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Lewis, Kirstin and Pearce, Sarah. 2022. High attaining students, marketisation and the absence of care: everyday experiences in an urban academy. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 30(2), pp. 261-280. ISSN 1468-1366 [Article]

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High attaining students, marketisation and the absence of care: everyday experiences in an urban academy

Abstract

This article draws on the work of Nel Noddings to suggest that the current neoliberal, marketised system of education is eroding caring relationships in schools. Data are drawn from a small-scale qualitative study of an ethnically diverse group of high attaining sixth form students from a successful urban academy. Based on this data, we argue that two fundamental aspects of care, students' relationships with their teachers and an attention to their personal and social concerns, were neglected because of the overriding focus on examination success to maintain the school's position in the education marketplace. The article offers detailed evidence from the students' perspective to support the claim that the marketization of the education system leads to students being valued only in as far as they bring value to the school (Apple 2001). It also suggests that care is one of the main casualties in such a system.

Keywords: care; Noddings; marketisation; teacher-student relationships; academy

Introduction

This article suggests that the current neoliberal, marketised¹ system of education is eroding caring relationships in schools. Research to date has centred on teachers' responses to this regime, (e.g. Keddie 2015) and has often focused on the conflict between conformity to market-driven forces and the moral purpose of teaching (e.g.

¹ By marketization we mean the creation of a range of different providers of education who compete against each other to attract students and their parents (Ball 2013). Schools who fail to attract students or who do badly in national examinations are at risk of being closed down or taken over.

Ball and Olmedo 2013; Moore and Clarke 2016). In contrast, as Vainker and Bailey (2018) point out, there has been relatively little research on the impact on students.

In a neoliberal system, ‘everything is potentially a commodity for sale, including education (Apple 2004, 619). In order for the market to function, the customer, in this case parents, must be able to compare products on offer and thus a simple system must be devised to enable such comparisons. In England, league tables, in which schools are ranked according to their examination success, are published in local and national newspapers. This ranking has become the main determinant of school success, which in turn leads schools to focus their efforts on achieving the best possible position in the league tables. Growing concerns about schools gaming the system, for example by ‘off rolling’ students, unofficially removing those likely to perform badly in examinations (YouGov, 2019), underline the impact that marketisation is having on schooling in England.

Using data from a small-scale study of one multi-ethnic urban secondary academy², in this article we focus in detail on the ways in which, in such a system, ‘care for the student is pushed outside of the educational agenda’ (Lolich and Lynch 2017, 125). Drawing on the work of Nel Noddings, we suggest that for the students in our study, lack of care manifested itself in:

² Secondary school lasts from 11-16 or 11-18 in England. Academies are non-selective schools which are funded directly from central government rather than local authorities. They are overseen by outside sponsors and establish their own employment practices and curricula. They are regulated by Ofsted and follow the same rules on admission and exclusion of pupils as other state schools and sit the same exams..

- a lack of positive and sincere relationships between teachers and students
- a neglect of attention to their personal and social concerns as young adults finding their place in the world.

In highlighting the importance of caring to the students in our study, we seek to contribute to the growing body of work (e.g. Lingard et al 2003; Biesta 2009; Ball et al. 2012; Skourdoumbis 2019) which questions a system in which ‘what the student does for the school’ is prioritised over ‘what the school does for the student’ (Apple 2001, 413). The particular contribution this article makes to this body of work is to explore how students themselves experience this system.

An ethic of caring

Care ethicists argue that caring has long been an undervalued aspect of human society, and that in the neoliberal era it is even more under threat (Connell 2013). Tronto (2017) suggests that neoliberal approaches to care begin with the assumption that individuals should take responsibility for their own needs, and that if this is not possible the market will meet the need for care if there is a profit to be made from it. In the absence of both individual capacity and market opportunity, the family is the proper locus of care. In the neoliberal model, there is no role for human interdependence outside the family. The ideal type of citizen is thus free of caring responsibilities: ‘there is a deep disrespect for the relationally engaged, caring citizen’ (Lynch 2010, 62)

The sense in which we use the term care in this article can be defined most simply as ‘attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take

responsibility' (Held 2006, 10). Noddings makes an important distinction between caring for, which involves face to face relationships, and caring about, which is a more abstract attachment to a cause or an idea. In an education context, the teacher, as the relatively more powerful partner, must take the initiative in caring, but the caring relation is only complete when the student accepts the teacher's care and responds by 'a willing and unselfconscious revealing of the self' (Noddings 2012, 73).

Noddings describes four components in a care-based education. First, *modelling*, which requires competence and preparedness for the subjects and lessons they teach. *Dialogue and attention*, involves talking to students to learn about their interests and needs, and monitoring the effects of teaching through discussion with students. *Practice* requires teachers to build in cooperative activities such as group work and class trips to enable students to develop their own caring skills and attributes. In *Confirmation*, the final component, the teacher attributes the best possible reasonable motive for negative behaviour, reflecting back to the student the best version of themselves (Noddings, 1984). An example of this might be a teacher's response to a child who normally gives in their homework on time, who on one occasion has not done so. Confirmation in this case would mean that the teacher anticipates that there will be a good reason why the homework has not been done, rather than assuming it was due to negligence.

