

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

The Poetry of Connection and Care in a Participatory Research Project

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Connection and care often sit at the unexamined, perhaps implicitly devalued margins of participatory research. In this paper, we articulate connection and care as affective, social, political, and epistemological processes core to participatory work. We explore how these processes were centered in a youth participatory action research project about mattering for students of color at the youths' middle school. The project spanned two phases: first with middle school youth and university members as co-researchers and co-designers, and second as a team of university researchers that authored this paper. Drawing from transcripts and other artifacts from both teams' meetings, we use poems and imagery to access felt experiences, to portray connection and care in action, and to (re)imagine humanizing research, schooling, and social organization. Through these poems and images, we invite readers to consider how the practice of participatory research can create and enact more humanizing ways to be together in a world that constantly challenges the fullness of our humanity.

but the inefficiency, the incompetence, the ineffectiveness,
the dismal rate of production, the off-taskness, the wandering,
dreaming, were all just ways of being together. It was hanging
out connection. mycelial connection. play, hanging
all just ways of being together. if I got it you got it,
the dream of connection
the dismal rate of production, friendship, it was care,
it v friendship disagreeing
product, which is to say the product was our needs offered to
each other, held to each other, held by each other. Our product
was the dream of connection, which

I

The inefficiency, the incompetence, the ineffectiveness, the dismal rate of production, the off-taskness, the wandering, the flabbiness, the consensussing, the play, the listening, the dreaming, were all just ways of being together. It was hanging out, it was growing closer, it was mycelial, its product was itself, its product was connection, friendship, it was care, it was *I'm making jam on Saturday if anyone wants to join me*, it was *let me help with hauling the limestone*, it was *you can leave your kids with us as long as you need*, it was *take my car*, it was *whatever you need, if I got it you got it*, that was the product, which is to say the product was our needs offered to each other, held to each other, held by each other. Our product was the dream of connection, which, oh yeah, we were living.

—from *Inciting Joy*, by Ross Gay (2022, p. 104)

Our goal in this paper is to move acts of connection and care from the unexamined, perhaps implicitly devalued margins of participatory research to the center. To the heart of the work, where, we argue, they already are.

II



In an open letter to their school community, youth co-researchers on the project we report on here wrote: “We feel like we don’t matter because of certain people and experiences we have had during our time at [Washington] Middle School.” They went on to detail routine assaults on their humanity, ranging from peers’ casual use of racial slurs to teachers’ neglect, stereotyping, and harassment. A Black boy described being policed in the hallway by an adult on the “student support” team, who continued to yell “right in my ear” even after he explained that he was dizzy and on his way to the nurse. A young Latina described having her questions in class brushed aside, because teachers “think that I can’t catch up or that I’m not smart enough.” A Hmong girl shared how a teacher turned to her for help pronouncing words in Cantonese, a language neither she nor her ancestors spoke. These and the other stories in the youths’ letter add to the chorus of voices testifying that for students of color, schools are frequently sites of dehumanization (e.g., Dead Prez, 2000; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Gutiérrez et al., 2002; LaMotte

& Wallace, 2016; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). This underscores the pressing need for an ethic of care and connection both in schools and in education research with youth of color.

