they took them and what pictures they wished they had taken but could not. We asked them to select five photographs that best represented themselves and that would be shared with peers and teachers. Then we held small group discussions among the participating children about what they noticed about each other's pictures. At the end of these sessions, the children curated an exhibition of their photographs.

The project was designed to offer multiple opportunities and contexts within which the children could speak about the meaning of their images over time (at age 10, 12, 16 and 18).³ Positioning the children as media producers and interpreters of their own and each other's self-representations, and then putting their interpretations in dialogue with adult research lenses, including shifting discourses and practices related to childhood, education and global migration has been fundamental to an analytic process I have called *collaborative seeing* (Lico and Luttrell, 2012; Luttrell *et al.*, 2011; Luttrell and others 2012). It is through this process that we came to identify the salience the children placed on caring and the intimacies of their care worlds.

Children's double vision of care work

The choreography of care work – 'caring for' and 'caring about' – was a centrepiece of the children's commentary about the photographs they took of their family and school worlds. Caring for and caring about is a distinction identified within feminist scholarship to acknowledge the fact that caring encompasses both an ethic – caring about – and an activity – caring for (Abel and Nelson, 1990; Glenn, 2000, 2010; Ruddick, 1998; Tronto, 1993, 2001). 'Caring for' refers to the varied activities that provide for individual physical/survival needs, while 'caring about' is more associated with thoughts and feelings of concern and a sense of

responsibility for attending to another's needs. In the following sections, I identify how the children connected the ethic and activities of care in ways that challenge the logic of neo-liberal policies and practices.

School care

'Teachers-in-classroom' photographs were the most emblematic of care work in school. The children shared a common language of love and altruism to talk about their teachers. As 10-year-old Claire put it, 'I took this picture of my teacher. I like her because she works not just to get paid, but to help us'. This is a common cultural framework of understanding women's care work as motivated by love not money, and by altruism, not self-interest (Glenn, 2010). Indeed, this is a framework that the female-dominated teaching profession has had to wrestle with in its effort to gain legitimacy and respect (Acker, 1999; Biklin, 1995; Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Weiner, 2003). According to this framework, teachers' care work is naturalised, seen as part of their personalities rather than a set of skills they hone and activities they engage. The children adopted this gendered discourse to speak of their predominantly White, female teachers, emphasising their personality traits: 'pretty', 'kind', 'cheerful', 'calm', and that they 'make learning fun'. Cheryl photographed Miss Russell, her favourite teacher and said, 'She loves kids because she doesn't have kids of her own'.

'Love' of a subject matter or reading was also attributed to teachers as exemplified by Alison's description of 'Miss Leigh, our teacher, she reads this to us, 'cause she loves this book. And *every* year, *every* student that she gets she'll read it to. 'Cause she loves this book (*her emphasis*)'. From the children's perspective, their teachers' care work blurred the boundary between what is considered the 'private' world of emotions (loving children, loving a subject matter) and the public sphere of teaching. Especially striking was how the children referenced the emotion work that teachers do to make sure that children 'keep calm during MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) when everyone is stressed'. Here is 10-year-old Sophia's account of a dilemma of learning care:

MCAS is a big deal at this school, its really big. We don't get the best scores all the time. Especially for the 4th graders because they have to write an essay. We have to take the tests every year, third (*grade*) through sixth (*grade*). I get nervous, so nervous that I'm sick to my stomach. It is coming up in a week and a half again. It is tough and my teacher keeps on saying, 'Don't worry about it' but (*sighs*) sometimes I feel it's gonna be boring and sometimes I feel it's gonna be tough. We have to split our desks up for it. And then, we do our work and the teachers are walking around trying to help but they can't help as much 'cause it's the MCAS. It's tough for the teachers 'cause they don't know what to say, because they want to help us get it, but they can't give too much information as part of the question.

Beyond the usual narrative of stress-inducing high-stakes testing, Sophia brings a new level of understanding, pointing to the role that tests can play in interrupting relations of learning care – as teachers 'try to help but can't'. Sophia's narrative ties together the ethics of care (paying attention to and responding to children's needs, including the need to not worry) with the activities of care (i.e. giving information, but not too much information). Her narrative recognises the complexities of teachers' caregiving and the judgments that must be made, while pinpointing problems that can arise.

