REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF CULTURE KEEPERS: A YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT/SCHOOL CLIMATE INITIATIVE

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A Project Presented to
The Faculty of Humboldt State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

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May 2016
Abstract

REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT OF CULTURE KEEPERS: A YOUTH DEVELOPMENT/SCHOOL CLIMATE INITIATIVE
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This assessment reflects on key Jenn Rader learnings from the pilot year of the Culture Keepers (CKs), a youth leadership/school climate initiative designed to address the marginalization of young people of color on a diverse urban public high school campus.

Findings are organized around themes and inform recommendations for school communities looking to respond to the marginalization and subsequent poor academic performance of students of color. This report provides a theoretical context for the work, an analysis of student and staff reflections on their participation and an outline of the institutional collaboration among health center, community partner, Nayana Institute (a pseudonym) staff, teachers and school administrators. The intention driving this research is to inspire and support school communities to initiate and sustain student centered efforts that empower youth leaders, build capacity among their peers, and have a positive impact on school culture in diverse urban school communities.
Acknowledgements

A deep bow to Yvonne Doble, Jamie Jensen and Yatiel Owens, all of whom deeply understand the challenges facing distance learning students, and go the extra ten miles to give us the crazy amazing support and encouragement we need to keep the faith semester after semester. My HSU MSW cohort have been my greatest teachers and have provided support, counsel and inspiration since we began this journey together three and half years ago. My beloved colleagues at the James Morehouse Project challenge, teach and guide me week after month after year; I wake up every morning grateful that I get to work with them. Our Culture Keeper cohort have been a great joy for me this year and have shown me over and over again the power and beauty of this work. And finally, for Barb, Elijah and Ben, words cannot capture all that I hold in my heart for you, my wife and dearest boys. You are my oxygen, my energy, all that carries me onward always.
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Introduction

This introduction sets the context for an innovative youth leadership/school climate initiative, the Culture Keepers, at Ellis Clayton High School (pseudonym), a diverse, urban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. In 2015-2016, Ellis Clayton High School (ECHS) had an enrollment of 1,420 students; 20% Asian, 27% Latino, 33% African American, 17% white and 3% other. Twelve percent of students were English Language Learners (ELL) and 52% qualified for free and reduced lunch (PowerSchool).

The Culture Keepers grew out of a three year intensive effort to improve the ECHS school climate. Because this work took shape within a larger commitment to restorative practices, dynamic mindfulness and positive youth development I reference relevant literature from each of these three fields. I also locate the Culture Keepers within the specific context of ECHS since the fall of 2012 in an effort to contextualize any learnings from the Culture Keepers.

In addition to being a Masters student in Social Work at HSU, I am a 20 year faculty member of ECHS. I was a full-time social studies teacher when I founded the Student Health Center (a pseudonym) in 1998. I continued part-time in the classroom until 2005, when I stepped out of the classroom to devote myself fully to the growing work of the Student Health Center (SHC). In my role with the SHC, I have collaborated closely with school administrators and teacher leaders in efforts to improve our school climate over a number of years.
Climate Team Context

In 2010, ECHS was one of 58 schools throughout California to receive a Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant from the US Department of Education. This three-year grant (implemented in the fall of 2012) targeted California high schools with the greatest needs across multiple areas of school climate, e.g. school safety and bullying, substance abuse, positive relationships, student engagement, and other learning supports (CA Department of Education). ECHS was selected for participation in the S3 program based on data gathered the previous academic school year from the California Healthy Kids Survey and the California School Climate Survey. These surveys highlighted the need for ECHS to more effectively address disruptive behavior and to strengthen respectful and caring relationships on campus (California Healthy Kids Survey Report 2011-2012).

During the term of the S3 grant, under the leadership of a new young principal, a School Climate Team was formed to identify and address key issues impacting school climate campus wide. Initial Climate Team participants included the principal, myself, (the SHC director), the S3 teacher coordinator and an assistant principal. In light of the needs highlighted in the previously cited surveys, the Climate Team prioritized, as its first large-scale initiative, the implementation of a restorative justice (RJ) infrastructure on campus. A community partner, Youth First (a pseudonym) funded through the S3 grant, was enlisted as an expert partner to guide RJ implementation in 2012-2013.
Restorative Justice

While there is no conclusive definition of restorative justice, there is broad agreement that, in its current forms, RJ is resonant with indigenous practices (e.g. circle practices in First Nations communities in Canada, conferencing among Maori in New Zealand), and stands in contrast to dominant criminal justice models that place wrong-doers in relationship to state authority and not the victim who was harmed, and exclude victims from the “justice” process (Abel, 1982; Daly, 1998). RJ prioritizes repairing harm in relationships and includes offenders as deserving of community support; it takes a reintegrative stance toward wrong-doing rather than a punitive one (Daly, 1998, Karp and Breslin, 2011).