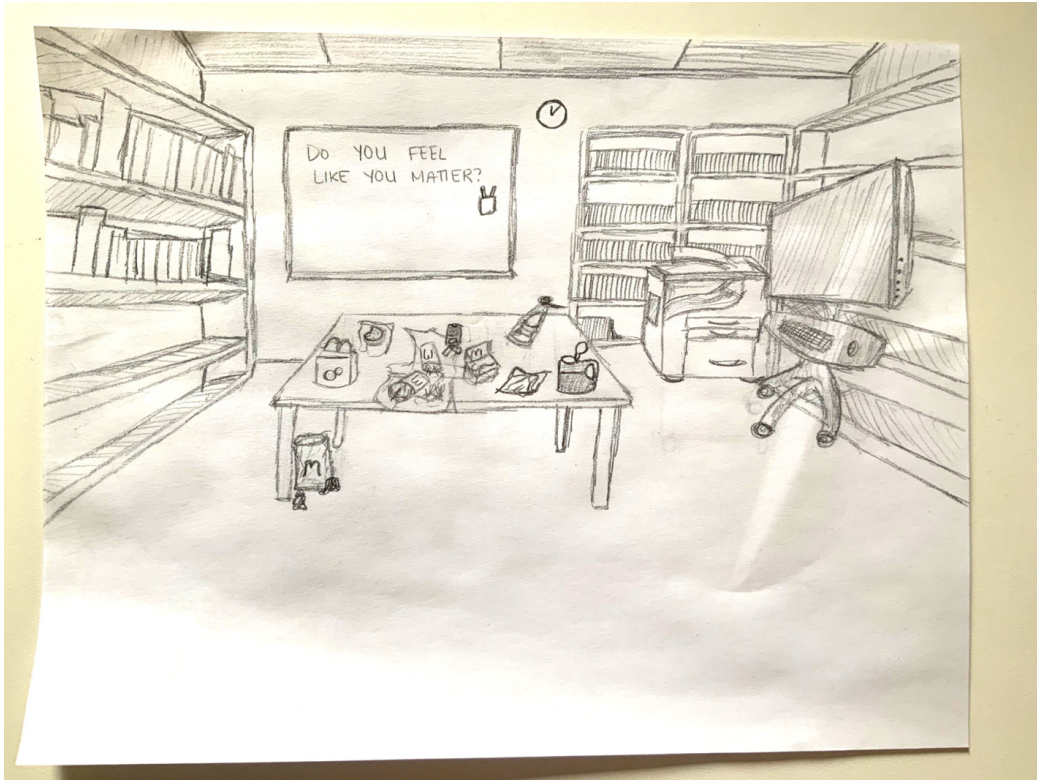
III

Participatory methods aim to address social problems in ways that center the knowledge, experiences, and agency of those most affected by the focal problems (Wilson et al., 2023). Such methods fit our project well, given our goal of “re-mediating” education for youth of color in U.S. schools (Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010). In line with other participatory researchers, we view developing critical consciousness and promoting activism among youth as essential to this work, and we view young people as social actors who *already have* essential expertise (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2017; Vines et al., 2025).

We argue that beyond conducting research and acting on findings, the practice of participatory research must include learning and enacting more humanizing ways to be together in a world that constantly challenges the fullness of our humanity. We endeavor to expand conversations about participatory research by articulating connection and care as some of the most important processes participatory work can provoke.

Connection and care are affective, social, political, and epistemological processes. They are located in our relationships and interactions with others. We feel them in our hearts, minds, and bodies. They can simultaneously reflect and bring into being power relations that are more egalitarian and more communally oriented than are typical in both formal schooling and research. All of this represents knowledge and ways of knowing that are too often devalued in favor of productivity and efficiency (O’Brien et al., 2022). As Gay (2022) wrote, “inefficiency ... off-taskness ... play ... listening” can be vital “ways of being together,” of enacting care for one another and living “the dream of connection” (p. 104).

IV



We draw on our experiences with a participatory project that was rooted in relationships and connections that spanned histories and communities extending far beyond linear or instrumental project boundaries. Committing to being pulled, pushed, *changed* by one another's gravity was an act of care that made new, previously unimaginable trajectories possible.

The project had two phases. In the first phase, Nicole, Chundou, and Saron worked with a group of middle school kids of color as co-researchers and co-designers of what began as an initiative to advance equitable mathematics instruction at their school, which we call Washington (a pseudonym). Washington served nearly 800 students, the majority of whom identified as White, and it had a reputation as a “good,” high-achieving school. Yet Nicole’s experiences as a Chinese American in the U.S. Midwest and as a parent of a Washington student led her to have concerns about the experiences of students of color there. She recruited Chundou as a graduate student researcher on the project, not only because of their advisor/advisee relationship but also because of Chundou’s connections to the school community. As refugees fleeing the wake of the Secret War in Laos, Chundou’s family had settled in a neighborhood where many youth attended Washington, and Chundou had been working as a youth programs volunteer at the neighborhood community center as a way of giving back. Saron had also been working at this community center through Americorps, and

Chundou recruited her as an undergraduate research assistant (rather than another graduate student, as Nicole had budgeted) because she was known and trusted by kids we had started to work with at Washington.¹

Seven kids participated in the project: Javari, a Black boy; Rhyme, a Black girl; Maria, Elena, Ximena, and Ayleen, who identified as Hispanic and Latina girls; and Ashley, a Hmong girl (all pseudonyms). A teacher nominated Elena and Javari for the group. Chundou recruited Ashley and Ximena at the community center. After a few weeks, Ashley, Ximena, and Elena invited Maria and Ayleen to join the group, and Javari invited Rhyme.

