

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## It Takes Heart: The Experiences and Working Conditions of Caring Educators

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"TAKE CARE / CARE TAKE" BY PETE RAILAND. 2020 (VIA JUSTSEEDS)

## Introduction

*In my personal life I am struggling with self-care. I just spent some time in the ER and time away from work...I will just keep going, going, going till my body literally shuts me down, which has taken place.*

- Interviewee from our care circle interviews

Like our interviewee quoted above, my body has “shut me down” with an acute episode of a chronic illness exacerbated by stress and overwork. While I sit on my couch recovering, I am thinking about how many of my students emailed me this week when they turned in their rough drafts to let me know that they were struggling—with under-treated illness because they were between insurance coverage, with a parent in the hospital, with a partner recently incarcerated and three kids to support. Even though I had a fever this weekend, I broke down and gave them feedback on their papers, because I didn’t want to add one more stressor to their already overwhelmed lives, and because I didn’t want one more piece of work hanging over my head while I recovered.

And that’s just me. Another co-author of this paper left our school—after a long struggle in her department to organize care for Black women—when she was forbidden from bringing her children to work over the summer but couldn’t afford to leave them home (her hourly wage was only a dollar more than her hourly child care costs). Our third co-author left during our writing process to pursue more meaningful work in hope of better pay one day. These are a few results of relentless care without replenishment (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 68) -- quitting, illness, burnout, withdrawal -- which serves neither our students nor ourselves, in the end.

While these may seem like extreme cases, they are not unique. The city we live in is getting more expensive by the year. The current annual income needed to meet the cost of basic needs in King County for a typical family has grown by more than \$20,000 over 9 years, outpacing inflation (Pearce 13). House prices in the Seattle area have risen 57.7% since 2007, compared to the U.S. Average of 31.1% in the same time period (Federal Housing Finance Agency). Our colleagues describe longer and longer commutes to find more affordable places to live further from school, and so do our students. For our faculty, staff, students, and their families, pay isn’t keeping pace with the cost of living (Center for Economic and Business Research 6-11), while tuition has risen (Long “Could you go to College?”). The combined effects of an increasingly expensive city and inadequate wages mean that at our community college we are struggling to take care of ourselves and each other.

When we interviewed our colleagues for this research on care work, they talked about struggling to find time to care for themselves, trips to the ER, and their fear of slipping back into substance abuse from stress. They also talked with pride about the accomplishments of our students—many of

whom are political and community leaders, all of whom are dedicated to their studies. We feel that we must keep “going, going, going” to serve our brilliant students well, but while the need for care seems to be growing, our resources for meeting that need are not.

At the heart of the education work that we do at our community college is this “crisis of care” (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 68). As a majority (51%) Black and Brown college of working adults (46% work; average student age is 27) (Seattle Central College), our students and colleagues have faced some of the worst ravages of neoliberal era “policy, deeply embedded racialized structures, and persistent discrimination” that destroy wealth and put them on a knife’s edge of precarity (Oliver and Shapiro 18). Students often arrive at our school having been denied what they need to succeed (like textbooks, rent, tuition) in a predominantly white city with an extreme wealth gap (Balk) and many of us take it as a pedagogical and moral necessity to help them meet those needs and remove unnecessary barriers to their learning.

Despite research on culturally responsive teaching and feminist education that demonstrates students’ greater ability to flourish when they are cared for in the classroom (Gay 48; Nodding 20, 176; Ladson-Billings 14), this work often goes either unrecognized or uncompensated (England, Budig and Folbre 467). To care for students well takes considerable work and skill; and providing care for a wage (especially not a livable one, especially if you are a woman of color in a predominantly white institution, especially if you are working an unwaged double-shift) can be dangerous, depending on the working conditions (Hochschild 89-90; England 391-392; Jocson Porter, Spence-Wilcox, and Tate-Malone 283). And while we’ve gotten consistent messages from our administration for years about how important it is to do this care work—lauding our “generosity,” our “empathy and understanding” (Edwards Lange, “Message from the President” May 15th, 2020), our “long hours” and “personal touch” (Edwards Lange, “Message from the President” April 24th, 2020) that are important because “we need to be there for all our students” (Edwards Lange “Message from the President” March 31, 2020), and reminding us that “how we support our students can be the difference between the decision for them to stay or withdraw from a class, the difference between finding self-confidence, or losing hope” (Pan “Convocation Address”)—the most recent of those have come at the same time that staff is being laid off and faculty contract negotiations have stalled on the issue of compensation. In the neoliberal, scarcity-based institutional context in which we work, these contradictions set the well-being of our students against the well-being of us as educators.

