"They're Not Closing This School, We Won't Let Them"

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Abstract

This autoethnography details the story of my personal experience in the field as a social work MSW and Ph.D. student, working as the facilitator of a human rights-based after-school and summer program at an urban high school set for permanent closure in a structurally oppressed community, and my journey to the realization that I was witnessing genocide in the form of structural violence. One purpose in writing this narrative is to provide a social and cultural context to the ubiquity of structurally violent policies, such as closing public schools. This story also testifies to the wealth of strengths that youth possess to resist even the most severe human rights abuses. I also write to show the inextricable political link between individuals and societal structures and systems and to challenge social workers to actively oppose structural violence and its genocidal effects. As I reflect on the genocidal conditions I witnessed, I will at the same time critically consider the profession of social work's role in responding to structural violence, as well as the great potential that our profession has to meaningfully address crises like these.

Keywords Human rights · Structural violence · Genocide · School closures · Structural social work · Autoethnography

Introduction

> The biggest sin is sitting on your a**.
> —Steinem, (2011)

This is the story of my personal experience in the field as a social work MSW and Ph.D. student, working as the facilitator of a human rights-based after-school and summer program at an urban high school set for permanent closure in a structurally oppressed community. It tells the story of my journey to the realization that I was witnessing genocide in the form of structural violence. Structural violence is conceptualized as indirect violence, where there may not be an identifiable perpetrator of violence because it is embedded into the structures of society and manifests as unequal power or life chances (Galtung, 1969). But it is physically and psychologically as toxic as other forms of violence. This story also details the heroism of individuals and communities in resisting this genocide despite

tremendous forces working against them. This narrative is based on my ethnographic field notes and memos, across the span of 18 months while I was an MSW intern.

When searching for a framework with which to tell this narrative, I chose the Human Rights Perspective through the lens of Critical Race Theory, allowing me to engage in "scholarly resistance" by connecting and critiquing the role of power in racialized oppression and human rights abuses of people of color, perpetuated by and throughout society's structures and institutions (Bell, 1995). While reading this narrative, you may find yourself experiencing disbelief that such abusive conditions could exist in the USA, but all the events I describe here are true accounts of my experiences and observations. I suffer from secondary trauma as a result of my work, which can make it difficult to describe the countless human rights abuses that I have witnessed. I have thoroughly disguised all identifying information, in accordance with our code of ethics, preserving the nature of the events and their meaning for me and the participants.

Though this narrative is presented as an autoethnography, my intention is to center the heroism of the youth and community. As a White person, my options with regard to racism and structural violence are either perpetuating it through inaction, white supremacy or its counterpart "white saviorism," or intensive, active solidarity and resistance

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against racism and structural violence (Helms, 1993). If White social workers are to be allies in the struggle for racial justice and against structural violence, white supremacy in all forms must be rejected, including centering whiteness in narratives about racial justice. White social workers must also reject political moderatism. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that the white moderate impedes Black liberation, even more so than white nationalists, as they paternalistically advocate for negative peace, or the "absence of tension" over positive peace, or the "presence of justice" (1992, para. 19).
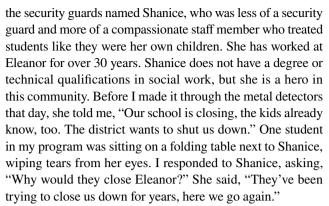
Structural Violence

A snapshot of my daily commute to the high school I worked at, which I have disguised as Eleanor High School, helps paint a picture of the profound differences in resources that afflicted Eleanor's community. Each day while driving to and from Eleanor, I drove on an expressway along a body of water, passing through a northern and southern section of the city. On my commute, in the southside area around Eleanor, I saw primarily African American people, passed one grocery store, zero pharmacies, two unused closed public school buildings, and dozens of unmarked police cars. After about 10 minutes of driving, I merged onto an expressway taking me north, through neighborhoods inhabited largely by White people. Here, I passed massive stadiums, parks, tourist attractions, and beautiful trails where scores of runners and bikers are often outside enjoying the warm summertime sun. Along the body of water, there were yachts, skyscrapers, beautiful public art displays, and luxurious condominiums. The observable inequalities I saw driving to and from Eleanor every day were staggering.

