

**Just Inquiry Through Circles of Care:
Tracing the Legacy of School in the Square**

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And the Intergenerational S2 Research Collective¹

The only way to survive is to take care of one another.
Grace Lee Boggs

As Grace Lee Boggs would tell us, “the only way to survive” or teach, or research, “is to take care of one another.” And so we have.

School in the Square (S2) is a small, progressive charter school in Washington Heights, New York City, grades 6 - 8. The school serves 300 students, many of whom are immigrants from the Dominican Republic living in the Bronx and Washington Heights. In September 2019, the first graduating class of 96 fanned out to 37 high schools across New York City. With these alumni, the S2 Inquiry Project - Stories Over Time was born: a longitudinal, inter-generational, participatory and care-ful project designed to accompany young people navigating high school in a city scarred by rising inequality gaps. As a five-year project, we anticipate gathering stories of struggle, survival and triumph within a backdrop of gentrification, educational segregation, a long history of tensions between police and communities of color, the looming threat of ICE, and deportation haunting immigrant communities.

The Intergenerational S2 Research Collective (26 of us!) formed a cross-institutional participatory research collective documenting—with oral histories, participatory surveys, vlogs, letters to self, auto-ethnography, mapping, writing retreats, restorative circle conversations, and video—how first and second-generation immigrant youth navigate NYC’s high schools. Our chapter explores year one: how we have crafted a multi-method design, tracing the journeys of youth forging diverse academic paths held by “circles of care.”

Creating an Intergenerational, Participatory Research Collective

When Evan Meyers, founder of S2 and Sherry King, consultant, asked Michelle Fine to help them chronicle, over the next five years, the academic, social, institutional, personal, and activist journeys of Latinx immigrant youth and children from immigrant families navigating high school, Michelle asked Guttman Community College professor Samuel Finesurrey to develop an oral history component of this research and doctoral student Camille Lester to work with young people on a participatory survey by/for the graduating class. Finesurrey brought on

¹ Team is comprised of S2 Students including Ashley Cruz, Alondra Contreras, Ariana Peña Ramírez, Brandon Mendoza, Joel Almonte, Aidan Lam, Siarra Savignon, Noah Campell, Jesslin Hiraldo, Lauren Santos, Samantha Bruno, Alyssa Victoria, Noel Columna, Naomi Pabon and Mya Laporte; Guttman Community College Students including Ramon Estevez, Viandry Mena and Ariadna Villeda; S2 staff including Arnaldo Rodriguez, Evan Meyers and Sherry King, and Videographers from the Educational Video Center, Steve Goodman and Scarlett Holloway

three community college students at Guttman Community College (Ramon Estevez, Viandry Mena and Ariadna Villeda) to help train youth researchers in the praxis of oral history. Evan, Sherry and Arnaldo Rodriguez, High School Counselor and Alumni Coordinator, recruited 15 S2 graduates as youth researchers and to help humanize and popularize the knowledge being produced by this inquiry project, videographers Steve Goodman and Scarlett Holloway from the Educational Video Center in New York City joined the project. Together we form what Maria Elena Torre would call a participatory contact zone, an intergenerational research collective (Torre and Ayala, 2014; Zeller-Berkman et al, 2011).

In a deeply Vygotskian sense, this study is designed as a “zone of proximal development” (1962, 1978) – we make the road by walking, together. Our inquiry is designed to understand what tools, readily available and embedded in S2’s institutional culture, young people take with them into and throughout the high school years and what students need as they journey to high school and beyond. With the critical analyses of Renee Antrop-Gonzalez and Anthony de Jesus (2011), we want to trace how the S2 “culture of care” moves into the bodies of young people, and under what conditions the sense of belonging can be carried into high school and beyond.

Just Care as Intergenerational Participatory Inquiry

In this research project, we conceptualize care as a form of justice., built into S2 and woven into our inquiry. We draw on and extend Nancy Fraser’s notion of justice as **redistribution, recognition** and **participation** (see Fine, 2017; Fraser, 2009). We understand the school, and the S2 inquiry, as concentric circles of care. This work and S2 pursue recognition through a curriculum dedicated to the critical exploration of culture, history, struggle and identity. The school speaks to redistribution by insuring the working-class students enjoy broad access to opportunities for rigorous education, supports, family involvement and post-graduation counseling. This school and the project value participation by young people from immigrant families engaged as co-researchers.

As a Critical Participatory Action Research project (Fine, 2017) this intergenerational inquiry is firmly rooted in the perspectives of the youth, with appreciation of their racial, cultural, linguistic, class, and immigration related struggles and their brilliant, delicate, and intricate coping strategies. All of us wanted to ensure these youths would transcend traditional understandings of subjects in an academic study by becoming deep, critical and central partners in uplifting testimonies that honor the experiences of their peers, their kin, and NYC’s immigrant communities.

