

**DO WE WANT THE CANARY TO SING? THINKING ALTERNATIVELY  
ABOUT ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION**

Amy Elizabeth Swain

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Approved by:

George W. Noblit

Allison D. Anders

Silvia Bettez

James Trier

Jocelyn Glazier

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## **ABSTRACT**

AMY ELIZABETH SWAIN: Do we want the canary to sing? Thinking  
alternatively about alternative education  
(Under the direction of Dr. George W. Noblit)

Alternative schools give us a perspective for viewing our educational system as a whole, while also considering the message and purpose of our institutions. Who does alternative schooling serve? What is the job of alternative schooling? Hugh Cale Community School, located in eastern North Carolina, offers insight into the role and purpose of alternative education from the perspective of students and staff. This work invites readers into the hallways of Cale to learn about the students and staff who work there. Cale is a site of contrast between the agency of individuals and the constraints of systemic institutional structures. This work is intended to speak back to the educational community writ large about the position and possibility of alternative education.

## **DEDICATION**

To my grandmother, Frances H. Harris,  
who believed in me

And to my boys, Jack and Teddy,  
who changed my life

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This work is but one moment of my life, a moment that floats and rubs against other moments filled with the heart and laughter of so many people who have graced my life. This work, like this life, continues on in moments passed and moments to come, all these strung together and connected, winking and beaming, like party lights along a night sky. My thanks and appreciation for those who fill these moments is beyond measure: you fill my heart and make my life possible.

I am so grateful to the students and staff at Hugh Cale Community School, who allowed me into their school and made me a part of the culture there. The staff at Cale is comprised of so many amusing people who filled my days with laughter. The students at Cale are all so wonderfully wrought. There is nothing in the world like the magic of youth, and I am so happy to have been able to share in the lives of these kids. Thank you, thank you, thank you guys for rocking as hard as you do.

If I were allowed to do so, I'd shrink into a teeny, tiny person and sneak away into the pocketbook of Mrs. Jamison, so as to be able to be carried away into her adventures wherever she might go. I doubt she'd let me do that, simply because she would get annoyed with having to feed me and answer my questions so instead, I will share yummy Panera bagels and laughter over (real!) coffee and be eternally grateful to be called her friend.

My family has made many sacrifices so that I might be able to write and do my work. In a sense, they each gave me two gifts, one of themselves and the other, of me. To Adam, Jack, and Teddy: thank you so much for allowing me this time, and for loving me still while I was gone. I look forward to our lives together. To my momma: thank you for being my Momma Goose. Thank you for this life.

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Carolina wouldn't be Carolina for me without Dr. George Noblit. I remember walking into his office for the very first time, where he sat amidst piles and piles of papers and books, booming laughter and inviting me to study with him. I am not entirely sure who (or what?) is responsible for creating George, but I am so incredibly thankful that he is a part of this world and a part of my life. George is the finest educator I have ever known, and certainly the most courageous. He has introduced me to some of the best people that I know in this world, and he initiated me into the best possible gang ever: AESA. To him I say, "*So what?*" and "Thank you."

Thank you to the other members of my committee: Allison, Silvia, Jim and Jocelyn. Thank you for reading and commenting, for questioning and pushing me to deliver, and thank you for signing off on this thing!

And finally, I am most grateful for the love and guidance shown to me by my grandmother. She once told me I could get here, and so I have.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### HUGH CALE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

As Runt and Michael<sup>1</sup> sign in, the smell of marijuana accompanying them is overwhelming. They arrive after 10 a.m., more than an hour late for school. “You guys smell like smoke,” I say from the front desk, handing each of them small pink passes to class, my white face turned into a frown. Mr. Bryant, the custodian/bus driver/handyman, looks up from his morning Sudoku puzzle and asks Runt to come over closer to him. Runt hesitates and Michael has a sudden desire to use the restroom. Head down, Runt steps next to Bryant and Bryant asks him quietly how his day is going so far. “Good,” is the soft reply. Runt sidesteps Bryant and hurries to join Michael in the bathroom.

Mrs. Jamison, the principal, walks out of her office and Bryant reports that Runt and Michael are late and that they smell like marijuana. Jamison steps out into the hall with a sigh, heading in the general direction of the two latecomers. “I can smell you from here,” she calls after them. From my perch in the front office, I keep my ears perked, interested to see how Jamison will handle this situation. Will she suspend them? Chastise them? Write them up? They are obviously high. The signs are unmistakable: red, sleepy eyes, a slight giggle on their lips.

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<sup>1</sup> All names and places are pseudonyms, with the exception of my husband, Adam, and myself.

A few minutes later, Michael and Runt are on their way out of school. Michael tries to return to his locker, claiming he needs to get some work, and Jamison directs him back to the front door. “You smell like marijuana. Come back tomorrow when you haven't been smoking.” She waves him off. “Goodbye. I'll see you tomorrow.”

It has been two months since I started volunteering in the front office at Hugh Cale Community School. After a few weeks of watching Mrs. Jamison in action, I cannot help but be impressed with her endless patience and consistency. A short, light-skinned black woman, Ailee Jamison is as quick to shake her fist at a student as she is to pat him or her on the back. There have been few instances in which I've witnessed Mrs. Jamison's anger. Usually, this takes place behind closed doors with a student who is constantly eroding her efforts to keep him or her out of trouble. With the majority of students, she is imperturbable, mollifying students by responding to their threats and machinations with a patient indulgence. Firm but forgiving, Mrs. Jamison listens to her students and does her best to appease them.

When two students were reported skipping an off-campus mentorship one afternoon, Mrs. Jamison was highly annoyed but also chastised herself for not stopping to listen to the students. “They were trying to tell me why they didn't want to go, and I just shooed them away.” Caught up in the madness that happens during class changes, Jamison pushed the boys away because she thought they were simply trying to get out of something. “Now they've done skipped their mentorship and we don't know where they are when they are supposed to be with us. What am I supposed to do with them?” Unwilling to suspend them without cause, Mrs. Jamison decided to wait until she found the boys and heard their side of the story before she decided on a consequence for

skipping. This is but one of the many episodes I've witnessed at Hugh Cale Community School in which the principal was deliberate and thoughtful, and slow to render judgment. Blanket, zero tolerance punishments do not have a place at this school. "Work with me and I'll work with you" is Mrs. Jamison's motto.

I easily understand why the students like this school. Cheerful murals and student work decorate the halls. The library is open and full of books, albeit old books; it is a meeting place for school gatherings and faculty celebrations. The cafeteria always smells of some warm meal cooking, and the bangs and clang of the pots and pans captures the sound of that day's lunch. Lockers opening and closing, easy jokes between friends, the errant student lingering in the halls - Hugh Cale is similar in tone and pace to the "home" schools of many of these children, but this place is also more real and more "home" than "school" to many more of these kids. The culture at Hugh Cale is accepting and patient, structured and disciplined, fun and educational without being punitive and crushing. The teachers teach, the students go on field trips, the principal's door is always open.

Interestingly, security is at a minimum for a school that covers grades 6 – 12. There are no metal detectors or surveillance cameras. The only door that is routinely locked is the teacher's lounge, where mail and other personal belongings are stored for teachers. Students breeze in and out of the front office during breaks and in the middle of class, poking their heads in the open doors of Mrs. Jamison or Mrs. Moore, the school's bookkeeper and only office personnel. The bathrooms are open and accessible at all times, where groups of three or four boys often congregate until staff calls them out.

This school exists in stark contrast to other traditional public schools and punitive alternative schools, where security measures sometimes facilitate a "prison-like"

atmosphere (Fisher, 2011; Giroux, 2009; Kupchick and Bracy, 2010; Reyes, 2006). In the early months of 2012, an auditor from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction visited Hugh Cale and found the lack of security almost laughable. He told Mrs. Jamison that Hugh Cale was the “least secure alternative school” he'd ever been in. Following his inspection and based on his recommendations, visitor badges appeared at the front desk, although these were rarely handed out. One obvious reason for the lack of surveillance equipment or security measures is the dearth of expendable funding that Hugh Cale receives each year from the local school board.

The lack of extra funding is a problem for the administration of Hugh Cale, both for security measures and other aspects. Hugh Cale is largely made possible by state funds set aside for “at-risk” children, known better by its line item in the state budget or the colloquial, “69-money.” Because Hugh Cale is an alternative school, the student body rotates with every new semester, thus there is no Booster Club or Parent-Teacher Organization driving fundraising. The guidance counselor, Ms. Givens, works hard each year with local businesses to collect coupons and tickets to distribute as prizes for students and staff. Eyeing you over the glasses sitting on the end of her short, black nose, Ms. Givens will smile and hand you a coupon for a free sundae at Sonic or a free combo from McDonald's. “Treat yourself,” she'll say.

If people are available and weather permits, Mrs. Jamison organizes a car wash to help raise money for the school's slush fund. Ms. Givens can usually convince the local auto stores to donate sponges, rags, and soap. Students are rallied the week prior and promised extra credit for attending or helping out. They come and stand by the street holding hand-lettered signs, yelling at passerby. The staff and teachers who cannot

attend almost always bring their vehicle through with a donation of a few bucks. A local Baptist church will often match any funds raised up to a few hundred dollars; this same church arrives each year with a Christmas tree and decorations during the holiday season. Monies raised during these carwashes go toward special trips for students and staff, such as a school-wide end-of-the-year visit to a nearby water park.

Low funding is the sole reason that Mrs. Jamison works without internal office support. There are no assistant principals and no office personnel save Mrs. Betty Moore, who manages the school's records, phones and money. If Mrs. Jamison has to be absent, the PE teacher or one of the special education teachers step in. In the morning and afternoon, female students cover the front desk, answering telephones and delivering messages as part of their work-study or mentorship. The school is without a gymnasium, using instead a trailer parked behind the main building for sports and other activities. On warm school days, the PE teacher (and former mayor pro tempore of Redding) leads his students outside for their activities. Volleyballs are at the top of the school's "wish list" for donations, along with basketballs, jump ropes, book sets, protractors, rulers, poster board, markers, construction paper, dry erase markers, binders, pens and pencils.

When the school district made cuts over the summer of 2011, Cale lost its assigned school resource officer (SRO) and was forced to "share" with other schools that still had full-time officers. Most of the time, this translated to an officer showing up about once a week and staying for just a few hours. On other days, the deputies would simply ride through the parking lot without ever entering the school building. Some weeks went by without anyone showing up at all. It took Mrs. Jamison a lot of

unpleasant negotiations and closed door-meetings to secure a full-time school resource officer for the 2012-13 school year, as discussed in Chapter Three.

But luckily for the school, the lack of security does not correspond to a lack of safety for students or staff. A glance at the school's Report Card indicates a very low degree of violence at the school (NCDPI, 2013). During the 2011-12 school year, the “number of acts of crime or violence reported per 100 students, which includes all acts occurring in a school, on a school bus, on school grounds, or during off-campus, school-sponsored activities” was just three incidents (NCDPI, 2013)<sup>2</sup> – the same number reported by one of the local high schools, Albemarle High. Camptown High, the other high school, reported 8 incidents of crime or violence during the same school year. Several of the students I interviewed commented on the lack of violence at Hugh Cale. Michael, a rising junior and soon-to-be-father who has been at Hugh Cale since seventh grade, described the student body as full of “class clowns” and said there was “no fights and no violence.” Tyesha, a light-skinned black senior who loves Tweety Bird, supported Michael’s claim, “We never had a fight here in this year, or half the year. I mean, we never have a fight here. We have arguments but everybody has arguments.” She continued, “Like they fight more over [at a local high school] than I’ve ever seen here because I’ve never seen a fight here. And I’ve been here since 10<sup>th</sup> grade.”

However, the local community's perception of Hugh Cale assumes this school to be much more violent. Cale is more commonly known around this small town as the school where the “bad kids” go. I asked Michael what he thought folks in the community

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<sup>2</sup>The Safe Schools Act required principals to report any instances of crime or violence each year. Reportable offenses range from homicide to possession of drugs or alcohol. In Cale’s case, the three incidents were all non-violent.

think about Cale, and he said, “Oh, they hear the word ‘alternative’ they think it’s just bad.” Mrs. Jamison said that when she is out in public and people find out she is the principal at Cale, “they say, ‘*Oh!*’”

She continued, “You know the reaction I get, it’s like, ‘Oh, you poor thing. Bless your heart.’ You know, that kind of thing. My teachers get the same reaction, when they say they work at Hugh Cale. ‘Oh my god! You work there?’ Ugh.”

Across the country, alternative schools are often stigmatized as inherently barbaric (McGee, 2001), and Hugh Cale is no different. This is partly due to the fact that some of the students are long-term suspended from their home school, while others are attending due to disruptive school behavior, attendance problems, or poor grades. Whatever the reason, the general public perception holds that alternative schools are places where misbehaving children are sent.

This is not to say that Cale is without discipline issues, or that the students are not still subject to regulation and normalization practices (Ferguson, 2000). Mrs. Jamison conducts unannounced body searches of her students, capturing contraband lighters and cell phones among other items. Students are required by Cale policy to submit lighters and cigarettes to the front office when entering the building at the start of each day; that afternoon when the bell rings, lighters and cigarettes are redistributed to owners. Drug possession is not tolerated at Cale, but students can and do sneak off campus for cigarette breaks and other recreational activities, as demonstrated by Runt and Michael.

Mrs. Jamison has also turned away potentially problematic students from her school. In one instance, she refused to hear the case of a teenager who had been arrested

and held on felony charges. “He's not coming to my school. Send him to Riverville<sup>3</sup>,” she told Mr. Keaton, the district’s drop-out prevention specialist. Mr. Keaton often petitions the principal with prospective students that he is trying to serve in our district. Part of Jamison’s decision to turn this particular student away was based on knowledge of the student and the student’s prior behaviors, but also the considerations of how certain students affect the overall climate at Hugh Cale. Mrs. Jamison told me that when evaluating special cases, such as children with mental health problems or felony records, she has to think about how to best serve every child while also running an effective school. One consideration is the number of children at Hugh Cale at any given time, “The higher the numbers get, the more kids we get, the less effective we can really be. You know, so, um, ideally we should not ever be more than one to ten. And to really get the most bang for the buck, it’s probably we should stay under one to ten – one to six, one to seven. One student usually is like the equivalent of five. Especially if you have a kid that’s got both – behavior and academic [problems].” However, the purpose of Hugh Cale is to serve children, and that is the bottom line according to Mrs. Jamison. Figuring out how to do serve everyone successfully is top priority. Mrs. Jamison said, “But you know, we have [special cases] coming, and just trying to keep everybody safe, just trying to keep us serving kids but at the same time not putting us in harm’s way, ok?”

### **A Closer Look at Alternative Schools**

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<sup>3</sup> Riverville is a local non-profit organization that helps students complete their high school diploma or GED equivalent while at the same time offering students training in employment skills. Students at Riverville YouthBuild are able to earn an income while finishing their General Education Diploma in connection with the area’s local community college.



Alternative schools traditionally serve at-risk students or those students with disruptive or school-avoidance behaviors (De La Ossa, 2005). Students who are identified as “at-risk” are those who are “often behind academically, have dropped out of schools, or have been expelled or suspended from conventional high schools” (Lange, 1998, p. 183). As such, alternative schools are often settings that offer students who would otherwise dropout a second-chance at school success. Writing on alternative schools, Deirdre Kelly (1993) positions these “continuation schools” as a final stage – a brief stop – before dropping out, while also acknowledging that a few alternative schools serve as a safety net for some students.

Mary Anne Raywid (1994) developed a model of three “pure” types of alternative schools: Type I - schools of choice based on popular innovation and following the latest trend in educational reform; Type II - last-chance schools for students who have been suspended or expelled from traditional schools; and Type III - those which serve students who need remedial academic attention or social and emotional support in order to be successful. Raywid notes that while alternative schools may be some combination of these three types, only the latter two genres are designed as treatment facilities that are intended to rehabilitate or reform the “problems [which] lie within the individual” (pg. 27). In last-chance schools and remedial schools, primacy is given to the behavior and comportment of the individual, emphasizing discipline and basic skills before academics, because it is believed that the children attending these schools require these “ground rules” in order to be successful.

Schools of choice (Type I) are commonly known as magnet schools, and sometimes, charter schools. These schools are differentiated from the other two types of

alternative schooling because of assumptions built into the school and its students (Raywid, 1994; Reyes, 2001). Schools of choice underscore the agency of the students who are drawn to these “magnet” programs because the student has elected to attend this school. It is presumed that traditional schools are not meeting the academic needs of the student – perhaps the student requires more challenging material or has advanced beyond her peers and needs individualized instruction, perhaps the student needs more math, more music, more art or more science that what the traditional school has to offer. Whatever the case, Type I schools position the traditional school as insufficient for the child’s needs.

Students who attend the other types of alternative schools, last chance (II) and remedial schools (III), do so not out by choice or elective, but either by referral or because they are *sentenced* there. Raywid notes that last-chance schools are “likened to ‘soft jails’” and that being there has “nothing to do with options or choice” (1994, p. 27). Last chance and remedial schools are driven by deficit models, which assume that “something is wrong with the student or the student’s family” (2001, p. 51). These schools are designed to modify student (mis)behavior, based on behaviorist notions of conformity. White, middle class norms and values drive contemporary notions of traditional schooling, and students outside these whitestream mores often find themselves at odds with standard educational institutions (Grande, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999).

Kelly (1993) traces the rise and revisions of alternative schooling from the 1900s through three distinct iterations. Initially, alternative schools were designed as school/work transition centers for youth aged 14-18 who did not want to continue on to high school or college. These part-time schools served employed students. When

schooling became compulsory in the United States, alternative schooling shifted its focus toward “‘adjustment education’ where students’ psychological problems were addressed” (p. 35). Attention centered on students who were disinterested in schools or characterized as rebels; pregnant or sexually promiscuous females might be included in this group. During the 1960s, alternative schooling shifted again to re-conceptualize itself as a potential center for curricular innovation and experimentation. This last modification is how schools of choice, or magnet schools, came to be classified among alternative schools.

Underlying the assumptions of last-chance schools and remedial schools are stereotypes about the type of student who does not “fit” traditional school models: these students are outcasts, misbehavers, deviants and miscreants. It’s easy to understand where this thinking is derived. After all, if traditional schools are meant to serve the public, aren’t those who cannot thrive under normal circumstances somehow lacking?

Last chance and remedial schools operate on a deficit model of education, assuming that students “need” additional skills and values. In his latest book, Richard Valencia (2010) traces the social construction of the term “at-risk” as a marker of deficit thinking. Following the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, critics of the excellence movement intended “at-risk” to designate the potential of failure in educational institutions. However, the term was co-opted by advocates who directed the term at individuals most likely to continue to be a drain on the public government through social welfare (Margonis, 1992). Thus, those most likely to fail “either in school or in life” (pg. 112) were identified through an inventory of risk factors, such as grade retention, having English as a second language, or being from a low-income family. The stereotypical

student at risk of failure was then easily identified as a student of color, from a low-income single-parented household, where English may or may not be the primary language. “The use of the ‘at-risk’ label is very troublesome because it is a classist, racist, ableist, and sexist term – a 1990s rendering of the 1960s cultural deficit framework that locates pathologies in the individual, family, and community, rather than focusing on institutional arrangements (e.g., White privilege; political conservatism; class stratification) that generate and perpetuate inequality” (Valencia, 2010, p. 114). Students who are labeled at-risk students are seen to be lacking important components for success. Blame thus shifts from the institution to the individual. In the case of school failure, the stereotypical individual is almost always a person of color and/or from a working-class family. According to Valencia (2010), school-based interventions are designed to supplement these “deficiencies”.

Valencia writes that the inventory identifying risk factors itself “is misdirected because it masks the presence of systemic bases of academic failure such as schools with inferior resources and unqualified teachers” (2010, pg. 112). He goes on to document the ongoing paradigm shift which re-centers systemic inequities, such as the misdistribution of educational funding, as explanations pertaining to school failure. Color-coded inequities, such as the discipline gap or the achievement gap in schools, become the fault of the individual who cannot behave or adapt to schooling. Students of color are overwhelmingly featured at the bottom end of the achievement gap, the opportunity gap (Darling-Hammond, 2010), and the discipline gap (Gregory et al, 2010; Monroe, 2005). Teacher assumptions about the nature of these children can be overwhelmingly negative: these are unruly, undisciplined, low-achievers who need constant supervision.

Students labeled “at-risk” are most likely to be served by under-qualified or poorly trained teachers, to attend under-funded schools that lack necessary resources, and to be placed in classes that focus on behavior modifications over academic skills. But even considering the wealth of literature explaining how the socio-cultural contexts of these school make failure inevitable, research shows that teachers, administrators and other school personnel *still* cling to notions of individual deviance, ultimately believing that the students themselves cause their own problems and need to be placed in centers and sites of containment (Gregory & Moseley, 2004; Noguera, 2008).

Indeed, people still argue it is not the hostile environment but the dysfunction of the children themselves. Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) echoes this peculiar emphasis on the self as divorced from the social in schools, noting that for the children who end up in the Punishing Room, “the institutional discourse was that getting in trouble was not about race but a matter of individual choice and personal responsibility: each child made a choice to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’” (p. 17).

However, Kenneth Polk and Walter Schafer (1972) argued in the early 1970s that the structure of schooling contributes to youth delinquency. In order for schools to reward and promote students with good behavior, there must be corresponding mechanisms that deny and punish “bad” students (Polk & Schafer, 1972). “Schools are organized and run in such oppressive ways...that many students are placed at risk for school failure” (Valencia, 2010, p. 125). When schools fail students, it sends a message to the student that they will never be able to define a conventional life course through education.

## **Situating Hugh Cale Community School**

Hugh Cale Community School is an alternative school for grades 6-12 in Redding, North Carolina. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction website, Hugh Cale reports two indicators of school satisfaction for students and staff: school attendance (84%) and teacher turnover (<10%). Ninety-five percent of high school seniors who attend Hugh Cale finish and graduate. During the 2011-2012 school year, thirty seniors were able to complete their studies and returned to their schools to graduate. Since 2006, 51 seniors have graduated. Each graduate has their name on a plaque outside the front office. The State Superintendent of North Carolina public schools recently visited Redding and commended the district for “surpassing the statewide graduation rate and exceeding the statewide graduation rate for African-American students” (Ponder, 2013). Cale is very much a part of this success.