Our group met weekly at Washington for a year, during lunch and recess. In line with our participatory paradigm, the kids shaped our research focus, routines, and practices. They were free to come and go as they wished. In a previous collaboration, Nicole and Chundou had learned that we wanted our work with kids to be less like “doing school” and more like “dinner at auntie’s house,” drawing on experiences we had had growing up in large, tightly knit families (Hmong American in Chundou’s case, Chinese American in Nicole’s). In line with this desire, we brought sandwiches, fries, and cookies. The kids reciprocated, bringing their mom’s enchiladas, bags of Takis, and scraps from the cafeteria. Javari also occasionally brought games (a deck of UNO cards was his favorite). In this and many other ways, care flowed in every direction—not only from adults to kids, or from officially recognized “researchers” to research “subjects” (see also Farsakoglu & Djampour, 2021).

We spent a lot of time hanging out, playing UNO, getting excited about who was beefing with who, swapping stories about grandmas engaging in illicit activity, and sharing food. And, with our encouragement, cajoling, and technical support, the kids became co-researchers of “mattering” for students of color at their school (Love, 2019)—a focus that was more meaningful to them than the initial problem of equitable mathematics instruction (which had been rooted in Nicole’s background as a mathematics educator and mathematics education researcher). They co-designed and conducted interviews, wrote their open letter, and performed their letter in front of the principal. One way to understand the project would be to investigate its formal products, following the product-oriented approach that scholarship on community-engaged and participatory action research often takes (e.g., Cammarota, 2011; Raygoza, 2016). Without discounting such an approach, we focus here instead on the interactions and relationships within the team, not as means to other ends but as acts of resistance, transformation, and learning in and of themselves (see also O’Brien et al., 2022).

¹ We use the word “kids” in an effort to humanize our youth co-researchers as much as possible. Terms such as “middle school students” and “youth co-researchers,” while more commonly used in research, are more reductive and somewhat distancing. With “kids”—a word we use in our daily lives as teachers, parents, and aunties—we aim to help readers connect more deeply with these growing, striving human beings and their complex, multifaceted humanity.

V



The second phase of the project—which focused on analyzing relationships and interactions in the first phase—echoed, mirrored, riffed off what we had done in the first, even as team membership changed. The kids graduated from Washington and mostly moved on from our project. Meanwhile, Carly, Rosanne, Sofia, and Siqi joined us for some initial discussions about participatory research, and all decided to stick around to analyze our data and write with us. They were all interested in learning more about participatory methods, and were all connected to Nicole in some kind of mentoring relationship. And all were looking for a research community. For several months, the seven of us (eight, if you count Carly’s baby) sat around Nicole’s dining table eating za’atar spiced popcorn and chocolate chip cookies, talking about the range of outcomes participatory research can produce and the types of relationships it can foster—transactional, instrumental, mutually supportive, affirming, pedagogical, anti-hierarchical, and/or transgressive, breaking the usual rules of school and research. We read articles, shared stories, played with the baby, analyzed audio recordings and transcripts of the Washington team’s meetings, and co-constructed the poems we present here as well as many others. Our connections to each other helped

us make potentially risky moves, such as choosing to focus on something as “soft” as care, questioning each other’s interpretations of our data, and experimenting with poetry.

Thus, care and connection were gravitational forces that oriented us to each other and to our work throughout our time with the kids *and* our later analysis and writing. On the scale on which our project operated, care and connection were not sufficient to achieve systemic change. Nor were they always tidy or straightforward to enact. But they were vitally necessary to our efforts to bring another world into being. Our goal here, we repeat, is to move acts of connection and care from the margins of participatory research to the center. To the heart of the work, where, we argue, they already are.

VI

We present our meditations on connection and care as they manifested in our participatory work with the kids through a collection of poems. We constructed our poems through a process of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2009), drawing on audio recordings, transcripts, and other artifacts from our work at Washington. We shared the poems with youth co-researchers we had kept in touch with (Maria, Elena, and Javari), asking if they felt that the poems represented their experiences of care and connection in our group accurately. They all agreed that they did. Javari’s response was itself poetic:

reading this, I had one word in my mind
and it was right
I felt that word
through every single word
down to the period
I don’t know how
you were able to capture
so many feelings
in your words

With these poems, we attempt to convey various ways that both adults and youth actively participated in extending care to and forging connections with one another, from sharing food, games, and vulnerable experiences, to leading activities, to listening well.