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Care work is “people-making” labor (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, Fraser 68) that “develops the human capabilities of the recipient” (England, Budig, and Folbre 455) and falls under the category of “social reproduction” (Weeks 24-25, 140-141). Social reproductive labor--the work of feeding, nurturing, soothing, educating, and ensuring that basic needs are met--though often intangible, creates and replenishes labor power, and in that way produces value under capitalism (Federici 92). Despite this value, care work, associated as it is with women, is devalued in terms of both money and prestige for the worker, regardless of gender (England 382; England, Budig, and Folbre 466).

Because the specifics of care work are not articulated in our contracts or our job descriptions at our school, and because it belongs to a category of work that has traditionally been unwaged or under-waged, it is easy to frame it as “extra” work, that some education workers opt into--rather than “real” work that we all have to do. This obscures how essential that work is for students to learn, how valuable it is to institutional goals of student achievement and retention, and the way it is disproportionately done by women and people of color (Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 45, Care Collective 19). Its feminization, racialization, and connection to emotion makes care work and care workers uniquely vulnerable to exploitation through both burnout (Hochschild 90) and a wage penalty (England Budig, and Folbre 468).

Many of our interviewees said that the care work that they do with students is the most fulfilling part of their job. But in contradiction to the adage that, “If you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life,” at our school we have found that we never work harder than when we do the work of love. Miya Tokumitsu, in her essay, “In the Name of Love”, exposes the danger inherent in “loveable” work:

No one is arguing that enjoyable work should be less so. But emotionally satisfying work is still work, and acknowledging it as such doesn’t undermine it in any way. Refusing to acknowledge it, on the other hand, opens the door to the most vicious exploitation and harms all workers.

Or, in the words of one of our interviewees, “I’m happiest when I’m teaching, but I’m also poorest when I’m teaching, which is unfortunate.”

To follow Tokumitsu’s logic, understanding the care work of education as labor is a step toward mitigating its potential exploitation by helping workers understand what working conditions will sustain the kind of care work that our students deserve. While research on care is extensive and thorough in its descriptions of what constitutes care and why it matters for the cared for, the literature is much more limited in talking about the worker’s experience of providing care and the conditions of that work. To contribute to this understanding, this paper asks: what is the experience of producing care in our college for caring educators, and what are the working conditions that enable or disable educators to do it well? The most significant themes that emerged from these interviews were: the value of care work in the

educational context, emotion as labor, the time it takes to care, the limitations of self-care as an individual practice, and mutual aid to change the working conditions of care.

## Method

Working from Patricia Hill Collins, who puts an ethic of care at the heart of a black feminist way of knowing (282), we chose a method that would honor the great wealth of wisdom in our community, based on lived experience, that was being shared with us, and that would serve that community well as we moved forward. We chose to use a talking circle interview method as a form of critical participatory action research, which is “a commitment on the part of both researchers and actors to jointly observe, problematize and transform behavior” (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 12, 27). The talking circle—practiced first and most often in indigenous communities (Graveline 363)—was a way to build relationships amongst workers while also building knowledge in our area of inquiry. This method was chosen as a direct example of giving and receiving care: an allotment of time, dialog, and attention to understand each other’s experience (Shevalier and McKenzie 1093 - 1095).

We used a purposeful snowball sampling method to identify education workers for our circles who produce care (Beaudry and Miller 41). We defined “education worker” broadly as anyone who contributed to the education of our students. Using criteria developed through our research on culturally responsive caring in education, we drew up an initial list of educators to contact--we then asked those that we contacted to reach out to others in the college who met our criteria of a caring educator and extend our invitation. As a result, our participants came from all across the college: they were classroom teachers; librarians; student services workers; information technology (IT) workers; counselors; staff members of the multicultural services office, the financial aid office, and the tutoring center. The authors of this article and the interview group of 21 colleagues are a deeply diverse group in terms of race, age, nationality, position, income level, and institutional power (with the exception of administrators, who were not included in the interview group, in order to allow other workers to speak freely).