The school serves students who are classified by teachers and administrators as “at-risk” for failure, mostly due to poor academic performance. As such, this school could be classified as some combination of Type II (last-chance) and Type III schools (remedial). Low academic achievement accounts for the largest number of student referrals, capturing those students who need credit recovery or course make-ups. Some students are referred to Cale because of behavior disruptions at their home school. According to Ms. Moore, Cale’s School Information Management Systems (SIMS) operator, only 3 students are currently at Cale because they were long-term suspended last year. The remainder of the school’s population are those students who have self-

selected to attend Cale<sup>4</sup>. In any given semester, black males make up the largest percentage of students<sup>5</sup>.

Increasingly, students want to transfer or remain at Hugh Cale so that they can graduate, which is in line with academic literature on other successful alternative schools (e.g., Groves, 1998; Kelly, 1993). When talking with David, a senior who is now at Cale for the second time in the last four years, David stated, “I know I can graduate if I stay here. I know I can.” Although he wants to return to traditional high school, his only reason for doing so was because his most of his friends were there. With each new school year, Mrs. Jamison has to leave an allotment of seats – five to seven – open so she will be able to serve students who have been long-term suspended from their home school. Because she is “saving space” for potential students, Mrs. Jamison ends up having to turn interested students away.

Some of the students who enroll at Cale are not allowed to return to their home schools. Ms. Moore offered me the story of one student, a black male, who was long-term suspended from his regular high school during the 2011-2012 school year. He finished up the year at Hugh Cale. Over the summer, the student’s regular high school, Camptown High, underwent a change in administration, and the new principal barred the student sight unseen from returning to traditional school. The principal cited the student’s alleged drug use as grounds for his refusal, despite the student’s successful

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<sup>4</sup> Actual numbers and figures for each category (long-term suspended, self-selected, or academic referrals) are hard to generate because the student body at Cale changes with and within each semester.

<sup>5</sup> Greatschools.org calculates the racial distribution as 70% black and 30% white. I have only known one Latino male to attend Cale in the 1.5 years I have been at this school, and have seen no visible population of any other students of color.

course attendance and grade completion at Hugh Cale. Teachers at Cale attested to the fact that they had no indication of the student's drug use. Further, the student's documentation around his long-term suspension stated that after a semester the student would be allowed to return to his home school. Another student, Que, was barred from returning to Camptown High because he had exchanged heated words with the same principal. These examples illustrate how Cale often becomes the de facto dumping grounds for unwanted students (Kelly, 1993), those who Henry Giroux (2009) has called a "disposable population" of youth – students who are seen to cause too much trouble in regular classrooms.

Hugh Cale is used throughout the district as a type of threat for misbehaving students. During our interview, Mrs. Jamison told me, "We still get the occasional principal calling us from the middle school to 'scare straight' a student, you know." The principal of other schools will call Mrs. Jamison and say, "I'm going to have Susie, this parent, bring her son over because he's headed for the alternative school, Mrs. Jamison, and you know, we want him to walk around and get a sense of how it's going to be if he's going to go there."

This strategic threat by local schools is likely attributed to the negative image of Hugh Cale among community members; building on tacit fear of the unknown, other schools attempt to dissuade students from the "wrong path." Like other alternative schools, Hugh Cale experiences a disconnect from neighboring schools (Groves, 1998; Kelly, 1993). Mrs. Jamison often has to struggle with other principals in the district who want to transfer students to Cale as a punitive placement for (mis)behavior. Cale is not a



prison, or a site of punishment, and it is telling that many of the district principals (and broader population of Redding) behave as if it were so.

In the following section, I offer a snapshot of Parkmore Alternative School to elucidate the effects of punitive schooling on both students and staff. Parkmore is what Reyes (2006) would define as a disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP). “The DAEP is a prison model intended to isolate students from their community” (Reyes, 2006, p. 54). This school falls under Type II of Raywid’s alternative education model: a last-chance school for misbehaving youth.

### **Apples and oranges**

From December 2010 to June of 2011, I sat with middle-school students at Parkmore Alternative School in central North Carolina. Parkmore is located in a large, urban city that is home to two large, nationally recognized universities. The district website for Parkmore stated that this school served students with chronic behavior problems, as well as those who had been long-term suspended. Parkmore serves 150 students per school year in grades 6-12. The student population is mostly black and brown, with more males than females<sup>67</sup>. The attendance rate for Parkmore is an estimated 74%, and teacher turnover for this school is 13% according to the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI).

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the student body is hard to establish because the school population is always changing.

<sup>7</sup> Greatschools.org calculates the racial distribution at 81% black, 12% white, and 7% Hispanic.

I had asked the principal, Jamal Donner, for permission to come to Parkmore to observe and participate in his school. A tall black man with long locks tied at the nape of his neck, Mr. Donner was open to my being there but cautious about my status as an educational researcher. Understandably, he requested that I not contribute to the negative perceptions of Parkmore and I assured him that I would do my best. At the time, I had no idea what I had agreed to and how impossible that promise would be to keep. I found very little to say about Parkmore that was positive.

During the six months I attended Parkmore School, my experiences were unpleasant and tense with violence. I witnessed five fights – three of which I broke up myself while pregnant – and heard tales of another six more which took place while I wasn't on campus. Although there were at least three school resource officers stationed in the school at any given moment, it was rare that an officer was on hand to disrupt or break-up an altercation.

One of the worst fights I witnessed was an all-out brawl between two 8<sup>th</sup> grade females that took place across the street from Parkmore immediately after the school day ended on a Friday. The entire school turned out to watch the fight, including office support staff, custodians, teachers, and the administration. The middle school teachers had been aware that the fight was scheduled, and one even asked me if I was going to “watch” when the bell rang. The two girls fought until the victor tired of throwing punches, with no one intervening or attempting to stop the fight at any point. The school resource officers did not interrupt the fight; instead, they directed car traffic that had slowed to a crawl and was blocking the view. I was both fascinated and scared, worried that one of the girls would end up seriously hurt. After the fight dissolved, both girls ran

to catch up with their yellow school buses, whose drivers had been parked and waiting for them. On Monday following the fight, both girls were at school and no more was said about the matter.

It is almost incredible how normalized physical violence between students was at Parkmore. Sitting in class one day with four seventh graders, I listened somewhat dumbstruck as they discussed who of their peers they would like to see get into a fight. “I want to see Kayla fight a girl,” Jariq said, because usually Kayla ended up opposite a boy. Sandy chimed in, “It’d be cool to see another two boys fight. The last fight we had was Ronsho and Darius.” The miserable irony is that fights erupted with such frequency at Parkmore even these conversationalists might find themselves as combatants at any given turn.

At Parkmore, profanity was common and undisciplined; two black female seventh-grade students even called the black assistant principal a “motherfucker” to her face without penalty. Students cursed during class and in the halls, directing slurs and salacious epithets to each other, teachers, and support staff. Discipline was inconsistent; sometimes students would be isolated in the in-school-suspension room, while other times the profanity and disrespect was ignored. The teachers were often visibly frustrated at the lack of consistency and support from the assistant principal. I attended several after-school staff meetings where the teachers discussed having trouble with difficult students. They asked explicitly for help. The female assistant principal told the teachers to “write [the student] up.” One teacher, a white male Learning Strategies teacher, complained that writing the student up didn’t do any good, because “nothing ever happens.”

Surveillance and security were a priority at Parkmore. Students entered the building through the front entrance, passing through metal detectors and pausing for a pat-down by school resource officers before being able to gain access to the school. A school resource officer sat behind a table in the middle of the middle-school hallway. The bathrooms were locked at all times, and adults always accompanied students to the bathroom. Classroom doors were shut and locked after each class change. Students traveled between classes with an adult. Lunch was served to all students in the classroom, with Styrofoam lunch trays delivered to each student by support staff.

This school very much fit the description of a “soft” jail. I was often unnerved at the similarities between Parkmore and prison. During class, students would get up from their desk and walk over to the door, where they would peer out the small glass pane into the hall, hoping to catch a glimpse of an errant passerby. It was made clear to the students that Parkmore was a punitive placement. The middle-school science teacher once congratulated her class on good behavior, and then followed her praise with an admonishment. She told the students to continue to behave, “so you don’t have to come back here.”

One day Parkmore, I was sitting with 3 seventh graders in social studies. We were waiting for the teacher to return to the room. Meanwhile, the students were firing back and forth at each other, having a conversation while simultaneously taking hits and trading insults. One student, a white male, said to the black male, “That’s why I’m getting out of here, and you have to stay.”

The black female intervened, “That’s because you aren’t as bad as me.” She said, “Some people have to stay here their whole life.”

The white male returned, “The only place you stay your whole life is juvie.”

The culture at Parkmore was both oppressive and depressing. The students often compared Parkmore to a prison and complained, “Man, you can’t do nothing here. I want to go back to my home school.”

I offer this glimpse, my personal perspective, into another alternative school so as to invite readers to think through what it is that Cale offers students. There are many similarities between Cale and Parkmore: both are alternative schools, both serve students in grades 6-12, are located in North Carolina, have mostly black and brown students and are run by black administrators. But Cale stands in direct contrast to Parkmore because of the mission and the culture of both schools. Parkmore is run on an overwhelmingly punitive model of schooling, whereas Cale strives to bolster and empower students. The success of the students and staff at Hugh Cale Community Schools generates a strong critique for the conventional logic of schooling in the United States.

### **A frame for understanding**

In what follows, I bring readers into the experiential space of my-being so that we – you and I – can begin to think and dialogue around the contradictory contexts of alternative schooling. This socio-cultural space is complicated and layered, historically situated in the Southeast, and trapped between general and the particular, the dialectic of individual agency and institutional and societal structures (Giddens, 1979). I believe that alternative schools offer something to those of us in education. Alternative schools give us a perspective for viewing our educational system as a whole, while also considering

the message and purpose of our institutions. Who does alternative schooling serve?

What is the job of alternative schooling?

It is in these institutions that we can get a measure of how we're doing as a society on a number of questions that are fundamental to our best sense of who we are. How well are we preparing students from a broad sweep of backgrounds for life after high school, and how adequate are the programs we have in place to remedy the failures of K-12 education? How robust is our belief in the ability of the common person, and what opportunities do we provide to realize that ability? (Rose, 2012, p. 9)

I believe that alternative schools are symptomatic of the destructive, neoliberal policies that currently constrain our educational system and limit the potential of our nation's youth. Drawing from the work of Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres (2002), I want to draw a broad metaphor that positions the students of Hugh Cale as canaries, miner's canaries. Canaries were once taken into the coal mines to help alert the worker of the presence of toxic gases. If the canary stopped singing, or became sick, the miners would know to head toward safety or to put on respiratory masks. Guinier and Torres write:

The canary is a source of information for all who care about the atmosphere in the mines – and a source of motivation for changing the mines to make them safer. The canary serves both a diagnostic and an innovative function. It offers us more than a critique of the way social goods are distributed. What the canary lets us see are the hierarchical arrangements of power and privilege that have naturalized this unequal distribution (2002, pg. 259).

By dint of its *raison d'être*, Hugh Cale indicates that there is something wrong in our American educational system. Scores of students are leaving traditional schools each year to attend alternative schools. In North Carolina, there are 178 alternative learning programs and schools spread across 100 counties (NCDPI). Within each of these schools, administrators, teachers and students face myriad problems and difficulties such as issues of insufficient or unhelpful educational policy and funding, teacher frustration

and burnout, and identity and representation (stereotype threat and negative stigmas). Each of these schools signify students are one-step away from dropping out (Kelly, 1993). The social, economic and health consequences for school non-completion are striking:

Drop-outs are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and ultimately single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 2).

However, I argue that Hugh Cale Community School shows us that there are alternatives to alternative schooling. During the 2011-12 school year, the drop-out rate for Albemarle County schools reported a record low of 2.04 percent, or 35 students. Four years prior, in 2007-08, the reported number of students leaving or being pushed out of school was 4.26 percent, or 81 students (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2013). This reduced rate of student disengagement can be partly attributed to the hard work done each year by the students and staff of Hugh Cale. Thus, Cale offers an alternative vision for educational schooling – that of possibility. This is the story I hope to share from my experiences at Cale.

In an effort to make my method and theoretical frames clear, I attempt to outline my thinking in *Looking in and Looking Out*. This chapter serves as an explanation for three different aspects of this work: the theory driving the method and the method for the theory, my perspective on educational research, and finally, the person doing the writing – my-being. I have chosen to fuse both autoethnographic methods and a critical social narrative to help situate and explicate the complexities that I have experienced as a resident of Redding and a student in the academy. My method is thus both/and:

autoethnography and critical social narrative. I agree with Marcelo Diversi and Claudio Moreira, “there is no ethnography without ‘auto’ at the epistemological level” (2009, pg. 190). All ethnographies are written from a personal perspective, and it’s up to the ethnographer to decide how much of themselves to include in these stories (Diversi and Moreira, 2009). I do not know how to write without including myself, especially not when so much of my own history and upbringing are tied to the narratives of this area. Writing autoethnographically also allows me to supplant post-positivist claims of “doing” qualitative research in a narrowly defined fashion which privileges Western ways of knowing and being. In this work, I’ve chosen not to “study” the students and staff of Hugh Cale, not to analyze our conversations and their discourse, not to scrutinize their choices or their backstories. Writing in this way and from this standpoint allows me to think more critically about the general and the particular, and to investigate and critique the interaction between the structures of the social world and the lives lived within.

After establishing my-being, I move to tell three stories. Each story involves a single inanimate object – a plant, an orange, and a newspaper – that, by itself, does not hold symbolic meaning. From these seemingly benign artifacts, I’m able to write relationally about the meaning that I myself have constructed and attached to these items, but also, I’m able to invite my reader to form their own understanding and meaning. At times, I purposely refrain from giving or defining my own interpretation for just this reason: I want to both underscore the arbitrariness of the meaning that I personally attach to these incidents, while at the same time signaling for multiple, layered interpretations rather than the single, rigidity of my own meaning (Saussure, 1983).



The following chapter, *Public Opinions*, is about the subtle power of white discourse. Racist white discourse is common and pervasive in our small town; it stretches from within the family to the public and back again. It is important to understand how racist discourse structures the community and the school and the lives of those located therein. However, this discourse is often masked as individual critiques of “losers” and those who are a financial drain on the economy. This chapter focuses on the public shaming of Cale students by our local newspaper and offers readers insight into the pernicious history of racist legacies.

Chapter Four, *School Policy*, focuses on the interstices of the school-to-prison pipeline through a story of a sixth-grade child who was arrested and charged with drug possession on school grounds. The student, Tony, was removed from his home school and placed at Hugh Cale for nine weeks. Tony’s story helps contextualize the damaging effects of school policies, and the abuses of adults in power. By writing around the incident with the plant, I’m able to suggest explanations for how students come to be disengaged or disenfranchised with educational institutions, due to what Eve Tuck (2012) describes as “humiliating ironies” and “dangerous dignities.” This chapter attends to the insidious reach of the school-to-prison pipeline, a metaphor for the local, state, and federal policies and guidelines which shuttle kids out of schools and into prisons.

In Chapter Five, *Student-Teacher Disconnect*, I pick up the discourses that teachers engage around and about students. I work at separating out the implications and assumptions about students, and thinking through how students become positioned as “other” within school walls. The teachers at Hugh Cale are by no means perfect, but they do an excellent job of working with and connecting to difficult students. This chapter

works at understanding the possible consequences of teacher failure, or worded differently, what can happen when teachers give up on a student's potential. This chapter focuses on one student at Cale, but readers are urged to see this student's story as a prism through which to consider the broader implications of negative labels and labeling.

Finally, I move into examining Hugh Cale as a site of possibility. I offer several aspects of Cale that I think complement the school's warm climate and encourages those within it to thrive. Cale offers opportunity to all of its students, and I think this is telling for the vision of Hugh Cale and the mission of this alternative school. I also share my own experiences with second chances and possibility.

This work is intended to speak back to the educational community about the position and possibility of alternative education. I agree with Jay McGee (2001) that we have to reform the messages that are transmitted about alternative schools and replace negative representations of these schools with opportunities they provide students and the important role of alternative education in our society. McGee urges us to share information about what is working in alternative schools so that these schools can receive "positive recognition" (p. 589). This work is to that end.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LOOKING IN AND LOOKING OUT

My purpose in this work is to step outside – or perhaps alongside – dominant social science research, into a realm that calls on the arts and humanities for guidance. There is an expectation in social science research to try to uncover or understand phenomena, to take notes and observe and somehow extrapolate what is “*really*” going on, to present work to the academy and say, “This is what I’ve found” and “These are the results of my study.” Educational research has become obsessed with scientism, or “science’s belief in itself” (Habermas, 1971, p. 4). Scientism is the appearance of science, it is the performance of science (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). Scientism equates science with knowledge and scientific methods with the production of knowledge (Baez and Boyles, 2009; St. Pierre, 2006). Dorothy Smith writes,

The approach I have tried to develop is above all conscious that we are not doing a science that can be treated in abstraction from the rest of society (indeed the possibility of such a science is a myth). Our intellectual work and the ways in which we can make a society conscious of itself are very much a part of that society and situated in institutional contexts we did not make, though we are working to be part of their remaking (1987, p. 9).

I am not a scientist, although I have been trained as a sociologist of education. I do not and will not claim reliability or validity, rigor or generalization.

There is a move toward defining educational research in specific, narrow ways which privileges ideas of professionalization and the politics of naming Truth – Truth

that is official and certified and written with a capital T – Truth qua Science and Science qua Truth. Benjamin Baez and Deron Boyles (2009) critique this move as delimiting access and voice by constraining what “counts” as acceptable knowledge within the field of education. The push for scientifically based research drives educational research policy across North America, South American, Europe, Australia, and Africa (Denzin, 2009). Scientifically based research (SBR) advocates the isolation of science from the humanities, and a disassociation from philosophy, history, and humanities-oriented inquiry (Howe, 2008). Baez and Boyles show that this move attempts to position science research as “above questions of good or right action” (p. 23), above critiques of motive or ethics. This is a position that privileges power and control, Truth, as named by white, Western ways of knowing and being (Baez and Boyles, 2009; Lather, 2004; Lincoln and Cannella, 2004). This work is centered on my perspective, because I do not possess the ability to step outside myself and live in other bodies, nor do I possess the ability to understand or speak from a point of view that differs from my own perspective. However, in choosing autoethnography as a method through which to share my perspective, I hope to allow the reader to make her or his own decisions about my interpretations. I hope to lay bare my biases and prejudices, and to surrender myself and my stories to the reader (Ellis, 2009). This move is also strategic: I hope to counter dominant, white Western ways of owning Truth (Howard, 2006) by admission of my own faults.

The positivistic-bent of SBR movement derives its power and position by denying the voice of others. I think of the SBR movement as a type of “ruling apparatus” within

the academy – one that privileges dominant modes of being. Dorothy Smith (1987)

offers the following definition for the ruling apparatus:

... a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power. A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms. It is an *extralocal* mode of ruling. Its characteristic modes of consciousness are objectified and impersonal; its relations are governed by organizational logics and exigencies. We are not ruled by powers that are essentially implicated in particularized ties of kinship, family, and household and anchored in relationships to particular patches of ground. We are ruled by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships (p. 3).

This work is not-*that*. I push back against positivistic claims of knowledge and being. I embrace the messy, complexity of life and lives. My work will not stand without context and embodied ways of knowing and being. My research interests and methods of inquiry are intricately intertwined and based upon principles of equity and social transformation (Stanfield, 2006). I am deeply committed to qualitative methods as a form of decolonization of ideas within the academy (Diversi and Moreira, 2009). My work is both political and personal. The work of indigenous scholars (e.g., Bishop, 1998; Wilson, 2008) and scholars of color (e.g., Madison, 1993) has challenged me how to think about my-being as a white scholar, and I base my research methods and style of inquiry on the information these scholars have shared with the broader educational community. If there is fault with this research, the blame lies within my interpretation.

Dwight Conquergood helps me think how to begin to situate my work as an ethnographer. He writes, “ethnographers work with expressivity, which is inextricable from its human creators. They must work with real people, humankind alive, instead of

printed texts. Opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books” (1985, p. 2). Conquergood advises us to start with the body-being of both ourselves and others – rather than the science of the text toward the bodies of others-as-data. I see my work as informed by my theoretical training and background in sociology, philosophy, cultural studies and the arts. I want to try to locate my work as between the spaces of abstract theory and embodied practice, between the social sciences and the arts and humanities, between the academy and the world outside.

For these reasons, I move from my-being into the contradictions and life of Cale, and back again. Over the past few years, I have been reading pounds of information about alternative schools and the punitive nature of schooling in the United States. I have learned about the negative effects of school discipline policies on students (Theriot, Craun, and Dupper, 2010; Wald and Losen, 2003) and about the specific effects these policies have had on students of color (Monroe, 2005; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson, 2000). I have read accounts of alternative schools suggesting what works and what is good (Comfort, Giorgi, and Moody, 1997; Groves, 1998; Lange, 1998; McGee, 2001), but I have been unsatisfied with the accounts I’ve read. Where are the people?<sup>8</sup>

In order to take readers into Hugh Cale, I have to invite readers into my-being. I turn inward, toward my navel to find the lint and crumbs of life that hide there (Pelias, 2009). My-being in this world is informed by who-I-am. Who-I-am is constituted by the physical realities of my body - a body marked with white skin, gendered and sexed female – and certainly the stories that I tell are imbued with the status and privilege of my locally situated positionality (Anthias, 2009). But my-being is also comprised of the

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<sup>8</sup> A notable exception to this is Mary Hollowell’s (2009) *The forgotten room: Inside a public alternative school for at-risk youth*.

entire field of my habitus at any given moment (Bourdieu, 1990). My habitus is who-I-am, and who-I-have-been, it is my toolkit to unlock closed areas and my compass which helps me choose my direction. It is this temporal everyday-being that I bring to these pages, vulnerable (Behar, 1996) and open. “The self is construed here in the particular, relational sense, the sense in ‘which each of us is and comes to be’ within the context of persons-in-relation, rather than in the universal sense of selfness” (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 8).

I connect the theories and theorists of my academic schooling with the lived and real experiences of my history – my past and my present. I want to write in a way that honors that divide. When I enter Hugh Cale, I enter as a graduate student, a mother, a woman, a white woman, a middle class white woman, a former teacher, a former student of Redding schools, and an anti-racist activist. I cannot come to the school and say “I am a researcher” for in that space and that location, I am not primarily a researcher. I am a front-desk operator, a phone answerer, a snack provider, and a joke teller. I am a crossword doer, a jumble solver, a storyteller, a temperature taker, a mother-caller.