Today, there are a broad range of models, programs and initiatives that all lay claim to fundamental tenets of RJ: harm takes place within a community and a community is weakened when its members’ relationships are harmed; a response to harm must include both the perpetrator and the victim and address the needs and obligations of all affected. These core assertions have, since the 1980s, given rise to a wide variety of projects and initiatives around the globe, primarily in criminal justice or community based settings (Van Ness and Heetderks Strong, 2014)

Restorative Justice and Schools

Traditional research around school failure invariably locates the “failure” in the bodies of individual students, families and communities of immigrants, the poor and
people of color rather than our public schools (Ryan, 1965, Solorzano and Yosso, 2001). Critical Race Theorists and others disrupt this discourse by shifting the burden from these individuals and communities to our public schools that serve them, asking in broad terms, “How do our schools function to exclude certain populations from their right to a public education?” (Yosso, 2005).

In a comprehensive study of disciplinary practices in California, Freedberg and Chavez (2012) attempted to understand and address the disproportionate rate of suspensions for African American and Latino boys in California schools. Their study made vivid the connection between “zero tolerance” policies first implemented widely in the 1990s, and high rates of suspension among youth of color. It was in this context, as an alternative to disciplinary policies that had a devastating disproportionate impact on youth of color, that Restorative Justice practices began to take root in public schools (Karp & Breslin, 2011, APA, 2008).

Restorative Justice emerged as a response to the failure of zero-tolerance policies that excluded disproportionate numbers of young people of color from school communities, fostered the school to prison pipeline and replicated the punitive and exclusionary modes of incarceration in our public schools (APA, 2008). Preliminary research on RJ practices in school settings showed a potential to improve school climate, increase school connectedness and sharply reduce school suspensions (Schiff, 2013, Morrison, 2011).
Positive Youth Development

Resting on earlier research done by Bonnie Benard and others on resilience and developmental assets (Benard, 1991 and 2002), positive youth development (PYD) challenges the dominant narrative that viewed youth as “at risk” for dangerous or destructive behaviors or problems to be fixed, and instead sees youth as a positive resource (Lerner, 2005). PYD is “an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools… recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths” (Youth.Gov, n.d.).

The PYD lens focuses youth development efforts on building skills and competencies, rather than simply preventing substance abuse or other harmful behaviors. Too, PDY recognizes that young people develop within an environmental context. Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) identified the “five C’s of PYD, competence, confidence, character, connection and caring,” all of which pre-suppose, in a school setting, an active and robust relationship between and among young people and the adults in the school community. Research has highlighted the importance of these “developmental relationships,” linking them to a range of positive outcomes (The Search Institute). The PYD model insists that a critical component supporting healthy development for young people is a close relationship with caring adults (Lerner, 2005, Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). In addition, PYD underlines the need for young people to be involved with “skill-
building activities” and to have “opportunities for participation in and leadership of community based activities” (Lerner, 2005). These criteria and conclusions are aligned with research on school connectedness, an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (Blum, 2005). PYD and its concomitant asset, school connectedness, mitigate against social isolation, lack of safety in school, and the marginalization of large sectors of the school population.

**Dynamic Mindfulness**

Our decision to include dynamic mindfulness was impelled by Saleebey’s (1992), assertion that “one’s relationship to the outside world is always mediated by the body.” Many of our young people are unable to work skillfully with strong emotions, are disabled when stress takes hold in their bodies or when, as a function of early childhood trauma, they are unable to self-regulate in ways that are adaptive to the demands of a classroom environment. Dynamic mindfulness includes both breathing and movement using techniques borrowed and adapted from yoga and meditation practices. School based research (Frank et al, 2014) has shown that after regular participation in the practice of dynamic mindfulness, "Students showed lower levels of perceived stress and greater levels of self-control, school engagement, emotional awareness, distress tolerance and altered attitude towards violence."
Pilot Year Examination

The goal of this research was to examine the pilot year implementation of the Culture Keepers through a range of lenses. These included: CK youth voices, via anonymous formative assessments, participant observation of Climate Team meetings, review of CK activities through activity logs and anonymous evaluations by teachers and students who participated in CK interventions.

My intention was to track the efficacy of the Culture Keepers as a school climate intervention. There has been local interest in the work of the Culture Keepers from other schools looking to respond to the marginalization and subsequent poor academic performance of students of color. I hope that this work, grounded in the values and commitments that inform positive youth development and restorative practices, will inspire others to initiate and sustain youth centered efforts to undermine the effects of systemic racism on youth of color in ways that empower youth leaders, build capacity among their peers, and have a positive impact on school culture in diverse urban school communities.

The Genesis of Culture Keepers

It’s important to consider the constellation of conditions that coalesced to give rise to the Culture Keepers.
**Historical Context: 2012-2015:**

Under the leadership of our community partner, Youth First, initial efforts in 2012-2013 to implement Restorative Justice (RJ) practices were in turn, inspiring, frustrating and confusing. Teachers, after participating in an intensive two day introduction to RJ, were inspired and eager to be a part of using RJ to strengthen a positive school climate, but were unclear about their role in that unfolding process. Universal tier 3 practices to build strong classroom communities (e.g. forming classroom agreements, having regular classroom check-ins, using restorative inquiry to problem solve classroom challenges or more deeply understand content) were not formally introduced, taught or supported, and teachers struggled to understand how they would participate in the more intensive tier one and tier two interventions (e.g. harm repair circles, reintegration circles and circles of support) for students at risk for failure or facing disciplinary action in their classes.

