TRANSFORMING THE CONCEPTS OF COMMUNITY AND SELF-CARE

Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, "digesting" key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

In this issue of *Equity Digest*, we probe the issues around privilege and access of marginalized individuals to traditional notions of self-care. We also illustrate how self- and community care are required to maintain and sustain the well-being of marginalized individuals and their communities. Finally, we push toward a more inclusive concept of self- and community care and provide suggestions for doing so.

Get Informed

Self– and Community Care Have a Positive, Reciprocal Relationship

Self-Care: A Familiar Concept with Accessibility Problems

Self-care has become a trendy topic and is overall associated with wellness and well-being, relaxing, and forgetting about troubles (Leach, 2019; Leonowicz, n. d.). Self-care is defined as the act of valuing, maintaining, and nourishing our health, emotionally as well as physically (Brill, 2012; Leonowicz, n. d.). Within the context of social justice and educational equity work, one must trouble the mainstream notion

of self-care prevalent in popular culture by considering the equity implications of the act of self-care. In doing this we raise the questions, who gets to practice self-care, and is it accessible to everyone? In essence, who gets to relax and who doesn't—who thrives and who just survives?

When we look historically at these concepts, we find that self- and community care related to marginalized individuals and communities tie directly to the social justice work of feminist activists of Color in the 1960s (Alzate González, 2015; Bernal, 2006; Michaeli, 2017). Audre Lorde (1988) wrote a dedicated piece on self- and community care, calling to fellow feminists of Color to band together against common oppressions. Over the course of the feminist movement, feminists called for the cultivation of self- and community care as a way to combat patriarchal and racial violence (Bernal, 2006).

The Importance of Community Care

Although the importance of self-care is promoted in today's culture, many believed that self-care is not sufficient for maintaining the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of those who are experiencing stress during the fight for equity; as a result, the concept of community care emerged as an important focus. Community care is the effort to nourish and sustain a community through the cultivation of each other's wellness by individuals, leveraging the relationships between them (Dockray, 2019); it means showing up for each other in the time of need. Community care comes in many forms, such as neighborhood interest groups, communal homes, support groups, and grassroots nonprofits (Dockray, 2019).

Self- and Community Care Can Help Cultivate Each Other

Self- and community care have a reciprocal positive relationship (Audre Lorde Project, n. d.; Brill, 2012; Chandler, 2018; Leach, 2019; Michaeli, 2017); they can help cultivate each other. Chandler (2018) highlights the lineage of this concept through lifting the village philosophy of African ancestors, in that each self-sufficient member of the community works together to form a strong and sustainable community. Although it is clear how vital community care is in ensuring the well-being of the individual as well as the collective, the notion of community care has not taken hold in popular mainstream culture like self-care has (Dockray, 2019). The lack of significance placed on community care in dominant society can be linked to the lack of societal investment in the preservation of the cultures of marginalized communities (Chandler, 2018). Self-care and community care are deeply interconnected, and we need both for healthy and resilient communities (Brill, 2012). In order for a community to thrive, individuals within communities must come together and take care of each other by building relationships, strengthening the foundations of the community, while restoring their own well-being.

Why You Should Care
The Concept of Self-Care Revolves Around Privilege

Troubling the Concept of Self-Care

Self-care may seem inaccessible to individuals on the margins because self-care is generally based in a White, cisgendered, non-disabled, middle class value system that often revolves around access to leisure activities and discretionary time (Ahmed, 2014; Leach, 2019; Leonowicz, n. d.; Michaeli, 2017; Padamsee, 2011). When we think of mainstream notions of self-care, we think of putting ourselves first and treating ourselves to something special—it's about the individual, without consideration of the structural and institutional influences that prevent our wellness in the first place. Ideas that are promoted through media, such as a spa day or yoga retreat, tend to offer solutions that are not options for people who work long hours for insufficient pay (Leach, 2019). In this manner, self-care can seem inaccessible to some

populations. The socio-historical and political causes of pain and injustice are ignored in the "happiness industry" that is obsessed with pampering oneself, as well as emphasizing positivism, meditation, and work-life balance (Michaeli, 2017). Many do not have such privileges to ignore their everyday, marginalized realities.

