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Healing That Leads to Action: Restorative Justice, School Leadership, and Institutional Change

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Healing That Leads to Action:

Restorative Justice, School Leadership, and Institutional Change

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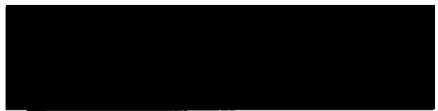
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5/3/23

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Dr. Katrina Bulkley

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Abstract

When immigrant youth are harmed by institutional policies and practices that reinforce idealized notions of nationalism and assimilation through subtractive and coercive strategies, school leaders can turn to restorative justice as a technology of resistance. This participatory action research study, with the author as a participant, captures four school leaders from Colorado, New York, and New Jersey, who interrogated institutional policies and practices and promoted authentic inclusion and equity for immigrant youth through restorative justice. As we participated in a process of collective restorative contemplation, we engaged in a form of personal healing that guided intentional and thoughtful action to transform our school environments into inclusive spaces. This year-long study emphasizes the critical role school leaders play when challenging institutional culture and negotiating policies and practices that harm immigrant youth.

Acknowledgements

I want to first and foremost, acknowledge the unwavering support from my wife, Mary, and daughters, Joanna, and Ellie. Long days and long nights away from home were never easy to manage with a young family. We were sometimes stretched thin, but you all continued to give me the space to pursue this goal.

Next, I want to thank my amazing dissertation committee. I want to acknowledge Dr. Reva Jaffe-Walter, my dissertation chair, whose work has inspired me and challenged me as a principal and educator serving in immigrant communities. It gave me a new lens to interrogate school practices and evaluate my work as a school leader. In addition, she encouraged me and kept me accountable in all the right ways. She was always eager to read my new pages and pushed me to articulate the ideas that I was beginning to develop. And she was right, bike rides were a great place to find a break from the dissertation or work out the knots in my head. I could not have done this without her.

In Latin American culture, families often choose a *madrina* to mark special occasions and milestones. These are women, filled with wisdom and grace, who serve as both guides and anchors. For this occasion, I have selected Dr. Kathryn Herr to serve in this role. I am grateful for her many contributions throughout this study. She always made herself available to talk and catch up, sharing wisdom cultivated from her vast experiences. Our thoughtful conversations, which often went beyond the scope of this study, though somehow always seemed relevant to this work, kept me grounded. This is our life's work, what else could we do with our time?

Dr. Katy Bulkley helped transition me into the graduate program and adopt this new role as researcher. I valued your rigor and critical perspective. Your thoughtful and poignant questions and comments have helped shape me and this work.

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I want to acknowledge the amazing and talented school leaders who participated in the study. Throughout the year together, I enjoyed deepening our friendship and participating in your lives. Our trip to Chicago, to present at the 2022 NACRJ Conference, was a personal highlight and celebrating the end of the formal study at Tango Sur is a cherished memory. Next time, though, we take two Ubers- we can't all fit in one car. Better yet, I will take a Divvy bike to our next destination. I am grateful that we have been able to maintain our friendship, even after the end of this study. You have helped shape my values and practice more than you know.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Mary, my partner and collaborator in helping to make this world a better place. From the start, I was drawn to your love for people and your uncompromising commitment to justice. It was during our long talks in the Hen House that I fell in love with you and began to imagine a future where we would work side by side, improving outcomes and pursuing justice in our communities. You have always inspired me, as you take what is and dream it into a beautiful and amazing future. You have never shied away from challenges and faced opposition with tenacity and grit. I love you so much.

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Hurt people, hurt people.

Healed people, heal people.

Eventually, love wins.

Unknown

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background to the Study

When conflict and harm occur, school leaders trained in restorative justice practices often respond by facilitating reconciliation between the individuals involved. Responsibility and accountability inform the process as school leaders seek solutions to heal the harm, transform the conflict, and reestablish a healthy relationship. However, when the harm is caused by institutional policies and practices that reinforce idealized notions of nationalism and assimilation, harming immigrant youth, it becomes more challenging for school leaders to identify paths that will adequately respond and restore students' sense of worth, value, and belonging. This study captures school leaders' actions in negotiating institutional policies and practices that support an agenda to create school environments that provide for authentic inclusion and equity for immigrant youth.

As a school leader, I have been confronted with situations that provide me a deeper understanding of the challenges educators working with immigrants experience in school settings. During the fall of 2015, the national and international community was responding to violent attacks, some of which were perpetrated by violent Muslim extremists. In reaction, teachers from my school and neighboring communities demanded greater supervision, limited access to the school building, and stricter policing protocols aimed at controlling the Muslim community that was part of the school. I was surprised by the number of teachers calling for these measures and disconcerted when I recognized their limited understanding of these situations and our community. Even more surprising was the opposition I encountered from central office administrators when I proposed professional development training aimed at humanizing Muslim students and families and hosted by a Muslim community youth advocate.

Their attempts to cancel the training, suggesting it was not in compliance with district practices and committee procedures, pointed to the use of coercive strategies to exert their influence to control this situation and manage community perception. Over the years and in different districts, I had similar confrontations when addressing “the problem” of immigrants in different aspects of schooling. These incidents pointed to a trend where administrators or teachers positioned immigrants as threats or perceived them to have values that were not aligned with the values of the community. In reflection, I see how these trends were reinforced during my schooling experience.

As a six-year-old immigrant from Latin America, I had no notion of the subtle and coercive formal and informal practices and policies embedded in my schooling experience that were meant to assimilate me into the dominant culture. Unaware of these practices, I anticipated authentic relationships with my teachers in my new school community, grounded in love and belonging. At the time, I believed that my teachers would automatically support my transition to my new school community, accept my cultural and linguistic differences, and support my authentic inclusion in their classroom. As a child, I had little doubt in their unquestionable goodness, generosity, and desire to connect, motivated by their desire for my success. My accent, limited understanding of English and dominant norms and values, and inability to transition quickly into American society put me at an extreme disadvantage that I failed to acknowledge. In reflection, my teachers motivated me to embrace their views and replace my identity with their essentialized notions of belonging. The mismatch that I experienced, however, caused me to withdraw, accept responsibility for the rejection I experienced, and devalue my cultural identity in my new home. As a school leader, I see this pattern continuing to operate on a regular basis.

I now recognize that I did not have the language or critical frameworks needed to make sense of the dynamics that played out in my early experiences. I have come to see that my teachers' behaviors were partially informed and guided by policy decisions and values that left little to no room for my authentic self (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). My experience is not unique, as scholars have documented similar stories, pointing to the strained relationship between immigrant students and educators while also identifying systemic practices and policies that negatively impact children's schooling experiences (El-Haj, 2015; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). I can now note how the lack of structures and practices to support authentic inclusion, coupled with educational priorities that emphasized assimilation and reinforced notions of belonging rooted in nationalism, were detrimental to my development. I have suffered long-term consequences due to an agenda that supported everyday assimilation, failed to establish an authentic culture of care (Cavanagh et al., 2012), and confronted coercive practices and policies.

As an adult, I can now recognize and reflect on the impact of school-based processes that reinforced nationalism and assimilation across various contexts. The emphasis on identity has resulted in conflicts across the world, as groups have struggled to achieve justice and equity, while others have sought to maintain dominance and control (Bernstein, 2005; Heyes, 2002). Marginalized individuals have shared their stories in the hope of creating a broader understanding and recognition of their unique experiences (Lee, 2005; Wilkerson, 2020). As a school leader who works with immigrant students, my personal experiences and those recounted by students and scholars have shaped my beliefs and informed the decisions I make. As a result, I have invested in using restorative justice as an organizing paradigm to shape the culture of the school and inform my decision-making. Practices associated with restorative justice allow me to

confront oppressive institutional practices and policies so students can experience authentic belonging, recognize their unique cultural backgrounds as valuable resources, and cultivate self-worth and self-efficacy.

Statement of the Problem

In schools across the United States, marginalized groups continue to experience the negative and harmful effects of assimilation. The goal of assimilation, as opposed to authentic inclusion, can lead to the rejection of cultural and community resources, the loss of identity among immigrant youth, and the breakdown of local communities (Jaffe-Walter, 2016). According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2018, there were approximately 44.4 million immigrants in the United States. Of these, 47% aged five and older were identified as limited English proficient (Batalova et al., 2020). Current U.S. educational data forecasts that culturally and linguistically diverse students will make up the majority of school-age children by 2025 (Hussar & Bailey, 2017). Previous educational research has documented that many of these students will face barriers to educational, economic, and political opportunities and confront the realities of restricted access to a variety of resources, which will negatively impact their lives and the lives of those in their community (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). When one considers the disproportionate percentage of immigrant students who drop out of school, are unemployed or underemployed, or are incarcerated (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009), it is no wonder that many people recognize and lament the inherent flaws and failures in our systems and institutions.