My habitus is loaded and laden with who I am and who I have been, but also, who I am becoming (Swain, unpublished). The composite knowledges which constitute each field of *knowing*, of *history*, of *being*, are always present, always informing and being informed by the other.

“...The everyday world as the matrix of our experience is organized by relations tying it into larger processes in the world as well as by locally organized practices. A feminist mode of inquiry might then begin with women’s experience from women’s standpoint and explore how it is shaped in the extended relations of larger social and political relations” (Smith, 1987, p. 10).

Each relational aspect constitutes my view, as well as exposes the observations I am making from this perspective. I do this to lay bare my perspective and all that is loaded therein – to invite readers to see as I see and to understand that my gaze is flawed and human. My lens is connected to my history.

### **Translocational positionality**

As a writer invoking claims about the world as seen through my eyes, I know that I must tell you *who* I am. But who I am doesn't begin to tell you *when* and *where* and *how* I am (Denzin, 2010 citing Marcus, 2009). Floya Anthias (2002) argues against "identity" as a fixed and stable construct, preferring instead a narrative of location "that tells a story about how we place ourselves in terms of social categories such as those of gender, ethnicity, and class at a specific point in time and space" (p. 498). Narratives of location are performative, historical, and fragmented, active tellings of the self across time and space. Anthias builds upon narratives of location with positionality that she describes as relating,

to the space a the intersection of structure (as social position/social effects) and agency (as social positioning/meaning of practice). The concept involves processes of identification but is not reducible to these, for what is also signaled are the lived practices in which identification is practiced/performed as well as the intersubjective, organizational, and representational conditions for their existence (pg. 502).

By combining narratives of location with positionality, Anthias gives us the notion of translocational positionality – a way of describing/understanding the self that is both contradictory and contextual, dialogical and complex. Translocational positionality thus gives me a way of thinking about, and describing, narratives of my-being that do not bind



me to my past and seal me into the present. Issues of race and class, and later, gender, play important roles in the process of my-becoming.

*A short story of me*

Redding – “with its narrow brick roads, historic Ku Klux Klan claverns, and black social clubs – is a typical small southern port city” (Willink, 2009, pg. 2). The town used to have a big sign, “The Klan welcomes you to Redding” (Kelly-Goss, 2008). I knew a kid who claimed his granddaddy was the Grand Dragon of the KKK – that he’d seen the robes, and another girl whose grandmother had old Klan records. In high school, lots of white kids who were fans of the music group, 311, touted the band’s alliance with the Klan (“K” is the eleventh letter of the alphabet, so 3 x K = KKK)<sup>9</sup>. Racist white culture was imprinted on my brain very early in life.

I came home from kindergarten with huge adventure: I had a boyfriend! His last name was Simpson (the same as my maiden name) and so we were obviously destined to be married. My first romance didn’t last long. When it was discovered that my boyfriend was black, my mother was horrified and shamed me. My father made fun of me in public, calling five-year-old me a “n\*\*\*\*\* lover”. Interracial coupling was almost unheard of until the late 90s, and even then, white people still frowned upon it. Within my family, interracial friendships were even frowned upon. During high school, I invited a Filipino girlfriend over to do a class project with me, and my older brother called her a “sand n\*\*\*\*\*” and asked where she left her turban<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The band’s name actually references the police code for indecent exposure.

<sup>10</sup> Beside being an asshole, my brother also sucked at geography.

But these are the messages I ingested and consumed growing up. I was strictly forbidden to go into or near any of the black neighborhoods, to call or talk with black friends on the telephone, or to associate with black kids outside of school. These messages were reinforced throughout my family, both implicitly and explicitly. Racial segregation, to me, was normalized and unquestioned. It just was the way things were.

Every February, white kids in Redding are implicitly allowed to skip school on “MLK Day” (Hughes, 2006; Willink, 2009). I remember one year, in ninth grade, when my mom couldn’t pick me up and I had to go to the assembly. My friends and I were sitting high up on the wooden bleachers in the gymnasium, with our backs to the speakers. I arranged a quarter, a nickel, a dime and a penny out in front of us and showed the two girls how everyone else turned their back on Lincoln because he freed the slaves. This memory still pains me sometimes when I pick up a penny from the ground.

### *Coming back ‘home’*

I experienced what could only be called cognitive dissonance when my family and I moved back to Redding in December of 2011. This is the place where I grew up, but I was not my childhood self when I returned. Coming from a liberal, yuppie/hippie “whitestream” (Denis, 1997; Grande, 2003) college town where I was working on my doctoral degree, I was shocked to realize few people recycled. I jumped after people, “Wait! You aren’t going to throw that bottle away, are you?!”

My husband and I are both from Redding. He grew up in the country, in a small two-bedroom house his grandfather built, a house that might be worth around \$30,000 if it were sold today – assuming the missing vinyl siding was replaced. I grew up in the center of town, in a two-story, three-bedroom, drafty house that was built in the 1930s.

My grandparents helped my mother buy the house after her divorce, with a wink and a nod and a push and a shove, but mostly with a down payment and by cosigning the mortgage.

There was no central heat and air in my mother's house. In the winter, the gas logs in the den at the back of the house made that room an unbearable sweat box, while elsewhere in the house, the draft would chorus through your clothes, chapping your skin and sending you running for more socks. The house in the summer time was only bearable with a few A/C window units and a lot of oscillating fans. Mama was strict about the use of the window units; if you weren't in the room, you had to cut the air off. The City of Redding made a bad deal with a local electrical company and so electrical bills grow expensive very quickly. It is not uncommon for a 1,000 sq. ft. house to average a \$600+ electricity bill in the most extreme months of the year (see Nichol, 2013 for more). When I moved into my first college apartment with central heat and air in 1999, I marveled at the consistency of the temperature from room to room. I loved the freedom of being barefoot in the wintertime, and even (gasp!) being too hot at night.

Growing up, I'd ride my bike along the river and marvel at the gorgeous houses that share its banks. These houses sit back away from the road, on sweeping green lawns with magnolia trees. I dreamt about living in one of these grand houses with a sweeping green lawn and magnolia trees, fantasized about belonging in a house with Ethan Allen furniture and woolen, handcrafted Persian rugs, pretended that I was riding my bike just around the corner to my gorgeous home on the river.

I was so excited to be able to live in this neighborhood. Strangely, we moved from an 1800 square foot house in Chapel Hill into a place with an additional 900 square

feet and managed to save \$200 in rent. I felt like I'd finally made it – at least according to my idea of Redding standards. My husband, Adam, and I joked about being “baller,” about rolling with the big dogs, or at least pretending we were able to do so. That our neighbors brought us pies and goody bags to welcome us into the neighborhood thrilled and entertained us. “Who does that?” we would cackle and laugh, “only rich people.” Folks went out of their way to introduce themselves to us, including stopping their car and waving us down to say hello. Adam often says that he feels he has to put on a nice shirt to go outside and collect the mail.

What became immediately apparent was that renting our house in the swanky river neighborhood granted us entry into a higher social class than we'd ever been party to before, certainly one that I'd never experienced as a graduate student. While I'm sure that my advanced degree accorded me some standing, it was without a doubt my husband's profession that concerned and interested everyone. “What does your husband do?” The secret, veiled curiosity of the white upper middle-class was both baffling and galling. I rankled at the politely unspoken question, “Where does your money come from?” and wanted to shout confirmations of my own value and merit.

This was a different world and one I was not immediately familiar with. In graduate school, I was surrounded by a diverse group of fierce, determined women whose personal relationships were of little consequence to the work in which we were engaged. My girlfriends all held advanced degrees or were in the process of applying to graduate schools. In Redding, I was invited to participate in a monthly book club where I was one of two women with a full-time job. Almost all of the twenty-odd participants are stay-at-home moms. Each of the women are white heterosexuals with at least some college

(most held a Bachelor's) whose husbands are either doctors, dentists, lawyers, business owners, military officers, or something of the like. One woman commended me on my schooling, "that's so nice," and stated that she didn't have a job because she couldn't think of anything she wanted to do. Teaching had been a consideration, but that was just "too much paperwork."

In this strange upper social tier, there were no people of color. In my neighborhood, there is a black family who lives seven or eight houses down from me. They are a friendly family of five, including the mother-in-law, who always wave and greet me when I am out walking my beagle mix, Barney. A book club member told me that "that family" - "they" - are "just renting."

"Oh, us, too!" I replied with a straight face, seething on the inside.

And so my huge, gorgeous house by the river became an obligation. I hated the expectation that came with my address, hated the disconnect from a life I loved and had thrived in. Most of all, I hated that I hadn't realized any of this before moving into our house; I hated my own foolishness.

### **A method for Cale**

I've struggled with how to tell the story of Hugh Cale, what kind of school it is, who the people are that work there, and what the students are like who go to school there. I struggle with this telling because of the popular assumptions a lot of people have regarding alternative schools – I struggle because I once spoke these assumptions. When I tell people that I work at Hugh Cale, the responses range from "Bless your heart" to "Oh my!" and "Do you feel safe there?" The surprise and apprehension that people

return to me gives me an indication of their presumptions about Hugh Cale: it's a bad school, the kids are bad, and so on.

It's not just enough for me respond, "these aren't bad kids" or to explain how factors  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  have contributed to their "badness." Even coming from the racist discourse in which I grew up, it's hard to speak to other whites through that, to pull people into understanding. While I think both the defense and explanation are necessary, I don't believe it's enough to make the public *care* about the students who go to Hugh Cale. Because that is ultimately my goal: I want to convey to others the deep care and love I have for the students and staff at Hugh Cale. If I am to tell the story of Hugh Cale Community School, then I am to tell the story of all whose lives are affected by it. And I am to do so, hopefully, in a way that tells a full story – a story full of contradictions, a story without resolution, a story that invites readers to give a damn about the people who populate it. Because ultimately, isn't that what social science research is supposed to do? Don't we want people to give a damn? I offer my perspective, a perspective that cares, to hopefully convince others to listen to the voices of those who live and experience alternative schooling. As Nina said, "Some people say [Cale is a place] for bad kids. And some people say it's for some people to help their academics. Because that's what I went for, my academics. I wasn't a bad person." It's my hope that these stories of Cale will help provide perspective on the assumptions and popular misconceptions surrounding alternative schooling, to demonstrate that there are alternate possibilities in alternative education: alternative schooling is not just a place for "bad" kids.

And so I made several choices about how I would go about writing about Cale. My first choice was not to scrutinize the students. I didn't want to survey the kids and try

to make statements or generalities about who they are or how they behave, or even why they behave how they behave. If a kid wants to smoke some pot before, during, or after school, so be it – there are certainly worse things he could be doing, and none of that has any bearing on the institutional forces of the school and schooling writ large. My second choice was not to scrutinize the teachers. A lot of education work is concerned with pedagogy, and the methods employed in distilling the curriculum. For this story, what happens in the curriculum and in the day-to-day practice of instruction doesn't matter so much to me as how the students see and interpret their teachers. From almost every account I gathered, students liked their teachers and believed that their teachers cared about them. That was enough for me. My third choice was to focus on the nebulous space between the general and the particular of Hugh Cale, and through this, attempt to arrive at understanding the school as a location of being. My method was to “observe contradictions within institutions and the ways those contradictions played out in lived lives” (Tuck, 2012, p. 16).

To do this, I wanted to look at the context of the school, as a site within a racist Southern town, to think about how school policies come to bear on the lives of students, and how teachers engage in teaching within this climate. Our thoughts and opinions about schooling are probably always right at some point, but are never right all the time nor are they proven right in more than just a quick glance, a moment, a blip in the passage of time. I use narrative to bring the reader into these moments, because “stories invite us to come to know the world and place in it” (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 13).

### **Lessons I learned from Parkmore**

My time at Parkmore was full of dismal, painful moments. I usually had to convince myself to drive out to the school, which was 45 minutes away from my house. I felt so useless, sitting in the classroom with my notebook and with nothing to do; I tried to offer my assistance to all of the teachers, “Do you need copies run? Can I help with anything?” No one took me up on my offers. Even worse, most of the teachers didn’t talk to me at all. Some made small talk, and said ‘hello’ when I arrived at school, but otherwise, most of the teachers treated me like the lurker I was.

When I asked the assistant principal if there was something more that I could be doing, something that would be helpful, something that would contribute to the school itself, she said she’d ask the teachers. That afternoon, she told the teachers that I was a “behavioral analyst” and that I could help the teachers with the behavior problems of the students<sup>11</sup>. No one needed my “help.”

The students were curious about my presence, but most of them were used to the troupe of social workers, special educators, assessment practitioners, and other “watchers,” they paid me no mind except to ask, “You writing about me? You writing about us because we bad kids?” I would always answer, “No, I’m writing about alternative schools” and “You are not bad kids. You might have made some bad choices, but you are not bad kids.”

One sixth-grade boy absolutely refused to be alone with me, and would not speak to me at all. He knew me for who I was – a white researcher watching and studying his brown body. I sat beside him one day and tried to help him with his worksheet. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes:

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<sup>11</sup> This is not what I do.



Javon is dressed in a greasy sweatshirt hoodie with his head down on the desk – he is uninterested in talking with me. Or doing any kind of work. I’ve tried cajoling – he is uninterested. So far he hasn’t said a word to me – only grunts and head shakes and nods. He has gorgeous lashes and smooth brown skin. I am feeling very helpless right now. I have no idea what to do to get this kid interested – ha! – in his work. I do not want to punish him or get him in any trouble for not doing his work. But then, what to do? I have tried moving him to the computer lab – no response. Tried reading with him – no response. I feel silly. Cajoling is the only word I can think of for what I’ve been doing –pleading with someone to do something – and there is no force or power that I have to get him to do something. So helpless and so frustrated. I’m also worried about looking helpless, because if I look how I feel then I’m in big trouble.

Parkmore taught me that I needed a role, a place, if I was to continue learning about alternative schools. Parkmore also taught me not to approach the students and staff, but to let them come to me. I couldn’t just go in to watch them – these people were not objects to be studied. And so I first contacted the Hugh Cale in December of 2011 to talk with the principal about Cale being a possible site for my dissertation research. During that meeting, Mrs. Jamison told me a lot about her school, but I learned the most about the principal herself. Ailee Jamison is a charismatic principal with a sharp wit and a penchant for laughter. She talked frankly about her teachers and their performance in the classroom, and I was struck by how intimately she knew both her teachers and their pedagogy. Mrs. Jamison was also unafraid to discuss her concerns regarding one teacher’s apparent weakness during a recent observation. “Now I’ve done hired this teacher, and she can’t teach. Now I’ve got to worry about that.”

Her concern for her students and her school was obvious, and it was also obvious how drained she was as a result. “I’m tired,” Mrs. Jamison said. “I can’t do this anymore, not do it and do it well.” She told me of her current job search, of trying to find another administrative position in another county or across the state. She was open to

moving anywhere and doing anything. “I’m very good at my job, ok? But being good at my job is tiring. And I’m burned out, ok? I need to do something else.” When she began to talk of leaving, I knew that I couldn’t chance starting my dissertation research here. What if the new administration didn’t welcome my presence? My project could be in jeopardy. But I recognized Mrs. Jamison’s need for assistance and so I offered to come and be an extra body for her. “I can do whatever you need me to do,” I said.

It was decided that I would help out in the front office, and that I would begin with the new semester in January of 2012. My first day was also the first day of the new term, which meant new classes and new chaos as students got settled. I walked in to confusion. A student was supposed to have returned to his “home” school, one of the area’s two traditional high schools, but instead he’d shown up at Cale that morning. The boy stood gangly and awkwardly, all knees and elbows, while Mrs. Jamison tried to figure out how to get him where he was supposed to be. There was no school resource officer who could take him, the buses had already left, and she couldn’t leave the school. With my keys still in hand, I offered to drive the child across town. In the car, the student expressed his displeasure at having to return to his home school. It turned out that he’d known he’d been reassigned to the other high school over the break, but at had shown up at Hugh Cale anyway. When I asked him why, he told me that he’d “rather be at Cale,” where the classes are smaller and there weren’t so many students.

I was surprised to hear this kid say that he preferred the alternative school to his regular high school. It only took me a few days, a week perhaps, to understand why the errant student preferred Cale. My primary assignment is answering the phone and being an “extra hand” in the office – filing, sorting, shredding. Through this position, I have

come to know almost every kid by name. Mrs. Jamison's has a tacit open door policy. Students wander in and out of the office all day long. It often amuses me how students come in just to poke their head in and wave. Students drift into the office during class changes, on the way to the bathroom, or after getting a drink at the water fountain. They come during lunch or during their breaks, and they stay until they are shooed out. That's another part of my job: designated shoo-er. I also field calls from parents who phone to say that their child is sick and will be absent, or those who want to know whether or not their child is in school that day.

After I'd been working for Mrs. Jamison for a few months, she asked me if I wanted to complete my dissertation research at Hugh Cale. Or rather, she asked me *why I wasn't* completing my dissertation research at Cale.

"I would love to!" I told her. "I love this school!" But I also told her that I was unwilling to plan my research at a school where the administration might be changing shortly. I asked Mrs. Jamison if she'd heard anything from her job search.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I want to, but they would have to pay me so much more to make it worth the move. My family is here, my grandbaby is here."

And so I came to belong at Cale.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **PUBLIC OPINIONS**

Although I had every intention of going, I didn't visit Hugh Cale all summer. In my mind, I had planned to ride my new white and red Schwinn over to the school and visit with Mrs. Jamison and Mrs. Moore. I'd thought about taking them lunch or just going over to say, "Hi!" I imagined Mr. Bryant working to clean out some of the storage or playing Spider Solitaire, Mrs. Moore stepping out for a cigarette break, and Mrs. Jamison hunched over at her computer or on the phone with some bedraggled parent who didn't want their child sent to Cale. I'm not sure why I never went, especially since I passed the school several times a week on my way to drop off and pick up my boys from my mom's house. Each time I drove past, I would think, "I need to stop by," and yet, I never did. Part of the problem with procrastinating is that you almost, always, run out of time waiting for the right moment.

As it turned out, the only time I saw any of the office staff was one night when my husband's family went to Applebee's for dinner. Applebee's is one of the few chain restaurants in Redding. When I was in high school, I thought rich people ate there. My husband's aunt was in town from Toronto, Canada, and his whole family had gathered at the restaurant to celebrate. As my husband and I walked in, I saw one of the black students from Hugh Cale, David Boyer, at a table with a young, pretty black girl. It was obvious they were on a date, so I waved and said hello, and David shyly responded. Our

large party was seated at a table for 14, spread out across one whole side of the restaurant. I was relieved to have Grandma there to take care of my oldest child while I cared for the baby.

We had just been served our meals when Mrs. Jamison walked in with some girlfriends. She and I warmly greeted each other, and I stood to give her a hug. I had missed her face. We exchanged pleasantries and I told her I missed Hugh Cale. She laughed and said that Betty Moore was already asking when I was coming back because “she had stuff for me to do.” More papers to file, more cumulative folders to update, I was sure. I said I looked forward to coming back and hoped to see them again soon. I could ride my bike over there! After Mrs. Jamison left, I rejoined my family.

From the far end of the table, my brother-in-law was discussing what classes he was going to take that fall at Rivers Community College. Leary had just completed his GED after 10 long years and was excited about enrolling in college. He said he wanted to sign up for sailing. I suggested he might first want to sign up for Swimming 101, since he didn’t know how to swim. My husband reasoned that Leary could always wear a lifejacket. Darby, my father-in-law, said Leary might not be able to swim, because he had a form of dwarfism and thus was built short, solid, and thick.

“The two have nothing to do with each other,” I argued. As long as Leary was able-bodied, he should be able to swim. Not to be outdone, Darby stated that a dense body mass prevented people from being able to float, which is why black people can’t swim. Darby believes that black people have a different body composition than white people, which makes black people natural athletes, albeit athletes that can’t swim. He and I had argued heatedly over this topic before and I was less than thrilled to have it

come up again at dinner. That it came up at dinner, across a long table, *in public* especially annoyed me.

Having grown up here, I know that racism and anti-Black sentiment is very prevalent in our area. But I'm continually frustrated by the blatant, open discrimination that happens at every turn; to have it come from my family is even worse. When I first started studying and working in anti-racism, I had to learn how to gently chide my mother for saying the "N-word" around me when referring to black people. I had to explain to her that it was a derogatory term that I didn't appreciate or agree with, and that her use of it was unsettling and upsetting me. This was – by far – one of the most awkwardly difficult conversations I've ever had with my mother. In the months that followed, my mom would occasionally slip and immediately correct herself, like someone who curses in front of small children. I appreciated that she loved me enough to do so, even if she didn't agree with my position, and I respected and loved her enough not to force the issue. If and when some implicit, "coded" racism comes up in our conversations (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), I try to ask questions that challenge and disrupt the stereotypes and assumptions made without insulting or belittling my family (Johnson, 2006).

At the restaurant, I was frustrated with Darby because we'd already had the discussion whereby he believed that blacks were physically and genetically different from white people. By suggesting that black people are biologically different from white people pulls upon old myths of racial difference, which only serves to reinscribe a false, "natural" hierarchy, with the white man featured prominently at the top.

Although Redding is 54% black (US Census, 2010), whites are so accustomed to ownership and privilege in this town that they do not even drop their voices when talking

about blacks in public. “N-bombs” are dropped with regularity and without regard to whoever is listening. Confederate flags are on display across the county, and many of the local vehicles are stickered with the Dixie flag.

Every summer, a local fruit festival is held some thirty miles outside of Redding. At the festival, local vendors sell Confederate Flags and other Southern memorabilia. This past year, my husband and I went for the first time at my mom’s suggestion. The local chapter of The Sons of the Confederate Veterans had a booth set up, inviting members and passing out informational packets. Inside the Ruritan Club located at the fruit festival, donations for the raffle include a black baseball cap featuring Robert E. Lee, a folded Confederate Flag, and a DVD copy of *The Song of the South*. My husband and I stayed less than an hour, pulling our kid away from the bounce house and slide in order to make a quick getaway because I was so uncomfortable there. I did not see a single person of color at the festival.

