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Transformative School-Community-Based Restorative Justice: An Inquiry into Practitioners' Experiences

Ariane White
Loyola Marymount University, arianewhite@yahoo.com

LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Transformative School-Community-Based Restorative Justice: An Inquiry into Practitioners' Experiences

by

Ariane White

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Loyola Marymount University
School of Education
Los Angeles, CA 90045

This dissertation written by Ariane White, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Date

Dissertation Committee

[redacted]
Antonia Darder, Ph.D., Committee Member

[redacted]
Rebecca Herr Stephenson, Ph.D., Committee Member

[redacted]
Thalia Gonzalez, JD, Committee Member

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DEDICATION

In memory of Nicole Willett,

whose friendship was an invaluable gift,

and whose support and encouragement

I continue to feel, even after her death.

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ABSTRACT

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As restorative justice gained popularity in schools as a potential strategy for helping to reverse the deleterious effects of zero-tolerance policies, numerous misunderstandings and misapplications have emerged. This study focused on the experiences of school-based restorative justice practitioners and sought to foreground their voices and perspectives to highlight what is necessary for restorative justice work in schools to be effective. Critical narratives were used to elucidate participants' perspectives and to allow their voices to serve as the focal point for the study. Findings were as follows: (a) the depth and ongoing nature of preparation practitioners undertake to sustain restorative justice work must be emphasized; (b) rather than a program or set of steps, restorative justice must be experienced as a set of principles or a philosophy grounded in genuine care and concern for individual people; (c) a cultural, political, and social shift is required for restorative justice to be implemented with integrity; and (d) restorative justice is a project of humanization and re-establishing democratic ideals. As such, educators in the field are encouraged to embrace the depth and complexity of the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice and to acknowledge the personal, internal work that must be undertaken to serve a transformative function in school communities.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> We urgently need a paradigm shift in our concept of the purposes and practices of education. We need to leave behind the concept of education as a passport to more money and higher status in the future and replace it with a concept of education as an ongoing process that enlists the tremendous energies and creativity of schoolchildren in rebuilding and respiriting our communities and our cities now, in the present. (Boggs, 2002)

My inquiry into the arena of school discipline and related issues began the moment the bell rang at the beginning of my first day of teaching in 2003, with a six-week teacher training crash course my only formal preparation for the position. I was excited to talk with my students about literature, which is why I had agreed to take on this seemingly impossible position, as literature for me has always served as a profound source of inspiration in times when I felt most alone and desperate for meaningful human connection. I naively imagined that all I would need to do to succeed as a teacher was to share my love of reading and of learning with the nearly 200 students I would see each day; and that this love would automatically be transmitted to them. I was clueless about how my students felt about being in school and about how they would perceive me—another young, White woman with considerable class privilege presuming to have something valuable to offer them—and I had no idea how exhausting and disorienting the pace of the day would be for me, with six-minute passing periods separating five classes a day, and with a planning period that would often be usurped by the urgent need for coverage in some other classroom. Furthermore, I was utterly unprepared for how to address the many forms of student behavior, which communicated—oftentimes without much subtlety—how the students truly felt about being in school and about my presence in front of the classroom.

As the only White person in the room much of the time, I became increasingly conscious of the ways in which my White privilege and class privilege interacted with the prevailing power

structures, permitting me to embody so much institutional power as a young teacher. I quickly realized the need to overcome the many assumptions I carried with me into the classroom, such as the belief that hard work and dedication was all that it took to achieve success or that my students' lives were just like mine when I had occupied the same classrooms as a student. My students graciously instructed me in the realities of their lives, their families' struggles, their own frustrations at inhabiting a positionality within the system of schooling that was, in fact, quite different than the one I had occupied. Through listening to my students' life stories, I began to understand their experiences of schooling on a more systemic level, began to see more clearly how the institutional structures participated in shaping and limiting my students' options and their sense of what was possible for them to achieve.

At the same time, I found myself feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the ways that discipline and classroom management were discussed in my teacher preparation classes, and even more concerned with how I saw it being enacted throughout the campus. It was not uncommon to hear teachers describing particular groups of students—usually working-class students of color—in disparaging ways, adopting an almost fatalistic attitude toward their inability to conform to the behavioral and academic expectations of the school as an institution. This consistent use of a deficit framework by many teachers when speaking about my students' lives clearly solidified the low expectations that were placed upon them, in contrast to the culture of rigor and high expectations consistently adopted with the primarily White and Asian students in the magnet program.

When these deficit attitudes coalesced into actions, discipline served a much more insidious purpose than the stated goal of keeping everyone safe. Instead, discipline served a socializing function that reinforced the normative trends of racialized and class-based privilege

that clearly contradicted any kind of meaningful educational goals for students, let alone the prevailing rhetoric in the dominant culture of education as a vehicle for limitless opportunity. I wanted nothing to do with it. And yet I also felt incredibly insecure that, as a young woman and a new teacher, by rejecting conventional notions of authoritarian discipline, colleagues would perceive me as having no control over my classroom. I feared that my job security and survival in this profession were at risk, if I could not figure out how to "manage" the many student behaviors that required intervention.

One of the skill sets that ultimately allowed me to see a way through conflicting viewpoints about how to engage student behaviors and helped me to move toward at least beginning to articulate the way I wanted to share classroom spaces with students was mindfulness practice. A daily commitment to breathing and meditative introspection taught me to notice and understand my own emotional triggers, to pause and to breathe through my initial reactions in difficult moments, and then to respond in a more grounded way to whatever required my attention. In doing so, it helped me to realize that my students, like me, were oftentimes caught in overwhelming reactions to circumstances and situations that were truly beyond their control. Furthermore, none of us had ever been explicitly taught the kinds of strategies I was beginning to learn about how to create space internally for uncomfortable emotions without needing to react or to take others' actions personally. Once I gained greater clarity and confidence in the internal nature of my own experience, I began to share with students more transparently my own triggers and needs. This type of honest sharing facilitated the space for them to do the same, and we began to negotiate our respective needs when we found ourselves together in the classroom space. Thus, I began to unwittingly explore the realm of restorative

justice practices with my students, especially as it related to communicating needs effectively and resolving conflicts, in ways that are mutually beneficial and fundamentally transformative.

Reflecting on my early years of teaching, I see clearly that there are two distinct pathways in addressing behavioral issues in schools: there is the traditional punitive route of seeking to control students' behavior through intimidation and harsh consequences; and there is the restorative approach of cultivating healthy and sustainable relationships that can serve as the foundation for thriving communities. Despite the prevalent behaviorist and authoritarian trends in classroom management and school discipline, I am clear that I am not interested in controlling anyone. Rather, I am passionate about supporting students in cultivating self-awareness and emotional clarity such that they have greater access to a fuller range of choices for how to act, even in difficult situations. I am interested in developing authentic relationships with students and colleagues as a solid foundation for resolving conflicts in healthy ways, through which relationships and communities can be strengthened and sustained, rather than distorted or destroyed.

At around the same time as I found mindfulness practice so helpful as a new teacher, I also began regularly attending the Saturday Dialogue offered monthly by the Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere, Los Angeles (AWARE-LA). In this space, I encountered other like-minded White people who sought to confront their varied experiences of White privilege in constructive ways and to learn how to develop an anti-racist practice that could promote equitable interactions in multiracial settings and institutions. I began to develop language to explore and explain my discomfort with the power dynamics in my classroom, and in schools as larger institutions; and I came to realize that my experience of witnessing how differently the system operates on White students compared to students of color and working-class students was

not unique. In dialogue with others, I stumbled into an awareness of one of the clearest ways in which society's inequities are continually reproduced: through various forms of tracking in schools and through inequitably enforced disciplinary policies on school campuses.

As a White student attending a public high school, I had been free to roam the campus; my White privilege was the only hall pass required to assure school personnel that I had a reason to be out of class. By contrast, as a new teacher at this same high school, I witnessed how my students of color—in the very same hallways—were monitored much more closely, often harassed and questioned for the same behaviors I had exhibited as a student. At times, they were forced to do push-ups for being late to school. At other times, they were handcuffed by school police for expressing their frustrations or for refusing to comply with an officer's directives. As I witnessed my students' daily experiences of being systematically dehumanized and targeted by other adults on campus, it became clear to me that it was not enough for me to focus solely on treating my students as human beings in my classroom.

The contrast between my own experience as a student being socialized into a position of relative privilege and that of my students of color at the same school led me to feel the urgent need to call attention to the inequities embedded systemically within how student behavior is addressed, along with the broader social injustices schools perpetuate through punitive and inequitably enforced disciplinary practices, to raise the possibility for collective transformation of these unjust systems. Hence, these personal experiences and insights come together here to shape my motivations and inform this critical study, which interrogate and unveil with greater specificity the experiences of school-based restorative justice practitioners. Ultimately, this study sought to cultivate new insights into the social justice efforts of practitioners in the field of restorative justice.

Statement of the Problem

Defining the problem that informs this study required addressing numerous key issues that intersected in the education of students from working class communities of color. These included the manner in which institutional racism and neoliberal educational policies and practices associated with the school-to-prison pipeline resulted in the persistence of racialized disparities in the academic experiences and achievement of students of color in schools today. Furthermore, inadequate understanding and faulty implementation of promising alternatives such as restorative justice served to reinscribe the status quo and perpetuate the systemic inertia responsible for the failure of schools to meet the needs of all students, especially those from historically marginalized communities.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

In the neoliberal climate of the 1980s, school policies toward student behavior began to shift in ways that aligned with the broader society's movement toward a more punitive approach toward nonviolent crime that had been building since the 1970s through the so-called War on Drugs. The prevailing cultural norm of this time used the broken window theory of crime, recommending that even minor offenses be met with harsh punishments; the logic being that the threat of harsh punishment would deter more serious crime from occurring and would decrease crime, overall (Nguyen, 2013). Such policies were further expanded during the Clinton presidency, with the adoption of "three strikes" policies and further expansion of categories of crime that could be classified as felonies (Clemson, 2015). Such zero-tolerance policies and their punitive consequences catalyzed an exponential growth nationwide in the prison population, consisting primarily of people of color from working-class backgrounds serving sentences for nonviolent, drug-related offenses.

As similarly harsh tactics toward misbehavior began to be more systematically applied in schools, they resulted in similarly disturbing societal trends. Specifically, such widespread tactics contributed to the creation of what is now known as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Hoffman, 2014; Nguyen, 2013). The formation of this so-called pipeline corresponded with the growth of youth incarceration and an expansion of the prison population in society at large, with people of color and working-class people being overrepresented among those who are directly impacted by these policy changes. Studies have indicated that the prevalence of zero-tolerance disciplinary practices in schools, including out of school suspensions and expulsions, have contributed to a greater influx of young people into the juvenile justice system (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Clemson, 2015).

Furthermore, whereas in previous generations, students' misbehavior was most often treated as a teachable moment, an opportunity to reflect and grow, and something handled solely at the school site, increasingly, law enforcement has become directly involved in school disciplinary issues. This has dramatically raised the stakes for young people who at times behave outside of the accepted parameters dictated in school settings, as they are being held accountable in ways that undermine their ability to succeed in school and often lead to direct encounters with law enforcement and the establishment of a formal criminal record (Mallett, 2016; Skiba et al. 2015). These dynamics raise greater concern when examined in the context of the disparate impact of such harsh, disciplinary practices on students of color and working-class students, as well as the long-term impact of such practices on student achievement and the corresponding long-term life outcomes associated with this phenomenon.

Racial Disparities

Comparable to statistics of racial demographics in burgeoning adult prisons, working-class students and students of color have disproportionately faced a dramatic increase in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions since the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, including many for offenses that are subjective in nature. According to several recent studies, Black students were 1.8 times more likely to be punished with an out-of-school suspension than their White counterparts and are 2.2 times more likely to be removed from the classroom as a form of punishment, with similar results for Hispanic/Latino students (Finn & Servoss, 2015). A more detailed breakdown of infractions and exclusionary sanctions by race illustrates the overwhelming disparity in suspension practices for Black and White students (see Table 1). The overwhelming disparities in disciplinary practices raise concerns about the impact of the schooling environment on distinct groups of students, especially in light of the data on the burgeoning prison system.

Furthermore, with accusations of misbehavior being subjectively levied and interpreted by teachers and administrators who mostly do not share the racial/ethnic and class backgrounds of the students under disciplinary review, an ever-growing number of studies have suggested that implicit bias and other insidious forms of racism have contributed to these disparate outcomes

Table 1
Infraction Type and Discipline Sanction by Race

Rate of Out-of-School Suspension	Black	White
Disobedience/disruptive behavior	16.3	1.5
Fighting/violence	7.0	0.8
Harassment/intimidation	1.5	0.8
Truancy	1.0	0.2
Rate of In-School Suspension	**Black**	**White**
Disobedience/disruptive behavior	10.0	1.9
Fighting/violence	1.6	0.5
Harassment/intimidation	0.5	0.1
Truancy	0.3	0.1

Note. Rates are calculated as suspensions per 100 students. Adapted from "Security Measures and Discipline in American High Schools," by J. D. Finn and T. J. Servoss, 2015. In D. J. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the School Discipline Gap*, p. 52. Copyright 2001 by Teachers College, Columbia University.

for students from already marginalized communities (Balfanz et al., 2015; Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Finn & Servoss, 2015; Hoffman, 2014). Indeed, several recent studies have called attention specifically to the plight of Black girls, whose rates of suspension and expulsion are the fastest growing among students in U.S. schools. For instance, Wun (2018) found that Black girls nationwide in 2011-2012 were suspended at a rate of 12% compared to White girls at 2%.

Additionally, Epstein, Blake, and González (2017) stated that in 2013-2014, 52% of girls facing multiple suspensions were Black girls, compared to 22% of White girls. Such studies further implicated the racializing processes through which the dominant culture has socialized people to expect Black girls to be more mature and self-reliant than their peers of other races, contributing to a pervasive lack of compassion, nurturing, and understanding for Black girls—a

phenomenon that has devastating consequences in terms of how they are treated in schools and in society, at large (Annamma et al., 2016; Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017; Wun, 2018). Thus, the impact of the legacy of institutionalized racism in this country cannot be ignored when examining the overall impact of school disciplinary policies.

These findings, echoed in a growing body of literature on the topic of racial disparities in school discipline, underscored the urgency behind the need to develop healthier ways of relating to all students, especially those who are most likely to be targeted and subjected to the biases embedded within the current disciplinary systems. As Shollenberger's (2015) study indicated, drawing from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY 97), the use of exclusionary discipline such as suspensions and expulsions was strongly associated with the continuation and exacerbation of the very kinds of behaviors that would result in disciplinary sanction. When such disciplinary actions were looked at in full consciousness of the legacy of racism in this country, it became evident that the socialization of young people in schools, especially students of color, contained within it an expectation of assimilation and conformity that, when resisted by young people in schools, has led to their criminalization and further marginalization from a mainstream society dominated by White cultural norms (Blake, Butler, & Smith, 2015; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Carter et al., 2017). Thus, it became essential to reconsider both the purpose and the impact of such policies, if the prevailing rhetoric in schools about striving for the success of every student is ever to manifest as a tangible reality.

Indeed, such punitive responses toward student behavior, especially those whose racial and ethnic backgrounds already situated them to a certain extent outside of the dominant culture, have compromised these students' opportunity to succeed academically. Studies have indicated that disciplinary disparities along racial lines have tended to mirror the so-called achievement

gap, through which it became increasingly clear that the system of schooling has impacted specific demographics of students differently, not only in terms of academic performance, but also in terms of life outcomes (American Psychological Association Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Williams, 2017). Additional research indicated that suspensions and expulsions often distracted from underlying or related issues that compromised students' ability to fully engage in school, be it chronic absenteeism or learning differences, which amplified their anxiety and undermined their ability to behave in ways that authorities found acceptable (Balfanz et al., 2015; Blake et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the deleterious effects of such disciplinary practices were felt not only by the individual students, themselves, but have had broader effects in society, at large. A recent study, for instance, tracked the impact of suspension on students' long-term academic outcomes, as well as their potential earning power over their lifetimes. Findings suggested that suspensions were highly correlated with eventually dropping out of school, which dramatically lowered a person's earning potential over a lifetime, thus limiting their economic potential to reinvest their earnings in their communities (Marchbanks et al., 2015). Regardless of whether causal relationships between factors could be determined, the use of exclusionary discipline in schools was clearly related to a host of other negative outcomes that undermined students' possibilities of receiving an effective education, with concerning implications for the health of our communities.

Despite the growing body of literature that has substantiated not only the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies in schools, in terms of their stated goal of preventing serious offenses from taking place (American Psychological Association Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Nguyen, 2013), as well as the clear evidence that documented the disparate impact of such policies on historically marginalized groups of students (Balfanz et al., 2015; Hoffman, 2014;

Losen & Whitaker, 2018), there has persisted a limited understanding of how to successfully implement more effective policies and practices that would adequately address student behaviors while also promoting their overall engagement in learning (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). That said, if student behaviors continue to be viewed through the lens of culpability and deficit, and if disruptions to "business as usual" continue to be pathologized rather than embraced, age-old systemic inequities will be perpetuated, as students whose cultural backgrounds locate them outside of the dominant culture and economic mainstream will continue to be perceived as the problem—deficient beings that need to be corrected and will therefore be targeted for unwarranted surveillance, monitoring, social control, and punishment.

Restorative Justice: Beyond a Quick Fix

Though restorative justice has tremendous potential to be used effectively in schools to address student behaviors and to curb the school-to-prison pipeline (which is discussed at length in Chapter 2), its problematic implementation must be raised here briefly as part of the problem that informs this study. There has existed a widespread lack of understanding of how to effectively use restorative justice principles and practices in school settings. Specifically, restorative justice practices have been adopted in many schools as merely another programmatic overlay, added to existing structures and practices, with the expectation that it can serve as a quick fix for the myriad interpersonal issues plaguing school campuses (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, & Brown, 2015). Rather than delving into the depth of ongoing practice required, school administrators have expected immediate results when beginning to implement restorative justice practices and have failed to recognize the need for a long-term focus on systemic change at the level of school culture. In a study that has posited restorative justice practice as an important potential solution, such a reality cannot be overlooked.

Furthermore, restorative justice has often been implemented solely in reaction to misbehaviors—a narrow approach that has misconstrued the intent of restorative justice, at a fundamental level. Specifically, what the adults in such schools have failed to recognize is that restorative justice is not merely a program or a prescribed set of steps or protocols that can easily be adopted by anyone (Bolitho & Bruce, 2017; Morrison, 2007a; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Riestenberg, 2012). Nor is it an approach that can quickly eliminate the kinds of behavioral challenges that inevitably occur on school campuses, where there are endlessly competing needs, priorities, values, and concerns.

As briefly discussed earlier, restorative justice within the school context has been introduced as more than an alternative to punitive zero tolerance approaches. Rather than comprising merely of a set of rigidly fixed and prescribed protocols, restorative justice constitutes a philosophical stance that requires a profound paradigm shift in how people relate to each other, rooted in the socially just recognition that no person is expendable. It further requires unlearning the commonly used punitive approach to addressing harm and, instead, strives for a more humanizing notion of accountability, one that facilitates the repair or restoration of healthy relationships and a transformation of the school community culture (Bolitho & Bruce, 2017; Zehr, 2015).

The goal of restorative justice is, therefore, not intended as a new way of controlling student behavior. Despite the reality of how it has unfortunately been used in schools, restorative justice in its truest form foregrounds the practice of cultivating humanizing relationships that can help to transform the unhealthy social systems that contribute to the manifestation of harmful behavior, in the first place (Ginwright, 2016; Vaandering, 2010). It is through this paradigm shift in attitudes within educational institutions, clearly articulated in the epigraph by Boggs (2002)

that it becomes possible to transform the insidious cycles that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline and to instead cultivate a different outcome—one that ultimately has the potential to transform a school's culture and climate in ways that benefit everyone.

Though ample literature has described the implementation of restorative justice in schools and the range of practices and protocols that have been shown to support some deeper philosophical shifts in school culture (Morrison, 2007a; Riestenberg, 2012; Zehr, 2015), little attention has been paid to the role of restorative justice practitioners or what kinds of internal, personal preparation is required for adults working in school settings to enact truly restorative practices, in place of traditionally punitive ones. This gap in the literature was one that this study has intended to address. As a result of this gap in collective understanding, there has persisted a significant amount of skepticism about restorative justice practices in schools because it has not been possible for anyone to simply implement a so-called restorative protocol and expect their classroom or school climate to be automatically transformed. All too often, people who are new to attempting to implement such practices will find that "it doesn't work," meaning that it does not immediately have the desired impact that they hoped for. What this study has highlighted is how essential it is for restorative justice practitioners to undertake their own reflective journey of healing, growth, and self-inquiry. It foregrounded this fundamentally intrapersonal element of restorative justice as being essential to effective facilitation of restorative justice practices in schools, if the goal is to ultimately transform oppressive relationships and toxic dynamics and to create schools that meet the academic and human needs of all student populations.

Purpose of the Study

This study uplifted the internal work that practitioners undertake on a personal level to be able to effectively implement restorative justice practices in their schools. By exploring

participants' personal histories and their journeys into the field of restorative justice practice, this study sought to articulate the ongoing project of personal and professional development required to engage with young people and adults in a restorative or transformative manner within a school setting. In choosing this focus, a much more personal aspect of restorative justice work emerged as a key component of working for social justice in schools, one that began with the quality of interactions between individual people. This study relied upon a fundamental belief articulated by Weil (2016) that "the education of children is the root system underlying all other systems" (p. 3), and that if we work toward transforming the educational system, other systems will necessarily evolve in complementary directions. The study further emphasized that, through the cultivation of healthy relationships between young people and adults in educational settings, school communities and the broader society can be healed and transformed.

With its emphasis on the lived experiences of practitioners, this study humanized and rendered more transparent the depth and complexity of preparation required to engage effectively in this work and to actualize its social justice imperative. All too often in the realm of education, value is placed primarily on what is quantifiable and easily reduced to a formula or set of fool-proof, and ultimately abstract, steps. The qualitative methodology this study adopted aimed to counteract that detached, scientific approach and instead sought to bring to life the richly complex lives and experiences of people engaging in this ultimately transformative work with youth. As such, it sought to reclaim the research process from the grip of ostensible objectivity and bring human stories back into focus as the primary, foundational elements of a transformative educational experience. Ultimately, this study emphasized the personal development of practitioners' philosophy and their capacity for engaging in restorative work within school communities that serves to catalyze healing and transformation.

Research Questions

I used the following research to highlight the process of self-inquiry and healing undertaken by school-based restorative justice practitioners to prepare them to engage effectively in restorative work in schools:

1. How do school-based restorative justice practitioners' multiple identities and self-reflective practices influence their restorative justice work in schools?
2. What practices and frameworks do restorative justice practitioners associate with effective implementation of restorative justice in schools?
3. What internal and external obstacles do school-based restorative justice practitioners identify in their work? What are some strategies they use to address these obstacles?

Conceptual Lens

The conceptual lens used for this study integrated several key frameworks to acknowledge the complexity of the internal personal work that is required to effectively engage in restorative justice practices in schools. It posited that the interactions between these frameworks would yield new insights on the function of restorative justice practitioners on school campuses and their unique capacity to catalyze the transformation of school culture and climate, using their own personal growth and ongoing healing as a model. Indeed, it is hoped that this study has articulated a foundation for what I am calling *transformative school-community-based restorative justice*. This is an approach to restorative justice in school-communities that recognizes both the potential inherent in restorative justice practices and their limitations given the broader context of a society founded on institutionalized racism, in which people are personally and collectively traumatized due to intersecting forms of oppression (see Figure 1).

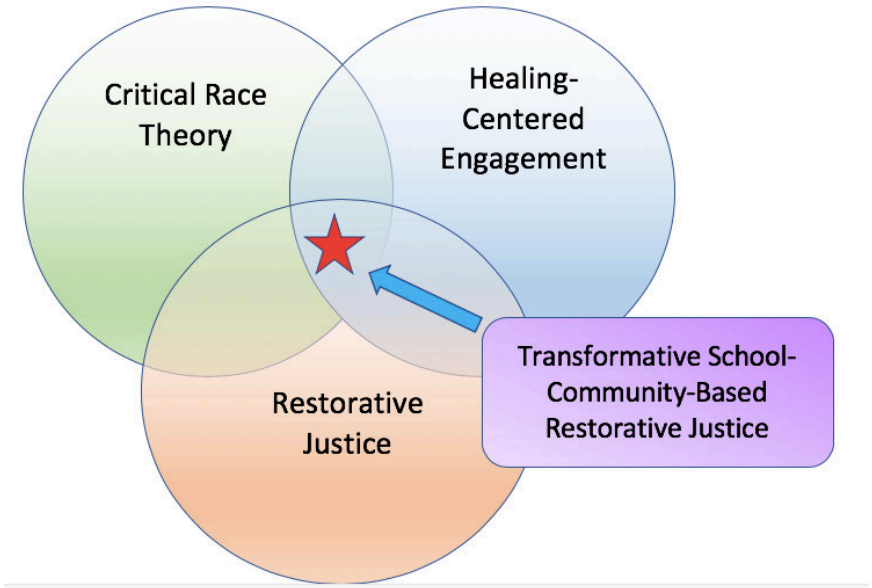

Figure 1. Conceptual lens.

This study has sought to articulate a vision for a transformative form of restorative justice practice that emerged from the nexus of three frameworks: restorative justice, critical race theory (CRT), and healing-centered engagement or healing justice. This transformative version of restorative justice honors our human capacity for growth and self-reflection, even as it acknowledges the legacy of injustices that plague our society and all its institutions, including education. This exploration has served as a road map toward the transformation of unhealthy and unjust systems that are ultimately at the root of harmful behaviors so that schools can be reclaimed as sites for the cultivation of democratic life, wherein our similarities and differences can be celebrated and our personal and collective needs can be met (Darder, 2012; Giroux & Penna, 1998; Vaandering, 2010).

Restorative Justice

This study sought to honor the wisdom of the tradition of restorative justice, which uses a systems approach to cultivating healthy relationships within the context of a community and which operates on the fundamental principle that nobody is expendable. The practice of

restorative justice work in the modern, Western world has acknowledged with gratitude the origins of such a humanizing philosophy as being central to the cultures of numerous indigenous societies that have recognized how the well-being of each person is essential to the health of the whole community (Vaandering, 2010; Zehr, 2015). Thus, a healthy society is grounded in the process of cultivating and sustaining healthy relationships, as there is mutual recognition that a community's collective survival is dependent upon the well-being of each individual member.

When applied in the modern context to instances where harm has been caused, this philosophy mandated a type of response to harm that was different than the punitive, exclusionary approach that has become rampant in dominant Western culture. Rather than casting out someone who has caused harm, this approach recognized the need for everyone who has been affected by the situation to come together to process through the impact of what has taken place, such that the person who has caused harm experiences a form of redemptive shame that leads them to be internally motivated to behave in ways that account for their previous actions and that repair any harm that has been done (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015).

Ultimately, a restorative approach to harm and conflict calls into question the very foundation of modern Western societies, in which fear and distrust so often prevail and where relationships, as a result, have often functioned in superficial and conditional ways. Instead, a restorative approach to healthy relationships prioritizes building trust and authentic connection so that, when conflict inevitably does arise, there is a solid relationship as the foundation through which authentic accountability and healing are sought.