In schools, researchers have looked into the inequity that results in higher levels of discipline referrals, higher representation in special education, lower representation in advanced classes, and lower rates of graduation among immigrant, Latinx, and Black students (Annamma et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2005, 2011). Rather than continue to blame individuals, families, and

communities for these trends, educators have turned their focus to interrogate schooling policies and structures to understand how this inequity is created, maintained, and sustained in the United States (Apple, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2006). These are symptoms that point to a deeper institutional problem.

Researchers who have investigated the causes and effects of disproportionality have long critiqued institutional practices and structures aligned with both assimilation and essentialized characteristics of belonging rooted in nationalism. As noted in the research that highlights the negative impact of disproportionality on immigrant, Black, and Latinx youth, it seems clear that values, such as equity, inclusion, and belonging, are not authentic priorities in most school settings, where school officials opt for policies and practices that reinforce success via market-based measures (Annamma et al., 2014; Scanlan & López, 2014). This claim becomes more egregious when one recognizes that the institutions that are expected to create opportunities and open pathways to marginalized youth sustain and maintain a system that perpetuates inequality and discrimination (Carruthers, 2013; Johnstone, 2002; Nesbitt & Clarke, 2004). In this context, some have advocated the need to challenge both institutional structures and social relationships to correct these trends (McCluskey, 2013; Vaandering, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

In school settings, school leaders have a pivotal role in the implementation of initiatives and school policies that support authentic inclusion and equity among marginalized youth (Khalifa et al., 2016; Scanlan & López, 2014). Researchers have documented the critical position school leaders occupy and the responsibility they carry to ensure all students experience educational success (Scanlan & López, 2012, 2014). When confronting issues of disproportionality caused and reinforced by systemic and institutional practices and policies,

many school leaders have been documented acting as the catalyst for change (Crawford & Dorner, 2019; Khalifa et al., 2016).

As school leaders, we have the responsibility to create occasions for change in our school communities to improve outcomes for all our students. That said, how can we address the disproportional experiences in our schools without also looking into the mechanisms that maintain this system of inequity and injustice through processes that support assimilation? Beyond establishing norms that reinforce assimilation, current political projects establish goals associated with nationalism that complicate the landscape for immigrant youth (El-Haj, 2015). In response, there is a growing community of educators who see an opportunity to remodel schools using restorative justice principles and values associated with inclusion, equity, and social engagement. This paradigm shift is counter cultural as policies and practices are evaluated under the critical lens that restorative justice offers practitioners, and coercive factors are substituted for elements that support a culture of care (Cavanagh et al., 2012). In settings where restorative justice is embraced, individualism, nationalism, the false guise of meritocracy, and market-based standards are substituted for ideologies that support community, equity, and justice (Reimer, 2018; Wadhwa, 2015; Winn, 2018). There is an opportunity to inform current and future practice since limited time has been devoted to understanding implementation efforts from a school leader's perspective. There is a need to understand how school leaders identify, adapt, and resist policies and practices that are not aligned with restorative justice.

To understand the use of restorative justice in creating and fostering environments that promote authentic social engagement in public schools serving immigrant youth, I organized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study with school leaders from across the country who are also committed to implementing restorative justice in schools that serve immigrant populations. I

used this collaborative space to analyze the historical and contextual elements operating in schools, to better understand nationalist and assimilationist dynamics embedded in school structures, and to identify solutions to address issues of equity through inclusion. The goals and vision of the study align with the focus of PAR, which is on collective social transformation and the integration of theory and practice, with an emphasis on social critique and social action (Anderson et al., 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2015).

In collaboration with a group of school leaders from across the country, I engaged in discussions that highlighted practices informed by restorative justice and intended to establish cultures of care in our buildings. We are individuals who have previously received formal training in restorative justice and are committed to the implementation of this paradigm in our schools. We represent elementary and high school perspectives, and our work provided glimpses into each school's implementation at various stages of children's development. During our monthly meetings, we asked ourselves two questions: 1) How can we use this space to question our practice and interrogate our beliefs and assumptions as we seek to establish environments that reinforce equity through inclusion among our immigrant students? 2) What can we learn together and from one another to inform our practice and to provide a mirror for ourselves as we look to grow and evolve in our capacity as school leaders?

In addition, an informal self-interview study with critical friends was incorporated into the design to offer a reflective and critical lens to evaluate and question my practice and thoughts. This was a private space where I reflected on my story as an immigrant and educator. It was a space to consider the role of restorative justice in my school, where I offered immigrant students an opportunity to experience authentic inclusion and belonging.

The stories and professional knowledge documented in the inquiry groups and the self-interview study provide current and future school leaders with resources to support their implementation of restorative justice initiatives in their schools. I hope that the findings are transferable to similar settings for researchers and educators looking to lead change on behalf of immigrant youth.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature

In this chapter, I present a theoretical framework and relevant empirical research that frames my dissertation study. I begin by describing how the ecological systems model can be used to understand the transmission of ideologies across various social and cultural systems to guide institutional priorities and practices and influence individual and community identity formation. This allows me to then use Foucault's technologies of discipline and Freire's concept of *conscientização* to identify the use of controlling or liberatory strategies within marginalized communities. Following the description of the theoretical framework, I offer a glimpse into the lived experiences of immigrant youth in schools, highlighting processes of assimilation linked with essentialized conceptualizations of nationalism. A review of restorative justice follows, highlighting a transformative orientation that is aimed at confronting and addressing school-based policies and practices that create harmful and repressive environments for immigrant youth. Finally, I review relevant literature on school leadership for immigrant students, highlighting leaders' attempts to address issues of exclusion and inequity and focusing on teacher development, community partnerships and outreach efforts, teaching and curricular resources, and school discipline. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how my dissertation study contributes to the field of restorative justice for immigrant youth, focusing on the role of school leaders in creating environments that affirm equity and authentic inclusion.

Theoretical Framework:

Ecological Systems Model, Technologies of Discipline, and *Conscientização*

The theories that inform this study include Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems model, Foucault's technologies of discipline, and Freire's understanding of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness. These theories are used to describe how school leaders use restorative

justice to adapt, adopt, or resist school policies and practices that create harmful environments for immigrant youth. These frameworks provided me with the necessary insights to recognize the use of formal and informal technologies that maintain systems of discipline and control over immigrant youth in school settings. They also allowed me to identify the countercultural actions school leaders take to foster communities that are aligned with values and principles associated with restorative justice.

Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems model provides a psychological framework that I use to describe how cultural ideologies are transmitted through various systems to guide institutional norms and practices that shape individual and community identity. From the elements most intimate to an individual, such as family and local community in the microsystem, to more abstract conceptions, such as cultural ideologies and attitudes in the macrosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1992) described the transmission of ideologies across systems. According to clinical psychologist Richard Schwartz (2021), in the United States, there are four main ideologies that inform the majority of our social relationships, self-perception, and ways of thinking: racism, patriarchy, individualism, and materialism. These ideologies are embedded within institutions in our country and maintained through formal and informal practices and policies. As such, the ecological systems model can be used to identify and describe the process and impact of these ideologies and associated norms, rules, and roles on institutional practices and policies that shape immigrant youth identity and influence human development. Researchers have utilized this framework to understand the interrelationship between social institutions and immigrant youth, describing the impact of cultural and social ideologies on their development and self-efficacy (Jensen, 2007; Paat, 2013). Absent from Bronfenbrenner's (1992) framework, however, is an explicit discussion of the use of authority and power in the transmission of

ideologies through the various systems or the effects of agency as a technology of resistance. To address dynamics of power more explicitly, I utilize both Foucault and Freire to add an analysis of both coercive and liberatory mechanisms and strategies used to reinforce or resist processes associated with assimilation.

Foucault explored the strategies and mechanisms that social institutions, including schools, used to shape individual behavior. Examining a variety of institutions, Foucault (1995) identified their underlying political and economic purposes and described various strategies they adopted and implemented to exert control and maintain power. Foucault (1995) was able to identify and describe how power was maintained and sustained by the dominant group through the use of technologies, or human-developed strategies, to discipline individuals and maximize their efficiency in economic terms while simultaneously producing politically submissive and obedient bodies. These technologies operated as “small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious, mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion” (Foucault, 1995, p. 140). Foucault’s research into institutional practices associated with discipline and punishment laid a foundation for future studies into power and control over marginalized communities (Apple, 1995; McCray & Beachum, 2014).