In order to enable the maximum number of workers from different job classifications to participate, we held three different circles of two hours each at different times of day. This was important to us because of the long-time separation between faculty and staff at our college, which has divided us along a number of lines of privilege, including race, gender, and income level. We also asked the office of employee development to promote our circles as professional development, so that workers could participate during work hours and would not have to take personal leave. During our circle interviews, several participants spoke about nearly skipping the circles because they were too fatigued, overworked, or burnt-out to add any additional thing to their schedule. One participant said, “I was not sure I was even going to come today – I’ll be absolutely honest. My year has been one big, long, shit storm. And this week I

was like, 'I'm done.'" From this feedback, we suspect that we may not have heard from some of the folks most impacted by care work and its consequences: about 20% of those who signed up for the interview didn't attend.

In each circle, participants were introduced to the major themes of our research and the form of the talking circle. We posed a series of three questions about their current life and work. After a question, each member of the circle in predictable turn spoke as long as they wished on the question without interruption. In order to break down the objectification of the research subject and the hierarchy of the researcher to researched (DeVault and Gross 215; Davis and Harrison 10), we three authors participated as members of the talking circles, and answered our own questions, but did not code or include our answers in the analysis of the interviews.

To systematically code the interview transcripts, we used a hybrid method that included a priori codes developed from our research on education and care, and in vivo codes that emerged from the interviews (Saldaña 587-599). This resulted in an initial list of 41 codes that were classified into eleven categories. These categories were used in a second round of coding to determine their significance within the data. Through this process, five of these eleven categories were chosen (and slightly reorganized to include some subthemes) as the main themes of this paper, based on their significance within the interviews.

## Importance of Care in the Educational Process

Workers in a feminized field of work like education, have experienced the devaluation of their care work to the point of its erasure *as work* (England, Budig, Folbre 457). That erasure is usually achieved through the insistence that care is an emotion that emerges naturally and spontaneously from the individual (England 383) rather than an intentional "orchestration of skill and judgement" (Walker and Gleaves 65). Further complicating this is the deep, personal meaning that this kind of work can hold for education workers. For many of our interviewees, the care work they do with students is "how we contribute to the greater good." In fact, this was the most consistent theme in our interviews: the pleasure, meaning, and connectedness that our colleagues experience when doing care work with students. As one interviewee put it, "What's going to fulfill me when it's all said and done? This will fulfill me: higher education, and being able to help others, and to be a voice."

To bring attention to this important work and improve outcomes for students, feminist and critical race scholars work to transform the set of beliefs, moral imperatives, and deep emotions into defined, highly skilled actions in the work of care. Geneva Gay defines care in the educational setting as, "A value, an ethic, and a moral imperative that moves 'self-determination into social responsibility and uses knowledge and strategic thinking to decide how to act in the best interests of others'" (47).

In her foundational work on care and education, Nel Noddings describes the essence of care as receptivity and engrossment on the part of the carer to the one being cared for (30),

Caring involves, for the one-caring, a "feeling with" the other....The notion of "feeling with" that I have described does not involve projection but reception. I have called it "engrossment."...I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other. I become a duality. (Noddings 30)

Working from Noddings, Gay describes the important difference between the feeling of care that many of us have for our students and the transformation of those feelings into action,

Emotions (such as concern and compassion) are important anchors and catalysts in culturally responsive teaching, but they lack behavioral embodiments that are fundamental to facilitating student learning. Thus, all attributes of caring must be translated into actions for them to be of much value in improving the achievement of culturally diverse students. (Gay 53)

This distinction between "caring about" and "caring for" is an essential one in research on care (Shevalier and McKenzie 10898; Care Collective 21). "Caring about" is a "relatively detached" emotional experience, while "caring for" is an experience of "motivational displacement or the 'desire to help'" (Shevalier and McKenzie 1090), which education scholars like Gay would suggest is not fulfilled until it is embodied in action on behalf of students (53).