The black artist, John Sims, calls the Confederate Flag “visual terrorism” (Holyfield, Moltz & Bradley, 2009), and I think this is an apt description. The presentation of Confederate flags on cars, clothing, houses and buildings, and other spaces is about defining oneself as affiliated with “the South as a distinctive region, individual rebelliousness, a self-conscious ‘redneck’ culture, and segregation and racism” (Coski, 2005, p. 7 as quoted in Holyfield, et al., 2009, p. 518). The flag represents a collective group membership, but one that does not include or welcome non-white others. In high school, I identified as a redneck and proudly wore t-shirts featuring the Confederate flag and Nathan Bedford Forrest or other known racists. I proclaimed “heritage, not hate” when I had the Confederate flag added to my high school class ring.

And, in some sad sense, part of this racist identification for me *was* about heritage – it was about belonging and knowing the parameters of my membership, boundaries solidly defined by the presentation of the flag, country music, and redneck culture. But this membership was also heavily underscored by anti-black sentiment by me and others like me – “heritage, not hate” was simply empty rhetoric.

Confederate flags are almost always associated with anti-Obama sentiment in this area, although certainly the two are not mutually inclusive. I once pulled up behind a vehicle with four inch lettering proclaiming:

**O**ne  
**B**ig  
**A**ss  
**M**istake  
**A**merica,  
*AGAIN*

Flanking this proclamation were two large Confederate flags. Despite the denials, it is really hard to believe that the loud vitriol surrounding Barack Obama’s presidency is not laden with racism – not when my beautician<sup>12</sup> drops her voice and says, “you know, considering what we’ve got in office right now.” *What* – not *who* – is in office.

Redding is seriously divided across race and class lines, although class and race are much of the same in our small town. There are rich white folks and poor white folks, but all of the black folks are poor, or at least that’s the way it seems. Around here, white folks walk for exercise and black folks walk to get somewhere. In Redding, there isn’t an obvious professional class of black people – at least not from a white person’s

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<sup>12</sup> After this comment, I stopped using her services, although I failed to counter her racism in the present. To be completely honest, I was afraid to speak up and be judged in a salon full of white people.



perspective. The total number of black lawyers and doctors can be counted on two hands with a few fingers left over. There are no black dentists. The paradox of this reality is the presence of a historically black university near the heart of the city's historical district. Redding State University was first founded in 1891 as a normal school for black teachers, and is now part of North Carolina's 16-campus public university system. Redding State proudly serves almost 3,000 students, but among white people the university is denigrated as "not a *real* college." Local lore is that whites can "get paid to go to school" at "Watermelon U" because of the scholarships offered to white students to help meet the university's diversity quota.

Race relations in this small town are incredibly strained. De facto segregation is the rule and less the exception. Real estate redlining and old money ensure that white folks live along the river and control access to the water with manicured lawns and private piers. There is no site along the water for public swimming, so unless one has access to a pier or a privately owned boat, the broad expanse of river is off limits.

There are gas stations for black people and gas stations for white people, funeral homes for black people and funeral homes for white people, shopping centers for black people and shopping centers for white people. Sometimes, the distinctions are subtle and implicit and conveyed through social class – an upscale clothing boutique, high end cosmetics – but in other instances, the markers are explicit and long-standing. For instance, the Astro-Mart gas station on the main drag is known to white people as the "Afro-Mart." The Food Lion grocery store along the same street is either called "Hood Lion" or the NFL (N\*\*\*\*\* Food Lion), and whites will travel past this one to the newer, "cleaner" Food Lion up the road. Similarly, the Hardee's restaurant located closest to a

black neighborhood is called the “Black Hardee’s” as opposed to the “White Hardee’s” a mile away. White folks claim the food tastes better at the white Hardee’s. A local nightclub closed and reopened under “new management” to discourage black patrons from returning. This same nightclub previously had implicit nights for white and black clients: Friday night was “Black Night” and Saturday night was “White Night.” Over dinner recently, my brother stated this night club was much better now that there weren’t so many black people there.

Mr. Bryant and I discussed Redding’s racial segregation in the office one day, because I asked him where young black folks go to hang out. Where do the college kids go? He told me about a social club located deep within a black neighborhood called The Shack, adding that some of our students hung out there. There are at least two bars downtown that cater almost exclusively to white clientele, one of which is located directly adjacent to a nightclub, Mangoes, which serves both black and white customers. Mrs. Jamison walked in during the conversation Mr. Bryant and I were having, and she said that her youngest daughter would sometimes go to Mangoes with her friends. I asked Mrs. Jamison if her daughter went to either of the other two (mostly white) bars, and she said “No, but maybe sometimes.”

I asked Mr. Bryant if he and his family ever ate in any of the downtown restaurants, which serve mostly white people. “Oh nooooo,” he said, shaking his head, “oh no.”

Mrs. Jamison waved us away as if we were annoying flies. “Why not?”

Mr. Bryant and myself, who both grew up in Redding, perceived defined (and similar) racial boundaries, and Mrs. Jamison – who grew up in New York City –

dismissed these color lines. Mr. Bryant and Mrs. Jamison are close in age, but of differing social classes.

In Redding, racial distinctions are pervasive and common. My mother used to manage an elite retirement home for wealthy whites, and she described to me how she was asked to selectively advertise vacancies so as not to attract black residents, whose presence would upset the “little old ladies.” Instead, black women cooked and cleaned at the retirement home, often working for less than \$10 an hour.

This is the message broadcast every day through our small town: black people serve as support staff, white people hold the power. It is this message that Sherick Hughes (2006) takes up and writes against in a recent book featuring Redding and surrounding areas. Hughes describes the deeply entrenched racism and the contest for social progress. His book, *Black hands in the biscuits not in the classrooms: Unveiling hope in a struggle for Brown’s promise*, describes the fortitude, strength and perseverance local black families found in hope and unity throughout this area’s tumultuous integration of our public schools.

White flight is familiar in the local schools. In Albemarle County, there are six private schools<sup>13</sup>. The two PreK-12 private schools with the highest enrollment numbers<sup>14</sup> (approximately 200 students at each) report at least 94% of the student population is white. The county’s largest nonsectarian private school was established in 1965, coinciding with “freedom of choice” racial integration in the area’s public schools. It would be 1970 before black and white students were finally brought together in a

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<sup>13</sup> Two of the schools are nonsectarian. The other four denominations are Methodist, Seventh Day Adventist, Baptist and Assembly of God.

<sup>14</sup> The combined enrollment total of the other four schools is less than 70 students.

single high school, Camptown High, and into the 1970s before all public schools in North Carolina were officially desegregated (Hughes, 2006).

Interestingly, the local private school serves as the “alternative school” for well-to-do white students who get into trouble in the public schools, including someone expelled my junior year of high school for bringing a hunting rifle onto campus. My working-class white boyfriend was long-term suspended during our senior year for threatening to stab a teacher, and he went to Hugh Cale. When I asked him what it was like out there, he responded, “It’s just a bunch of n\*\*\*\*\*.”

Over Christmas in 2011, I had a conversation with the white Episcopal priest about education. Father Harrison asked for my perspective on public education, and went on to tell me he was part of a group lobbying the local Board of Education to create an A+ magnet school in the area. Father Harrison was concerned about the poor performance of Albemarle public schools. He wanted a “good” school for his boys to attend, an option that included a focus on the arts and sciences. During the course of our conversation, it became clear that Father Harrison presumed his two boys would attend the new magnet school, even though they were slated to attend a different school in the district. The oldest of the boys was not yet four at the time.

Since my husband and I moved back to Redding, we’ve encountered several white parents who are concerned with the local schools. My cousin and her husband moved across the river into a neighboring county where the student population at the local elementary school is 82% white. Another Redding parent complained to us that the primary school his son was zoned to attend was “too dark.” He and his wife now use his mother’s address across town so that his child can attend a better school. The enrollment

of black children at the first elementary school is 62% of the total population. At the “better” school, the enrollment of black children is 58% of the total population. However, the “better” school pulls from two of the wealthiest white neighborhoods in Redding, including the one where my family and I currently live.

These examples of school choice and social mobility only serve to underscore the advantages available to wealthy whites when selecting their child’s schooling. A person can certainly not be faulted for wanting what is best for their child. The problem becomes when a school’s success or failure is determined by the number of children of color attending the school, or the socioeconomic status of the student body. Reyes offers the following critique, “...the absence of a vision for the public nature of education makes education a commodity available to the most knowledgeable, most aggressive, and better-financed consumer” (2006, p. 49). I think her critique is something worth considering: To what degree should education be accessible for the public? What is the purpose of public education? The service provided by our public educational system is the only opportunity some people will have for academic learning (Rose, 2012), and by limiting the quality or experience of this, we as a society are closing down the future for our children. Do we believe that everyone deserves a chance at education?

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The 2012-2013 school year started on August 27<sup>th</sup>, amidst the sweltering humidity of late summer. Even in this coastal town, the heat can be stifling. I called Betty Moore to find out if she needed help before the students arrived. She wanted a few things filed and organized and I was more than happy to help. I was eager to visit Hugh Cale. I absolutely love the anticipation of a new school year. It is an excitement that has stayed

with me since childhood, and sometimes I imagine it is acute nostalgia that connects me so deeply to schools and education. As a child, ‘school’ represented the snubbed edges on pink erasers, the bent corners of abused textbooks, and the oscillating grind of the wall-mounted pencil sharpener. Shiny borders along the rims of bulletin boards, chairs that shifted and creaked as students restlessly switched positions, and the school day beginning and ending with the ringing of bells.

As an adult, I especially enjoy teacher workdays when schools are empty of children but busy with preparation. Hugh Cale is no different in this regard. The teachers were rested and happy and grumbled good-naturedly about the brevity of their break. The entire school had been scrubbed and cleaned, the floors waxed and mopped, and the smooth smell of disinfectant hung about the halls. When I walked into the front office, I was surprised to see that there had been significant changes made over the summer. A new desk had been added; there was a new, round meeting table and chairs. The old, sagging, floral sofa had been replaced with two stilted, waiting-room style sets of adjoining seats. The new security check-in system was mounted in a standing cubicle for visitors, an upgrade from its black-tarped jury-rigged stand from last semester. The front office looked like, well, an *office*. It used to look like a room thrown together with thrift store furniture and some phones added in for extra oomph.

“Ooh la la,” I said upon entering, “this sure is fancy!” Betty Moore and Mrs. Jamison emerged from their offices and we exchanged smiling, laughing hugs of welcome. I voiced my admiration of the new furniture and begged for all of the details. Mrs. Jamison said that Betty Moore and Mr. Bryant had worked hard over the break, cleaning up and rearranging the front office.

“I love the new chairs,” I told both ladies, pointing at the waiting room seating.

“Well, now students can’t be laying around, flopping down and trying to sleep on the couch all day.” Mrs. Jamison went over and sat down in one of the chairs. “If they tried to sleep, they’d have to be like this,” she said, slumping uncomfortably over one of the seat railings, “or this,” she said, sitting up and laying her head back against the wall. “Now they can’t lay back and put their feet up and complain that their heads hurt and stay up here all day.”

One of my favorite things about Mrs. Jamison is her vibrant animation. She tells every story with her whole body, pacing and moving and waving her hands. She invites call and response participation from her audience, and it is impossible not to participate. I laughed, hard, at her antics. Even Betty Moore was hooting.

“And who is the new desk for? Are you finally getting a secretary?” The new desk was up against the wall of Betty Moore’s office, across from Mrs. Jamison’s door. A monthly desk calendar and a phone were neatly arranged on top, next to a small pot of Wandering Jew<sup>15</sup>. There was a long, wooden, horizontal set of drawers behind the desk, holding an electronic three-hole paper punch, a motorized stapler, and other office necessities.

“It’s for our new resource officer.” Mrs. Jamison beamed.

“What?!” I almost shouted. “How did that happen?”

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<sup>15</sup> Otherwise known as spiderwort, *Tradescantia zebrina*. I purposefully call this plant by the name it is known for in this area, where there is no synagogue and no Jewish people (to my best knowledge).

“Well, I basically threatened Mr. Longwood over the summer. It’s ridiculous for us not to have one. I can’t be calling 911 every time we have a problem. We need someone here.”

The issue of the school resource officer has been a painful point of contention over the last year. In Redding, the school resource officers are drawn from the patrol division of the Albemarle Sheriff’s Office. The Board of Education funds the officers’ salary and benefits, with the Sheriff’s office covering the cost of uniforms and other incidentals. Prior to the 2011-2012 school year, the Board of Education cut the funding for school resource officers in the county, dropping the number from 5 to 4 officers. The rationale was that a permanent, full-time officer would be placed at each of the two high schools and middle schools. Officers from those four schools would rotate shifts, each officer taking a day to work at Hugh Cale. Most of the time, this translated to an officer showing up at Cale about once a week and staying for just a few hours. On other days, the deputies would simply ride through the parking lot without ever entering the school building. Some weeks went by without anyone showing up at all.

Luckily, Cale didn’t often have a need for a school resource officer. By herself, Mrs. Jamison does a great job of “maintaining,” as she puts it, but she has also noted that, “the problem was that at any given moment, it could. And it can get scary around here – even with a resource officer – it gets scary. We just don’t know. It’s like a powder keg, it can go off any minute.”

I could tell that Mrs. Jamison was tickled over the assignment of a new school resource officer. She affectionately patted the empty desk, and pointed out the new



phone and computer hookups. “Mrs. Moore has cleaned out the desk and gotten it all set up for someone to come move in.”

“What did you get me?” I asked characteristically. Growing up as the second child, I never want to be left out of anything.

Mrs. Jamison laughed at me. “I’ve got a bunch of empty bulletin boards for you to do. C’mon and let me show you.”

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Three weeks into the school year, we were still waiting on the new resource officer. Not only had our new officer not shown up, no one else from the Sheriff’s department had come in the officer’s stead. Mrs. Jamison had talked to Mr. Longwood, and there was some kind of disagreement between the Board of Education and the Sheriff’s department. It boiled down to money. The Sheriff’s department had not included the cost of the SRO in their budget because Mr. Longwood failed to officially request an officer for Hugh Cale. It seemed that nobody wanted to pay for the resource officer. However, Mrs. Jamison had been lead to believe the Board of Education had set aside the necessary funding for the position and an agreement had already been reached with the Sheriff’s department. Mrs. Jamison called the Superintendent’s office weekly, asking for updates, only to be told that there was nothing to be done. She became increasingly frustrated when she learned that funds been diverted from the ‘69 money’ to pay for an assistant principal at a local elementary school. North Carolina school districts have a special budget line for programs and schools serving “at-risk” kids; it is commonly known to administrators as ‘69 money.’ Learning this was like rubbing salt into an open wound; Mrs. Jamison needed both a security officer and an assistant

principal, and money that could've been used to fund either positions was used to supplement another school in the area.

"He knows I need somebody," Mrs. Jamison said, exasperated. Mr. Longwood had once been the principal of Hugh Cale Community School; he'd been here when the school started and so he was well aware of the struggles Mrs. Jamison faced. Mrs. Jamison told me, "Anytime you talk to anybody and you say we don't have a resource officer at Cale, they're always like, 'Huh?' It's just so confusing for anybody with any sense. Because it just defies logic that you would be sending children who are violating school district policies, you know, on the highest level, and you are sending all of those same kids to the same location. Instead of where they were spread out throughout the district, now you are putting all of them in the same spot, so they can feed off each other like a feeding frenzy with no resource officer to support, to keep everybody, attempt to try to help us maintain some safety. It just doesn't make sense."

Mr. Longwood had written a letter to Sheriff Carter pleading for an officer to be assigned to Hugh Cale. He hyped up an incident from the previous week, when a seventh-grader with extreme emotional and behavioral problems had kicked a bus driver. The student was removed from the bus without issue, but Mr. Longwood used the incident as a platform to prevail in Hugh Cale's favor.

The excitement over the new desk had quickly waned, and every day the desk remained empty was evidence of Hugh Cale's marginalized existence. We all felt it.

"This isn't right. It isn't fair," I cried righteously.

In the office, the atmosphere was resigned. “This is the way it is. This is how Cale gets treated. What can you do?” Mrs. Moore, Mr. Bryant, and Mrs. Jamison seemed to be echoing each other, each picking up where the other left off.

Inspired by Dwight Conquergood’s (1994) experiences in the Big Red apartment building, I wanted to do *something*. Without any political clout or power of any kind, I could only draw upon my social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977), namely, my education. I knew that the public should and could be made aware of the pettiness of our local government. It stood to reason that people would be supportive of Hugh Cale, especially when they realized how bereft our school was in relation to other schools. Our kids deserved more than this.

I called the local newspaper and tried to reach the education reporter. My calls went unanswered, so I switched tacks and attempted the reporter who covered city and county news. To my delight, Richard Bezor answered his phone. I explained to Mr. Bezor that I was a volunteer at Hugh Cale, and that I had a story that his newspaper might be interested in. I explained that our school had gone several weeks without a school resource officer, and that the safety and well being of Cale’s children was being placed at risk. At length, I described the marginalization of these children and the lack of resources devoted to this school, I admonished the city and local government for refusing to serve the school or its students, and I emphasized the notable service provided to these students through quality education at Hugh Cale. Children were successfully graduating from school due to the support of the faculty and staff at Cale. This school deserved more. “These aren’t second class citizens,” I said.

Mr. Bezor listened to my story and tut-tutted his agreement and disapproval of the situation. Finally, Mr. Bezor asked, “Now, who are you again?” I described myself as a “graduate student in education who works with alternative schools.” Mr. Bezor thanked me for my call and asked if I could be reached for comment, if necessary. I agreed and hung up the phone, feeling rather full of myself.

Another week went by, with no resource officer and no word from Mr. Bezor. Then, this story appeared on the front page of our local newspaper:

*Tuesday, Sept 18, 2012*

**School Officer OK'd for Cale: Funding for SRO a concern for some commissioners**

By: Richard Bezor, staff writer

Responding to school officials' concerns about the safety of students and staff, Albemarle County officials Monday approved the assignment of a school resource officer at Hugh Cale Community School.

Albemarle Sheriff Rocky Carter and Redding-Albemarle Public Schools Superintendent Lester Longwood both said the officer is needed at the school, where there have been a few incidents already this year, including one in which a student hit a staff member.

Cale serves students who have had difficulty in a regular school setting, often because of behavioral issues. Longwood indicated many of the students have been identified as “behaviorally handicapped.”

Commissioners expressed concerns about the costs of the resource officer position, and more generally about the cost of operating the school for a relatively small number of students.

Carter explained that the sheriff's department can absorb costs such as vehicle and uniform in this year's budget.

The Redding-Albemarle Public Schools are paying salary and benefits for the officer out of the school budget.

The total personnel cost for the schools to hire the resource officer is \$46,984, including \$32,122 for salary and \$7,214 for health insurance.

“We have identified funds that will cover the costs of this officer and will reimburse the county,” Longwood wrote in a letter to County Manager Roger Kepner. “We feel that for safety reasons it is imperative that we have an officer on duty at Hugh Cale Community School as soon as possible.”

Commissioner Tony Riddick said those who live in the community near Cale are concerned about safety issues. Sometimes students leave the school and are seen walking in the community, he said.

Riddick said he believes it's important for the school to have the resource officer.

"Cale definitely needs a resource officer," Carter agreed.

Carter said that last school year the department tried to rotate resource officers from other school through Cale, but that did not work very well. He pointed out it left the others schools without a resource officer.

There have been a few incidents at Cale already this school year, and Redding police have been called to respond at the school, Carter said.

Longwood said that in one incident, a student hit a staff member. He said the staff member was not injured but the incident was troubling for the staff at the school.

Commissioner David Smith expressed frustration over the cost of serving students whose behavior keeps them out of other schools.

"It certainly doesn't speak highly for our society today, does it?" Smith said.

"It's the world in which we live," Longwood responded.

Smith was speaking not only about the operation of Cale but also about Carter's report that some students for safety reasons are taught one-on-one in an interview room at the Albemarle Public Safety Building.

Carter said having a resource officer on hand at Cale can prevent many incidents from ever occurring.

After the commissioners' vote Monday afternoon, Longwood said he is glad Cale will be getting the resource officer.

"It's all about safety," Longwood said in an interview after the commissioners' vote.

Angela Tolson, a member of the Redding-Albemarle Board of Education, agreed that the resource officer is very much needed. She said the school district needs Cale in order to provide an education for students who have not been successful in other school settings.

Tolson said students at Cale may benefit from components of the program there, such as smaller class sizes.

"We have to support something for these kids," Tolson said.

"They're not throwaways."

During discussion of the request, Commissioner Frank Seton asked why the resource officer needs a car.

Carter replied that while the resource officer stays at the school for most of the day, the officer sometimes has to transport someone away from the school. In addition, the school resource officer also checks for students who are skipping school in the community, he explained.

"They do use their car," Carter said.

I was aghast. Confusion and fury flooded my emotions, and heartache gripped me as I realized that copies of this newspaper were sitting in every classroom at Hugh Cale. Free newspapers are delivered to schools throughout the district every day, and students at Hugh Cale often read through the paper during their morning Reading Block. It was likely that students were reading this article, reading about themselves as a burden on the system, reading about how they were labeled and outcast by the local government. It might be one thing to suspect this to be true, but to read about yourself in the local paper was something else, altogether. The black Superintendent of Redding-Albamarle Public Schools actually called the kids at Hugh Cale “behaviorally handicapped”!

Moreover, I was furious with the story itself, which only served to heighten the prevailing negative perceptions of the students at Cale. The reporter, Mr. Bezor, did nothing to substantiate the claims made by any of the persons cited in the article, nor did he even make an effort to tell another side of the issue. The reporter failed to compare incidents of violence from the other high schools with Hugh Cale, leaving a one-sided, heavy-handed picture of Hugh Cale as unsafe. This picture was uncomplicated and inaccurate. It would stand to reason that if Cale were as threatening as folks believed, that this would be the *first* school to have a school resource officer – not the last. Surely the students at Hugh Cale deserved the same protections available to students in the other schools. Why didn’t the Mr. Bezor highlight this aspect of the story?

In the article, the students at Hugh Cale were portrayed as dangerous miscreants, whose mere presence threatened the safety and well-being of the school’s neighbors. The irony was that the children walking in the surrounding community *belonged* to the surrounding community; many of our kids walked to school every day. Most of the

streets surrounding Hugh Cale were part of historically black neighborhoods. How could someone distinguish between Cale students and students from the HBCU directly across the street? It stood to reason the white residents also perceived the black college students as dangerous, as well.