In describing the method of control, Foucault (1995) identified a common institutional “policy of coercion” that “defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines” (p. 139). According to Foucault (1995), institutional mechanisms were intended to affirm and maintain culturally accepted ideologies that would sustain economic and political control over all sectors of society. Foucault (1995)

recognized that schools served as one of the primary institutions that were integral to this process. When describing schools, Foucault (1995) wrote, “[the organization of space] made the educational space function as a learning machine, but also a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, and rewarding” (p. 147) individuals, often based on the social value attributed to the child within the system. Schools were both authorized and equipped to shape individual identity and influence development based on culturally accepted norms and ideologies. Scholars have utilized this framework to describe the role of schools as an integral social institution responsible for reinforcing agendas associated with coercive politics of belonging by assimilating immigrant students into U.S. society (El-Haj, 2015; Valenzuela, 1996).

Scholars have noted that schools function as sites for political and economic induction and indoctrination and that one of the primary purposes of the institution of schooling was to prepare youth to be contributing members of the nation (Labaree, 1997). A primary process embedded in school design was the assimilation of individuals and communities from diverse backgrounds into a national monoculture, affirming the belief that this was the path to their success and the nation’s progress (El-Haj, 2015; Greene, 2007). The belief that accepting and affirming the national imaginary and embracing common values and practices associated with the dominant group would create economic, political, and social prosperity was accepted almost universally and implemented through both formal and informal policies and practices. Gonzales (2016), however, notes that “successful assimilation and full membership depends on the host country’s willingness to include [immigrants]” (p. 7), acknowledging the social power residing in the dominant group to control immigrants. As nationalist discourses targeting immigrant youth have multiplied, scholars have documented the use of technologies of control and exclusion to discipline them (El-Haj, 2015; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999).

In response to violent and harmful situations among oppressed individuals, Paulo Freire articulated a process that identified, critiqued, and rejected social and institutional processes that devalued individuals and offered processes that strengthened human agency among marginalized communities. The process of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, represented “the development of the awakening of critical awareness” (Freire, 2005, p. 15), or the individual’s sense of understanding, role, and responsibility in their world. According to Freire (2018), human agency is made explicit when individuals can identify and name oppressive ideologies and cultural norms that disproportionately affect them and implement liberatory strategies to reject these elements through resistance, protest, or acts of subversion. By empowering individuals, he offered tools to confront hegemonic power, transform oppressive social conditions, and align the community with the goal of authentic justice.

Freire’s (2005) emphasis on “transforming reality,” the process of “creating, recreating reality,” and “intervening in reality” to align with the goals of justice is central to his understanding of human agency, and he advocated for a “critical optimism [that] requires a strong sense of social responsibility and of engagement in the task of transforming society” (p. 10) among oppressed groups. Freire’s goal, therefore, was to resist and reject attempts to limit an individual’s capacity to change their society. Scholars studying immigrant communities have documented this form of agency and subversive praxis through school leader practices (El-Haj, 2015; Jaffe-Walter; 2016; Kelsey et al., 2015; Khalifa et al., 2016). Their commitment to transforming harmful institutional practices exemplified Freire’s understanding of *conscientização*.

In describing the role of schools in society in *Reinventing Paulo Freire*, Darder (2017) noted that “school generally functions in the interest of the marketplace rather than serving as a

democratizing influence upon local economies” (p. 11). In language that reflects Foucauldian thinking, she reminded her readers that “the ideological formations that preserve capitalist structures of domination and exploitation also function to preserve the political structures of inequality within the United States and abroad” (p. 73). In response, she encouraged the development of “a revolutionary praxis of hope that works both for the transformation of social consciousness, on the one hand, the reconstruction of social structures on the other” (p. 30), which is a countercultural expression rooted in justice to transform social contexts. Additionally, as Darder (2017) noted, this praxis is developed in solidarity with one another and is grounded in community experiential learning. It is through collective struggle and self-reflection that liberatory practices are enacted and sustained within social settings.

Literature Review

Positioning Immigrant Students in Schools

This study includes principals who work in public schools that serve “unwanted” immigrant populations that are also ethnic or racial minorities. The target population for the setting of this study is broadly defined as immigrant youth. This categorization is based more on an understanding of how these youth are positioned in the social hierarchy by the dominant society than on any unifying quality or characteristic that is held in common by members of this diverse group. Gonzales (2016) emphasized the label of “immigrant” as an individual’s “master status,” as this description has “the tendency of particular human traits, labels, or demographic categories to dominate all other statuses and to prevail in determining a person’s general social position” (p. 15). Wilkerson (2020) preferred to use the concept of caste to describe how the dominant group has positioned others in society in a formal system of power. Based on a few important characteristics—namely, being non-White and having cultural ties, at times remote, to

foreign countries—this diverse group is similarly positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy and labeled as an underclass by members of the dominant society.

The category of immigrant youth is not a homogenous group. Immigrant students' backgrounds, cultural practices, political and religious affiliations, languages, and identities vary tremendously (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). For this study, however, this diverse group may include recent immigrants (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009), individuals identified as the 1.5 generation (Gonzales, 2016), and even youth from immigrant backgrounds who were born in the United States and have limited to no contact with the country of origin (Valenzuela, 1999). The reasoning behind identifying them as immigrant youth is the fact that members from the dominant social group often lump this diverse population into a homogenous entity (Suárez-Orozco, 2001) in the social hierarchy.

The label of immigrant most often carries negative connotations among members of the dominant society and influences immigrants' experiences with formal institutions in the United States (Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This label often communicates notions of perceived illegitimacy, illegality under the law, and limited rights to resources that are often exclusively maintained and protected by White Americans (Lee, 2005; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). This dimension adds a significant layer of complexity to immigrants' lives due to their limited access to resources, contentious relationships with institutional authority, and limited ability to maintain connections with family and community members across borders (Castañeda, 2019; Gonzales, 2016). Their status as immigrants positions them as “others” and negatively affects their daily lives as they are forced to negotiate with a variety of institutions, such as schools, who do not always value their perspectives or contributions (Castañeda, 2019; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009).

I recognize that other characteristics impact the ability to access resources and experience authentic inclusion and equity among immigrants, which was addressed and highlighted during the data collection phase of this study. These characteristics include the length of time in the United States, parental education, family structure, gender, country of origin, class, or local school context (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2009). At this time, these are not primary characteristics and do not affect the selection of the individual school contexts.

Systems of Exclusion and Inequity in Education

In many settings, school staff manages immigrants in schools through the use of subtle and sophisticated technologies that reinforce dominant values through “coercive cultural assimilation” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 26), maintaining and reinforcing systems that result in marginalization and oppression. Educational anthropologists, such as El-Haj (2015), Jaffe-Walter (2016), and Valenzuela (1999), in their school-based ethnographies of immigrant youth, provide valuable insights by highlighting discriminatory and harmful practices that maintain systems that promote assimilation, reinforce essentialized nationalist identities, and create repressive environments for these students. In these settings, teachers and leaders were often unaware of the consequences of their actions or failed to interrogate the impact of formal and informal practices and policies on immigrant youth. Formal and authorized technologies, such as school discipline codes, grading practices, and attendance policies (Valenzuela, 1999), and informal practices that point to the hidden curriculum in schools performed similar functions to discipline and control immigrant youth and “erode young people’s connections to their cultural and religious values and transnational attachments” (Jaffe-Walter, 2016, p. 65). These researchers’ work points to the explicit and implicit mismatch between students from diverse backgrounds and school cultures (Villegas, 1988), identifying coercive and, oftentimes, abusive technologies to assimilate youth

into mainstream school communities. As these researchers noted, when formal and informal strategies failed to achieve their assimilationist goals, institutions leveraged their retributive tools, falling back on coercive practices to discipline immigrant youth, such as exclusion and segregation.

Nationalism and Subtractive Assimilation

In school settings, researchers who focus on immigrant students have identified a variety of tools and techniques that reinforce nationalist values aligned with the cultural matrix of the dominant society, with the goal of reproducing these values in immigrant youth. Both El-Haj (2015) and Jaffe-Walter (2016) picked up on these patterns in their ethnographies in the United States and Denmark. Jaffe-Walter (2016) revealed how national policies and discourses reinforce nationalist values and enforce narrow visions of citizenship that translate to the disciplining of immigrant youth in schools. In these settings, citizenship is “tied to racial and ethnic ways of belonging” (Jaffe-Walter, 2016, p.16) and performs a disciplining role among immigrant youth. Similarly, in the United States, citizenship and assimilation are aligned with the majority-White culture and essentialized cultural representations (El-Haj, 2015; Wilkerson, 2020). In both El-Haj (2015) and Jaffe-Walter’s (2016) studies, teachers and leaders embodied and articulated the values of the dominant society, projecting idealized national imaginaries and demanding students to embrace practices associated with these values.