The active and skilled dimensions of "caring for" are articulated in a number of ways by different scholars, but the dimensions cluster around a few common strategies that caring education workers employ. These could be described as: cultural responsiveness through competence in students' cultures and identities and an acknowledgement of racism and other forms of discrimination (Gay 48; Ladson-Billings 36; hooks 131; Nieto 38; Shevalier and McKenzie 1092; Borck 3; Garza, Alejandro, Blythe and Fite 2); relationship building through dialogue, attention, trust, respect, and high regard (Ladson-Billings 38; hooks 131; Shevalier and McKenzie 1093; Borck 3; Walker and Gleaves 65; Garza, Alejandro, Blythe and Fite 4); attendance to students' socio-emotional and physiological needs (Gay 48; Shevalier and McKenzie 1097; Borck 3; Garza, Alejandro, Blythe and Fite 5); and a focus on instruction and skilled pedagogy in all aspects of the school experience (Ladson-Billings 161; Walker and Gleaves 65; Garza, Alejandro, Blythe and Fite 4).

In the majority of this research, these are described implicitly or explicitly as the actions and orientations of individual teachers (Borck 3). But for educators who truly care for their students, these essential aspects of care can represent an overwhelming individual duty. To act on the deep knowledge of students' lives means confronting the injustices they face on the basis of their race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and disabilities. For our interviewees, confronting those injustices has meant

transforming curriculum; providing food and other necessities; helping to navigate school and social services bureaucracies; confronting teachers and administrators who are creating barriers to students' progress; participating in protest and social movements that affect students; and being the confidantes of students who may be experiencing considerable pain, discrimination, and want. The reward for this work is to know oneself as a necessary part of another's development, and often to experience that care in return from students or colleagues. As one interviewee put it, "What I enjoy the most is to be able to help students to look at and believe in themselves." The danger is that defining this work as the responsibility of individuals is unrealistic and can lead to self-doubt, frustration, and despair. Expressing frustration when her colleagues did not help students enough, one interviewee said, "It affects me deeply when I see that others don't care as much as they should."

Education research says comparatively little, however, about the conditions *for the educator* that facilitate that caring labor. Borck begins this process by expanding the Noddings-based definition of care beyond individual teacher's behavior into the school at large (2) through the notion of "structural care." Borck describes structural care as "the social structural conditions that enable care to emerge" (2), including co-constructed culture among teachers (10), physical environments that are affirming (8), and "institutional priorities, policies, and practices that reflect commitments to regard students positively" (2). Borck warns that the capacity for care among educators is determined not by the intensity of the individual educator's commitment to this process, but by "structural forces that intersect with teachers' time, priorities, and ability to provide meaningful connections with students" (7). However, Borck's description of structural care focuses on the quality of interactions between students and the caring structures (teachers, administrators, school culture, school buildings), and does not elaborate on the working conditions that build and maintain these structures. Through our interviews, we found that losing sight of the conditions that enable the work of care interferes with the workers' ability to sustain that work over the long-term.

## Emotion as labor

A number of our interviewees, the majority of whom are from marginalized backgrounds in academia, expressed their care work towards students as a form of "giving back," because they had experienced care themselves when they were students. For this reason among others, care work for education workers often has both an emotional and a moral dimension. While motivating, the moral and emotional dimensions of care work can also trap workers in poor working conditions. Folbre's "prisoner of love" theory explains that "emotional bonds put care workers in a vulnerable position, discouraging them from demanding higher wages or changes in working conditions that might have adverse effects on care recipients" (England 390; Folbre 40). In addition to a reluctance to organize for better conditions, care work has other unique dangers including

alienation from the self, and a dulling of the "signal function of emotion" (Hochschild 22). Arlie Russell Hochschild defines emotional labor as work that:

...requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others...the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality. (Hochschild 7)

In combination with Noddings's description of care as a "receiving the other into the self" (30), Hochschild's description of emotional labor helps us to understand how the education worker may temporarily suppress their internal emotions and material struggles in order to sustain the appropriate outward caring state to facilitate student learning.