Sweet Sheena came into the office and saw that I was reading the paper. She asked me softly, “They said we were handicapped. What’s that supposed to mean?”

I had no answer. The Superintendent, Mr. Longwood, was a former principal at Hugh Cale. He should’ve known better.

In the office, the mood was grim. The victory of the SRO battle was shadow-cast by the humiliation of the reporter’s negligence. Mr. Bryant just shook his head and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “What can you do?”

*Thursday, Sept 20, 2012*

Letters to the Editor

**Article Hurtful to Cale Students**

By: Amy Swain, Redding resident

I’m writing to express my deep disappointment with the article regarding the newly appointed school resource officer at Hugh Cale Community School. I’m also inviting you to consider the students who are affected by reading they have been labeled “behaviorally handicapped” on the front-page of our newspaper. This article could have been written with much more care and deliberation, and I believe a responsible journalist would have been aware of this.

The information provided is skewed and highly inflammatory. It suggests that a resource officer for Hugh Cale is a burden on city and county taxpayers, and a burden on the Redding-Albemarle Board of Education. What of the other four resource officers serving schools in Albemarle County – two of whom are placed at middle schools?

When your staff writer, Richard Bezor, chose to include Commissioner’s critique of Cale students – that it “doesn’t speak highly for our society” when a school needs a resource officer – we might also wonder at a society that requires SRO at middle schools which serve

students aged 11-14. We might also consider a society which pushes students (like those at Cale) out of schools each year at alarming rates.

Why not consider what it says of our society that students at Cale are not being served equitably under the law? That they are considered as less than deserving by not one but two of our county commissioners? An education should be provided for these children, and is required by state and federal mandates. Although it is true that some of Cale's students cannot find success at their home schools, it also bears mentioning that Cale does an excellent job of helping these students graduate each year. Cale serves this community in more ways than one, and the work of the faculty and staff is denigrated when an article is published that suggests this school is no more than a holding cell for delinquent youth. How dare you, Mr. Bezor. These students are already stigmatized as trouble-makers without further damage inflicted by careless media personnel.

To comment on the number of "incidents" at Cale this year – without also attending to the reported incidents at Albemarle County High School, Camptown High School, Williams Middle School and Redding Middle School – is just poor journalism. Mr. Bezor has also failed to note that it has taken over a month for county officials and administrators to place an SRO at Cale, while other schools had an officer appointed on the first day.

But maybe Mr. Bezor needs reminding: These students are not throwaways. They are not second-class citizens. They deserve an education – a good education – and they receiving that at Cale.

You could do more, Mr. Bezor.

*Editor's note: Our reporter, Richard Bezor, reported the facts as they were presented at an Albemarle Commissioners meeting. The story accurately quoted both school, county and law enforcement officials about the need and consequences of placing a school resource officer at Hugh Cale Community School. If the way those officials described that need or those consequences lacked sensitivity, the complaint should be directed at them, not Bezor who was just doing his job reporting their comments.*

When I arrived at Cale Thursday morning, Betty Moore asked me if I had been upset with the reporter at the Daily Advance.

"Heck yeah!" I replied. "He pissed me off."

"Oh, you think?" she responded with her thick New York accent, laughing.



Mr. Bryant looked up from his morning Sudoku and smiled at me, “Ok, Ms. Amy, ok.” Nodding his head, he handed me a newspaper and told me my letter had been printed.

I reread my letter, and the heat from the initial story flooded me once again.

“That guy is a jerk.” I dropped the paper. “Jackass.”

“Did you see that note at the end?” Mr. Bryant asked me. “Looks like somebody is trying to get themselves out of trouble.”

“Yeah, ‘*facts*’, my foot!”

Mrs. Jamison came out of her office and hugged me. She thanked me, and she, too, laughed at me. I beamed like a second-grader that had just made Student of the Week. It felt good to stand up for people that I care about; it felt good to be a voice – a white voice of critique against whitestream marginalization of the kids at Cale. Mrs. Jamison leaned over my desk and picked up the phone to do the morning’s announcements, adding this addendum:

“I would like to send a shout out to Ms. Amy in the front office for her nice letter about Hugh Cale in the paper. We really appreciate the kind words.”

Later that evening, my family met with my husband’s parents for dinner. It was a weekly tradition for us to eat at one of the local Mexican restaurants. At the table, Adam stated that he’d run into a family friend, the assistant district attorney of Redding, downtown earlier in the day. The ADA commented on my letter to the editor, and told Adam, “Amy really cut into Rich Bezor. He isn’t such a bad guy. In fact, he’s one of the best we have at the paper.”

My mother-in-law asked what I'd written about, and I filled her in on what had happened. She said she understood where the county commissioners were coming from, since it didn't make any sense to fund a school with so few children, especially a school where the kids can't behave. "They have a point, you know."

"But they *do* behave," I responded, "traditional schools just don't always work for everyone."

"But that doesn't mean these kids should get special treatment," Adam's mother maintained. Our relationship is somewhat tense, and I could feel the strain pushing through my shoulders and neck. I did and I didn't want to press the issue.

When I began doing anti-racism work in 2006, one of my mentors told me that I would have to "choose my battles." She advised that those who engage in the work of social justice will often meet with resistance, and that that resistance will begin to damage what's inside. In order to practice self-care, one must learn when to engage and when to resist so as to escape continual, deafening, defeat.

My time in Redding these last few months has been that of frustration, borne of silence. Over and over again, I have found myself in all-white discourses of domination, privilege, and racism. It has almost been an out-of-body experience at times, when I can step outside and beside myself, and think, *What the hell are you doing here?* I do not fit, and I sit uncomfortably in a space that does not welcome me.

I have been told, passive-aggressively and with love, that I ruin parties with my opinions and conversation. At a dinner party one night, the white woman across from me began telling a story about a hit-and-run she was involved in a few months prior. After her car was hit, she indignantly chased the driver down the street, where the fleeing car

turned onto Turner Avenue. “And of course,” the storyteller related, “the guy was from Turner Avenue, if you know what I mean.” That was the punch line – *Turner Avenue*.

I knew very well the implications of both this story and the woman telling it. Turner Avenue, and surrounding area, is a mostly black neighborhood. This district is incredibly poor. The 2010 United States Census estimated that the income level of this area was about 91% low-to-moderate income (LMI), meaning that 91% of the residents in this area lived at, near or below the poverty line.

However, I looked at the woman across from me and asked, “What *do* you mean?”

As she fumbled her response, I maintained my gaze and allowed her no latitude. “No, I’m sorry. What does Turner Avenue have to do with the story?”

I wanted her to say it. I wanted her to say, “Of course, the people were *black*.” I knew I was in the wrong for being confrontational. The table became fraught with silence, and uneasy glances passed between the guests. I excused myself and went to the restroom so that I might calm my shaking hands. I was so angry – at the woman, at her story – but I was also angry at myself for sitting through a dinner party with people I didn’t have that much in common with, not when I should’ve known better. *What the hell are you doing here?* When I returned to the table, the conversation ended abruptly. The tension was palpable, thick and heavy and shaming me. *Race traitor*.

Although I wasn’t immediately excised, social invitations have begun to slow to a trickle, a reluctant drip. I pretend that I’m too busy to participate – there are papers to grade, a dissertation to write, my kids to raise. Busy, busy, busy – that’s me! The grass

has to grow, and I have to be there to watch it, right? But I also ache with the disconnect, the ostracism, and the loneliness.

So, sitting at the dinner table with my mother-in-law, I did not and could not question her position on the students at Cale. Our relationship is, at best, tolerant of each other, and I couldn't rock the boat of peace with a direct challenge. Adam's mother is an accomplished businesswoman; she has started and run several successful businesses on her own. Used to being in charge, she often believes that she is "right" in every situation and chuffs at any push against her authority.

My mother-in-law's dominance reminds me of the powerful position whites occupy both in our small town and on a national scale. Gary Howard writes about the assumption of rightness, "Dominant groups tend to claim truth as their private domain" (2006, p. 54). This is the position many white folks in Redding take up in respect to race relations and the (mis)distribution of power, goods, and services. It is incredibly hard to challenge those in power, both from within and without the power structure itself. Those who believe they hold truth also hold something far more dangerous and deadly: arrogance.

Thankfully, my husband intervened, "Well, otherwise, the students will drop out. I mean, Leary might've been a lot better off if he'd gone to Hugh Cale." Leary's dwarfism and slow demeanor had made life hard for him as a teenager and he struggled in school. He dropped out as soon as he turned sixteen. He enrolled at the local community college to obtain his GED, but that effort was short-lived and ineffective. It has taken ten years for Leary to finally get his GED. He was so excited about

“graduating” and receiving his diploma that he sent out invitations to the ceremony and, later, passed out pictures of him in his cap and gown.

My husband’s mother reddened, and her face tightened. “Well, he wouldn’t have gone to Hugh Cale.”

I looked down at paper tablecloth and wished one of my boys needed to go to the bathroom. Maybe I needed to go, myself.

Adam, sensing he had struck a nerve, pressed on. “Maybe he should have.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have,” his mother responded stiffly. There was a charged silence, and then thankfully, the moment passed as my young boys demanded attention. But later, I wondered why Leary wouldn’t have gone to Cale? Because of its reputation as a “bad” school? Because the school is predominantly black? And what if he had gone? Would he have graduated?

I doubt it.

*September 23, 2012*

EDITORIAL

***Our View: SRO at Cale; Some miss reason it’s needed***

\*The Albemarle County commissioners approved a request from the Redding-Albemarle Public Schools to assign a school resources officer to the Hugh Cale Community School.

\*Kudos to the board for approving the SRO assignment. It is justified, but some members missed the education objectives behind the request.

We applaud the Albemarle County Board of Commissioners for giving a thumbs up to a full-time school resource officer at Hugh Cale Community School. The board was encouraged to go along with the assignment by the Redding-Albemarle Board of Education and the Albemarle County Sheriff’s Office. Both agreed that law enforcement at Cale, the system’s alternative school, should be approved.

The county wasn't asked to kick in direct funding. The position salary and benefits would be funded by EC-Albemarle, while the sheriff's office will pay for uniforms and vehicle expenses. Those costs, to come out of this year's budget, include \$46, 984 for salary, benefits, health insurance, and related expenses.

The county's decision was the right one. In their discussion of the request, however, some commissioners fretted about the costs of a resource officer and operating a school that serves only a few students. We're concerned that those sentiments reveal a lack of exposure to the real world of education, which requires special accommodations like Cale.

Cale was set up as an alternative school more than a decade ago. Found in many school systems, alternative schools serve students, some of whom have behavioral problems, who have trouble adjusting to a normal classroom environment. School Superintendent Lester Longwood described these students as "behaviorally handicapped."

Cale's operations are organized to work with students who have difficulty adjusting. Teachers and staff are trained to help these students make adjustments in behavior so they can learn. The goal is to provide a setting to give them as much opportunity as possible to overcome their handicap and emerge with an education. Many students assigned to Cale are allowed to reenter the regular school environment.

The process, however, comes with the cost of dealing with some – though certainly not all – students that have a violent personality. Unlike the general student population, where there may be the occasional fight between students, Cale has a higher potential for that to happen. Additionally, earlier this year a Cale student struck a school staff member. Though the incident apparently did not result in injury, it raises the concern among the school staff as well as among the residents living in the area of Cale, which is located off Polk Drive across from the Redding State University campus.

Assigning an SRO, who is in effect an officer of the Albemarle Sheriff's Department, is certainly a justified response for the safety and security of students, staff, and local residents at Cale. For the same reason, SROs are assigned at other schools, which the county currently supports.

However, because of its small student population, the costs of operating Cale and keeping a resource officer there may appear out of line with other schools, as it apparently did to Albemarle Commissioner David Smith. In fact, responding to the needs of students with behavior problems *is* more costly to the taxpayers.

Smith observed, "It certainly doesn't speak highly for our society today, does it?"

To which Superintendent Longwood responded, "It's the world in which we live."

Both responses indicate the varying perspectives of how public officials see and react to their respective obligations. Smith apparently

view students with behavioral issues as a costly inconvenience, preferring the image – and myth – of education as engaged and goal-motivated students, unaffected by differences in their home and family experience.

Longwood, on the other hand, whose focus is on melding the objectives of education with the realities of the human experience, responds by looking for solutions to that challenge.

Cale is a response to students who may not fit in with other students or the general classroom model, but whose lives can be improved by education when adults and leaders care enough.

Granted, it's commendable that Albemarle commissioners scrutinize expenditure of taxpayers' money. The goal of being both efficient and wise with the use of public money always should be a guiding principal for public officials.

We'd urge, however, that when they consider expenses for public education, that the objective of saving a dollar not come at the cost of a student's future. That will turn out to be even more expensive to the taxpayers.

This last editorial defined and magnified the situation for me. Gary Howard writes, "Dominant groups have the power to control public discourse. Whites in Western nations have written the official history, established the systems of education, owned the media, directed the flow of funding, disproportionately influenced the political climate, and occupied the seats of power in most social institutions" (2006, p. 65).

The local newspaper has the power and the platform through which to moderate any debate in our area. The newspaper is run almost exclusively by white people, and as such, they are able to leverage arguments in a manner that accommodates their interests and needs. In this particular case, the newspaper staff demonstrated their lack of journalistic credit and attention to all possible sides of an issue. Kupchick and Bracy describe the role of the media in creating specific responses on social issues, "[the media does] so by providing only certain type of information about these problems and by subjectively framing issues in ways that lead the public to adopt particular beliefs" (2009, p. 137). Whoever was responsible for penning this editorial obviously knew very little

about the “goings-on” at Cale, and has used popular myths about students at alternative schools to bolster their claim that Cale students have “violent personalit[ies].” The article assumes that there are more fights at Cale than at the traditional schools, which, according to our students, simply isn’t true. Further, the article positions an emotional response – residents near Cale feeling unsafe – as information (Kupchick and Bracy, 2009) but fails to quote and/or find a single resident who is concerned.

My letter to the editor must have shamed someone into this miserable defense, which only reiterated the callous, hurtful comments from the original article. The editorial frames this issue not as a civil rights matter, but as an economic issue by concentrating on the cost/benefit analysis. Delgado and Stefanic point out, “rights are almost always cut back when they conflict with the interests of the powerful” (2001, pg. 23). The take-away is that Cale students are a drain on the system. The article stops short of critiquing our educational system, which fails students at alarming rates and is the reason Cale even exists. I wonder if the readership of the paper can also read between these lines. “Given that the average citizen has little firsthand knowledge of many social problems, he or she receives this information from claims makers whose duty it is to inform the public about these issues” (Kupchick and Bracy, 2009, p. 137)

Officer Gina Smithson quietly started at Hugh Cale Community School the following Monday.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### SCHOOL POLICY

“Who is the new little boy in middle school?” It’s a question I often ask whenever I see a new face. The question is not so much *who* as in, “What’s her name?” but “Who is that? What’s his story? Where did she come from? Why is she at Cale?” Next to my seat at the front desk, there is a large sliding glass window through which I can watch most of the events of the hallway. Whenever the middle school would troop by, I’d catch glimpses of a new kid, short and pretty with dark, smooth skin. Working in the front office, it helps to be able to know a child’s name and their “story.” But also, I’m kinda nosy; I pretend it’s just my qualitative training.

“Tony?” Mrs. Jamison fills in a name with the face.

“Oh, is *that* Tony? I’ve heard you talking about him. Messy’s new friend.”

Messy is a sixth-grader. His nickname was given to him because he is into *everything*. In other words, he is a *mess*. Messy spends more time in the office than any other child in Hugh Cale. He is famously prone to temper tantrums and sulking, right before cracking into the most gorgeous shit-eating grin you’ve ever seen. Small for his age, he isn’t bigger than a minute but his personality is so big and outrageous you could pack it into suitcases and still have some left over for your carry-on. Messy has a hate-hate relationship with the middle school language arts teacher, Mrs. Donald, and as such, he is frequently sent to the office to allow Mrs. Donald a breather. She tolerates him as best

she can, which isn't saying very much since her tolerance level is quite low. Knowing this, Messy gets under her skin and itches her very bones. But then, Messy does that with just about everyone.

There is an endearing quality to Lil' Mess, one which Officer Smithson and I have agreed upon although we cannot define it. She and Messy are fast friends, and she often talks to him with her "mother voice." He will appear at her side, charming her with questions and small talk, easing her out of whatever snacks and candy are in her desk before she realizes that he is out of place. "Where are you supposed to be?!" With a grin, he'll say he had to go to the bathroom, and then he'll ask another question and the wooing starts again.

Messy is infamous for stirring up trouble. He talks to anyone and everyone, boasting and telling jokes, inviting all present to join his audience. If slighted, Lil' Mess will sit and chip away at the perpetrator until all that is left is a throbbing, pulsing nerve – a human variant of Chinese water torture. He is combative and alternately, incredibly engaging and irresistible. It has been somewhat surprising that Lil' Mess and Tony have taken up as such fast friends, given that most students merely tolerate Messy. Tony is quiet and polite around adults, offering a shy smile, while Messy bounds into the room and demands attention. From the stories I've heard, the two feed off the other's energy and are about to cause poor Mrs. Donald, the language arts teacher, to lose her mind.

Mrs. Jamison tells me Tony's story. She said that she went over to have an IEP meeting<sup>16</sup> at Williams Middle School because they were trying to send another kid over

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<sup>16</sup> Every child who is identified as having special needs (or requiring special education services) must, by federal law, have an individualized educational plan (IEP) drawn up specifically for her or him. Teachers, parents, school administrators and school support

to her. “I was sitting in this meeting and I was all tired, like ‘ok, who is this kid and why are you sending him over to me?’” She had her little notebook out and was trying to look interested.

Mrs. Jamison said that Tony was referred to Cale because he had given some marijuana to another child. Only, it wasn’t *really* marijuana – it was the crushed leaves of a plant off the teacher’s desk. She said, “I looked up and was like, ‘Ok....’, like, are you *serious*? And the teacher is telling me how she saw Tony come and take some leaves off her plant and crush them up in his hand and take them over to another little boy and say ‘hey, I’ve got some weed’ or something stupid like that.”

“So there weren’t really any drugs?” I asked, somewhat incredulous. “And the people in the meeting knew that the drugs weren’t real?”

Mrs. Jamison’s eyebrows were raised and she had the craziest look on her face. “I was sitting in the meeting looking around like, ‘Am I being punk’d? I was looking around for hidden cameras, like, ‘What’s going on here?’”

Everyone in the meeting was completely serious and on the basis of drug possession, Tony was being recommended for a 45-day change in placement. By law, any child that is identified as ‘exceptional education’ or ‘special education’ found with drugs or a weapon can be automatically given a 45-day change in placement. Augustina Reyes (2006) offers some insight:

Generally, special education students may not be expelled or removed from their special education service or the Individualized Educational Plan

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personnel work together to create an individualized plan based on the student’s current performance, and in consideration of the student’s strengths and weaknesses. Once an IEP is in place, any proposed change in the student’s education must include a meeting with all involved parties (school, parents, and others). Parents must be in agreement with all proposed changes.

(IEP) unless it can be shown that the misbehavior causing the disciplinary action is not a manifestation of the child's disability. After the IEP team has determined that the misbehavior is not related to the disability, a special education student may be expelled or suspended for a long-term period not to exceed forty-five days. The parents must agree to the change. Since all educational services cannot be completely terminated during a suspension or an expulsion, alternative placements must provide special education services (pg. 39).

Mrs. Jamison said that at his regular school, Tony "wasn't doing well and he was getting into issues," and that it was likely that because of these problems, the teachers and administration at Williams Middle wanted to get him out of there. It is no secret that teachers and administration will often collude to remove underperforming and/or disruptive students from the regular classroom, so as to "improve" instruction for the remaining students (Reyes, 2006; Tuck, 2012). My experiences as a teacher confirm this. When I was teaching middle school language arts and social studies, I thought my whole year would be improved if only Lanie Griffin was not in my room – as if the removal of that one child would somehow magically upgrade my novice teaching abilities. She was loud and distracting, impossible to keep on task, and her attention span was shorter than a minute. As a novice teacher, she made instruction hard and classroom management harder. My team teacher felt the same way, and he and I often petitioned the principal to have Lanie removed. In Lanie's case, our principal said her disruptive behavior was not enough to warrant her removal due to her IEP. He told us to "document, document, document" everything, though, just in case. *Just in case.*

Arguments can be made for and against the removal of problem students from any classroom. One of the most common arguments for the removal of students is to allow the students who "want" to learn the ability to do so. It is something that happens

in classrooms in every city and state across the country. It is how our educational system functions, how our policies are designed. Eve Tuck (2012) writes,

One might take the perspective that schools do precisely what they are intended to do: schools that deny large portions of students diplomas work to keep people out of an economy that can't sustain the meaningful work of the whole population, and to ensure that there will always be workers willing to tolerate low wages, poor working conditions, and no unionization (2012, p. 24)

When I later discussed Tony's case again with Mrs. Jamison, she pointed out, "The question became whether he should have had the 45 day change of placement in the first place, because it wasn't real drugs, it was fake drugs, and truthfully, the placement is not for fake drugs. The placement is for real drugs. And you've got a sixth grader." As a sixth grader, Tony had only been at Williams Middle School for a few months when he was transferred to Hugh Cale for nine weeks. So within one semester, Tony attended two brand new schools with brand new teachers and brand new kids. Moreover, his placement at Cale could only be perceived as unfair punishment for a trumped up drug possession.

It has been well documented that "suspensions create disengagement from school and lead to negative school outcomes" (Reyes, 2006, p. 27). Any time out of school amounts to the loss of instructional time, educational assistance, camaraderie, and the absence of a relationship with both classmates and the teacher. In Tony's case, these factors could also be coupled with possible indignation or resentment, amounting to what Tuck (2012) describes as humiliating ironies and dangerous dignities:

I call the disrespectful interactions between school personnel and youth, and the unintended consequences of school policies, humiliating ironies because they do not just serve to exclude youth from schooling, but assault their dignity in the process. Dangerous

dignity is the powerful position that youth take up in response to and in anticipation of this ongoing humiliation and hypocrisy (p. 15-16).

It would be next to impossible for a child to come out on top of any situation like Tony's without a powerful sense of disconnect, disappointment, and confusion. I can only imagine that this incident not only injured Tony's self-efficacy, but also his sense of fairness and trust in schools.