Critical Race Theory

In the pluralistic context of the United States and other modern societies, healthy relationships have too often been undermined by the broader context of power relations that systematically divide and racialize people into categories, arbitrarily privileging certain groups over others. Such divisions then have served to undermine our collective ability to engage effectively in democratic life (Darder, 2012; Giroux & Penna, 1988; Vaandering, 2010). In the United States, specifically, with the legacy of the current distribution of wealth rooted in plantation slavery and the construction of racialized categories used to rationalize the brutalization and enslavement of the very people whose labor catalyzed the compilation of such wealth, it has become essential to critically examine racism as a factor in perpetuating injustices and social and material inequalities throughout society (Anderson, 2016; Darder, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; hooks, 1994; Wadhwa, 2016).

Schools, since their inception in the United States, have served a socializing purpose and have operated as a vehicle through which injustices have been reproduced and perpetuated (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2003; McLaren, 2003). This can be seen in contemporary times, through the continued segregation of students by race and class, despite federal policies explicitly prohibiting race-based segregation. It is further evident in the reality that students of color are disproportionately represented in lower level classes, as well as special education, and that the graduation rates for White students far exceeds that of their peers of color (González, 2015a; Howard, 2010). Given these systemically embedded ways in which students of color experience schooling compared to their White peers, it is essential to explore the impact of the legacy of racism on how schools function (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The imperative is even stronger when looking in the realm of disciplinary policy and practice,

where students of color are significantly overrepresented in being sanctioned with exclusionary discipline than their White counterparts (American Psychological Association Zero-Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Annamma et al., 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). In a school system where more than 80% of educators are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, the racialized component of such dynamics cannot be ignored.

Given these pervasive trends in schools throughout the United States, critical race theory has provided an invaluable theoretical framework through which to examine the systemic impact of race and racism on students of color and to explore what would be required to transform these insidious dynamics in schools. Emerging in the late 1980s as a response to the recognition of the persistence of systemic racism in the functioning on law schools and legal studies and, recognizing significant gaps in analysis within the critical legal studies movement, critical race theory (CRT) sought from its inception to foreground the salience of race when seeking to address issues of systemic injustice in the United States (Crenshaw, 2011). Theorists in this movement recognized that part of the reason why it was difficult to bring about lasting change to institutions that perpetuated injustice was that there did not exist adequate frames of reference through which existing struggles could be understood. About this, Crenshaw (2011) stated:

> Within the context of particular institutional and discursive struggles over the scope of race and racism in the 1980s, significant divergences between allies concerning their descriptive, normative, and political accounts of racial power began to crystallize. This misalignment became evident in a series of encounters—institutional and political—that brought into play a set of 'misunderstandings' between a range of individual actors and groups. (p. 1259)

The CRT movement sought to clarify the root of such misunderstandings and to catalyze institutional change through the recognition that an analysis of racism must always be central to any political or social effort that aims to contribute to justice and equity.

Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) seminal text, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," was among the first to directly address how this framework could be applied to the educational system and identified the intersection between race and property as a crucial point for any analysis aimed at promoting greater justice and equity. At the same time and as such categories were seen as fruitful inroads for inquiry, Crenshaw (2011) cautioned:

> CRT is not so much an intellectual unit filled with natural stuff . . . but one that is dynamically constituted by a series of contestations and convergences pertaining to the ways that racial power is understood and articulated in the post-civil rights era. (p. 1261)

In other words, the framework for systemic analysis offered by CRT is not one comprised of static and immutable categories; rather, it has invited a dynamic and ongoing analysis of power relations that manifest in racialized ways, given the contemporary and historical context in which institutions are situated.

In examining more contemporary applications for CRT, Crenshaw (2011) recognized the challenges and opportunities inherent in the dominant cultural norm of post-racialism, and the power of a CRT approach to analyzing such rhetoric and the policies that emerge as a result of the norm of colorblindness. She stated that:

> The opportunity presented now is for scholars across the disciplines not only to reveal how disciplinary conventions themselves constitute racial power, but also to provide an inventory of the critical tools developed over time to weaken and potentially dismantle them. Beyond the academy, the opportunity to present a counter-narrative to the

> premature societal settlement that marches under the banner of post-racialism is ripe. In short, the next turn in CRT should be decidedly interdisciplinary, intersectional, and cross-institutional. (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1262)

As such, in continuing to evolve in concert with the shifting narratives in society, CRT has invited both complexity and specificity into the examination of systemic issues of justice and equity as they continue to manifest through interactions, policies, institutions, and systems. By developing a practice of thinking beyond the confines of conventional disciplines or the boundaries of specific institutions—or even discrete categories such as singular aspects of identity—it has become possible to develop a way of seeking and thinking about systemic issues that can catalyze their transformation.

Thus, CRT implicated all adults in school settings as playing a role in perpetuating unjust dynamics and outcomes, as well as having the potential to be part of the solution (Darder, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The pathway toward such a solution comes through critical self-examination, reflection, inquiry and dialogue, all of which were well aligned with the purpose and practice of restorative justice. By using the lens of critical race theory, it became possible to speak about insidious dynamics that the dominant culture prefers would remain unnoticed or at the very least unnamed (Darder, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Giroux & Penna, 1988; McLaren, 2003). This critical approach, in countering the normativity of silence about race and racism, invites the discomfort that inevitably comes with examining one's own complicity in perpetuating injustice and further recognizes this inquiry as a prerequisite for the transformation of such dynamics.

Healing-Centered Engagement

Healing-centered engagement has built upon existing work in the field of trauma-informed practices and has taken it several steps further toward an even greater degree of depth and integration. Ginwright (2016) stated:

> Radical healing encourages teachers, activists, and youth stakeholders to consider that the results that we seek are a function of the quality of our relationships and the clarity of our consciousness and way of being. Successful policy change and interventions that create healing, improve school climate, and improve learning depends on the interior condition of both the adults and young people in the communities and schools we seek to transform. Change is not only a function of what we do, what we know, but it is also about who we are on the inside. (p. 111)

This statement encapsulated the need to integrate notions of healing and transformation into this inquiry into restorative justice practices. It is not enough to simply engage in the practices. We must deeply inquire into who we are in the practices we are engaged in and consider how we are healing from the traumatic experiences we have likely encountered.

Trauma-informed practices. As one aspect of healing-centered engagement, trauma-informed work directly aligned with restorative justice in that it has recognized that behaviors manifest as survival strategies that, when better understood, can be transformed. Furthermore, it has helped to posit restorative justice as a response to a public health crisis, rather than seeing it as merely a set of strategies to be used to address disciplinary issues. Rather than seeking to judge or punish unhealthy or harmful behavior, those who use a trauma-informed or healing-centered framework seek to understand the causes of behavior and, ultimately, provide the supportive space required for a lasting transformation to occur. In other words, a healing-

centered or trauma-informed approach aims to restore health and well-being rather than merely controlling someone. This framework emerged from the findings of a 1998 study by a group of physicians sponsored by Kaiser Permanente in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control, on the lasting impact of adverse childhood experiences, also known as ACEs (Felitti et al., 1998). From that study, others in the fields of mental health and education have extrapolated how such experiences often translated into the kinds of behaviors that elicited correction or punishment in schools and even worse, if they are left unchecked, and young people encounter the police (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008; Dods, 2013; Ortiz, 2017).

A trauma-informed and healing-centered framework has recognized that a punitive approach to behaviors that are a result of childhood trauma only exacerbate the behavior and often contribute to the re-traumatization of an already vulnerable person, leading to a downward spiral in terms of behavior and overall ability to function within socially-accepted parameters (Ortiz, 2017; van der Kolk, 2002). Thus, a trauma-informed approach to school discipline—having gained widespread attention through the 2015 documentary film, *Paper Tigers*—has recognized the need for something other than a punitive response to young people, who may have experienced numerous ACEs in their formative years and may still experience them as an ongoing part of their lives (Redford & Pritzker, 2015). Behaviors triggered by trauma are thus understood to be symptoms, rather than personal flaws to be regulated or punished.

A trauma-informed approach has also recognized that racism and other forms of oppression impact people's psyche and behavior in much the same ways as other forms of trauma (Capatosto, 2015; DeGruy, 2005). DeGruy's (2005) text encapsulated much of this complex phenomenon in what she terms *post-traumatic slave syndrome*. DeGruy traced the

legacy of institutionalized racism and highlighted the traumatic impact that is still enacted in the lives and relationships of the descendants of enslaved peoples. Drawing upon the clarity of her work and others like Capatosto (2015), who are beginning to understand and name the impact of systemic oppression on young people, a trauma-informed, healing-centered approach to school discipline must operate with race-conscious, class-conscious, gender-conscious lenses, similar to the critical consciousness of intersectionality that arose within the realm of CRT (Crenshaw, 1989).

As such, a healing-centered or trauma-informed approach has provided inroads into interrupting the kinds of injustices that have all-too-often been perpetuated in schools when responding to the behaviors of young people from marginalized backgrounds. Instead of pathologizing young people and locating the source of wrongdoing superficially on their behavior, such an approach has invited a deeper inquiry into the systemic roots of such behaviors. Moreover, it has invited examination of the behavior more as an indicator of a larger structural ailment, rather than something that is inherently wrong with any individual person (Darder, 2012; DeGruy, 2005; Vaandering, 2010).

Through this inquiry, it became clear that a healing-centered approach to education, much like restorative justice, was oriented toward the healing of personal wounds in conjunction with the transformation of unhealthy, unjust institutions, systems, and cultures. By distinguishing between the impact of a behavior and the inherent value of a person, it became possible to more effectively address the root causes of problematic behaviors and to ultimately transform them not to control them but, rather, to support their development and create conditions under which they could thrive (Frank, Bose, & Schrobenhauser-Clonan, 2014). Furthermore, moments of harm or unskillful behavior are treated as opportunities to connect and to hold people accountable for

their actions in a loving way, preserving the focus on cultivating transformative relationships and communities that can become self-sustaining in the long term. Additionally, behavioral issue can be seen as symptomatic of broader social issues pertaining to injustice and can be addressed on the level of legacies of injustice, rather than pathologizing individuals and their behaviors. Healing-centered engagement or healing justice, for Ginwright (2016), "involves (1) transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place, (2) collectively healing and building hope" (p. 7). Thus, the focus is on healing the conditions underlying people's behavior and creating alternate conditions that are grounded in a realistic form of hopefulness.

Methodology

This study used critical narratives as methodological approach to center the lives and stories of nine school-based restorative justice practitioners. These practitioners all worked in public schools in Southern California, and their professional contexts spanned all subjects, Grades 6-12. This qualitative methodological approach was grounded in the philosophy of pragmatic relational ontology (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), which rests in the notion that reality is contextual and can be understood primarily through the lived experiences of people. Thus, the method of storytelling was recognized as a valid approach to data collection, as the perceptions and interpretations of the storytellers, themselves, were honored as containing their own fundamental truths (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

Data for this study were gathered through recorded one-to-one sessions, in which I used open-ended prompts to elicit participants' stories, as well as through a focus group that included six of the nine participants. Prior to the focus group, participants had the opportunity to engage in member checking of the initial transcripts to clarify their statements and to add to them, as

needed. The data from these one-on-one conversations were then coded using a grounded theoretical approach, with an eye toward emerging patterns and significant themes. While the pre-selection of the aforementioned conceptual lens certainly guided my focus toward some categories or patterns that seemed significant, I worked consciously to remain as open as possible to the themes that emerged organically through an analysis of participants' narratives and lived experiences as restorative justice practitioners. These initial patterns and themes were then presented to participants during the focus group, where they had the opportunity to further reflect, clarify, and prioritize which themes seemed most salient or significant. My intention was to ultimately co-construct the meaning or significance of key themes or ideas with participants, which I hoped would adequately mitigate the impact of my personal assumptions or biases about the work that came from my own experiences as a restorative justice practitioner.

The final stage of data analysis used an adapted version of a framework posited by Batts (2002) called the four levels, which is an analytical tool that aligned well with the conceptual lens used in this study. The four levels are *personal, interpersonal, institutional* and *cultural*. Using a modified version of this framework, which was developed to catalyze social justice and institutional change, helped me to organize the findings and clarify how they could be used for the improvement of the field of restorative justice work.

Positionality

As the introduction to this chapter indicated, my positionality in this study is that of a White, female high-school teacher with an ongoing interest in better understanding dynamics of power and privilege that play out in school settings and that are at least partially grounded in specific aspects of identity. My interest in this topic is grounded in my own trajectory of beginning to understand the impact of my unearned privileges, as well as the ways in which I

have faced discrimination. These experiences have shaped how I view the world and how I interact with other people, especially my students. I recognize how much harm can be perpetuated when dynamics of privilege and oppression are not acknowledged; and I strive for healing in my relationships and to have a genuinely positive impact on the lives of young people I encounter in schools. Wherever I go, I aim to cultivate opportunities for transforming unhealthy tendencies in how people relate to each other, especially in school settings, to hopefully promote and catalyze broader social transformation in service of justice and equity.

I recognize, too, my shortcomings in these areas, and I continually reflect on the ways in which I have perpetuated injustices in my classroom through my unskillful use of power and my inability, at times, to operate in a manner that is firmly grounded in a transformative form of restorative justice. For instance, I have had interactions with students of color, at times, where it seems that my only recourse in addressing their behavior is to send them out of the classroom or to assign detention, even while recognizing in the moment that my actions are part of a larger system that perpetuates injustice against students of color, in particular. My own shame and regret at such experiences has spurred an interest in deeply exploring what it takes to truly engage with young people in restorative ways and what the conditions are that are necessary to make it effective. While this shame that I feel about certain unskillful interactions from my teaching experience is my own, and I seek to be accountable for the impact of my actions, I also recognize that my behaviors took place within the broader constructs of school-communities. As such, this study also sought to interrogate conditions in which practitioners have found themselves, to better understand how and why certain behaviors manifest among adults as well as students. I hoped, and it has proven true, that this study would also provide me with the

perspective and inspiration necessary to reengage in school settings with greater confidence and commitment to transformative school-community based restorative justice.

Delimitations

This study intentionally included a relatively small number of participants who are all located in the southern California area for ease of access and to prioritize engaging in depth with each participant's personal and professional story. It also focused specifically on school-based restorative justice practitioners working in mostly traditional public schools, as it was my intention to highlight the essential work that takes place in schools that are often maligned or disregarded in broader conversations on innovation and effectiveness in education. I further emphasized classrooms as the primary spaces where many early interventions of a restorative nature take place, as so much of the power of a restorative approach to working with youth resides in the aspects of community-building and informal interventions that prevent conflicts from escalating. Furthermore, this study focused on practitioners who work primarily with students in their adolescent years—from Grades 6-12, given that much of the existing research on school discipline focuses on this tumultuous time in young people's lives (Balfanz et al., 2015; González, 2012). Young people in this age group need effective guidance and support in learning how to engage effectively with peers and others in ways that acknowledge their life experiences, while providing them with opportunities to continue to grow—something that a restorative justice approach can provide.

Limitations

Given that most participants worked in different school settings, it was difficult to make direct comparisons between participants' experiences, or to anticipate the degree to which these findings would be generalizable to other contexts. Furthermore, the choice to track specific

themes rested with each individual researcher, so there was a considerable amount of subjectivity embedded within the design of the study, such that another researcher might have chosen to emphasize different aspects of participants' narratives and might have arrived at some different conclusions. Additionally, my choice to focus on practitioners working mostly in traditional public schools could limit opportunities to compare practitioners' experiences in different types of schools and, again, could raise some questions about the potential for generalizability. Finally, the realities of school-based practitioners' schedules resulted in not all participants being able to participate in the focus group, though they each did dedicate a considerable amount of time to the one-on-one narrative session. That said, not all of the participants had the opportunity to weigh in on the key themes I identified, though there was considerable affirmation and consensus from among those who did participate, so it is unlikely that the others would have dissented greatly from the rest of the group.

Key Terms

The following list provides some of the definitions for key concepts that are used in this study, recognizing that multiple definitions may exist for certain terms, depending on the contexts in which they are used.

Adverse childhood experiences: Exposure during childhood to abuse or household dysfunction that can have a lasting, traumatizing impact on a person. Types of adverse experiences are categorized broadly in terms of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, as well as household dysfunction, in the forms of exposure to mental illness, substance abuse, violence toward a caregiver, and criminal activity in the household (Felitti et al., 1998).

Circle process: The format originates from indigenous communities and provides an inclusive process not only for those involved in conflict, but anyone in the community who was affected by it. Various types are in use, under a range of names, including peacemaking circles, healing circles, community building circles, etc. In each of these processes, a talking piece is used, and only the person holding the talking piece speaks, while others listen actively. There are usually multiple rounds, with an open check-in followed by responses to prompts (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Riestenberg, 2012; Zehr, 2015).

Critical race theory (CRT): A theoretical lens that first gained traction in the legal field as a critique of dominant civil rights discourse and of the slow pace of reform around issues of race in the United States. It foregrounds the notion that racism is the norm in the United States, and often uses storytelling as a vehicle through which to provide counter-narratives. It has been applied to educational institutions as a way of examining the institutional structures that perpetuate inequity and seeks to transform society to become more racially just (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Multiple identities: A term that encapsulates the complexity of personal identity, acknowledging that a person's sense of self is comprised of an evolving consciousness of the specific ways in which one is both similar to and different from other people. This term invites exploration of power dynamics across specific aspects of identity, including race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and class, and other variables that correspond to differential degrees of access to the dominant culture and accompanying privileges (Tatum, 2000).

Restorative justice: an approach to achieving justice that involves, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offence or harm to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations with the intention to heal and put things as right as possible (Zehr, 2015).

Restorative justice practice(s): A range of tools that educators can use to promote positive relationships with all students and build healthy communities in schools. These same tools can then be used to respond to conflict and repair relationships that have been damaged, as they have already been established as community practices (Stewart Kline, 2016).

Restorative principles: Restorative practices are grounded in key principles that guide the implementation of specific protocols. These principles include, first and foremost, a primary focus on repairing harm when it has occurred by highlighting the needs of everyone affected. It does so by cultivating a recognition of mutual obligation to each other as members of a shared community. It operates on the principle of inclusivity, involving all stakeholders in a community process until all community members' needs have been met in through a consensual practice of full engagement and loving accountability (Zehr, 2015).

Restorative values: For restorative principles to be enacted authentically, there must exist an underlying commitment to the value of respect for all, at the basic level of humanity. Thus, one key restorative value is an awareness of the interconnectedness of all people. At the same time, this value must be tempered by the recognition of the uniqueness of each person's needs and the particularity of each community member's perspective (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Zehr, 2015).

Trauma-informed classroom practice(s): A range of strategies and practices that support physical and emotional awareness and promote self-regulation through developing effective responses to stress, including those that trigger past traumas. These include activities that specifically help to center and ground a person in an awareness of present sensations, as well as various strategies for working directly with the breath and linking the breath to conscious physical action that supports the processing and release of stressful emotions (Frank et al., 2014).

Organization of Study

This study intended to contribute to the growing body of literature that supports the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools by elucidating the crucial role of practitioners and the journey required to effectively engage with young people in schools using restorative justice as a guiding framework. Chapter 2 of this study explores the existing research on the origins and practices associated with restorative justice, particularly in school settings. It uses existing literature to demonstrate connections between the distinct components of the conceptual framework and to make a case for the need for a race-conscious and healing-centered approach to restorative justice practice in schools. Chapter 3 further elucidates the methodological approach used in this study and explored the philosophical cohesion between this methodology and the topic under study. Chapter 4 presents the narratives gathered from participants and identifies major patterns and themes that emerged. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the major patterns and themes and concludes with a synthesis of key findings and specific recommendations for future research and practice in the field of restorative justice. This synthesis was offered in the hope that transformative school-community-based restorative justice

can be used in ways that ultimately transform school culture and improve the overall climate for everyone who spends time on K-12 campuses.

CHAPTER 2

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

> In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change. We have to appreciate that truth can be received from outside of—not only within—our own group. . . . We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with another person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper. (Thich Nhat Hanh, as cited in hooks, 2003, p. xv-xvi)

This chapter provides an introduction to the origins and history of restorative justice, acknowledging its origins in indigenous cultures and locating its adoption in modern Western societies within the judicial system. It explains the key principles and practices associated with restorative justice work, to provide additional context for examining how such practices have been integrated into school settings and to identify where challenges and contradictions have emerged. This overview provides a foundation for the more focused discussion that follows on how restorative justice has been used and applied in school settings, including a critique of some of the common pitfalls and the articulation of some possible avenues for improvement.

Specifically, an understanding of the underlying philosophy and practices associated with restorative justice allows for further exploration of the potential for restorative justice to be used in schools as a framework for improving school climate and culture, fostering a sense of belonging and opportunity for healing among all students, promoting achievement, and ensuring equity of educational outcomes. It also provides a point of reference for recognizing *how* and *why* schools often fall short of operating in a truly restorative manner and underscores the urgency behind developing school-wide practices that cultivate equitable relationships and support healthy conflict resolution. This includes recognizing the enduring legacy of racism in the United States and the disparate impact of disciplinary practices based on race; as such, I

examine literature on the need for a race-conscious and culturally relevant approach to implementing restorative justice in schools, one that can promote the transformation of existing legacies of injustice and inequity.

This chapter also explores literature associated with the field of trauma-informed practices. Such practices encourage self-care and healing as precursors to supporting others experiencing similar trauma. Thus, despite key gaps in the literature, this study posits that the combination of self-awareness of race and other aspects of identity and the ongoing need for healing and personal growth to hold space for others' suffering comprise foundational elements of restorative justice practitioners' effectiveness and the sustainability of their work.

Origins of Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative justice is not a new concept; on the contrary, it has served as the philosophical foundation for the cultivation of healthy relationships in countless indigenous communities dating as far back as there are records of community practices (Coyle & Zimmerman, 2009; Llewellyn & Howse, 1999; Zehr, 2015). Though the language used to describe this approach to justice varies by context and culture, the fundamental premises are remarkably similar and speak to a form of wisdom that emerges from the recognition that the well-being of any person is inextricably linked to the well-being of the communities in which they participate, and vice versa. Such a philosophy recognizes that every person is essential to the community; that nobody is expendable; and that it would be extraordinarily harmful to the community itself to cast out or otherwise dispose of a member of the community, even if that community member has caused harm (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999; Riestenberg, 2012).

It is essential to recognize these cultural and contextual origins of restorative practices resist the all-too-prevalent tendency in dominant Western culture to co-opt and reify aspects of a

culture and apply them in ways that are divorced of the context or cultural wisdom that underlies a specific practice or set of practices (Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015). Recognizing the roots of restorative justice as being essential to the fabric of numerous long-lasting cultures and civilizations helps to clarify that restorative justice is more than a set of practices; it is a philosophical mindset and way of approaching interactions with other people that goes far beyond addressing moments of misbehavior, notions of which are also value-laden and culturally specific (Riestenberg, 2011; Zehr, 2015). With its infusion into Western societies, it has become clear that what is necessary for restorative justice is to be used with integrity and to undertake a genuine and profound cultural shift—a shift that reinvents how harm is conceptualized and how individuals are held accountable for their behavior.

In the modern Western context, where accountability has been equated with punishment, restorative justice first gained traction within criminal justice as an alternative to incarceration (Morrison, 2007a; Riestenberg, 2011). Through a range of programs and practices often structurally linked to the court system by way of alternative sentencing pathways and other programs, restorative justice practices have been used in efforts to interrupt cycles of recidivism and to expand notions of accountability beyond punitive reactions intended to match the degree of offense. By contrast, restorative justice has included the potential for repairing and restoring relationships that have been damaged and creating the context through which healing and transformation could take place (Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015).

This approach to reconciling instances of wrongdoing is then radically different than conventional Western criminal justice models, and rests on the ability to separate behaviors from individual actors and a strongly held belief in that person's inherent worth and capacity to engage empathetically with people they have harmed (Zehr, 2015). At the same time, it holds strongly to

the recognition that certain behaviors are unacceptable and demand the transformation of the perpetrator's mindset to ensure that existing harm is addressed, and that future harm is prevented (Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015).

Restorative Principles and Practices

Within the context of this broader philosophy on community health and loving accountability, restorative justice practices embody clear principles through a range of practices designed to strengthen relationships and repair wrongdoing. As a method for addressing conflict and harm, restorative justice relies upon a fundamental commitment to truth-telling through live encounters between people affected by an instance of harm, including the individual or individuals deemed responsible for perpetrating the harm (Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015). These encounters emphasize the need for people to hear each other's perspectives to develop a more complete understanding of the impact of their actions. Indeed, the approach to harm advocated for by restorative justice is analogous to Freire's (2003) notion of the need to break down the seeming dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed. For Freire, the very notion of oppressor and oppressed serve to reify each other, to the detriment of each finding their way toward freedom and fuller humanity.

Restorative justice is, therefore, rooted in the principle of respectful engagement, always with the intention of restoring relationships and facilitating an integrated form of accountability that emerges from within, serves as a genuine expression of understanding of the impact of behavior, and expresses a strong internal commitment to righting the wrongs that have been experienced (Zehr, 2015). Thus, a restorative justice notion of accountability operates primarily at an internal (or interpersonal) level by catalyzing self-awareness through reflection, in the context of hearing how other people have experienced one's actions. It is an invitation toward

regaining the capacity for empathy that may have been eroded or lost in a moment where harm was caused, and recommitting to the kinds of actions that are mutually beneficial and expressive of healthy relationships between individuals and community.

Restorative Justice Circles

The most widely recognized format for such truth-telling encounters is the restorative justice circle. Known by many names, including *community building circle*, *circle process*, or *harm circle*, among others (Clifford, 2013; Morrison, 2007a; Riestenberg, 2012; Zehr, 2015), the circle provides a physical manifestation of the type of accountability sought through a restorative process. In a circle, everyone sits facing each other, ideally with no barriers separating one another. In some practices, a ceremonial centerpiece is used to provide a visual and symbolic focus for the process and to infuse the process with a sense of something sacred or profound. The formation of a circle creates an unbroken link between all participants, visually and symbolically, demonstrating the commitment to restoring a healthy community. Every person is considered an equal member of the circle and is fully included in the process, even if they are the one who has caused harm—with an opportunity to listen deeply and to share their own perspectives on the events under discussion.

Community building circles. It is essential to note that not all circles are convened to address harm, as that would be a narrow application of the underlying philosophy of restorative justice. Given that the primary focus of restorative justice is on the cultivation and maintenance of a healthy community, circle processes are used at times for purely community building purposes (Coyle & Zimmerman, 2009; Hopkins, 2004). In such circles, people come together to share stories, memories, dreams, and other experiences that deepen the bonds between all participants, through deep listening and authentic sharing. Each circle begins with an affirmation

of the guidelines for circle practice, which include an expectation that one person speaks at a time; each person speaks from their own experience; people share air space and are mindful of the time constraints of the circle process to ensure that everyone can be heard; and people honor confidentiality, and hold strongly to the commitment to not repeat someone else's story outside of the circle. Oftentimes, a talking-piece is used to visually indicate whose turn it is to speak, so that each person experiences being deeply listened to, without cross-talk or interruptions. Such circles provide an opportunity for truth-telling of whatever arises in the moment, with an opportunity to be heard and silently supported, without needing to justify, defend or respond to others' reactions or interpretations (Clifford, 2013; Hopkins, 2004; Riestenberg, 2012; Zehr, 2015). Thus, this type of process invites participants to be fully themselves and to share their perspectives with others through the process, weaving stronger bonds of connection and mutual understanding.