For the educator, that might mean putting aside the initial emotional response provoked by a student to create the emotional atmosphere of warmth, patience, acceptance, or authority that is necessary for that student's flourishing. In one interview, a faculty member describes this process of shifting her emotional state from frustration to care during and after a tense conversation with a white student who questioned her lecture on racism and genocide:

Having to argue this with him. And the level of how we have to regulate our emotions in those moments....And literally losing sleep, right? And the distress that comes with that. And that student feeling it too. And caring for those students, even though they just piss you off sometimes when they say stuff like that. So feeling the anger, but also still caring for them, and wanting them to learn, and wanting them to grow.

After the faculty member explained the frustration, hurt, and care that she was managing while teaching this student after the official lecture was over, she went on to explain additional working conditions that made that interaction especially taxing:

And that was just Monday. And then on top of that you're having to think about tomorrow's lecture and Friday's lecture. And thinking about the stuff I have to do this evening, like after I leave here. And the grading, and you know, just everything else on top of that....There's this sort of energy and care that you need to give to students that happens outside of the lecture itself. And that takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of energy.

This instructor suggests that the emotional dimension of teaching, while challenging, is something to be expected when she says, "And caring for those students, even though they just piss you off sometimes." Rather than the interaction itself, what the instructor identifies as creating a strain is her worry that this essential teaching moment is taking time from her other contracted responsibilities, which will add time on to her work day as well as anxiety about getting everything done.

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In the context of work, emotional labor competes with other forms of work in a way that puts a particular pressure on the worker, distinguishable from how we labor emotionally in our personal, non-work lives. Hochschild describes the way that having to perform emotions on command for a wage can lead to stress and dissonance (90):

The whole system of emotional exchange in private life has its ostensible purpose in the welfare and pleasure of the people involved. When this emotional system is thrust into a commercial setting, it is transmuted. A profit motive is slipped in under acts of emotion management, under the rules that govern them...Who benefits now, and who pays? (119)

One interviewee answered the question of “who pays” by reporting a health professional’s concern for her health as a result of the emotional intensity of her work:

He [the medical professional] told me, when you care for others, you can’t resist your feelings to that person. You’re going to put their pain somehow into yourself when you really care. And if you don’t learn to take care of it, it’s not good for your health. And you can’t keep holding it. It’s only going to harm you in your very close relationships.

What Noddings describes as the essential “feeling with the other” (30) is framed by this worker as dangerous to her physical well-being.

The danger to the worker who does caring labor lies in being alienated from our emotions by continually suppressing or manipulating them for a wage (Hochschild 17). We use our emotions, like our senses, to tell us about our world and any potential dangers that we might encounter (29). If those emotions become distorted through overuse on the job, we can lose our ability to accurately detect and interpret the world around us for our own well-being (30). One of our interviewees described this in terms of “taking her work home with her”:

I’m exhausted. Especially this year and the work that I’m doing. It’s been a rough year....It’s interesting because I used to say like, “Oh I’m so lucky I don’t bring work home with me. [SCOFFS] How, like, deluded that statement is for anyone. You know? So, it’s really, it’s been interesting to kind of see that...shift.

While emotional labor, like any labor, can be tiring, time away from work provides relief and allows for recuperation. However, our interviews and research suggest that the pressures of time, efficiency, and too many responsibilities or students are the elements in the workplace that cause a

worker to “bring work home” and interfere with recovery time. As another interviewee explained, “When I don’t take my time...on the weekend, then I’m taking it away from somewhere else...I have to be honest with myself...it can make me resentful. Moving a little bit closer to breaking down.”

The combination of increased care work at school and reproductive labor at home amount to an increasing pace of work for our interviewees. As with our colleagues, Hochschild found that the airline attendant workers she interviewed reported a qualitative difference in their experience of fatigue from emotional labor when deregulation and efficiency measures resulted in an “industry speed-up” in their work (more customers, with fewer workers, and shorter recovery periods) (121-123, 126). This “industry speed-up” created a dissonance between workers’ desire to authentically care for customers, the lack of time to do so, and shorter recovery periods between shifts. Under these conditions, efficiency became antithetical to care. The workers we interviewed reported the industry speed-up at our school as significantly contributing to the strain of their care work, by making work responsibilities bleed into their traditional recovery times when they worked late in the evenings or on the weekends to catch up.