Williams Middle School exploited the incident with the plant to have Tony removed. A few weeks prior to the incident, one of Tony's teachers had taken her class down to the library and shown the students several pictures of a variety of plants, marijuana included. It was this same teacher who witnessed Tony "dealing" crumbled leaves and reported his behavior. He was arrested and charged with drug possession. Following Tony's arrest, he was required to go to district court over the matter.

I asked Officer Smithson what she knew of Tony's drug charge, and she responded she thought that, "the judge was gonna drop it and just make him write a paper about the effects of marijuana on the body." Officer Smithson agreed "there was really no case there." She was surprised that the magistrate had even issued the petition for Tony's case. However, this only underscores Noguera's (2008) grim assessment, "for many parents, preparing their Black sons for the likelihood of an interrogation by the police has become an increasingly regular part of socialization to manhood" (p. xiv). Bernadine Dohrn explicates the high penalties associated with Tony's arrest for fake drugs, "Having any delinquency or criminal record has increasing consequences for obtaining scholarships, access to higher education, job eligibility, and the likelihood of escalated sanctions if there is a subsequent police investigation or arrest" (2001, pg. 98).

The incident with the plant raises some incredibly hard questions. Mrs. Jamison said, “Well, now could he have gotten a few days home for that incident? And you know, sent back to school? Probably. Ok.” But Tony was not simply reprimanded and sent home for “pretending” to have drugs in school. He was arrested and charged with a misdemeanor. This escalation of punishments within the school increasingly criminalizes kids (Swain and Noblit, 2011) and takes issues that would once have been handled by the administration into the hands of law enforcement officials.

Recently, the US Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights held a hearing on the School to Prison Pipeline. Advocates for Children’s Services, a project of Legal Aid of North Carolina submitted a statement for the record and in it, detailed how school policy is leading to the criminalization of school youth. I think part of their statement is worth quoting at length:

The over-policing of North Carolina public schools contributes to excessive numbers of students being funneled directly from the schools to the juvenile justice system. During 2011, forty-three percent of all juvenile delinquency complaints were school-based...thousands of the school-based complaints were for minor offenses – such as communicating threats, disorderly conduct, and being ungovernable or truant – that should have been handled using alternatives that are more productive than court involvement. Black students were disproportionately subject to complaints. During 2010-11, they represented twenty-six percent of the student population but received forty-five percent of school-based delinquency complaints. Over the last five years (2007-2011), non-school-based delinquency complaints decreased by twenty-five percent, whereas school-based delinquency complaints decreased by twelve percent. To make matters worse, North Carolina is one of two states in the nation that *automatically* charges, prosecutes, and sentences all sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds as adults (ACS, 2012, p. 5, emphasis in the original).

There is every reason to believe that our schools are actively delivering large numbers of students directly into the judicial system as a result of school punishments coupled with

arrests, citations, or referrals to criminal courts. The school-to-prison pipeline is a metaphor that describes the conduction of disposable populations of children out of school and into prison through the complex confluence of local, state and federal policies and procedures. The school to prison pipeline disproportionately affects students of color. Identification of children who are in danger of transmission along the pipeline is easy: “many will be taught by unqualified teachers, tested on material they never reviewed, held back in grade, placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative out-placements before dropping or getting pushed out of schools altogether” (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 11). Another study found that students are often suspended or expelled from school the year prior to incarceration (Balfanz et al, 2003), thus demonstrating a clear link between school disengagement and future prison punishments.

Police presence is now a standard in North Carolina schools. Between 1995 and 2008, the number of school resource officers in North Carolina public schools increased by 249 percent (ACS, 2012, p. 5). Police are often untrained in discipline management and overreact within the school setting, treating students like “perps” and aggressively responding to conflicts. SROs are under the direction of their department, and have no responsibility or obligation to school administrators (ACS, 2011, p. 2).

SROs are typically not trained for work in schools. Officer Smithson has talked about the bad advice she has gotten from her superior about the type of kids that are at Cale. Her superior warned her not to trust the kids, because “they are usually lying,” and to be careful because “they will try to get one over on you.” Fortunately for the students



at Cale, Officer Smithson did not listen to her superior officer, choosing instead to learn about the kids by getting to know them.

Mrs. Jamison said, “God was really looking out for me” when Officer Smithson was sent to Hugh Cale. “But at first, when I heard they were going to be sending me a brand new police officer fresh out of training, and a woman on top of that, and a short woman on top of that, I was like, ‘Are you trying to set me up?’” Gina Smithson is just over five feet tall, with short curly blonde hair and blue eyes. A former masseuse, Officer Smithson is a trained dance instructor who teaches dance class after school. Officer Smithson believes in holistic healing and kinetic touch therapy. She is not your run-of-the-mill law enforcement officer – which is the most likely reason she and the students get along as well as they do.

The chief of police has recently issued ordered officers to do daily security checks on all the schools and businesses in Albemarle County. Once a week, a female police officer arrives at Cale and walks through the building. She has complained to Officer Smithson, “I don’t know how you do this everyday.” The police officer has gone back and forth with the students, demanding respect, because she says that the students make mean comments when she walks by. Officer Smithson chided the students for misbehaving and “embarrassing me and Mrs. Jamison, but she also critiqued the officer’s demeanor with Cale students. “She has done nothing to earn their respect. She is just another uniform, walking around looking for reasons to look down on them. Truthfully, I am more embarrassed by her behavior than I am theirs.”

Negative interactions between students and SROs and school staff pressures students to assert themselves, especially if they feel they have been humiliated (Tuck,

2012). Sometimes, students find that fighting back to maintain or assert their dignity is more trouble than it is worth, especially when factors outside school are influencing their decision. It is sometimes easier to leave school altogether.

The Drop-Out Prevention Specialist for our district is Sammy Keaton. Sammy is white, tow-headed, soft-spoken, and a shy computer whiz. It took me several months of being at Cale to realize that the “drop-out prevention guy” was the twin brother of a man I used to work with at Ace Hardware. Sammy would often come into the store to visit his brother. What made this revelation all the more significant is that sixteen-year-old me used to have quite the crush on a young Sammy Keaton. When I remembered and told Sammy this, he turned bright red and made a quick exit, tickling me to no end.

Sammy started working with the Redding school district eleven years ago. He started in a small corner of the library, behind a make-shift partition that separated him from what was then a combination library-classroom. Since then, he has “upgraded” his office to an ancient trailer at the back of Hugh Cale. Parents and students often call and visit Cale in order to speak with Mr. Keaton. He makes himself readily available and handles each student’s case with care and attention.

To help me understand the drop-out prevention process, Mr. Keaton walked me through some of the standard procedures for identifying and assisting students who are falling through the local system. Recently the Redding school district received accolades from June Atkinson, the North Carolina Superintendent of Public Schools, for its low drop-out rate (Ponder, 2013). Although Cale was not cited in the newspaper article, I would argue that most of the success rate experienced by the district can be attributed to

the dedication of Mr. Keaton and the rest of the staff. Mr. Keaton has said, “there’s no magic program” for helping kids, just hard work.

Traditionally, the regular school is responsible for identifying students who are having academic issues such as keeping up with coursework and/or sufficiently meeting course requirements. Unfortunately, the process of identification can be damaging to a student by positioning the student as “needing help.” In her landmark book, *Keeping Track*, Jeannie Oakes (2005) identifies 4 overarching characteristics of tracked students that I believe pertain especially to the kids of Hugh Cale. It is this initial sorting and labeling which begins the school-to-prison pipeline:

First, students are identified in a rather public way as to their intellectual capabilities and accomplishments and separated into a hierarchical system of groups for instruction. Second, these groups are labeled quite openly and characterized in the minds of teachers and others as being of a certain type – high ability, low achieving, slow, average, and son on. Clearly these groups are not equally valued in the school; occasional defensive responses and the appearances of special privilege – i.e., small classes, programmed learning, and the like for slower students – rarely mask the essential fact that they are less preferred. Third, individual students in these groups come to be defined by others – both adults and their peers – in terms of these group types. In other words, a student in a high-achieving group is seen as a high-achieving *person*, bright, smart, quick, and in the eyes of many, *good*. And those in the low-achieving groups come to be called slow, below average, and – often when people are being less careful – dummies, sweatogs, or yahoos. Fourth, on the basis of these sorting decisions, the groupings of students that result, and the way educators see the students in these groups, teenagers are treated by and experience schools very differently (pg. 3).

After a student is identified by teachers and staff in the Albemarle school district, the student is referred to the Student Assistance Team (SAT) who then creates and implements interventions designed to help the student return to parity, or at least

something resembling average. These interventions are largely stopgap measures and there is no indication when or how help is conferred to students who are struggling.

If the proposed interventions are unsuccessful<sup>17</sup>, the SAT reconvenes and decides upon an alternate course of action. The student is either referred to Hugh Cale for grade/credit recovery, or the SAT designs other interventions. If this second round of interventions is also unsuccessful, the student is referred to Hugh Cale. This is the path that a majority of students at Cale have followed, including Nina, Tyesha, Que, Sheena and Robert. Each of these students was recommended to come to Cale because they were not being “successful” at their regular school. Several of the students talked about being on a contract<sup>18</sup>, which was part of the intervention process and could focus on myriad areas: attendance, grades, behavior, and so on.

Tyesha said that she came to Cale because “I was low on grades, but then like, I had left [Cale]. I had been here since like my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year, I had went back to Camptown High and I had got in trouble. But I didn’t know I was on contract, so they was like, I had to get right or they would send me back, and after a while I just wanted to come back, because I was getting less help over there than here. I was getting more help over here than there because it’s like a smaller environment.”

It became clear to me that even though some of the students knew why they had come to Cale – poor grades, misbehavior – there was definitely gaps in communication occurring between the school, the parents or guardians, and the student. Que’s story

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<sup>17</sup> School success was never defined. My impression was that interventions were designed on a case-by-case basis, and I was not privy to the students’ personal files.

<sup>18</sup> A state-mandated Personal Education Plan (PEP) for students who have the potential to fail.

illustrates some of this miscommunication. I asked Que, as I asked all of the students with whom I talked, how he had come to be enrolled at Cale. Que said that starting the second semester of his sophomore year, “We changed semesters and I wasn’t doing too good with my grades so [Camptown] sent me here like to catch up in academics. Thing about it, they didn’t even let me know that I was coming here – just sent all my stuff to Cale.”

I was somewhat confused sitting in the interview with Que – *Did the schools not call his mom? Send a letter? Was there no meeting? How did he register? Is that possible?* I tried to gain some clarity. “What do you – did [Camptown] meet with your mom or whatever?” The answer was no. When the spring semester started, he took the bus, as usual, to Camptown High. Upon arrival, he learned that he didn’t have a schedule, and moreover, that he’d been transferred to another school. “They just sent all my stuff here, like, ‘you belong at Cale. Your stuff is at Cale.’ So [the resource officer] had to drive me over here.”

Betty Moore, the school’s data manager, said that an SAT meeting was held to discuss Que’s case. However, I myself have witnessed students showing up at Cale because they were simply “told to come there,” without having enrolled or filling out the transfer paperwork. The inverse is also true, as evidenced by student who, on my very first day at Hugh Cale, showed up when he was scheduled to be at Camptown High.

Mr. Keaton said that once a student with low academic performance is enrolled at Hugh Cale, if the student is still “unsuccessful or unresponsive”, Mr. Keaton will meet with the student and his or her guardians to explore other options, such as the GED at the community college. If the student is successful and meets their goals, she or he will be

recommended for re-enrollment at regular school. Mary Hollowell (2009) offers the following perspective on re-enrollments:

Removing students from mainstream schools and having them earn their way back was controversial. Many alternative school teachers doubted that troubled teens' problems could be solved in one semester. A common academic problem found in alternative schools was poor literacy skills, and correcting that took time. Experienced alternative educators sometimes wondered if students should be returned to regular schools, at all. In some cases, regular schools contributed to problems by being too large to fulfill the needs of troubled teens, who need smaller classes and one on one attention (p. 14).

Mr. Keaton said that there are roughly three factors that determine whether the student returns to regular school or continues at Hugh Cale: the length of time since student was first enrolled at Cale; the number of credits/how far behind student is from her or his projected graduation schedule; and whether or not the student will benefit from the smaller classes and focused attention of Hugh Cale. Mrs. Jamison also adds space considerations to that list, because she has to try to keep her numbers low to be effective.

On Mr. Keaton's end, students that drop out of school are located by telephone or in person, by word-of-mouth, former addresses, social workers, or even through police records. Mr. Keaton said that sometimes he feels like a detective when attempting to track down a student and his or her parents or guardians. A meeting is then arranged with both the student and her or his guardian to discuss with the student possible options. Every attempt is made to encourage the student to return to school or to help the student enroll in GED courses. Most students (typically 20-30 per year) either return to their regular school or enroll at Hugh Cale. The majority, between 15-20, enrolls at Hugh Cale and work their way back to their regular school.

However, there are many students each year who do not want to return to their home school. Students like Sheena and Tyesha found support at Cale that they had not previously experienced at their home school. Nina believes that Cale allowed her to graduate. She said,

Me, I like Cale because it was like a small environment, because the teachers help people out one-on-one. That's what I liked about Cale; I don't get distracted. I used to get distracted in classes, like in a big environment. Like now I went to Cale I improved a lot, like in my grades, so that helped me out a lot.

Students self-selecting to remain at Cale highlights their agency in determining their own educational narratives. It demonstrates that given the opportunity through institutional supports and personal assistance, high school students are invested in their education and want to succeed.

Unfortunately, the middle-schoolers at Cale are too young to make these decisions for themselves. Very few of the middle school students at Cale self-select to be there, wanting instead to return to their home school – even if they are academically successful at Cale. But many of the middle-school students who come to Cale end up remaining at the alternative school into their high school years.

Tony finished his 45 day change of placement at Hugh Cale, and returned to Williams Middle School without incident. Messy, after repeated office referrals and problems with his teachers, plus problems in the community, was recommended by his social worker for a residential treatment facility outside of Redding. Messy was removed from his home by the court and transported to the facility.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **STUDENT-TEACHER DISCONNECT**

The younger Mrs. Mason piled my tray high with sliced turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy. I asked for an extra scoop of green beans (my favorite) and declined the wheat roll. “Do you want an orange or this?” she asked in a breath-whisper, sweeping her hand over several small containers of applesauce.

“An orange, please,” I answered, eyeing the vibrant fruit. I love winter oranges – a spot of brightness in the midst of cold. I took my tray and walked to the elder Mrs. Mason to pay for my lunch. The two women were distantly related through marriage but otherwise unacquainted.

The elder Mrs. Mason, Roberta, has been the cafeteria manager at Hugh Cale since it opened in 1997. Mrs. Jamison said that every year, Mrs. Mason says she is going to retire but has yet to do so, which is good, because she makes a mean lunch. Her cafeteria is run like a large kitchen, with warmth and thought put into every meal. People from outside the school often come to Hugh Cale for lunch, or come to pick up Styrofoam take-out trays piled high with food. Mrs. Mason is quiet but she sees everything. She confessed to me that she has taken a few students under her wing, serving them meals and demonstrating affection through her food. “There are those that I knows needs help,” the older woman said. A Godly woman, Mrs. Mason believes a tree that fell in your backyard is a blessing, for it might have fallen somewhere else and done more damage.



I joined Mr. Bryant, Mrs. Rose, Mrs. Dennis, and Mrs. Robbins, one of three regular substitutes at Cale. Mrs. Robbins is a gorgeous, tall black woman who wears her short graying hair in loose twists. Always well dressed and polished, she wears a smile and greets everyone enthusiastically. I enjoy every conversation I've ever had with her.

As I tear into my turkey and gravy, conversations bob and weave over and around my head. Characteristically, Mrs. Rose is carping about the students doing this or not doing that. She routinely strikes me as frazzled and endearing, as someone who lives in the liminal space separating mania and artistry. Her red hair is threaded with gray and she wears her anxiety about her like a cloak. Mrs. Rose is the quintessential English teacher – eccentric and strange in her eccentricity. Even her path to Hugh Cale is interesting. She was once a high school drama teacher at a magnet school, but later left teaching to become an emergency medical technician. While working as an EMT one night, she received a call to help a girl at a high school basketball game who had dislocated her knee. Mrs. Rose said that the girl “smelled like school” and it made her heartsick for teaching. She then recertified as a teacher to help “at-risk” students. She was one of the first hires Mrs. Jamison made when she came to Hugh Cale in 2005. Her teaching style at Hugh Cale is to sometimes “throw out the curriculum” in order to go “where you need to go” with the students.

Mrs. Rose will often call the front office, exasperated, to let us know that a student is on his way because she “can’t do anything with him.” More often than not, this results in the student receiving a stern “talking-to” from Mrs. Jamison before he returns to the classroom. Mrs. Rose writes up more students than any other teacher in high school. But Mrs. Rose cares deeply for her students and will also do absolutely

anything to help them, from helping them fill out job applications to taking them to the bookstore to select a favorite book. Mrs. Rose has also written grants to help secure funding for the school, including a grant, which ended in the creation of a “What’s Cooking at Hugh Cale?” recipe book for the local community. In probably one of my favorite descriptions of a teacher, Nina said, “I love Mrs. Rose. I really do. I used to come to her for everything, for real for real – boy problems and everything. But yeah, she’s a good teacher...it’s just that she talks a lot. I don’t want, you know, lecture all day, but we do a lot of bookwork. That’s true English for you – we do a lot of bookwork in her class.”

Three tables over, Shamon is standing and talking loudly, seemingly to himself. The students around him appear not to be paying him any attention, and yet Shamon performs to his audience of none. I am tickled and say so to those around me. Shamon notices us watching and his performance increases in tone and measure, and he begins to sway and thrust his black hands around as if dropping beats. He is comedic in a buffoonish way, oblivious to others and confident in his talent. Shamon is one of Cale’s mainstays; due to the largesse of his “jacket,” he has little chance of ever returning to a regular school. Shamon operates on the perilous border between suspension and expulsion from Cale. Most of his antics are just enough to warrant him a few days home, but not enough to get him expelled.

A favorite pastime of his is taking folders/notebooks/book bags that belong to other kids and hiding them on top of cabinets, in the maintenance closet, in the boy’s bathroom or even among another student’s things. This “game” of Shamon’s has frustrated Mrs. Jamison to the point that she’s threatened to give everyone in the

classroom detention unless the item is returned. Generally, whatever is missing is discovered right before the bell rings or very soon thereafter.

One of the teacher's mentioned Shamon's perennial trouble, and the conversation at the teacher's table segued with ease into the suggestion that Shamon would end up in prison. No one and everyone seemed to say it. Pedro Noguera (2008) and Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) write of similar incidents in which they witness staff members identify students destined for the penitentiary. Unlike Noguera and Ferguson, however, I am not shocked by this presentiment. I have worked in schools with too many cynical teachers to be surprised by a staff member's apathetic judgment; I myself was a teacher just like this. If a student is not performing at some implicit measure of success, then it's assumed her or his inevitable future involves "flippin' burgers" or "jail-time."

For some of these kids at Hugh Cale, the probability of a prison sentence is very high. A recent study by the Pew Center on the States (2008) estimates that 1 in 54 adult males aged 18 and over will be incarcerated at some point in their lives. For black males aged 18 and up, the chances of incarceration jump to 1 in every 15 people. For black males between 20-34 years of age, it is projected that 1 in 9 is or will be incarcerated.

Even the geographical location of Hugh Cale Community School, as an alternative school in Redding, North Carolina, works against these kids. North Carolina is one of 10 states with the second highest rate of prison growth in the country. Thirty miles away across the state line, Virginia ranks in the highest fifth of states reporting booms in prison growth between 2006 and 2008 (Pew Center on the States, 2008).

After it was suggested that Shamon will be incarcerated, Mrs. Robbins dryly commented, "These students think it's cool to be in prison."

Mr. Bryant nodded his head, “Yep.”

I spoke up, “But that’s because they don’t know the realities of prison. Because what they see when someone goes to jail is that he’s gone for a while, and then comes back with fresh clothes and lots of attention. It’s looks like vacation.” I spent a few years visiting prisons across North Carolina and talking with prisoners about their educational and life experiences as part of a research evaluation funded by the NC Department of Corrections. The stories those inmates shared with me affected me in myriad ways and those stories swirled through my head as I sat at the lunch table. I thought of TJ, Ralph, Mato and Antonio – the kid with the song in his heart.

“When folks are released, they don’t tell you about the nights spent crying in your bunk or having to miss your grandma’s funeral because you are locked up.” I paused before continuing, “I talked to one woman at the women’s facility in Raleigh who told me that all she wanted to be able to do is to turn on a light, because she can’t even flip a switch while she’s locked up. That’s what she said, ‘I just want to flip a switch.’ You lose all your freedom.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Robbins said.

“Folks don’t tell you about getting hit with locks or what goes on in the bathrooms.” I continued.

Mr. Bryant chimed in, “Yeah, they don’t tell you about that.”

“One guy at the High Rise told me about getting pushed down the stairs when he was wearing handcuffs,” I said, referencing the 16-story youth facility in Morganton, North Carolina. At Western Youth Facility, prisoners range from 13 to 22 years of age,

with 16-20 year olds being the bulk of the population. On an average day at Western, there are 650 inmates who could be sitting in a high school somewhere.

Mr. Bryant pushed his Redskins cap up and leaned in, “That’s where my son was, the High Rise.”

“Yeah, but sometimes they push themselves down the stairs,” Mrs. Rose added. “That’s when we would get called in,” she said, referencing her tenure as an emergency medical technician.

I kept on, “At Western, folks can’t go outside if it’s too cold and it’s in the mountains of North Carolina where it stays snowy in the winter. They get to go out on the roof, sometimes, but not all the time. Folks don’t talk about that.”

Officer Smithson, who had joined us a few moments ago, shook her blonde head, “I mean, can you imagine?”

Some of the students noticed the conversation at the teacher’s table and started watching us. I don’t know if they could hear us or were simply interested in observing.

“They are like animals,” Mrs. Rose said. “I mean, when I would go in to Albemarle [Correctional Institute] on calls, I wouldn’t look at anyone, just straight ahead because they could just say the nastiest things. It’s awful for women there.” She tightened up as she said this, shivering and pantomiming wearing blinders.