Noddings' central argument is that any successful educational encounter between a student and a teacher begins with the teacher's genuine engagement with the perspective and the needs of the student:

If what we do instructionally achieves the instrumental end- A learns x- we have succeeded instructionally. But if A hates x and his³ teacher as a result, we have failed educationally. A is not 'better' as a result of our efforts (Noddings 1984, 174)

For Noddings (2005, xix) 'The living other is more important than any theory. This is a central idea in an ethic of care'.

Her call to return to the central importance of a caring teacher-student relationships in schools offers a strong challenge to current practice. Reflecting on Noddings' work and marketised education systems, Chatelier and Rudolph (2018, 6) characterise current conceptions of teachers and students as:

'two economic units whose success or failure is contingent upon their value being increased [and where] the increased value of one unit is reciprocally related to the other. If the student increases its value, so too does the teacher. Thus, while there is a relation that continues, the relation has been transfigured from a human relation to an economic one.

One early and significant criticism of Noddings's concept of caring (e.g. Hult 1979) was that such intensity- engrossment, in Noddings's terms- places an unrealistic and unfair burden on teachers. She argues that this criticism misunderstands the nature of caring:

I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is be totally and non-selectively present to

³ throughout her work Noddings uses the female pronoun for the one-caring (in this case the teacher) and the male pronoun for the one cared-for (in this case the student).

the student – to each student- as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief, but the encounter is total. (Noddings 1984, 180)

Hoagland (1990) suggested that another potential difficulty with Noddings's model is that it might create inappropriate levels of dependency in the cared for. Wehlage et al. (1989, 122) articulate a similar objection to caring relationships between students and teachers:

Many teachers in comprehensive high schools believe it is important to create social distance between themselves and their students as a means of maintaining discipline and helping students to become more independent, responsible and mature.

Her student-centred approach suggests that it is the student who should determine when they are ready for independence, and it is for the teacher to respond to this need.

Noddings's work makes the significance of a nurturing teacher-student relationship clear. But importantly for this article, she also addresses the question of whether attention to students' concerns and experiences outside school is a legitimate matter for teachers. She argues that what she calls relatedness is crucial for the teacher, who is ideally 'not eager to move her students into abstraction and objectivity if such a move results in detachment and loss of relation' (Noddings 1984, 182) This suggests that teachers need to ensure that their teaching is relevant to the students. Elsewhere (Noddings 1984, 184) she argues that the school should be:

a setting in which values, beliefs and opinions can be examined both critically and appreciatively. It is absurd to suppose we are educating when we ignore those matters that lie at the very heart of existence.

Such matters, she suggests, are likely to include, ‘God, sex, killing, loving, fear, hope and hate’ (Noddings 1984, 184) many of which were indeed raised as pressing issues by the students in our study.

It is possible to argue that teachers who seek to give students the best chance for examination success are caring for their students to the best of their ability in the current system. Indeed, Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) argue that in neoliberal education systems, caring is increasingly rearticulated as attention to learning outcomes and academic standards. It could be argued that this is a form of caring *about* students in an abstract, generalised sense, rather than caring *for* them as individuals with unique needs and experiences. The participants in our study were cared *about* throughout their school lives, and excelled academically. Yet they felt that their education lacked attention to two key issues, each of which, following Noddings, we define as aspects of caring *for*: nurturing relationships with their teachers, and a recognition of their personal and social needs as young adults finding their place in the wider world.

Nurturing student - teacher relationships

There is a considerable body of research that shows that caring *for* students, in Noddings’ terms, leads to positive outcomes, both in terms of academic achievement (e.g. Tichnor-Wagner and Allen 2016; Thijs and Fleischmann 2015; Duncan-Andrade 2007; Strahan & Layall 2006) and in terms of students’ wider personal and social development (e.g. Gorard and See 2011; Archer & Yamashita 2003; Langer 2000). In

her study of three secondary schools in the USA, Aness (2003, 127) states that strong teacher-student relationships were ‘the central, most powerful, driving force of the schools.’

Gorard and See (2011) found that the qualities that students most valued in teachers were all aspects of caring *for*: above all, competent teaching, which Noddings defined as modelling. Then, being available for academic and personal support; listening to their concerns; and being able to relate to them as people, by having a joke or remembering a birthday, for example. These can all be seen as examples of what Noddings termed ‘attention and dialogue’. Krane et al. (2017) also noted that positive relationships between teachers and students are built through small acts of human kindness.

Johnson’s study (2008) suggests that such small acts of care had a positive impact on students’ ability to cope in school. He also found that schools that seek ways of strengthening student-teacher relationships over time, for example assigning teachers to work with the same class for up to three of four years, made them more likely to turn to their teachers for help when needed, a recommendation Noddings has made (1984, 2012). Aness (2003) also found that low teacher turnover in the schools in her study made trusting relationships more likely to develop. However, teacher recruitment and retention are becoming a challenge internationally. In England, the government has reported that more teachers leave the profession before the retirement age than 5 years ago, 30% within 5 years and that schools are finding it a challenge to fill positions with quality teachers (Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018). This scenario is echoed by Kulz (2017) who suggests in her ethnographic study of an English urban academy that staff turnover amongst teachers is high and that this is in part to do with their workload. The students in our study also raised this as a problem in developing relationships with teachers.