RJ was largely understood in its more limited role of facilitating the positive repair of a specific harm between parties; our community partner failed to communicate to school staff the broader potential of restorative practices to shift culture toward inclusivity and belonging through a broad array of practices, only a portion of which are formal circles designed to address specific harms. The lead teacher charged with facilitating the tier one and tier two interventions struggled to take-on the formidable logistical challenges of scheduling and facilitating an ambitious calendar of circles each requiring the participation of multiple school staff and ongoing follow up. School staff were confused if the new RJ practices entirely replaced the old punitive protocols around detentions and suspensions or if there would somehow be a blending of the old and new.
By the spring of 2014, our community partner’s leadership had receded. RJ had made meaningful, but uneven, inroads across campus. The principal and two assistant principals consistently used restorative practices in their encounters with young people, a scattered group of teachers regularly used tier three practices to build strong classroom communities, and the S3 teacher lead, working with JMP staff and school guidance counselors, facilitated circles of support each week. While these inroads were meaningful, the school fell far short of the initial goal of comprehensive implementation of RJ practices across the three tiers.

One significant strand of RJ, restorative inquiry, did take root, especially among our school administrators on the front-lines of the disciplinary process. These school administrators integrated restorative inquiry into their regular practice with young people. This approach largely replaced the earlier idea that all restorative work happened in formal circles. Restorative inquiry (e.g., What were you thinking at the time? Who was harmed? How can you make it better?) creates a reflective space for young people to build capacity to be accountable for their behavior and to problem-solve solutions in partnership with a caring adult. While still holding roughly 1 harm-repair circle a week, the more informal restorative inquiry had become a robust aspect of our restorative practice work by the spring of 2014.
Restorative inquiry carried forward the key principles of RJ (i.e., it is inclusive, capacity building and youth centered), in a less resource intensive, more sustainable set of practices than formal circles. This success, and our administrators’ own growing confidence with this practice, would impel restorative inquiry to be a key component of our design of the Culture Keepers initiative.

In 2014-2015, the Climate Team assessed the uneven success of RJ implementation and came to the conclusion that while formal RJ practices (e.g. harm repair and re-integration circles) are important and necessary, they are resource intensive and cannot, by themselves, be the core of our RJ work at ECHS. Informed by the insight, “[w]e have to change our thinking from modalities of punishment to modalities of transformation and change” (Patterson, 2012), the Climate Team charged itself with a new initiative: create a youth-based project to respond to student and teacher needs to both strengthen the capacity of individuals to work with conflict and transform the school community more broadly. This new youth-based project would become the Culture Keepers.

**Culture Keepers Program Design:**

The Culture Keepers initiative is located at the nexus of PYD, dynamic mindfulness and restorative practices. In response to the uneven success of RJ implementation, the Climate Team was searching for a strategy that could be a best practice PYD project for the youth CK participants, AND utilize restorative and mindfulness practices to strengthen the school climate through non-punitive, relationship-
centered interventions with young people functioning on the margins of their classroom and the school community. These interventions would connect CKs with their peers in structured, informal encounters that encouraged capacity building and learning new skills in the context of peer-to-peer support.

Recognizing that many of the challenging behaviors driving disciplinary action and school failure are rooted in trauma and its sequelae, the Climate Team committed to including a program component that would support our CKs to introduce individual students and classrooms to effective tools for strengthening their capacity to self-regulate and manage stress. ECHS had an existing relationship with the Nayana Institute and was eager to capitalize on this partnership to bring dynamic mindfulness practices to classrooms and individual students across campus.

As the planning took shape, it became clear that this work required high-level collaboration and risk-taking by a range of adult actors at school: administrators, SHC staff and teachers would all have to support direct participation of CKs in arenas that had always been closed off to student participation—discipline, student support and the classroom learning environment, each of which is a key component of our overall school climate.

In light of the above, the Climate Team committed to training and supporting CKs to engage with the following activities:

- **Walk-and-Talks**: a CK housed in the SHC would respond to a teacher’s call to come to the classroom to connect with a disruptive or disengaged student on a “walk-and-talk,” a 10-15 minute restorative inquiry intervention to create a space
for young people to reflect, calm down and be able to re-enter the classroom community in a positive way.

- One-on-one mentoring: CKs would be matched with a peer who is struggling with organization or academic work by pushing into classrooms or working 1:1 with student peers in the SHC.

- Peer Mediation: CKs would partner with school administrators to mediate peer conflicts to avert disciplinary consequences for student participants.

- Dynamic Mindfulness: CKs would partner with John Respiro (a pseudonym), our Nayana Institute staff partner, to lead dynamic mindfulness practice in classrooms 2-3 times/week.

- Schoolwide campaigns: CKs would partner with SHC staff/interns to lead an awareness campaign around a CK identified school climate issue. This could include faculty presentations, classroom workshops and/or other events and activities on campus.
Methodology

Chilisa’s (2012) challenge to researchers to be “a transformative healer with responsibilities to others” guided this research. The “others,” in this instance, were the young people, school staff and faculty with whom I am in community at ECHS. I am a twenty year faculty member at the high school. I have been privileged to have had the “prolonged and substantial engagement” with research participants Chilisa names as essential in establishing the necessary trust and rapport between the researcher and research participants. The young people and the adult staff facilitators of the CKs shared a commitment to directly address and improve the school experience of those on the margins of our school community, largely African American and Latino young people.