I shook my head. I knew what she was talking about. “But I think that’s because they knew you were scared. I didn’t have anything like that when I would go, but I would also look at everyone in the face and say ‘hey!’, ‘how are you?’ and ‘hey there!’” I made a big show of waving like an obnoxious politician.

“That’s right,” said Ms. Robbins, nodding her head. Ms. Robbins works in prison ministry, and operates a non-profit that sells bottled water to raise money for newly released inmates, providing housing and revenue to help with the transition experience.

It’s true that walking into penitentiaries is an unnerving experience, as gates open and close at intervals to mark your passage through the cinder block walls. The click and clang of metal doors feels solemn and final: in this moment, you are *here*.

Years ago, my father told me his prison story. In 1991 with nowhere else to go, he was sleeping in the hull of a rotting boat at the old shipyard in Redding. The shipyard was once a thriving business, part of the Redding Iron Works and Supply Company, where my mother would buy cotton candy and watch boat races as a young child. But in the early 90s, the shipyard was little more than an abandoned junkyard, housing the decomposition and decay of years past. My father emerged from these rusted, barren shells to meet the transport bus, the bus waiting to take him away, the bus on which freedom ended. My dad said that as he got on the bus, it struck him that he’d “really fucked up this time”, that there was no going back and no escape.

I suspect that the finality of boarding the transport bus brought home to my father the damage he’d wrought over the last ten years: his infidelity and betrayal of my mother; the gaping absence his abandonment seared into my brother and myself; the severe beating he laid on his second wife; alcohol, gambling, philandering; and the commercial embezzlement which finally earned him his bus ticket. As my father shared this story with me, I could see the weight of those years on his lined and weathered face. Later, I would learn from various prisoners what happened when the bus arrives at its

destination. Demarcus shared with me his story of going to prison for the first time, and in his words I could hear the echoes of my father:

I was terrified, I was petrified. I'm going to prison? Oh my god, they're gonna rape me, they're gonna beat me, man...I was petrified. On the bus, I was shaking like a leaf. The whole way, I'm pretty sure they saw me shaking. My hands, man...ain't no way. And then they don't make it no better when you get off the bus. They, 'Get up on the wall, you...' I mean, they are talking pure-tee junk to you. And then whenever, there's like 20 different guys in front of you and you gotta get naked in front of all these guys. I was like, 'Man, you serious?' That's when it became a reality to me – once I heard that door slam shut. I was like, 'Yeah, it's over.'

For my father, Demarcus, and hundreds of thousands of others who are or have been incarcerated, entering prison means facing a social and civil death. Prisoners undergo a symbolic and literal transformation, losing not only their autonomy but also their political citizenship. Manza and Uggen (2004) trace criminal disenfranchisement back to ancient Greece and Rome, when offenders lost their ability to participate in political elections. In medieval Europe, felons could be injured or killed without penalty. The breadth of punishments facing a criminal offender extends well beyond a prison bid. Meiners (2009) uses “civil death” to describe the “consequences of conviction and incarceration that extend beyond life in prison, including restrictions on voting, employment, and social services.” After release, it is difficult for a felon to secure and sustain living-wage employment, and those with drug-related convictions are barred from ever obtaining welfare or federal housing.

Inside and behind the walls of prison, inmates lose *time*. I once talked to TJ, a 24-year-old man who had been in prison since he was 15 years old. When I asked what he planned to do after he was released, he responded, “I don't even know how to drive a car.

I got locked up around that age when I should have been learning the fundamentals of how to live life, you know. So I'm just real far behind."

Being "behind" is sum total of prison. Prisoners I spoke to often remarked that time "stands still" when you are locked up. The technological progress of the last ten years are mind-boggling: GPS, hand-held phones which take pictures and send email, digital music, television, and films, ... The advancements in communication allow people to video-chat for free anywhere in the world, but prisoners are excluded from these and other privileges.

Time also marks and signifies the social relationships and lives of those lived on the outside – hearts that break and heal, the death of family members, children who "grow up in Polaroids"<sup>19</sup>. Of romantic relationships, Demarcus scoffed, "Ain't no inmate got a girlfriend in prison."

The loss of time is purposely one of the most punitive aspects of incarceration. Cesare Beccaria is credited with instigating the modern reform of criminal law and the nature of punishments (Barnes & Teeters, 1943; Monachesi, 1972; Panzarella & Vona, 2006; Roth, 2005; Skotniki, 2000). In lieu of government sanctioned torture and public executions, Beccaria argued for a life sentence of slave labor and the deprivation of liberties, since the odious and interminable nature of a "total and permanent loss of liberty" was more fearful to the reasonable man than a swift death (Becarria et al, 2008, p. 53). Foucault (1995) writes that the deprivation of liberty is paid in the most equitable of penalties – *time*.

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<sup>19</sup> A woman incarcerated in Raleigh, North Carolina told me this was how she watched her child grow up. This image still hurts my heart.



But time *qua* punishment is not only about the loss of days but of dispossession of self. This, then, is both the symbolic and literal reality of a social and civil death: dehumanization.

In prison the government may dispose of the liberty of the person and of the time of the prisoner; from then on, one can imagine the power of the education which, not only in a day, but in the succession of days and even years, may regulate for man the time of waking and sleeping, of activity and rest, the number and duration of meals, the quality and ration of food, the nature and product of labor, the time of prayer, the use of speech and even, so to speak, that of thought, that education which, in the short, simple journeys from refectory to workshop, from workshop to the cell, regulates the movement of the body, and even in moments of rest, determines the use of time, the time-table, *this education, which, in short, takes possession of man as a whole, all the physical and moral faculties that are in him and of the time in which he is himself* (Foucault, 1995, citing Lucas, II, 123-124, emphasis added).

Prisoners become all too keenly aware of the extensive punishment of incarceration, but sometimes find it difficult to describe the process of institutionalization. Asked about his experiences in prison, Stan Mayfield once told me:

But you know, just being here, you do just see the whole thing is just, it's just...I don't know. Sometimes I'll be sitting in the, in the cafeteria eating, and really, it'll dawn on me like, "Damn. Boy, you locked up in—in here." Cause I just see everybody in browns, you know what I'm saying? And I wake up and I'm like, "Damn. We really locked up." And they got us, you know, trained or something. You know? And I'm like, "Man..." Then I touch my man, and I'm like, "Look at this, man." But he ain't really understanding what I'm saying when I say look at this, because I ain't say what I was just thinking to him. You know? He was like, "What is it?" And I'm like, "Look, man. We locked up man. And look how it's going. You know? How this line is going. How they got us sitting in this cafeteria. They telling us where to go, you know what I'm saying? They telling us when to go to sleep, you know what I'm saying? They telling us when we got to eat. You know?" He's like, "Man, you tripping, bro." I'm like, "I'm serious." But, I don't know. It's just crazy, I mean. It's tough. It's super crazy."

Walking through the prison yard, where all movement is regulated and normalized, you can feel the gaze as curious faces look to see who is entering their

domain. That the experience can be likened to visiting an animal shelter only underscores the gruesome nature of institutionalization. Of prisons, Stan Mayfield said, “This is not really the place for no one. I mean – some people do harsh things. They deserved to be *punished*-punished. But this place here, I don’t know, it’s just like statistics say, we animals locked in cages.”

But the men and women behind bars aren’t animals – they are people, people with stories and lives, people who used to be students just like the kids at Cale.

Mrs. Jamison wheels the large, gray trashcan around to collect empty trays and discarded chocolate milk cartons. First Lunch ends and the students leave the lunchroom in a chatty, boisterously happy mass. I watch Shamon as he leaves, and as he pulls up his sagging black pants over his blue plaid boxers, I realize how very young he is – just a kid. I try to imagine someone looking through him in 10 years, afraid to catch his eyes or acknowledge his presence. What happens? When does erasure begin? When do we lose sight of the people inside the bars?

Zygmunt Bauman (2004) writes that this type of erasure is the inevitable outcome of global modernity. Bauman argues that a civil and social death is meant to ensure that prisoners never return to the public sphere. Rehabilitation is not either an option or a concern. “The main and perhaps the sole purpose of prisons is not just any human-waste disposal but a final, definitive disposal. Once rejected, forever rejected” (p. 86). Bauman posits that the churning tide of modernization identifies and selects entire populations of people who are not “fit” to compete in the world market and are thus, disposable. Among the outcasts who “fell off the productive treadmill” (pg. 84) are immigrants, refugees, the

poor, and minorities. These marginalized groups are collateral damage in the forward march of progress and expansion.

Writing on the spectacle of prison culture and punishment, Michelle Brown (2009) offers a compelling thesis for how and why we as a society become desensitized to – even accepting of – the erasure of “populations ... defined by their vulnerability, invisibility, and exclusion: the very old, the very sick, the mentally-disabled, the poor-onto-death, the imprisoned, victims of extreme violence, as well as other historically marginalized groups on the basis of race, religion, and ethnicity” (pg. 34). As the marginalized become increasingly isolated from society, the implementation of punishment is easily mollified by experiential distancing, a proximity made impossible by prison walls or urban ghettos, thereby displacing the onus to care about “those who fall outside the frames of social inclusion” (pg. 35). Within the whitestream margins of society, we participate as spectators and relinquish our obligations of the pain of others. Our culture is comforted by the neoliberal doctrines of individualization and individual choice. Those who are in prison deserve to be there because they have chosen to be there.

Ann Arnett Ferguson (2000) complicates this line of thought by troubling the trope of young black children as animals. She argues that historically, popular depictions of black males positioned them as “verminlike, voracious, dirty, grinning, animal-like savages” (pg. 82). Contemporary representations of black youth as violent, criminal, and thug-like continue to recreate black males as animalistic predators. Ferguson argues that these negative metaphors eclipse the behavior of black youth as that granted a relatively innocent “child” or “boy.” She states:

As “not-children,” their behavior is understood not as something to be molded and shaped over time, but as the intentional, fully cognizant actions of an adult. This means there is already a dispositional pattern set, that their behavior is incorrigible, irremediable. Therefore, the treatment required for infractions is one that punishes through example and exclusion rather than through persuasion and edification” (p. 90).

Taken together, Bauman, Brown and Ferguson give me a way of thinking about how cavalier pronouncements about Shamon’s future – that he is destined for prison – function to shorten the school-to-prison pipeline for students like Shamon. In pre-judging his fate, Shamon is no longer a child with choice. Adults around him have already destroyed and erased his possibility. Shamon is already living a life sentence.

Of this inevitable outcome, Michelle Alexander (2010) wrote,

The young men who go to prison rather than college face a lifetime of closed doors, discrimination and ostracism. Their plight is not what we hear about on the evening news, however. Sadly, like the racial caste systems that preceded it, the system of mass incarceration now seems normal and natural to most, a regrettable necessity (p. 185).

I recall a conversation I once had with a white prisoner named TJ about the destructive nature of prisons. TJ pointed out that prisons were not designed for rehabilitation, and he stated angrily, “A lot of these people, they see us as inmates, you know? A lot of people, they don’t even know that we were not *born* here. I feel like sometimes they think that we were just *born* here, that this is just a race of people, ‘This is how they are, and don’t worry about them.’”

I’m frustrated because I don’t understand how Shamon’s future can be erased, especially not in an educational setting like Hugh Cale. If I looked to academic literature to help me understand, I might find studies that suggest there is some sort of student-teacher disconnect (Milner and Tenore, 2010), that the teachers are unfamiliar with their

students (Ayers, 2010), or teachers adopt a deficit perspective in regards to their students (Monroe and Obidah, 2004; Toshalis, 2012). Noguera writes of teachers that “fill the knowledge void with stereotypes based on what they read or see in the media” (2008, p. 105). All of the teachers and staff at Hugh Cale *know* Shamon, they know his family and background, and they know his academic ability. He has been a student at Cale for many years. The teachers at this table, especially Mrs. Dennis and Mrs. Rose, are the type of teachers to try to reach Shamon, to work with him, to care about him and his future.

I whole-heartedly believe the teachers at this lunch table truly care about their students, and that they are concerned about Shamon and what happens to him. I know this because the students themselves believe the teachers care. Tyesha said, “The teachers are always on you. They be like, ‘I’m gonna beat you if you don’t do this work.’ There is lots of support.” Echoing Tyesha, Que told me, “Here, you get like, written up or they try to fight you back to class. I’m like, ‘*Gosh.*’”

The students I’ve interviewed tell me again and again that the teachers at Hugh Cale are much more strict than the teachers they’ve had at the traditional high schools. As Que put it, “Some teachers at other schools be like, ‘I don’t care. I still get my check.’ And they just let you sit there, leave out the classroom, whatever.”

It’s obvious that the smaller classroom size is advantageous to both students and teachers at Cale. There is much more attention given to the student on a day-to-day basis, thus rendering the invisible visible. Within this, the dismissal of schoolwork, the refusal to participate, is not tolerated. Students are told that they *can* and they *will* succeed. The teachers here are mindful of student behavior, constantly admonishing lack of manners and other misconduct.

During our interview, Mrs. Rose's passion for her students was evident.

She said,

The most important fact one needs to know when coming into an alternative school is that you have to get to know the child. These are kids that slip through the cracks and didn't get the basic blocks they needed to have. Kids with problems can't fix those problems without getting back to the basics. You should touch all children. Knowing them is important. Touching them is important. You have to reset a kid's beliefs on what a teacher is – the kids need to know that teachers are on their side. A lot of them have adversarial experiences with teachers. We have to be aware of the kids. Aware of what's going on in their personal life. Students are a part of everything – we need to know when they are hungry. We need to know when they need a hug.

However, it's not always easy to connect with students. Mrs. Rose told me that, sometimes, the kids "come to [Hugh Cale] with grudges. *Grudges*. Sometimes, the kid's behavior is absolutely appalling. And a clean start is hard to give a child like that." But Hugh Cale is not a continuation school in the sense that what happened at the home school does not follow the kid to Cale. With Mrs. Jamison, kids get a fresh start, a clean start. Mrs. Jamison reminded Mrs. Rose, "Katie, they are children."

Perhaps, then, what is happening when a teacher looks at a student like Shamon and says that he will be in prison one day, is not that the teacher does *not* care, but rather, that she or he has poured caring, love, and support all around him, or someone like him, and received no reciprocity, no response, no encouragement that this student wants or has a place to hold that care and support.

Nel Noddings (2003) discusses the importance of a reciprocal relationship of caring between a teacher and her student, "In situations where the student rarely responds, is negative, denies the effort at caring, the teacher's caring quite predictably deteriorates to 'cares and burdens.' She becomes the needy target of her own caring."

Noddings believes, and I agree, that reciprocity is essential to maintain a teacher's commitment to her profession. A teacher's work is long and stressful, and teachers often need to feel that their effort is toward some good. Mrs. Jamison said, "Because those kids, when you help them, and they are actually being successful academically, it's a nice thing. It's a nice feeling. For my teachers, it's a nice thing for them, for school to finally be a place that works, instead of a place that doesn't work for them."

Shamon can be frustrating, for sure, when he walks into the office and snatches up my mints, only asking and shame-facedly saying "thank you" after I've reproached him. He is often self-absorbed and irritating, and his penchant for "games" can make you want to throttle him. But overall, he is a good kid – which is why it doesn't make sense that sometimes teachers have to fight him into caring about his work.

Noguera offers the following insight:

Students who get into trouble frequently are typically not passive victims; many of them understand that the consequences for violating school rules can be severe, particularly as they grow older. However, as they internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms (2003, pg. 343).

Over the years, Mrs. Jamison has dealt with many difficult students. The hardest ones to reach often "just weeded themselves out. And we've lost some of those along the way – who just dropped out because they just *did*. Not that we didn't try to encourage them or love 'em up. Or you know, try to do whatever we could to get them in class and doing some schoolwork, but you know, there was just too many outside influences, or they were just too far gone for us even to hold on to. *You gotta want to be held on to.*"

Those students, Mrs. Jamison says, “you have to release them with love,” and hope for the best. She continues, “Sometimes, somebody comes through the door that we thought were penitentiary bound, you know, and they say, ‘I’m in the service.’ I’m like, ‘*Really?*’ ... You can never tell.”

The lunchroom is much quieter without the students. Only a few of the staff remain: Mrs. Rose and Mrs. Dennis, Mr. Bryant, Officer Smithson and myself. Mrs. Robbins has gone on with her students to class. The conversation at the table has morphed into the various oddities and contraband that are smuggled into prisons. Mrs. Rose tells a story she heard of items that were supposedly taped onto a cat that was then released into or near the prison yard. Officer Smithson shares an experience she encountered during Basic Law Enforcement training, in which she and other deputies entered the local penitentiary to perform a drug search.

I’m annoyed with the talk at the table, the talk of urban legends, this society of the spectacle (Debord, 2000). What transpires at or in prisons is often provocative to those outside the walls because, as a society, our only connection to the “truth” of correctional institutions is mediated to us through popular culture (Brown, 2009), thus rendering what *is true* false. We are drawn to these falsities as bugs to a light, drawn to the allure of an image so titillating in its deviance, seductive in its inaccessibility, that the illusion becomes reality. I’m disappointed in my inability to sway the opinions of educators I know and respect, and silenced by my position as outsider. It’s almost like trying to convince a young child that Santa Claus doesn’t exist, when the proof surrounds them at Christmas year after year.



I focus on finishing my turkey and potatoes and remind myself to tell Mrs. Mason how much I enjoyed this lunch. I had just started peeling my orange when the cafeteria door opens and eight or nine male students stream into the cafeteria, laughing. All of us look up from the table, bewildered.

“Where are you supposed to be?” Mrs. Rose asks.

Michael answers above the chorus of boys, “Mrs. Forbes kicked us out because we were eating in class. She told us all to go to the office.”

I notice then that all of the students are holding oranges. Some of the guys have only a slice or a partial orange, where others have oranges that are largely intact. The color pops in and among the throng of bodies, flashes of brilliance.

“Mrs. Forbes kicked us out.”

“She doesn’t want us eating in class.”

“She said, ‘Get out!’”

“She said she’s gonna write all of us up.”

None of the boys look particularly disturbed at having been sent out of class. Rather, they are animated and smiling at one another.

“Ok, well you can all leave then. Go home.” Mrs. Jamison begins to shoo the boys out of the cafeteria and toward the school’s front door. “If you can’t behave in Mrs. Forbes’s class then you can all be suspended.”

The troupe of guys walks out of the lunchroom and out of our sight. Over the distant laughter and whooping, I ask, “Are they all going to go home?”

Mrs. Dennis shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “I have no idea.”

Mrs. Rose laments, “They just think it’s all fun and games here. No one is serious.”

I think about the last few interviews I’ve done with the students, including Tyesha’s, which we finished just this morning. Tyesha is a senior at Cale, a bubbly young black girl eager to graduate and start at the local community college. She intends to go into nursing. Tyesha echoed other students by describing Cale as “fun,” but she went further to say that, “Everybody [at Cale] is like family.” Tyesha spoke highly of her experiences at Hugh Cale. She told me that this school was the first place that she’d learned she could *trust* – trust the students, trust the staff, trust herself. She said that Cale taught her that schools were safe places, something she’d never experienced prior to 10<sup>th</sup> grade.

Yeah, they keep it safe. They make sure don’t nobody come here to like, hurt you. Like, it’s just they make sure every student, they don’t care how they do it, they make sure every student learns, pass... You know, they make sure no one feels like they have to watch their back here, or that they feel like they are going to be bullied. Or, they do a lot. Even by just like having little meetings, like in the library, they let us know that they do want us to go somewhere. No other school will have a meeting with their students to let them know how much they care, how much they want them to pass, feel like they are safe and the love, it’s just, the love that everyone feels and shows. You can’t get it nowhere else but here.

I think about my conversation with Tyesha this morning and I wonder out loud, “Maybe it’s because this is the first school where they are all accepted? So it’s fun for them?”

Mrs. Dennis shakes her head again, “But we can’t teach when they are having fun.”

Mrs. Rose says, “Look at that. They are going back to class. I knew she wouldn’t suspend them.”

Mrs. Jamison shepherds the boys back through the cafeteria and toward the science classroom, where Mrs. Forbes is presumably waiting in an empty room to continue her science lesson. All of the boys still wear huge grins. Michael is grinning so hard he looks like the Cheshire Cat.

Mrs. Dennis says, “Once one of them starts up, it’s hard to keep the others on task.”

Mrs. Rose says, “They *need* more self-control.”

Officer Smithson says, “Yeah, you can’t always be playing around like this.”

Mrs. Rose says, “More discipline. They need more discipline.”

“I don’t know what they need,” Mrs. Dennis says, “But they need something.”

Earlier this morning, the last question I asked Tyesha was, *What would this school need to help or to make everyone succeed? Or does it need anything?*

She responded,

No, they don’t need anything. Because they already do it. They do it before you can even ask or show it. They show you that you are gonna succeed no matter what. Even if it takes more than one teacher or more than one principal – you know, more than one. You are going to make it out of here, one way or the other. Even if it takes down to the last day of school that they are going to make sure that you are gonna pass, you are gonna graduate, you not gonna have to look back and be like, “Dag, I have to go back and do the same thing again.” It’s basically just like the whole No Child Left Behind, that’s how it is here, no child will be left behind here.

With a sigh, I look at my empty Styrofoam tray. The orange peels are all that is left when I get up to throw it away.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **AN ALTERNATE POSSIBILITY**

For the longest time, I put off writing the conclusion for this work. What I most dread about this final chapter is the ending – because in this story, there are no neat and tidy endings. When the school year ends in June, I know that it is likely that I will leave the students and staff of Hugh Cale and probably never come back. If I stay in the academy, it is likely that I will not return to Redding save for a few holidays, a few short snatches of time, a few moments too brief to allow me to exist as I am now – a friend, a coworker, a mentor, a white adult who cares about what happens to the students and staff of Hugh Cale.

I recently had a conversation with the mayor of Redding, Mr. Powers, about the future of Hugh Cale Community School. Mr. Powers is a white male in his mid-sixties, and a former school superintendent of Redding-Albemarle County Schools. Over the last few months, Mr. Powers and I have developed a working relationship, and I have great respect for both his history and his vision for our area. Mr. Powers asked me to serve on a local task force charged with building stronger families in our area, and I had the opportunity to design and write a federal grant for the City of Redding that targets crime prevention through educational and economic innovation. Sitting in the mayor's house one afternoon, he asked me what I thought about closing the facility in which Hugh Cale

is currently housed, and moving the alternative school into a nearby high school, in essence creating a school within a school.