Equally striking is Sophia's level of understanding about how test taking individualises students, requiring them to 'to split up our desks' – shifting from their collaborative working groups to autonomous units. Indeed, the children often spoke of their own learning in terms of solidarity and care, as a practice organised in a way that they could 'help each other' – the mainstay of group work. Next to 'teacher-in-classroom' photographs, the children took

pictures of their learning-group members to whom they paid tribute, as Yanira did when she said, 'this is Maureen and she makes sure that I don't get confused multiplying negative numbers, so I wanted to show how she helps me learn'. Allison spoke about her group in the following way:

I took this picture to show how we help each other learn in class.

How do you do that?

So, we come together if somebody doesn't have a book, you just don't leave them. You help each other out.

Expanding the web of caregivers in classrooms, the children took pictures of the school principal and expressed special gratitude, explaining that she does a 'great job caring about the school'; she is 'good at her job because she gets special things for the school' and she 'takes care of children who have problems'. It is notable that the children framed their principal's success in terms of securing economic educational resources – from new textbooks to a new computer lab she was credited with providing – as well as affective resources for children with 'problems'.

Christopher told the following narrative about why he photographed the principal:

She is really nice to the students. She won't, like...ah, yell at the students to tell 'em what to do, she's just, she's really nice and with a calm voice, not every principal is that calm. She really wants to help students so that's why I took it.

I: How does she help you?

C: Well, one time my mom wrote a complaint about some kids who were making fun of another boy in the class. It was, like, a long time ago (not in this class) and they were making fun of him so I told my mom and she wrote a letter... So all the boys that were involved she (the principal) talked to us to help solve the problem...

Like, she would talk to us and we would be able to tell our own part of the story. And then she would tell us that we would have to talk to each other and say we're sorry. When we were walking back to class, I don't know how, but when we got back to the class, we're already friends and we're already discussing something else.

Christopher's narrative – told half in the past and half in the present tense – signals his sense of the ongoing attention to fostering social relationships and the care work it takes by the adults around him (his mother and principal). Christopher's counter-narrative exposes the outlines of the dominant story of 'failing' schools (schools where test scores are not measuring up) by offering an alternative economy of value within school – i.e. positive social relationships.

The children's representations also invoked their desire to 'help out' those who care for them. Ten-year-old, Alanzo photographed the school secretary explaining:

She helps me out when I have a problem in class. I stay with her in the morning before school starts [*because his mother drops him off to get to work on time*]. So I work in the office to help her out.

Angeline describes her photograph of Sue, the 'lunch lady':

I like her because she's very nice ... she is really kind. I help her a lot with her work.... If we didn't have her we would be starving, starving [*her emphasis*] and we won't be able to learn. *Why?* How

can we learn without no breakfast, no lunch, how can we learn like that? Our stomachs will be going 'Give us some food!'

Angeline and Alanzo both paid tribute to those in school who care for them, connecting the arguably under-recognised role of school staff as vital for children's learning and growth. In both cases, the children are reading these signs of care as grounds for reciprocity and they both indicate a sense of relational satisfaction through being 'helpers'.

Against a backdrop of an implicit, instrumental and individual achievement model of education and a 'children as human capital and social investment' discourse, the children's counter-narratives suggest other possibilities. It is because the children's care narratives bring new understanding to paradigmatic accounts of learning and education that their insights deserve attention. These include:

Learning care is collective work

First, aside from their gendered constructions, the children's images extend the concept of care beyond individual student–teacher relationships.⁴ If their school and classrooms appear to meet their educational needs and provide personal attention, it is because people (and in this case women and children) collectively *work* to make this happen.

Learning is social, not individual

Second, the children's narratives run counter to educational discourses that valorise individual achievement over collaboration and school reforms that place ever increasing demands on teachers to 'teach to the test'. Performance measures of learning have moved from a holistic model, towards a more instrumental model that is assessed by a single, individual measure – test scores. This model redirects the time and attention teachers pay to meeting social and emotional needs that facilitate children's learning – including the time children can spend 'helping each other' which was held in the highest regard by the participating children. Moreover, schools and teachers can be actively punished for the time and attention they give to children whose needs are viewed as exceeding others – whether these needs have to do with (dis)abilities, language, emotion, homelessness or poverty. My point is that the children's images and narratives – both explicitly and implicitly – run counter to the contemporary policy imperatives about what matters in schooling, which focus more on 'how much did this child learn today?' than on 'what kind of human being is this child becoming?' And while these need not be mutually exclusive aims, they can be at odds depending upon available resources and how children's learning is assessed.