Addressing harm. Once circle practice has been established as a norm within a school-community, the groundwork is in place for using circles to address harm. If community building circles have been used in a genuine way, true to the philosophical principles underlying restorative justice, then, when harm has been caused, a harm circle can be called for, to address what has happened. This type of circle includes anyone who has been affected by the harm. As such, it is still fully inclusive of anyone who feels that they have a genuine need to be there; and all participants enter the space with the shared intention to restore relationships and repair any harm that has been caused. This requires, first and foremost, that the person or people identified as having perpetrated some form of harm be willing to engage in the process and hear the perspectives raised by others in the circle, all of whom have been affected by the situation in some way.

At times, extensive preparation is required by facilitators to arrive at the point where a circle process is possible (Clifford, 2013; Stuart & Pranis, 2006). Through this opportunity to hear the experiences of other people, and the impact of their actions, perpetrators of harm engaged in a restorative process will likely experience what Morrison (2007a) called *redemptive shame*. By hearing and witnessing the impact of their actions on others, the individual's capacity for self-reflection and accountability is engaged, thus motivating them to remedy the harm they have caused (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015).

Ultimately, a harm circle or other restorative process used when harm has been caused provides a vehicle through which reparations can be made and through which all community members' needs can be met. The process of truth-telling and perspective-sharing allows for the complexity of the underlying dynamics to be unearthed and considered, and for a collective sense of empathy for each other's experiences to be heightened (Llewellyn & Howse, 1999; Morrison, 2007a; Pepinsky, 2006; Stuart & Pranis, 2006). Thus, the purpose of a harm circle is not at all about blame or punitive notions of accountability. Rather, it is rooted in the principle that members of a community are mutually accountable to each other and that when everyone's basic human needs are collectively met there is no reason for individuals to act out in ways that cause harm (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Llewellyn & Howse, 1999). This requires a collective shift in understanding how harm is conceptualized and addressed. It further affirms a commitment to the dignity and worth of every community member and a willingness to express one's vulnerability as a vehicle toward ultimately healing and strengthening the collective.

The literature is replete with examples of how harm circles have been used to effectively resolve conflicts and repair or even transform relationships that were strained or broken by

harmful behavior. In their work, Umbreit and Armour (2010) included anecdotes about the impact of harm circles, including the following:

> A youth got drunk, broke into a school along with his friends, and accidentally set fire to the school causing enormous damage. At a meeting with some of the teachers and parents, a young girl showed the youth the scrapbook she had kept in her classroom. About one-half was just burned to a crisp, and the other half was charred. She said, "This is all I've got as a remembrance of my brother, because this scrapbook is photos of my family and a photo of my brother, and he died not so long ago, about a year ago, and that's all I've got now." Then you saw the tears trickling down the face of the youth. This was the start of a process in which the youth eventually took "ownership" of the offense, apologized to all affected by it, and gave up his weekends to help build a new playground. He did not come to the attention of the police again (Cayley, 1998; Johnstone, 2002). (p. 111)

This example—along with countless others like it—demonstrated the power of the circle process, through which someone who has caused harm is commanded to bear witness to the impact of their actions on others. This act of listening and witnessing generated an emotional, empathetic response and humanized or re-humanized each of the participants by making space to hear each other's perspectives and understand each other's experiences.

Restorative Justice in the School Setting

As research in the field of school disciplinary practices began to reach consensus in the 1990s in condemnation of the impact of zero-tolerance policies, restorative justice practices began to be implemented with greater intentionality and scope in U.S. schools. Scholarship in the field began to specifically call attention to the negative impact of punitive discipline on student

achievement and long-term academic and life outcomes and the need to rethink how to address student behaviors while preserving young people's presence in schools (Balfanz et al., 2015; González, 2012; Harrison, 2007; Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015; Mallett, 2016; Robbins & Kovalchuk, 2012). For instance, in a longitudinal study of Florida youth, Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox (2015) demonstrated a clear connection between even one suspension in ninth grade and lower attendance and performance rates throughout high school. Recent findings such as this indicated that the values of retribution or punishment, which have been the norm undergirding disciplinary practices in schools, needed to be replaced with the values of healing and restoration, whereby moments of misbehavior can be used as opportunities to teach and transmit these more community-centered values, strengthening the school community (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Mullet, 2014; Vaandering, 2013).

Drawing upon the considerable momentum restorative justice gained in the legal field, its key principles and practices were readily adapted to school settings, though some of the terminology has been altered to better match the context of the scope of issues in schools and the unique purpose of schools in the context of the broader society. For instance, some schools have tended to use the term *restorative practices* rather than *restorative justice*, though there are still some advocates for the use of the term *justice* in school settings; similarly, phrases such as "the student who caused harm" and "the person who was harmed" at times replace terms like *victim* and *perpetrator* that have traditionally been used in restorative processes within legal settings (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Fisher, Frey, & Smith, 2016; Morrison, 2007b).

Ample literature has documented the range of practices implemented in schools, including the various forms of circle practice (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Clifford, 2013; Morrison, 2007a; Riestenberg, 2012; Zehr, 2015), restorative practices such as conferencing, and

other more targeted interventions (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Calhoun, 2013; Davis, 2014; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Pavelka, 2013). This study draws upon existing literature on the essential philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice and connects it with literature in other areas that can further amplify what is required for restorative justice practitioners to work effectively in schools. To do so requires an initial critique of how restorative justice has at times been used in schools; this will be followed by the identification of some of the essential elements of effective school-based restorative justice practices.

Paradigm Shift in School Discipline

Recent scholarship on school discipline has focused on the need for a paradigm shift in terms of how schools attempt to address student behavior. Indeed, this shift required different understandings of harm and accountability as well as norms related to problem-solving, the components of which need to first be illuminated and understood before meaningful and lasting change in systems can be fully integrated (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Wadhwa, 2016). Wadhwa (2016) stated:

> Given that restorative justice is being used both in the criminal justice and educational systems, it has the potential to reshape the current paradigm of how we run schools, honor our students, and address them when problems arise. Challenging the school-to-prison pipeline and ensuring schools do not act as peculiar institutions involves more than discipline reform—it necessitates new decisions around a constellation of factors such as curriculum, pedagogy and the very foundation of restorative justice, building relationships. (p. 26)

Thus, it has become clear that it is not enough to simply introduce restorative justice practices as an overlay to existing structures. What first needs to be changed is the prevailing mindset about

how to approach student behaviors and to strengthen the existing infrastructure to develop a greater capacity to respond effectively to young people's needs.

Overcoming a quick-fix mindset. Schools have tended to respond to disciplinary issues in a reactive, quick, and harsh manner, as if to demonstrate their effectiveness through the sheer speed and severity of their responses. Though this authoritarian approach may have served this symbolic purpose in the short term, research has indicated that it directly undermines the long-term effectiveness of schools and compromises student academic outcomes, while failing to prevent future instances of unsanctioned behavior (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; González, 2012; Osher et al., 2015). In fact, according to González (2012), the experience of suspension or other exclusionary practice actually spurred further instances of misbehavior. In referencing nationwide high suspension rates and specific findings from studies in Denver public schools, she noted: "absence from school was found to be a significant predictor of dropping out, as well as discipline and behavioral problems" (González, 2012, p. 298). Thus, punitive measures such as suspensions ultimately failed to accomplish even that which they claimed to directly address, while creating a host of long-term consequences, the ramifications of which were disproportionately felt by those communities most marginalized and underrepresented in schools (González, 2012, 2015a; Riestenberg, 2011). As a result, this kind of crisis orientation to problem solving, which has often characterized school leaders' responses to student behaviors, has only further exacerbated existing inequity and has perpetuated rather than solved existing problems.

Perils of a rewards and punishment model. Oftentimes, especially in the early stages of transitioning from a purely punitive approach to discipline, schools have used disciplinary systems that have incorporated tangible rewards as a counterpart to the punishments enforced if

behavioral expectations were not met (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Mallett, 2016). Through subscribing to this ostensibly more progressive notion of rewarding positive behavior, rather than simply relying on punishment that places all attention on negative behavior, this approach still raised philosophical issues and exacerbated existing problems, leading to additional ones that undermined the integrity of school leaders' efforts. Specifically, by using a rewards and punishment approach to discipline, schools may have inadvertently perpetuated a form of passivity in students that locates all authority in external sources of validation or sanction, rather than supporting them in cultivating their own intrinsic motivation and moral compasses (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Clifford, 2013; Llewellyn & Howse, 1999). About this, Hopkins (2004) argued:

> To behave well in order to be rewarded—whether this is with a good grade, a merit mark, a prize or a certificate—encourages self-centered motives, and dependency on others' approval. It does not help to develop an internal locus of control and an ability to take responsibility for the behavioural choices made and the impact these choices have on others. When the reward ceases to have value, the individual can cease to perform in the way that the reward was intended to encourage. (p. 150)

Thus, while such rewards systems may encourage students to engage in school-sanctioned behaviors, their motivations were misaligned with the deeper goal of transmitting values that would foster and sustain healthy communities.

Furthermore, even the rewards aspect of a rewards and punishment disciplinary model still used a primarily reactive approach to discipline, rather than a proactive cultivation of the kind of values that would prevent behavioral disturbances from arising. This critique of school discipline as being reactive rather than responsive mirrors a broader critique of the dominant cultural value of retribution as the prevailing goal within the court system, one that has

contributed to the burgeoning prison system and the corresponding social ills that plague modern society (Clemson, 2015; Irby, 2014; Skiba & Losen, 2016). By merely reacting to negative behaviors through punishment or seeking to promote positive behaviors through shallow rewards, schools have failed to connect their disciplinary practices with the widely accepted purpose of schooling: to provide an educational space where young people can learn the requisite skills to function as fully participating members of society (Vaandering, 2010; Wadhwa, 2016). Instead, what has prevailed is a system that reinforces dominant cultural norms, privileging certain groups over others and perpetuating a narrow, monocultural view of what constitutes acceptable behavior.

Critique of behaviorist philosophy. In seeking to move toward the effective use of restorative justice in schools, it is necessary to unpack the dominant cultural assumptions that underlie responses to behavior and to instead develop a set of practices that align with the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice. Specifically, numerous studies have critiqued the behaviorist philosophy that underlies conventional disciplinary practices (e.g., Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Irby, 2014; Irby & Clough, 2015; Vaandering, 2014a; Wadhwa, 2016), recognizing that the primary goal of practices rooted in such a philosophy was management of student behavior, ultimately preserving the status quo in terms of power and social control. Part of what the literature considered problematic about this approach is that the attitudes and practices that emerged would locate authority exclusively outside of students and demanded a high degree of compliance and conformity related to rule-based institutional expectations (Irby & Clough, 2015; Liasidou, 2016; Vaandering, 2014a).

In traditional systems of classroom management, perceptions of effective discipline are achieved through the attainment of compliance, with the necessary sanctions in place to enforce

consequences when individuals deviate from expected norms. The disciplinary system, itself, is organized to prevail as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. Through interactions with such a system, young people are encouraged to reflect on their behavior only to the degree that it resulted in either a tangible reward or a negative consequence, and to position themselves either inside of or outside of the range of behaviors that were officially sanctioned (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Irby, 2014). What is overwhelmingly overlooked and, indeed, undermined with that approach, was the opportunity for students to cultivate a sense of intrinsic motivation for behaving in a way that is mutually beneficial to all members of the community. Under such behaviorist scrutiny, the moral development of young people inevitably atrophied (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Liasidou, 2016) and the opportunity to use interactions between people as a vehicle for learning was lost.

From Reaction to Prevention

In contrast to the prevailing behaviorist disciplinary systems, restorative justice, when used with integrity, has provided a framework through which the very culture of a school can be transformed, such that ways of addressing student behavior shift from reactive and punitive practices to proactive approaches for building a climate of mutual care and concern for each other's well-being. In other words, restorative justice operates on the philosophy that mistakes are opportunities for learning (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Harrison, 2007; Zehr, 2015. As such, it becomes necessary to collectively reclaim the energy currently used in blaming and punishment to instead cultivate the kinds of school communities that are healthy spaces for everyone, shifting resources and focus toward the proactive cultivation of healthy and transformative relationships, which ultimately reduce or prevent harm from occurring (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Harrison, 2007; Stewart Kline, 2016).

Deliberate effort and preparation are required to overcome the prevailing behaviorist trends and to cultivate a humanizing school culture that believes in every person's capacity to make thoughtful choices, when provided with a deep enough understanding of each other's needs. A restorative approach to school discipline recognizes that relationships grounded in genuine understanding of each other's needs ultimately serve as profound internal motivators for community members to engage in positive ways with each other, thus eliminating any temptation to resort to punishment, as unwelcome behaviors decline in direct proportion to the transformation of a school's climate and culture (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Clifford, 2013; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005; Skiba & Losen, 2016). Thus, an authoritarian and punitive disciplinary climate can be replaced with one that is authoritative, combining a high degree of structure with an equally high degree of support, as can be seen in Figure 2. Contrary

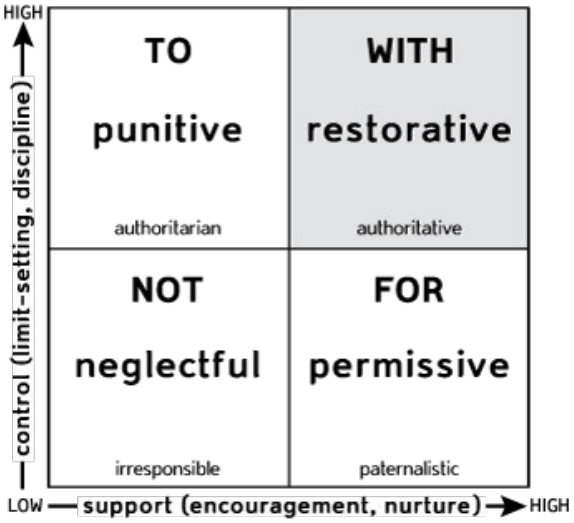

Figure 2. Social discipline window. Adapted from "Restorative Justice in Everyday Life," by T. Wachtel and P. McCold, 2001, p. 117. In H. Strang and J. Braithwaite (Eds.), *Restorative justice and civil society.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press. Copyright 2001 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission.

to popular misconceptions of restorative justice that portray it as operating from an entirely permissive framework lacking in consequences or accountability, Figure 2 clearly portrays the high degree of accountability embedded within a truly restorative process.

Continuum of interventions. This authoritative approach to school discipline is made possible through a shift in focus from reaction to prevention, along with the cultivation of a range of strategies to address moments of discord when they inevitably arise. What often makes it difficult for an untrained eye to recognize the power of restorative justice in action is that, when used in an integrated and philosophically grounded manner, most instances of conflict resolve themselves long before they would even be considered a problem by a traditional school administrator. Indeed, the beauty of this system and philosophy of maintaining healthy relationships is that, given the foundation of mutual trust and respect that functions as its core, oftentimes an incredibly subtle intervention is all that is needed to circumvent and ultimately transform a conflict that might otherwise escalate without the structure and support provided, through the continuum of interventions that comprise the toolbox of practices grounded in restorative justice (Harrison, 2007; Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015). Several key elements of the restorative practice continuum are described below. That said, given that it is difficult to document the absence of a problem, such informal interventions comprise an area of restorative justice practice that is undertheorized and about which key gaps in the literature persist.

Affective statements and questions. One of the first indicators of a conflict that is either brewing under the surface or already in full force is the recognition of the presence of emotions, even though they may be subtle at first. Affective statements directly name the emotions that are present providing an opportunity to awaken empathy in those who are involved in the

conversation and ultimately having a better chance of addressing the cause of the emotional disturbance through compassionate dialogue. Affective questions, similarly, are used when noticing the presence of emotional disturbance in others that may even operate below the threshold of their conscious awareness. These questions invite shared inquiry into the emotional quality of experience, providing support and the recognition that something needs to be addressed (Clifford, 2013; Morrison, 2007a; Riestenberg, 2012). Ultimately, by working directly with emotions in a restorative manner, using affective questions and statements, as appropriate, provides inroads for people to name their genuine needs and work toward consensus on how to ensure that everyone's needs are met (Clifford, 2013; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Zehr, 2015).

Collaborative problem-solving. The use of consensus-based or otherwise collaborative efforts at problem solving honors the reality that everybody in a community has their own needs, and that it is essential to include everyone in a process of conflict resolution to ensure that their needs are adequately met accounted for (Morrison, 2007a; Zehr, 2015). At the heart of such restorative approaches to addressing conflict is the expectation that those who caused harm will come to recognize the degree of their own responsibility in the situation and, by so doing, be willing to make amends and to account for the impact of their actions (Harrison, 2007; Zehr, 2015). Such collaborative processes often happen in the moment, as a situation unfolds in the context in which it arose, with spontaneous intervention provided by someone who is adept at recognizing the early signs of emerging conflict at the interpersonal level. It is worth noting that interventions may never come to the attention of school officials and thereby go unnoticed in terms of their role in shifting school climate and culture.

As such, recognition of this continuum of practices and the subtle power of the most informal interventions indicates the potential inherent in a whole-school approach to using

restorative justice while also requiring tremendous skill and intuition among practitioners (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). Morrison and Vaandering (2012) have noted the philosophical underpinnings of such an approach in the following manner:

> Restorative justice, through its focus on reconnecting people to each other and highlighting inherent relational qualities, emphasizes social engagement, which also includes addressing violence and aggression in schools. When this occurs, education becomes a practice of freedom and hope . . . and discipline regains its original meaning and is understood as a means for nurturing human capacity rather than a method of managing others. Thus, a relational ecology has emerged as the normative theoretical framework for understanding and practicing restorative justice, with early models of practice driving further theoretical development. (p. 146)

Thus, there has been a growing consensus in the literature that restorative justice must become part of the fabric of a school, integral to daily interactions and grounded in this philosophical emphasis on the health of relationships throughout a community system for it to be effective. As such, even this cursory examination of the continuum of restorative practices revealed that restorative justice cannot be implemented in isolated, decontextualized ways, if the intent is to foster genuine and lasting cultural shifts and improve overall school climate.

Whole School Approach

Recent literature on school discipline and alternatives to zero-tolerance practices has recognized this need for a whole school approach to the cultivation of positive behaviors, even as philosophical differences have persisted about what approach to take. For instance, in a 2014 report by the U.S. Department of Education, three guiding principles to improving school climate and discipline were identified: (a) the need for whole-school engagement in the cultivation of a

positive school climate; (b) support of community resources, including training for teachers and other adults, in how to engage with young people in positive ways; (c) mental health services for young people in crisis; and (d) other strategies to focus on the prevention of disciplinary incidents.

Furthermore, Voight, Austin, and Hanson (2013) found strong correlations between improved school climate and overall student achievement, suggesting that focusing on improving school climate could catalyze positive changes that would permeate an entire school community, with lasting impact on young people's sense of themselves as scholars and citizens. Sheras and Bradshaw (2016) recognized that "positive school climate is fostered through a shared vision of respect and engagement across the educational system and requires sustained commitment by students, staff members, and the community" (p. 132). Restorative justice, with its emphasis on cultivating healthy relationships, inspired full engagement among all constituents in an inclusive manner that extended far beyond the mere enactment of disciplinary sanctions (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Instead, restorative justice genuinely engages every community member in the co-creation of a community that focuses on meeting every member's needs.

Philosophical divergences. While numerous studies have emerged in support of this whole-school approach to the cultivation of a positive school climate (i.e., Morgan, Salomon, Plotkin, & Cohen, 2014; Osher et al., 2015; Riestenberg, 2012; Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2014), it is necessary to further underscore some key philosophical divergences in approaches already mentioned and to consider the long-term impact of these distinct philosophies on specific student populations. Wadhwa (2016) clearly articulated the spectrum of whole-school models and the underlying philosophies behind each approach in her

study. She specifically highlighted some fundamental distinctions between restorative justice and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), an approach that has gained widespread popularity in school districts across the United States. Wadhwa has indicated that PBIS and similar whole-school models operate within a framework of rules, regulations, rewards and consequences that still function primarily as mechanisms for control and management through external sanctions. By contrast, restorative justice, with its emphasis on the cultivation of authentic and healthy relationships, used the principles of full participation and genuine engagement, emphasizing every individual's capacity for self-regulation and for connecting in healthy ways with others.

Other critics of PBIS and similar behaviorist approaches to school-wide disciplinary practices underscore the potentially hazardous consequences of disciplinary measures that continue to be rooted in the expectation of control and compliance. Such studies have emphasized the insidious nature of efforts of social control that operate in ways that are antithetical to democracy, as well as comprising a missed opportunity to fully understand the complexity of causes for behaviors that manifest in students, which could provide opportunities for deep learning if they were handled in a restorative manner (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Irby, 2014; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). Other critics further explored the underlying inequities perpetuated through systems of social and disciplinary control, which continue to perpetuate racial disparities in discipline even as they claim to improve school climate (Liasidou, 2016; Vaandering, 2010).

By contrast, restorative justice aims to fully engage young people in the process of understanding the impact of their actions, thereby inspiring greater empathy and capacity to choose to act in ways that benefit the whole community (Morrison, Thornsborne, & Blood, 2005;

Wadhwa, 2016). Furthermore, such practices, grounded in a philosophy of full inclusion, lay the groundwork for promoting equity throughout the school community, by cultivating the skills of deep listening and the ability to hold space for multiple perspectives to contain seemingly divergent truths that are all simultaneously valid (Stewart Kline, 2016; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). These fundamental distinctions ultimately comprise a strong case in favor of the use of restorative justice as the philosophical framework for whole-school strategies and practices that are most likely to result in the genuine transformation of school culture in service of equity and full inclusion.

Philosophical continuum. In the same way that a continuum of restorative practices ranging from informal to formal provides a spectrum of opportunities for using restorative justice, it is also possible to evaluate the degree to which an intervention or model is restorative and to locate strategies and models on a spectrum of the degree to which they function in a restorative manner. In perhaps one of the most seminal works on restorative justice—first published in 2002—Zehr (2015) articulated a series of reflective questions about how to determine whether a model or set of practices could be said to be restorative:

1. Does the model address harms, needs, and causes for all involved?
2. Is it adequately oriented to the needs of those who have been harmed?
3. Are those who offended encouraged to take responsibility?
4. Are all relevant stakeholders involved?
5. Is there any opportunity for dialogue and participatory decision-making?
6. Does the model treat all equally, maintaining awareness of and addressing imbalances of power? (pp. 70-71)

Using this set of questions as a foundation, it has been possible to reflect on a range of strategies that function, to varying degrees, in a restorative manner and to use these questions to guide schools toward the use of practices that serve to promote healthy relationships and communities.

Elements of Restorative Schools

Although a full discussion of the systematic implementation of restorative justice in schools is beyond the scope of this study, I intended to contribute to the growing body of literature on key elements required to create and sustain a restorative school, grounded in a culture that uses restorative justice as its primary framework, in seeking to provide educational spaces that promote equity and inclusion among all members, including students, teachers, and administrators. What follows is an exploration of some of the essential elements identified from the literature that arguably must be fostered for a school to function in a restorative manner, including: healthy relationships; healing-centered engagement through trauma-informed practices; a sense of belonging; and race-consciousness. Though some of these topics may extend beyond the standard texts on restorative justice, the aim here is to emphasize key elements that are at times overlooked when schools first attempt to adopt restorative justice and to make a case for the need for greater synthesis between the collective understanding of restorative justice, critical race theory as a component of culturally responsive pedagogy, and healing centered engagement.

Healthy Relationships

One of the primary components that sets restorative justice apart from other whole-school models for improving school climate and discipline is its emphasis on healthy relationships. The proactive cultivation of strong connections between members of a school community serves as the foundation for the fundamentally preventative role that restorative justice practices can play

in school settings (Hopkins, 2004; Llewellyn & Howse, 1999; Stewart Kline, 2016; Toews, 2013). Through school-wide use of community-building strategies, such as talking circles, along with other more informal, restorative practices, the majority of potential conflicts that might otherwise escalate into disciplinary events can be averted because individuals who might otherwise misunderstand each other or not have the opportunity to build empathy with each other have, in fact, learned to respect and appreciate each other, even while acknowledging differences (Fisher et al., 2016; González, 2012; Howard, 2010; Wadhwa, 2016). For example, González (2012) documented findings from 12 states in varying stages of implementing restorative justice in their schools, all of whom experienced dramatic decreases in suspension and expulsion rates and whose formal restorative interventions resulted in high levels of agreement and satisfaction among participants. In Maryland, for instance, the suspension rate decreased 88% from the 2008-2009 school year to the 2009-2010 school year, indicating a dramatic shift in how student behavior was addressed (González, 2012). Such findings underscored the importance of a whole school cultural shift in developing a restorative philosophy to guide disciplinary policies and practices.

Successful implementation of restorative justice in a school community must focus primarily on the range of preventative strategies that cultivate the kinds of healthy and supportive relationships required to weather conflict and varying degrees of difference of opinion or perspective. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) described the relationship between three distinct tiers of intervention (see Figure 3) as follows:

> The primary or universal practices—the broad base of the triangle—involve reaffirming relationships through developing a value-based ethos that builds social and emotional skills. The secondary or targeted practices, forming the middle layer of the triangle,

involve repairing relationships through facilitated and supported dialogue. The tertiary or intensive practices that respond to a specific case—the small top of the triangle—involve rebuilding relationships through intensive facilitated dialogue that includes a broad social network. (p. 114)

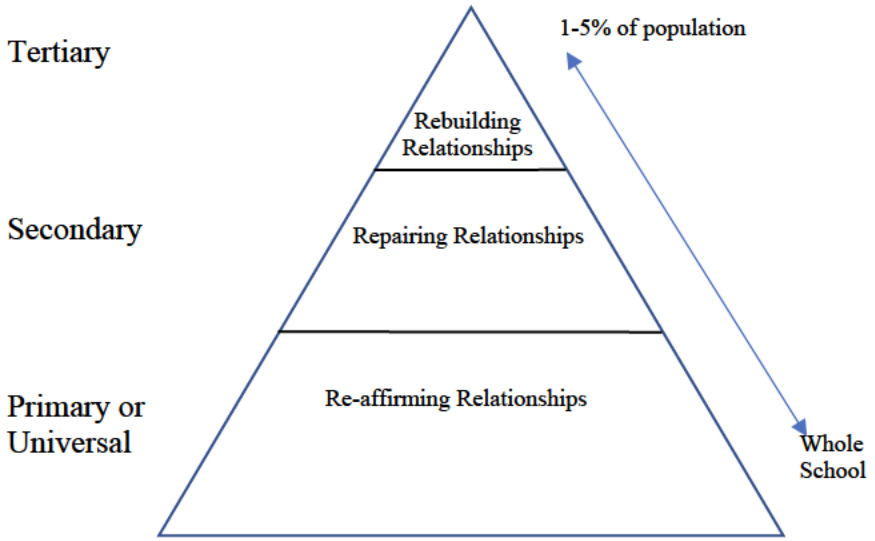

Figure 3. A whole school model of restorative justice. Adapted from *Restoring Safe School Communities* by B. Morrison, 2007a, p. 109. Copyright 2007 by Federation Press. Reprinted with permission.

The image in Figure 3 clearly demonstrates that restorative justice is not simply about replacing punishment with a so-called restorative protocol. Rather, it is about shifting the focus of the entire community toward the kinds of practices that are grounded in a philosophy of care and concern for every individual (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Carter, 2013; Davis, 2014). It requires deliberate and consistent effort of a magnitude rarely undertaken in traditional schools to proactively cultivate a community that functions in a restorative manner. The benefits of doing so, however, are tremendous, in that members of such communities develop a greater capacity for tolerating each other's distinct needs without resorting to the competitive and sometimes destructive behaviors that underlie and escalate interpersonal conflicts.