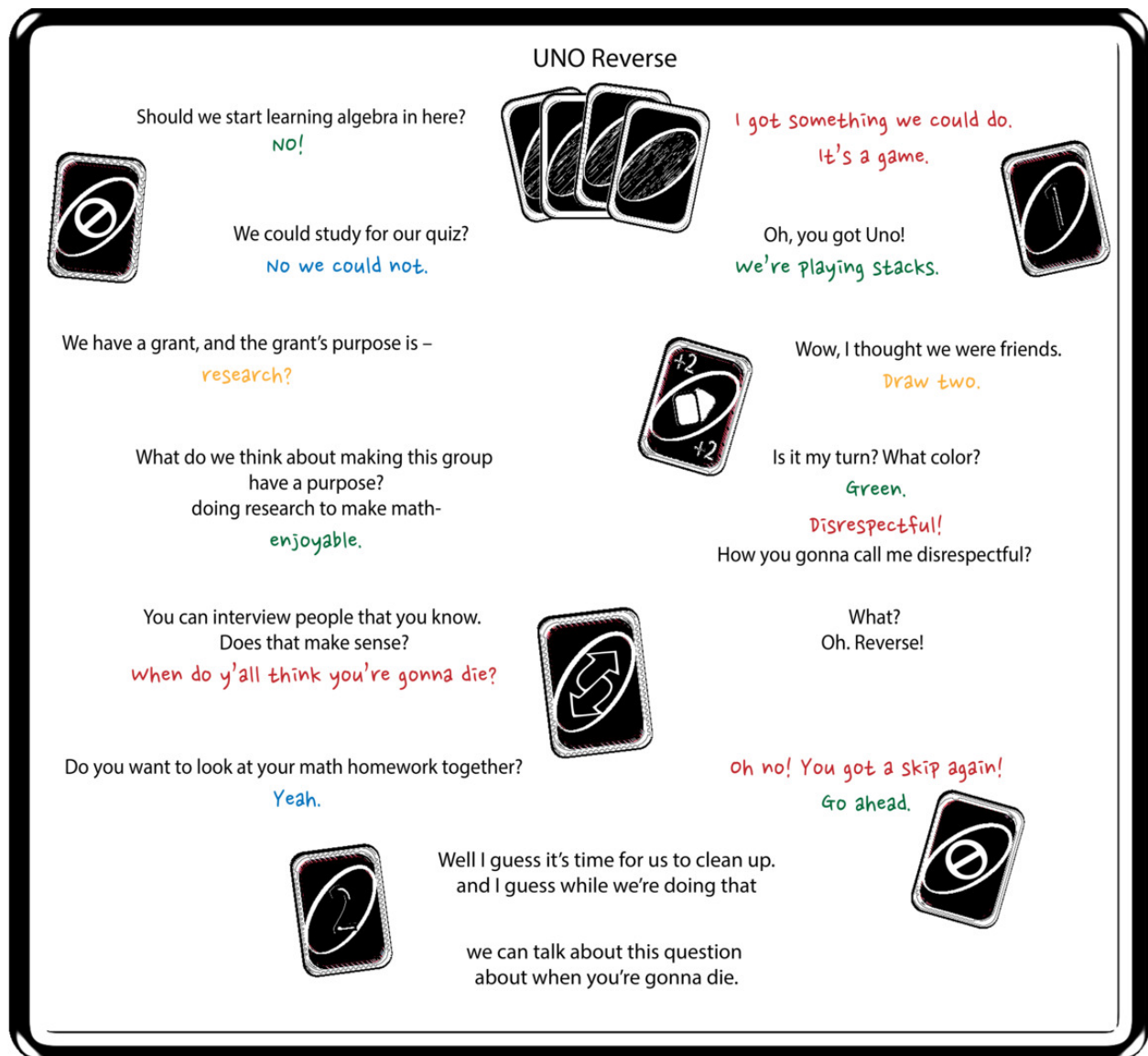
We chose to use poems for several reasons. First, as Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt.” Speaking in particular about women, as a queer Black woman herself—that is, speaking about those whose knowledge and power have been subordinated, pushed to the margins, denied—Lorde wrote, “The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.” Similarly, Shawn Ginwright (2008), citing Robin Kelley, has articulated poetic knowledge as an

“emancipation of language and old ways of thinking’ that ruptures banal and mundane experience of struggle and in doing so reveals insight and ways to imagine a new social order.”