The consequences of this are even more staggering: residents living in one of the wealthiest, whitest neighborhoods in my city live on average to be 90 years old, while residents living near Eleanor, 15 minutes away, live on average to be 60 (Gourevitch et al., 2019). A 30-year difference in life expectancy in the span of eight miles. Many of us learn to accept this as the only possible reality, but as the richest nation in the world, how can we continue to accept this?

"They've Been Trying to Close Us Down for Years, Here We Go Again"

The afternoon that I learned Eleanor was closing will live with me forever. As I parked my car that day, I noticed there were more cars around than usual and I felt an indescribable sense of anxiety as I approached the school—I knew something terrible was going on. I was greeted as usual by one of

the security guards named Shanice, who was less of a security guard and more of a compassionate staff member who treated students like they were her own children. She has worked at Eleanor for over 30 years. Shanice does not have a degree or technical qualifications in social work, but she is a hero in this community. Before I made it through the metal detectors that day, she told me, "Our school is closing, the kids already know, too. The district wants to shut us down." One student in my program was sitting on a folding table next to Shanice, wiping tears from her eyes. I responded to Shanice, asking, "Why would they close Eleanor?" She said, "They've been trying to close us down for years, here we go again."

I was thankful I had a helpful clinical supervisor and someone like Shanice, who I always relied on for her on-the-ground expertise, especially on this day. She told me the students were terrified of what this meant for their futures and to "let them lead and say anything they want during the program, just talk." They began asking us about where they will go to school when Eleanor is closed.[1] They were worried they would be unable to afford public transportation to this new school and if they could not, "Will the new school be too far to walk to? Will it be safe to walk? Will it even be safe to take public transportation?" One student in my program said, "I'll probably just drop out because I won't be safe." I realized that in a city that does not provide low-income students free, safe transportation, depriving students of a community school puts them in life-threatening situations; they sacrifice food and money to pay for transport and risk their lives from violence on their daily trips, just to get an education readily available without life-threatening costs in privileged communities.

I made my way up the staircase to our after-school program classroom. The students silently walked behind me, mourning their school. We entered the classroom, organized the chairs into a circle, and began the session. The after-school program I direct draws from Critical Race Theory, the Human Rights Perspective, and Critical Consciousness Theory, and aims to promote (1) resistance to injustice and resilience against poly-victimization due to poverty, structural and community violence, and maltreatment; (2) positive life trajectories; and (3) forms of community cultural wealth and capital of communities of color, rejecting pathologizing frameworks (Yosso, 2005). We accomplish these aims through interpersonal, critical, and humanistic group learning processes, where youth assume primary responsibility for direction of the group, including the topics they learn about and discuss. Each day is divided into two parts: interpersonal

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[1] These students would have graduated before the district finished building a new school in this community, meaning that they would be required to commute to the next closest school, many of which experience similar structural oppressions as Eleanor.

group learning based on principles of humanistic group therapy, which focuses on promoting emotional and mental wellness and critical participatory group learning based on Critical Civic Inquiry (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017), in which we discuss and reflect on youth-identified social issues meant to promote critical consciousness and discourse. I used these processes to aid and support these students throughout this narrative. My supervisor, who is a faculty member, initiated the program at Eleanor and encouraged my use of the Human Rights Perspective, advocacy, and my understanding of structural violence as genocide. We are fortunate to draw from 14 years of youth feedback to optimize our program. The result is over 90% youth engagement, and youth ratings of our program as highly engaging, safe, interactive, and supportive, as measured by the Youth Program Quality Assessment (Smith & Hohmann, 2005).

We start each session with check-in's, where students discuss positive and negative feelings, memories, or thoughts. This day was different, though. As I was about to initiate the circle processes, one student, Ayah, emphatically said, "They're not closing this school, we won't let them." Another student next to her, Michelle, shook her head, with her arms crossed and said, "They think we're failing." I knew these students and they were anything but failing. Even so, when this student said, "they think we're failing," every other student scoffed and shook their head, disappointed that they were being so negatively stereotyped. Other students began describing what this school meant to them. One student said, "this is where I eat…I eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner here. I am here at seven in the morning and leave at seven at night." Another said, "my Mom and Dad went here. All my friends go here. I work here, I learn here. I basically live here." After the session ended that day, I drove my normal route home past the yacht parties and luxurious condominiums in the wealthier communities where people live 30 years longer, feeling numb and defeated.