Connections with teachers. Strong connections between teachers and their students comprise an essential element in students' ability to thrive both personally and academically. Indeed, it is often at the level of classroom interactions that students formulate their views of themselves as learners and solidify around a sense of what their role is within a school community. As such, teachers play a crucial role in determining the trajectory not only of how students perform in their specific classes, but how their identities as scholars and community members develop. Indeed, healthy relationships between teachers and students were identified as one of the key elements of successful schools in a study of New York schools (Ofer et al., 2009).

Even the language that teachers use in describing students and their behavior can have lasting consequences, in terms of how others view that student and how students see themselves. For instance, Harold and Corcoran (2013) noted in their study, which used focus groups of teachers discussing everyday issues with students, that much of the teachers' language defaulted to individualistic norms that located the root of problematic behavior within specific students, rather than accounting for environmental or structural factors that could influence such behavior. They cautioned that such an approach reflected a "limited capacity to engage with the complexities of student emotional and behavioral presentation" (Harold & Corcoran, 2013, p. 47), ultimately revealing the teachers' inability to connect with their students or to provide the requisite relational support required to better understand and resolve difficult interactions.

By contrast, a restorative approach prioritizes the development of a greater depth of emotional understanding so that complexities that inform students' behavior can be adequately understood and addressed in such a way that strengthens relationships and, ultimately, the entire school community (Stewart Kline, 2016; Vaandering, 2014b). This reframing away from punishing unskillful or inappropriate behavior and toward understanding the root causes of

behavior aligns precisely with the approach undertaken in healing-centered engagement and trauma-informed work, a field that is rapidly gaining momentum in its potential to support people in healing and transforming unhealthy dynamics and recognizing the systemic causes for poor health and other ailments that can manifest in behaviors that are not condoned in school-communities.

Healing-Centered Engagement

Though the literature on restorative justice seldom explicitly connects the potential for restorative justice to effectively promote health, healing or to respond to trauma, a growing body of literature in the fields of healing-centered engagement and trauma-informed practices is comprised of recommendations for educators that directly align with the principles and practices inherent in a restorative approach to working with young people in schools (Center for Youth Wellness, 2013; Ginwright, 2016; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). A 1998 study on the impact of ACEs sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente reported that traumatic experiences in childhood, known as ACEs, can have a direct impact on a range of health outcomes if they are left unaddressed (Felitti et al., 1998). These health impacts result from risky behaviors that traumatized people undertake as subconscious coping strategies for dealing with all that they have experienced. Such behaviors, when enacted by young people in schools, tend to be the kinds of actions that lead to punitive sanction.

Healing-centered engagement and trauma-informed work have specifically underscored the reality that punitive disciplinary practices often punish the effects of trauma, rather than seeking to address and ameliorate the underlying causes of such behaviors (Ginwright, 2016; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008; Wade & Ortiz, 2017). Recent studies have highlighted the injustice of this use of punishment, as young people who have experienced

trauma were revealed as being more vulnerable to poor academic achievement and dropping out, in addition to disciplinary action (Porche, Fortuna, Lin, & Alegria, 2011; Wade & Ortiz, 2017). As such, restorative justice and its guiding principles provide an opportunity to create the kinds of spaces and processes that promote the potential for healing and transformation of behaviors rooted in trauma, ultimately freeing individual survivors of trauma from the otherwise lasting effects of such experiences.

As people heal from traumatic experiences, their ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors is cultivated, yielding new possibilities for how to respond to difficult situations and how to interact with others in healthier ways. This internal capacity for self-regulation also sits at the heart of restorative processes that facilitate the cultivation of empathy and recognition of the impact of one's actions (Riestenberg, 2011). Thus, it becomes clear that the advances made in the understanding of trauma and how to effectively address it could further strengthen the implementation of restorative justice and related practices in schools. It is, therefore, essential that behaviors manifested due to trauma be addressed to create a foundation for healthy relationships and responses to conflict. As such, restorative justice efforts in schools could be further strengthened through the explicit use of trauma-informed practices as part of its central aim to understand the root causes of unskillful or harmful behavior and to support its transformation.

Sense of Belonging

Healthy relationships at the interpersonal level contribute to a more global sense of belonging that serves as another essential element of restorative schools. Ultimately, restorative schools are inclusive schools, where intolerance and bullying are extinguished from the prevailing culture of the school, and where each person feels connected to the broader

community and to the values that underlie its shared culture. As Stewart Kline (2016) has stated, "Restorative justice is built from the belief we are all connected through a web of relationships and when a wrongdoing has occurred, the web becomes torn" (p. 97). It is the connections between people that are prioritized in restorative justice community practice. When harm occurs, as noted earlier, even the person who caused the harm is not targeted or banished; rather, the entire community, including the so-called perpetrator, work together to repair the rift that has occurred.

Research has indicated that when young people feel a sense of belonging at school, they are less likely to engage in behaviors that cause harm to others (Gregory et al., 2016; Hopkins, 2004; Morrison, 2007a). With a mindset oriented toward inclusion and repair or relationships, when harm is caused every person in a community is more likely to tangibly sense how important they are to the entire web of connected people; they understand on a deeply felt level that nobody is expendable (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Riestenberg, 2011; Vaandering, 2014b). This sense of belonging comprises the foundation for academic success and students' overall well-being at school.

In exploring restorative justice as a framework for supporting a sense of belonging, it is essential to acknowledge the racial disparities that persist in how punitive school discipline is enacted within schools that consist of predominantly students of color, and the correlating disparities in academic achievement among students of color. Recent studies have indicated that a sense of belonging is essential not only to a daily sense of well-being, but also to support the kinds of tangible, academic successes upon which schools are most often evaluated and, even more importantly, interrupt the cycles through which historically marginalized groups of students

are prevented from reaching their full academic potential (Bottiani et al., 2017; Gregory et al., 2016; Stewart Kline, 2016).

For instance, the description of the Denver Public Schools (DPS) provided by González (2015b) revealed that from 2009-2013, during a period of deliberate, district-wide implementation of restorative justice, there was a substantive increase in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on statewide tests; average ACT scores increased during this time from 15.4 to 17.6; on-time graduation rates increased nearly 5% in just one academic year, from 2009-2010; and the high school dropout rate decreased from 11.1% in 2006, when restorative justice was first introduced to the district, to 6.4% in 2010. Furthermore, during this same period, there was a steady decrease in the disparity in suspension rates between students of color and White students (González, 2015b). Though these findings do not necessarily reflect a causal connection between the implementation of restorative justice in DPS and the reduction in racial disparities in exclusionary discipline, along with improved academic achievement, these trends suggested a compelling correlation between proactive, nonpunitive approaches to discipline and the overall improvement of school climate and academic outcomes.

Race-Conscious Approach

Recent literature has indicated the need for a race-conscious approach to restorative justice, given the prevalence of racial disparities in school discipline and the reality that students of color are often excluded from the dominant cultural norms privileged on school campuses (Carter et al., 2017; Pena-Shaff, Bessette-Symons, Tate, & Fingerhut, 2018). Furthermore, the literature has emphasized the need to cultivate a heightened sensitivity toward other social identities that can erode a sense of belonging, if unspoken norms persist unexamined (Gregory et al., 2016; Utheim, 2014; Wadhwa, 2016). Indeed, the persistence of racial disparities in school

discipline, when examined from the philosophical framework of restorative justice, points to a failure to understand the lives and experiences of the students of color who have been disproportionately punished through exclusionary discipline. Furthermore, missing school can have a negative impact on academic outcomes—such as test scores and graduation rates—which further exacerbates the so-called "achievement gap" and highlights one of the many dangers of racial disparities in school disciplinary practices (Losen & Whitaker, 2018).

Drawing upon a growing body of literature on racial threat, Payne and Welsch (2015) examined a disturbing trend in schools that indicate a negative correlation between the percentage of Black students and the implementation of non-punitive disciplinary practices such as those grounded in restorative justice. Juxtaposed with Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz's (2016) findings, which indicated a greater sense of belonging and stronger connections between students of color and their teachers when restorative practices were used and the simultaneous trend of schools being less likely to use restorative practices when their population is comprised of a greater number of students of color, the literature highlighted how schools too easily perpetuate existing societal injustices (Payne & Welsch, 2015; Wadhwa, 2010; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). As such, it is imperative that schools comprised of students from historically excluded backgrounds consider the deeper implications of their disciplinary policies and practices.

Specifically, there is a clear need to address the role of implicit bias in perpetuating inequity in disciplinary outcomes, given the disproportionate percentages of office referrals and suspensions experienced by students of color. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights data on suspensions, this discrepancy based on race has steadily increased since the 1970s, clearly implicating the trend in zero-tolerance disciplinary practices and other

prevailing cultural norms (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014). That implicit bias is also likely a component in these disparities is corroborated by data that indicates that students of color, especially Black and Latino students, are more likely to be suspended or expelled for the same behaviors enacted by White peers and that Black students, in particular, are more likely to be suspended for offenses that are subjective in nature, rather than those characterized by clear delinquency—such as vandalism or violations of school rules (i.e., smoking on campus) (Finn & Servoss, 2015; McIntosh et al., 2014; Shollenberger, 2015).

In articulating a framework for how to begin to ameliorate the issues associated with implicit bias in school discipline, McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, and Smolkowski (2014) acknowledged:

> Individuals' implicit biases are more likely to affect their decisions when the structural demands of a situation exceed the available information (e.g., judgments that are inherently difficult, subjective, or ambiguous), or when cognitive resources are limited (e.g., when decisions must be made quickly or individuals are physically or mentally fatigued). (p. 6)

Given the relentless pressures on teachers in school environments, with considerable structural constraints in terms of time and capacity, it becomes apparent how even the most well-intentioned educators could default in making decisions that are subconsciously informed by implicit bias. It is precisely in such conditions where a restorative approach to discipline can interrupt reactive decision-making and can foster a classroom culture rooted in mutual respect and recognition, one that simultaneously promotes equity and full inclusion (Gregory et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). Though the literature contained a range of

recommendations on the specific programmatic approaches intended to achieve this goal, there has been a growing recognition of prevailing inequities and the need for a systemwide approach to ameliorating them.

Culturally Responsive Discipline

Existing literature on culturally responsive pedagogy implicitly, if not explicitly, supports the use of restorative justice in schools, given the racial and cultural diversity of the nation's population that is reflected in school communities (Choi & Stevenson, 2009; Howard, 2010; Monroe, 2006; Pinto, 2013; Utheim, 2014; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). Howard (2010) directly connected the stark racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes with the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, emphasizing teachers' roles in cultivating classroom spaces that honor the diverse cultural norms and needs of all students and that respond to students' behavior in ways that are sensitive to the multifaceted nature of an individual's identity (Howard, 2010).

In specifically applying Ladson-Billings' framework for culturally responsive pedagogy to discipline, often called "classroom management," Pinto (2013) emphasized the need for classroom teachers to prioritize engagement rather than control through coercion, echoing the critique offered by other researchers and theorists on the insidious ways in which social control is enacted in school settings (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Liasidou, 2016). Furthermore, both Howard (2010) and Pinto (2013) emphasized the need for ongoing critical self-reflection on the part of teachers to ensure that they aim to work with their students in culturally responsive ways. By proactively using curricula and pedagogical strategies that promote inclusion of all students' voices in meaningful ways, many of the conditions underlying the purported need for more punitive forms of discipline tend to dissipate (Howard, 2010; Pinto, 2013).

Moreover, by centering processes that invite student voices and that promote active listening in a climate of mutual respect and care, restorative justice can serve as a powerful complement to culturally responsive pedagogy. Umbreit and Armour (2010) extended this notion even further to explicitly call for an intersectional approach to school discipline:

> An analysis of the intersectionality of gender, race, class, culture, religion, and sexual orientation is critical to understanding victimization, crime and wrongdoing, and the role of restorative dialogue in addressing harm and furthering meaningful accountability and community safety. Such an analysis, however, requires more than a factual description of cultural differences because the meaning of those differences is imbued with the interconnections between power, privilege, and oppression. (p. 266)

As such, the practice of restorative justice becomes a process of seeking to understand and rectify systemic injustices that form the legacy of countless forms of oppression that continue to this day. Umbreit and Armour further emphasized, "If restorative justice proponents are not aware of historic relationships of power between indigenous or dispossessed groups and majority culture or import practices without regard to context and traditions, restorative justice can inadvertently become a colonizing influence in itself" (p. 267). Their clarity on the pitfalls inherent in a shallow appropriation of restorative justice practices underscores the importance of supporting practitioners in developing greater social consciousness of how restorative discipline in schools is situated within broader systems and power relations.

Resisting Dominant Cultural Disciplinary Norms

Beyond even the imperative to approach discipline in a culturally responsive manner is the need to resist dominant cultural approaches in relating to students, such that the legacy of inequities that persists in society can be transformed through the co-creation of a more equitable

and democratic school culture. Numerous studies have offered compelling critiques of the ways in which discipline has been enacted in schools that reinscribe existing hierarchies in society that trace their roots back to the initial colonization of this land and privileging those who ascribe to dominant cultural norms (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Irby, 2014; Liasidou, 2016; Vaandering, 2010; Wadhwa, 2010). Irby (2014) used the metaphor of "nets of social control" (p. 513) to describe the escalating levels of constraint employed to enforce dominant cultural norms and to sanction or exclude those who did not conform to this narrowly prescribed set of expectations. Both Irby (2014) and Liasidou (2016) acknowledged that behavior is socially constructed through others' expectations, as are the labels used to categorize individuals based on their behavior, without acknowledging the structural and cultural nature of such processes.

Many of these same studies, along with some others, have recognized the potential inherent in restorative justice practices to dismantle socially constructed inequity, recognizing how normative identities and behavioral expectations contribute to larger systems of oppression. Liasidou (2016) identified the need for an intersectional approach toward addressing young people's behavior in schools, given that "an intersectional approach aims at analyzing, questions and challenging the ways in which particular forms of human diversity are 'otherised' and treated oppressively" (p. 229).

Irby (2014) likewise advocated for deliberate efforts to transform the existing levels of constraint such that fewer students would be sanctioned in a system that privileges those whose identities align with the normative school culture. Vaandering (2010) further noted, "For [Restorative Justice (RJ)] to be effective and sustainable it must be understood first and foremost through a critical lens that recognizes the systemic, institutional, and structural dimensions of power relations in school communities" (p. 151). With this statement, Vaandering (2010)

implicitly critiqued the ways in which purportedly restorative practices have been co-opted in school settings and used in service of the prevailing system of control and coercion. By rejecting this de facto cooptation of restorative justice, its legacy and potential can be reclaimed in service of equity and inclusion.

Pluralistic Schools

Indeed, it is through the transformation of school culture in ways that honor and celebrate the diversity inherent within school communities that democratic values can thrive and be transmitted to the younger generations. Restorative justice provides a framework through which counter-narratives can be heard and validated, a prerequisite for a truly equitable and inclusive community (Wadhwa, 2010). In this spirit, González (2015b) posited that restorative justice can be viewed as a liberatory political ideology, rather than a fixed set of practices or programmatic elements. Rather than viewing restorative justice as merely an alternative to punitive policies and practices, González (2015b) has argued:

> Restorative justice should be re-theorized as a way to confront injustice that becomes a political demand, specifically one for emancipation, for an end to domination and oppression, and the right to have a meaningful, rather than tokenized, voice. . . . . A political account of restorative justice compels us to consider how we envision taxonomies of relational accountability and political empowerment. . . . . Thus, restorative justice becomes an essential communicative act, which invites those who have suffered an injury to initiate a new dialogue of justice. (p. 460)

This politicized view of restorative justice lays the groundwork for restorative justice to be used in service of broader social and political transformation, beyond merely the overhaul of disciplinary practices in schools. Instead, restorative justice serves as a catalyst for

consciousness-raising and collective empowerment of the voices and groups that have consistently been silenced through dominant cultural narratives and norms (Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012).

Conclusion

An exploration of recent literature in the field of restorative justice and, more broadly, school discipline revealed the potential inherent in restorative justice to help transform school policies and practices and to promote a more just and equitable approach to addressing disciplinary issues in schools. While much recent research focuses on the programmatic aspects of restorative justice, exploring the types of practices that can be implemented, as well as the impact of such practices on suspension rates and corresponding long-term life outcomes for students, few studies have focused directly on restorative justice practitioners or inquired into their journeys of developing a restorative justice practice in relating to young people in schools.

While the elements of restorative justice work in school comprise a clear direction for schools to move toward cultivating inclusive and equitable communities, a gap persists in how to prepare school personnel to enact such changes and to steward the development of a restorative school culture. Specifically, a key aspect of restorative justice that is undertheorized is the character of restorative justice practitioners, themselves, and how practitioners have developed the consciousness and internal capacity necessary to engage with people in a restorative manner, while remaining true to this vision for the transformation of the school culture and climate. It is this gap that this study addresses through an inquiry into the consciousness-raising process undertaken by practitioners of restorative justice.

This gap in the literature and in the collective understanding of the depth of restorative justice practice calls into question the trend in the literature that promotes a whole-school

approach. Given current institutional contexts and constraints, it may be unrealistic to expect whole-school engagement at the level that effective practitioners can provide. This tension will need to be addressed in context-specific ways in educational institutions seeking to implement restorative justice with integrity. Furthermore, to disrupt the perilous notion that schools exist in isolation from the surrounding neighborhoods, school-communities will need to consider how to engage more effectively with the community beyond the discrete institutional context of the school as part of the process of striving to operate with restorative justice as a foundation.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

> I will tell you something about stories. . . . They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. (Silko, 2006, p. 2)

This study focused directly on the experiences of school-based restorative justice practitioners that have informed the development of their philosophy and practice of restorative justice to address this gap in the literature. It aimed to examine their life trajectories and pivotal moments that shaped the development of their consciousness of issues of inequity that persist in educational settings, as well as their efforts to engage with young people in transformative ways. This study consciously uplifted the vehicle of storytelling as a way of constructing knowledge and supporting collective transformation. It drew upon the tradition of narrative inquiry as articulated by Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) who stated:

> Beginning with a respect for ordinary lived experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only a valorizing of individuals' experience but also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted—but in a way that begins and ends that inquiry into the storied lives of the people involved. Narrative inquirers study an individual's experience in the world and, through the study, seek ways of enriching and transforming the experience for themselves and others. (p. 42)

As such, this study provided a vehicle through which the experiences of school-based restorative justice practitioners could serve as the central focus of analysis, and through which key lessons could be gleaned on the prerequisites for effective restorative justice practice, highlighting pathways others might undertake to develop such expertise in their own interactions

with young people in school settings. This approach involved delving into each participant's unique experiences while exploring the significance of those experiences within the broader social and political landscape, to illuminate the complexity of this journey toward an integrated restorative practice. Key themes that emerged from these stories served to articulate possible directions for aspiring practitioners to likewise undertake the challenges inherent in becoming effective restorative justice practitioners who work in service of the transformation of school communities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this inquiry into restorative justice practitioners' experiences:

1. How do school-based restorative justice practitioners' multiple identities and self-reflective practices influence their restorative justice work in schools?
2. What practices and frameworks do restorative justice practitioners associate with effective implementation of restorative justice in schools?
3. What internal and external obstacles do school-based restorative justice practitioners identify in their work? What are some strategies they use to address these obstacles?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

The goals of this study are well suited to a qualitative approach, as personal stories have the potential to catalyze deeper reflection within others, and to ultimately spur the capacity development of aspiring restorative justice practitioners. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) stated, "What narrative researchers hold in common is the study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events. These researchers usually embrace the assumption that the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience" (p. 4). Thus, through witnessing

the personal stories of restorative justice practitioners, the essence of restorative justice practice can be better understood.

Furthermore, qualitative methods—and critical narrative inquiry, in particular—validate the truths inherent in the stories and experiences of individual people and seek to embrace the complexity of human diversity as well as the tensions and contradictions that arise between people's divergent perspectives, within the context of asymmetrical relations of power. Clandinin (2013) defined narrative inquiry as "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding (p. 17). With this definition in mind, the experiences of restorative justice practitioners are considered to constitute a valuable source of knowledge about practice; it honored their lives and stories and seeks to embrace the totality of their experience, instead of dissecting or reducing their experiences into discrete or abstract phenomena.

Rather than striving for a simple consensus or seemingly neat conclusion, the methodological approach of this study embraces human complexity and, in doing so, models the type of democratic approach necessary to cultivate and celebrate human differences within schools and society. Furthermore, critical narrative inquiry cultivates an approach to knowledge that is pluralistic and inclusive, in that questions of structural inequalities are central to the analysis. In doing so, this methodology sought to function in a congruent manner with the content under study—the practice of restorative justice and the power of bearing witness to each other's truths in community.

Research Design

To answer the research questions, I engaged in an inquiry process designed to elicit the critical narratives of nine participants in this study. By asking open-ended questions, thereby

encouraging participants to share their stories, participants spoke about their personal journeys of their evolving work as restorative justice practitioners in school settings. Participants had the opportunity, through a process of member checking, to review the transcript of our one-on-one narrative session so that they could further clarify details of what they had said and add to it, as needed. Participants were then invited to participate in a focus group, during which they had the opportunity to weigh in on the significance of emerging themes and helped to shape both the organization of the presentation of data, as well as the recommendations for future research and practice that emerged from this study. The sections that follow provide a more detailed discussion of the research design, including participants, setting, data collection process and analysis plan.

Participants

The nine participants in this study were self-identified restorative justice practitioners, meaning that they incorporated into their daily work as educators at least some of the strategies widely recognized as being part of the continuum of restorative justice practices. They worked at various middle and high schools in southern California, and each participant spends a considerable amount of time in classrooms as one of their primary professional responsibilities as either classroom teachers or restorative justice coordinators. I used convenience sampling, drawing from my own personal networks of educators and restorative justice practitioners to curate a selection of participants whose life experiences and backgrounds reflect the diversity of educational environments in the southern California area. The participants were individuals whom I have encountered in a professional setting at some time during the past 15 years I have worked in the field of education or were part of my extended professional network and were

referred to me by someone who understood the purpose of this study and could vouch for a prospective participant's restorative justice work.

Participants were fully informed that the scope of their participation involved a recorded conversation, with open-ended questions designed to elicit their own personal stories and reflections. They understood that I would be recording the narratives that they shared with me and that I would ensure their confidentiality through the use of generalized descriptions of their work environments as well as pseudonyms for themselves and any other people mentioned during our conversations. They were also informed that I would share with them my findings for member checking, and that they would have the opportunity to participate in a focus group to review emergent themes, should they be interested in participating in that second stage of the study. Participants who joined in the focus group were informed that their confidentiality would be compromised to a certain extent, in that the other participants would know who they are. That said, as restorative justice practitioners, they are all skilled in holding stories in confidence, and were asked to preserve each other's confidentiality in the same spirit that they generally conduct their work.

Setting

Recorded conversations with each participant took place at locations that were convenient for them and conducive to an uninterrupted process. Such locations included quiet coffee shops or other quiet settings, depending on geographic or other logistical constraints. Likewise, the location for the focus group was determined to meet the schedules and logistical constraints of participants who had opted into this second stage in the process.

Data Collection

Demographic data were initially collected through a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix A). Data from the critical narratives were collected through audio recording, using my computer's recording capabilities as well as a handheld recording device as a backup, in case there were any problems with the computer recording. These recordings were transcribed using a professional transcription service that has a reputation for adhering to their privacy policies that uphold the confidentiality of recordings that they transcribe. Upon publication of the study, the audio recordings will be permanently deleted to further protect the confidentiality of participants.

Preliminary demographics survey. A brief pre-interview questionnaire was sent out to participants using a Qualtrics link to gather self-reported demographic information and to formally signify the beginning of the study with participants (see Appendix A). One open-ended question was included to invite participants to define restorative justice for themselves, though answering this question was not required to participate in the study. Rather, their answers or lack of answers provided insight into the depth of their engagement and on how they conceive of restorative justice work in the context of their own practice. All participants provided thoughtful and unique definitions, demonstrating their high degree of engagement with the study. The demographic information, especially social identities such as race, class, and gender, was used to inform analysis of participants' narratives, which comprised the major focus of the study. Participants were invited to self-identify in terms of the various demographic categories, demonstrating a broad spectrum of identities and perspectives.

Individual critical narratives. During each individual conversation with a participant, I positioned my computer close to the participant to maximize the quality of the recording. My handheld recording device was similarly positioned near the participant as a back-up recording

device, so that it recorded the participant's voice more strongly than any other sounds in the vicinity. Each participant was asked open-ended questions (see Appendix B for examples.) designed to invite them to share their personal stories that comprise the journey of their professional development as restorative justice practitioners. Each conversation included some version of the research questions and included follow-up questions that responded directly to the initial stories that each participant shared.

Optional focus group. Participants were provided with the opportunity to join in a follow-up conversation with fellow participants once an initial round of coding had taken place to identify themes that emerged from the initial one-on-one conversations. The focus group provided an opportunity for participants to further clarify points made in the initial conversation and to further reflect on the significance of the emerging themes. Six of the nine participants took part in the focus group. This focus group conversation was audio recorded using the same devices as in the previous section, this time with the handheld recording device being passed, almost as a talking piece would be, ensuring that each speaker's comments were recorded with maximum volume.

Data Analysis

Data from each individual conversation with a participant were coded in Dedoose (2018) version 8.0.35, a web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data, using an inductive approach to examine emergent themes. The ability to employ an infinite number of codes in Dedoose made it possible for each participant's perspective to speak for itself with minimal manipulation on my part. I paid particular attention to commonalities between participants' stories as well as key differences, and began to identify similarities between transcripts, as well as differences. I subsequently grouped codes together

into patterns or themes, with some of the original codes becoming subheadings under another code that served as an umbrella concept or theme. I used some of the analytic features available in Dedoose to identify patterns that emerged with great frequency, as well as those codes that co-occurred with each other. In determining how to present the data, I considered both the frequency of occurrence as well as the trends of co-occurrence between coded patterns or themes.

Once I had gathered preliminary themes, I contacted participants to engage in member checking of their individual transcripts and then invited them to participate in the focus group to further reflect on initial patterns or themes that had been identified, clarify any of their previous statements, and to offer additional insights or examples that had emerged since the initial round of conversations. After sharing the key findings from the initial round of conversations, I used open-ended questions to spur conversation among participants, including additional storytelling to illuminate personal examples of how key themes manifested in their work. I employed sample questions (see Appendix C) for the focus group, along with additional questions that emerged in response to the discussion among participants.

I used inductive coding for the focus group conversation to track emerging themes, and I emphasized capturing which themes resonated most strongly and collectively among participants. I used participants' insights into the significance of the initial themes and patterns from the individual conversations to guide the next steps in analyzing the data. These insights ultimately informed the final recommendations offered by this study to the field of restorative justice work in schools.

At this point in the process, it became apparent that a modified version of Batts' (2002) four levels framework would serve as an effective organizational principle for the presentation

and analysis of data. The research questions were constructed in a manner that corresponded to Batts' framework, especially given the modification I made to the framework. The first research question focused primarily in the personal realm, while recognizing that issues related to identity often also function at the cultural level. The second and third research questions invited inquiry into the interpersonal, and cultural domains, while personal reflections were also elicited. As such, I have modified Batts' framework to better account for the ways in which the four levels or domains overlap and inform each other. Specifically, in Figure 4, I have reconceptualized Batts' four levels as four spheres that intersect each other in various ways.