Steep cuts in education spending and the reorganisation of public education according to market principles have shifted whom and what is valued in schooling. Studies suggest that middle-class parents are able to play local education markets to their own advantage (Ball, 2003). Oversubscribed schools are able to select the most 'teachable' students, who are predominantly middle class, while poor and working-class students are more frequently confined to schools that are deemed to be 'failing', as increasingly determined by test scores (Lauder and Hughes, 1999). School resources, once considered basic, are increasingly withdrawn – whether in the form of textbooks, transportation, school counsellors, or school-sponsored music, art and sports activities; and this narrows the parameters of what is valued in children's development. As a result, there is an intensification of demands placed on the taken-for-granted work of mothers which is especially costly for wage-poor, economically excluded and marginalised mothers and their children (David, 1993; Griffith and Smith, 2005; O'Brien, 2009; Reay, 1998). *Making visible and placing value upon family care work*

and its relationship to education was a heart-felt storyline in the children's counter-narratives, to which I now turn.

Family care worlds

'Women in kitchen' were the most emblematic photographs of family care. Whether they lived in single-parent or two-parent households, the children depicted women (mothers, grandmothers and aunts) as primary caregivers and prized them for their key role in 'feeding the family' (DeVault, 1991).

Ten-year-old Sebastian describes a picture he took of his mother in the kitchen who recently migrated to the United States from Colombia in the most glowing terms, explaining that she comes from a 'long line of intelligence'. He says he took the picture because he 'admires' and is 'grateful' for everything she does ... 'it is tough with her job and all she has to do' but she is 'always there for us'.

He says he took a picture of his mother in the kitchen because, 'she cooks good food of rice, beans, chicken. She cooks soup on Sunday morning, *mondongo (from Colombia)*'. Later in the interview, Sebastian described weekly meals with extended family members.

This is my uncle. He's coming for food – because we have it. He's always coming for food or we're always going there for food. Cause if we make a lot of food and they haven't, 'cause usually he just gets home late from work and my aunt, she comes really, really late, like, after him. And when they both get home my mom calls them to offer if they want some food because it would mean a lot. So they come over and eat.

Sebastian's narrative is among the many examples of how the children tied together the ethics and activity of their mother's family care work, acknowledging that the practice of care creates and maintains relationships of interdependence. Sebastian's narrative also casts family care as being organised around the demands of work routines, and this was a common thread woven throughout the children's accounts of family care.

Francine described the photograph of her mother in the kitchen preparing coffee for her father as a key moment in the choreography of family care – 'every night she makes coffee for my dad who won't get home until late at night 'cause she gets up early to leave for work'. She goes on to reflect:

This is my mom. She's very beautiful, I know that. She's also smart, even though she didn't go to college, but she's very, very smart. We love her very much. She loves us very much. She has a great personality. She has a good job. She mostly does all the work at her job. She goes to work an hour before everybody else, cause it's nice and quiet and she can get a lot of work done...She comes home at 5:30, so we don't really do much because she wants to eat dinner, have two glasses of milk. Then she lays down on the couch, watches some movies. Then we tell her about our day at school and she asks what papers she needs to sign.

Both the form and content of Francine's narrative speak to the daily rhythms of family-work life as 'pretty scheduled', but not in the same terms as the 'hurried childhood' of middle-class family life where children are shuttled from one after-school activity/lesson to another as a means to enrich their competitive advantage – what Lareau calls a concerted cultivation model of middle-class child rearing (2003). Francine narrates a photograph of her dog by explaining the choreography of after-school life – how she and her sister come home from school, tend to the dog, fix themselves a snack, complete their homework and prepare dinner, awaiting their mother's return from work. Francine portrays care work – her mother's, her sister's and her own – as a practice of mutuality and interdependence. And along the way, she makes a point to emphasise their mutual love as well as her mother's social value – her beauty, smarts (even without a college degree), personality, competence at

her job, and attention to school-based expectations and demands (i.e. the ‘papers she needs to sign’). Most important, however, is gratitude. Asking me whether she can talk about the picture of her mom again, her emotions are palpable. There is a faint smile on her face as she gazes on it, turning the photograph for me to see:

I really like my mom (*pausing and looking at me*), because she’s the one who mainly gave me life; my dad, with his help too. But she’s the one that had, that had a lot of pain. So, I’m really grateful to her.