By acting as mediators of dominant values, educators can use their positional influence to limit authentic participation among immigrant youth, coerce immigrant students into rejecting their culture and traditions, or demand that students embrace the dominant cultures’ practices to enter mainstream society. For example, El-Haj (2015) described a teacher’s call to “round up” any Arab or Muslim students after the 9/11 attacks and noted that “the teacher’s demand indexed

an already existing politics of belonging that build boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in relation to the national imaginary” (p. 5). Similarly, Jaffe-Walter (2016) described the tension experienced by an immigrant student during a classroom discussion, where she rejected her teacher’s value-laden interpretation of her cultural norms. After listening to students’ reflections on the incident, Jaffe-Walter (2016) shared that “students were familiar with the figured world of the Danish school and the consequences of resistance” (p. 81). Throughout their ethnographies, both El-Haj (2015) and Jaffe-Walter (2016) described incidents when students were confronted by their teachers for rejecting their teachers’ offers to help. In these situations, teachers utilized a variety of strategies to discipline their students through seemingly innocuous school procedures, public reprimands, or formal disciplinary processes. In response, students learned how to adapt to or resist incidents when their immigrant identities were confronted.

Valenzuela (1999), on the other hand, conducted research in a Houston high school among Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American peers, where she identified formal and informal strategies that devalued students’ home cultures and reinforced modes of assimilation. She noted “that schools such as Seguin High are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students’ cultural and ethnic identities” (p. 5). Formal policies such as achievement tracking and programming for bilingual education highlighted the school’s failure to create inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students. Valenzuela’s (1999) research provided an alternate account for the achievement gap between U.S.-born youth and their immigrant classmates, noting the school’s “subtractively assimilationist policies and practices that are designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language” (p. 20). These systemic elements were enforced through a retributive paradigm, where students learned to embrace new cultural and linguistic priorities to succeed or face the consequences. In response,

many students rejected “the content of their education and the way it [was] offered to them” (p. 19), establishing patterns of agency and resistance, though suffering disciplinary consequences.

Aside from identifying structural and organizational strategies that marginalize students, Valenzuela (1999) also pointed to the relational distance that undermines success. She argued that students’ relationships with school staff were negatively impacted when their home culture was undervalued. The failure to authentically “care” for students beyond instrumental relationships created conditions in which students felt neglected and marginalized by their teachers. Valenzuela (1999) commented that “administrators routinely disregard even the most basic needs of both students and staff” (p. 5). The need to understand and attend to students’ identities and their related needs marks a glaring omission in the school’s commitment to creating inclusive environments. It is both the structural and relational failures that maintain systems of marginalization for Mexican-American youth at Seguin.

These researchers have provided educators and school leaders with valuable insights into the lived experiences of their immigrant students. Their analyses have highlighted the damaging formal and informal structures and policies that challenge student identity, reproduce deficit thinking, and maintain systems of exclusion for many individuals and communities. Through discourses, policies, and practices that affirm nationalism or assimilation, schools leverage sophisticated technologies to maintain discipline and control over immigrant youth. Students who fail to adapt experience retributive punishment, such as suspensions and expulsions, and find themselves in what scholars have identified as the school-to-prison pipeline (González, 2012; Hogan & Emler, 1981; Wadhwa, 2015). In response to this trend, a countercultural movement has reacted and responded by adopting restorative justice as a shift in worldview (Davis, 2019; Fronius et al., 2016).

Restorative Justice

Historically rooted in many indigenous communities throughout the world, restorative justice was first proposed and utilized in Canada to address concerns about the retributive-focused Western justice system and to provide an alternative that emphasized community building and community healing (Fronius et al., 2016; Ross, 1996; Zehr, 1990). In the field of criminology, restorative justice provided a necessary corrective to address limited victims' rights, counter high recidivism rates among offenders, and build and encourage community development where harm had occurred (Ross, 1996; Zehr, 1990). The focus on restoring relationships and healing communities rather than using failed retributive strategies, such as punishment, as a deterrence has convinced many to pursue restorative justice in their communities (Ross, 1996; Van Ness & Strong, 2014; Zehr, 1990).

The adoption of this model into the juvenile justice system propelled the restorative justice movement into education, where the correlation between school discipline practices and encounters with the criminal justice system led researchers to identify the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma et al., 2014; Davis, 2019; González, 2012; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Wadhwa, 2015). High percentages of predominantly minority students who were suspended or expelled from school eventually found themselves in frequent interactions with local law enforcement and the prison system, leading educators and researchers to recognize the long-term damaging effects of exclusion and marginalization in schools (Fronius et al., 2016; Wadhwa, 2010, 2015; Winn, 2018). Often, the infractions that resulted in suspension or expulsion were the result of overzealous retributive disciplinary policies and practices that disproportionately targeted and impacted students from diverse backgrounds (Davis, 2019; Wadhwa, 2010, 2015; Winn, 2018). Furthermore, researchers also acknowledged the biased and racist perspectives and

interpretations embedded in school policies and practices that limited access to valuable resources or pushed students from diverse backgrounds into the fringes of school communities. The impact on marginalized students led some educators to consider the value of adopting restorative justice frameworks in schools to address systemic and institutional injustices (Vaandering, 2010).

At its core, restorative justice seeks to strengthen relationships, create systems of social engagement, and address the underlying causes of harm experienced by individuals and communities (Hopkins, 2003; Morrison, 2013, 2015). Dorothy Vaandering (2014), a leading voice in the restorative justice movement, utilized language reminiscent of Freire when she stated, “explicitly insisting that restorative justice be broadened to encompass the well-being of all, and the building and affirming of relationships demonstrates that restorative justice is really a commitment to humanization—the support of people in their ontological vocation of becoming more fully human” (p. 25). By adopting a worldview informed by restorative justice, scholars argue that educators can proactively and effectively respond to the needs in diverse communities and establish environments that promote equity through inclusion.

Restorative justice’s influence goes beyond merely addressing interpersonal conflict once harm has occurred. It can also be used as a paradigm to respond to systemic harm caused by oppressive institutional policies and practices. In her writings on restorative justice, Vaandering (2014) drew on Freire’s notion of *conscientização* and stressed the need to develop environments where individuals and communities can acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate their identity and contributions to society. These concepts acknowledge the social and political dynamic between marginalized individuals and communities and those who keep them in a state of dependence (Freire, 2018). By challenging these assumptions, marginalized individuals not only recognize

their humanity but simultaneously identify marginalizing institutions and structures that create and maintain this unjust system. In this context, restorative justice articulates foundational principles that inform institutional and relational practices to establish communities of justice, healing, and belonging. It is a humanizing pedagogy that affirms individuals and communities, celebrating their identities and developing greater appreciation and understanding. Though initially and most often used to address issues with school discipline, restorative justice has been adapted to meet various needs in diverse communities (Anfara et al., 2013; Fronius et al., 2016).

Restorative Justice in Education

Restorative justice in education (RJE) has become more frequently used throughout the United States and across the world to improve outcomes for all children, challenging retributive justice paradigms. Implementation in Oakland Unified School District (Gregory & Evans, 2020), Denver Public Schools (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Wadhwa, 2010; Wiley et al., 2018), Madison, Wisconsin (Winn, 2016), and Boston Public Schools (Wadhwa, 2015) in the United States and schools throughout the UK (Reimer, 2018), Canada (Nesbitt & Clarke, 2004; Reimer, 2011, 2018; Vaandering, 2014), New Zealand (Carruthers, 2013; Drewery, 2016), and Australia (Cowie, 2013) has propelled the movement forward. Though still experiencing challenges in adoption and implementation, equity-oriented educators have come to recognize restorative justice as a valuable and effective shift in education that can serve to reverse these negative trends and establish learning communities where all children and adults are valued and are able to thrive.

Restorative justice in education is based on three core values that inform the worldview of educators: every person is valuable, every person deserves respect, and every person should experience and practice mutual concern for one another. These core values inform all practices

associated with restorative justice (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). As schools begin to shift away from retributive justice paradigms and utilitarian views of individuals and embrace a system that values everyone's humanity, individuals and communities will begin to experience greater integrity for themselves and reciprocity in relationships. This leads to practices that focus on social engagement rather than social control in schools (Morrison, 2013, 2015; Reimer, 2018). Strategies that focus on social control emphasize the goal of assimilation and revert to exclusionary practices when individuals or communities resist or rebel. Social engagement, on the other hand, creates an inclusive space where all voices, perspectives, abilities, and forms of knowledge are valued, cultivating equity between all participants (Morrison, 2013, 2015).

When discussing restorative justice, one model to describe the three core components and their overlapping connections is the shape of a tetrahedron, a pyramid with a triangular base. Each of the core components—nurturing healthy relationships, repairing harm and transforming conflict, and creating just and equitable learning environments (Evans & Vaandering, 2016)—serve to capture every aspect of school life and inform school-based practices and procedures. These components are not novel in school communities. However, when considered through the lens of restorative justice, one can experience the subtle shifts that establish schools as sites for social engagement among all students and staff. According to restorative justice practitioners, the use of retributive strategies, such as threats, coercion, and other technologies of control, becomes irrelevant when individuals experience authentic partnerships and commitment to community-building (Hogan & Emler, 1981; Morrison, 2013).