This research is informed by Critical Race Theory’s invitation to both the researcher and the research participants to take a stand in service of their values; to eschew an attachment to “objectivity,” and instead to actively disrupt a system that manufactures school failure for large numbers of black and brown youth (Ladson-Billings, 2000). As almost all young people of color themselves (13 of 14 students), the CKs were well positioned to support a shift in the discourse that so overwhelmingly locates the responsibility for school failure on young people of color themselves. This research and the voices that inform it are an effort to shift our gaze to the role that larger systems (e.g. the school disciplinary apparatus in and out of the classroom) play in
manufacturing marginalization and school failure for large numbers of black and brown youth (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology well aligned with Critical Race Theory (CRT); like CRT autoethnography challenges the conventional separation between researcher and participant, as well as the notion of the researcher’s neutrality and objectivity (Peterson, 2015). It privileges culture and context and encourages the researcher to use a subjective lens to make meaning. Autoethnography allowed me to use my long experience in the school community and my social justice commitments as assets in my research.

My hope is that the tentative learnings from the pilot year of the Culture Keepers can offer a promising direction for those looking to create interventions with young people that build relationships, teach new skills and strengthen connections to peers and the school community.

**Methods Process and Participation**

This study was conducted over the 2015-2016 academic year. Culture Keeper data was gathered from de-identified formative assessments that students filled out at their weekly meetings. Data from the Climate Team was gathered as a participant observer in weekly Climate Team meetings. Additional data from teachers and student peers was collected from anonymous evaluations.

Culture Keepers were the 14 eleventh grade members of the pilot year cohort of the Culture Keepers. In addition to their work across campus, Culture Keepers met
Thursdays during an extended lunch period (students were excused from the last ten minutes and first ten minutes of the two classes before and after lunch). Meetings lasted one hour and included dynamic mindfulness practice with John, our Nayana Institute partner, group reflection and restorative practice skill building activities. As a part of each meeting students completed an anonymous formative assessment. CKs were told that they didn’t have to answer every question every week, but to respond to the questions that felt most alive for them each week.

This assessment asked:

- Where do you feel like your work as a CK is getting stronger?"
- What training/support has been helpful to you?
- What support do you need?
- What has it meant to you this week to be a CK?
- What does it make you think about?
- Anything else you want us to know?

The ECHS School Climate Team facilitated the institutional support for the CKs on campus. I was a participant observer on the Climate Team. Other Climate Team members were the SHC youth development coordinator, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation teacher leader, the principal and the TOSA (Teacher on Special Assignment) responsible for the majority of the school discipline. We were sometimes joined by other SHC staff and interns and one other assistant principal.
The Climate Team meets weekly for one hour on Thursday mornings to discuss, among other things, all facets of CK work across campus. This included navigating relationships with classroom teachers, building referral systems to ensure CK participation in peer conflict mediations and “walk-and-talks,” setting up a process for CKs to lead faculty and classroom conversations around CK identified school climate issues and general trouble shooting and problem solving. Climate Team members signed waivers allowing me to include their voices from Climate Team discussions. These perspectives were represented anonymously in the final report. Other school staff and students were represented through brief evaluations that they completed anonymously after having had contact with CKs, identifying only by status (e.g. student, faculty, other school staff).

To make meaning from the data described above, I used inductive analysis, a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to identify key themes and concepts as they emerge from the raw data to review the Culture Keepers formative assessments and Climate Team minutes (Thomas, 2006). Using this approach I was able to identify themes across participant responses. I used these themes to reflect on a set of key questions, including:

- Does the training and support of the CK’s contribute to capacity building—are they able to be increasingly effective in their various roles on campus?
- What was their identity formation as CKs—Does their identity as a CK inform their experience as a student at ECHS? Does their identity as a CK inform their relationships with friends and family outside of school?
• Does the collective work of the CKs impact student success for the individual students and classrooms with whom they partner?

After reviewing the data enumerated above, I drew a set of tentative conclusions and recommendations for strengthening the program beginning in the fall of 2016.
Results

I was able to review 95 formative assessments completed between November, 2015 and March, 2016. Of the 95 assessments reviewed, 41 were filled out completely, 54 were filled out partially. Culture Keepers were instructed to engage with the process each week, but only to respond to the specific questions that felt “most alive” for them that week. As a participant/observer on the Climate Team, I was able to participate in and review minutes from thirteen Climate Team meetings over that same time frame. In addition to the Culture Keeper assessments and Climate Team minutes, I was also able to review seven evaluations from teachers who had students participate in “Walk-and-Talks” with Culture Keepers and nine evaluations from students who had either participated with a Culture Keeper in a walk-and-talk or peer mediation.

Through the end of February, Culture Keepers had participated in 102 peer mediations and 39 walk-and-talks. One Culture Keeper pushed in (participated in the classroom) to two English Language Development (ELD) classrooms on Wednesdays with a SHC staff person and intern to support a youth development initiative with immigrant students, Migrations and Journeys. Two Culture Keepers were partnered one-on-one with students for academic support and/or mentoring. Culture Keepers made two presentations in the fall to faculty; one to introduce their work on campus more generally, and one to enlist faculty support in a school wide effort to raise awareness around sexual harassment. A team of six Culture Keepers met for 8 sessions with a pair of SHC interns to design a 20 minute “teach-in” around sexual harassment that they were to bring into 17
ninth and tenth grade classrooms in April, 2016 (after the conclusion of this research). This full range of work was represented both in the Culture Keepers’ formative assessments and in the Climate Team meeting minutes.