"Genocide for Profit"

Eleanor has been educating students for over 100 years and has been institutionalized as an anchor of the community. Schools like Eleanor are multi-purposed institutions that provide an array of functions to communities, including educational services, social services, before and after school programming, multiple daily meals, mental health services, employment, social order, and space to participate in community cultural life (Peshkin, 1978). These human rights are inarguably necessary to human development and living. They are undeniable rights that all humans are entitled to. However, public schools are designated to be failing if they have low enrollment and students have persistently low-test scores. My students read this as their failure. But schools with greater numbers of students of color in segregated

cities are fundamentally set up to fail (Miller, 2020). For example, there is an association between public school closures and the proliferation of charter schools in urban communities of color. This is problematic because charter schools are considered to be less regulated and diverse than neighborhood schools and are criticized for employing teachers with less experience (Marshall, 2017). If you are a student of color in this nation, your public school is more likely to be closed because it has low enrollment, because charter schools are more likely to exist in your neighborhood (Pozen Center for Human Rights, 2013).

This same cycle exists for the second criteria of a failing school: low test scores. When public schools are predominantly funded by property taxes, schools in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods are better funded. With more resources, students' academic performance as measured by standardized test scores improves. In most districts, schools are evaluated with identical standards of enrollment and test scores, yet all schools are not provided with identical resources for meeting those standards. Eleanor severely lacks resources. In fact, according to the 2018 city budget, more capital funds were spent on one high-performing high school, than all public elementary and high schools in the neighborhood that houses Eleanor, combined (Chicago Public Schools, 2018).

The closure of public schools is a city and state-sponsored action, justified by maximizing economic and educational productivity. In my city, amid a wave of school closures preceding Eleanor's closing, 88% of the students whose schools were closed were Black and 94% were low-income (Pozen Center for Human Rights, 2013). The stated intent of a district to practice efficient capitalism by closing over fifty public schools in Black and Brown communities disguises disregard for the importance of enabling marginalized impoverished groups to exit poverty. Trapping people in poverty by refusing to provide them with equitable education and social service resources to counteract the traumas associated with structural poverty is genocidal, as can be seen in the numerous documentations of health disparities (Fredrick, 2018).

It was obvious that Eleanor did have problems; there were no working water fountains, often no paper towels for hand drying, or even toilet paper. Because of lack of staff and resources, the library had to close, students with disabilities could not get timely Individual Educational Plans, and students had to take classes twice. Imagine how school staff felt, trying to run a school under such conditions. What is most telling is that the students and community opposed the closing of their school. Their voices should matter, and this essay amplifies those voices. They wanted equitable resource allocation throughout the district. They wanted support in fixing the problems within the school. They wanted their school to stay open.

I realized I was amidst a human rights crisis: the city's decision to simultaneously close over fifty public schools,

including the high school at which my program occurred. This experience highlights the cruelty embedded within inequitable social and educational policy in the USA. School closures are highly concentrated in communities of color, focusing negative effects on already overburdened communities. Schools can be a symbol of community and inspiration, which is why community families demand infusing resources and competent staff rather than closing schools. The city's closure of over fifty public schools is rooted in an extensive history of racist public policies, which developed and nurtured structural inequality and violence through structural segregation (Anderson, 2007). Drawing from Galtung (1969) and Farmer (2004), it is possible to understand that school closures are economically driven and historically given acts of violence toward low-income, communities of color. Acts of structural violence remove agency and perpetuate generations of suffering by depriving communities of human rights critical to healthy development and sustainable economic health. When public schools close, a community loses an accessible resource that guaranteed many human rights.

This structurally violent policy of closing schools is a form of genocide, as defined by the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Kunz, 1949). This convention defined genocide as, "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group
(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group
(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group

The We Charge Genocide petition, first authored in 1951 and then taken up again recently, posited that the USA is committing the crime of genocide against African Americans. As stated in We Charge Genocide (Patterson, 1952), just because genocide does not succeed in the total destruction of a race of people does not mean it is not happening. Intent in the definition of genocide needs to be reconceptualized to consider Galtung's (1969) notion that violence is embedded into the structures of society and may not have an identifiable perpetrator. Genocide comes in many forms and it is no less genocidal, by definition, to cause serious bodily or mental harm to members of a group by neglect and deprivation of fundamental human

needs through public school closures than it is to kill members of the group.