A concern that is often raised is the lack of reliable evidence showing that restorative justice positively impacts discipline referrals and offers a successful alternative to address harm in schools (Wadhwa, 2015; Winn, 2016). Though research in educational settings is inconsistent,

research into organizations and communities that adopt and practice restorative justice has shown the positive social impact it can have when implemented with integrity (Ross, 1996). In addition, most schools and districts that have adopted restorative justice claim to see an improvement in social relationships, school engagement, and overall satisfaction with education (González, 2012; McCluskey et al., 2008; Wadhwa, 2015; Wiley et al., 2018; Winn, 2018).

In addition, some community members are concerned by the belief that restorative justice is soft on wrongdoing (Anfara et al., 2013; Johnstone, 2002; Morrison, 2015). This false concern is embraced by those who maintain a strong conviction that retributive justice is most effective in addressing wrongdoing and changing behaviors (Anfara et al., 2013; Johnstone, 2002; Morrison, 2015). Some would counter, however, that high recidivism rates and the use of exclusionary practices for those most needing and benefiting from education highlight the ineffective system of social control that is practiced in schools (McCluskey et al., 2008). Restorative justice focuses on accountability to others and the community (rather than rules), seeks to understand the underlying causes that lead individuals to commit harm, and focuses on the needs of the victim when addressing the wrongdoing and restoring the relationship (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

Finally, practitioners have criticized the co-option of restorative justice practices by the dominant society as a strategy to maintain and exert control and influence over marginalized individuals (Goens-Bradely, 2020). In *Colorizing Restorative Justice*, scholars and practitioners of color reflected and critiqued current practices associated with restorative justice and offered necessary corrections when working in marginalized communities (Valandra & Hoksila, 2020). Goens-Bradley (2020), a restorative justice practitioner, concluded, “Whites in restorative practices will continue to inflict harms on People of Color and Indigenous Peoples (POCIP) as long as they refuse to ‘develop and apply a race-conscious lens’” (p. 3), which includes

understanding historic and systemic policies and practices that promote discrimination. In many circumstances, researchers have criticized restorative justice practitioners who have failed to create authentic spaces for healing and restoration due to implicit biases and the use of disciplinary processes influenced by everyday politics of belonging and nationalism (Parker, 2020; Wilson, 2020). Their critiques provide necessary correctives for improved outcomes among marginalized communities and shed light on the subtle technologies of control employed within schools.

Implementation Models

When exploring restorative justice practices in schools, researchers have discussed implementation by describing three overlapping models that inform processes, outcomes, and goals (Cremin, 2013; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Van Ness, 2013). These models or conceptions move practitioners through a continuum of proximity between individuals and institutions (Zehr, 1990) that seeks to deepen awareness and address the underlying causes of conflict and harm.

The first model, the encounter conception, focuses on the individual level and seeks to address harm through proactive processes, such as community circles or restorative conferences, to encourage relationship-building and establishing healthy environments. These processes focus on understanding the emotional, physical, and psychological impact of conflict, while the goal is to build relationships between individuals within a community (Cremin, 2013).

The reparative conception focuses on understanding the impact of harm and seeking reparations and restoration of relationships when harm has occurred (Cremin, 2013; Sia, 2013; Van Ness, 2013). This conception focuses on victim-offender mediation, highlighting the local and immediate context when addressing harm. In most school settings, the reparative conception

has focused on the conflict that originates between students or students and staff. Therefore, the goal is to address incidents of student misbehavior and create paths of healing and restoration within the immediate school community. By modeling appropriate behaviors, educating individuals to process feelings of guilt and shame, and developing greater awareness and empathy for others, restorative justice offers an alternative paradigm to student discipline (Cremin 2013; McCluskey, 2013).

The third model, the transformative conception, is focused on addressing structural and institutional injustice that shapes and informs the individual's and community's environment. This conception seeks to address underlying causes of harm by interrogating unjust social and institutional systems (McCluskey, 2013; Reimer, 2018; Sia, 2013; Vaandering, 2010, 2014; Van Ness, 2013). This then points to issues of power imbalance, explicit and implicit bias, and discrimination in various dimensions of schooling, recognizing historical patterns and current manifestations of injustice. This conception does not simply seek to address incidents of conflict and harm between individuals but investigates the very structures, practices, and procedures in schools, often mediated through school personnel, that are the root cause of the harm. Student misbehavior is viewed globally and holistically and understood in a context of structural and institutional practices and injustices that must be addressed to create paths of healing and restoration.

In these contexts, transformative restorative justice seeks to address inequity and exclusion by understanding harm and conflict contextually, historically, and institutionally (Davis, 2019; Vaandering, 2010; Wadhwa, 2010). Immigrant students will have a greater chance of success when educators have the awareness to critique the current educational system and social relations, the skills to adopt changes to discriminatory practices and procedures, and the

ability to implement strategies that will counter these harmful effects. Fania Davis (2019) reminded practitioners of the need to identify institutional policies and practices that maintain systems of retributive justice and warned that “not adopting a more expansive view runs the risk that restorative justice offers a quick fix, addressing symptoms but not underlying causes” (p. 35). Barbara Sherrod (2020), in *Colorizing Restorative Justice*, noted, “Harm done on the institutional levels must first be acknowledged, institutions must hold themselves accountable, and that restoration must take place before we can move forward” (p. 55). The application of the transformative conception allows for a comprehensive analysis of the circumstances surrounding harm and conflict and seeks to address the underlying systemic causes, not merely the immediate symptoms.

In schools that serve immigrant youth, restorative justice offers a countercultural option to retributive paradigms and can subvert the negative and harmful impact of systems that work to assimilate or exclude immigrant individuals and communities (Archibold, 2016). Principles, values, and practices associated with restorative justice offer an alternative to the existing model that has negatively impacted our schools and communities, which reinforces dichotomies of good or bad and right or wrong, based on essentialized conceptualizations of citizen or immigrant. With this task in mind, school leaders are positioned within the institution of education to evaluate and inform how policies are interpreted and enacted in schools (McCray & Beachum, 2014). They carry the responsibility of considering how their actions and implementation of district policies and school procedures will affect students and communities, leading to greater participation and equity or continuing to maintain systems of exclusion and control (Katz, 2012; Scanlan & López, 2012). Their decisions have a direct impact on school culture and climate, teaching and learning, and school-community relations and can create or

hinder opportunities for authentic participation and inclusion in schools (Crawford & Arnold, 2017).

Leadership for Immigrants

The literature on leadership focused on the needs of immigrant students, leadership for English-language learners (ELs), and leadership in diverse contexts seeks to understand the mechanisms employed by school leaders to address organizational issues of equity by developing systems of support, leveraging resources, and evaluating the efficacy of various initiatives (Khalifa et al., 2016; Magno & Schiff, 2010; Scanlan & López, 2014). The literature describes how school leaders negotiate environments, policies, and practices focused on the needs of marginalized communities, including immigrant students. The literature prioritizes practical suggestions aimed at supporting implementation through programming and policy decisions (Crawford & Arnold, 2017; Lowenhaupt & Reeves, 2015), professional development opportunities for teachers (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Lad & Braganza, 2013), community partnerships and outreach efforts (Auerbach, 2010), and school-based disciplining practices (Katz, 1999; McCray & Beachum, 2014). By understanding some of the barriers that prevent schools from achieving parity measured by neoliberal accountability standards, researchers have documented the processes that school leaders utilize to respond to emergent needs or make sustainable changes for their communities (Crawford & Dorner, 2019). Strangely, these barriers can often be due to school leaders' limited understanding and background knowledge related to the various needs of immigrant youth (Brooks et al., 2010; Figueroa, 2017). Too often, school leaders fail to appreciate the political nature of educating students for democracy (Apple, 1995; DeMatthews & Vela, 2020; Miller & Martin, 2015; Ryan & Katz, 2007), seeing their work as disconnected from broader social movements. With this in mind, many examples of competent

leadership fail to fully capture a transformative orientation that seeks to both understand and address relational and institutional elements that create and maintain retributive paradigms and exclusionary practices while simultaneously promoting an environment of social engagement among all members of the community.

Some researchers described the need for school leaders to recognize the political dimensions embedded in their everyday work, alluding to processes aligned to individual and community critical awareness or, *conscientização*. Anderson (1990), for example, recognized the need for educators to move beyond administration as “technique and craft” to “viewing it as a form of praxis steeped in political and normative issues” (p. 52). Others documented principals who recognized the opportunity to confront and challenge retributive practices and policies that maintained marginalized communities in positions of dependence (Lopez et al., 2006). The literature also illuminates the process principals use to assess local, national, and international political contexts to inform their immediate school context (DeMatthews, 2018; Ward et al., 2015) and to utilize local resources to mobilize their school communities to support immigrant populations (Cooper, 2009; Ryan & Katz, 2007; Santamaria et al., 2017). Working beyond the traditional scope of school leadership, much of this literature highlights principals who recognize the impact of political discourse and policies on their immigrant communities and the efforts they take to create safe and supportive environments for their students and families.