An original intention for this research had been to include aggregate disciplinary data as a tool for evaluating the impact of Culture Keeper work on campus. Through a series of conversations over the winter with my community partner, the TOSA (teacher on special assignment) who was the lead administrator for bringing in Culture Keepers to the peer mediations, we decided that this data would not support an evaluative process of the Culture Keepers work on campus this fall for two reasons: 1) in 2015-2016, ECHS had two (out of two total) new assistant principals; their learning curve was steep, and would very likely have been a factor in explaining shifts or trends in aggregate disciplinary data, and, 2) this research was only able to capture data from a portion of a school year, which made it difficult to link aggregate data with broader conclusions around the role of Culture Keepers on our school climate over 2015-2016.

**Emergent Themes: Culture Keeper perspectives**

Through a close review of the Culture Keepers’ formative assessments the following themes emerged:

**Skill Building:** In their assessments, the Culture Keepers reflected on both the efficacy of the formal training and support they were receiving and their skills improvement through their own experience of both doing the work and reflecting on it. While a number of students referenced the skill building activities as helpful and asked...
for more of that kind of training in our lunch meetings, a greater number reflected on how much they were learning through the lived experience of doing the work. This was particularly true for peer conflict mediations, the clear favorite activity among the Culture Keepers.

**Student quotes referencing skill building:** “When we started the Culture Keepers I was kind of scared that I wouldn’t know what to ask or what to say… but after all the training and being willing to work with other students, my skills have grown tremendously.” “Before Culture Keepers I wouldn’t call someone out on things that they’re doing wrong—now, as a Culture Keeper, I have the authority to do that instead of just staying silent.” “My skills at hearing both sides of the story have gotten stronger —I have more of a willingness to hear both sides of the story.” "I got a lot of help from Coach K. (the TOSA)—sometimes he’s in there sometimes not, sometimes he takes a lead or sometimes I do.” “The examples/skits are really helpful for me-being in the room and having an adult there was helpful—you also have to just get thrown in and do it.” “I think we got good enough training/practice—you have to be in one (peer mediation) to really know what it’s like. Each one is different; you have to do it to know… Culture Keepers referenced how useful it was to work in pairs, “Normally we don’t have any trouble knowing how to respond—if one person doesn’t know how to respond, the other one will help out.”

Dynamic Mindfulness: Across the board, students reported that they use dynamic mindfulness as a tool in their own lives AND that they wished that we spent less time practicing dynamic mindfulness in our regular weekly meetings. At the same time that
students were asking for less formal practice time in our meetings, many reported a range of examples of how they use mindfulness in their own lives:

**Student quotes referencing dynamic mindfulness:** “Maybe a little less dynamic mindfulness practice in our meetings…” “With some Thursday meetings I’m really okay with it (dynamic mindfulness), some other Thursdays dynamic mindfulness is too much time…” “…It’s helpful, the breathing, focusing on your breath, it’s like, ‘this is awesome…’” “Being a Culture Keeper I’ve learned to take a ‘time out’ to close my eyes, to calm myself down, to breathe.” “I saw classrooms change their whole act from the beginning to the end of the semester. All the teachers were doing it while we were doing it—it helps them too.” “It feels good because it’s not something that could ever be negative, it feels good to do something that is positive for other people.” “I practice at night before I go to bed and have a really peaceful sleep. I do it when I’m stressed, or when I catch myself being stressed—I can notice and be aware of myself.” “I think it’s useful—helps me de-stress.” “Whenever I’m feeling like I need to let go of a negative emotion—the breathing—it works for me because you can do it anywhere.” “Sometimes when I’m angry or a little stressed, I go in a room by myself and breathe.”

**Relationships with Peers/Adults:** There were repeated references in the assessments to deepening relationships among the Culture Keeper team, with student peers for whom they had done peer mediations or walk-and-talks, and, finally with the adult SHC and school staff with whom they partner as Culture Keepers.

**Student quotes referencing relationship building:** “As a Culture Keeper we get a chance to meet everybody—not just in our own group—that are having problems, that are
lost. (After a mediation) I haven’t seen them out of class ever since. I did a few check-ins, or they say hi to me or I say hi to them…” “One of the girls I did a walk-and-talk with came back to the (SHC) with a friend the next day and wanted me to check in with both of them.” “The experience is really good, to see someone go from being really upset to being okay…They feel comfortable sharing with me, I can tell them I understand what they’re going through.” “She was more comfortable talking to me about her issues, she didn’t see me as an authority figure. It definitely made her more open, more willing to share, now we greet each other around campus.” “Kids will come up to me, ‘when are we going to do that check-in?’ Since they’ve done it before they know it’s a space where they can feel safe.” “I like having connections all across campus, with teachers and admin--you build lots of trust with people.” “I like doing mediations and then doing a check-in afterwards. I like developing relationships with people--I walk past them in the hallway and can say, ‘Hey how are you doing?’” “Some teachers thought I was a bad kid—football player, big guy, black guy, they see me in a better eye now.” “Teachers hear that I’m a Culture Keeper and it changes their attitude toward me. People look at me and feel like I’m sketchy or scary, but when they know that I’m a Culture Keeper they feel differently.”