Graham et al. (2014) argue that the importance of good individual student-teacher relationships extends beyond the classroom into the ethos of the school as a whole. But developing a caring school community is often in direct conflict with the more urgent need to maintain a strong league table position. In the UK, official policy recognises in theory the importance of positive teacher-student relationships. The All Party Parliamentary group's 'Character and Resilience manifesto' (Paterson et.al 2014) highlighted the importance of positive student-teacher relationships in supporting and guiding students to meet the challenges of employment and future life. But Author (2016) highlights difficulties in this, suggesting that the demands placed on teachers mean that they often do not know their students well enough to be able to offer them the appropriate support and guidance to meet such challenges. Kidger et al. (2009) explored the views of staff and students about the ways in which students' emotional health is supported in 296 English secondary schools. They suggest that despite key policy documents, (DfES 2007; DH 2005; DfEE 2001) emphasising the significance of school settings in addressing students' emotional wellbeing, in the eight schools in which they conducted focus groups it was felt by both students and staff that the schools did not actively support students through a caring ethos. Although students highlighted the importance of having someone to talk to when coping with emotional difficulties, their teachers felt that they lacked the requisite knowledge to support them. Whilst schools provided a range of support, for example, learning mentors and a school nurse, students knew little about the options available to them (Kidger et al. 2009).

There is some evidence to suggest that the reason for this lack of attention to student well-being is that formal organisational responsibility for pastoral care in schools is

being marginalised by academic achievement priorities. Ball et al.'s study of four English secondary schools (2012, 80) found one of the schools had rewritten the role of heads of year so that their central focus shifted to improving achievement for their year group rather than addressing behavioural issues. They argue (2012, 79) that the 'totalising and individualising of performance' in all four schools, 'colonise[d] a great deal of school activity and teacher-student interactions', leading one teacher to comment: 'every child doesn't matter, what matters is getting A to C grades above a certain percentage.' The authors argue that such a system leads to teachers objectifying students as 'talented, borderline, underachieving, irredeemable' (Ball et al. 2012, 78) in terms of their potential for examination success, rather than relating to them on a human level. Thompson (2010) suggests that good student-teacher relationships are often dependent on teachers seeing students as, 'the hegemonic good student', meaning the student who conforms to school expectations not only in terms of attainment, but also in terms of appearance and behaviour (Bradbury 2013; Youdell 2003, 2004). Viewing students in this way has a particularly negative effect on working class and some ethnic minority students who find it harder to meet the criteria for this narrow view of the good student (Kulz 2017; Valenzuela 1999). Of particular relevance to this study is the finding that there is often a lack of understanding between Muslim students and their teachers (Sensoy and Darius-Stonebanks 2009; Basit 1997).

Attention to students' personal and social concerns as young adults finding their place in the world

Dialogue is one of the four components of care in Noddings's formulation, and she argues that 'if dialogue is to occur in schools it must be legitimate to discuss whatever is of intellectual interest to the students' (Noddings 1984, 183). Based on this, we argue

that attention to students' personal and social concerns is also an aspect of care. Lingard et al's extensive work on pedagogy also highlights the importance of making connections between curriculum subjects and both students' biographies and the world beyond the classroom (e.g. Lingard et al 2001, 2003). This work built on Newmann et al's (1996) influential research which advocated what they termed authentic pedagogy, incorporating three key elements: knowledge construction, disciplined enquiry and value beyond school. According to this research, it is important for learning that school achievement has 'aesthetic, utilitarian, or personal value apart from documenting the competence of the learner.' (Newmann et al 1996)

Despite this evidence of the pedagogical merit in making connections with students' lives and with the outside world, there is a growing body of research which suggests that genuine critical discussion of topics such as race, class and students' cultures are often avoided in schools and classrooms (Kulz 2017; Darder 2002). A reluctance to discuss social questions can extend to the school curriculum, where contemporary issues, which would make the learning more relevant and urgent, are not taken up. Alexander and Weekes Barnard (2017) suggest that whilst historically the humanities have been a valuable forum for exploring questions relating to students' identities, contemporary history teaching does not routinely include the diversity of students' lives. Epstein (2009) concurs, suggesting that this is because of teachers' fears about creating conflict with students, parents, or community members, or of losing control in the classroom, or because of the pressure to focus on the formal syllabus. Journell's study (2010) of teachers of politics in US secondary schools found they rarely made links to contemporary politics in teaching. He also suggests that this was because of a reluctance to depart from a fact-based curriculum geared to passing high stakes tests in

a marketized system. Au (2008) argues that this testing regime also produces a more teacher-centred pedagogy, with fewer opportunities for genuine student engagement and interactivity, such as field trips, discussions and independent work. In Noddings's terms these represent lost opportunities for practising co-operative skills as well as ways of making learning more relevant. Thompson et al (2010, 651) are also critical of exam technologies which deny students the opportunity to 'connect more strongly with their everyday concerns'. Vainker and Bailey (2018, 783) agree that this avoidance of contemporary connections stems from the increasingly accepted view that: 'the secret to success is to focus very tightly on the critical area for success, ruthlessly ignoring activities extraneous to achieving results'.

