"Ay! Miss, I don’t get it."

"This shit is boring!"

"Well I’m just not gonna do it, you can suspend me if you want, I don’t give a fuck."

But in reality she actually gives much more than a fuck. The challenge here lies in navigating away from a battle of wills, while simultaneously uncovering reasons why the student is refusing, and also attempting to instill some form of confidence in their academic abilities. Such is the everyday task assigned to educators at the Care Center in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

My first two days at the Care Center, all I did was listen; I listened to stories about countless baby-daddy drama, concerns about how to tell a friend to better clean their child’s bottles, questions about what it means to be a parent, and wonderings about whether or not they will ever “go far in life.” I was overly conscious about my presentation and what my presence inside the classroom would mean for the students. Quickly I learned that students cared less about physical differences and more about personal connections. It was all about how I connected to them: Did I have a baby? Could I speak Spanish? Would I be able to laugh with them?

That week I was forced to brush up on some old math skills that I haven’t used in years: fractions, percentages, decimals, simple algebra, area and volume. It all came flooding back to me as I recalled techniques and strategies, suddenly
becoming an educator. Having never tutored before, I was initially apprehensive, however after a few hours I started to get the hang of it.

Every day became a test of my ability to determine when to encourage, when to listen and when to put my foot down. One of the biggest challenges I faced was convincing a student to not only do their work, but to also put effort into the work that they were doing. Most of the students have been told countless times that they are failures, that they are stupid and that they are not going anywhere; so it’s no wonder that they have aversions to doing work they “should have” learned years ago. It was definitely a process for them to accept that I was not going to judge or shame them for leaving traditional high school. It took a bit of time and a lot of honesty on both of our parts in order for this to happen, and once it did, the results were beautiful.

The most amazing moments I experienced at The Care Center occurred when I was able to feel that the connections I had made with students held meaning. The first time I felt it was after an intense tutoring session with a student, after which she exclaimed, “I got this, damn miss, you make this shit simple!” I replied with an attempt to instill confidence in her and she accepted. Afterwards, I felt a wave of accomplishment wash over me. I had helped her see, and I could make a difference to her. Over the course of my internship, I watched these moments happen over and over again, and not once did they lose their power.

It wasn’t until about a month in, that I discovered another sense of accomplishment from the students: they actually liked me! They eventually began arguing amongst each other regarding which afternoon activity I would participate
in. I was wanted, and not just for help on a math problem, but actually wanted. Thus, began multiple loving relationships with so many of the students. Recently a student, who a month ago was refusing to work with me because of my high expectations for her, revealed that she wanted to attend my graduation from college this year. She explained that she wanted to support me, you know, because I had supported her. Words cannot do justice to all that she made me feel within a fifteen second conversation.

Just to clarify, despite the close relationships I had with many students, they did not feel the need to make my job any easier. They did quite the opposite actually. Because I was so close with them, I had a difficult time receiving professional respect from the students. It was always a challenge to keep them on task and many times they would dismiss me as a friend, rather than view me as a staff member. It took a lot of patience; I was forced to learn how to recognize when I needed help. Having a supportive staff around me was a blessing in so many ways. There was always someone around to answer questions, help enforce school policies, give the students lectures when they needed them, and even to listen to me vent frustrations (always with productive feedback).

I came to the Care Center at a very difficult time and the staff’s ability to support me is a testament to the amount of heart the organization has. In addition to cutting salaries by twenty percent, the organization was forced to lay off two staff members and make many structural changes that had a ripple effect on the school. The budget cuts became an issue both inside and outside of the classroom. Thus,
even in the face of frequent challenges, the organization is full of hardworking individuals with a lot of love and confidence for their students.

Witnessing the organization go through many of these challenges was crucial to my understanding of a career in nonprofit work. Budget cuts are a reality everywhere, but in nonprofit organizations, they can be fatal to the organization. Fortunately, the Care Center is still standing, because of the tremendous heart that the staff has. This has helped me to redefine what it means to be an educator. Being an educator means putting yourself into your work one hundred and ten percent of the time. This is amplified when working in communities facing blatant oppression on a daily basis.

When I began my internship this summer, I had already studied a great deal of social justice material. As a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies major, I have taken many classes dealing with issues of reproductive justice. Listening to and taking part in many conversations with students about life in Holyoke, I have been able to recognize new branches of reproductive justice that I hadn’t experienced before.

One of the most prominent issues (both at the Care Center and everywhere else in the world) is the availability of power. Because many of the students experience a lack of power regarding issues such as financial stability, in the spaces where power is available to them, it is intensified. Violence is a big issue in the community and despite complaining about it, it seemed to me that many students see it as an outlet to exert power over others. They would frequently discuss recent fights among fellow students and make justifications for celebrity issues of domestic
violence. Many times, the conflicts would arise on the basis of another student’s “ability to parent.” Parenting rights are another source of power for students and can many times be conflated with violence as means of protection and validation. As a result, community members are influenced generationally. This was a major eye-opener for me in wondering about the capacity of reproductive justice and its intersections to hold these complexities.

I came to the Care Center more than excited with pretty realistic expectations. Over the course of the summer I have been both challenged and praised many a time. The positive feedback, support and love that I have been fortunate enough to receive have validated not only my work, but my sense of self as well. I am proud of myself and of the students I have worked with. Usually, I would use this space to explain how grateful I am for the “connections” I have made; however, those phrases do not do justice to the way that I feel. I am beyond amazed by the friendships and the continuing relationships that have blossomed from this experience. The only thing I would change about my experience would be to do additional reflection for myself, in order to have a sharper picture in my mind when I look back on the past ten weeks. To future interns: be honest, be flexible, don’t be afraid, and soak it up.