Such expressions of gratitude for their mothers’ roles could be heard throughout the children’s care narratives, albeit expressed differently by the girls than by the boys, which I have written about elsewhere (Luttrell, 2012). Here, my point is to draw out the shared ‘care consciousness’ about the value of their mother’s hard work and its relationship to their education and well-being.

Empty kitchens-on-display (of counter-tops, refrigerators, kitchen tables) also triggered narratives of family care-giving strategies organised to accommodate parents’ work schedules, which in many cases meant that parents were unavailable to be photographed. Close to a third of the children were unable to photograph a mother or another important family member for many reasons (the demands of shift work, divorce, separation, incarceration, deportation, illness or death); and they found symbolic ways of representing them – including photographs of family photographs, pictures of artwork, clothes, toys and letters they had received from a loved one.

Angeline rose early in the morning to photograph her mom, who works double shifts at a nearby nursing home as a certified nursing assistant. ‘She goes to work 7 a.m.–11 p.m., on Saturdays 7 a.m.–3 p.m. Most of the time she goes at 7 a.m.–11 p.m. and my Dad goes at 3 a.m.–11 a.m.’ Angeline asked her mom to pose in her ‘work uniform’ as an expression of pride that her mother was able to find a job so quickly upon migrating to the United States from Kenya (Angeline was one among many children who took photographs of their mothers in work uniforms to extol their paid care work jobs).

Of her kitchen-on-display photograph (Figure 2) Angeline described her own participation in care work:

Cooking, cleaning up the house. This is where I wash the dishes, this is the stove. I like cooking a lot. That’s where I do my chores, most of the time on the weekends, that’s what I do.



Figure 2. My Kitchen, Angeline.

Angeline explained that her mom has been teaching her to cook, but 'sometimes when my mom goes to work and she has to leave early, and she doesn't have time to cook, then if it's the weekend and I'm not going to school and I need something to eat, then I ask my dad if he can cook for me and then he cooks. He's a good cook, *for a man*' [*her emphasis as she smiles at the interviewer*].

These all-too-familiar gendered dynamics of care work have been documented by many researchers, usually focused on mothers' moral imperative to care and do education work, regardless of social positioning (O'Brien 2007). In keeping with this cultural storyline, the children did feature adult women as the primary caregivers (when adult men were portrayed, they were either lounging in living rooms or shopping). Similarly, the boys and girls also depicted their own asymmetric participation in family care worlds. Boys referenced their domestic labour as chores and 'rules of the house', tasks they are expected to do, but not tasks they photographed themselves doing or provided much detail. By contrast, girls often proudly displayed themselves (or implements of their work, such as vacuum cleaners) in ways that indicated not only their extensive role in family care, but also their pride of place in it.⁵

Against a backdrop of an implicit model of white, middle-class 'intensified' motherhood and family life, the children's counter-narratives of care emphasise that they are being cared for, and that their mothers successfully 'do' culturally prescribed mothering within the strictures of unforgiving work routines, whether they live in single female-headed families or two-parent families. As I have written elsewhere, children read signs of anxiety or stigma about their family care and upbringings, and very early in their lives, children in wage poor families sense the public scrutiny their mothers face and will attempt to protect them (Dodson and Luttrell, 2011; Luttrell, 1997, 2003, 2012; also see Romero, 2001; Thorne, 2001). It is noteworthy that the children seemed compelled to emphasise their mothers' social and educational value. This is a hidden injury of care injustice – that children may sense that over-worked parents (predominantly mothers) are judged negatively by others. It is against this lack of respect and/or recognition of their family care worlds, which these children's counter-narratives can be said to speak.