It took me a few moments to compose my answer because the thought of closing Hugh Cale truly hurt my heart. There is an essence to Hugh Cale, a life within the school and the building that I have grown to love, even amidst the peeling paint and asbestos. Mr. Powers enumerated the many reasons it made sense to move Hugh Cale. Financially, it would save the school district \$1million in operating costs, and the maintenance and upkeep of the facility was becoming a burden. The building where Hugh Cale is currently located was formerly an elementary school, and it was initially closed in the early 1990's due to building's aging structure. The building later reopened as an alternative school after some comprehensive renovations, but Cale still has weekly problems with plumbing and the aging HVAC systems. The potential host high school, Camptown High, served close to 1,600 students when I attended school from 1994-1998, but now, the student body was comprised of approximately 700 students. Mr. Powers explained that an entire wing of Camptown High could be closed off for Hugh Cale without affecting the rest of the larger school's operations.

Each of these reasons made sense to me, but still I could not fathom how Mrs. Jamison might maintain her effectiveness in a building that belonged, even superficially, to another principal. Even if the students and staff were transferred to Camptown High and housed within, so much of the character of Hugh Cale would be lost. But Camptown also offered many benefits to Cale students, including the opportunity for more and better electives, updated technology and a superior facility.

Ultimately, I conceded to Mr. Powers that fiscally, his plan made sense. But I had to confess that I thought it was a plan that would not and could not serve the students of Hugh Cale as adroitly as they were being served in the present. The students of Hugh Cale are well aware of their stigmatized position within the community and amongst their peers. They know that they are at a “bad school” for “bad kids.” They know the school itself is run-down and the textbooks and course materials are outdated, but Cale is also a stand-alone school where they belong. It is a place that welcomes them, and supports and cares for their well-being – not somewhere at the back of another building, not an annex where the punished students are hidden, or the slow students have to go for remediation. At Cale, the students are free to be a part of the school, to create the fabric that holds the school together. This school is *their* school, a school that “puts up with them,” as Michael said.

Tyesha’s voice echoes in my head, and I remember the warmth and affection with which she said, “Like I never smiled so much in a regular school until I got here. I never been so ready to come to school. Like, Christmas Break, I would wake up every morning ready to go and I was like, ‘what am I doing?’ But I be ready to come to school, ready to leave the house every morning, it’s just like...it’s just Cale. I love it here.”

If the building housing Cale were to close, what would happen to the climate of this school? Would students like Michael still think it was fun? Would Mrs. Mason’s lunchroom replacement still add to the student’s meals, or slip them cookies and treats for free? Would Officer Smithson still be able to stay with Cale? I doubted that our students would be able to answer the phones at Camptown, or deliver messages through the

school, or hang up posters or have pep-rallies in the cafeteria. The ethos of Cale would ultimately be destroyed.

Sitting at the table with Mr. Powers, I recognized that he, a white male with advanced degrees in education, had invited my perspective because I am a white woman with advanced degree(s)<sup>20</sup> in education. This is not to say that Mr. Powers does not respect or work with the black community and black leaders of our community – he truly does a great job of uniting diverse perspectives. But, I occupied a spot at his table in this conversation about hypotheticals because of how whiteness works – favoring those who look like the ones in power. A lot of policy is often made without asking the input or opinions of those who would be most affected by it. I worry that Mrs. Jamison will not have a say in what happens to Cale – I worry that she will be seen by those in charge, those who are making decisions, as just black hands in the biscuits (Hughes, 2006) – someone paid to do her job and not ask questions.

This is important because Mrs. Jamison *knows* her school. She knows the strengths and weaknesses of her teachers, her students, and the facility in which they are housed. She once confessed that she stays up late at night, worrying and praying over the school and the people therein. After I left Mr. Powers' house I drove immediately over to Cale. I felt like Mrs. Jamison deserved to be aware of potential decisions the city muckety-mucks were considering in regard to Hugh Cale, but I knew I was bringing unpleasant news.

After she heard what I had to say, Mrs. Jamison said, "That doesn't make any sense." Immediately, she drew a list of potential shortcomings and problems. What if a

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<sup>20</sup> Crossing my fingers!

student was long-term suspended from Camptown? He wouldn't be allowed on school grounds. What about the middle-schoolers who attend Cale? Should they be placed with even *more* high school students? How could Cale students take electives with other students? What if there was a fight? Where would Cale students eat lunch? How could Cale keep track of what students belonged there?

Mrs. Jamison thanked me for telling her and said she would pray on it. There is no accounting for what the future will hold, or how things will turn out at Cale – to the building, to the students. But, what we do know is that closing off potential possibilities limits what outcomes are available. There are students at Cale who are successful because success is an option for them.

Mrs. Jamison's office walls are full of pictures of her students – pictures that were taken on field trips, or in front of the school, pictures that were taken at graduation or of students in their cap and gown. As we sat in her office, surrounded by these faces, Mrs. Jamison said to me, "Nobody has a crystal ball, you know, can't foresee the future. I mean, I wouldn't have thought I would've lost four of them before they even turned 21." She pointed to a picture of a young black girl in a blue shirt, smiling into the sun at the camera, hair blowing in the wind. "Shanice, I look at her and I can remember her bopping in here trying to get Mrs. Rackley to help her with her Algebra 2, having Mrs. Rackley help her with this, coming in here with Mrs. Moore, answering the phone, sitting at that desk helping out like she ran the school because we helped her graduate."

Mrs. Jamison paused, "She's gone." She pointed to another picture, a student of a tall young, black man standing beside Mrs. Jamison at graduation. "There goes Isaiah, who we helped graduate, and he's gone."



Mrs. Jamison took a deep breath. “Joey Hanks, he was a pain in my ass. He was sent here and had scales in the back of his car – I mean he was into serious drug dealing and all this stuff out there at Albemarle High. And we tried to talk to him about staying clean and staying off drugs, and I want to say that while he was here for some of that part he didn’t do drugs as bad, you know, but he’s gone...and of a suspected drug overdose. Right? Laid down, went to sleep and didn’t wake up. Quashawn Biggs just got shot out here in our community, less than a month, maybe two months ago. Laid down, dead. Ok? You know, who would have saw that? I don’t know. I don’t know. You can never tell. You can’t. Things happen.”

### **Watch the canary**

Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres urge us to “watch the canary” (2002, p. 259), to think about the contradictions inherent in our institutions. If we think about the students at Hugh Cale as canaries, they indicate to us the toxic gases that exist in our educational system. Students of color face vast inequities in their schooling experiences. Students of color often encounter what Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) has called an "opportunity gap" in schools. They are often denied access to high-quality curriculums, and are subject to unskilled or under-qualified teachers and overcrowded, segregated schools. Students of color are disproportionately represented in lower-track, lower-ability classes (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Haller, 1985), and comprise the majority of students who are suspended or expelled every year (Children's Defense Fund, 2008). In the “criminalization of school discipline programs and adolescent behavior...it is not unexpected that the usual suspects would be involved in the process: African American

and Latino boys” (Reyes, 2006, p. 49).

Each year, increasingly large numbers of students are removed from schools through explicit means, such as expulsion or suspension, or implicit methods of school pushout, a term Eve Tuck uses “to describe the experiences of youth who have been compelled to leave school by people or factors within school” (2012, p. 1). It is certainly not true that all students who leave school early will end up incarcerated (Tuck, 2012), but prisons and schools are intimately and intricately related (Davis, 2008; Swain & Noblit, 2011). Almost half of the adult prison population is comprised of high school dropouts (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Harlow, 2003). When a student reaches prison, the canary is dead and our educational system has failed<sup>21</sup>.

Hugh Cale Community School exists to help prevent students from dropping out – it exists to help students graduate from high school. Students needing academic remediation or extra instructional support benefit from the services at Cale. Students who find trouble in a regular school environment come to Cale and find structure and support. Mrs. Jamison points out that kids with academic problems and those who misbehave in school are not mutually exclusive categories; poor academic performance can often lead to student misbehavior and vice versa.

Cale offers students credit recovery and an easier path to graduation. It is not that the curriculum, assignments, or the school work itself are any less challenging for students; Cale follows the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and all of the students at Cale are required to take and pass the end-of-grade tests administered by the state. Rather, Hugh Cale provides students with more one-on-one student-teacher

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<sup>21</sup> Not ironically, education provides the best chance for success for prisoners post-release.

interactions, an adjustable pace for students to measure and complete their assignments, more flexibility in scheduling, and less resistance and strife.

Mr. Keaton and other teachers at Hugh Cale work hard to identify and encourage students who would otherwise give up. Students can stay after school to complete instructional courses online in English, math, and other subjects to help them “catch up” to their peers. Teachers at Hugh Cale assist students with academic remediation and to show the students that they can “do” school. Sheena said at Cale, “the work is more easy and simple. [The teachers] break it down to you the easy way instead of the hard way.” Students like Cale, and say it is a “fun” place to be.

But unfortunately, Cale struggles with issues of negative representation in the broader Redding community. “Alternative schools have an image problem...partly from the ‘school for losers’ bias”, writes Mary Anne Raywid (1994, pp. 30-31). An administrator of an alternative school echoes this thought,

...members of the general public – and many educators, as well – often define the students in alternative schools by the difficulties they face rather than by their ability to overcome these difficulties. There is a tendency to see potential dropouts not as “turned off” but rather as disruptive, deviant, dysfunctional students who are a detriment to the traditional school...Instead, [alternative schools] are perceived as places where disruptive students are sent in order to protect and benefit the students who remain in the traditional schools (McGee, 2001, p. 589).

Adopting a deficit perspective toward kids who are struggling in school overlooks the agency and voice these students possess (Tuck, 2012). And students at Cale push back against this representation. “Cale is not a school for bad kids,” Sheena said. Sheena got into a fight at Camptown High and her grades started to slip. Her mother was afraid that Sheena wouldn’t be able to graduate, so she called Cale and asked if Sheena could enroll. Over the summer, Cale provided Sheena with online courses to

help her recover the courses she'd failed. Like Sheena, most students flourish in the environment provided for them at Cale, including Tyesha, who said she'd never smiled in school before coming to Cale. Both Sheena and Tyesha chose to come to Hugh Cale, and both girls will graduate in June 2013.

How can Hugh Cale, whose reputation is one step away from prison, the final stop before dropping out, how can this be a place where kids find success? Students attach themselves to Cale and graduate, because they are seen as having potential and recognize it in themselves. This school is empowering students and it is changing the educational narratives of children in this small town. Cale provides an alternative to punitive alternative schooling, but it also stands as a strong critique for what is failing students in traditional, conventional public schools. In what follows, I want to list some of the aspects at Cale that are working for students and staff.

*Cale is staffed by experienced teachers.* Most of the teachers at Cale have been at the school for eight years or more. Mrs. Jamison says she tends to “shy away from hiring brand new people because it’s a lot, and you have to kind of be – it works better if you are a little older. Then the kids are not going to try you quite as much, you know, if you look right out of school.” Linda Darling-Hammond writes, “Recent studies have found that the difference in teacher quality may represent the single most important school resource differential between children of color and white children. Studies of student achievement in Texas, Alabama, New York, and North Carolina, for example – have concluded that teacher qualifications – based on measures of expertise, education, and experience – account for a larger share of the variance in student achievement than any

other school factor, and can equal or exceed the influence of poverty, race, or parent education” (2001, p. 40).

*Cale is a warm, working environment.* Throughout the year, teachers and staff gather in the library for holiday meals. Everyone brings a dish (or two, or three) and we all sit down to eat together. Afterward, we play games and share fellowship. Dismal working conditions affect both the staff and their students (Darling-Hammond, 2001). Mrs. Jamison works hard to support her staff, and listens to their concerns in monthly staff meetings. Her door is always open for those who need to talk.

*Cale provides a safe, learning environment for students.* Cale does not have metal detectors or security cameras, and the discipline rules and practices are clear and consistent. Cale is not a punitive place for kids to learn. Skiba and Leone write, “Schools characterized by metal detectors and security officers were reported to have higher rates of violence and disorder than those characterized by students’ understanding of school rules and belief that rules were fairly enforced” (2001, p. 36).

*Cale is a small school.* There are usually less than 10 students in every class at Cale, and studies show that small, learning environments are better for students (Cox, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fine and Powell, 2001; Kelly, 1993). An added benefit of Cale’s small structure is that students who continue at Cale have a better opportunity to develop stronger relationships with the teachers (Noddings, 2003). Michael, who has

been at Cale for 5 years, has had several years of math with Mrs. Rackley, English with Mrs. Rose, and history with Mrs. Dennis.

*Cale has developed a strong sense of community.* Student work lines the halls of Cale, and the student government association has a dedicated bulletin board that students get to decorate. Students also participated in painting one of the murals at Cale. Cale holds carwashes to raise funds to take students on field trips and fun events, like the yearly end-of-school adventure at a nearby water park. Moody (1997) believe that developing a strong sense of community between students and staff help to construct the alternative school setting as a positive learning experience for students. Other research indicates that students who feel like members of their school community experience greater school success (Fine, 1991; Wehlage, 1991), thus underscoring the importance of school context.

These are just some of the positive aspects of Cale. Another potential benefit is the constant presence of role models and mentors. There is a high number of black faculty and staff serving Cale; thirteen of 18 adults at Cale are people of color who “look like” the students they serve (Monroe, 2005). Every February, black history is celebrate not through perfunctory recitations of Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream speech, but rather through a whole-school assembly that features vocal and dance performances by students of Redding State University. Spoken-word poetry, fraternity and sorority step routines, a cappella and rap music are all part of the uplift and affirmation of the black community. Hugh Cale students walk alongside college students in the Redding State University

homecoming parade. The mayor pro tempore of Redding, and former pro-footballer, Herb Riddick, is also the school's gym teacher. He is a highly respected member of the community, and it is not uncommon for other high-ranking city officials to call and consult with the city councilman at Cale. Mr. Riddick is often seen cavorting and joking with the students throughout the day.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of Cale is that the teachers and staff at Hugh Cale do not give the kids permission to fail. (Ladson-Billings, 2002). One of the activities high school students at Cale participate in is visiting the admissions office of Redding State University and a nearby community college, Rivers Community College. At the admissions office, students fill out enrollment paperwork and receive financial aid counseling from college financial aid advisors. Volunteer college students from Redding State are at Cale weekly, if not daily, to assist with remediation and tutoring during school hours. Robert says that at Cale, "the teachers stay after you to finish your work." Tyesha told me about how Mrs. Moore, the school's SIMS manager, would call her every morning during the summer to wake her up and remind her to come to school so she could finish her coursework. Within the school itself, collegiate pennants decorate the front office, and students have created poster boards that proclaim what they are interested in doing with their futures. Among the more obvious choices of singing or music production, there are golden glove hopefuls, artists-in-the-making, and future animal biologists.

Despite the institutional forces that constrain possibility, Cale is a successful alternative school. Cale successfully provides for the students who are the hardest to serve. There are students who self-select to attend or remain at this school, rather than

returning to their traditional school. This self-selection, in essence, elevates Cale to Raywid's Type I classification of alternative schools: schools of choice. Students are able to define and determine their own educational narratives because of the options afforded to them by the presence of Hugh Cale. Moreover, they are able to identify traditional schools as not sufficiently serving their needs: the teachers are too lax or don't care, there are too many fights, too much drama between students, the classes are too hard or move too fast for the student to keep up.

But in order for Cale to provide these options, this school must struggle against negative representations in the community, lack of district support, and a lack of expendable funding. Mrs. Jamison talked about how parents will often fight to keep their child from coming to Cale because of the social stigma attached to our school:

Lots of my parents come very upset that their children have been sent to us or recommended to come to us, even the ones who were long term suspended. Ok? When they are lucky to even have an opportunity to further their education. They're still like, you know, 'I don't want my child over there.' But the ones who get recommended as slow-learners or because they are behind or because their attendance has not been up to snuff or if they've failed a lot of classes or whatever the reason that they are being recommended to come, and sometimes I have parents that want to fight that... Even though they are not being successful in the regular school setting. What they find after they get here is that it's not as bad as they thought it was going to be. It's not at all what they thought it was going to be. We aren't having the raping and pillaging in the halls and all that kind of craziness they thought was going to happen. Kids aren't getting into fights everyday, their kids aren't being bullied nonstop, um, you know, kids aren't cutting each other and you know, slapping the teachers and stuff. Their kids actually seem to be learning, actually talk about what they are doing at school, um, I've had parents – I don't know how many, Amy – come to me and say, 'you know, you didn't just help my daughter or my son academically, they are a better person because of the time they spent at Cale.'

I believe the school district does not offer enough support for Cale, nor does the administration at the central office understand what it is that Cale is providing for



children. The district claims the graduation rates of Cale, but refuses to claim the students therein. That other principals will call Hugh Cale to have students paraded through the building as if on a jungle tour is both insulting and condescending to the students and staff. That the superintendent of Redding schools called Cale students “behaviorally handicapped” demonstrates an enormous lack of understanding about the type of student attending Cale, and about the processes involved in getting the students there.

There are three types of students at Cale: those who self-select to attend, those who were referred for poor academic performance or who have missed too many days, and those who have been long-term suspended from their home schools. The faculty and staff at Cale must find a way to serve all of these students successfully, and I believe that Cale delivers on this. But as Mr. Keaton has said, “it takes a lot of hard work.” Mrs. Jamison acknowledges both the contradiction inherent in this collection of students, and the difficulty in trying to serve them.

That’s sort of a trade off in an alternative school right now. When you have kids who are sent for academic issues who are slow learners who would benefit from a smaller setting, you know, from more one-on-one, well, not necessarily one-on-one but you know what I mean, a smaller classroom setting where they can get more attention, sometimes some one-on-one. We have to mix them with kids who are selling drugs and you know, got all these behavioral issues and may not necessarily have academic issues but have all the behavioral issues. So you’ve got a mixed bag of tricks – you’ve got those kids who are slow learners, like I said, who can benefit from this, then you mix them with kids who are in violation of school policy, for behavioral issues, and then those combination of kids who are both, have the behavioral issues and academic issues. So you’ve got all three mixed in, and the trade off is ‘do they start – some of those slow learners who weren’t showing antisocial behaviors, when you mix them with kids who do have antisocial behaviors, right – who leads who? Do they start picking up some of those antisocial behaviors? Are they strong enough to you know, not fall prey to that, ok?

Without a PTA or booster club to support Cale financially, the school must resort to other means of collecting funds to provide for extras. In April of 2013, a group of college students and Alpha Phi Omega fraternity brothers from Redding State University held a benefit program in the cafeteria of Cale on a Saturday. Between fifty to seventy-five people turned out in support, including students, teachers, and members of the local community. Students from Cale performed their own spoken-word lyrics, sang solos, and recited poetry from Maya Angelou. Officer Smithson brought performers from her dance troupe who staged three musical theater sets to the delight of the crowd.

The messages of the event centered around uplift and faith in one's self. There were deeply Christian spiritual undertones, and the fellowship of the crowd was something to witness. The event organizer made a short speech titled, "Changing hearts instead of losing lives." He spoke of the death rate of black males, of mass incarceration, and of students who drop out of schools. One spoken-word artist from Redding State University detailed the destruction of guns and violence in the lives of black folk. Performers drew close to the heart and pulled the audience together. At the end of the program, everyone who was there gathered for a picture to send to the newspaper. The event organizer said the picture was to "show that something good was happening at Cale."

Hugh Cale Community School demonstrates that "even though the canary is in a cage, it continues to have agency and voice" (Guinier and Torres, p. 259). The students at Cale, despite "lives so punishing, so filled with poverty, crime, abuse, and addiction" (Hollowell, 2009, p. 3), thrive and find success because Cale offers opportunities to do

so. So if we heed Guinier and Torres' advice, and watch the canaries, at Cale we might just hear them sing.

#### **POSTSCRIPT: A second chance**

Shamon was arrested in March of 2013 and charged with carrying a concealed weapon on school grounds, a felony. He was with two other boys, one a student at a local high school, and another former Cale student who'd been long-term suspended the previous fall. The three boys were attempting to enter a high school men's basketball game when a deputy, a school resource officer, stopped them because they "looked suspicious" (Staff reports, 2013). Deputies searched Shamon and the former Cale student but came up empty handed. When the officers turned to the third kid, all three boys raised a stink in an effort to distract the deputies, who found the handgun and arrested them.

Of course, the story made the front page of our illustrious local newspaper. Mrs. Jamison was both livid and upset, proclaiming Shamon "looked like a big fool with his face on the front page of the paper."

Officer Smithson went to the Redding district jail to see Shamon. She said that it was a "touching" visit, and that afterwards, she got into her car and cried "like a baby." It has taken some time for a relationship to develop between Officer Smithson and Shamon. He was incredibly standoffish initially, possibly due to the uniform and the badge that she wears. Smithson said, "He used to threaten me all the time! We had not seen eye to eye since I started. But, after tricking him into teaching me algebra for an hour as he completed his assignment, I felt our relationship took a slightly more positive

turn.” Eventually the two came to a place where they could interact, and it says a lot that she went to visit him.

Officer Smithson says that working at Cale has given her a whole new perspective. “There are so many things I have learned about how to treat people, just by working at Cale. I am amazed at how much I love my job. I look forward to going to work in the morning. [The students] give my job more purpose than it had before. I was called to be there!”

I asked Officer Smithson if she could tell me about the visit she had with Shamon at the jail. I was curious because I had thought a lot about Shamon, especially while writing this work. I worried about how he was doing, and how he was holding up -- away from his family and freedom.

I talked with him. He is interested in going through the NC Challenge<sup>22</sup> program! He admits that the only way he can change is to get away from here. He's so smart and really funny. It was a different Shamon at [the district jail]. He was more like a little boy than a man. He still had his guard up, at first. I wanted him to see that I genuinely cared about what happens to him. We had a heart to heart talk. As he was being walked away by the guard, my heart was breaking. I know that he needs to feel the consequences of his actions. But, it was hard seeing him like that. As I was leaving, before he went through the door, he called out my name, "Deputy Smithson!" (He never says that – he usually calls me 'Hey'). He said, "Tell Mrs. Jamison I love her, and my homies, too! I love all y'all!"

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<sup>22</sup> NC Challenge is a residential program that allows kids the chance to rebuild themselves through education and job training. If accepted into the program, Shamon will get another chance at a conventional life.

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