Our inquiry project weaves four methods: *visual identity maps* (n=80) drawn by the graduates; *oral histories* of the graduating cohort (n=50), conducted by the youth researchers; a *participatory survey* (n=75) designed by S2 alumni, and a *video – gift*, from the graduates of 2019 to the graduates of 2020. To date, the bulk of our inquiry centers on the oral histories that have been conducted and transcribed. As you will hear, when peers interview each other about the transition into high school, when they are mentored by community college students with shared biographies, when they have a transition counselor they trust who holds them in his heart, the inquiry is simply richer, the narratives more complex and, we would argue, the

process more just. You may wonder if, and how, youth as researchers affect the inquiry. We asked them.

At our January retreat, Samuel asked: “Why does it matter that *you* are gathering the oral histories?” Joel Almonte named the benefits he and other youth derive from being the architects of this work: “It’s important that we do these interviews...it makes us feel part of the whole project, like we do matter.” Sierra Saviñon, Jesslin Hiraldo and Lauren Santos agreed that they felt, “proud to be a knowledge producer.” Aidan Lam added, “It feels good to be doing something productive and creative.” When probed further, “What other questions should we include in the next round of interviews?” Almonte added, “Where do you get your inspiration from?” Finesurrey pressed, “why is this important, Joel? Where do you get your inspiration from?” With a soft smile the ninth grader responded, “My family. They have been through so much, I owe this to them.”

As experts on their own experiences, and those of their peers, engaging the youth as researchers strengthens the trustworthiness of the narratives gathered and, in more traditional terms, enhances the validity of the material. Brandon Mendoza reflected, “It’s important that we do the interviews because...we can relate to [our former classmates] and they would trust us more.” Alyssa Victoria agreed, “It is important that we do the interviews because...we are interviewing people who are comfortable with us.” Samantha Bruno said the bonds shared by people of the same generation would prove beneficial as well: “Because I’m interviewing people around my age they would be more truthful in their answers and...more open.”

Youth researcher Alyssa Victoria saw how the project could be a resource not only for herself and her peers, but also to improve S2. Victory hoped “the results...help improve S2...even though its already a good Middle School.” This optimism was shared by Naomi Pabon who argued that “These stories matter because people [S2 educators]...will be able to know the student’s point of view.” Arnaldo Rodriguez explained he is using the narratives as he counsels the next cohort to middle schoolers toward high school, considering “what really is a good option and what’s not.” Arnaldo and Evan are visiting the high schools to determine where are the best fits for S2 graduates.

Care has been an ethic of the school culture since its inception, and care has shaped the inquiry since June. But, as important, care also manifests in the financial investment by the school in a transition counselor, a duty Rodriguez performs. As the project was launched, last Spring, we anticipated that some young people—over five years— might run into trouble as they move through adolescence, in housing, confrontations with police, health issues, family concerns, and the specific obstacles facing immigrant communities. As researchers we did not want to simply “document,” but also hoped to help young people in potential crisis. S2 administrators, Evan Meyers was generously receptive. The school decided to dedicate resources so that Rodriguez’ job would be to prepare current 7th and 8th graders for the transition to high school and to serve as the central contact point for S2’s alumni. Continuing to serve as a guidance counselor to the entire graduating class of 2019, even as they enter into high school, Rodriguez is a much-valued source of comfort for the students and their families. Lauren Santos explained, “Mr. Rodriguez helps you with a lot of stuff.”

Rodriguez works to make sure the kids, their parents and he are always “on the same page.” As a graduate of New York City public schools and CUNY, Rodriguez’ process of building trust with the students and their families involves referencing his own struggles in adolescence:

“I don’t mind divulging or disclosing some info about my personal life...there may be some connection...that may be helpful.” As someone who often served as a translator for his own Spanish speaking family, Rodriguez has become a cultural translator for newly arrived families anxious about their children entering high school: He explains, “Parents are worried about their kids graduating from middle school at 13 or 14 and going to school with kids who are 18 or 19...especially if a family just moved here from the DR and is unsure what the culture is like in the United States...”

Rodriguez is often the first adult to hear about the obstacles faced by graduates of S2 and their families. As such, he provides a distinct sensitivity to our research methods and questions. As he helps these high schoolers overcome the challenges they face, he also refashions their experiences of pedagogical apathy, parental anxieties, student surveillance and school safety, among others into new topics for our study. Because of his unique position as both researcher and care-provider, S2 is better able to use the material collected by this project to help advise their eighth graders on the fit and quality of different NYC high schools.