The We Charge Genocide petition stated, "…the oppressed Negro citizens of the United States, segregated, discriminated against and long the target of violence, suffer from genocide as the result of consistent, conscious, unified policies of every branch of government" (Genocide, 1951). The petition argued that the foundation of this genocide is economic: "It is genocide for profit." They write that the intricate structure of society's institutions enforces an oppression that guarantees profit. I argue that we can see We Charge Genocide's foundational argument in the contemporary closure of public schools across the USA. Specifically, the unelected school board's rationale for closing over fifty schools, four of which were in the same neighborhood as Eleanor, was twofold: low test scores and "underutilization." There were five times as many students applying for our after-school program as we could accept: there would have been plenty of utilization of community school services, which did not exist elsewhere within walking distance in that community.

Social death is also an aspect of genocide that is relevant to school closures. Social death as an element of genocide is characterized by a loss of social vitality, thereby a loss of identity (Card, 2003). Social vitality provides identity that gives meaning to life and exists through inter-generational, contemporary relationships, and community. Losing social vitality is a loss of identity and can result in a loss of meaning for existence (Card, 2003), long associated with despair. Since public schools are multi-functional and provide a sense of individual and community identity, closing over fifty schools in Black and Brown neighborhoods at once can result in mass social death. Coupling social death next to physical death at the center of genocide takes the focus off of the individual and puts it on the relationships that make up communities (Card, 2003). When school closings concentrated in Black and Brown communities are considered nationally, as opposed to regionally, it becomes clear that this violence is structural and genocidal (Ahmed, 2007).

Marcus: "Death is Creeping Closer-and-Closer to Me"

The day after I learned about Eleanor's closure was cold and raining, which reflected my mood. The school's closure was weighing on my mind, but I was still ready to support the students in any way I could. At the start of our session, a student named Marcus expressed his concern for the violence that was sure to follow the closure of Eleanor. When I first met him a year before, he refused to say more than a few sentences each day for several months straight, yet never missed a session. He spoke more when it was just him and me talking and over time, he became more and more comfortable

opening up about the trauma he was experiencing. On that day, he told me his brother had been killed the night before. He said he feared being killed more than anything, that he only left his house to go to school and back because as he said, "death is creeping closer-and-closer to me, I know it's coming for me." Marcus and I talked for about 2 hours after the session, until the school closed. It was late and dark out, so I drove him home, giving us a few more moments to process his brother's passing.[2]

Regarding transferring schools, Marcus told the group, "people are going to get killed. You can't walk down [street name] if you're from here. I don't have money to get on the bus every day, so what are we supposed to do?" This broke my heart. I could not comprehend why children had to pay for public transportation or how the city could accept conditions where students are killed while traveling to school. I knew it was not a coincidence that this school, along with the other nearby schools, had zero white students. This is the nature of structural violence.

Marcus was right. Students whose schools were closed face an increased risk for violence. The Midwest Coalition for Human Rights (2013) released a memo detailing how a string of school closings in a Midwestern city compromised the human rights of children. They wrote that children have the right to be free from violence and the right to life and that closing schools increases children's risk of violent victimization because students sacrifice food for transportation and have to cross gang lines to get to new schools. The notion that closing schools is sound financial stewardship is dangerously naïve and fiscally irresponsible. City, state, and federal costs only go up when children are traumatized, maimed, and disabled by shootings.

Derrick: "I Am All by Myself Here"

It was a new week and I drove to Eleanor with renewed energy. The impending disaster of closing this school was still in the back of my head, but I kept thinking about the vigor that Ayah had last week when we learned about the closure. During our session this day, Ayah told me that her community is organizing to prevent Eleanor from closing. She said most of the students and their families were involved and had plans to protest at the district's headquarters and the Mayor's residence. I later found out the key organizers of this were Eleanor alumni whose children currently attended the school. A few students expressed apathy, but Ayah stood up and made a speech that resembled a monologue from an Oscar winning movie. She told everyone that this is not just

about closing this school. Rather, it was about preserving their lives and histories. She said, "they shut my elementary school down before, our high school today, and it will be our lives next." I saw the inspiration and hope grow on the students' faces and I am sure Ayah saw it grow on mine, too.