A trend in the literature is the development of unique leadership frameworks to guide principal practice. These practical frameworks and continuums seek to systematize leadership practices and operationalize leadership behaviors in school contexts. They are primarily grounded in research supporting and linking culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016; Magno & Schiff, 2010), leadership for social justice (Miller & Martin, 2015), and

transformational leadership (Nash, 2011; Solsona-Puig, 2019). By utilizing these frameworks to understand the role of leadership in immigrant communities, scholars have continued to identify practices linked to change efforts. Sadly, these frameworks have become so ubiquitous that they seem a precondition to publishing research on leadership practices. Too often, their focus is on what school leaders “should” do in their settings, broadly describing target behaviors and actions, without fully acknowledging varied access to resources, organizational interest and will, and the school leader’s understanding of the educational environment. In addition, this work is often siloed, considering the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, without fully attending to broader issues of inclusion as a philosophy to prioritize relationships and identity development within an institutional setting.

Teacher Development

One primary approach to support immigrant youth is through professional development focused on in-service teachers. This literature discusses the use of professional learning activities to create spaces for teachers to interrogate their personal biases, develop pedagogical skills related to immigrant and ELs, and create inclusive spaces for all members of the community.

Some forms of professional development that are identified include understanding language acquisition and processes for ELs (Lowenhaupt & Reeves, 2015; Scanlan & López, 2012; Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011), addressing bias and stereotypes (Ezzani & King, 2018), responding to emerging political conflicts impacting immigrant youth (Burkett & Hayes, 2018; Castellón et al., 2020), and understanding general experiences common among undocumented immigrant youth (Crawford & Arnold, 2017; Lad & Braganza, 2013).

For example, Brooks et al. (2010) and Elfers and Stritikus (2014) discussed school leaders’ use of professional development opportunities to improve academic outcomes for ELs.

By coordinating the delivery of professional development, school leaders can equip and empower general education teachers, many of whom lack formal training and explicit background knowledge on ELs.

In addition, the development of multidisciplinary leadership teams is a documented strategy to support teachers who work with immigrant students in schools (Menken & Sánchez, 2020; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Aside from coordinating the delivery of services, these teams serve as a system of support and guidance to teachers who may not have the necessary training, background, and understanding to fully support immigrants' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Scanlan and López (2012, 2014) developed an original theoretical framework grounded in culturally responsive school leadership that focuses on teacher development. Their goal was to promote authentic and critical sociocultural integration across the school community, cultivate language proficiency among all content areas, and support academic achievement within inclusive settings. Their conceptual design addresses their concern to create and maintain learning environments that are proactive and responsive to a diverse student population by attending to teacher and classroom needs.

At times, when school principals are aware of broader political movements impacting the emotional well-being and safety of their students, they respond by providing context-specific professional development focused on harmful political discourses and ideologies. A case study conducted by Lac and Okilwa (2020) on refugee African Muslim girls in a large city in the southwest United States highlighted one approach to provide meaningful professional development aimed at confronting essentialized identities and nationalistic priorities. In response to the national discourse against refugees and immigration that negatively influenced teacher

perceptions and attitudes towards these students, the school leader organized professional development opportunities to directly address misconceptions and stereotypes.

In a similar vein, in response to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and deportation threats, Castrellón et al. (2020) and Crawford (2017) discussed the use of professional development to equip teachers to respond to this crisis by providing them with appropriate legal information to safeguard their students and families. Similarly, Adriaan et al. (2020) discussed school leaders' use of teacher development opportunities to respond to the fear and panic that overwhelmed the largely immigrant community after Donald J. Trump's election victory in 2016. To create a supportive environment, the principal initially coordinated the use of restorative circles for students and staff to discuss their fears and concerns. This community-building process provided a window into the students' lived experiences and allowed staff to not only empathize but directly respond to their concerns. When further confronted by the news of the deportation of a parent, the principal then proceeded to become actively involved in advocating for their release from detention, partnering with local and national human rights organizations. Through this process, he became more emboldened to speak out against deportation, participated in local immigration training, and brought this information back to his school community.

Community Partnerships and Outreach Efforts

Researchers have noted school leaders' strategies to support immigrant communities by developing authentic partnerships with students and their families and building coalitions among organizations to amplify the impact of their work. These documented strategies move beyond traditional school-related activities to include the need for wraparound services for families, where families get guidance for matters related to employment, health, and housing (Pecina &

Marx, 2020). Holistic attention and response to the community's needs creates a space for authentic partnerships.

Scanlan and Johnson (2015) created a second framework to track strategies that develop and support ongoing family and community partnerships in diverse environments. By utilizing culturally responsive school leadership to inform leadership practices that support community engagement, these authors suggested the need to equip both educators, parents, and community members to be “boundary spanners, border crossers, and advocates” (p. 165) for equity through inclusion. Their framework emphasizes authentic and equity-oriented partnerships that stress student and community asset identification, continuing education, and redefining classroom and community spaces to support students and communities from diverse backgrounds.

Scholars have also documented school leaders' attempts to support and mobilize their local community to address issues of exclusion and injustice (Cooper, 2009; Johnson & Pak, 2018; Katz, 2012). Burkett and Hayes (2018), in their findings, discussed access to lawyers and social workers for immigrant families after the 2016 election. DeMatthews and Vela (2020) discussed a principal's coordinated response with local partners to address the immediate needs of his school's undocumented immigrant community.

Researchers have also documented school leaders' attempts to negotiate and challenge deficit views and exclusionary practices and policies originating from within the organization (Brooks et al., 2010; González, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). Their ability to manage the multicultural and political environments within their communities highlights their commitment to change. Bonney et al. (2020), for example, documented the development of family literacy events that recognize immigrant families' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and celebrate

various cultural practices. This strategy highlights the school leader's commitment to confront deficit-oriented narratives, leading the way to the creation of affirming and supportive spaces.

Lopez et al. (2006) described a principal who positioned himself in opposition to district leadership, promoting programs and practices to empower his students and community. Though not supported by his supervisors, this principal challenged deficit orientations and, while working with local organizations, established programs that affirmed his immigrant students' identities. As attested by these scholars, the principal had "taken both personal and professional risks for his border-crossing behavior—transgressing the social norms and expectations for a school leader" (Lopez et al., 2006, p. 68).

Though there is ample evidence of activities to support immigrant communities through community partnerships and outreach, there seems to be inconsistent attention to changing institutional cultural practices that maintain systems of inequity. Even with these attempts to support their local communities, Cooper (2009) noted that while there are significant improvements in the community, "[many of] these leaders have not moved beyond the rudimentary strategies to promote cross-cultural understanding and inclusion" (p. 716). Superficial whitewashing cannot satisfactorily cover up injustices or address the fundamental failure in our institutions to develop ideal conditions for immigrant students to flourish.

Teaching and Curricular Resources

Scholars have acknowledged the need to challenge deficit-oriented district policies and school practices and procedures that limit immigrant students' opportunities, and they seek solutions to expand and increase participation across school programs (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Okhremtchouk et al., 2018). For example, programming decisions that prioritize English-only instruction, embrace the goal of assimilation to the dominant culture, and subtract cultural

resources from ELs are directly linked with student underachievement and rejecting schooling as a pathway to success (Valenzuela, 1999). Growing understanding of the damaging effects of isolating practices, especially as it relates to representation in classes and programs that lead to increased outcomes, has become a major targeted area for improvement.

Horsford and Clark (2015) advocated for school leaders to support racial reconciliation in schools that serve students from diverse backgrounds by addressing ineffective teaching and the use of discriminatory curricular resources in the classroom. These researchers contested assimilationist strategies embedded in teacher practices and curricular resources, noting the marginalizing and racist assumptions rooted in practices that seek to acculturate students into the dominant school culture. By describing racial literacy on a continuum, these authors offered examples to serve as potential benchmarks for others who are engaged in racial reconciliation and restoration.

Kelsey et al. (2015) and Lowenhaupt and Reeves (2015) have noted the exclusionary nature of English as a second language (ESL) practices in many schools, where students are isolated from their peers to receive support and instruction. Whether through self-contained programs or ESL classrooms that are isolated from the rest of the building, the authors suggested that these practices limit access to native English-speaking peers who serve as models, limit exposure to rigorous curriculum and higher standards and expectations, and ultimately may have damaging and stigmatizing effects on children. In response, scholars have documented school leaders' organizational practices and school-based policies that attempt to mitigate barriers for ELs, many of whom are also immigrants.