With the first S2 students graduating in 2019, Rodriguez is responsible for tracking them throughout the various high schools they attend in NYC. He explains the adjustment is a difficult one: “While at S2 it’s easy to walk into a classroom and check on a kid. Our alumni are so spread out that I can’t just go grab somebody.... I can’t physically do something because I’m not in that space.... It feels a little bit overwhelming....” Joined by Meyers, Rodriguez visits the high schools of former S2 graduates. They seek to remind former S2 students that School in the Square remains a loving resource, accountable to the needs of its alumni.

As with Rodriguez’ participation in this project, the undergraduates from Guttman were selected based on their potential as researchers and their ability to connect with Latinx youths entering high school. Like many of the students at S2 who now serve as youth researchers, Ramon Estevez and Viandry Mena immigrated in grade school from the Dominican Republic while Ariadna Villeda is the daughter of El Salvadorian immigrants. Mena, who wants to be a school counselor after college explained, “I feel very connected to the students.... some of them are immigrants like I am.”

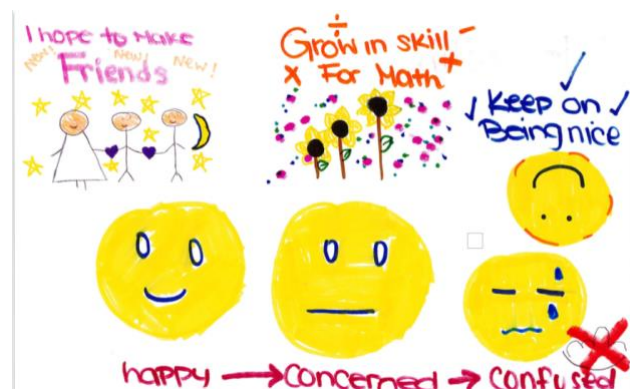
From the beginning, it was apparent to those of us from outside S2 (Sam, Camille, Michelle, Ariadna, Viandry and Ramon) that these young people had not only been well-educated, but were encouraged to develop their distinct voices and inspired toward inquiry, dialogue, and creativity. Ariadna reflected in her first vlog, “I am a little surprised, but these kids really have a lot say.” Ramon commented: “This project offers a safe space for these young individuals to tell their stories.” While transcribing one of the interviews, Viandry was moved by what seemed like a younger version of her own experience: “I learned that I’m not alone. The things that I passed through, someone else is passing through the same things...” These community college students provide the youth researchers with oral history mentoring and they serve at slightly-older role models, having journeyed a similar path through NYC’s secondary schools just a few years earlier.

Now that you have met the many characters in our intergenerational circles of care, we pull back the drapes to elucidate how this participatory inquiry began and how it has unfolded over year one.

Initial Meeting: Map Making and Letter Writing

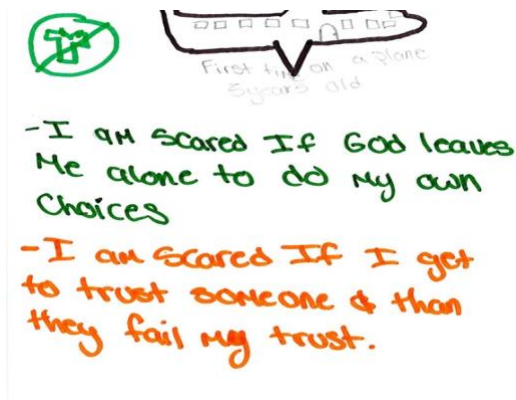
It was a stuffy, hot, and humid day in June 2019 when approximately ninety 8th graders packed into a basement gym first met with college students and CUNY researchers. Worlds were colliding and merging. The graduating students were buzzing with expectation, anxious about what was to come in high school. How would their friendships and sense of community be altered? Through the introduction of this project, an emerging research team collaboratively worked to pick up the pieces by way of figuring out how we would all “live” together for the next few years.