**Why Culture Keepers Work Matters:** Culture Keepers referenced important learning and outcomes for themselves, for the individuals with whom they’ve worked and for the school community more generally. As individuals, they noted their impacts in the school community and their capacity to work more skillfully with conflict, and to communicate more effectively in their lives outside of school.
**Student quotes referencing the value of the work:** “It helps the student and the teacher—the teacher benefits by not having to stop teaching or embarrass the student. It saves the student from getting a referral.” “A few times I’ve seen people get into an argument, almost a fight, and I can just kill it—like I have more confidence to step in.” “This work makes me feel important, like I’m helping—it feels good being able to help people.” “I tend to stop before I react to things, like at home if there are problems in the house—if my brother and my mom get into a problem, I can calm the situation down—the same thing at basketball practice…It’s getting people to see stuff from a different point of view, like, ‘If you were them, how would it feel?’” “I’m excited about the classroom conversations (around sexual harassment)—It’s another way that we’re having an impact on the school—changing the culture at the school. We’re doing our part to get rid of that negative aspect of our school culture.” “Being a Culture Keeper helps me get involved the way I want to be involved with the school, helping students, students-to-students type thing. I really like it. I like that it IS going somewhere—that I can connect with freshman and sophomores and help them be on the right track—so when they’re juniors and seniors they can say I’m glad this person showed me this and this so I don’t have to go through it…” “It makes me feel that this school cares about the students, that Culture Keepers are here for the students.” “I know people look up to us. One of the people in the mediation came to talk to me, it was kind of empowering…not just being known as being tall and a baseball player.” “It’s like I’m in the middle of the food chain at ECHS—like faculty, then Culture Keepers, then students. It feels pretty good.” “It definitely gives me more of a sense of pride and responsibility—I know that I have to be an example for everyone else,
to be a leader, I have more of a purpose, more of a sense of myself as a leader.” “It’s
definitely helped me with my shyness. Having the power to not succumb to my
shyness— it’s empowering to deal with people, to be in a deeper way with people.” “I’m
not as angry. I’ve always been an angry person, I let everything get to me, but now I’m
not as angry, more chilled out now. I think it’s the group, we all have our struggles, but
when we come together everything is forgotten for that hour we are together…” “The
responsibilities I have as a Culture Keeper makes me feel good—I told my mom, ‘Mom,
I’m a Culture Keeper, I’m doing all these things at school.’” “I can use what I’m
learning—like I did mindfulness with my basketball team, and I can tell my cousins what
I’m learning—I can take it outside of school and expand on it…Leaving high school this
is one accomplishment I’ll be really proud of—knowing that when I leave ECHS I’ve
done something that really mattered, and that feels good.” “I feel like I can impact not
just the school, but the world—just being respectful, helping people out.” “Culture
Keepers bring students together. We’re kind of like the zipper between kids and
adults…we help them meld together…Students know that we’re connected in some way
with people in authority, so we can relay what they said, with confidentiality…” “I’ve
used the ‘Culture Keeper card’ a lot lately-- mentioning that you’re a Culture Keeper
kind of accredits you that you’re someone they could trust, someone they could talk to,
it’s like our trust ‘diploma…’” “Being a Culture Keeper empowers you to believe in
yourself that you can make a difference in someone’s life.” “It’s really opened the door to
having my own voice—especially with the faculty, they listen more…” “Being a Culture
Keeper has really helped because I’ve been going through a rough time with my family.
It’s helped me evaluate things better, it’s helped me to be able to talk and be able to handle things—or to know when I can’t really change things…”

**Emergent Themes: Teacher Perspectives**

The seven teacher evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. Teachers noted that, while they often need support working with disruptive students, the only “support” that has been available to them is through the disciplinary process, “If I didn’t want to engage that process (e.g. send a student to student services on a “referral”) then I had no other options.” The walk-and-talks, while limited in scope, represent a departure from the punitive process that had been their only option. Teachers reported that they enjoyed partnering with the Culture Keepers, that it felt like a “positive intervention,” and, “even if it just lasted for one day, my student returned in a better place than when he had left the room.” Teachers also shared that accessing the SHC was a lot easier than trying to call down to Student Services, “What a relief to dial an extension and hear (G’s) voice on the other end!” On the constructive end, teachers noted that the SHC had an “obvious capacity issue…If I called the SHC every time someone was trying to blow up my room, they’d be overwhelmed in one block (class period).” One teacher worried that students could take advantage of the opportunity to be out of class with a peer, “after the second walk-and-talk, I started to wonder if L. was acting out just to get out of class with H. again…”
Emergent Themes: Student Perspectives

Students filled out nine evaluations after either a walk-and-talk or peer mediation with Culture Keepers. These evaluations yielded less rich information because of the sparse responses, “It was good,” or “I liked it.” One student noted that the Culture Keeper “didn’t take sides,” and a number of responses echoed the Culture Keeper observations that students connected well with their Culture Keeper peers, “he kept it real,” “I liked that they were on our same level,” etc. Three of the nine evaluations commented on ongoing contact with Culture Keepers, “She checked in a few days later to make sure we was still cool. Now I say hi to her when I see her in the halls.”