After the session, Shanice asked me to speak with a student who was not enrolled in my program, named Derrick. Shanice said that he used expletives during class because he was being bullied and his teacher wanted Derrick suspended. I asked Shanice if Derrick and I could speak alone and we started walking down the hall together. He said that he was diagnosed with autism when he was much younger. He had been forced to attend Eleanor by the school system's special education team, even though Eleanor did not have the resources to meet his Individual Educational Plan. Later, I learned his parents did not know it was within their legal rights to protest the transfer. I asked Derrick if he was receiving any special education services or accommodations at Eleanor and he broke down crying, saying, "No. I am all by myself here." He told me that he hated Eleanor because it was so unlike his old school. An excerpt from my field notes this day state that:

> This week, one of my clients at Eleanor told me he felt neglected by the school because he is persistently cold, thirsty, and hungry because most of the water fountains do not work, nor does the furnace, and that they do not offer extra food at lunch. He said Eleanor does not offer services like special education classes, anger management assistance, and access to a social worker. Derrick went on to say he enjoys reading books but is unsafe to travel to the public library and the library at Eleanor was 'chained-up.' I asked him why they would not be allowed in the library and he said because the roof caved in and he was told it is not safe to be in there. To my knowledge, the roof was never fixed.

I heard Derrick's "all by myself" as his plea for help. I told Derrick that I would help him, and I saw him regularly twice a week throughout my internship. He progressively became more connected, improved his anger management, and was more able to study. I wondered if his diagnosis of autism was correct and sought to correct it as I was concerned about how this additional stigma of an untreatable diagnosis would follow him. I realized how powerful a social work intervention could be.

I saw students experience other forms of human rights abuses: security guards, hired as protective contractors, physically assaulted students. Once, as I was walking up the stairs to the second floor of Eleanor, I saw a security guard grab a student by the neck, lift him up with one hand, and slam his head against a locker. A call to the state child welfare agency resulted in no action. Students and staff told me that when administrators at Eleanor became aware of a potential fight through social media or if students were caught fighting, staff threw both students inside of an empty

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[2] We have permission from the university to drive students home when we believe their safety is at risk.

classroom, locked the door, and let them fight until the issue was resolved. I remember vividly being told by Ayah that their last principal got into a physical fight with a pregnant student. The student was suspended and transferred schools. There is no justification for acts like this, but after years of being beat down by structurally violent policies, it is easy to imagine the sense of desperate rage the security staff and principal could feel.

Children should not have to endure the kind of abuse that Eleanor students did. But ultimately, the malfeasance is the responsibility of the school district, policymakers, and voters who do not feel responsible for perpetuating the deplorable conditions forced upon their neighbors. Students at Eleanor, including those like Derrick in need of special education services, told me that across 3 years, they had never seen a psychologist or a social worker. Shanice told me that the person charged with being their social worker was also a teacher and case manager, whose credentials to serve traumatized youth were uncertain. One of my reflexive memos state:

> I've learned that a psychologist has not been present in years and the social worker is actually a teacher, with no IEP follow-up. Eleanor has the highest homicide rate in the district and every student I know has had someone they loved murdered. One of my clients' fathers died last week and I am counseling two others about their parents being murdered within the last two weeks. To my knowledge, our program is Eleanor's only mental health service provider, as the principal gave us permission to use a classroom during the day. We will be available for scheduled and drop-in counseling services four days per week, from 8:00am-6:00 pm. I am happy this worked, because Eleanor is being abandoned in every other way.

The trauma experienced by Eleanor's students is far from unique. Researchers have known for years that the great majority of urban youth in high-poverty communities of color experience multiple traumatic events (Finkelhor et al., 2007) and lack the therapeutic resources to remedy those traumas. Why were our social work interns, neither sought after nor formally endorsed by the school district, the only ones helping?