Kelsey et al. (2015) documented educator perceptions that view specific non-English home language development as detrimental to academic success and an obstacle to assimilation.

By viewing language as a problem (Ruiz, 1984; Scanlan & López, 2012), scholars have noted how educators fail to leverage this resource to support student learning (Cummins, 2005; Schechter & Bayley, 2004). This type of practice further marginalizes non-English-dominant students (Liou, 2016) and creates cultural hierarchies in school communities that affect access to resources.

A different form of isolation and marginalization is created when Els are excluded from college track classes due to their limited English abilities. Belcher and Hairston (2020) discussed the exclusion of many Els from AP classes, where educators conflate their limited ability to communicate fluently in English with their intellectual capacity. Programming and assessment criteria exclude non-English speaking students from benefiting from coursework that will enable them to increase their chances of continuing their education post-high school. In response to this disproportionate underrepresentation of ELs in college track classes, these scholars described how school leadership worked to create opportunities to increase access and support in these courses.

Finally, there is also a wide consensus that school curriculum and curricular resources need to be reviewed and replaced with resources that promote equity through inclusion (Johnson & Pak, 2018; Scanlan & López, 2012). According to scholars, these resources would not only attend to English language acquisition but also provide authentic representation and historically accurate perspectives to ensure students see themselves and their communities reflected in the curriculum. This also entails a curriculum that affirms students' cultural identity/ies and provides paths to access their funds of knowledge to support integration and achievement (González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992).

School-Based Discipline

Finally, there is also growing interest in understanding district discipline policy and school implementation that disproportionately targets minority students. Some school leaders have turned to alternative models of discipline to address this glaring concern, though there is substantial documentation of the continuing use of traditional retributive discipline practices operating in schools (Katz, 1999).

For example, McCray and Beachum (2014) argued for culturally relevant leadership to address the disproportionate number of disciplinary cases involving immigrant youth. Rather than attending to this growing trend through traditional retributive models of discipline, these authors stressed the need for leaders to develop “not only the appropriate knowledge base but also the proper attitude” (p. 406) to adequately respond to conflict in schools.

Scholars have documented leaders’ attempts to mitigate the harmful effects of retributive discipline models by implementing strategies such as restorative practices (Davis, 2019; Hass-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). Hass-Wisecup and Saxon (2018) advocated for increased commitment in these practices, as they warned of the dangers of the school-to-prison pipeline—the understanding that retributive practices in schools, such as suspension and expulsions, are linked to future risk of incarceration. Scholars have documented how implementing restorative justice practices resulted in improved outcomes for marginalized youth and strengthened key relationships in school settings (Hass-Wisecup & Saxon, 2018; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). This research points to the need for innovative approaches to address student misbehavior; however, it fails to discuss and address the underlying causes that create the conditions for this to occur.

These scholars documented leadership practices that support equity through inclusion by attending to teacher development, establishing community partnerships, assessing curricular resources, and examining school-based discipline. However, each of these contributions influences isolated educational elements and fails to interrogate the sociocultural context of schooling and how disciplinary structures reinforce assimilation and nationalism. Since little attention is focused on addressing underlying structural and institutional issues related to exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization, these contributions are only partially useful. Without attending to immediate socio-political contexts while simultaneously interrogating historical patterns of racism embedded in school cultures, practices, policies, and structures, some researchers fear that this leadership, though well-intentioned, will not realize its ultimate goals of equity and authentic inclusion.

Contribution of the Proposed Study

In this study, I engaged in the process of social critique and social action to interrogate the repressive use of institutional power, confront school-based practices and policies that harm immigrant youth, and identify liberatory leadership practices that support equity through inclusion. First, my study contributes to the field of restorative justice by addressing the gap in the literature and adding perspectives from school leaders responsible for implementation. As schools continue to embrace restorative justice as a framework to establish a culture of care and enhance social engagement in schools, school leaders face the responsibility of ensuring fidelity to the core principles and values. As the research shows, there has been investment in articulating the benefits and improved outcomes among marginalized individuals. Capturing perspectives from school leaders offers invaluable insights for continued development.

This project also looked at leadership practices in immigrant communities holistically rather than in isolation, as past research is fragmented and disconnected. The study provides insights into the everyday actions and underlying beliefs that inform the development of school environments that support immigrant youth and address institutional policies and practices that harm students. Through an open discussion of both the formal and informal policies and practices operating in schools that reinforce concepts of nationalism and assimilation, this study illuminates principals' responses to harm and conflict in schools. The dual focus remains on the impact school leaders have on the local school environment and the role school leaders play in supporting change among those responsible for forming institutional policies and defining institutional practices.

Conclusion

Researchers have acknowledged the positive impact restorative justice can have as an organizing framework in school settings, addressing situations that result in conflict and harm while also interrogating institutional policies and practices that are responsible for creating environments where this is possible. Through a discussion of the relevant literature leading to the current study, I have highlighted how immigrant students experience harm associated with assimilationist technologies and marginalization in schools. Researchers see the promise of restorative justice as it stands out as a viable solution to create environments that support authentic inclusion and equity. As research has shown, many school leaders continue to seek opportunities and solutions to improve outcomes for their immigrant students. Though limited in scope, their efforts show their commitment to their communities. Through this study, I hope to share the impact the implementation of restorative justice can offer schools that serve immigrant youth.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction and Research Questions

This study sought to understand how school leaders use restorative justice to address institutional harm and conflict experienced by immigrants and establish environments that encourage authentic inclusion grounded in equity. This research adds new insights and dimensions centered on principals' responses by expanding understanding of harm and conflict beyond traditional interpersonal definitions to incorporate institutional and systemic harm caused by a broad range of assimilationist and nationalist strategies.

This PAR study included a group of principals from across the country, me included, who engaged in critical discussions on the impact of restorative justice on our school communities. Our focus on critical incidents and emerging situations ensured that our focus was grounded in practice and also encouraged the development of our collective understanding of restorative justice and its application in schools. Herr and Anderson (2015) recognized the benefit of action research to capture “the expertise of locals about their own problems and solutions” (p. 11). It is this intimate knowledge of our local school communities, coupled with an understanding of the goals and initiatives established in each environment, that allows for meaningful discussions about the role of restorative justice in these contexts.

The study was guided by the following research question and subquestions:

RQ1: As principals, what can we learn together and from one another about the use of restorative justice to establish environments that support the development of a culture of care for immigrant students as we continue to grow and evolve in our capacity as school leaders?

RQ1_a: How do we, as school leaders, manage and negotiate policies and policy decisions to align them with restorative justice values and principles?

RQ1_b: How can we, as school leaders, leverage restorative justice to confront formal and informal practices to create more inclusive and equitable environments for immigrant students?

Study Design and Methodology

Participatory Action Research

Transformative restorative justice is focused on addressing the underlying systemic causes of harm and conflict, transforming communities, and empowering individuals (Davis, 2019; Wadhwa, 2010). It is grounded in a collective commitment to the concept of community (Archibold, 2016) and prioritizes the power of shared knowledge, storytelling, and dialogue (Davis, 2019), reinforcing the centrality of local contexts and intimate relationships (Vaandering, 2010). Therefore, exploring the use and implementation of restorative justice would benefit from research that includes perspectives from those most closely involved with the development of strategies and practices, who are equipped with an intimate understanding of the practices and procedures of the institution. For this reason, the PAR study design allowed us to share our critical perspectives and analyses while simultaneously documenting change efforts resulting from participation in the study. It is through this iterative process that we recognized that as we worked together for change in our communities, we were also transformed—our ideas, understanding, awareness, and applications—by our deepening understanding through the process of authentic collaboration.

Participatory action research is focused on social transformation, with an emphasis on social critique and social action (Anderson et al., 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2015). It reflects a commitment to maintaining the integration of theory and practice, recognizing the essential relationship between the two, and maintaining a balance that allows for critical reflection and orthopraxis. Originally conceptualized by Freire as he worked in Latin America among

politically and economically marginalized groups, PAR was understood as a form of liberation as it created a space to empower oppressed individuals (Herr & Anderson, 2015). Growing self-knowledge and self-awareness is a precursor to liberatory practice. By working alongside one another to understand and address the conditions that created and maintained harmful environments, our PAR study documented and informed a process focused on authentic collaboration and change.

Key in the development of PAR was the desire to understand the relationship between social events, processes, and structures within a broader context that included historical and ideological forces. In describing this characteristic, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), as cited in Herr and Anderson (2015), wrote that PAR “is a social process focused on the interrelationship between an individual and their social environment,” while “the object of investigation is to change the world for the better in a number of ways: practice, knowledge of practice, social structures, and social media (what we might call discourse structures)” (p. 17). This study used PAR to interrogate the use of restorative justice to adopt, adapt, and resist institutional practices and policies in schools that serve immigrant students. The ultimate goal of PAR is “to highlight paths toward greater humanization and away from dehumanization” (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 19). Through this study, I was able to provide critical insights to encourage the development of school leaders who wish to promote equity and justice.