## The Speed-Up and the Time it Takes to Care

More than just shrinking our recovery times, in contemporary neoliberalized higher education, we experience this “industry speed-up” (Mountz, et al. 1237) in the form of class size increases; staffing reductions; the replacement of permanent full-time positions with contingent, part-time, and adjunct positions (Brint 30); increased institutional assessment demands (Bennet and Brady 149); the expectation of monitoring email from home (Mountz, et al. 1251); higher bars for tenure and promotion (Mountz, et al. 1253; Wilcox and Schroeder 82); the absence of allocated time necessary to build culturally necessary, trusting teaching/learning relationships (Collins, 275); and an increase in student needs as a result of the elimination of social services in other parts of the social safety net (Meyerhoff, Johnson, and Braun 485; Harvey 22-23).

The education industry speed-up of increased responsibilities and decreased paid staff time to meet them requires a pace of productivity that workers struggle to meet. One of our participants, describing the pressures of efficiency, said,

I’m 65...I feel like I’m slowing down and everybody else isn’t. You know, like, I’m finding myself...I can’t process the same kind of way. I don’t have the same endurance. You know, I don’t have that, you know, like bubbly, keep going, you know, I can’t. I get home at night and I’m like, “I’m going to go swimming!” No I’m not. I mean, I just can’t...I can’t anymore. So I spent some time feeling horrible about that. Like, eh, everyone is kind of

working circles around me...and they're like gonna let me go here pretty quick because I'm not working quickly enough or fast enough.

In contrast, a 70 year old social worker at the school whose work was very similar to the interviewee quoted above, described herself as "potent" and able to "give a lot to the people around me." But she attributed this ability to the amount of time she is contracted to work:

I have to say to those of you who are younger that working half-time really is the way to go. [CHUCKLES] So I don't share these feelings of, gosh, my life's being taken over by work, that kind of thing. I love what I do. And it's only part of my life.

The expectation of efficiency in their care work created distress for several interviewees. They reported that when trying to concentrate on a student crisis, they were distracted with the pressure of other work piling up, their inability to complete their paperwork responsibilities during their paid work time, and their resentment at having to carve time out of their life outside of work to complete their responsibilities. Several interviewees expressed a sense that they didn't know where they could reclaim work time, because they were unable to turn students away when they expressed a need, but they had too much other work to complete to fit it all into contracted hours. As one interviewee said, "There's no shortcut. There's no saying to that student who's sitting across from you crying that, oh, you know, 'I've got four minutes. Can you, like, wrap it up?' You know, 'I'm in a hurry.'"

## Self-Care and Mutual Aid

The squeeze that interviewees experienced as a result of a heavy care load was interpreted by many as a failure of self-care. One participant, who reported that his wife was "jealous of his students" because of the amount of time he spent at work, went on to describe how he is better at helping his students with self-care than at practicing it himself: "I have that expectation [of self-care] of my students, because I don't want to see them burn out—it seems like I'm more concerned with their well-being than my own." While popular self-care discourse typically positions it as an individual practice (Penny; Kisner), our interviewees' inability to ensure their own well-being appeared to be more structural than personal--related to low pay, precarity, and workload. In addition, there is an inherent conflict in care as it is formulated in education literature. This contradiction stems from demands of both an engrossment, an authentic "feeling with" the other (Nodding 30; Shevalier and McKenzie 1090), and the emphasis in popular self-care culture on individually determined and enforced "boundaries" between the self and other, and between work and other parts of our lives (Kurki 74).

A recent email from our HR director about pandemic conditions reminded us that, "Our students are relying on us to help them navigate this unprecedented time, so please take care of yourself" (Dixon). But even the workers most diligently committed to caring for themselves have a hard

time doing so when they can't afford nourishing food, when they have a 2-hour commute because they have been pushed out of the city by gentrification, or when that commute gets them home too late to schedule a doctor's appointment. Interviewees reported having a hard time fitting care work for themselves into a day already stretched by care work for their students, under pre-pandemic conditions. One of our interviewees articulated a theme that began to emerge in our discussions, but took shape more fully after the interviews were over:

Why does self-care have to be solitary?...There is that real, narrative thread around, like, "You gotta go take care of yourself," implied by yourself, alone, doing these various activities. And there's something, so... much more um... meaningful and also like, healing, being with other people.