Within the next few weeks, this story took a hopeful turn. Ayah and the other organizers took action. Shortly after she made her speech during the program, Ayah and another student from my program, Ciara, led a student sit-in, where all students left their classroom during the day to sit in the hall to protest the closure. Ciara was holding a megaphone, leading her peers in a chant. Ayah was at the opposite end of the hallway, aiding Ciara's efforts. Photos of this protest were circulated by the media, which sparked a broader movement to prevent the closure. Ayah and Ciara were my clients, who met with me weekly for individual supportive therapeutic services.

Over the course of this school year, I saw incredible growth in both students, and I felt like I was making a difference.

Shortly after Ayah and Ciara led the sit-in, a group of parents and students marched on the Mayor's house. They protested the decision to close Eleanor on the sidewalk in front of the Mayor's multi-million-dollar house, in a neighborhood where children are able to walk to one of the top-ranking high schools in the nation. Families in Eleanor's community wanted the same resources as the Mayor's neighbors had to solve Eleanor's challenges. These families were following a tradition: recently, parents staged a hunger strike, demanding the re-opening of a closed community high school in a similarly deprived community of color. It took 34 days and jeopardizing their health for the Mayor and school district to relent to this community's desires and re-open the school (Perez, 2015).

Isaiah: "He Just Told Us He Needed Help and Didn't Know What to Do"

Winter break followed shortly after this protest. One cold, snowy day in December, I was working in a cafe, thinking about Ayah, Marcus, and Derrick, feeling frustrated that I was three blocks from the high school which receives more district funding than every public school in Eleanor's neighborhood. My phone rang, and I saw Shanice's name appear on my screen. I answered and she said, "Isaiah just showed up to Eleanor, he wasn't wearing a coat or shoes. He just told us he needed help and didn't know what to do." The following is an excerpt from my field notes I took later that day:

> A student in my program walked over twenty blocks from his home to Eleanor without shoes or a coat on. He has a learning and cognitive disability. He is also a foster child. His foster siblings take his paychecks, food, and cell phone. Shanice said his family is being evicted from their home in a few weeks. He is also persistently hungry. He is 20 years old, so he has 10 more months in the foster system, thus this becomes an emergency. His caseworker is not interested in a working relationship. I am deeply concerned that he will fall through the safety net because there seems to be a massive hole when it comes to providing care for adults with disabilities in the foster system.

Shanice went on to say that she and the principal gave Isaiah cash they had with them, a total of about sixty dollars and coats and shoes they keep at the school for emergencies. The principal took Isaiah to get food and warm clothes at the store. Shanice said she just wanted to let me know since his phone was stolen and Isaiah trusted me as his social worker. I thanked her for telling me, and hung up the phone,

once again in a state of disbelief, there were no aids or protections in place for Isaiah. So, he went to Eleanor in his time of need, because he knew he could count on the staff to care for him. And people say this school is *failing*? It was all Isaiah had. I stared out the window, mesmerized by the dense snow. Our program staff helped Isaiah, often a few interns at a time, to address his diverse needs. He got a steady job, an apartment of his own, and, while working, ran into one of his interns at her graduation, greeting her with a hug of congratulations.

"We Won…For Now"

A week after the protest, students and their families held a sit-in at the district's headquarters. This was heavily covered by media and I felt hopeful about the political pressure being applied. I was eager to resume our after-school program. That Monday, I walked into the building and was joyfully greeted by Shanice. She was always at Eleanor, making the impact dreamed about by many social work students entering the profession. I realized I was learning how to be a social worker from my clients and Shanice, that this work is less a job than it is a lifestyle. I walked up to the classroom and encountered the principal, who told me the school received funds from the district to employ all students in an after-school job. I was thrilled to hear about this opportunity, but also wondered how this would impact attendance in our after-school program. I walked in our room, was greeted by Ayah, Marcus, and Ciara who said they preferred our program, despite our lower stipend. They told me that our after-school program was the only place they could be themselves and speak openly without judgment. I asked them what the other job was, and they said all the students are being paid to empty out every room in the building to prepare for its permanent closure, or as Ayah said, "…it's like digging our own graves." After a couple days, we were back to our program capacity, as students preferred our program.