First came introductions, and then our first “visual method.” Markers, crayons, and colored pencils covered the tables as students drew out their feelings to the prompt “As you think about your transition to high school, what are you dreaming?” The line of inquiry centered hopes, fears, and/or excitement about a looming transition to high school. With markers in hand, students concentrated on their papers, giggled with their friends, and whispered about their fears of the next level. They wrestled with making meaning of the dreams living inside of them. This first “method” was designed to signal our commitment to care as recognition, hearing from (and seeing) how young people envision their futures, embody their dreams and fears. We drew from Futch and Fine’s methodological exploration of mapping as method (2014). The images in this analysis were all hand drawn. Patricia Hill Collins (1994) makes a plea to de-stabilize hegemonic realities, making intentional room for folks of color, means utilizing alter-mediums; like images, statements, poetry—all allowing and creating space for individuals to embody authentic standpoints. Standpoints being colored by life’s experiences, fears, excitement, and hope wrapped up in what it means to be a young person at the helm of a swift transition. (See Appendix A)

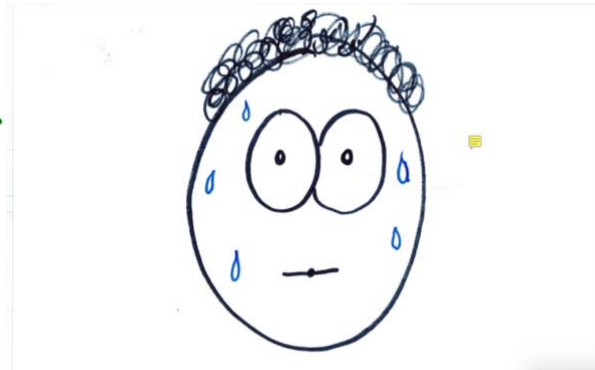


(Figure 1)

Fear of change, nervousness around making new friends, and dreams of being a basketball player were sketched on the pages. So were anxieties about “God leav[ing] me alone,” betrayals, tears and wild dreams of fame.



(Figure 2)



(Figure 3)

After the maps were completed we asked, “Who would like to share?” Nervous laughter, downward stares, and hugs filled the room as young people shared. Through their maps the students allowed us in; the adults in the room were invited to bear witness to hopes for success, fears of failure, worries of lost connections, and ties to their families. As their dreams and anxieties varied, so too did their visions for the future. There were a number of self-portraits and emojis drawn to explain the self which depicted tension, fear, nervousness, happiness, and sadness often alongside each other (Figure 1 and Figure 3). The messages that were written were filled to the brim with notes of survival, worry, and hope (Figure 1 and Figure 2). There were recurring messages that expressed fear of losing something, someone, trust, and friendship. As seen in Figure 2, the student wrote “...I am scared if God leaves me alone to my own choices” and “I am scared if I get to trust someone and they fail my trust.” There were also a number of messages embedded within these maps that expressed worry around disappointing self and family. The inner dialogue expressed through the writing came with demanding language such as: “get your grades up,” “keep grinding about your school work,” and “do it for your mom.”

After the mapping exercise, we asked the graduating students to write letters to themselves, as if they had just graduated from 9th grade. They authored letters of “care” from their future selves to their present selves. Quite a few volunteered to share. Joel stood to read his letter to himself:

Dear Joel

Congratulations! You passed 9th grade! I can't believe you also grew 7 inches and you now have facial hair. And that bullying incident wasn't as bad as you thought. So proud you are still friends with your School in the Square crew. See you soon -- so proud, Bro'

Joel

At the end of this session we asked, “Would anyone like to become a paid co-researcher, over the summer and across the next five years?” A long list of names emerged. Interviews were conducted and, in the end, 15 young people were selected as co-researchers,

paid for their time, committed to attending meetings, conducting oral histories, analyzing survey data and participating in making a video documentary. The research collective was born.

Co-constructing Peer Interviews

At our second meeting in May 2019, Professor Samuel Finesurrey and his students from Guttman Community College, Viandry Mena, Ariadna Villeda and Ramon Estevez met with 15 members of S2's first graduating class to discuss how they would gather oral histories from the full graduating class. Tasked with explaining and training rising ninth graders in the theoretical and methodological mechanics of oral history they began with a simple question: "Why is it important that the world understand your stories and those of yours peers?" This question unearthed narratives from these immigrant and first-generation youth about the trauma produced, and fortitude developed in the face of xenophobic policies and discourses. These 13 and 14-year-olds hoped this project would humanize the representations of their community and their peers. They understood that their participation was essential, for only they could navigate this intimate landscape with care and familiarity, gathering testimonies from former classmates. The youth researchers hoped that this work could also provide material for educators, researchers and policymakers seeking equity for marginalized communities.

Finesurrey and the Guttman students introduced the youth researchers to common oral history practices and ethics. Together they generated a list of common question to create consistency across the dozens of oral histories these high schoolers would be gathering from their fellow S2 graduates. The youth researchers then recorded preliminary interviews of one another. After giggles, deletes, erasures, "oh, no, the recorder isn't on," "can we start again?" "why am I unable to talk?" and lots of loving feedback, they decided to re-interview one-another at the following August meeting.