Disability scholar, Yashna Maya Padamsee, explains the dangers of self-care conceived of solely as an individual practice:

Self-care, as it is framed now, leaves us in danger of being isolated in our struggle and our healing. Isolation of yet another person, another injustice, is a notch in the belt of oppression. A liberatory care practice is one in which we move beyond self-care into caring for each other.

Several interviewees described the collective action of talking about their working conditions through the lens of care as doing important psychological and material work for them. One interviewee called the circle interview "good medicine." Another interviewee said, after describing the problems that over-work was causing him at home, and his fear of relapsing into substance abuse as a result, "I can honestly say, if I wasn't sitting here, I probably wouldn't have put that out in the open. And I may not have actually consciously thought of that." As this interviewee shows, the isolation that many of us experience in the academic environment effectively obscures our shared experience of exploitation and overwork. In part because many workers we interviewed shared the notion that care work is an "extra" part of their work that they are personally compelled to do, they feared reprisal if they complained, or believed that others were handling that load more easily than they were.

Soon after our interviews ended, participants began developing mutual aid strategies with each other as a form of self-care. They strategized, empathized, and offered each other material assistance. Since our interviews, many participants have called on each other--based on what they learned during the circles, and the camaraderie that developed through mutual vulnerability--for assistance and advice. This has taken the form of drawing on colleagues' expertise and resources to aid a student, using each other as references for full-time work with better pay and fewer hours of hustling, having another colleague to grieve with when a student has died, and sharing tabling responsibilities at a union walk-out. Sharing the meaning, scope, and cost of their care work began a process that changed the material and emotional experience of work. During one interview, a

participant described this process of developing an analysis of working conditions while sharing stories of care work with the group: “my idea of self-care is more about learning a new way of looking at something which I can apply to the conflict.” Analyzing working conditions specific to care seemed to move participants from thinking about individual self-care to strategizing for collective care. An interviewee articulated the sense of strength in collectivity this way:

What makes this transformative is that there’s this bond with people that I barely know. You know, people I’ve never seen before and now we have this connection to just a deeper sense of who we are collectively. That gives me the staying power. That gives me the perspective.

Another interviewee echoed this desire for mutual aid when she said, “I like the idea of us helping each other when we need it...we spend a good share of our life in the workplace. And so why shouldn’t we share with those around us and ask for them to help us?”

## Conclusion: Working Conditions That Facilitate Care

We would describe this one result of our circle interviews as the development of mutual aid networks, or in disability justice terms, care webs (Piepzna-Samarasinha 34) amongst colleagues and across job classifications as workers come together to help themselves, in spite of or without waiting for the institution or the state to provide the means (Kropotkin 184). The trust that developed during our care circle interviews enabled the continuation of care work with the practical support of colleagues, but has also supported broader work toward better working conditions.

The circle, as paid professional development, serves as an example of how an institution acknowledges and then manifests support for those in the profession of care. It is apparent through our circles that care also belongs to the external, in the community. In this setting, a caring community needed a date and time.

Our interviewees articulated that in our context, the overwhelming and negative experience of care work is created not by the work itself, which they described as an essential part of quality education for our students, but by the conditions under which it is performed: too much work, low pay (or non-replenishment), precarity, the multiple jobs necessary to make ends meet, and the material conditions of students. The conditions that will enable the continuation of our care work *with* replenishment, therefore, is more time to care, less work, and better pay.

As the social worker in our group asserted when she said “Half time is the way to go,” having more time to do less work makes a material and psychological difference for the worker who does care work. The idea of less work may seem counter to the well-being of employees who risk alienation if they do less of what is most meaningful to them: connecting to students. Unfortunately, despite the feminist and culturally responsive education literature that demonstrates the impact of care on student success,

education workers are asked to do a tremendous amount of work that does *not* contribute as directly to student and worker well-being as care work (Dunn 37). Working collectively, an analysis of the care work that contributes to student learning and well-being emerges. With this analysis in practice, we gain the ability to organize against work that doesn’t contribute directly to student well-being, a.k.a. the neoliberal education industry speed-up: accountability mechanisms, institutional assessment, committees for new institutional initiatives, extensive hiring and onboarding because of high turnover as a result of low pay.