School assemblies, traditionally opportunities for discussing more personal and community issues which impact on students' lives, are now more often used as powerful instruments in establishing the ethos and expectations of the school and to disciplining and shaping students' conduct accordingly (Silbert and Jacklin 2015). Yet Baines et al. (2018, 102) argue that on issues of racism and other aspects of social injustice:

[The students] are already living it, whether they are victims of it or not. If we're not talking about it at a young age, they'll develop rose coloured spectacles and pretend it's not happening, or they will feel like their teachers don't care...

'silence is a great teacher. It says, 'I'm fine with the way things are.'

Methods

Data from this article are drawn from a small scale interpretive, empirical study which involved interviews with seven sixth form students in one urban academy during 2018. The original aim was to explore how students experienced the current marketised regime of teaching and learning on a day to day basis. We selected this school for two reasons. First, because it was judged to be outstanding in every area of school life in its latest Ofsted inspection report, including students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Thus we chose a setting in which the marketised system was working successfully on its own terms. Second because it was located in an ethnically mixed area. This enabled us to explore the impact of marketization on students from a range of backgrounds. At the time of the interviews, the Ofsted report recorded 60% of students as being from minority ethnic backgrounds, described as mainly African and Pakistani; the remainder were from white British backgrounds.

Snowball sampling (Robson 2016) was used to identify participants. One student who was known to one of the researchers, was initially interviewed and then asked to identify other students who she could approach. The profiles of these participants are detailed in Table 1. Although we did not seek to create a representative group, it does in fact reflect the ethnic make-up of the school. The first participant interviewed was a high attaining student and she then identified other participants who were also doing well academically. This gave us a group of seven successful students. Although it was not our original intention to select by attainment this led us to explore how marketization impacts on the most successful students. There has been relatively little research on high attaining students' perspectives on their school lives. The experiences of students who have been marginalised by current education policy have received a good deal of attention and there is good evidence that the system is not working for

them (e.g. Kulz 2017; Sensoy and Darius Stonebanks 2009). There has also been some work done on how middle attaining students navigate the system (Thompson et al, 2010). Our data suggests that even those students who were benefitting, in credentialist terms, from these same policy imperatives, felt that something was lacking in their education. We have characterised this as a lack of care.

The researcher who knew the first participant conducted all of the interviews. She possessed a good knowledge of the school and its members (Greene 2014). This ‘insider’ knowledge and relationship to one of the students enabled her to establish trust amongst the group and led to more natural interactions and spontaneous conversations with participants, directly before and after interviews, which enriched the data (Unluer 2012).

Working with a small sample was also beneficial for a number of reasons. The interviewer was able to establish fruitful relationships with the participants and thus explore their experiences in depth. For this depth to be achieved, it was important for research to be intensive, where one individual ‘case’ can provide new insight, rather than extensive (Crouch and Mckenzie 2006). Second, a relatively small data set meant that each of us became very familiar with each unit of data and was able to see connections between them. Third, we believe that this has benefits for the reader as they are able to ‘get to know’ the participants as they read several of their contributions across various themes. This is far more likely in a smaller sample than in a larger one where only one or two quotes maybe offered. With a small sample such as this, our aim was not to generalise but to enrich and deepen the discussion in this area (Crouch and

Mckenzie 2006) by representing how one group of young people experience marketised structures at the micro level.

Data were collected through six in depth individual face to face semi structured interviews and one interview conducted by email. These interviews took place in a location which was chosen by the participant- in most cases a local café known to them. Interviews lasted 40-60 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. Questions focused on eliciting detailed discussions in relation to day to day experiences of the current marketised regime of teaching and learning. The project followed guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018) and was granted ethical approval from the researchers' institution.

Table 1: The participants

Name of student	Profile
Sara	A seventeen year-old student of Somali heritage ⁴ , who joined the school at the age of sixteen from a state secondary school in a neighbouring London borough. She is studying sciences in the sixth form and has a place at university to study Medicine next year
Samaya	An eighteen year-old Indian Muslim student who has been at the school since she was eleven. She is studying Humanities subjects at 'A' level

⁴ These descriptions of ethnic backgrounds are derived from students' own self-definitions at interview

Nuur	An eighteen year-old student of Somali heritage who has been at the school since he was eleven. He is studying sciences at ‘A’ level and has been offered places at two universities to study Medicine next year.
Jade	An eighteen year- old student of black Caribbean heritage who joined the school at the age of sixteen and has a place to study Politics at University next year
Sofia	A seventeen year- old student of mixed white and black West African heritage. She has been at the school since she was eleven and is going to study History at University next year.
Luna	An eighteen year-old white British student who joined the school at the age of sixteen and is studying sciences. She has a university place next year to study Physics.
Faheem	An eighteen year-old student of Pakistani heritage who has been at the school since he was eleven and is intending to study Medicine next year.