Over Fall semester 2019 the youth researchers were sent out to conduct two additional oral histories with S2 alumni who were not participating in the project as interviewers. As is done after every set of oral histories, through collective reflection, some questions were changed, a few eliminated and a number added while our interview practices evolved.

Overtime, through the praxis of conducting and transcribing oral histories, collectively analyzing and reading through the transcripts, we settled on eight central themes culled across questions:

1. S2 as a Home
2. Personal Evolution at S2
3. S2's Continued Support
4. Experiencing High School
5. Safety and Surveillance in High School
6. Living Bilingual Lives
7. Ideas about Community/Identity
8. Revisioning Futures

Below, we review four of these themes to show how a sense of voice, care and a participatory ethic unfolded to produce powerful narratives, provoke new questions and unearth novel paths of study.

S2 as Home: We didn't ask, "What do you consider home?" But that's what the graduates wanted to talk about. We believe the shared experience at School in the Square between youth interviewees and interviewers invoked the central theme of "S2 as Home." One S2 graduate explained, "I would consider home School in the Square because I met a lot of people that I trust and still talk to." Another, attempting to explain the significance of their bond with the school spoke with pride: "I feel like we built this school." Arnaldo Rodriguez appreciated the sentiment and agreed: "Students voices are definitely intertwined into the school's mission...[and] the students know that."

The teachers and staff, as well as the design of the school, seem to have a profound and lasting impact on these now-high schoolers. Referencing the S2 teachers and staff, one graduate told us: "I really feel like they're god parents to me." The intimacy of this middle school, serving its alumni as a safe and joyful place, clearly provides a framework from which the rising ninth-graders in this study feel entitled to evaluate—not always favorably—their current schools. Confirmed in the participatory survey results (below), S2 graduates significantly and across the board rated their middle school as more caring, filled with a sense of belonging, where "I feel respected" and "my opinions matter" when compared to their high school experiences.

Safety and Surveillance in High School: With a few months of high school under their belts, the graduates spoke passionately about another core theme: their fragile sense of safety and surveillance in high school. Both because of their own experiences, and their interviews, the youth researchers decided we needed to explore more fully the embodied and contradictory tensions of feeling safe, feeling fearful and being criminalized by school security measures. Respondents detailed many disturbing experiences with security guards, metal detectors and the scanning of their fingers upon entering the building. "Once we get in [the school], we got to put our phones in a bag and whatever electronic devices we have in a bag. And then, after that we got served by security, they have like metal detectors.... After they're done, they check our book bags..." Another student described new technology being brought into their schools to surveil the students: "There would be these two scanner locations where I would go and [they] scan my finger to see that I'm present in the school." While many of the S2 graduates expressed anger at and frustration with these security procedures, arguing that they feel criminalized, a few acknowledged that they carry unhealthy levels of fear in their respective high schools, warranting security measures. One student explained that when arriving at school they, "usually just scan my card, go through the metal detector.... It makes me feel safer." Given these varied responses, the research team decided to dig deeper.

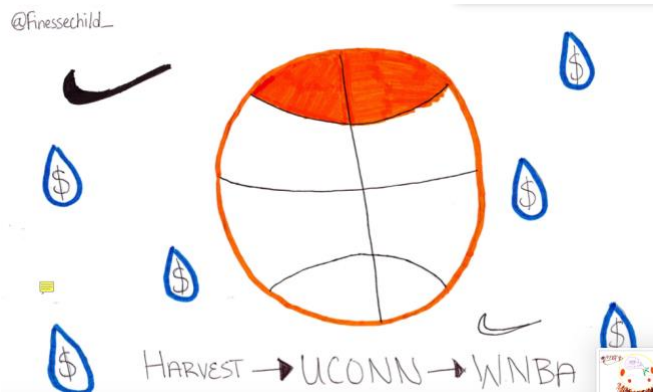
At our January retreat, the youth researchers realized there was something missing in the questions about security in the school. Finesurrey presented a quote drawn from one of their interviews to the group: "I don't feel that safe...there's a couple of gangs in the school." At first hesitantly, some of the youth researchers recounted their own fears, and reluctance about going to certain places within their school. One of the youth researchers responded, "I don't feel safe in the bathroom, and so I just don't go while at school." Once the bravado was pierced, others agreed naming staircases and bathrooms as places to stay away from. The specifics of youth fears, up to that point, had not been unearthed by the original list of questions. Only after our collective discussion did the group realize that our framing of the question seemed to call for a critique of policing, feeling criminalized and evaluations of one's

sense of security, but did not go far enough in exploring the context of students' fears. Thus, after our deliberations, the youth researchers generated new questions to be asked in future oral histories including, "Do any parts of your day feel unsafe?" and "Are there places or times in your school you feel unsafe?" The hope is that these questions will paint a more complicated picture of how concerns about safety and surveillance impact educational outcomes.