The commercialization of self-care, and the industry around it, promotes the self-care of privileged groups of people, ranging from the location of many self-care businesses (e.g. day spas), often situated in the perceived safety of upper middle class, White neighborhoods—to the accessibility of transportation to get to these locales (Ahmed, 2014). The welfare of the privileged is valued and promoted, while the well-being and care of marginalized groups of people is seen as less important.

Institutions & Oppressions That Prevent Wellness & Self-Care

Self-care, as it is conventionally framed, isolates marginalized individuals in their struggles, subscribing to a deficit philosophy of these individuals (Padamsee, 2011). The ill health, lack of self- and community care, and failure to thrive is blamed on the sub-par initiative and lack of motivation of individuals, particularly in oppressed communities (Dockray, 2019; Leach, 2019, Michaeli, 2017); little to no attention is paid to the institutions and systemic oppressions that prevent wellness and self-care for marginalized peoples and their communities.

A critical perspective of self-care—that is, perceiving the social forces that constrain individuals and communities within systems of inequities based on their social identities (Duncan-Andrade, 2007)— views self-care as self-preservation and a political act in itself in that it is working against the notion that marginalized groups should not focus on their own care (Lorde, 1988). As

Audre Lorde struggled to survive her entire life as a queer, Black feminist, she noted that her struggle to survive with multiple oppressed identities had always gone against status quo expectations of failure, and even death. Care for herself pushed back against systemic oppressions.

Self-Care and Community Care, Redefined

The notion of self-care as community care has yet to be a mainstream concept (Dockray, 2019), although self-care as community care has been shown to have a wealth of wide-reaching benefits, including decreasing apathy, healing intergenerational trauma, boosting the immune system and energy levels, as well as transforming relationships (Chandler, 2018). By taking care of its members, community care creates a shared sense of responsibility, which in turn promotes individual and community healing and resilience (Brill, 2012). Through self- and community care, marginalized individuals in particular can cultivate their well-being, as well as remind each other of their worth, while challenging the dominant narrative (Audre Lorde Project, n.d.; Lorde, 1988).

Moving Forward
Towards More Inclusive Definitions of Self– & Community Care

Self-Care and Community Care Practices

Critical, inclusive self-care is learning how to live our lives in a way that we are mindful of how we are, knowing ourselves in a way that is holistic – how are we mentally, physically, spiritually, in our relationships and in our emotions. It is the understanding that the personal and the political are together. The personal has to be mindful of the collective, and the collective has to be

mindful of the individual (Chew, Jayaseelan, Vyo'dele, Mukonambi, Mina-Rojas, & Hernández, 2016). Making self-care an act of "political warfare" (in its feminist and social justice sense) involves historicizing and politicizing the "self" and the "care," inevitably placing them in context, thus bringing into the picture the collective and the community. This means grounding self-care (and care in general) in concrete local and global contexts that vary tremendously (Micheali, 2017); therefore, care, wellness, and healing can look very different across cultures, but these ideas are grounded in the value of the safety and well-being of the individual and the community (Michaeli, 2017).

Creating Communities of Care

There are some practices that we can partake in to create communities of care. We can potentially create initiatives in spaces towards building and strengthening networks of like-minded and diverse peoples who can help when community members need it. The spaces that are created do not have to be a physical location--many individuals create online communities of care. Networks of people can include grief counselors, chefs, babysitters and accountants, all who can help at a moment's notice and react to a wide variety of problems (Leach, 2019).

Some other practices that we can do are (Leach, 2019):

- investing in relationships
- reaching out to friends and community members who are struggling
- hosting a regular gathering like a potluck or game night so people can meet face to face
- building relationships
- donating or organizing donations for community members who have experienced a crisis

When we act from a place of asset-based ideologies, we create a culture of caring in which everyone's needs can be met and everyone has something to offer to the community (Leach, 2019). While sustained,

interpersonal acts of kindness are a critical part of community care, there are also more structured versions.

Community care can take a number of forms, including (Dockray, 2019):

- neighborhood groups
- communal homes
- support groups
- community-based

Summary

As you can perceive from this *Equity Digest*, it's time to move toward a more inclusive, accessible conceptualization of self- and community care for the benefit of all. Particularly for marginalized individuals and communities, self- and community care are practices that can oppose oppression and marginalization.

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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