A few more weeks passed, and students were still disturbed by the prospect of attending a different school in the fall. But one particular Thursday marked another turning point. I entered through the doors at Eleanor and saw Ayah sitting on a table, talking with a few of her peers. She had the widest, proudest smile on her face and before I could greet her, she said, "We won." I asked, "What did we win?" She told me that the district had reversed their decision to close Eleanor. At first, I thought she was joking, but I saw her smile get somehow bigger and I knew at that moment it was real. Shanice walked toward us and asked me if I heard the news. Ayah abruptly said, "I told him already that we won…for now." I asked her what she meant by, "for now," and Shanice said the district has delayed the closure for a few years until all of the current students graduate. Ayah told Shanice and me that the students will not give up and they plan to keep the school open permanently.

The Eleanor community deserves recognition for this victory. The community also taught me something invaluable and redefined me as a social worker. They demonstrated the power of youth standing up for their human rights. I feel transformed as a human by their actions, dedicated to human rights.

Challenging Our Profession to Take on Genocide

Potentially, human rights values are the soul of the social work profession. The International Federation of Social Workers (2012) writes, "The social work profession, through historical and empirical evidence, is convinced that the achievement of human rights for all people is a fundamental prerequisite for a caring world and the survival of the human race." Social workers and social work students are, therefore, potentially expert human rights advocates and activists.

One of contemporary US social work's problems is that the conditions of deep poverty are so horrifying that people react by distancing themselves. It is understandable that people fear being shot at or victimized while trying to do their job. But a non-responsive, overly bureaucratized social work profession lacks the flexibility to respond to those afflicted by structural violence, like the Isaiah's of the world, when they show up shoeless, coatless, and starving in a snowstorm, no longer a formal client but simply a fellow human being. There are no manuals or randomized controlled trials documenting how the Ayah's of the world can stage sit-downs and picket the Mayor's house, although at least this autoethnography offers a form of evidence that it works.

Approaching a systemic problem like structural violence can seem daunting because its root causes are multifaceted. It is therefore difficult to identify one broad-sweeping solution for such a problem. While it is tempting to create a blueprint of policy recommendations, I will instead discuss specific recommendations that focus on facets of structural violence experienced by the youth in my narrative.

First, a viable alternative to closing a public school is converting it into a community school, which is defined as a school improvement strategy in which "schools partner with community agencies and local government to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement" (Coalition for Community Schools, 2021). Generally, most community schools exhibit four features: integrated student supports, expanded learning and opportunities, family and community engagement, and collaborative leadership and practices (Oakes et al., 2017). The National Education Policy Center concluded that community schools are an effective, comprehensive intervention in schools where structural racism and poverty are barriers to living and learning (Oakes et al., 2017).

Social workers are potentially key personnel in preventing public school closures. They can expand their understanding of practice to include macro-level issues and organize school staff, parents, and students to push their district to choose a community school conversion over closure (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2019). They can advocate for reallocating public funds to more funding for community schools, social services, and free public transportation for public school students. Additionally, a broader partnership between schools of social work and public-school districts would be mutually beneficial. I was the only social worker or social work student present in Eleanor High School for years, despite being just minutes from many top-ranking schools of social work.

Finally, while the evidence of alternatives to school closures are important, officials' policy decisions need to be driven by the voices of those affected by the policy. Social workers can promote this by engaging parents and students as co-researchers in participatory action research, an approach to research and knowledge production that seeks to transform unjust systems by studying and taking action on issues most relevant to the community member co-researchers (Gonell et al., 2020). Understanding that marginalization and school closures are forms of genocide gives social workers a base for advocacy and developing policies and practices to undercut structural violence.

The experiences that I described reinforce the notion that social work is political, and also that mental health care for polyvictimized youth, services for students with disabilities, clean water, and access to community schools with basic resources are human rights. Addressing the genocide caused by structural violence requires that we all make it a life commitment, not just a job, like Shanice and others I did not have space to describe here.