Living Bilingual Lives: Proud of their heritage, nationalities, and their languages, the S2 graduates came of age in quite homogeneous neighborhood elementary schools before attending a predominantly Latinx and heavily Dominican middle school. Many are now enrolled in rather diverse high schools, where Spanish, for instance, does not fill the hallways. The research team decided that we wanted our work to challenge stereotypes, inform conversations about immigrants and their children, and make visible the many worlds and languages that S2 alumni navigate. Realizing that most of their former S2 classmates were bilingual, with many speaking Spanish as their first language, we decided to ask about how youth move between learning in English and returning to Spanish speaking households. So we asked, "Can you tell us about living between languages?"

Some said it was a struggle, and they felt a loss of identity: "My Spanish... [is] one part of my identity that is somewhat like going away from me just because in school it's not bilingual like everything is English and you can't always have that Spanish part in you." Another spoke of the heavy intergenerational responsibilities that come with bilingualism. She educates her elders and feels an obligation toward her non-English speaking relatives: "In my English class we would have vocabulary words and I would translate them from English to Spanish, mainly for my parents so that they can understand." We had another open conversation about this quote, exploring both her care for elders and her sense of responsibility. Finesurrey asked the youth researchers how they feel about the "super power" of being bilingual and the attendant responsibilities. Rodriguez offered that in his own childhood, being bilingual was a gift, but also a burden. He told the group that he was responsible for the translation of conversations and documents for his relatives and "sometimes it was tiring, a lot." "What about the rest of you?" A show of hands suggested that translation responsibilities had at some point fallen on most of the S2 alumni in the room. The youth researchers agreed to add a new question for future oral histories, "Some people say it's a burden being bilingual, others view it as a gift, and many feel it a little bit of both. What about you?" This question, the team hopes, will provide significant insight on the responsibility of bilingual youths in immigrant households. Only through these collective, open conversations do rich contradictory emotions emerge.

Revisioning Futures: In our inquiry, we wanted to trace—from 9th grade until after senior year—the development of goals for the S2 graduates. We also wanted to encourage them to think hard (and realistically) about their futures. From the outset, the research team wanted to ask: "Where do you see yourself at age 25?" As is common among middle schoolers, many of the youth both in their oral histories and their maps (Figure 4 and Figure 5) said they hope to pursue careers in athletics, specifically basketball or baseball, mirroring what sociologists call "hoop dreams," for both girls and boys. But in reviewing the narratives, the youth researchers began to worry about what might happen if these athletic dreams fall short. What's the back-up plans? We realized that we needed follow up questions like the one suggested by S2 alum Brandon Mendoza "Do you have a Plan B or Plan C?" to prod their peers to think through options.



(Figure 4)



(Figure 5)

Some of the S2 graduates already held ambitious professional goals hoping to become politicians, doctors and engineers. With the team working for this project hoping to both study and influence outcomes, youth researchers agreed to add the question, “What obstacles are you worried could get in the way of your goals?” to ensure their peers would think about the hurdles they may face and how to overcome them.

Finally, questions about the future reflected authentically their current, and anticipated, troubles with precarious financial circumstances. In their maps and their interviews, many hoped to “make money.” The graduates of S2 often tied financial success to the ability to become positive agents of change. “I want to be rich and I don’t want to struggle...I want to like bring change to like my community.” These findings mirror the projections on the maps produced in the first meeting with graduating S2 students. A number of maps that highlighted the relative importance of capital, money, “getting cheese,” money tear drops. Tracing the evolution of future goals throughout high school is an exciting line of analysis for the research team going forward.

A Brief Glimpse at Participatory Survey Design and Preliminary Findings

We have collected close to 50 peer oral histories to date, but we also wanted to collect some quantitative data from the full cohort. Camille Lester, an instructor at CUNY and advanced developmental psychology doctoral student, worked with the S2 alumni to “popcorn” questions for a survey. The survey went through multiple drafts and students were given the chance to critique, cross out, underline, circle, ask questions, pose new questions, and write in the margins what they believed was relevant. The final survey became a living document of 46 questions all related to the transition to high school, comfort, safety, and support. There were two sections, “School in the Square and Me” and “My New High School and Me.” The survey was placed on Google Forms and was distributed to all S2 graduates.

