

# A Narrative Inquiry of Charter School Social Work and the “No Excuses” Behavior Model

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*Neoliberal education reform has resulted in a growing number of charter schools across the country, many of which are concentrated in low-income communities of color (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). Charter schools serving these demographics often practice a “no excuses” pedagogy featuring two components: (1) universal, precise behavioral expectations and (2) systematic rewards for compliance and penalties for disobedience (Golan, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Whitman, 2008). This article examines overlooked consequences of the “no excuses” model by presenting a narrative inquiry involving 3 social workers from charter schools in Harlem, New York. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted about professional background, roles and responsibilities, the school community, and the political context of charter schools. The collective narrative that emerged from this framework describes how participants have met their concern that a “no excuses” model creates traumatic or unsupportive environments for marginalized students with evidence-based advocacy. This article serves to foster the community of charter school social workers who wish to critique the “no excuses” model within their schools and on a broader scale.*

## Neoliberal Education Reform and Narrative Inquiry

Publicly funded, privately managed charter schools have become a major tool of neoliberal education reform, the system of market-based policies that have increasingly governed America’s public schools in the past several decades (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). Shiller (2011) argues that the relationship between charter schools and the marketplace is twofold: They explicitly aim to prepare students for the workforce, and they model their structure on the market itself. In this system, schools are commodities that rely on academic data to prove themselves a worthy choice for parents to send their children. Neoliberal reform’s data-driven, academic-focused climate has privileged the voices of educators, policy makers, and business leaders, while devaluing contributions from school social workers.

Narrative inquiry, the process of collecting and presenting the meaning of personal experiences within a body of research (Schwandt, 2007), is a promising methodology for incorporating social workers’ perspectives into the conversation about charter schools. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) argue that narrative inquiry is frequently used in educational research because

educational phenomena are constructed by the personal stories of learners, teachers, and researchers. Narrative researchers often shape their reports’ underlying structures around participants’ life experiences, as opposed to a traditional literature review or theoretical paradigm (Wiebe, 2009). By leaving the organization and representation of personal stories to the researcher, narrative inquiry capitalizes on their complex, nonlinear, and often contradictory nature (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). School social work, carried out through interpersonal relationships that inherently share these characteristics, is particularly suited for narrative study.

### **Recruitment**

Convenience sampling was used to recruit social workers from 3 charter schools in Harlem, New York, which houses almost 70 percent of charter schools in Manhattan (New York City Charter School Center, 2015). A Columbia-affiliated third party facilitated the recruitment of two participants, whose schools will be referred to as Metro Institute and Keystone Prep. The researcher independently recruited a third participant, whose school will be referred to as Character Academy. Because of logistical constraints and an initial open-ended framework—which did not call for saturation—data collection concluded after three interviews.

### **Methodology**

At the beginning of each individual interview, social workers were asked to address four topics: professional background, professional roles and responsibilities, the relationship between their school and the community, and the political context of charter schools. The terms “community” and “political context” were left open to each social worker’s interpretation to foster a degree of collaboration between researcher and participant characteristic of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The rationale for this structure drew from studies about the diverse roles school social workers embody, including clinician, advocate, and policy practitioner, as well as their responsibility to employ an ecological perspective (Constable, 2009; Monkman, 2009).

### **The Collective Narrative on “No Excuses”**

The primary narrative that emerged from this framework describes each participant’s ethical conflict and call to action regarding school practices unsupportive to students receiving counseling, those with diagnosed disabilities, or those who have experienced trauma. In Metro Institute and Character Academy, students were expected to constantly sit, speak, walk, or have items arranged on their desk in a specific way that reflected their school’s culture; otherwise they would face disciplinary action. Maintaining

the methodology of narrative inquiry, this article organizes each participant's stories into a collective chronology (Creswell, 2013). Before elaborating on individual results, it is worthwhile to contextualize these behavior models.

Aforementioned behavioral expectations reflect what the literature increasingly refers to as the “no excuses” pedagogy used by a subset of

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charter schools (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). “No excuses” schools are known for universal and precise behavioral expectations with a system of merits for obedience and punishments for disobedience, an extended school-day and year, a culture of college preparation, a rejection of street culture, very

high standardized test scores, and frequent data-driven assessment (Golan, 2015; Goodman, 2013; Whitman, 2008). They are often concentrated in low-income communities of color, such as Harlem, and operate under the notion that poverty is “no excuse” for failing schools (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

### **Part One: Ethical Conflict**

The social workers from Metro Institute and Character Academy discussed their concerns that universally rigid behavioral expectations unconsciously perpetuate the disenfranchisement of marginalized students, such as students of color, those diagnosed with ADHD, or those who have experienced trauma:

Metro Institute: It sickens me sometimes to feel like we replicate something that can bring up something very traumatic for a student of color or a student of trauma. So if you're a student who has been disenfranchised, felt isolation, felt rejected, not necessarily felt heard for whatever outside reason, and you can come into this school and on some level we replicate that—not on a conscious level, on an unconscious level...I tend to believe because also we get students of color who racially have felt a lot of stuff, that even brings up even more stuff for them...They battle this idea of “I have no voice. Why do I have to sit in this damn room for eleven hours? Why can't I operate this particular way?” (personal communication, November 4, 2015).