Hiring and retaining an adequate number of permanent-full time positions prepared to share the responsibility of care work is another step toward having more time and less work. One of our interviewees who is an adjunct faculty member and serves on a number of committees across our college, described how insulting it felt to be working on committee work between quarters only realize that all that work might have been for free when she received her contract in the mail; her employment isn’t guaranteed quarter to quarter. Many of the participants in our care circle interviews are part-time and/or work multiple jobs. Our union recently conducted a study of faculty and found that 84% work at least one more job in addition to their primary teaching responsibilities in order to make ends meet (AFT Local 1789). Creating access to more staff hours to meet their needs with more full-time positions would reduce strain for current full-time employees with a high student load, for current part-time workers who are stretched between multiple jobs, and for students.

As our interviews demonstrated, we cannot, without harm, do all of the care and reproductive work we are tasked with at work while we suffer from inadequate recuperation time at home. And, not for this pay. Low pay means multiple jobs, long commutes, and additional stress. When care work is not seen as a formal aspect of our jobs, it is not compensated either monetarily or with an allocation of needed time. A recognition that care work is a shared responsibility that is essential to the educational success of students demands that care work be paid work in tandem with defined time for care work. Adequate pay would also reduce bureaucratic burdens on educators by reducing turnover (and therefore reducing hiring committees, and onboarding).

While the scholarship on educational care points again and again to the difference between “caring about” and “caring for,” the work that emerged from our colleagues to change working conditions at our school falls into a third care category, introduced by Joan Tronto: “caring with” (28). Tronto describes “caring with” as a notion close to solidarity (28) that moves beyond the individual to individual “caring for” to a recognition of politicized collective care for broader change (Care Collective 21). Our faculty union initiated a campaign that asked us all to log our extra hours: all the work that we did in addition to the work that is explicitly outlined in our contract. The information from the salary survey and the campaign was used to help faculty build a case for a cost of living adjustment to address the rising costs of our city and soon after we concluded our

interviews, faculty, staff and students walked out to demand that cost of living salary adjustment in the spring of 2019. As a result, faculty won an 11% cost of living increase over the next two years, and classified staff cost of living increases were guaranteed through that process. Since then, under threatened austerity measures by the state and our college district, justified by COVID-19, workers have been organizing across the three unions of our college to demand an end to layoffs and furloughs, more full-time teacher and staff positions, and free tuition and adequate state funding for students. By reframing the stressors of care work from personal failings to dangerous working conditions, caring educators have been able to clearly articulate and struggle for changes to those working conditions that will benefit our students and ourselves. Understanding, in detail, the way that our working conditions affect the provision of care for students can fight the “prisoner of love” mentality that keeps care workers from organizing for better conditions when they think it might harm those they care for (Folbre 38-41). The formulation of these demands for better working conditions, the planning of events to raise consciousness about those conditions, and attendance at walk-outs to bring about change in those conditions all emerged from “caring with” relationships between coworkers and students built person to person that resulted in collective action for change.

But despite the successes of this solidarity born of mutual aid, there have been many consequences of our uncaring conditions. Many of our best colleagues have left our school because of low pay, too many demands, and emotional burnout, including five of the twenty-one participants in our interviews and two of the co-authors of this paper. These co-authors and colleagues were champions of racial and gender justice at our school, and leaders in their employment classifications. With each departure, it becomes harder to connect students to the offices and individuals who will care for them well--it takes time to develop the expertise and institutional knowledge to provision care. When (if) these colleagues are replaced, our new colleagues, by definition, won't have accumulated that knowledge and won't immediately be well connected to the community. Because these are hazards of our working conditions, every experienced employee who leaves because of burn out, every student who drops out of school when they can't find a staff member to connect them to available resources, is a workplace injury: not inevitable, and not an accident.

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