A total of 75 School in the Square alumni completed the online survey, across a total of 37 schools in New York City from Inwood, to Harlem, to Gramercy, to Brooklyn, to New Jersey. Carrying forward on our commitment to a justice of recognition and self-determination, the survey opens with: “Please describe yourself in five words.” Across the cohort, as you can see in our Class of 2019 word cloud, the top adjectives were smart, funny, and caring. No surprise.

feelings about their upcoming transitions (Rogoff, 1989). When we built the survey, we were interested in understanding the cultural tools that were placed in the pockets of S2 graduates as they were transitioning, enjoying, struggling, conforming, and surviving—or leaving—their high schools. The survey was built by Camille, Sherry and youth researchers. Before that, we polled some educators and youth asking for possible “items” in order to create what we consider the “bad draft.” A small group of youth researchers then piloted and critiqued this draft. The final survey went through multiple versions and the students were given the chance to deeply critique, cross out, underline, circle, ask questions, restate, pose new questions and write in the margins what they believed we needed to learn. The final survey focused on comfort, support, sense of belonging and safety, in the transition, comparing S2 to the new school experiences.

Likewise, turning to our collective analyses of the oral histories, at our after-school meetings and half day retreat, we set up the space so that divergent perspectives—rather than key or most prominent themes—were at the center of the analysis. When we were discussing metal detectors and the “gift” of bilingualism, Samuel scaffolded the conversation so that various perspectives could be voiced or represented. Patricia Hill Collins (1994) argue that to truly de-stabilize hegemonic realities, we need to carve intentional (and methodological) room for folks of color (and everyone) to rely upon alter-methods and alter-mediums, like images, letters, poetry, creating space to produce knowledge as individuals and collectives, and to re-present deep, complex standpoints and perspectives colored by fears, excitement, relationships, micro-aggressions, freedom dreams, all caught in the swirl of “transitioning” to high school.

Third, in our inquiries, we hold **space for difficult and humbling conversations about key constructs**. At our January retreat, after we bathed in the oral histories and the survey material, giggled and dissected the word cloud, Camille asked us all to move our chairs into the round. The intra/inter-generational research collective sat in a circle and the question of what does it mean to belong, to be connected was gently posed. The conversation was rich and humbling, ranging from friends to family to school. Gut wrenching stories of feeling unsafe, being cast aside in the classroom so that a teacher can “get through the material,” teachers not fully engaging with the dynamic aspects of the students, disorientation with content not fully grasped, school counselors not fully holding space, bathrooms becoming spaces to avoid and never enter, stairwells morphing into battlegrounds – we heard tensions of self-becoming, within ever shifting and deeply complicated environments. Camille held space for us to deeply consider – what does it mean to feel connected and feel belonging? We heard from the youth researchers that being seen and heard, fully, is essential for a sense of belonging. As one noted, “If I could say one thing to my teachers is to think not into expectation but reality. Not a lot of kids have it easy. You have to think about them and how to help them when they are struggling.” Another student chimed in “..my teacher doesn’t try to help me. I remember this one time, the class was engaged, but I wasn’t. I felt afraid to ask for help, because I felt like he was going to judge me.” Another stated, “...My teacher always has a schedule, ‘you got two minutes for this,’ ‘five minutes for that,’ you really are not engaged in the purpose of the class just trying to finish work and you don’t learn much. Responding to this in a hushed manner, another student stated “...I just feel confused most of the time.” Wrapping up the conversation, a student stated “If I could say something to my teachers, I would say interact

more with my classmates to understand and know them as a person.” We took the time to thicken what we call critical construct validity.

With these three moves of critical participation toward validity – deep participation, the invitation for counter stories, and holding space for deep reflection on constructs in context – we believe we move beyond simple notions of “bias” or “objectivity,” we complicate educational constructs as always existing in contexts – and often toxic contexts and we take seriously young people as embodied, thinking, relational and feeling, trying to survive and learn in contexts and institutions that are too often disembodied, thought-less, arelational and punitive.

Many S2 alumni appreciate their current high schools, but many others spoke in a relatively timid dialect of fear, frustration, and an unwillingness to be vulnerable. One commented, “...I have two algebra teachers and they write so fast. Compared to when we were at S2, Mr. Davis used to take time, he would explain things over and over and over again. ”Having had a taste of just care and sense of belonging at S2, they know what it means to be seen, heard and cared for. A question to be explored by our research, going forward, asks: Is it enough to have had a three-year moment of just care to make it through high school and beyond? How do students who have experienced just care find it, create it or exit settings that are care-less? We know that just care, and belonging, stem from making space for young people to be fully present, messy, vulnerable and wildly intersectional. We are honored to accompany them over the next several years as they seek, discern and create contexts that are worthy of their complex selves even as they flee (or avoid) those contexts not worthy.