Emergent Themes: Climate Team Perspectives

The Climate Team minutes reflected textured conversations that included excitement about the unfolding work of the Culture Keepers and concern for the formidable challenges that go along with creating and sustaining the institutional spaces for these young people to do their work. Each week participants shared anecdotal stories of Culture Keeper work on campus. On March 3, the SHC Youth Development Coordinator shared with a visiting school administrator, “we took on this project on top of everything else that we do because we could see that kids were fed up with the ‘old school’ way of doing things—you mess up, we punish you, you’re out of here.” The SCH director shared that one of the Culture Keepers reflected with amazement on the strong participation of the principal, “He really knows me! When I was in the 9th grade, I was
involved with a lot of girl trouble. I learned a lot that year. Now, whenever he sees girls going through the same thing, he looks for me to mediate. I like that I get to work with admin, like we’re on the same team.”

Climate Team participants’ strong personal connections with the Culture Keepers and obvious joy and enthusiasm for the project carried them through moments of doubt and uncertainty about being able to sustain the institutional bandwidth across the school community to carry this work forward.

Some of the challenges that surfaced in the Climate Team minutes included: In the fall of 2016, the school district would no longer allow students to earn elective credit towards graduation for being “TA’s” (teacher assistants). This is the scheduling mechanism that allows Culture Keepers, in pairs or threes, to be housed in the SHC during the school day to be available for their work across campus. If they have to be enrolled in academic classes throughout the school day, SHC staff and admin would not be able to readily access them to do their work across campus. At a January meeting the principal shared that being a new first-time father for was not a good fit with the evening commitments required of a high school principal; he announced that he had requested a district transfer to an elementary school for 2016-2017 school year. Our TOSA, who plays a lead role supporting and integrating Culture Keepers into peer mediations, is completing his administrative credential program in the spring and is unlikely to be returning to ECHS in the fall.

High turnover among key Climate Team staff emerged as the single greatest challenge to carrying the Culture Keeper work forward after its pilot year. ECHS will
have one of four administrators returning in the fall; the lone returning administrator is completing his first year of work in the high school. The two SHC staff on the Climate Team shared a fear that the SHC, absent strong administrative support and capacity for restorative practice infused discipline, would be unable to carry the program forward in 2016-2017. Participants noted a keen sense of obligation to the young people moving forward, “we can’t recruit and train a team of young people, get them excited for doing meaningful work and then not have the capacity to make anything happen…I’ve seen that happen before, it sucks.”

At the same time as these concerns were being voiced, the Climate Team developed a list of students to recruit for the second cohort of Culture Keepers, and a plan to work with the first cohort to train and integrate the new cohort into the existing team of Culture Keepers for 2016-2017. One participant noted that, in moving forward it felt like, “we’re on a high wire with no safety net underneath.” There was also ongoing discussion about the role of the Nayana Institute, the challenge of raising funds to support that partnership, and if we should use the same set of activities (e.g. having John work directly with the Culture Keepers at their Thursday meetings and continue to partner with Culture Keepers to lead dynamic mindfulness in classrooms) to diffuse dynamic mindfulness into our school culture across campus.
Conclusions

Taken as a whole the data from the pilot year of the Culture Keepers initiative points to a range of successes and challenges. Returning to the questions that impelled this research, learnings from the pilot year indicate that the infrastructure set in place to train and support the Culture Keepers is effective and powerful. This includes the regular Thursday meetings, John Respiro’s mentoring and support for leading dynamic mindfulness in classrooms, the TOSA’s mentoring and support for peer mediations and the SHC’s lead role as liaison with teachers for walk-and-talks. Culture Keeper assessments referenced a range of new skills, capacities, confidence and self-agency. These were grounded and reflected both in their new role in the school community and outside of school through interactions with friends, family and teammates.

Evidence from a small number of student and teacher evaluations suggests that peer and teacher contact with Culture Keepers is positive. Both Culture Keeper and peer evaluations noted ongoing contact after peer mediations/walk-and-talks—greeting one another in the halls or students seeking out additional support from Culture Keepers and/or staff in the SHC. Teachers were overwhelmingly supportive of the idea of partnering with Culture Keepers to implement non-punitive supportive classroom interventions for students whose classroom behavior was disruptive or disengaged.

While there was ample evidence for positive impacts on the Culture Keepers themselves and the individual students with whom they were working, there was little to no evidence in this study to support any conclusion around school-wide or population
level impacts of the Culture Keeper initiative over its pilot year. Anecdotal evidence points to the strong participation of our most marginalized students in peer mediations and walk-and-talks, but the scope of these interventions was too small to evidence any kind of school wide impact. The narrow time window of this study, and the large number of other variables impacting school climate at ECHS made it difficult, if not impossible, to hazard even a tentative guess at systemic level impacts at this early date.

**Challenges**

A number of challenges emerged over the course of this research. It became apparent to the Climate Team over the course of this year that the infrastructure and collaboration needs for quality implementation of an initiative of this kind are immense. Administrators, SHC staff and teachers must all have strong collegial relationships to sustain the level of collaboration necessary to ensure strong and ongoing Culture Keeper participation across the program activities.