In addition to accessing felt but as yet unnamed ideas, creating emancipatory knowledge, and imagining a new social order, poems provide a way to convey truths about layered and non-linear phenomena, centering transmodal qualities of “form, intensity, rhythm, and movement” (Petitmengin, 2007, p. 64) that make up the nature of felt experience. To find the poetry inherent in the words of conversations is to lift and reinvigorate the vibrancy of a moment lived together. We invite readers to let these poems wash over them, allowing the analytic stance typical of social science to dissolve, letting feeling come to the fore.

An audio version of the poems, inspired by Petchauer and Brown (2023), is available in the Supplementary Files. We encourage readers to access it for a different experience of care and connection in our work.

VII



Note. Adults' speech is represented with black text, kids' with color.

VIII

Enchiladas verdes Con Pollo

Ingredients.

Tomatillo

Jalapeño

Garlic

cumin

Salt

Oil

Queso Fresco

Tortilla

Prep.

Peel the tomatillo and bring it to a boil in a pan, along with the jalapeño^{and} water, for 10 min. Then remove from heat and blend together with garlic^{salt} and cumin. Then, in a pan, add oil and chopped onion until it's golden brown then pour in the previously blended sauce and let it boil for up to 5 min.

the chicken:

Boil the chicken breast until ready then shred the chicken. Then heat up the corn tortillas, put the chicken with a bit of sauce then roll it putting plate then put sauce on top and the Queso fresco.

Note. Recipe courtesy of Elena's mother.

IX

DISCOURSE ON RESPECT, Part 1

You barely filled it up
Javari said, taking the jug from Ximena's hands
and filling his cup.

Yeah you guys usually fill this water super high
said Chundou.

It's two different highs, no
it's three different highs,
Rhyme reminded.

High as a kite
High as hell
Javari riffed.

I remember my momma

████████████████████ at my
grandma's party.

Ha! Did your grandma know?
Nicole inquired.

Mmhm! My grandma ██████████

My grandma—
So in Hmong culture, it's really
normal to ██████████ *which is*
██████████ *in the United States.*

What the ██████████ *is that?*

So, it's ██████████
██████████

a lot of Hmong people use it
for ██████████ *And one time,*
my grandma ██████████

and then she ██████████
██████████
While fishing!

Javari's laughter filled the room
She was ██████████?

██████████, *yeah*
Chundou chuckled.

Nicole looked at her laptop.
All right, we got Ms. G here?

I want water
Rhyme announced

You want water?
Maria heard

I'mma do it. Here, hold it
Maria poured

X

DISCOURSE ON RESPECT, Part 2

All right, we got Ms. G here?

Nicole said, introducing a recording
of Elena interviewing Ms. G.

My grandma used to [REDACTED],
Elena said, staying on topic.

Guys, I love Ms. G
Javari played along.

She makes me fall asleep.
Ashley's counterpoint.

Someone hit play.
The recording mingled with
Let me have one of those cookies and
Who were you talking to?

Elena's voice came through the speaker.
Do you feel like this school
has a positive environment?

Ms. G answered,
We're just really working
on students
being able to listen
to adults
this year
and then

I have to go. I would be willing to finish this interview later, she said.

You can go finish it,
Maria told Javari.
Look you got a lot of people in this room right now!
Javari resisted, or maybe invited.
Ayleen was quiet, as usual. Listening.

Wait a second, I feel like
we need to break down
what she said at the end,
Chundou asserted.

Y'all need to stop looking at me!
Javari exclaimed.

What did she say?
Maria asked.

She said they're working on—
Chundou paused.
Students listening to adults, Nicole continued.

No.
Rhyme said it.
Clear as day.
They need to listen
To us.

Exactly! Javari, triumphant.

"If We say this, You do it,"
Rhyme voiced Adults at School.

Mutual respect. That's all I'm gone say. Mutual respect.
Javari dropped the mic.

It would be interesting to ask her,
like well what do you mean
by students listening to adults more,
Chundou mused.
Because I think us in this room?
Like I think we all kind of had a,
a reaction when she said—

I didn't.
Maria cut in.