On a practical level, this adaptation more truthfully revealed the relationships between the four domains, representing them as intersecting and in relationship to each other, as opposed to discrete and completely separate from each other. On a philosophical level, articulating these domains as spheres also served to dismantle the sense that these categories existed in hierarchical relationship to each other. Envisioning them as intersecting spheres without a hierarchical relationship more directly aligned with the philosophical values underpinning restorative justice. Thus, the organization of the presentation of data sought to amplify the themes most salient through frequency and co-occurrence, while using this modified version of Batts' (2002) framework to facilitate the meaningful analysis of data in Chapter 5 of this study.

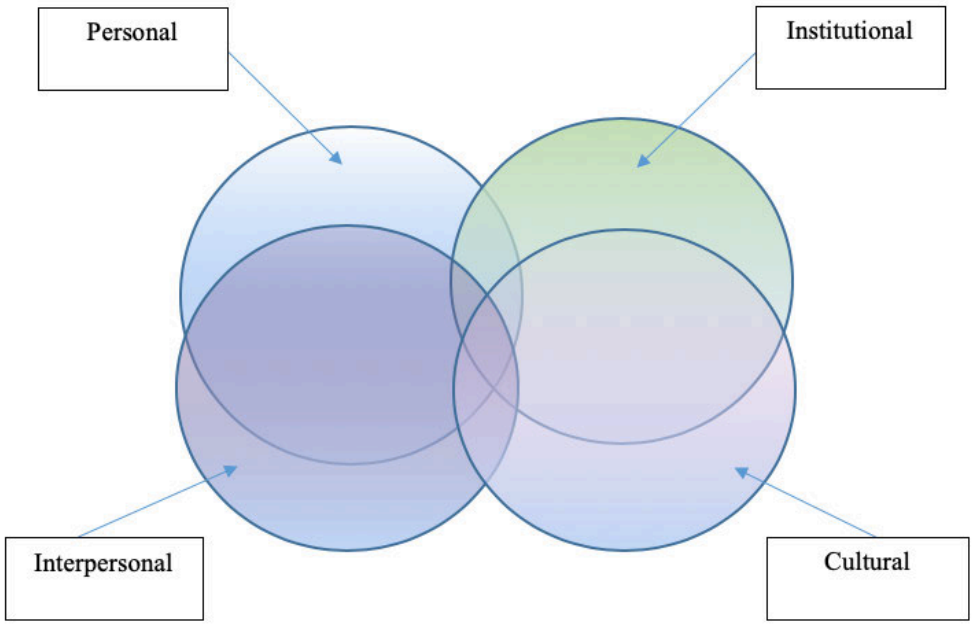

Figure 4. Four spheres framework. Adapted from "Is Reconciliation Possible?" by V. Batts, 2002, p. 11. In I. T. Douglas (Ed.), *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*. Copyright 2002 by Church Publishing.

Limitations

As stated in Chapter 1, I remained aware of several limitations to this study. Specifically, it was difficult to anticipate whether true comparisons between participants' experiences could be made, or the degree to which these findings would be generalizable to other contexts, given that most participants worked in different school settings from each other. Furthermore, the choice to track themes rested with the researcher, so there was a considerable amount of subjectivity embedded within the design of the study, such that another researcher might have chosen to emphasize different aspects of participants' narratives and could have arrived at different conclusions. Additionally, the researcher's choice to focus on practitioners working mostly in traditional public schools limited opportunities to compare practitioners' experiences in different types of schools and, again, could raise some questions on the potential for

generalizability. Finally, not all of the participants were able to participate in the focus group, so some of their perspectives may have been missing from the final recommendations.

The qualitative approach of critical narratives invokes a radically different notion of validity and trustworthiness than that which is traditionally associated with quantitative empirical studies. Rather than striving for the illusion of objectivity, critical narratives strive to elicit the radical subjectivity of participants' accounts, recognizing that knowledge is constructed by each person and is filtered through their life experience, social identities, and uniquely complicated perspectives. Thus, the goal of this type of study was not to arrive at some universal and irrefutable proof. Rather, it sought to respect the veracity of participants' perspectives by validating each statement as an authentic reflection of that person's personal truth in that moment.

By honoring the personal truths of multiple participants and seeking to identify both similarities and differences, this study valued and uplifted each participant's perspective, while acknowledging key differences and accepting potentially unresolvable contradictions. Rather than seeking simplistic unity for the sake of a sense of shallow certainty, this study embraced the complexity of multiple perspectives and transparently acknowledged the need for a multiplicity of approaches to restorative justice to genuinely respond to the diverse needs of young people in our schools. It is through this commitment to embracing complexity that this study's findings can be considered valid, as a falsified sense of certainty or consensus would undermine the very celebration of diversity this study sought to embody.

Furthermore, by including the option of a follow-up focus group, this provided participants with the opportunity to take further ownership over the data that is collected and to further clarify their statements and offer their insights into what they believe to be the most

salient themes. This provides an essential checkpoint that counteracted the limitations of the researcher's perspective and instead invited the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and participants, a strategy that philosophically aligned with the methodology of critical narratives and of the ultimate aims of restorative justice. This alignment between the content and the methodological processes further enhanced the validity of the study, as it demonstrates philosophical coherence and integrity in this design.

Delimitations

This study intentionally included a relatively small number of participants who are all located in the southern California area for ease of access and to prioritize engaging in depth with each participant's personal and professional story. It also focused specifically on restorative justice practitioners working in mostly traditional public schools, as it was my intention to highlight the excellent work that taking place schools that are often maligned or disregarded in broader conversations on innovation and effectiveness in education. Furthermore, this study focused on practitioners who work primarily with students in their adolescent years—from Grades 6-12—as this age group is often viewed in a negative light by the broader society. Additionally, many young people in this age group need effective guidance and support in learning how to engage effectively with peers and with other people they encounter in the community in a nuanced way that acknowledges their life experience while providing them with opportunities to grow, something that a restorative justice approach can provide.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF DATA

> Education at its best—this profound human transaction called teaching and learning—is not just about getting information or getting a job. Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world. (Palmer, as cited in hooks, 2003, p. 43)

This study uplifted the voices of school-based restorative justice practitioners, aiming to center their experiences in the broader conversation on the successes and shortcomings of restorative justice work in schools as it has been implemented to date. By centering the voices of practitioners working directly with young people in schools, it became possible to identify the motivations, ongoing preparation, and underlying values or philosophy that have guided and sustained school-based practitioners in their work. As such, the depth of the work undertaken by practitioners was revealed, as well as their wisdom about what makes for effective restorative justice work in schools.

The organization of data in this chapter is informed by a modified version of Batts' (2002) four levels framework, which I am calling four spheres. This framework fosters clarity on how to critically analyze initiatives oriented toward change in service of social justice. The four spheres are: (a) personal, (b) interpersonal, (c) institutional, and (d) cultural. In speaking with each of the participants, their responses to distinct questions could be analyzed within one or more of these spheres, with some expected overlap between them that often aligned with the co-occurrence between themes. Given that the purpose of this study included problematizing existing restorative justice practices in schools with the hope of improving them, this framework for analyzing opportunities for change aligned well with the analysis of my data. Furthermore, my adaptation of changing the levels into spheres more accurately depicted a non-hierarchical

relationship between the spheres and was, as a result, more philosophically aligned with the goals of this study. With this in mind, this chapter provides a systematic presentation of the data collected from nine restorative justice practitioners. Toward that end, the discussion begins with a composite portrait of participants. Next, the data are discussed according to the four spheres noted above and are presented thematically, according to the major issues and concerns raised during the critical narrative sessions with the nine participants, as well as the focus group session.

Composite Portrait of Participants

Participants for this study included nine school-based restorative justice practitioners. They all had more than five years of experience working in public schools, with more than half of them having served in public school settings for upwards of a decade. Eight out of the nine have worked primarily in traditional public schools while one has worked primarily in public charter schools. Six of them served primarily as classroom-based teachers who used restorative justice work in their classrooms. Of those six, at least three of them had also taken on considerable informal leadership in seeking to support other colleagues or students in using restorative justice principles, tools, and practices in addressing issues in their schools. The remaining three participants served in a primary role of restorative justice coordinator, working at a school site in that capacity to support teachers and students in implementing restorative justice work.

With respect to participant demographics, six participants identified as people of color from various backgrounds. Three participants identified as White. The full spectrum of gender identities was reflected by participants, as was a range of identities in terms of sexuality, socioeconomic status and class, and other social identifiers. Thus, this was a very diverse group

of participants in many ways, even while they shared the commonality of engaging in restorative justice work in schools (see Table 2).

Practitioners' Definitions of Restorative Justice

In addition to responding to demographic questions, participants were invited to share their definitions of restorative justice through a pre-interview questionnaire (see Appendix A). Their definitions are included here to highlight each practitioner's outlook on restorative justice work in schools:

> Donna: A process of addressing individual and community needs and individual and community trauma. It rests upon a foundation of strong and trusting relationships. It increases accountability and honesty.
>
> Justin: I view the practice as a horizontal formation that seeks to facilitate positive individual and group transformation by building on the personal strengths of all the participants.
>
> Victor: A system of justice that seeks to restore wholeness to individuals, relationships, and communities by engaging all affected parties in dialogue that focuses on the harm that was done rather than the law/rule that was broken.
>
> Heather: Circle practice or listening practice that builds community and heals rifts.
>
> Anita: I feel like restorative justice is a way of holding communities together . . . a way to ensure safe spaces for all . . . a way in which we can collectively and in a love-based humane way grow together toward freedom.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data

Name	Race & Ethnicity	Gender	Socioeconomic Status and Class	Sexuality
Donna	South Asian Indian	Cisgender woman	Raised poor; currently middle class	Queer
Justin	African American	Cisgender male	Middle class	Multi-sexual
Victor	White, Ukrainian	Nonconforming /Variant	Need-to-work wealthy	Pansexual
Heather	White, anti-racist	Female	Middle class	Mostly straight though fluid
Anita	Southeast Asian Indian	Female	Middle class	Straight
Joshua	White, French	Male	Middle class	Heterosexual
Celeste	Black/African-American	Woman	Lower middle class	Heterosexual
Sara	Chicana	Woman	Middle class	Lesbian
Tamara	Thai/Japanese Asian American	Woman/Female (Cis)	Working class	Straight

Joshua: Restorative justice is an approach aimed at building community as well as repairing harm by focusing on needs and obligations.

Celeste: Efforts to repair harm and break negative patterns and behaviors.

Sara: A framework to help people communicate needs, hurt, and praise. I also think it brings up and possibly addresses root issues. It is intentional and voluntary.

Tamara**:** Restorative justice is the "invisibilized" social emotional work of acknowledging and honoring the humanity of people and relationships while holding people accountable when harm happens.

Though each practitioner's definition is unique, they collectively highlight a philosophical approach oriented toward cultivating healthy relationships and communities, one

that requires considerable depth of practice to embody. Consistent with these responses, the data also revealed tremendous convergence in the underlying values and philosophy that guided participants' work. While each participant's unique identities and positionality certainly informed how they engaged with young people, a considerable amount of synergy persisted between their responses within each of the four spheres articulated by Batts (2002). As such, this modified version of her four levels framework has proven useful as the primary organizing principle for the presentation of this data, while also aligning with the guiding focus of each of the research questions and the salience of emergent themes.

Reflections in the Personal Sphere

In their responses related to the first research question, most participants reflected deeply about themselves, their identities, and their ongoing practices of self-care and saw connections between this personal undertaking and their work of engaging with young people in schools in a manner that is aligned with the principles and philosophy of restorative justice. Some of the key themes that emerged from this aspect of discussion were: the importance of being aware of one's positionality in relationship to young people based on race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.; working with integrity; engaging in self-care practices; and the importance of critical self-reflection in relation to undertaking restorative justice work in schools.

Awareness of One's Positionality

Donna was among the majority of participants who explicitly stated the importance of being conscious of the impact of one's own identity in doing restorative justice work. She stated:

> To be a person of color obscures who I am and who they are sometimes. I certainly use that identity and believe in it very strongly, but I also try not to conflate who I am with who the people I'm working with are in ways that are a disservice to that work. I'm really

> trying to name and see and be aware of the ways that Black people are really present in the life of this land and country, in a way that has everything to do with the initial oppression that this country is built on, and how my relationship to that can be one of collusion or it can be one of seeing my own trajectory in history as a South Asian person, our own experiences of oppression and institutionalization and colonization. (Donna, Interview)

This statement clearly indicated that Donna was aware of how her positionality influenced her relationships with her students and impacted her ability to understand their struggles, demonstrating a key point of intersection between the personal and interpersonal spheres. It further underscored the necessity of incorporating critical race theory into a discussion of restorative justice to ensure that positionality and identity were engaged in critical and authentic ways.

Joshua similarly reflected on his positionality as a White person in the context of the legacy of individual and collective struggles for justice among people of color. He said:

> I think for me, it's important to always know, to be aware of my identity in my work. I cannot be blind and pretend that I know what my students are going through, because I don't. I can empathize. I can listen. I can understand, and that's what happens in circle. You listen to their stories and that kind of stuff. At the end of the day, it's always knowing that it's not the same reality. Especially, I mean, I didn't grow up here in South LA . . . I'm not targeted by police. What just happened with the Starbucks thing.[1] I mean,

[1] In April 2018, two Black men were arrested at a Starbucks in Philadelphia while waiting for a friend to arrive. A store employee accused them of trespassing because they had not yet purchased anything and called the police to have them removed (Held, 2018).

> you know, I can sit there without being profiled in a negative way. It's just being aware of all that, of those privileges of being White. (Joshua, Interview)

As someone whose racial identity did not match that of his students, Joshua recognized the importance of cultivating an awareness of the significance of this difference to connect with students effectively across difference and empathize with their experiences. This recognition of positionality and privilege again underscored the need for a race-conscious approach to restorative justice work and for White people, specifically, to be able to recognize and appreciate the significance of race and the differential impact of racism on the lives of students of color.

Sara commented on how much of an asset it was to share a linguistic culture and tradition with her students and to offer community building circles in Spanish. She said:

> I can't be vulnerable with a group of students if I can't communicate with them literally in the language that they need. Then it doesn't work, as well-intentioned and as vulnerable as I want to be or I want them to be. (Sara, Interview)

She recalled how much more willing her Spanish-speaking students were to be vulnerable and open with each other and to fully engage in circle because they were able to hold the circle in Spanish. Thus, Sara's Spanish language abilities positioned her to serve as a powerful ally for her students, revealing the need for cultural competency in restorative justice work.

Justin, similarly, saw himself as an ally for students struggling with their sexuality or whose identities differed from the norm in some way. His description of his sexuality as not subscribing "to any narrow, particularly not White, male, gay political agenda" meant that he saw himself as "very open to a lot of differences" (Justin, Interview). He described supporting a young person who eventually came out to him as transgender and credited his exploration of his own identities—the work he had done on himself—as serving as a crucial foundation for why

that young person felt safe in confiding in him. He stated, in reference to speaking to that young person: "'I see you for who you are, and I love you.' That's sometimes all it takes for someone to just slowly but surely start to make choices that are better" (Justin, Interview). Thus, for Justin, awareness of his identify and honoring his own positionality also made him open to other people's truths, a fact that made his efforts at supporting them more effective. Students like the ones he described could sense his own genuine acceptance of himself and the non-normative aspects of his identity and immediately felt that they could be more open and accepting of themselves, as well.

Working with Integrity

This knowledge of self and positionality revealed the importance of the quality of integrity when engaging in restorative justice work in schools. It was not enough to have simply undergone some training and know how to ask questions in a circle. Rather, each individual practitioner needed to understand themselves in relationship to other people and recognize the significance of both commonalities with students, and also differences. This led them to cultivate a considerable amount of integrity, at least in how they spoke of themselves and their interactions with young people and colleagues, as well as in their reflections on their work.

For instance, Donna reflected with considerable nuance on the significance of identity in a way that also revealed her integrity. She stated:

> I definitely feel very strongly about who I am and my identities have so much to do with the way I am and why I am. But that's not to say that I think someone with different identities wouldn't or couldn't. I guess I really feel like our project as human beings is to figure out how each one of us can answer these questions. I'm not of the belief that one

> has to only have oppressed or marginalized identities in order to do this work with integrity. (Donna, Interview)

In saying this, Donna demonstrated humility—arguably a key component of integrity—and the recognition of how complicated it can be to strive to relate to young people in schools in a restorative manner. She did so without essentializing the qualities needed to connect with young people, recognizing that this type of integrity can be cultivated, regardless of one's background, but that it is work that required deliberate effort, attention, and skill-building.

Celeste also revealed her integrity when describing how she related to students on a human level, and how she made herself vulnerable through being transparent about her own shortcomings. She said:

> I let them know when I do things that I shouldn't do. I'm like, Yeah, you all, I was gossiping about somebody. I felt so bad about it. . . . You know, within reason, but I also don't want them to think that I'm just this all day everyday pious individual. You know what I mean by that. I want them to see me working through it, so I tell them You all, I was supposed to save $150 because that's what I told you I was going to do because you set your goals, I set mine. I'm like, I didn't because I just didn't want to cook, y'all. I went out to eat every day, and now I need a new tire and I can't buy one. What should I have done? They're like, "You should've saved." You know what I mean? I want to just model problem-solving and how even if you fail, you pick yourself back up. (Celeste, Interview)

Celeste's ability to be transparent and model these moments of human weakness revealed the integrity at the root of how she worked with students. She was not expecting them to be perfect

and, instead, was honest and open about her own shortcomings. She continued to speak about how she tried to serve as a role model for her students when she stated:

> It's why I dress the way I dress. It's why everything. Again, I do feel the responsibility, so as much as I like to join in some things with them, some things I won't because I want them to be very clear. In my head, it's like, I want to be something or someone they can aspire to be like. I take that very seriously, which means there's certain things I'm just not ever going to do in front of my students. That's how I live my life. That's part of it, is I literally do not do anything, or my goal is to not do anything that I would not be comfortable with my students doing if they were my age. That's always kind of been the goal. It started with my son. It's like I want to be the kind of woman that I would be comfortable with him bringing home to meet me. (Celeste, Interview)

Thus, for Celeste, there was very little separation between how she functioned in school and how she lived the rest of her life, demonstrating a high degree of integration and integrity in the manner she carried out her work.

Victor took this degree of integrity even a step further by attributing all significant learning to the students, themselves. Victor stated, in response to a question about learning to work effectively with students, that it was:

> By being willing to learn from them. By being vulnerable. By being transparent. By being open, by listening deeply, by speaking honestly. By being patient, by recognizing when I haven't served them in the ways they need, and being accountable for, and apologizing to them, and trying again, repeatedly. Making lots of mistakes, and learning from those mistakes, and making new mistakes. (Victor, Interview)

Victor, like Celeste, revealed a degree of vulnerability and a willingness to model human fallibility in a loving way that revealed deep integration and integrity. By modeling integrity in this way, Victor created the conditions whereby students could learn to accept each other and themselves and similarly interact with each other from a place of integrity and wholeness.

Practicing Self-Care as Preparation

For many participants, engaging in ongoing self-care practices served an important purpose of helping them cultivate the qualities of centeredness, being grounded, patience, and the ability to sustain their energy and enthusiasm for restorative justice work in schools even when conditions were less than ideal. Victor, for instance, laughed at the question of how to sustain engagement in the intensity of restorative justice work. Victor said:

> I'm laughing because I feel like my whole life has been in preparation. I mean, certainly my own healing practices, therapy, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, developing a mindful movement practice. A sense of integration, a sense of wholeness of my being, but then also acquiring real skills for nonviolent communication, for community building, for dealing with conflict in a way that is transformative, in terms of self-awareness raising, in terms of self-esteem building for myself and for others. Encouraging the best in myself and others. There are many practices . . . where do I start? (Victor, Interview)

For Victor, engaging in restorative, transformative work constituted the ongoing work of an entire lifetime, and the personal work that Victor undertook on an ongoing basis contributed to the capacity building needed to sustain such work with students.

Sara, though somewhat casual in her statement about self-care practices, also revealed a strong commitment to them. When asked what kinds of things she undertook as self-care, she stated, "Oh, the normal things, you know, hiking. I spend a lot of time by myself. I have a huge

stack of journals I do" (Sara, Interview). The simplicity of her statement belied the depth of some of these practices and minimized how countercultural, indeed radical, many of these practices were. The power and value of these practices having become normalized as part of a consistent routine for Sara became especially clear in light of Anita's subsequent reflections.

Anita, too, recognized the value of health and self-care to sustain her in her restorative work with young people as she reflected on the contrast from her earlier years of teaching. She stated:

> Yeah, just me really wanting to be healthy so that I can train more, so I can be happier. My way of life was not working for me anymore. Honestly, I would say seven or eight years ago, I would teach, go home, take a nap, go out and party 'til two o'clock in the morning, wake up at six or seven and go do the same thing over again. I think when I hit 32-ish, my body just couldn't handle that shit anymore and I needed to find a way—I need music. I need movement. I need social adult interaction. That's what honestly was going on for me. . . . So that's how I found capoeira and then all of this other shit came along with it. It's been really life changing for me. It makes me a better teacher. It makes me a better person. I legit think I was a functional alcoholic for a really long time. I think a lot of teachers are. I think a lot of doctors, I think a lot of lawyers, I think a lot of our fucking society right now is. It's very normalized. (Anita, Interview)

Anita's ability to reflect on developing self-care practices as the turning point in her life pointed clearly to its value for her personally, and in her ability to sustain her work with young people in a mature and integrated way.

In contrast to Anita's early years as a teacher, Heather reported strong self-care practices from the beginning of her teaching career. She stated:

> I was in therapy my first several years of teaching. And that was essential. Oh my gosh, what I was confronting as students appeared before me with all they were carrying. I needed a place where I could completely unload it and understand it. (Heather, Interview)

Her awareness of the need for support early in her teaching career and her commitment to a therapeutic process undoubtedly contributed to her longevity within the profession.

Celeste connected her commitment to self-care practices directly to her work with students. She stated:

> So yoga, music, breathing, affirmations. I do affirmations with my students. All the things that I do for myself personally, I share with my students. My job, my duty, my obligation, my life's purpose is to model health for them and then try to give them tools and strategies to be healthy and successful. (Celeste, Interview)

By bringing these practices to her students, Celeste also ensured that she continued to engage in them, as the students, too, would have experienced the benefits of them and begun to ask for them.

Tamara, too, was passionate in her explanation of how she engaged in self-care work. She stated:

> What keeps me going, it's something to do with spirit, like self-care-type stuff, not to just umbrella that, but it's me actualizing the things that we talk about, especially when it comes to trauma and healing. Tapping into ancestral ways of moving through stuck-ness and pain and harm by honoring, honoring traditions that are lost. And something that has come up for me, especially in speaking on this very topic, is the idea of ceremony, and ceremony meaning a lot of things to different people, but it's a sacred time to heal, a sacred time to be intentional, and just honoring our existence and our resilience and

> persistence. And like I said, ceremony can look so many different ways. Like Circle is ceremony, as well. Meditation is ceremony. Washing dishes can be a ceremony. But the common thread of it all is the meaning that we give to it and the healing meaning behind the act of sacred time has been super powerful in grounding me in this hard work. (Tamara, Interview)

Tamara's commitment to healing through ceremony and sacred time demonstrated the depth of her commitment to a long-term capacity to engage in challenging work.

Critical Reflection Makes All the Difference

Related to the deliberate undertaking of self-care practices, numerous participants reported cultivating a frame of mind conducive to self-awareness and self-reflection. For instance, Celeste stated: "I'm always thinking, 'How can I be better and healthier so that I can be better and healthier when I'm serving my students?' You know what I mean?" (Celeste, Interview) Her self-reflective practice regularly included keeping her students in mind, wanting to be able to better sustain herself in supporting them. She continued by saying:

> I think most people are reflective most of the time, but the critical reflection is what makes all the difference. Critical reflection is kind of looking at what you did well, what you didn't do well, what worked, what didn't work, but then taking that information and applying it and making changes. If you're critically self-aware, critically self-reflective, ideally that's going to inspire change of some sort. (Celeste, Interview)

This statement by Celeste expanded the notion of self-reflection to include a critical component, one that focused on continual improvement with an orientation toward growth and change.

For Anita, her development of self-awareness in her restorative justice practices with students was connected to her own developing political awareness of broader social issues, specifically the impact of policing on young people in society. She said:

> My school . . . was more social justice based as well, so I started becoming a little more politicized, but when I fully started grasping this is when I started doing work around police brutality and really realizing that, essentially, I was re-creating a police state in my classroom. If I'm out here trying to fight for a world where we don't have to, then I need to teach my kids how to be different with each other, right? Because we are so trained to be so fear-based. So that's when I really started looking into "How can I do something different?" (Anita, Interview)

Thus, for Anita, her reflections on the personal level about her teaching also dovetailed with an awareness of their impact at the institutional and cultural levels and led her to recognize the need to transform her teaching practice to be more directly aligned with her values.

Reflections in the Interpersonal Sphere

The second and third research questions elicited numerous responses that could be readily examined within the interpersonal sphere, as participants overwhelmingly indicated how much of restorative justice work in school was about cultivating functional relationships between people. Numerous participants acknowledged the challenge of balancing self-care with care and attention for others. Victor, for instance, stated: "I guess as we engage with other members of our community, one very present struggle that I'm sitting with is balancing self-care with care for others and making sure that both are being addressed" (Victor, Focus Group). Celeste further recognized how her personal work toward integration and integrity impacted how she related to her students, again demonstrating the interplay between the personal and interpersonal spheres.

She said: “I think part of it is when I slip up bad, if I slip up, I will apologize to the whole class and I will tell them what I’m apologizing for. I think that the first time I did it, they were all like—whoa” (Celeste, Interview) Thus, as participants maintained an emphasis on their own personal growth and development, their attention also turned toward their connections with others.

Essential Qualities of Healthy Relationships

There was a clear consensus among all of the participants that a tremendously important aspect of restorative justice work in schools was about cultivating healthy relationships with young people, colleagues, and community members. In the context of recognizing how profoundly relational this work was, participants named essential qualities such as love and connection, as well as the need to be vulnerable and being both a good listener and being heard by others as interpersonal qualities and dynamics that undergirded the unfolding of effective restorative justice work in schools. Furthermore, numerous participants shared examples of such dynamics in the context of recognizing the traumatic and challenging experiences young people in schools have faced.

Love. Justin, for instance, reflected on the power of love as he recounted an incident with several middle-school-age girls who had consistently been in trouble with school administrators who responded to them by trying to threaten or intimidate them. He stated:

> We have kids who have been through difficult things. They have come here as unaccompanied minors. They’ve seen everything. They’ve seen people get killed. They’ve seen people raped. They’ve seen all kinds of things, plus the neighborhood, certain streets you can’t walk down at night, so you’re going to scare them? It’s not going to work. Early on, the vice-principal, one of the supervisors came and he said, “You

> know, we've tried everything with these girls. We haven't scared them into shape." I'm thinking, you know, you've tried everything, but have you tried loving them? I know with him in particular, one of the girls had been sexually exploited for a couple of months. She was in northern California, and he shooed her away like a s stray dog. Someone else looked at her and shook their head and said, "Lost cause." There are people who have that belief. (Justin, Interview)

Justin's belief in the power of loving relationships as a vehicle for transformation shifted the focus from how adults in schools have been socialized to approach addressing unskillful behaviors demonstrated by students. The emphasis on love, on cultivating a loving relationships or connection facilitated an entirely different perspective on the conversation about school discipline, one that clarifies how the interpersonal sphere can impact the institutional realm.