A thematic approach was used to analyse the data, which involved a six-phase process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Working separately, we coded all individual units of data from the transcripts. We then worked together to assign codes to themes to reflect as accurately as possible the participants’ perceptions of their experiences at school. Whilst one of us, the interviewer, had established relationships with the participants and brought her detailed knowledge of the participants and the school context to this process, the other, who was not involved in data collection and thus unfamiliar with the research context, was able to focus exclusively on the units of data. This worked as a form of validation and strengthened our analysis. Three main themes

emerged through this process. Two themes related to the students' perceptions of their experiences at school. The first was that they felt their teachers did not know anything about them as individuals and the second, that teachers did not discuss anything that they felt to be important in their lives outside school. The third theme concerned students' explanations for these perceptions. These were: that schools see learning as purely for the purpose of passing examinations; that teachers lacked the knowledge and confidence to discuss contemporary issues that were relevant to their lives and that such discussions might lead to distracting levels of controversy in school. Although our original intention was to focus on students' experiences of marketised school systems, during the process of data analysis we saw a clear connection between our reading on the impact of marketization on students, and the ethics of caring.

Findings

Teacher-student relationships

Each of the seven students noted that teachers appeared uninterested in them as people, and that there were few instances of them feeling cared *for*.

Faheem:

It was all about good grades. If you make a good impression on me and you're going to get good grades then great...otherwise I don't really care about you,

Luna:

If the school shows an interest in something about a student's life other than their exams that would really reduce the atmosphere of pressure that created especially in sixth forms.

Faheem and Luna articulate the view-which was repeated by all seven students - that examination success was seen by the school as the *only* important factor in their school life. This led them both to feel that teachers did not care about them as young people with complex needs, interests and experiences. Their views are reflected in Apple's (2001) argument that in an increasing number of schools, students are not seen as human beings but as individuals who are valued only in as far as they bring value to the school, and Ball et al.'s (2012) observation that students are often objectified in terms of their capacity to do well in their examinations. Luna's comment highlights the pressure this places on students.

Nuur was also critical of the school's focus on testing, suggesting that for him success was more bound up with human relationships:

School is not just about grades- it's way more than that. What does successful mean anyway? To me it's about having a good relationship with everyone, being happy, their mental welfare, this all depends on an understanding of everyone.

His comment suggests that good human relationships are based on a mutual understanding of and acceptance of difference and that it is the responsibility of schools to facilitate these relationships (Gorard and See 2011). He articulates clearly the desire for a more caring ethos in the school.

Sara, a Muslim student, offered another example of how a lack of care impacts negatively on students:

If someone says something about Islam to me, I wouldn't go to a teacher, if someone says something abusive, keep it to yourself. I'd probably just go to the toilet, cry to myself, then come out and be ok again.

Sara suggests that she felt her experience of anti-Muslim racism would not be understood, and that no action would be taken. Although there were few instances in the interviews of any students approaching teachers with their problems, other comments from Muslim students suggest that this was a particularly difficult issue for Muslim students in the current anti-Muslim era (Sensoy and Darius-Stonebanks 2009).

Noddings's (1984, 60-1) claim that the attitude of the teacher as the 'one-caring' is crucial in establishing a caring relationship, and that students 'feel the difference between being received and being held off or ignored' seems relevant here. We suggest that these students felt that they were being either 'held off' or ignored by their teachers, and that there was therefore little chance that they could or would understand how such situations might impact on them as young Muslims.

Ball et al (2012) suggest that classroom teachers' pastoral role is being eroded because of the focus on examinations. In this school, pastoral care was seen as the responsibility of particular staff members, but, as in Kidger et al.'s study (2009), some students were not clear how this worked, and Sofia felt staffing was not managed in a sensitive way:

Our new academic co-ordinator is supposed to be able to deal with pastoral stuff but it's a man- Asian girls especially don't want to go to a man with issues. I don't think we've even got a head of pastoral at school. You'd have to check the website.

Nuur:

There's a head of mental health but I only know because the lady in the library told me.

There are several issues here. First, that a member of staff with the title 'academic co-ordinator' is responsible for young people's personal and emotional needs suggests that, as Ball et al. suggest, this role has been colonised by academic achievement priorities. Second, that neither Nuur nor Sofia, who had both spent seven years at the school, know who has overall responsibility for pastoral care at the school, suggests that this aspect of school life is not seen as important by the school. Kidger et al (2009) offer evidence that students' lack of knowledge about who is responsible for well-being issues is a common problem. Third, that the member of staff with responsibility for sixth formers' personal issues is a man in a cohort which has a large number of Muslim students suggests a lack of understanding and empathy for their needs.

Traditionally, the form tutor would have had a key role in pastoral support. But Sofia felt that this role had changed from one of pastoral care to a more academic focus:

Even form tutors are more about the academic stuff and I've had lots of those. I think you've got to hope you get a good relationship with one teacher.

Here Sofia suggests that in this school, as in the school in Ball et al.'s study (2012), the role of the form tutor is now more focused on attainment than pastoral care. She also points to the issue of high staff turnover contributing to the difficulties she faces in building positive and supportive relationships with her teachers (Ovenden-Hope et al. 2018; Kulz 2017).

Faheem reflected on the impact the lack of care from teachers had on him:

It was hard as some of them were genuinely really nice people and it was hard to see that they didn't care for you...you're also a human being and an adult and I think they thought it would affect our studies without realising that if they *didn't* address things it would affect our studies. You're still neglecting the fact that certain people have other things going on that will affect their studies.