Many social work students come to the profession with the hope of igniting social justice. However, all too often they graduate without knowing clients like Ayah, Ciara, Derrick, or Marcus who can show them the true potential of social work. Too many social work students graduate still afraid and closed off from people the most hurt by structural violence because their teachers do not build the necessary education-in-action bridges for their students. How will social work students learn to combat structural violence if their teachers cannot show them? How can social work fail to take on structural violence and racism as the grand challenge of social work? Why am I, still a student of social work, the only social worker present during Eleanor's crisis? How could it be that mine was the only internship at Eleanor, or anywhere near it, when a genocide was and still is occurring in communities within 10 minutes of three top-ranked schools of social work? How will social work students learn to combat structural violence if their teachers and curricula avoid it?

While reflecting on my field experiences in an autoethnography can feel retraumatizing, it is important to me that I share my narrative in order to demonstrate the brutality of structural violence, such as school closures, as well as the wealth of strengths youth possess to resist even the most severe human rights abuses. It is important to provide a corrective narrative about youth of color living in structurally marginalized communities, because so much of what is said about these youth is distorted. I chose to present this narrative in the form of an autoethnography because this method allows me to discuss a multifaceted construct such as structural violence in a highly contextualized way not available in other research methods. One of the advantages of writing an autoethnography is that there is no pretense of neutrality: it is my "interpretation of an interpreted experience" (Witkin, p. 11, 2014). For full transparency (Milner IV, 2007), I am white and grew up with sensitivity to poverty and human rights, living paycheck-to-paycheck in a family of seven. While I struggle with the oppressive realities of capitalism, I will never be oppressed because of my race or sex and will have opportunities due to the privileges associated with my identities.

As a child, I remember getting up before sunrise to deliver newspapers with my parents for 13 cents per paper, and thinking, "both of you already have jobs, why are we doing this?" I learned that "working hard" does not actually afford one a college education, healthcare, or even basic human rights, like electricity and running water. Experiences with poverty led me to study sociology, as a first-generation college-and then graduate student. Embedded in dominant narratives and culture in the USA is the notion that the "American Dream" is attainable for every citizen. I learned that this is inaccurate, which reflects one of my Dad's mottos, "Life's not fair, get used to it." Perhaps unknowingly, he instilled in me the view that a meritocracy was a myth. Even as I got older, poverty was omnipresent. We never went hungry, but I remember looking for quarters on the ground at the mall when I was 16 because I could not afford a 79¢ taco. Even now, I am struggling with over $120,000 of student loan debt to my own government, having to steal basic necessities, like groceries, just to survive.

The USA cannot be a leader of human rights in the world as long as there is pervasive acceptance of genocidal conditions in low-income communities of color. Few people feel responsible, so few people outside of the afflicted communities take responsibility for changing structural violence, so the malevolent conditions persist and get worse. Social workers should not be absent, but rather lead the fight against it with public education that structural violence can be overcome, and with solidarity and presence in afflicted communities.

Epilogue

I am writing this paper during an emergency shelter-in-place order due to the COVID-19 outbreak. I am surrounded by terrifying events, including sick family members and a sister working on the frontlines as a nurse in the intensive care unit, who described

her hospital as a war zone. I am frightened for the youth in my program and their families, many of whom are also working on the frontlines. Youth I know are being forced to work without hazard pay, hand sanitizer, or masks at grocery chains and restaurants. COVID-19 disproportionately affects low-income communities of color (Brooks, 2020), is rampant in jails and institutions for disabled persons, and I am not surprised. This genocidal structural violence is entirely predictable. I am reflecting on the notion of structural violence, feeling infuriated by our President and Congress' callous exacerbations of genocidal structural violence through neglect, hostility, and policies that aggravate rather than ameliorate life-threatening deprivations.

In the USA, being able to live and thrive is dependent on the class and race in which one is born. The pandemic brings it home: our clients are not the only ones affected by policy and politics. Everyone lives in the political arena. I often hear practitioners use language that reinforces a perceived separation between us and our clients. We have much more in common with them than we do with an elite political class of policymakers who are resigned to poverty as some unfixable problem, who act as though massive deaths from the pandemic were unavoidable when they could have been prevented, starve our nation's children, and close our public schools without listening to students and their families. Structural violence and poverty have many causes. These many causes can mean we have even more pathways to make a difference. We only undermine our mission if we hide in a bureaucratized version of our profession that does not take structural violence seriously enough to make combatting it a grand challenge. The strengths of the youth I know demonstrate poverty need not be inevitable, solidarity can combat structural violence, and caring can change lives.

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