This emphasis on love was further affirmed by Heather's reflection on this same topic. She said the following in response to the initial list of themes presented to participants at the focus group after the initial round of data analysis had been undertaken:

> I also think a word that's missing here and a word that people hesitate to use, but that I think gets at the heart of why I do the work I do is just operating from a place of love, really bringing love into your everyday interactions. Relationship-focused, community, all those things are about love. Being able to say that that's at the heart of what we do and not be scared of that, I think is really important. (Heather, Focus Group)

Heather's recognition of how counter-cultural it had become to name the power of loving students demonstrated courage to reclaim it as a central force in guiding restorative work with young people. The other participants' resounding affirmation of this statement underscored their collective desire to reclaim the right to fully embody the practice of loving students.

Connection. Related to the notion of love was the theme of connection—that multiple participants in their daily interchanges with young people, in particular sought to develop genuine connections grounded in the kind of love previously articulated. Victor again provided a bridge between personal/intrapersonal work and the interpersonal by stating:

> Relationships take lots of work. They take lots of attention, lots of intention. I've had to unlearn the things in my life that have become barriers to having healthy relationships. I've had to acquire skills and learn new skills that help me connect in healthy ways to myself and to others, and to create healthy spaces for myself and others to grow, and to learn, and to heal. (Victor, Interview)

The ongoing, personal work that Victor had undertaken made it possible to connect in healthier ways with young people, ways that facilitated students' transformations, as well.

In reflecting on this type of dynamic that can be seen as interpersonal, institutional, and cultural in nature, along with the pitfall that many teachers fall into of being primarily content-focused, Anita acknowledged that "a lot of people want to stick to the math or the science or the English and don't realize that in order to get that, they need to see the child as a human" (Anita, Interview). For too many teachers, their focus is on the material and not on the humanity of the learners in the space with them. Celeste further reflected on this issue, having similarly stated how much work went into connecting with students. She recognized that: "Part of my concern is that there are students who have maybe an A or B in my class but have a D or F in other classes . . . I feel bad because I want that success to carry over to all of the other classes, and it's not" (Celeste, Interview). This statement, though painting a sad reality for many students who did not feel connected to their other teachers, revealed how much of an impact participating in a safe classroom community could have. Where students felt seen and known on a human level, they

could also thrive academically; without that sense of connection to the teachers, students' academic progress often faltered.

Anita also raised the power of connection between the students, themselves, and how creating space for such connections to happen was part of the work of transforming the classroom community. She stated:

> I remember one of the questions I used to ask in circle, when we were doing really heavy circles, I would just ask my students, "When people are speaking, keep in mind anything that resonates with you. Keep in mind anything that you've been through," so we'd have an advice round at the end. The last round would be, "Speak on something that you connected to," and so-and-so would say, "Hey, I really . . ."—that shit was so fucking powerful because it was kids who never had connections before saying—"Oh, I heard you have this issue with your mom. I've gone through the same thing and I tried this. Maybe you can try it," or "Listen, I hear that you're having a situation in this classroom. I can tutor you," or all this really fucking powerful shit. (Anita, Interview)

The connections that were forged through the circle process allowed students to see each other and to see themselves reflected in each other in a way that strengthened their bonds and shifted the culture of the classroom community.

Sara reflected on the dangers of the converse experience, when connections were not forged with young people on a daily basis. She said:

> What does it mean to walk by a young person or an adult without acknowledging them? Whether it's your student or not because we obviously have a lot of them roaming around and not in class. I know the kids that are always out there and could be just like, "Oh great, here she is again," but instead it's like "What's your name again? How are you

> doing? Not even like, "why aren't you going to class right now?" Again, it's that, and I think that if I were to have a problem, which has happened . . . then they are like, "Okay, what do you need?" I think that we don't often see that as part of restorative justice. We just wait until something happened already. As opposed to that relationship that I started building or that connection that I had in just acknowledging that person means that now if there is conflict, I feel more comfortable with that person having my back. (Sara, Interview)

This statement underscored how restorative justice needed to be understood as more than a set of prescribed activities. Rather, it emerged from a philosophical stance and a set of values that infused every interaction with young people and colleagues in school settings with the notion that everyone matters on a human level, and that it was essential to prioritize connecting on a human level on a daily basis.

Donna similarly acknowledged the value and impact of seemingly simple, daily ways of setting the tone and leading with care and a desire to connect with students. She said:

> I was a couple minutes late to class the other day because I got caught up in a very stressful conversation with another staff member before school and the students were so sweet! I got to my class and I was unlocking the door and I was like "Oh, my gosh. I'm so sorry y'all. Sorry to keep you waiting!" We came in and everyone sat down, and somebody was like, "Good morning miss, how are you?" And they knew that they were doing it the way that I do it and it was just really sweet. It felt so sweet to receive that. And I just sighed, and I was like, "Oh my gosh. Thank you so much for asking. I'm really stressed out and I'm really sorry that the stressful conversation that I had this morning

made it so that I was late to meet you." And they were like, "That's okay.' But it was kind of like a joke, but it was serious. (Donna, Interview)

The students were able to reflect back to Donna the same kind of care and desire for connection that she demonstrated toward them when they were late or were clearly having a hard time. Thus, the interpersonal connections she forged served to co-create a fundamentally different classroom culture than the prevailing dominant culture in the school, at large.

Being heard. Inherent in these moments of connection was the capacity to listen deeply to another person's experience, to truly hear where they were coming from and to respond with empathy rather than judgement. Joshua, for instance, stated:

> Maybe it's obvious, but when you give the space to young people and staff to express themselves, to share their opinion, to be listened to, to be heard, everyone wants that. Even if they might not express it that way, everybody wants to be heard and wants to be listened to. Nobody wants to be suspended or pushed out of schools or to be told do this or do that. (Joshua, Interview)

With this statement, Joshua's words echoed Anita's prior statement about people wanting to be seen as being human and to have their human needs respected. He further underscored Sara's recognition that every person matters and that nobody was to be treated as expendable or beyond reaching.

Sara further explored the concept of being heard when she shared her explanation to her students of why it was necessary to create a physical circle, and how that helped them to be present with each other in a different way. She reported having said to students:

> "Even though it's not your intention to get distracted by your phone or by something in front of you, it's natural, and so taking those physical barriers away, now we are literally

more open." That was something totally revelatory that I didn't think would happen just because we were sitting in the circle because I had never done that before. (Sara, Interview)

She was able to see the connection between one of the primary tools of restorative justice work in schools—the community-building circle—with the underlying purpose and impact that such a tool can have. She helped her students see this, as well, and was able to generate their support and investment in the circle process as a result of her explanation.

Joshua expressed understanding of people's initial resistance to engaging in a circle process as he described his own discomfort when he first participated in a circle. He recognized that "when you're in circle, it's not about yelling the loudest or getting your point across, it's really about listening . . . I think that discomfort came from just not being used to sitting and listening. Mostly what you do is listen" (Joshua, Interview) This statement uplifted the challenge of cultivating the capacity to listen as a skill, and how revelatory it could be for people when they actually felt heard. Heather further related the power of listening when two people were in conflict. She said, "I used the protocol of having a witness and having the two people in conflict buffered by a witness who echoed what was said. It was so amazing" (Heather, Interview). Her example indicated that the very presence of a witness served the function of each person in conflict feeling more deeply heard. She went on to state that "They really got to hear each other. It didn't fix everything but if gave them a common ground to work from" (Heather, Interview) Thus, this witnessing presence—someone modeling the power of deep listening—in turn allowed for at least the beginning of movement toward a skillful resolution of the conflict.

Vulnerability. These reflections on connection and being heard also underscored the power of the willingness to be vulnerable, and how such a quality can facilitate meaningful engaging in restorative justice work with young people in schools. Tamara stated:

> Some teachers have issues with naming their feelings—the vulnerability piece—and that's ok. I will tell teachers that you don't have to talk about your feelings. You can talk about the impact that [a behavior] has on you. And if that feels weird, you can even talk about the impact that it has on the classroom. Just so that they can connect their actions to what's happening and why you're showing up the way you are right now. And being able to just drop that in a moment can help them. It might not change the behavior right away, but you're dropping a seed for the young person to make a connection with you. (Tamara, Interview)

For Tamara, while complete vulnerability was not required, she recognized how it could serve the purpose of helping a student to connect to a teacher and relate to them on a human level. She coached teachers in how to pace themselves in moving toward being willing to be more vulnerable, recognizing that it would be through a path of vulnerability that student and teacher would ultimately understand each other better and be able to support each other from a foundation of mutual respect.

Resonating with the challenge of what it meant to be vulnerable in the classroom, Anita reflected on a very personal level of how hard it was for her to work with young people at the beginning of her teaching career. She said:

> I think teaching has pushed me to be more grounded in myself. My first couple of years of teaching, it was like I was literally in middle school again—being made fun of for my teeth, or when I slipped up and slurred. I think it's incredibly important to be grounded in

> yourself and be okay with being made fun of and make fun of yourself. I think it's really important to have a sense of humor, but this vulnerability, when thinking about restorative justice, is what builds community. When students see you be vulnerable and share your shit, then it gives them permission to do so, you know? It might not be right away, but then you'll have a few start in circle. Then you'll have more and maybe in a couple months that hardest kid will start sharing. (Anita, Interview)

In this statement, Anita made an important point about vulnerability: She revealed that the degree of vulnerability that she, as a teacher, was able to model determined, to a large extent, the willingness of the students to be vulnerable and share with her. The acknowledged that this process was incredibly painful at first, as she had to confront issues that she had faced since childhood. She further emphasized how this practice did not work immediately, that it required an ongoing commitment to doing one's own healing work as the foundation for authentic engagement.

Community Building, Accountability, and Healing

With the goal of connection undergirded by love for students and fostered through a willingness to be vulnerable, participants further reflected on the power of such community-building work to lay the foundation for repairing harm when moments of conflict inevitably arose in their school communities. Joshua clearly articulated this philosophical approach to conflict and its implications for practice when he said:

> I really believe in relationships and that we are connected to each other in a way, so if there's harm happening somewhere in that web of relationship, it needs healing. It needs repair. You cannot just put it aside. Once you do that, you know there's something broken that you're not addressing with that bigger web of relationships and connections

> between people in the community. For example, if something happened, a harm happened in the community, and you put someone in prison or jail, you remove that person, you think you remove the problem, but you actually left that broken relationship, that wound, basically there. I'm not against jail at all costs or whatever but my philosophy is definitely how can we repair the harm in community rather than just put everybody in jail when something happens. (Joshua, Interview)

This emphasis on the web of relationships created a profoundly different framework for how to address moments of conflict or disconnect. With relationships as the binding force within the web, for Joshua, it became clear that the process of addressing conflict had to be about strengthening those relationships, rather than assessing blame and punishing people through removal.

Celeste described a particular incident with her students where she demonstrated her shared commitment to the restorative philosophy articulated by Joshua. After a young person had admitted to stealing some money from another student, she said:

> Eventually, I don't know how much time passed that day, the little girl did say it was her. She started crying, so I went over and hugged her. I commended her for telling the truth. I said to the class, "What we're not going to do, everyone, is make her feel bad." I was like, "Who in here has ever taken something that was not theirs? Anything, a pencil?" Every hand raised, so then we created this kind of forgiving space and she apologized. (Celeste, Interview)

By emphasizing connections and shared experiences, Celeste modeled and experienced with young people how harm can be repaired, when the focus was on uncovering the truth and understanding the source of what had gone awry.

Along these same lines, Anita said, “I think restorative justice values every member of society and creates ways that we can all have relationships and community, and then when one of us does fuck up, holds us lovingly accountable” (Anita, Interview) Here, accountability looked different than putting someone in jail or prison. Rather, she named an accountability grounded in love, which ultimately was a form of accountability firmly determined to continue believing in the best possible outcome of a situation, even after harm had been perpetrated by someone.

Healing centered. Inherent in this view about how to address harm was the recognition that a healing-centered approach was needed in working with young people. Joshua extended his discussion of values to addressing the traumatic experiences that students face in the community in which he worked. He stated:

> I really believe in restorative justice and the values of respect, of listening, of everybody has a story. There’s always a reason why someone is behaving the way they are behaving. I don’t believe in bad people and in good people. People might do bad things, but I believe in everybody’s own worth. Even though sometimes you cannot see it, even though it’s hard to see, I know everybody has good inside of them and if you can provide safe space, healing—‘cause a lot of, especially our kids here, a lot of our kids come from trauma. There’s a lot of trauma going on in the community and in their lives, so that obviously affects the way they are going to see their own worth and behave. (Joshua, Interview)

Thus, application of a restorative philosophy toward relating to young people required a recognition of the impact of traumatic experiences on their lives and an empathetic understanding of how this could alter students’ behavior.

Victor similarly acknowledged the need to be trauma-informed or healing-centered in working with young people in schools and named additional skills that educators working with traumatized young people could cultivate. Victor stated:

> Being informed about trauma is another skill. Understanding, and being able to recognize behavior that comes from unhealed trauma, and addressing it in ways that promote healing, and opening, and increased risk-taking, and increased sense of safety in risk taking. A kind of comfort with being in discomfort is another huge skill, and it's something we need to learn as educators. It's not something we're born with. (Victor, Interview)

This statement underscored the range of distinct skills that restorative justice practitioners developed as part of their repertoire of strategies for working with students. This further revealed the ongoing, life-long efforts of constantly striving to empathize more and engage more effectively that practitioners took on as part of their daily work. Furthermore, their willingness to undertake this work revealed the belief that their students could transform their suffering and heal from the traumas they encountered. They refused to lower their expectations of students based on all the difficulties they had faced; rather, they maintained high expectations and sought to support young people in healing.

High expectations. In the context of this study, high expectations emerged not so much as a "tough love" or meritocratic notion. Rather, it took the form of an expectation that young people were capable of healing, capable of transforming, an attitude that participants demonstrated toward students in multiple ways. Anita named that "I think holding kids accountable is having high expectations, which is a good thing" (Anita, Interview) She contextualized these high expectations in terms of holding each other in high regard and co-

creating a classroom culture that was grounded in respect and care for each other. Thus, her expectations were more about how people cared for each other and for the space than specifically on academics. Celeste further named that "I really, really want them to be independent, and I want them to be kind to others and kind to themselves. I want them to be self-disciplined. I want them to stand up when they can for the right thing" (Celeste, Interview). Her statement underscored her belief that these were things that her students could achieve and that she expected them to achieve as part of their development as human beings.

Similarly, Justin recounted a moment in earlier years of developing his philosophy on working with young people, including the expectations he had for them. He stated:

> I remember doing a summer camp and telling the kids "Now show me your best. Is this what your best looks like?" I don't know where that actually came from. Now, it's just what I believe. Everyone has their best self. I often asked the students open-ended questions of their big self: "So if you were demonstrating your brilliance, what would that look like? If you were demonstrating peace, what would that look like?" (Justin, Interview)

By asking students these open-ended questions, he invited them to demonstrate how they show up when they were being their best selves, and then expected them to continue to bring the best of themselves to their interactions with others in community. Thus, the kind of high expectations he held were the expectations that would help to create a safe and restorative community for everyone present, where everyone could heal and cultivate their best selves.

Reflections in the Institutional Sphere

Participants' reflections in the institutional sphere included additional responses to the second research question about effective practices while also delving into greater depth on question three—obstacles to effective restorative justice practice in schools. Some key topics included the faulty expectation that restorative justice could be implemented as a quick fix to disciplinary issues; that structural, systemic racism and other forms of oppression impact the legacy of efforts to implement restorative justice; and that there were certain values and ways of being, such as the prioritization of genuine community building, that were beyond the scope of what direct professional development could impart. That said, there was consensus among participants that, for restorative justice to be effectively used in schools, systematic efforts and support within educational institutions needed to undergird each teacher and young person's development and that there persisted a responsibility in the institutional sphere for the articulation of the values inherent in restorative or transformative work.

Restorative Justice Does Not Yield Immediate Fruit

Given the depth of work that participants revealed needed to occur in the personal and interpersonal spheres, it became readily apparent that restorative justice was not a program or a set of practices that could quickly be implemented, even with a commitment from administration to do so. As such, participants recognized its precarious position in the current landscape of discussions on its overall effectiveness. Joshua, for instance, stated:

> I think at the end of the day it's the consistency of doing it. I talked to teachers about that. If you do it one time, the first circle is always hard. The second is still hard, but maybe a little less. The third is still hard, but maybe a little less. Then by the eighth, ninth circle, maybe you can have two rounds with the kids and then by the 11th, 12th, 15th circle, you

might have like an actually nice conversation. It's not gonna happen overnight and if you do one circle and you're like "Oh, you know what, this is too hard" and you give up, and then you come back maybe ten weeks later because someone told you that you need to do this, it's just not gonna work. (Joshua, Interview)

Joshua's statement revealed what he interpreted as oftentimes a lack of will in educational institutions to sustain efforts long enough for positive results to emerge. Implicit in his statement was a critique of the prevailing attitude that if a protocol or strategy did not yield immediate results, then it could not possibly be serving a purpose. Heather echoed a similar sentiment when she stated, "I think that's one of the things about this work that it doesn't yield immediate fruit. And especially in middle school, there can be so much resistance to the process" (Heather, Interview). Both Joshua and Heather recognized the need for a deep and consistent investment in the process over time to experience the kinds of results that were possible in using restorative justice practices.

Donna offered an additional institutional critique on the process through which restorative justice was adopted in her district. She stated:

> Because of how RJ was rolled out, what we now have is a core of teachers of all political stripes who are really saying restorative justice didn't work, and we need more harsh measures. So, I think the way restorative justice has rolled out has actually been a way to justify harsher measures of discipline supposedly against young people. Which is the exact opposite of what we need and want. (Donna, Interview)

Thus, the lack of understanding of the depth of preparation and practice that needed to be sustained over the long term has resulted, in Donna's perspective, in an undermining of the implementation of restorative justice in schools, overall.

Healthy Communities

Rather than a quick fix that could be easily imposed institutionally, numerous participants articulated the need to view schools as communities and to strive to build healthy communities, which implied the need for ongoing efforts that would transcend the purview of traditional professional development. Victor stated:

> I think it's really about overcoming this illusion that we are separate. It's about real integration. It's about seeing everyone as necessary. It's about not letting anyone feel left out. If you look at healthy communities, that's what it's about. There isn't a training program for how to go into a healthy community, right? That's just silly. (Victor, Interview)

Thus, for Victor, restorative justice is about fostering healthy community, in all of the depth and complexity that that required. Victor's statement went beyond the mere critique of the institutions and how they engaged with restorative justice to recognize the futility of approaching it as a discrete program to be trained in. Rather, Victor revealed the need for a shift in values that would emphasize the health of a school community and that would strive to create such an environment.

Similarly, for Anita, restorative justice work in schools was also about building authentic community, something that transcends institutional mandates. She stated:

> In order for restorative justice to really function, you have to have community. You have to have people who buy into the community, who want to be part of the community. If the individuals don't want to be a part of the community, if they don't see any value of the community, then RJ is not going to work, you know, because why would you want to be holding someone accountable or be held accountable to somebody you don't respect

> or value? I remember the first year at one school, where its mission was to be diverse, you had your White kids over here, your Black kids over here, your Asians. There was everybody in the fucking rainbow there, but nobody talked to each other. You can't say, "Oh, hey, we have a good, diverse community." You have a diverse school population, but you don't have a community. In order to have a legit community, you need to put a lot of work into that. It's not just circle every once in a while. In order to create a community where everybody values each other, we all need to understand that we're dealing with levels of oppression in the world. Some more so than others. (Anita, Interview)

The type of work to which Anita alluded—the co-creation of a genuine school community—would require deep and sustained commitment over time, in the context of an understanding of the historical barriers to developing connections across difference, given students' relationships to distinct legacies of oppression. Her statement pointed to the shortcomings of institutions that were unprepared to take on the depth and complexity of that work.

Donna further revealed some of the problems inherent in how restorative justice had been implemented thus far in schools. She stated:

> Even the terms that get used of what we're supposed to do—classroom management—comes from I think a very corporate lineage and assumes, especially for the young people that I'm working with, that they need to be managed in a certain way, and I think that's so opposite to what I hope and think my role can or should be, but I think institutionally I also have had to come to terms with that is my role, and that within that role, there's a certain amount of power that I have where it's like I can do my best to make some space to heal and listen and connect with people and build accountability. And there are things

> that I cannot do alone; I need a team, and so I think restorative justice made me hopeful that I was going to have a team and, the way it has been rolled out, I just haven't. (Donna, Interview)

In Donna's words were a lament that the expectation of developing a thriving community were not achieved through her school's half-hearted attempts at adopting restorative justice and the limited framework for understanding and embracing the values of restorative justice, given the prevailing corporate, capitalistic culture that affected schools and how they functioned as institutions within the broader society.

Asking Somebody to Swim

While participants did indeed recognize that the work of community building needed to be deeper and more consistently sustained than what could be offered through direct professional development, they believed that, on the institutional level, schools needed to invest significant amounts of time and resources to support teachers and students in engaging in restorative justice work. Sara said:

> It's like anything else, if you are going to ask somebody to swim and you are like, "Okay, go ahead." It's like, do you want to give me some ideas beforehand? Do you want to give me some help while I'm doing it? I think that's teaching in general, but specifically when it comes to something like restorative justice, you got to support. I would say definitely starting a safe space [for teachers] because for some, and I've heard this from my own colleagues, being in a circle with students does not feel safe. It's like, I'm not ready to be vulnerable as an adult, so now I'm being asked to lead a group of teenagers in this space? Either way, I'm going to resist or I'm not going to do it with full faith, believing in it.

> That's the hard part because everything else in the school and in the district, it's like, alright, get in there. Here are your keys. (Sara, Interview)

Sara's statement uplifted a crucial element of meaningful preparation for engaging with young people in restorative ways: Adults needed to be practicing with each other. It could not possibly be enough to only engage with young people in isolated classrooms. To truly have restorative justice take root as the guiding philosophy in a school, adults needed to practice with each other both to model and also experience that kind of cultural shift for themselves.

Donna further articulated the depth and the kinds of support that teachers need to fully contextualize the significance of restorative justice work. She said:

> We've had so much professional development. How amazing would it be to have, I can imagine a three- or four-part training that's like, "Let's look at the education debt and the achievement gap. Let's look at the history of how certain communities have, it's been illegal for them to read and write. Let's look at, let's actually talk about the shit that we call the achievement gap. Let's talk about that in historical context and then let's actually talk about how something is owed to this set of students. But instead what they get is blame and criminalization and vilification. We need this as an attempt to begin to repay part of the education debt. Historical background, immediate, like, how is this an intervention into over-incarceration and under-education. But the third part, they just jumped right into which is how do you build a community building circle. That was their ground zero. I think when the AP Calculus teacher hears that he's supposed to take a day out every two weeks to ask people what their favorite food is for 40 minutes, he's like "The fuck is this shit? How is this racial justice for my kids?" (Donna, Interview)

Donna clearly envisioned that teachers need to have a shared understanding of legacies of oppression that impact different groups of students differently, much in the same way as Anita had previously articulated, and that this needed to be addressed systemically, through professional development and other school-wide efforts.

Leading Is Different

Teachers' tendencies toward resistance, as well as the lack of shared understanding of historical context and systems of oppression led participants to underscore the need for a whole-school-community approach to implementation of restorative justice. Joshua articulated with some compassion his understanding of why teachers sometimes demonstrated resistance to learning yet another new thing. He stated that his school had particular strategies for addressing this, in addition to professional development for teachers. He said:

> We also train seniors in being circle keepers, and so we send them to classes. The seniors now facilitate circles with younger grades. That's really cool because students respond better to their peers. If their peers buy into it, it's more like, "Okay, this is not lame. If they're doing it and actually leading it, then maybe there's some value in it." That helps, as well. That took us like four or five years to get to that point. Sometimes people don't understand that. They want everything right away. The reason why we use seniors is because those seniors have had three years of being in circle every week, and so they know the process better than anybody. Leading is different. They have to build their facilitation skills. Some students might need more coaching, but at the end of the day, they're doing it. They're doing a good job. (Joshua, Interview)

Thus, over time, the students became the carriers of circle practice, supporting not only their teachers but their peers in continuing to invest deeply in the community-building aspects of restorative justice work.

Addressing Institutional Barriers

In addition to those already articulated or implied, participants articulated numerous institutional barriers to the effective implementation of restorative justice, including the failure to address systemic racism and the pervasiveness of punitive norms that were difficult to shift among various school-community constituents.

Failure to address systemic racism. As numerous participants mentioned, the way in which restorative justice was implemented in their schools and districts failed to address systemic racism and other forms of systemic oppression. On the initial purpose behind the use of restorative justice practices, Justin stated:

> First of all, it was to address disproportionality, the school-to-prison pipeline. I think most people at the school would probably not think of themselves as racist practitioners, but when you look at what they're actually doing, they're continuing systems of oppression. I think a lot of teachers and administrators just did not make that connection. They did not make the connection of the impact of suspending students, what they were doing when they were not coming to school. They were reinforcing those behaviors that they were trying to address. That was actually really, really surprising for me. That's the first deeper level—why are we doing this. (Justin, Interview)

For Justin, adults in schools needed to have a clearer understanding of how restorative justice practices linked to actual social justice issues, how they could ameliorate legacies of oppression, for them to take these practices more seriously.

In a similar vein, Donna built upon her earlier statement on professional development in a way that dovetailed with Justin's statement. She said:

> We know that policy is a really important place to put a stop to how racist consciousness becomes operationalized. We know that. We've known that for a long time. But what that doesn't do is it doesn't give space to me and all of the other teachers that you've interviewed and the many, many other people who actually already believe in this or could easily believe in this if they were given a few breadcrumbs, to actually come along and be part of the project. (Donna, Interview)

Her disappointment rested in having lived through administrative decisions that precluded the possibility of restorative justice work being implemented with fidelity, integrity, or any consciousness of the purpose behind its implementation.

Punitive norms. In addition to failing to address systemic racism, participants struggled with how deeply ingrained punitive norms were in their school communities. Donna stated:

> We can only emotionally tolerate what we've given ourselves space to do, and so there's a whole bunch of really hurt people out there, young people and adults. Some of those adults are teachers who really don't have the empathetic muscle to do this stuff. And so, how do we talk on the healing of the parents that are like, "I want my kid to have the harshest punishment" or teachers who are like "I don't wanna go through a process to restore shit. I want this kid outta my class now." You know? And frankly, students. Students can have reactionary consciousness. Like, "Why isn't this kid getting kicked out?" (Donna, Interview)

Thus, many of the barriers to implementation of restorative justice practices also came from families and students, themselves, who—having been socialized with the dominant culture's

authoritarian norms and expectations—were not ready to embrace the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice.