His words suggest he understood that teachers may sometimes be forced, against their better judgement, to act in ways he perceives as uncaring. There is research that suggests that this pressure comes directly from a perceived need to prioritise students' examination results (Moore and Clarke 2016; Ball and Olmedo 2013) and that teachers may perceive the removal of distractions from exams, which are so crucial to students' future success, as a form of caring (Dadvand and Cuervo 2020). However, Faheem interprets decisions *not* to address such issues as a lack of care, because they do not take account of students' lived experiences and how these impact on their capacity to engage with learning and school life in general.

Across the seven interviews there was only one mention of what we would define as ‘caring *for*’ from a teacher. Faheem recalled:

The only teacher I had who engaged with us was my French teacher...I would go to her and tell her stuff that was going on and I remember in her French class she put on a subject about the hijab and France for us to talk about...she was really, really sweet but there’s only so much one person can do I guess...she was such a nice teacher but she just did normal stuff but for us it felt like above and beyond which was crazy really...she left after a couple of years though...

This teacher appeared to care for her students: she was approachable and available for support, and took time to make the curriculum relevant to their interests and experiences (Krane et al. 2017; Tichnor-Wagner and Allen 2016). Faheem notes that this behaviour should have been ‘normal’ but because most teachers adhered to a narrow curriculum geared towards examination success (Vainker and Bailey 2018) it felt unusually personal and relevant.

The place of contemporary issues in school

The second major problem that the students raised was the lack of attention paid to contemporary or culturally relevant issues in school. While some students referred to the lack of attention to issues they saw as urgent in the curriculum, most focused on an institutional near-silence on local and global events.

All seven students noted that at times the school was completely silent on such issues.

Sofia remembered:

We had a minute's silence after Manchester. The school didn't mention the attack, no assembly and they didn't warn form tutors that there'd be a minute's silence. We were sat in Psychology and the bell went and Mr. S said, 'it's a minute's silence,' and only halfway through we realised what it was for. It must be for Manchester- then it was, 'ok, get on with your work.

Sofia refers here to the recent terrorist attack on a concert venue in Manchester, in the North of England. She highlights the fact that there had been no mention of the attack at the time, and on the day of the minute's silence, form tutors were not informed that it would take place. Nevertheless, the teacher did not offer the chance to discuss the purpose of the silence, and was keen to return to the lesson as soon as possible, even though public examinations were not due to be held until the following year. She suggests that the acknowledgement of it was tokenistic rather than an opportunity to support students' understanding of complex contemporary issues (Kulz 2017; Darder 2002).

Nuur and Luna both referred to the missed opportunities offered by assemblies. Nuur suggests:

There's never any discussion...even assemblies are driven by grades...I was wondering why they're never about social political issues that are currently in the news, for example issues with Islamophobia.

Luna:

In assemblies teachers sometimes talk about social issues but generally in only a widely socially accepted way. Terms such as 'feminism' are seen as too controversial. The head of sixth form told a student they could not use the word 'feminism' in an assembly they had been asked to present but they did it anyway because feminism isn't even a controversial word.

Nuur refers to the way in which assemblies are focused on academic attainment and reflects on how they might be used to offer opportunities to discuss a wider range of issues that impact on him and his peers, such as Islamophobia. He was one of four students who mentioned during his interview the rare instance of a student-led assembly, on feminism, which Luna refers to above. She relates that even when the students were allowed to lead an assembly themselves, it was monitored very closely by senior management to ensure that the issues discussed were not contentious. While we cannot know the reason for the Head of Sixth form's instruction, the fact that even the term 'feminism' was deemed too controversial suggests that the parameters within which the students' were allowed to express themselves were very narrow, a phenomenon also noted by Kulz (2017).

For the Muslim students, the spate of terrorist attacks in Manchester and London had a particularly disturbing personal relevance, which was not addressed at school. Samaya stated:

The terrorist attacks aren't talked about. There is always a backlash after a terrorist incident- I'm always a bit more scared to leave the house and my parents are a bit more protective of me.

Sara:

There's no space to talk about it, Islam in the curriculum. No space for talking about it as a peaceful religion...I was dreading the attack on Grenfell Tower⁵ being...you know... when I woke up.

Both Samaya and Sara refer to their fear that as young Muslim women they will themselves be targeted after an attack. Sara's fear in reference to the fire at Grenfell Tower highlights the impact that the terror attacks have on Muslims, who know that the level of abuse and suspicion rises after each incident. But they both state that these fears were never addressed in school. Taken together with Sara's earlier comment that she would never speak to a teacher about receiving abuse because of her religious faith, these experiences illustrate Noddings's (1984) articulation of the relationship between the one caring and the cared for. Because no one in the school had taken the initiative

⁵ A fire broke out in a large block of flats in West London in June 2017, resulting in 72 deaths.

The cause of the fire is widely understood to be negligence on the part of the management company and the council in this very wealthy part of London. The residents of the block were mainly from poorer, ethnic minority backgrounds. An official inquiry is ongoing.

and offered care, the students did not feel able to share their individual concerns and their experiences: to ‘reveal’ themselves.