Okay except for Maria,
Chundou conceded.
Maria was the only one who didn't react.

Yeah.
Maria owned it.

But I think some of us in this room
had a reaction, so like, I think that means
our definition of listening
might be different than
their definition of listening.
So what is our definition of listening?

Well you said mutual,
Nicole said, looking at Javari.
Yeah you said mutual respect,
Chundou repeated.

Wait what is that,
Maria asked.
Still with us.

Elena was on it.
Que los dos a—que los dos se respetan.

XI

Javari the Director

3, 2, 1

dear washington community

3... 2... 1...

dear washington community

Why nobody talkin'?

3, 2, 1

dear washington community

Good job guys
BUT NOT GOOD ENOUGH

3, 2, 1

dear washington community

Rhyme was eating
you got your mouth closed
you got your mouth closed

Let's make some sound come out

*C'mon guys,
Let's lift it up!
You're right here,
I need you right here!*

*One more time,
Okay guys?*

Threeeee, twoooo, oneeee

Dear washington community

Why you so quiet?

Wait,
I have a question though...
Is y'all scared of anyone up in there?

Cuz like. I feel like we not gonna be able to do that shit if y'all don't feel like y'all not gonna be up in there and y'all don't feel like, y'all gonna be scared to do this shit. Or like, do y'all feel like any of them respect you?

do y'all feel like anyone up in there respect y'all?

Do you feel like they respect you?... because if y'all don't feel like they respect you, then we go up in that bitch and make them respect y'all.

But can we run it,
dear washington,
back?
Just like all of us?

Dear Washington Community

That was better.

We Black as fuck... We dark as fuck...

Dear Washington Community

Dr. Betina Love said, "We who are dark want to

MATTER AND LIVE

BUT THRIVE"

not just survive

Note. All of the lines in this poem represent Javari's speech during a rehearsal of the group's presentation to the principal, except for the repeated line, "Dear Washington Community," which was spoken chorally.

XII

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH?

It's the first week of April.

Every week, I'm like,
What are we doing?

Are we doing the right thing?

Are we doing enough?

This week, we're doing interviews.
Kids are interviewing their peers about
whether they feel like they matter at school.
Ayleen doesn't want to do any interviews.
I don't know, she doesn't feel like it.

She's always quiet in group.

But she did a great interview last week.

Anyway she doesn't want to.

So we asked her if she wanted to write instead.

And she wrote.

Oh my gosh,
she wrote!

It makes me wonder
how much she's had to say this whole time
And not said.

And how we've been listening to her.

Or not.