Tamara spoke further to this issue of socialization and why people react in some of the ways that Donna articulated. She stated:

> So, punishment and shame is not a need, right? But I think we're socially conditioned to use that with the accountability process. Really profound moments have been experienced by not just me but our team when we ask teachers, especially teachers or folks who work in schools, if punishment and shame is a need. And, of course, they'll say shame is not a need. When it comes to punishment, I think that's where people pause a little bit, because we like to say, "So where do you think we learn this idea that punishment is necessary?" And I think we usually start off in a very matter of fact way, because that's just what we've been conditioned to do and understand about when things go bad or when conflict arises. And when they're able to name the fact that punishment is not a need but able to speak on the difference between discipline and punishment, we're able to get to a more common ground in talking about RJ. (Tamara, Interview)

This example highlighted the deliberate effort required to unlearn the expectation for a punitive response to people's behavior.

Victor broadened this critique of punitive norms to address prevailing trends in the dominant culture when stating that:

> I think the barriers are any kind of paternalism, any kind of authoritarianism, any kind of hierarchical or oppressive dynamics where the authoritarian, whether it's a parent, or a teacher, or some other person in a position of power says, "Do this because I said so. Do this because you have to. Do this or you'll get kicked out. Do this or you'll get fired." I

> think we need a kind of mutuality that can only come about with real vulnerability, with real transparency, with a softness that doesn't exist in a paternalistic or authoritarian dynamic. (Victor, Interview)

The types of authoritarian dynamics described here by Victor and by numerous other participants proved antithetical to the values and principles at the heart of restorative justice work for all participants.

Reflections in the Cultural Sphere

The depth of work required in the personal, interpersonal, and institutional spheres revealed that, ultimately, for restorative justice work to be implemented in schools with integrity, there needed to be a deliberate shift in culture, or an effort to construct one from the very beginnings of a school's existence, for the work to unfold and sustain itself in seemingly organic yet very intentional ways.

Belief in Growth, in Humanity

Numerous participants spoke both in institutional terms but also in cultural terms about the legacy of injustice, which as a cultural inheritance has impacted how people related to each other in school communities. In addition to the failure to address systemic racism and the ways in which injustices were perpetuated through disproportionality in suspension and expulsion, several participants also offered direct critiques of capitalism as one of the guiding forces behind dominant cultural norms, including the prison system, the military industrial complex, and the impact of such systems on schools.

Prison industrial complex. Donna related a specific critique of the prison industrial complex and the recognition of how systemic racism was embedded within it when she stated:

> I come to the work of restorative justice as an abolitionist and as someone who understands that low-income people of color, especially Black and Latinx people of color, are really, really targeted and criminalized. The way to reverse that is not just by stopping the harsh or negative things, but actually developing some processes that are person-affirming, life-affirming, relationship affirming, growth affirming, and really believing that people need some space to be heard out when something difficult happens, either to them or that they're involved in or that they do to someone else. I think just a belief in growth, in humanity is what led me to this in the broader frame and really wanting that to be extended to young people in the fabric of what they experience in the day. (Donna, Interview)

Thus, for Donna, restorative justice work required a rethinking of how harm is addressed in the broader society on a deep, cultural level.

Critique of capitalism. Justin spoke along similar lines about the impact of the stories we tell ourselves in the context of capitalism, with the legacy of colonization at the root of the dominant culture. He stated:

> In myth analysis was an idea that if you can identify the originating story in a society, you can predict the future. I realized that to be true for any family, any community, any one person. It's like, if you get that first story, the same story keeps recapitulating itself. In critical race theory in the United States, how was the country formed? What was that originating story? We have moments where that story has been interrupted; however, there's always a tendency to go back to the same story. In the beginning, it was the 1%, and that 1% was maintained because of Christianity coming from England, King James, property, land ownership. Only White men who owned property could vote, and that was

> for a long time in the history. Some of the things that keep recurring is property ownership. So, in the first part, the indentured servitude, they were all White, Irish and British citizens. When African slaves came in, those Whites were given a little bit of power in terms of status, although they were still very, very poor, and there was still that 1%, so now we have the same thing with a lot of red state people. They're being used by the systems and they don't even know it. They're being used, so that's how that message just keeps going. Somehow, we have to break the narrative of the country, to be a country that is truly inclusive, not just in word, because the original founding fathers, their words were equality, but they had slaves, and women couldn't vote. (Justin, Interview)

For Justin, an awareness of these original stories was the key toward being able to shift the narrative and take the culture in a different direction.

Gendered oppression. Donna further articulated a critique of capitalism in the context of the gendered oppression that is perpetuated when work such as that required to engage effectively in restorative justice goes unnoticed and undercompensated. She said:

> Institutionally, our values are reflected in what we do as teachers or people in schools have time allotted for or the funds for. My imagination of this is we all teach one less class and we have a period where we're actually devoting time to these practices and acknowledging that this is very invisibilized work, very feminized, invisibilized, care-taking work of love and humanness that is unpaid labor, as the world is currently constructed, and so how do we shift that? We make time for it. We put money into it. We invest in it. (Donna, Interview)

For Donna, the cultural shift that needed to take place would begin with the valuing of the labor undertaken within the institutional constructs of school communities.

Embodying Values

One of the aspects of cultural shift that became apparent in speaking with participants was the intentional way in which specific values were transmitted through engaging in restorative justice work. Such values included a respect for difference, sincerity and genuine care, and a facility with maintaining focus on maintaining the integrity of a process rather than outcomes, necessarily. Tamara made a statement that encapsulated much of the conversation by stating that "Circle is a tool that we use to embody these values that we believe are important in the work: centering needs, accountability, and relationships" (Tamara, Interview). This approach was something that was shared unanimously by all of the participants, especially with respect to the following underlying values.

Respect for difference. Numerous participants spoke of ways in which they model respect for all people, including a celebration of uniqueness and difference in ways that enhance the classroom community. Celeste said, for instance:

> I have always been very connected to fairness and equality and justice for all people, period. I mean, even if I don't like you, even if I don't like your politics, I don't want to see harm come to you. I don't want to see you mistreated, even if you are behaving unjustly. I am still pretty extreme with that. Even the worst-behaved and worst-intentioned people, in my mind, they didn't come out of the womb that way. There have been a series of things. Some of them could be societal influence, family influence, peer influence, personal trauma and injury. It's just a very complicated mix of things. That's part of it, too, is me wanting not to simplify everything. Part of my politicization was realizing that there were a lot of complex systems and structures at work, a different kind

> of intersectionality, you know. So that's kind of my gauge for how to live my life. (Celeste, Interview)

This statement revealed her underlying values and the kind of culture she sought to create with her students and in the world. It was one that recognized the systemic nature of oppression and sought to transcend and transform them through deep practices of honoring people's humanity and working toward shared goals of lasting well-being.

Anita spoke in similar terms about the importance of valuing others in deep and meaningful ways. She said:

> I think that tapping into people's humanity is really key. I think that for the most part, people go into teaching because they either love children, or they love their craft. Either way, showing them that the best way to get results is by doing this, so if they are a math teacher and they love math, cool, I'm glad, but if you really want results in your classroom, if your passion for math is so deep that you want to share it and you're dealing with all this shit, then let me know you how to actually get your kids bought into you. Yeah. Love, respect, all the warm fuzzies. (Anita, Interview)

Anita sought to have teachers connect their passions with their students by connecting to their students through a process of recognizing and appreciating that everyone has different passions and interests.

Heather, too, sought to integrate a respect for difference into her classroom through curricular choices. She said:

> All year long, we've been doing this cultural inquiry project. We're rooted in the idea that an enemy is one whose story has not been heard. I had them find a culture other than their own and immerse themselves in a few readings from it. Live through someone

else's experience. And here at the end of the year, I'm having them write what I'm calling a TED Talk. It could be an essay. It could be a poem. But write about what you've learned about your own cultural identity, and what you've learned from this other culture. Cornel West said of Martin Luther King, Jr., that King called for us "to be lovestruck with each other, not colorblind toward each other. To be lovestruck is to care, to have deep compassion, and to be concerned for each and every individual, including the poor and vulnerable." Oh my god. Lovestruck. What a beautiful word. (Heather, Interview)

Through this project, Heather's students had the opportunity to encounter the paradoxical truth that by learning about others and respecting their differences, it is possible to simultaneously deepen one's knowledge of oneself and thereby be even more true to oneself in the process while coming to love and appreciate others.

Sincerity/genuine care. Along with respect, numerous participants focused on a need to emphasize sincere, genuine care for each person in the school-community. Sara stated:

> At its core, it's just about seeing someone, being in the presence of others and fully present. We throw those terms out like yes, it's a norm to be fully present or it's positive, and then all the other things that can go on our poster or an agenda or what have you. I think it's the practice of that. When I tell my students to be respectful and put away their phone, it's not because it's a rule. It's because this is our space and our space is going to be hindered. It's about being genuine listeners and genuine sharers. When things are difficult, if it's like a kind of resolution or conflict type of situation, then that is also absolutely key, and it has to be voluntary, otherwise it's not going to work. (Sara, Interview)

In other words, the transmission of culture and of genuine care could not be forced. It had to emerge as an inherent component of the cultural norms that were generated through deliberate effort.

Heather, too, spoke of deliberate efforts she undertook to express genuine care. She stated:

> What I try to do is listen more. When somebody's goofing off, it's about really trying to come from a place of curiosity rather than judgment. I had this great talk with this one kid one time where I asked him to step outside. I'm like, "So, what's going on?" I just genuinely cared and asked, "What's up?" He's like, "I didn't get any sleep last night; I just couldn't fall asleep, couldn't fall asleep." He talked about because he couldn't fall asleep, he got on his phone until he felt tired. I'm like, "Ah! That's like saying you drank coffee until you felt tired." But it was just coming from curiosity. It was such a better interaction than if I had been talking to him with an agenda. I need to do that more . . . (Heather, Interview)

In that interaction, Heather released herself from the socialized responsibility as a teacher to control the situation. Instead, she simply expressed her care and was present in dialogue with the student.

Victor, too, demonstrated a pragmatic yet deeply intuitive approach to expressing care for students. Victor stated:

> Yeah, I have to say I've studied a fair amount of educational theory and I don't tend to subscribe to any specific pedagogical approach, other than simply doing what works, and what works may change from classroom to classroom, from population of students to other populations. From what I am experiencing myself as an educator, and as a human

being in my classroom, it has to work for everybody involved. And so, I don't have a framework with which I go into my classroom. I kind of make it up as we go along, and I don't do it alone. I am co-creating an environment with my students, and a relationship with my students. A lot of it is being presence. Presence is part of my philosophy. Being present with myself and being present with the young people whom I serve, and seeing what comes up, and trying to gauge to what extent and how to respond. To be responsive, and to be responsible in that space. I listen, I watch. When I feel inspired, I suggest things, I propose things. I sometimes even direct, in the sense that I am responsible for holding healthy boundaries for students. But other than that, my students do most of the directing in the classroom. I don't know if that answers your question. (Victor, Interview)

While simultaneously disavowing traditional pedagogical frameworks, Victor aligned himself unwittingly with a vast critical and popular tradition oriented toward process, student directedness and sharing power.

Process orientation. Victor's non-philosophy dovetailed with a process-oriented approach to curriculum, as well. Victor provided an example of this by saying:

> Let's say the day before my students and I agreed to study astrophysics, and I have that on our agenda, but that morning, a student comes in and they're in crisis. There's something more pressing, and the other students are attending to that student's crisis. They're also engaged in that crisis more than they are in what they had planned to do the day before, and so that becomes the new lesson for the day. It becomes the new lesson plan: How do we deal with situations like this in our lives and how do they affect us? How do we heal from them? And what are the resources available to address this particular crisis? That happens almost every day. And so, astrophysics goes out the

> window, but perhaps a new topic emerges which is equally, if not more useful, that the students are far more engaged in, and that they will remember, long after high school, having learned. In council, one of the protocols that I find most useful is called "Turning into the Skid." I feel like I do that a lot, and the reason I think it's useful is because it's the anti-protocol. (Victor, Interview)

Thus, in Victor's classroom, restorative justice practice could be described largely in terms of being responsive as a school-community, in the moment, to what was emergent and what needs were being expressed by particular members of the community.

Joshua also recognized the limitations of a programmatic approach to restorative justice, and advocated for more of a process orientation. He said:

> For me, when people talk about RJ as a program, for me it's not a program. This is an approach. It's a philosophy. It's a way of doing things. It's a mindset, a world view, and that's really important. Experiencing circle, experiencing community building, experiencing building community with your peers through that process, I think that's very important. And then also reading, researching about the principles, the theory behind it, because it's so rich. When you see a circle and it's like, oh, this is a process. Okay, this is cool. This is easy. I can do it. There's so much behind it in terms of like why we do those things. Circle as a practice has been around for thousands of years, as indigenous practice. There's so much you can learn about why being in circle makes sense, why using a talking piece makes sense. This is not something you can learn just by watching a circle or even being in a circle. The experience might feel good but understanding, like I was talking about earlier, this world view that we're all connected together and it's a web of relationship, I mean, all that, I learned it by reading, researching, talking to people. I

> think that needs to be in that transformative journey. But no matter what, it's gonna take time. I think it's not fair to expect that someone in five days will be ready. (Joshua, Interview)

In saying this, Joshua, too, acknowledged the need to engage with restorative justice as a process, the depth of which constantly unfolded over time.

Sharing power. In a similar vein as Victor previously expressed the intention to co-create space with students, Heather recognized the value in sharing power with her students. In describing this practice, she shared beginning each class with a minute of mindfulness. About this she said, "It also has me thinking about my role as an authority figure in here. Giving up power for a minute and saying, 'I'm going to trust you guys. We'll see how it goes'" (Heather, Interview). She related that those moments of giving up the illusion of power were some of her most peaceful moments in the classroom, ones in which the students, themselves, felt compelled to step up in their responsibility for co-creating the space.

Joshua similarly acknowledged how schools are so often hierarchical, to the detriment of being able to experience each other's humanity. He stated:

> The great thing with RJ that I learned is that it really balances those powers, at least in that space. Now, the principal is always going to be the principal and the students are always going to be the students. . . . Everyone knows their place and I think that's important, but in that space, in that circle, people are allowed to be themselves, not just their title, their role. In that space, it really allows everybody to be just a human being. (Joshua, Interview)

By contrast to how hierarchies are often experienced, restorative justice practices promoted experiencing each other as human beings, flattening the hierarchy a bit, even as the basic structure of it tended to be preserved.

Victor further uplifted the value of restorative justice practices in the context of considering the deeper meaning of democracy. Victor stated:

> I've been looking at how to hold space in healthy, democratic, egalitarian ways. Our democracy is increasingly undemocratic, and I don't think it's enough to simply say, "Well, we have a democracy, so we're going to have a vote, and whatever the majority decides is what we're going to do." That's increasingly undemocratic because you have special interests, for lack of a better term, within any group that are going to sway the majority, and the majority is oftentimes a coalition of minorities that ally themselves for particular reasons that don't necessarily get all of their needs met but get more of their needs met than the minority. In that system, there are more unmet needs than there are met needs. And so, what I try to do is base collective decision making not on majority rule but on consensus. I try to reach consensus because I don't want anyone to feel left out. We've seen the impact of what happens in a society that has access to limitless resources where even one person feels left out. We've seen an increase in mass shootings. Why does that happen? Those individuals, for one reason or another, have felt left out. We cannot afford, as a society, to have anybody feel left out. That's another skill, how to include people, and to make sure that nobody gets left out. (Victor, Interview)

For Victor, the radical inclusivity cultivated by restorative justice philosophy and practices, where nobody was left out, ultimately dovetailed with the values that serve as the heart of a true democracy.

Conclusion

Overall, these reflections by participants uplifted the depth and complexity of restorative justice practices, beginning with the myriad practices and strategies participants undertook in their personal lives to responsibly account for their positionality and to develop their personal capacity to sustain restorative justice work in schools with integrity. Participants underscored the importance of work within the interpersonal sphere to engage effectively on a daily basis at cultivating genuine connections and relationships with colleagues and with students, recognizing that healthy relationships served as a prerequisite to the healthy resolution and transformation of conflict. They critiqued schools as institutions for their shortcomings in expecting restorative justice to serve as a magic bullet and instead pointed toward the need for a deep and lasting cultural shift in how schools could function as communities.

These reflections resonated with the conceptual lens used in the design of this study, which drew upon a well-developed and ever-evolving body of literature on the legacy and impact of restorative justice, especially in schools. The underlying philosophy of restorative justice dovetailed well with that of healing-centered engagement, in that both are oriented toward the healing and transformation of conflict, as well as deeper injustices. This lens was completed with the incorporation of critical race theory, with its deliberate and transparent inquiry into systems of oppression and a recognition of how those who are historically marginalized have been most directly impacted by a lack of care and attention to this area of focus.

Ultimately, these reflections provided significant insights into how restorative justice work in school communities can serve a deeply transformative purpose, beginning with the practitioners, themselves, and extending to students, other adults on campuses, schools as

institutions, and communities at large. These findings and their implications are addressed in the final chapter of this study.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

> Given the many challenges and tensions of life in schools, our relationships of solidarity must be founded on both a shared political vision and our sincere willingness to move together across our different readings of the world. By connecting our dreams of liberation, we can build together new paths to a world where all life is sacred and all children are born with the freedom to live, learn, love, and dream. (Darder, 2017, p. 126)

This study focused on the lived experiences of school-based restorative justice practitioners with the intention of foregrounding their voices in an exploration of insights associated with their practice. Findings from the study corroborated some of the existing literature on restorative justice, while one key gap in the literature was revealed related to the nature and depth of preparation of practitioners. Furthermore, findings pointed to the need to further complexify discussions of restorative justice work in schools, in ways that would better account for the institutional limitations faced by practitioners in their efforts to carry out restorative justice work. Practitioners' own definitions of restorative justice highlighted the interpersonal and ongoing nature of restorative justice work that transcends particular protocols or formal strategies for engaging with others. Findings further indicated the need for a broader political and cultural shift in how this work is conceptualized and implemented and highlighted the limitations inherent in existing institutional structures. As such, the conceptual lens used in this study proved useful, in that it emphasized not only the philosophical underpinnings of restorative justice but also included healing-centered engagement, along with elements of critical race theory. The conceptual lens allowed for a more critical and thorough examination of the findings and revealed crucial opportunities for improving how restorative justice could be more effectively undertaken in school-communities.

Discussion of Findings

Key findings from this study included: insights into the depth of practitioners' preparation; the nature of effective school-community-based restorative justice practices; barriers to and opportunities for effective restorative justice work within school-communities; and the need for transformation on a societal level in the political and cultural realm, to fully integrate the restorative justice philosophy and its values. This discussion of findings used a modified version of Batts' (2002) four levels framework, which I have called Four Spheres, to guide the organizational structure, mirroring the presentation of data from the preceding chapter. This was undertaken to provide continuity for the reader in tracking the connections between the data and the discussion of findings and their significance.

Practitioners' Depth of Preparation

Some of the most significant findings from this study emerged within the personal sphere, in terms of practitioners' personal healing and self-care practices, along with their underlying philosophies—aspects of restorative justice work that have been undertheorized in terms of their impact on how restorative justice is conceptualized and implemented. Too often, restorative justice has been presented to teachers in schools as a set of practices to engage in, with little attention paid to the underlying and ongoing preparation that serves as a foundation for interacting with students in a transformative way. Indeed, as Victor had stated: "My whole life has been in preparation" (Victor, Interview). The depth and ongoing nature of work practitioners undertook on a daily basis to merely sustain themselves in working with youth in a restorative manner highlighted the incredibly challenging and emotionally taxing nature of this work.

More recently, there has begun to be some recognition of practitioners' inherent qualities and personal work, including those noted in a study by Bolitho and Bruce (2017), but the scope

of inquiry into practitioners, themselves, thus far has been limited. Bolitho and Bruce recognized that certain qualities inherent in or developed by individual practitioners underlay their ability to engage in formal restorative justice interventions and to experience satisfying outcomes in such ventures. However, although their study emphasized restorative conferencing when instances of harm had occurred, it fell short of deeply investigating how these qualities would manifest in more informal interactions and interventions—the types of interactions that participants in this study reported as comprising the majority of how their energy and attention was spent in working with students in schools. This is an area where further inquiry is warranted.

Values, philosophies, and predispositions. Indeed, participants in this study explained in depth the underlying values and philosophical approaches that serve as the foundation for their restorative or ultimately transformative work with students. Their commitment to qualities including humility, integrity, trust-building, and deep listening resonated with Freire's (2003) articulation of the qualities underlying education as a practice of freedom:

> Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue—loving, humble, and full of faith—did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads the dialoguers into even closer partnership in the naming of the world. (p. 91)

These qualities and ongoing efforts to cultivate a climate of mutual trust comprised a considerable scope of practitioners' efforts to engage in restorative justice work in schools. This required them to engage in their own critical reflection and ongoing healing work, as well as to prioritize developing healthy and authentic relationships with students. While the literature on restorative justice has clearly articulated the underlying values inherent in the work (Amstutz &

Mullet, 2015; Zehr, 2015), few studies have explored in detail the depth of preparation and the types of healing required of practitioners to effectively engage in this work. Thus, participants' reflections on their own practices revealed an important area for further exploration, for restorative justice to more effectively serve a transformative function in school communities.

Predisposition toward loving, authentic relationships. These practitioners rejected what Darder (2017) has similarly critiqued as comprising the "colonizing practices of schooling" which "perpetuate a functional and instrumental view of knowledge that is primarily concerned with whether the student can perform the basic skills and do well on official standardized tests" (p. 117). Instead, participants emphasized the value of cultivating authentic relationships with young people that were grounded in authentic love, care, and desire for connection. As Justin had articulated: "Have you tried loving them?" This commitment to caring for students echoed Freire's (1998) statement:

> I feel it is necessary to overcome the false separation between serious teaching and the expression of feeling. It is not a foregone conclusion, especially from a democratic standpoint, that the more serious, cold, distant, and gray I am in my relations with my students in the course of teaching them, the better a teacher I will be. (p. 125)

Affirming the commitment to overcoming this false separation between teaching and feeling, participants embraced the cultivation of love for students as a path toward understanding and working effectively with them. Indeed, for these participants, genuine connection with students served as the foundation for any other kind of interaction—whether it be learning that was focused on some form of content or effectively addressing interpersonal conflict. Thus, participants' focus was revealed to diverge from the typical project of schooling and instead emphasized cultivating meaningful connections grounded in deep and abiding care.

Humanization. Engaging in restorative justice work required for participants a profound commitment to the humanization of both themselves and their students. Participants resonated with the pitfalls of what Freire (2003) termed dehumanization: "Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human" (p. 44). Engaging in restorative justice work with young people, characterized by creating spaces for them to tell their own stories, served to counter the hegemonic and dehumanizing forces inherent in the dominant modes of educational institutions and supported them in embarking upon a project to reclaim and celebrate their own and each other's humanity (Darder, 2017). As Joshua stated, "I really believe in restorative justice and the values of respect, of listening, of everybody has a story. There's always a reason why someone is behaving the way they are behaving" (Joshua, Interview). Rather than accepting the countless ways in which schooling serves to dehumanize teachers and students alike, practitioners like Joshua took on the project of re-humanization as a daily and deliberate part of their transformative practice.

Recognizing positionality. One key aspect of humanization, given the realities of racial disparities in school discipline, was that participants recognized the importance of acknowledging their positionality in relationship to race, class, gender, and other aspects of identity that contributed to power dynamics between them and their students. As Joshua stated:

> I think for me, it's important to always know, to be aware of my identity in my work. I cannot be blind and pretend that I know what my students are going through, because I don't. I can empathize. I can listen. I can understand, and that's what happens in circle. (Joshua, Interview)

His recognition of the importance of being aware of his identity and positionality, a trait shared by numerous participants in the study, is well supported by the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998) and by even more recent literature on racial disparities in school discipline (Bottiani et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Pena-Shaff et al., 2018) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014). That said, the literature on restorative justice, itself, was mostly silent on this topic of identity exploration in service of promoting equity. Nonetheless, participants indicated that the ability and predisposition toward identity-conscious introspection greatly enhanced their ability to skillfully navigate difficult conversations with students and made it possible for the students to see them as allies and role models, whether or not they shared the same identities. Such findings indicated the need for further inquiry into how restorative justice practitioners such as those who participated in this study have developed their capacity and willingness to engage in this kind of authentic and ongoing critical self-reflection.

Ongoing preparation. Furthermore, participants clearly indicated that the healing work they undertook in ongoing ways made it possible to sustain restorative/ transformative work with young people. Such work consisted of consistent efforts at self-care and the cultivation of their personal well-being. Heather stated, for instance that she "was in therapy my first several years of teaching. And that was essential. Oh my gosh, what I was confronting as students appeared before me with all they were carrying" (Heather, Interview). The need to undertake this type of self-care work was validated by hooks (2003) when she wrote of the perils of burnout that can occur, given the emotional labor undertaken by critical educators, and how burnout can undermine an educator's ability to approach students with love and care. About this, hooks (2003) wrote:

> To perform with excellence and grace teachers must be totally present in the moment, totally concentrated and focused. When we are not fully present, when our minds are elsewhere, our teaching is diminished. I knew it was time for me to take a break from the classroom when my mind was always someplace else. And in the last stages of burnout, I knew I needed to be someplace else because I just simply did not want to get up, get dressed, and go to work. I dreaded the classroom. The most negative consequence of this type of burnout is manifest when teachers begin to abhor and hate students. This happens. (pp. 14-15).

For hooks (2003), as for participants in this study, it was clear that the degree of emotional engagement required to truly connect with students needed to be replenished through deliberate effort, at times requiring a separation from classroom practice to deeply recharge.

Self-care. This honest assessment underscored participants' self-awareness of the need to find ways of restoring themselves and of sustaining their capacity for openness and emotional engagement. Sara, for instance, reported that she wrote in journals, spent a lot of time alone, went hiking and spent time in nature. Other participants echoed this need for restorative, healing activities. Recognizing this need, hooks (1994) stated:

> Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (p. 15)

Given that participants in this study were clearly interested in empowering students, hooks' (1994) recognition of the need for educators to cultivate their own well-being validated

participants' reflections and supported the considerable amount of time and effort they clearly devoted to such practices. That said, the literature on restorative justice work in schools has rarely delved into the topic of self-care or practices to sustain practitioner well-being, indicating a need for greater attention to be given to this area of inquiry, to support the flourishing of effective school-community-based restorative justice practice.

Secondary trauma. The commitment to ongoing self-care practices dovetailed with a recognition among participants of the need to heal from the impact of traumatic experiences they encountered with their students or even heard about through the open and caring relationships they had cultivated. This entailed developing trauma-informed practices that supported young people in healing, even as educators modeled healing practices of their own (Educators 4 Excellence, 2017). Numerous participants reported regularly engaging in mindfulness activities, meditation and yoga, both independently of their interactions with students and also, at times, with them. Heather practiced a minute of mindfulness with her students as a way of sharing power and Celeste brought in various breathing activities, including yoga and meditation, to her students. Studies such as van der Kolk et al. (2014) have affirmed the power of such ongoing practices in supporting people in overcoming the effects of conditions such as PTSD. These practices supported participants in remaining engaged in their work, modeling healthy coping strategies with students even as they sustained their own abilities to participate in deep and meaningful ways in the lives of their students.

Restorative Justice Practices in School-Communities

Much of what participants shared about the restorative justice practices they engaged in with students aligned directly with the extensive literature on restorative justice practices in schools. This included a clear commitment to community-building circles as well as effective

strategies for addressing harm, when instances of harm arose (Davis, 2014; Morrison, 2007a). Moreover, this study foregrounded in a unique way the classroom-based experience of seasoned practitioners, which illuminated an entire range of informal practices that have tended to not be emphasized in the literature to the same degree as the stories of more dramatic and formal interventions used when harm has been caused.