Alternative ways of caring

Embedded within the children's family care narratives are alternative models, including the work of children. They reported accompanying young siblings to and from school; going to neighbours before school to eat breakfast and pack their lunch; organising themselves into groups to travel to after-school destinations that changed daily; and coming to school early and staying late 'hanging out' with school personnel to accommodate parent work schedules. They also showed themselves in pictures 'hanging out' after school and on weekends with siblings and cousins generating their own leisure activities (watching TV, playing video games) or completing domestic chores, rather than participating in the many self-development after-school and weekend activities typically afforded to middle-class children. Eleven-year-old Terrence said of an image he took in a local store (Figure 3), 'After school I walk my younger cousins home and help them with their homework; sometimes we stop at the corner store and I get a candy bar so they will get their work done quick 'cause I have to check it and make sure it is right before my aunt gets home at 6.30 am'. Photographs that a viewer might expect to be about leisure or consumption (e.g. the candy store, television screens, cell phones, video games) were used by the children to discuss their own participation in family care networks. For example, of her photograph of a phone (Figure 4), 10-year-old Nia remarked, 'when my cousins call on the weekend, I say, maybe I'll come over later after I'm finished with all the cleaning'. She went on to explain:



Figure 3. After School, Terrence.



Figure 4. My cousins call, Nia.

I'm always helping around the house, because it's always a mess. Ebony [*her sister*] she always says, 'I want to be like you'. And I say, 'no you don't', and she says, 'I'm going to help you clean today'. And I go, 'you are? Really?' And she's like, 'yeah'. So she tries. I thank her, even if she doesn't help much, cause she wants to help.

Told as a dialogue between older and younger sister – Nia places value on her sister's desire to 'help', and is thankful for her efforts in easing the household responsibilities she shoulders.

Re-valuing children's care

Despite their widespread involvement in family care work to ensure survival, poor and working-class children's essential capabilities and remarkable achievements in this realm go unrecognised or viewed in deficit terms, especially within schools. Sociologist Linda Burton highlights the liabilities as well as the assets associated with what she calls 'adultification', and argues that the long-term consequences may not be fully apparent until children reach adulthood (2007:341). Acknowledging that 'adultification' is a critical coping strategy for

low-income and poor families, Burton warns that it is 'out of sync' with contemporary school demands for intense and early achievement for future success.⁶ From Burton's perspective, teachers and social workers should be better equipped to interpret children's own experiences and meanings they make from their extensive family responsibilities and duties, including a sense of self-worth, leadership and 'mattering' that can be harnessed to extend beyond the immediate needs of their families.

Adultification takes many forms, including what Marjorie Falstich Orellana has called 'language brokering' to speak of the unrecognised work that bilingual immigrant children perform for non-English speaking family members as part of everyday family life – paying bills, accessing social services, at doctor's appointments and during parent–teacher conferences, etc. (2010). Using a sociocultural rather than a normative developmental framework for thinking about children's language brokering, Orellana considers the cultural tools that children are afforded as part of this practice in terms of strengths rather than deficits. Even more striking, Orellana casts children's language brokering as a form of civic engagement, as work that they do for the 'public good' in the context of public institutions, such as schools and libraries, as well as in other public spaces, such as parks or businesses. What if we were to think of the care work being done by children growing up in poor and low-income families in similar ways – as work they do for the 'public good' in the service of brokering educational access and participation for themselves and others?

Towards educational care justice

Why is it important to lift up the children's 'counter-narratives' of care at home and in school? First, because these narratives illustrate the power of young people to challenge the constraints of dominant stories that surround them. I do not mean to romanticize their lives but to affirm what they have said and how they wish to be seen. My point is that narratives offer a tender defiance of contemporary stigmatised images of urban youth growing up in low-income communities and under-resourced schools.

Second, their narratives resist the cultural devaluation of care, and prohibit the possibility of mother or teacher blaming. Unlike the neo-liberal assault on care work – targeted towards low-income (often single) mothers and teachers – the children acknowledge, account, for and praise the work carried out by these adult women.

Such visions and valuation of care are at odds with current public narratives that devalue care. Consider the current national attack on teachers in the United States. 'Proposed Cuts Strike Teachers as Attacks on Their Value to Society' read a New York Times headline on March 2, 2011. The gist of the article is that teachers are reeling from the public scorn they feel directed towards them. Educational experts claim that teachers have rarely been the targets of such ridicule from politicians and voters. 'You are glorified babysitters who leave work at 3:00 pm. You deserve minimum wage', read one *counter-demonstrator's* sign during a rally in Providence, R.I. in support of teachers.