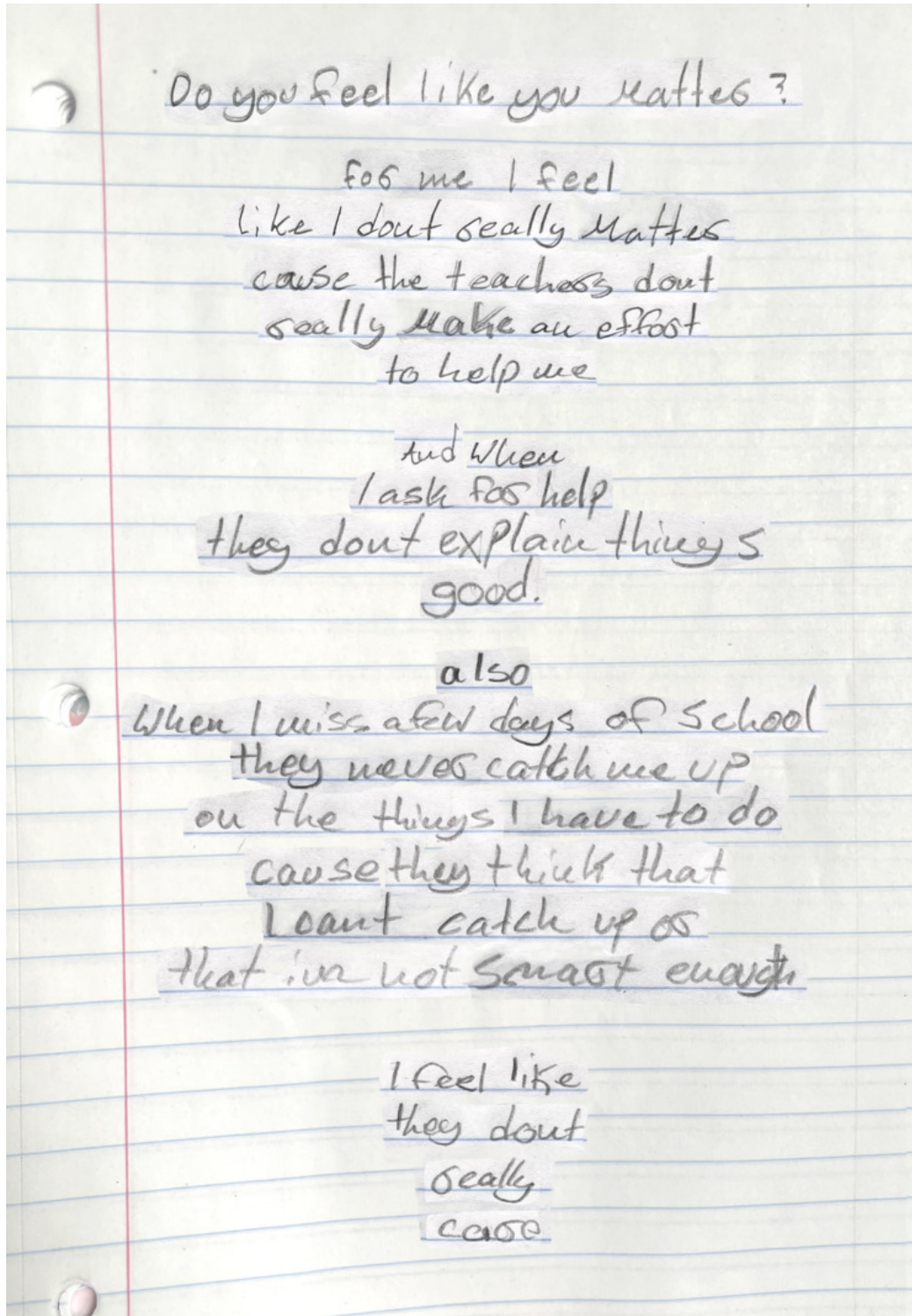
What are we doing?

Are we doing the right thing?

Are we doing enough?

Note. Poem constructed from an entry in Nicole's journal.

XIII



Note. Poem constructed from Ayleen's writing.

XIV

SPELL

Why'd it sound, when it said we who are dark—Ate it up! It sounded like we were casting like, a spell. Yeah it was cool. *We who are dark, we who are dark, we who are dark.* Guys! You wanna play a quick game of Uno? Sure. Baddie baddie shot o'clock! Wait what if that's how we start our letter? Baddie baddie shot o'clock? We who are dark? Yeah, haha. We should! Baddie baddie shot o'clock! Baddie baddie yay! Guys, we're gonna play Uno guys.

We who are dark, we who are dark, we who are dark.

XV

Our intention is that our poems should stand on their own. Our goal with them is to portray diverse forms of connection and care in participatory research, and to convey their weight and value. We encourage others who work in participatory paradigms to ask themselves how they are making room for connection and care in their own research, not just as means to other ends but as manifestations of the social transformations participatory work aims toward. We encourage allowing conversations to wander, making space for many forms of participation, and attuning to one another, recognizing that different people experience the work differently.

Finally, we hope we have connected with you, dear reader, in a field of words, yes, words / and feelings / textures / moods / for which words are but shadows / gestures toward / light.

Author Note

The Mattering Collective is an intergenerational group concerned with what it means for children, youth, and families of color to *matter* in schools. Nicole Louie¹ convened the group. Its first members were Chundou Her,¹ Saron Fenta,² and students at Washington Middle School (a pseudonym). Carly Ferguson,¹ Rosanne Luu,¹ Sofia Tancredi,² and Siqi Huang³ joined the Collective for analysis and writing at a point when youth participation

had tapered. It was Chundou's idea to use poetry to represent our work. From there, all of the individuals named here contributed equally to conceptualizing this paper. Nicole, Chundou, and Sofia played primary roles in drafting and revising the text. All of us, including three of our youth partners, reviewed the manuscript, provided feedback, and approved the final version.

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Supplementary Materials

Audio file

Download: https://jprm.scholasticahq.com/article/155828-the-poetry-of-connection-and-care-in-a-participatory-research-project/attachment/326795.mp4?auth_token=JzC5NHTPmp1VGzAigX0T