Reduction in formal interventions. A key finding based on participant reflections was that informal interventions within the classroom comprised a considerable amount of their effort and focus in restorative justice work. Such work clearly contributed to a reduction in both office referrals as well as the need for more formal, albeit ostensibly restorative, interventions, as these participants had few instances to report where conflict escalated to the point of requiring formal intervention. According to participants' experiences, when the classroom culture and climate emphasized cultivating healthy connections on an ongoing basis, more serious issues simply did not arise or did not arise with the same frequency as in other spaces, even when the same students were involved. Indeed, what participants related about their daily interactions with students revealed how they fostered the conditions where students were more likely to care for each other, the teacher, and the classroom space, and less likely to engage in conflict with one another. This aspect of practitioners' work, inasmuch as it comprised the absence of a problem, was seldom directly addressed in the literature, and its tremendous value has heretofore been underestimated. Tamara, for instance, named several ways of diffusing difficult moments in the classroom when she stated:

> Just so that they can connect their actions to what's happening and why you're showing up the way you are right now. And being able to just drop that in a moment can help

> them. It might not change the behavior right away, but you're dropping a seed for the young person to make a connection with you. (Tamara, Interview)

Participants, including Tamara, named several seemingly simple practices that had the effect of diffusing the vast majority of potential conflicts in their classrooms, such that the more formal and familiar restorative justice interventions were less a part of the stories they had to tell than the literature would indicate as common or necessary.

Affective statements. Participants reported generating connections with their students through the use of affective statements—naming feelings as they were arising and giving voice to the impact of specific actions in terms of this affective domain. The impact of this was to elevate students' empathetic attunement toward the person who named the feelings, triggering a humanizing effect that helped to shift dynamics that otherwise could have escalated into situations where deeper harm might have been caused. Donna's practice of this was so consistent, for instance, that her students even knew to ask her about her feelings in a moment where she was obviously stressed out. She had helped create a culture of caring and concern that her students took ownership of and continued on their own, even without her prompting. The impact of such a cultural shift was captured in the literature on accountability as it pertained to restorative justice (Calhoun & Pelech, 2010; Gregory et al., 2016; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Contrary to the dominant cultural narrative that has accused restorative justice of releasing perpetrators of harm from accountability for their actions, participants' experiences upheld a distinctive notion of accountability grounded in relationships and community. When students found reason to empathize with others, such as through the use of affective statements, they voluntarily became more immediately accountable for their actions and willing to engage in the classroom community in healthier ways.

While affective statements were certainly mentioned as a strategy in restorative justice literature (Clifford, 2013; Davis, 2014; Gregory et al., 2016), there has been comparatively little written about them when contrasted to the extensive literature on more formal interventions used when serious harm has been caused. Participants' clear commitment to affective statements as a practice indicated that there is more to learn from recognizing the significance of such seemingly simple practices and their impact on classroom culture and climate.

Naming of needs. Participants further reported that the naming of needs served a similar purpose as affective statements, in that by naming genuine needs—such as the need for respect, clear communication, connection, etc.—one's humanity became more apparent, and it became much more likely to forge connections even with people who express something in a seemingly conflictual way. As Anita stated:

> I think it's really important to have a sense of humor, but this vulnerability, when thinking about restorative justice, is what builds community. When students see you be vulnerable and share your shit, then it gives them permission to do so, you know? It might not be right away, but then you'll have a few start in circle. Then you'll have more and maybe in a couple months that hardest kid will start sharing. (Anita, Interview)

The naming of needs through vulnerable sharing provided an inroad into empathetic connection, serving as the foundation for harmonious interpersonal interactions which, in turn, helped to create a classroom culture that could serve a restorative/transformative purpose. As with affective statements, the naming of needs has been included in numerous guides for engaging in restorative justice practices in schools (Davis, 2014; Kidde & Alfred, 2011). However, the significance of this practice has been understated when considering the tremendously positive impact on classroom culture it has had when effectively and consistently used.

Ongoing relationship building. Such practices called attention to participants' continual focus on cultivating healthy relationships with students, and the ongoing nature of that work. As Victor had stated:

> Relationships take lots of work. They take lots of attention, lots of intention. I've had to unlearn the things in my life that have become barriers to having healthy relationships. I've had to acquire skills and learn new skills that help me connect in healthy ways to myself and to others, and to create healthy spaces for myself and others to grow, and to learn, and to heal. (Victor, Interview)

Indeed, such practices positioned the quality of genuine care within the interpersonal sphere as the foundation for learning and for co-constructing a transformative school-community.

Speaking of a pedagogy of love, Darder (2017) wrote that:

> Paulo Freire repeatedly affirmed in his work that the perception of our students as embodied human beings is paramount to both a liberatory classroom practice and the development of critical consciousness. Freire recognized the unique capacity of human beings to respond to their learning environments simultaneously by way of the intellect, body, and emotions, as well as spiritually. All of these aspects of our humanity within their particular pedagogical needs are present and active in the context of the classroom—all aspects of our humanity are activated and integral to the teaching and learning process. (p. 87)

This statement affirmed participants' commitment to seeing students as full human beings and to engaging in practices that supported each other's mutual acknowledgment from a foundation of trust, respect, and dedicated humanization.

Penetrate norms of isolation. Participants in the study also recognized how teachers often must work in silos with students and underscored the need to overcome such isolation to build community and connection among teachers as human beings. Participants emphasized that such efforts would benefit not just teachers but ultimately the students, as a more collaborative body of teachers would generate more holistic and comprehensive knowledge about students, their challenges, and what strategies could best support them in thriving beyond singular classrooms where they might experience relative success. Sara, for instance, shared:

> I would say definitely starting a safe space [for teachers] because for some, and I've heard this from my own colleagues, being in a circle with students does not feel safe. It's like, I'm not ready to be vulnerable as an adult, so now I'm being asked to lead a group of teenagers in this space? (Sara, Interview)

This statement, among others by various participants, revealed that adults in a school-community needed to model the kinds of community building and cultural shifting they were asking students to undertake with community-building circles and other foundational restorative justice practices. Without engaging in such work at the collegial level, participants felt that it was more difficult to transmit to students in a meaningful and lasting way. These findings were consistent with the literature that emphasized the need for a whole-school approach to the implementation of restorative justice, though much of the literature failed to address the depth of vulnerability and presence required of practitioners (Davis, 2014; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Morrison, 2007a). Participants affirmed that a whole-school approach would support a deeper cultural shift toward a more restorative philosophy and way of relating with students, in contexts where it was possible to inspire others to explore such depths, rather than seeing restorative justice as merely a situational program or a prescribed set of practices to adopt.

Need for more supportive infrastructure. Participants also indicated that there were significant barriers to the whole-school implementation of restorative justice at the institutional level. At this level, their primary critique of current institutions and infrastructure was the need for more time and resources, as well as proactive support from administrators. To date, in most participants' experiences, there has been inadequate funding and other allocation of resources to be able to prioritize the authentic infusion of restorative justice work into the daily operations of their schools in comprehensive ways. This would require engagement at all levels within the hierarchical structures that constitute how schools typically operate and has unfortunately not been the experience of most of the participants in this study.

Actively supportive administration. Participants reported that it was not enough for administrators to simply know that teachers had been trained in restorative justice or to allow such practices to take place in classrooms. Along the lines of the whole-school commitment, practitioners needed administrators to share the values and underlying philosophy that makes it possible to transmit the cultural elements of restorative justice to others in a way that was authentic, democratic, and humane, rather than autocratic and domineering. Too often, administrators default to issuing decrees or making grand statements about restorative justice, without engaging in the practices themselves. This made it difficult for practitioners in this study to engage in the work in deep and authentic ways, lacking the genuine support of administrators and the momentum that could be generated through such solidarity. Indeed, as Donna reported:

> Because of how RJ was rolled out, what we now have is a core of teachers of all political stripes who are really saying restorative justice didn't work, and we need more harsh measures. So, I think the way restorative justice has rolled out has actually been a way to

> justify harsher measures of discipline supposedly against young people. Which is the exact opposite of what we need and want. (Donna, Interview)

The lack of administrative support had the impact of efforts at restorative justice going awry, leading more people to reject the possibility of it working than ever before.

Student leadership. At the other extreme end of the hierarchy, practitioners recognized the value of cultivating student leadership in transmitting the value of restorative justice work in schools, as they could serve as the true ambassadors to other students who had yet to be exposed to the practices. Participants recognized that this type of student engagement had the potential to contribute greatly to a more lasting cultural shift that would embed school-community-based restorative justice practice into the fabric of a school-community.

Commitment to cultural shift. Participants indicated that a cultural shift was required to effectively engage in restorative justice practices in schools. As Victor stated:

> It's about seeing everyone as necessary. It's about not letting anyone feel left out. If you look at healthy communities, that's what it's about. There isn't a training program for how to go into a healthy community, right? That's just silly. (Victor, Interview)

It is never enough to consider restorative justice to be a program to implement or to see it as merely a prescribed set of strategies to employ when conflict arises. Rather, truly transformative school-community-based restorative justice practice entails a cultural shift that begins with transmitting a shared set of values in alignment with justice and equity, as well as developing the capacities necessary to truly steward such a culture with integrity and clarity.

Transmission of values. In articulating a restorative justice pedagogy, Toews (2013) spoke to this need for a values focused approach to engaging in restorative justice work, stating: "Values become the defining feature on which restorative justice philosophy and practice is

based" (p. 8). For Toews and others, the values underlying restorative justice practices were what mattered perhaps even more than the implementation of specific practices. Toews (2013) echoed Freire (1998) in articulating the values intrinsic to a so-called restorative justice pedagogy, one that transcended any particular program or project to function on the level of cultural transmission. These values include respect, accountability, interconnectedness, trust, among others, and serve as the framework through which restorative justice work can function (Toews, 2013). These values connected directly to the findings from participants in this study, for whom the transmission of values and the promotion of a culture oriented toward restorative justice is at the heart of their efforts in classrooms with students. As Anita expressed:

> In order for restorative justice to really function, you have to have community. You have to have people who buy into the community, who want to be part of the community. If the individuals don't want to be a part of the community, if they don't see any value of the community, then RJ is not going to work, you know, because why would you want to be holding someone accountable or be held accountable to somebody you don't respect or value? (Anita, Interview)

To cultivate a true community, there has to be a shared commitment to values including respect, care and inclusivity.

Educational spaces as sites of hope. Furthermore, participants' views on their work resonated strongly with Ginwright (2016) and Darder (2017) in their emphatic commitment to the cultivation of a sense of hope rooted in genuine possibility for improving their collective experiences in school-communities. Ginwright (2016) argued:

> Just as health and well-being are not defined solely by the absence of disease, justice is more than the absence of oppression. Similarly, creating hope in schools and

> neighborhoods involves more than violence-reduction tactics, such as cease-fires and gang truces. These strategies create temporary reductions in violence at best, but these are not characteristics of hope and peace itself. Building hope among youth of color in urban schools requires that educators rethink what is most important and come to recognize that healing and well-being are critical social justice ingredients. (p. 5.)

Ginwright's commitment to well-being as an aspect of justice resonated deeply with participants who recognized the need for young people and for communities to heal and transform many of the prevailing conditions that promote suffering. For instance, Donna stated in reflecting upon how to transform difficult conditions that young people face, that

> the way to reverse that is not just by stopping the harsh or negative things, but actually developing some processes that are person-affirming, life-affirming, relationship affirming, growth affirming, and really believing that people need some space to be heard out when something difficult happens, either to them or that they're involved in or that they do to someone else. (Donna, Interview)

Participants like Donna saw the potential for restorative justice practices, when used with integrity, to help bring about such shifts and to foster well-being and transformation of school-communities.

Darder (2017) further explicated Freire's notion of radical hope and the role of education in fostering such hope by stating:

> In Paulo Freire's vision, this participatory and transcendent education could result only through our permanent commitment and fidelity to a global project of emancipation, a commitment and fidelity born of a profound love for the world and for people—the love from which a revolutionary praxis of dialogue and solidarity emerges. From such love,

> Freire insisted, we could develop humility and patience to honor the capacity of our students, even when it is not readily evident; not to write off parents who resist our efforts; and not to give up on our colleagues who oppose our political dreams. (p. 79)

This same depth of commitment was what participants articulated when speaking of their work and situating it in the broader political context of the societal changes that need to take place for the ideals of restorative justice to become a reality in school communities.

Implications

The following discusses the major implications identified from this study with respect to theoretical, practical, and policy implications.

Theoretical Implications

By broadening the conceptual lens of this study beyond restorative justice to include both critical race theory and healing centered engagement, several theoretical implications for the field of restorative justice became apparent. Specifically, the need to be conscious of legacies of injustice—including racism, classism, and sexism—was revealed through the inquiry made possible by incorporating critical race theory. The use of restorative justice in the absence of a critical race component has proved problematic, as such practices have been used to conserve a status quo view of power imbalance and historical inequities, rather than transforming them. By applying critical race theory in an examination of restorative justice, the field of restorative justice becomes accountable to this legacy and positions itself to be better able to transform injustice rather than perpetuate it (Vaandering, 2010).

Similarly, by also incorporating a focus on healing-centered engagement with a foundation in trauma-informed work, restorative justice as a theoretical approach to working with youth in school communities to become stronger and better able to recognize the underlying

conditions that impact people and their behavior. Rather than reinforcing false notions of individuality or pathologizing individual behavior, a healing-centered approach, within the context of a critique of legacies of oppression, makes it possible to be more genuinely responsive to the needs of not only individual actors in a specific situation where conflict arises, but of school-communities as collectives. This theoretical emphasis posits personal development as having political implications. It further recognizes that the well-being of every individual is what comprises the well-being of the school community, as a whole (Ginwright, 2016).

Thus, this study articulated a conceptual approach that I am calling *transformative school-community-based restorative justice* as a way of highlighting the theoretical implications of a form of restorative justice that also emphasizes both critical race theory and healing-centered engagement. This conceptual lens, when serving as a foundation for restorative justice work in school-communities, has the potential to serve as a profound catalyst for equity and justice within the school as well as within the broader community. By seeking to dismantle the prevailing legacies of injustice and by emphasizing the collective nature of healing, this transformative version of restorative justice does more than address individual instances of harm or even superficially claim to build community in schools; rather, it has the potential to eradicate the conditions that perpetuate harm at a deeper level and to instead cultivate health and wholeness in school-communities in an unprecedented manner, given the role that schools have historically played in preserving the status quo and perpetuating injustice.

Implications for Practice

Most notably, this study highlighted clear implications for the practice of restorative justice in terms of the depth of preparation required for practitioners to engage in this work with integrity. Engaging in transformative school-community-based restorative justice work has

proven to be something that cannot be attained through standard professional development or even intensive trainings. Rather, it is a calling that practitioners follow as part of their life journey toward personal healing and transformation. It is a path of integrity that they follow because it has led them to deeper fulfillment, and it is one that they invite their students to join them in practicing, as well. Thus, for true practitioners, the preparation for this work consists of deep and ongoing healing work grounded in collective consciousness and embodied efforts toward healing our school-communities.

This reality of the depth of preparation required for authentic practice raises a tension in the common call for a whole-school approach to restorative justice practice. Educational institutions, as they currently function, are ill-equipped to support all adults in undertaking the depth of personal inquiry and self-reflection voluntarily undertaken by participants in this study. As such, it becomes necessary to envision how it might be possible to better understand and structurally support practitioners who are willing to explore these depths, while allowing space for classroom teachers who are unwilling or unable to engage in this level of personal inquiry to feel supported in doing the work that they are competent in undertaking. Such efforts will require creativity and mutual respect for everyone's contribution. It is hoped that, over time, if restorative justice practitioners' work were better understood and supported, that it would encourage other educators to transform their practice to be more fully grounded in a restorative approach.

On the institutional level, if schools would like to undertake this work with integrity, there needs to be a much greater investment of time, resources, and support for the cultivation of this ongoing healing and community-building work. This needs to include creative scheduling and staffing decisions such that teachers have permission to engage in their own deep healing

work and feel that they have the support they require to be able to model this kind of vulnerable work with students. This also requires trusting students to take on leadership and stewardship of the work, to help transmit the culture and values of transformative school-community-based restorative justice to their peers, as part of this project requires dismantling authoritarian hierarchies and adopting more democratic, horizontal structures. It further requires engaging families and community members to participate in school-community life, such that the often seemingly impenetrable divide between schools and broader communities can be dismantled.

Policy Implications

On a policy level, there must be movement beyond a rhetorical adoption of the language of restorative justice. Instead, authentic engagement is needed at every level. In school-communities, one of the implications is that this work must transcend the motivation of merely regulating student behavior, as such a focus still exists within a paradigm of domination that is antithetical to transformative school-community-based restorative justice work. Instead, the policy level must dovetail with a cultural movement toward greater inclusivity and pluralism, toward the deep and integrated practice of true democracy.

Practically speaking, one of the ramifications of undertaking this work is that it would become safer for young people to move through the community. By cultivating healthy interactions and relationships with all school-community members, including peers, families, business owners, transportation employees, etc., young people would feel a deeper and more profound sense of belonging as they travel through the community, and would ultimately experience greater safety for themselves and be able to help cultivate the experience of safety for and with others.

Ultimately, this work could translate into an experience of greater justice and equity in school-communities, as everyone's voices would be heard and their participation welcomed. By relating to each member of the school-community in this transformative way, power relations would be rendered more equitable. There would be open lines of communication across different levels in currently hierarchical structures, ultimately leading to the flattening of hierarchical structures that would yield healthier relationships across lines of difference. In other words, the overarching implication of this work is that it becomes possible to cultivate thriving school-communities in which everyone's needs can be met when policy is driven by the sincere desire to hear everyone's voice and to ensure that nobody is forgotten or excluded.

Recommendations

Five major areas constitute the focus of recommendation that emerged from the findings and analysis of this study. These include practitioner self-care, critical self-reflection, trust in the power of informal intervention, deliberate engagement in political and cultural change, and ensuring that nobody is excluded.

Practitioner Self-Care

First and foremost, this study highlighted how essential it is for restorative justice practitioners to engage in ongoing self-care to prioritize their own well-being to relate to others in a restorative and ultimately transformative way. It is not possible to think of restorative justice as simply a set of instructions that can be followed. Rather, it requires a level of self-knowledge and internal health and balance to be able to be present with other people in deep and profound ways, even when they are acting in ways that are unskillful or even harmful. It is through the ongoing self-care practices that participants undertook for themselves that they gained and sustained the capacity to engage in this work and to support the transformation of the behaviors

they encountered in young people through their work. Such personal work proved critical to the survival of these practitioners, within institutions that did not always support them in healing and recovering from the secondary traumas they encountered in engaging in emotionally-laden work with students. These practitioners, skillful and grounded as they are, recognized that they would not be able to persist in this work without prioritizing their own well-being and healing.

Critical Self-Reflection

This study also highlighted the need for all who seek to practice restorative justice in transformative ways to engage in ongoing critical self-reflection. This would involve seeking out sources of support and inspiration for learning how to unpack the socialization into how we each carry implicit biases with us and learning how to transform the behaviors that emerge from those biases into more equitable interactions with others. It further requires recognizing other ways in which we have been wounded—both individually and collectively—by a capitalist, racist, sexist, homophobic society. The need for this work is corroborated by the fields of critical race theory and culturally responsive pedagogy that recognize how teachers can so easily perpetuate systems of inequity, if they have not examined their own deeply embedded assumptions and the behaviors that result from them. Critical self-reflection spurs educators to develop the capacity to bridge our differences with others to create relationships grounded in trust and solidarity.

Trust the Power of Informal Intervention

In relating to young people, what emerges from this study as a primary recommendation is to trust the transformative power of informal interventions that are grounded in genuine care and that emphasize cultivating healthy relationships. So many potential conflicts can be deescalated to the point of never even registering as conflicts when people feel seen, heard, and valued for who they are. Educators who are paying attention and who are willing to engage with

their students on this human level can experience the profound joy of connection that reverberates through a school-community and that does indeed lead to a cultural shift.

Furthermore, such an emphasis on relating from a place of genuine care helps to disrupt the myriad ways in which young people's behavior is managed and controlled in authoritarian and paternalistic ways. To support young people in developing the critical consciousness to participate as engaged members of a democratic society, they need to develop more relational forms of accountability, which emerge from interactions that foster empathy and care for others. By modeling such a way of being and by relating to students from the vantage point of genuine care and concern, restorative justice practitioners help to transmit these democratic values that can help to spur cultural change in support of equity and inclusion.

Deliberately Engage in Political and Cultural Change

Educators are encouraged to recognize that the work they undertake as practitioners of transformative school-community-based restorative justice must necessarily involve transformation at the political and cultural levels. What is sought after in engaging in this work is not the management of student behavior to perpetuate the status quo in terms of how schools operate, but rather to help transform these institutions to better serve as vehicles for the transmission of truly democratic values and practices. Educators are encouraged to embrace the significance of their role in working at this level and to refuse to shy away from it.

Ensure that Nobody Is Excluded

This work is fundamentally about inclusion. As such, educators are encouraged to recognize that the cultural shift that must take place to truly embrace transformative school-community based restorative justice is that nobody can be left out. There is nobody in our school-communities who is beyond hope or without value. As such, it is our individual and

collective responsibility to ensure that nobody is excluded from the circle of our care and concern. The need for this is especially urgent given the neoliberal context in which the prison-industrial complex operates with impunity, using structural racism and other forms of oppression to perpetuate a culture that renders certain groups disposable, justifying their being cast off from society and often relegated to dangerous and poorly compensated forced labor. We must maintain constant vigilance to expand our notions of inclusivity such that the very notion of a so-called "other" dissolves into the home that is community.

Future Research

This study's focus on practitioners of transformative school-community based restorative justice provided necessary insight into the daily work that practitioners undertake to steward the cultural shift toward restorative justice in school communities. This work would be complemented by future research that centers student voices in the conversation about restorative justice in school-communities. Specifically, it would be fruitful to hear from students who have had the opportunity to take on some form of leadership in their schools related to the facilitation of restorative justice work, such as community building circles and harm circles, to learn from them about what they see as the value in this work and why they devote their energies to it. Such inquiry could be particularly fruitful in highlighting the dialectical relationship between teachers and students engaging in this work and could foster a recognition of the ways in which student leadership in such a capacity can help to dismantle hegemonic and hierarchical structures and replace them with more democratic modes of enacting relationships in school-communities.

It would also be useful to hear from students whose teachers engage in restorative justice work to varying degrees, and to understand from their perspectives whether they experience a difference in classrooms facilitated by teachers who engage in restorative justice work and those

who don't. Ideally, a future study would follow up with students who are in the classes of participants from this study to understand from students' perspectives of how these practitioners' work is experienced, especially as to how their experiences compare to those in other classes.

Furthermore, this work does not stop with teachers and students, but also extends to families and additional community members, as this work ideally engages the dialectical relationship between school and community. As such, it would also be valuable to hear from families about their engagement with restorative justice work in school-communities and to learn from them what their unique needs are, based on their positionality in relationship to the school-community. Likewise, it would be useful to hear from additional community members how they experience the impact of restorative justice work when it is implemented with integrity in schools. Engaging community members in a form of participatory action research to help co-construct, through the research, the kinds of relationships within and surrounding the school-community that they would aspire to create would be particularly rewarding.

Conclusion

This study, with its focus on practitioners of transformative school-community-based restorative justice, aimed to contribute to the body of research that strives to implement restorative justice work in schools with depth and integrity. This work revealed important connections between personal development and broader work for political and cultural change. It specifically highlighted the need for personal transformation to serve as the groundwork for the broader transformation of school-communities and society. Though the study began with a specific focus on the school-to-prison pipeline and the role of school disciplinary practices in perpetuating this particular form of injustice, the implications of this study proved to be much broader.

Specifically, this study calls for a transformation in how people relate to each other at all levels of society, looking at schools as a microcosm of the dynamics that play out in the community at large. It calls for the transformation of the intersecting webs of injustices that have plagued this society since its inception and strives to position transformative school-community-based restorative justice work at the center for how to help cultivate healthier and more loving relationships between people. Such relationships are necessarily grounded in a deep and integrated understanding of what justice truly is and how to strive for inclusivity and equity through all of our actions and interactions. Returning to Weil's (2016) notion that education is the root system upon which all other systems are created, it is clear that there is a considerable degree of urgency behind the need to transform schools in the ways articulated in this study. To do so would be to preserve the foundation for true democracy and to call for greater health and well-being at every level within our society.

Epilogue

As someone who has continually sought to cultivate healthy relationships with students, this study was incredibly affirming in recognizing how difficult it is to actually accomplish this and to do so with depth and integrity. The vulnerability that each participant demonstrated in our narrative sessions revealed how emotionally laden this work is and how deeply each practitioner needed to process it to sustain themselves and to continue. Witnessing their tears during our conversations and hearing them recount their frustrations helped me to also process my own intermittent sense of failure, having faced tremendously challenging moments with students in school settings. The fact that each of these other experienced practitioners also faced such moments helped me release some of the shame of my own difficulties and to have greater confidence in myself as a practitioner. These amazing practitioners helped me put into

perspective that this work is, indeed, comprised of a lifelong commitment to growth and healing and that it doesn't always feel good to be in the midst of a growing or healing process.

Furthermore, many of the participants reported that even having the one-on-one conversations with me, as well as participating in the focus group, shored up their commitment to continuing to find ways to take up leadership in this work, and also made them feel motivated to be in restorative circles and community with other like-minded educators. Participants asked me to continue to host circles for educators, as they found so much solace and support in having a space to talk about their practice by participating in this study. As a result of their request, I have been hosting regular open circles at my home where educators and cultural fieldworkers have been coming to share about their experiences and to derive support from each other in continuing to engage in the challenging work they undertake in their respective spheres.

Overall, this study has provided a humbling reminder of how important it is to be honest and vulnerable with myself and in community, and how essential it is to continually engage in critical self-reflection in the presence of others who are similarly predisposed. I am grateful to everyone who participated in this process of supporting me through this journey, especially the participants, themselves. I am also infinitely grateful to my committee members, who have borne witness to my fears, doubts, and excitement throughout the undertaking of this study, and especially to Dr. Darder, who has helped me to conceptualize this study as part of the broader collective struggle for liberation. I am grateful to my family and friends who have been patient with me during the days and weeks when I have been ostensibly absent and, by necessity, singularly focused on bringing this work to fruition. I could not have done this without you.

APPENDIX A

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

1. How do you identify in terms of race and ethnicity?
2. How do you identify in terms of gender?
3. How do you identify in terms of socioeconomic status or class?
4. How do you identify in terms of sexuality?
5. What additional identities do you feel have also shaped your perspective on your work and on the world?
6. How do you define restorative justice?

APPENDIX B

Sample Prompts for Narrative Inquiry

1. How do you define restorative justice or restorative justice practices?
2. Tell the story of what led you into this work?
3. What practices or frameworks do you associate with effective restorative justice practice in schools?
4. What internal and/or external obstacles do you experience in engaging in restorative justice work in schools?
5. What strategies do you use to address these obstacles?
6. How do your personal and/or social identities affect your practice of restorative justice?

APPENDIX C

Sample Prompts for Focus Group Conversation

1. How does emergent Theme 1, 2, 3 appear in your work in schools?
2. What additional themes or issues have not yet been named?
3. How do you hope this study might influence restorative justice work in schools?

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