Administrators, or school staff charged with being on the front-lines of the disciplinary apparatus, need both a strong commitment and a strong set of restorative practice skills to be successful. In addition to their own ability to do the work, they must be able to welcome young people into the process, support them and strengthen the young people’s capacity to lead restorative conversations with their peers. In an urban public high school, all of this work will, by necessity, happen in an under-resourced environment with every adult tasked with an infinite number of other competing commitments and responsibilities. In order to ensure strong teacher willingness to “try
something new,” there has to be an existing measure of trust among teachers, SHC staff and school administrators; mistakes will be made, so the capacity to forgive and forge stronger bonds is imperative.

**Recommendations**

While the visible work of the Culture Keepers is enormously exciting, there is a less visible groundwork necessary to support its success. Given that the Culture Keepers’ work is grounded in restorative practice; it would be a prerequisite for any school staff looking to implement a similar initiative to be well grounded in restorative practices before partnering with young people to teach and model these kinds of interventions. A Climate Team, or some other collaborative constellation of key figures that meets regularly is the heart and soul of this work. This team can include any number of ancillary staff, but at a minimum must include key administrators responsible for discipline and others with the capacity to house and coordinate Culture Keeper activities throughout the school day. There also has to be some scheduling mechanism (TA’s or otherwise) to ensure that Culture Keepers are available to participate in activities during the school day. This does not have to be all of the Culture Keepers at any given semester; they can step up and step back over the school year.

While insights from Critical Race Theory guided our work in spirit, we have not been able to bring our work to scale in a way that would allow us to have a systemic impact on the disproportionality that haunts disciplinary action in diverse urban schools. We believe in incremental culture change. We are committed to school climate work that
foregrounds students of color as change agents, that commits to creating relationships between and among school staff and young people and building capacity among youth on campus who are facing the greatest challenges. The early evidence, while far from conclusive, is compelling enough to carry us forward on this course.
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**Project Name:** Culture Keepers: Youth Leadership/School Culture Initiative Logic Model

**Goal:** Use research/learning from pilot year to strengthen CK program infrastructure and build capacity of adult leaders to sustain CK program into future years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Outcomes/Impact</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JMP Staff (Director, Youth Development Coordinator, Clinical Interns)</td>
<td>Attend weekly Ultimate Team meetings—Collect participant/observer data</td>
<td>Increased student participation in school climate initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECHS Admin (COSA, AP and Principal)</td>
<td>Attend weekly CK meetings</td>
<td>Increased awareness and a willingness among staff to see young people as positive resources and assets in school-based efforts to build a positive school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JMP Administrative Support (Coordinating student schedules, responding to teacher inquiries, requests)</td>
<td>Review CK formative assessments</td>
<td>Increased awareness among faculty members and students about the leadership capacity of students to effect change in our school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Keeper Team (initiative, inventiveness, energy, skills, commitment)</td>
<td>Review student/teacher evaluations from CK support activities</td>
<td>A growing population of young people of color who have the skills, tools and capacity to be leaders in efforts to create positive change in our school community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analyze data to inform coherent message around the efficacy of the CK program to improve school culture at ECHS</td>
<td>A positive and empowered school culture where young people feel supported and connected to strong peer leaders, one another and adult allies on continue</td>
</tr>
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**Assumptions**
- The CK project empowers participants and increases their capacity to play a meaningful role in school change efforts.
- JMP leadership in the CK project will facilitate access for CKs to faculty and strengthen CK work across campus (e.g., walk-and-talks, leading dynamic, mindfulness, peer mediations, issue circles and one-on-one peer mentoring)

**Possible Barriers**
- Other school demands could make it difficult for CKs to have ready access to classrooms or to interrupt disciplinary referral process.
- High turnover among key staff positions could mitigate against the CK program sustaining the necessary spaces for students to continue to participate in meaningful ways in the life of the school.
Appendix B

ECHS Culture Keeper Roles and Responsibilities 2015-2016

I. Student Supports and Interventions (TA’s Based out of JMP)
   a. Conflict Mediation: CK (alone or in a pair) leads students through the mediation process to resolve conflicts and problems.
   b. Walk-and-talks (one-on-one check-in): CK uses mindfulness and/or restorative inquiry strategies to support students to refocus and to be able to go back into class and avoid a referral.
   c. Post-Contact follow-up: After an intervention (a or b above) CK connects with a student to check-in and see if any further formal follow-up is necessary.

II. Classroom/Academic Supports and Interventions
   a. Lead or support classroom Mindfulness activities; work with Jonathan (Nicholas) and teachers to use Mindfulness activities during whole classroom instruction (modeling, participating, leading).
   b. One-to-one Mentoring: CK meets regularly (in JMP) with student mentee to support academic study skills (organization, planning/tracking/completing assignments and/or content specific tutoring).

III. Campus-Wide Supports and Interventions
   a. Issues Specific Campaigns: help lead and participate in ongoing campus-wide work around specific issues (e.g. present to faculty, co-lead issues circles for students/staff, design and implement classroom education) relevant to the culture and climate of the campus
   b. Events and Activities: plan and participate in fun activities that can help strengthen the culture and climate on campus (e.g. visit feeder middle school to present to 8th graders about resources available to them when they enter high school, link with other activist groups on campus for lunchtime events)