Two students mentioned the school’s stance on the referendum on Britain’s exit from the European Union. Faheem was very troubled by the school’s silence:

Brexit was a major problem. I wanted them to address it and they didn’t, it made me so uncomfortable. We didn’t know where we’re heading; we were only 16, no one addressed it in school, no one explained it. There were people in school who had European passports who were told that they might have to leave. How is that being organised? What is the school stance? They left it completely, they said nothing.

Sofia remembered a comment from the Deputy Head at around this time:

Before the externals [students new to the sixth form] started sixth form Mr. W. said, ‘forget about Brexit, about everything, until after your exams are over.’

Mr. W.’s comment is likely to have been motivated by his desire to ensure the students focused solely on revising for their examinations, and his perception of issues like Brexit as a potential distraction from the most important task of the school (Ball et al. 2012). But Faheem’s response shows that this approach is actually more likely to distract some students, as they are left anxious and fearful about their status and future. He reiterated his frustration with the school’s silence on important global issues in

relation to the election of Donald Trump, and made an important point about how he interpreted that silence:

What was so hard around the time of Donald Trump...when he got elected it was a massive blow to me, everything he stood for, it was a massive blow to loads of people, I remember going into school and thinking is anyone going to talk about this? I was terrified and I know a lot of other people were too and I was thinking is anybody going to address this? There's a complete racist lunatic in power and the teachers are saying nothing. I think the senior teachers, their silence, I thought meant something else. You start to think their silence means they're in favour of it and heavily in favour of it.

As Baines et al (2018) argue, when schools are silent, whatever the motives for that silence, students may interpret this as complicity, or at least a lack of care for students and their concerns.

While the norm of silence on such issues was seen as damaging by many in the group, they also saw the teachers' occasional interventions on discussions as sometimes problematic. Sara mentioned that the terrorist attack in Westminster was brought up in an assembly, 'as an example of London coming together. Nothing else, though'.

Her history teacher also referred to the attack, because a history school trip had had to be cancelled as a result. Sara recalled:

Mr. W. talked about what had happened, someone was shot et cetera, but nothing about religion- the root of it, that the man that did it was Muslim and did it in the name of Islam.

The reference to the attack only as an example of Londoners coming together, a good news story, appears to ignore the more complex and troubling issue of how British Muslims are positioned after such incidents. It is likely that in this incident, as in each of the incidents above, race plays a part: most of the teachers were white, and took a particular perspective on the attack. The aspect of the story that carried most meaning for them was the coming together of the community in response to the attack, and as teachers they had the power to determine the stance taken in the classroom. For the Muslim students, however, the attack carried much more troubling meanings, which were not touched upon in the teachers' responses (Imam 2009). In Noddings's (1984) terms, in meeting the needs of her students, a teacher should try to attain a dual vision: her own perspective alongside that of her student. In these instances, we suggest that the teachers approached the question only from their own point of view, and did not consider the perspectives of the students.

It is important to acknowledge that, while the students lacked the power to change the ways in which particular topics were handled in school, and certainly to challenge the results driven focus, they were by no means unwitting victims of these circumstances. They were perceptive and politically astute in their diagnoses of why their relationships with their teachers were so distant and why there was so little opportunity to discuss issues of interest to them. The most common explanation, offered repeatedly by all seven students, was articulated simply by Jade:

I think schools just see themselves as institutions to prepare you for exams.

and Nuur:

They just bang on about grades, a million times, non-stop, repeat.

Thus, students were very aware of the school as narrowly focused on examination success and elite university entrance (Au 2008; Harlen 2005). However, all the students also pointed to teachers' lack of knowledge, confidence or experience as explanatory factors in understanding why they did not address potentially controversial or personal issues. Sara suggested:

Without a textbook telling them what to say, they're a bit lost. They're not racist, they just don't want to tread on any toes. I can empathise with them. I'd probably be the same.

Sara suggests that teachers lack the experience to address issues directly, preferring to stay within the safe confines of the prescribed curriculum, represented by the textbook. Noddings (1984, 197-98) notes that the ideal teacher-student relationship she envisages requires a high level of expertise from teachers:

If the teacher does not know her subject matter very well, she cannot give her full attention to the students who are approaching it in a variety of ways. She

must, instead, maintain absolute control so that things are done her way- the only way with which she is familiar and comfortable.

But Sara also notes that there is another element to this reluctance to address issues of race. She is aware that some might interpret such avoidance techniques as racism- as indeed Faheem did in his comments on the school's silence on Trump's election victory. Sara, however, sees this silence as to do with a wish to avoid causing offence, through uninformed comment. Sara was not the only student to suggest that she empathised with her teachers and recognised the difficult balancing act that they had to perform. Other students showed that they understood that teachers might struggle to understand the lives of their students, because of the socio-economic differences between them (Basit 1997). Pearce and Lewis (2019) have argued that this has been exacerbated by the demands of accountability which leaves teachers little time for personal discussion and relationship building with students and their families, which would help them to understand their religious and cultural experiences.

Sofia was particularly astute in recognising the different possible reasons for teachers' silence on these issues:

Maybe teachers themselves don't talk about it; don't feel they can talk about it. Many are white, and come from mainly white areas. Some though might [talk about it] but are not in an environment that encourages it.