Character Academy: My training and practice teaches me that the way to support children with certain diagnoses is not aligned with those behavioral expectations...A lot of the children with ADHD were repeatedly spending a lot more time in the dean's office than they were in the classrooms because they were physically unable to meet those expectations without scaffolding

them to get there. And it was significantly impacting their self-esteem and I was repeatedly hearing in sessions—and ADHD is just one example—that they were bad and couldn’t do good (personal communication, December 9, 2015).

The social worker from Keystone Prep was not concerned about her school’s overall behavior model, which she described as progressive. However, she noted that, with Keystone Prep entering its first year of standardized testing, recent organizational changes (e.g., a new principal and many new teachers) have shifted staff’s expectations of counseling to yield fast and specific behavioral results:

Things are very different this year and I feel it in counseling, when I had a meeting last week and [staff] were like “in two weeks we need to know the progress” (personal communication, November 9, 2015).

Furthermore, each social worker felt compelled to educate staff about how the needs of students in counseling, surviving trauma, or working with disabilities do not always align with behavioral expectations following a “no excuses” ideology.

### **Part Two: Resolution**

Each participant described her process of negotiating her role and advocating for students, particularly by drawing on evidence-based practices. For example, Keystone Prep’s social worker has chosen to continue counseling students the way she has in previous years, despite facing direct pressure from staff:

Suddenly I’m going to act different in counseling and I was like ‘no, you know what you’re doing and you’re very purposeful about what you’re doing.’ So I just do it the way I would do it and just explain to staff it takes time (personal communication, November 9, 2015).

Character Academy’s social worker has taken concrete measures (e.g., organizing professional development and creating staff committees on trauma, crisis management, and ADHD) to encourage colleagues to consider differentiating behavioral expectations and support. She stressed the importance of presenting evidence to build a united effort among school leadership. Similarly, the social worker at Metro Institute stated that drawing on resources to educate staff has become a major professional responsibility. She noted the shift in how staff have responded after she adopted an asset-based, skill-building model:

Having the language to articulate specific things that kids need allowed me to be a part of the conversation...As I began to shift their lens through

conversation and getting them to try things because I was trying it, people bought into the fact that, “there may be some benefit to what she’s saying, let me try these things within my classroom” (personal communication, November 4, 2015).

Supported by evidence-based practices, each social worker found that her training in counseling and work with marginalized students provided her with tools to effectively challenge universal behavioral expectations within her school.

### **Discussion and Implications**

As the charter school movement expands, school social workers have an ethical obligation to be critical of any practices that cause harm to students (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). To be most effective, critiques must acknowledge the diversity among charter schools. In continued scholarship, researchers must remain cautious about making “no excuses” synonymous with “charter school”—not all charters use this model (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). There is a limitation with the sample of this study, drawn from charter schools already familiar to the researcher, that yields results relevant to mainstream neoliberal reform.

Within this study, Metro Institute and Character Academy may be characterized as “no excuses” schools, while Keystone Prep is a noteworthy exception. Although Keystone Prep had routinely differentiated its behavioral expectations and disciplinary measures, it crept closer toward a “no excuses” mentality as state testing accountability concerns grew among staff. The implication of this finding - along with the academic success of Metro Institute, Character Academy, and other “no excuses” schools - suggests a clear link between data-driven academic accountability and rigid behavior models. This relationship does not exist in a vacuum, and further study of its manifestation across socioeconomic and racial contexts is critical.

Proponents of “no excuses” charters use high standardized test scores to argue that public schools cannot justify citing poverty or systemic racism as causes for failure (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014). A data-driven environment makes it easy to assume that universal, unwavering high expectations serve all public school students equally in the face of these traumatizing external forces. However, this study demonstrates that focusing on accountability data alone obscures the exclusion and harm done to students on the margins—those who accumulate disciplinary infractions for not fitting the mold believed to serve their best interests. The social workers from Metro Institute, Character Academy, and Keystone Prep illuminate that these students are often those with diagnosed disabilities and trauma stemming from a host of sources,

most significantly poverty and racism.

Beyond the risk to these students, the ethics of a “no excuses” system even towards those who appear to benefit from it are questionable. Whitman (2008) argues that “no excuses” schools demonstrate paternalistic, middle-class values, which is valid on the surface due to their rejection of street culture and emphasis on college. However, Golann’s (2015) analysis reveals that interactional skills taught to the middle class, such as self-assertion, independence, negotiating authority, and taking initiative, are absent from “no excuses” schools, which instead emphasize submission to authority, rote behavior, and self-constraint. Golann (2015) presents the paradox that “no excuses” schools aim to grant working-class students access to middle-class institutions without cultivating the skills students will need to navigate them. When working-class neighborhoods are synonymous with communities of color, as in the setting for this study, it becomes even more crucial to consider the extent to which a “no excuses” model is enabled by systemic racism.

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Among the few studies that have brought us closer to addressing these concerns by examining everyday life in charter schools (Carr, 2013; Golan, 2015; Seider, 2012; Shiller, 2011), even fewer have underscored first-hand accounts from social workers. School social workers are not entirely spared from the accountability concerns that grip teachers and administrators when their work is expected to yield results that serve a “no excuses” model. However, they are additionally accountable to the ethical and moral obligations of the social work profession. When they answer the call to uphold these ethics—like the social workers at Metro Institute, Character Academy, and Keystone Prep have—advocacy for students most vulnerable to marginalization when there are “no excuses” is possible and powerful.

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