Reflecting on Just Care in School and Participatory Inquiry

Care has been woven into the fabric of S2 since the school’s inception, and care was stitched into this project’s research design and praxis. Care saturates the school and the curriculum and care is manifest in the generous funding for Mr. Rodriguez to function as the “transition” counselor and grounding presence for current students and graduates. A sense of care and belonging is evident in the maps, letters, oral histories, word cloud, and the surveys. Care can be heard when young people speak of their families as “inspiration” for the “struggles” they endured, and care is enacted in a short video gift to the graduating class of 2020, from the graduating class of 2019, a film of advice, laughter, hope and love to be presented at graduation.

Like the culture of S2, our commitment to a care-ful design has been animated in many of the research elements:

- A deep intersectional interest in young people’s lives and experiences, as they navigate structural inequities in the city.
- Oral histories designed (and analyzed) by and for the youth and revised over time as new issues emerge.
- A participatory survey culled from youth experiences, wisdoms and questions.
- Expansive retreats where students are paid and where we explore together the narratives, the survey data and host difficult dialogues.

Our project is just beginning. Thus far, this inquiry tells the relatively sweet story of immigrant families navigating the NYC "choice" school system. These students have grown up in one of the most unequal and segregated districts in the nation and were lucky enough to attend a middle school of just care. In our project we analyze how a deeply relational middle school "carries" over into high school. In our first year, we have learned that relationships matter, particularly for young people living in precarious circumstances. Over time, undoubtedly there will be heartbreaks about policing, housing, ICE, health...as well as joy.

In New York City, as in the nation and the globe, money and opportunities are massively inequitably distributed by class, race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability and immigration status. And so are institutional care and recognition. In their relations with public institutions including police, courts, social agencies and many schools, young people of color are routinely denied care and often meet with structural violence. In and by these same institutions, young people of color are often denied full bodied recognition of their gifts, struggles, and dreams. Living at the precarious edge of a nation in crisis, they deserve more and get less.

The Intergenerational S2 Research Collective seeks to redress, humbly, these cumulative harms through care as a lens of justice. Our research, like S2, takes seriously a justice of redistribution of opportunities, deep recognition and serious participation by the very young people most adversely affected by—and intimately aware of—the neoliberal reconfigurations of city life. Who better to narrate the thrilling and treacherous journey through high school?

The question of structural accountability asks: who cares?

Appendix 1:

The nature of maps allow researchers to take up residence in the in-between of their theoretical underpinnings and inquiries. To unpackage (Rogoff, 1989) maps, it involves not only a systematic process but also firm footing and direction as one travels within the uncharted territories of their questions. To begin the process of analysis; all 80 maps were printed. Based on this sample, every 5th map was chosen (twice), total end result: 12 maps. Each image was carefully examined and placed into provisional piles of themes such as: (1) basketball (future oriented), (2) "self portraits, and (3) "narratives, letters, wonderings to self. Following the wisdom of how to engage with images from Tina Campt, the maps were engaged with through a sensory register. This sensory register allowed the researcher to become lost within the colors, lines, strokes of the marker, and images drawn (Campt, 2017). While spending time in this sensory space the frequency, recurring messages, and emotions were all noted to understand what is embedded. Moreover, this step assisted a vantage point into the realities existing within young people as they are preparing to journey for yet another phase in their academic journey.

Appendix 2:

Taking a deeper look at the survey, a paired samples *t* test was completed to gain insight into any differences between middle school and high school (See Figure 7). The paired

samples *t* test revealed that there is a significant difference between middle school scores ($m=75.5, s=5.3$) and high school scores ($m=68.9, s=9.7$); $t(59)= 4.93, p \leq .005$.

Specifically, there was a significant difference between how students felt at middle school as compared to how they now feel at high school in areas such as; Opinion mattering/being valued in the classroom ($p=.000$), having friends at school they can turn to ($p=.002$), language at school being respected ($p=.015$), having school personnel to turn to with issues school/personal ($p=.000$), openness and access to new experiences ($p=.001$), preparedness based on experiences at school for the future ($p=.011$), disappointment about experiences at current school ($p=.006$), adequate resources for test preparation ($p=.001$), feeling safe at school ($p=.000$), and family feeling welcomed ($p=.000$).

T-Test

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	MS_sum	75.4667	60	5.25443	.67834
	HS_sum	68.9333	60	9.71259	1.25389

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	MS_sum & HS_sum	60	.163	.214

Paired Samples Test									
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	MS_sum - HS_sum	6.53333	10.26342	1.32500	3.88201	9.18466	4.931	59	.000

(Figure 7)

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