Like Sara above, Sofia appears to suggest that some white teachers, unfamiliar with multi-ethnic communities and race issues, might be reluctant to enter into discussions

on these topics. But she also acknowledges that other teachers would be willing to engage in discussion, but are prevented from doing so, either explicitly or implicitly, by the deracialised, examination-oriented norms of the school. Nuur also suggests that senior management placed pressure on classroom teachers not to deviate from the prescribed curriculum:

It's the system, they [Senior Management Team] push the kids and the teachers, so they come into lessons and tell them they're not doing it right in front of the kids. So, the teachers wouldn't think about talking about other stuff in lessons...apart from Mr. C, he talks to me outside of lessons about all sorts of things, and the librarian. But they're older, more confident, lots of years of experience.

Such approaches reflect the non-negotiable authoritarian management strategies discussed in Kulz's study (2017) where teachers are reluctant to deviate from tightly controlled lesson plans in order to incorporate 'sensitive' conversations into their lessons, even when they might enhance learning in the classroom. Nuur perceives Mr. C's and the librarian's willingness to talk to him outside lessons as a confidence gained through experience which allows them to circumvent the hierarchy in the ways that the less experienced teachers, who feel the need to maintain a degree of distance, do not possess. He also highlights the impact that senior managers' monitoring has on teachers. This point is taken up by Luna:

I think teachers higher up in the school [i.e. the Senior Management Team] try to avoid anything that could be controversial so if it came up they would skirt around it instead of discussing it.

She also encapsulates the view of several students when she stated:

In my experience teachers rarely talk about anything that could be sensitive and it generally seems like this is because they're afraid of a student or parent complaining about a teacher attempting to influence them...I think it also makes teachers more tense because they're constantly thinking that they could say something wrong and get in trouble.

Luna felt that all teachers were eager to avoid controversy. In her view, senior managers, who were responsible for maintaining the school's reputation in the community, did so because it might attract bad publicity for the school, a major concern in a marketised system. In contrast, for subject teachers, she felt that this was to avoid problems with behaviour in the classroom (Epstein 2009). She also alludes here to another possible fear for teachers: that of attracting criticism from parents, which might also have repercussions for the school's reputation.

Conclusion

This article has explored how the current marketised education system is eroding caring relationships in schools. The students in our study reported that their teachers knew very little about them as individuals and were reluctant to discuss any of the pressing

contemporary issues of the time: Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the Grenfell Tower disaster, events that impacted directly on their lives. This was especially damaging for the Muslim students who suffered daily as a result of these world events and felt that they could not talk to their teachers, as they lacked the knowledge and understanding of how these events impacted upon their lives. We argue that these experiences were all the result of the school's focus on maintaining its position in the marketplace in order to attract aspirational parents whose children would continue the cycle of success.

We acknowledge that marketisation has brought benefits to the students in our study, in terms of its commitment to high attainment, which, alongside the students' own attributes, contributed to their academic success. We argue, however, that this has come at a cost, as the academy did not have a caring role in students' lives. All seven students felt that school life should be concerned with more than the current focus on passing high stakes tests (Journell 2010; Vainker and Bailey 2018). As Faheem's reference to his French teacher demonstrates, what the students wanted was the small acts of human kindness from teachers that Krane et al. (2017) describe – an interest in their lives, listening to their concerns as a platform for building trusting relationships. They also wanted teachers who see contemporary events as valid topics for discussion in the classroom, and, echoing Noddings (1984; 2012), who have the subject expertise, life experience and confidence to address them. Although a focus on teachers was not the aim of this article, our data shows that the students recognised the difficult position that teachers were sometimes placed in, torn between caring *for* the students, i.e. wanting to engage with them, and caring *about* them, by coaching them to pass their exams. They

tended to see senior management as responsible for this. We argue that they in turn were under intense pressure to maintain the school's position in the market place.

In 2019 the school inspection body for England, Ofsted, published a new inspection framework which appeared to acknowledge some of the deficiencies that the students in our study have highlighted. It warned that inspections would in future give less credit to schools that achieve examination success at the expense of a broad education, and give more consideration to their social and emotional learning, including for example, their 'interests and talents', their 'resilience' and their 'appreciation of diversity' (Ofsted 2019, 11). There are signs here of a possible and limited reconsideration of the place of caring in schools, and a greater willingness to return to a debate about the purpose of education.

Since this article was written, two global emergencies have, in very different ways, brought this issue to much greater prominence. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen many schools focus on the physical and mental well-being of their students during lockdown. In the UK, headteachers are calling for a 'rebirth' of the school system in which the relationships and socialisation of young people and the school's role in the community is prioritised over results and inspections (Millar 2020). The Black Lives Matter movement has brought the issue of the lack of care for minoritized students in schools, and the lack of attention to diversity in the curriculum, to the fore. Many of the students in our study spoke eloquently of the pain and alienation they experienced as a result. Noddings' (1984, 184) insistence that education must attend to 'those matters that lie at the very heart of existence' is worth repeating here. We argue that her work on the centrality of caring teacher-student relationships offers a critical lens through which to

view how young people experience the consequences of marketisation in schools. It also offers authoritative support for those seeking a return to education as a moral and social endeavour, rather than a narrowly economic one.

Word count 8, 873

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