Questioning the social value of teachers, especially those who teach in the nation's most under-resourced schools in economically marginalised communities, mirrors an earlier attack on the social value of poor women raising children in these same communities. As several critics have pointed out, the so-called welfare-reform act in the USA in 1996 was the result of Reagan-era politics that successfully pitted the poor (and immigrants) against the 'middle class'. The successful passage of the legislation was based on the mobilisation of public scorn towards poor women who were accused of draining federal and state budgets. Derogatively referred to as 'welfare queens', poor women purportedly had children to assure themselves a welfare check. Rather than focusing on childhood poverty as the problem, single mothers who were structurally under- or unemployed were singled out as mooching from hard work-

ing, middle-class taxpayers (Adair, 2005). The logic underlying welfare reform was that it is better for poor single mothers to be forced to take low-skilled, low-paying and dead-end jobs, without adequate childcare, leaving their children to fend for themselves, than for the government to publicly invest in low-income women's education or employment training, or to subsidise quality childcare.

Fifteen years later, and a new era of politics – what is being called the politics of envy – is successfully pitting the 'public sector' middle class against the 'private sector' middle class; and it seems that teachers, who are predominantly female, are the new targets. In this parallel world of social disinvestment, teachers are viewed as 'benefit queens' holding 'cushy' jobs ['glorified babysitters'], overpaid with unseemly benefits, especially compared with middle-class taxpayers working in the private sector. According to this disinvestment calculus, it would seem that teachers, like poor, working mothers, are of little value to society. These twin disinvestment strategies are tied together and conspire to negate the social value of poor and low-income children's well-being and education, exacerbating an already intensifying social inequality, the roots of which lie in care injustice. Neo-liberal policies reinforce care injustice by blaming teachers and mothers who labour under conditions not of their own choosing, without adequate resources, while at the same time holding them individually responsible for the 'outcomes'.

Finally, the children's counter-narratives envision an alternative affective structuring of educational justice. Their narratives suggest that what brokers children's educational well-being rests in group life, not individuals, and on the work, not just the rhetoric, of love and care, including children's own agency in and benefit from the care-giving and care-receiving dynamic. Their versions of school and family life pivot around themes of love, mutuality, interdependence, and social and emotional ties that are solidified through 'helping', 'wanting to help' and expressing gratitude for care received. Indeed, this framing of care goes beyond the feminist distinction of 'caring for' and 'caring about', to include 'caring with'. As I have argued, such a vision interrupts the dominant view of care as an individual, private matter to be resolved in the market place, rather than as a mutual, collective responsibility and valued public good.

Ultimately, children's educational well-being and success cannot be divorced from the interlocking economic, cultural, political and affective relationship contexts in which they live and grow; it will require action across all four systems to ensure that all, not just some, children are afforded equal conditions of learning.

Contributor's details

Wendy Luttrell is a sociologist who studies the process of self and identity formation and transformation in school settings and how systems of inequality including, gender, race, class, and sexuality take root in young people's self evaluations and actions. She is the author of two award-winning books on this topic, *School-smart and Mother-wise: Working-Class Women's Identity and Schooling* (1997) and *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (2003), and is also the editor of *Qualitative Educational Research: Readings on Reflexive Methodology and Transformative Practice* (2010).

Notes

1 These are the labels and percentages provided by the school; they do not publish records of the immigrant status of the children. Students are eligible for 'free and reduced lunch' in United States schools if their family income is at or below 185% of the Federal poverty line.

The percentage of students in a school receiving free and reduced lunch is an indicator of the socioeconomic status of a school.

2 See Luttrell, 2010 for a full account of the process and prompts for picture taking, and a full discussion of how ethical issues were raised and discussed with the children.

3 Because of space limitations, this paper refers only to the first stage of research, leaving to another paper the topic of how the young people's visions of care changed over time.

4 See Feely 2012 who coined the term 'learning care'.

5 The gender dynamics portrayed in the children's family care worlds, and a full discussion of what is 'picture worthy' for boys and girls in relationship to their domestic labour is beyond the scope of this paper (see Luttrell, 2012).

6 A similar point is made by Morrow and Kjørholt in this *Special Issue* regarding competing discourses about the value of child labour between the global north and south. Indeed, Morrow raises the concern that children of the global south may end up feeling their lives are 'a waste' if they are unable to take advantage of educational opportunities because their families rely on them to contribute to the domestic economy.

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Accepted for publication 16 April 2013