Context

This PAR study took place from August 2021 through April 2022 with a group of four participants, me included, some of whom I have known previously. Though I met with some of the participants informally to discuss our work, this study was an invitation to participate in a formal learning community with consistency, structure, focus, and intentionality to our meetings.

The shift from independent informal conversations among colleagues to a PAR group benefited our work as the dialogue and critical reflections added substance and intentionality to our discussions and supported our implementation efforts.

Though our goal was to meet monthly from August 2021 through April 2022 for a total of nine sessions, work-life conflicts made it impossible to get together regularly. We were only able to meet six times during this period. This should be no surprise as we all had children, professional responsibilities, and unforeseen crises that prevented us from meeting every month. We made a conscious decision to only meet if we were all present to encourage consistency and support intimacy between the participants. Since we were a small group to begin with, having one person miss the meeting changed the dynamics of the group substantially. During the course of the year, we met for six one-hour sessions. Our meetings took place on August 27, 2021, October 12, 2021, November 19, 2021, December 17, 2021, February 25, 2022, and April 8, 2022.

This study took place as many of our schools reopened to full in-person instruction after we were forced to operate in a hybrid model of learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March of 2020, schools across the country have faced the challenges of educating students virtually, recognizing the disparity in educational resources and community support that negatively impacts marginalized communities. In addition, immigrant students were significantly impacted since many of the schools and communities lacked appropriate resources for new immigrant families, and schools did not implement adequate instructional models since many of the students were also ELs. School leaders varied in their response to this situation, and many continue to develop plans to address issues related to academic regression, absenteeism, and deteriorating mental health.

The study culminated with a joint presentation at the 2022 National Association of Community and Restorative Justice in Chicago, Illinois, where we each planned to present what we learned from our year together. Our session, titled, “School Leaders Negotiating Institution Practices and Policies,” was our opportunity to explicitly identify important takeaways from the study. During this session, I chose to prioritize the other participants’ learning as I was interested in hearing the important themes that resonated with them and comparing them with my personal findings. The findings in this study reflect the themes that were most relevant to me, though they do overlap with many of the themes that were important to the other participants. In sharing these findings with my colleagues, they confirmed their relevance and importance to our role as school leaders.

Participant Identification Process

The participants were school leaders that worked in communities with immigrant students, who were also formally trained in restorative justice and applied these principles regularly in their schools. The participants included two leaders from high schools and two elementary schools and represented urban, suburban, and rural communities from the eastern and western United States. Though I initially wanted to include a middle school participant, I was not able to identify an appropriate candidate. I reached out to potential individuals and asked the other three participants to reach out to their contacts. In the end, I decided to move forward with the three participants, rather than wait to find someone who would meet the middle school criteria. My goal was to detail our conversations over the course of a school year, and I did not want to begin after the school year started. I also did not want to introduce a new member to our PAR group after we began our meetings as I did not want to disrupt the group dynamic.

Participants varied in gender, ethnicity, years of experience using restorative justice, and years of experience as school leaders. I was also a participant in the group. It is the diversity of experience, background, and context that created an opportunity for rich and meaningful discussions on the use of restorative justice to benefit our communities.

Participants

Frank Williams was the high school principal at Mountain Top High School in central Colorado. After five years as the school's leader, Frank transitioned to a vice president at the local community college at the beginning of this study. During his time as principal, he spent much of his tenure implementing restorative justice practices in his community. The growing need for alternative approaches to address discipline and academic achievement and improve school culture compelled Frank to engage in this process. Previously, he was an administrator in Denver Public Schools, a consultant to schools facing challenges of disproportionality, and a restorative justice practitioner in Uganda, where he helped mediate between groups after their civil war. He has been instrumental in the development and implementation of restorative justice policies in Colorado. I have known Frank Williams for over 20 years as we were college roommates. Over this time, he has shaped my understanding of restorative justice and its potential to model practices on equity through inclusion.

Mountain Top High School sits at approximately 10,000 feet in the Rocky Mountains and serves a student population of approximately 460 students. Many of the families who live in the community work at the many nearby internationally recognized ski resorts. It is a historic community but has seen economic challenges due to its location and the decline of the coal and mining industry. Close to 68% of the student population identifies as Latino, while 27% are White, and 5% are biracial. Over 60% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Students

in this school consistently underperform compared to state averages on standardized assessments and graduation rates, and the school faces high rates of suspension and low rates of college and career readiness.

Nelly Tiger is the elementary school principal at Hollow Rivers Elementary School in western Colorado, near the Utah border. She recently transitioned to a principal position in her community from across the state and has been investigating the use of restorative justice in her school for only two years. In the two years that she has served as principal, she has participated in training with Dr. Tom Cavanagh from the University of Colorado and has continued to invest in building a culture of care in her community. Though new to the movement, she has shared valuable insights into the shift towards restorative justice in her community and was highlighted at a recent symposium. This study was our first time meeting regularly to discuss restorative justice.

Hollow Rivers Elementary School is located in a small urban community on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. The small city is geographically isolated from other metropolitan centers, has a growing wine industry, and attracts outdoor nature lovers due to the proximity to the Rocky Mountains. Hollow Rivers Elementary School has a student population of approximately 400 students. Seventy-six percent of students are White, while 19% identify as Latino, and 4% identify as two or more races. Fifty-eight percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Students at this school consistently underperform compared to state averages on standardized assessments. Though the school has low rates of suspensions among all students, higher rates among Latino students marks an area for improvement.

Casey Richards is the high school principal of Red Hook International High School in New York City. Casey started working at Red Hook in 2003 as a science teacher and then

transitioned into a leadership role as an assistant principal. She took over as principal in 2013. In 2012, Casey worked with the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility to coordinate a restorative justice training at Red Hook. Over the summer, she spent a week with a group of educators, “circling up” and learning the basics. This experience led her to continue to explore the use of restorative justice in education. I got to know Casey after I volunteered as an outside student evaluator, partnering with staff to assess student competencies in literacy and language as an alternative to the state’s graduation requirements. She shared a quote from Dorothy Vaandering that expanded my understanding of restorative justice as more than just a strategy to address student discipline issues.

Red Hook International High School enrolls students who have immigrated to the United States and have been in the country less than two years. Her community is truly diverse, as 53% of students are from Latin America, 21% from Asia, 18% are Black, having immigrated from across the world, and 6% are White, primarily from European countries. Ninety-five percent of her students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Test scores and graduation rates are below the state averages. There are approximately 350 students who attend the school.

I am the elementary school principal at Twin Ponds Elementary School in northern New Jersey. I have served the community for ten years, having moved here from a suburb of Chicago. Over the last seven years, I have investigated the use of restorative justice to support inclusion efforts among immigrants, students in our ESL programs, and students with special needs. In addition to my doctoral work, I have had the opportunity to take a class on the principles of restorative justice at Eastern Mennonite University and participated in Dr. Tom Cavanagh’s online program with a group of teachers from my school. Our initial implementation efforts have

convinced me that restorative justice can address institutional practices and policies that harm marginalized students.

Twin Ponds Elementary School is located in a suburb of New York City and serves approximately 400 students. Seventy percent of the students are White, 15% are Latino, and 12% are Asian. At Twin Ponds Elementary School, only 8% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. The school houses four special education, self-contained classrooms and is one of five elementary schools with an ESL program. Students perform at or above state averages on standardized assessments, and there is no significant issue with discipline.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	School	State/Region	Years as Leader	Years using restorative justice
Frank Williams	M	Mountain Top High School	Colorado/Rural	14	18
Nelly Tiger	F	Hollow Rivers Elementary School	Colorado/Suburban	10	4
Casey Richards	F	Red Hook International High School	New York/Urban	15	9
Jose Celis	M	Twin Ponds Elementary School	New Jersey/Suburban	17	7

Inquiry Group and Critical Incidents

This study incorporated two activities to develop our understanding of restorative justice: inquiry groups and an informal self-interview. Through the inquiry group, we created a space for authentic dialogue to investigate critical incidents and emerging situations related to our use of restorative justice. The inquiry group included a process for participatory analysis as we targeted the 2022 National Association of Community and Restorative Justice Conference in Chicago,

Illinois, as an opportunity to present important preliminary findings from this study. The goal was to develop our collective understanding of the ways restorative justice can support practices that lead to authentic inclusion and equity in our schools. It was through the process of sharing our stories, successes, and failures that, as a group, we strengthened our collective capacity to serve one another and the immigrant youth in our communities.

Inquiry groups have been utilized in a variety of studies to capture local knowledge grounded in personal experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Though I initially proposed a formal structure to our meetings, these sessions followed a semi-structured process, where discussions developed organically based on our current situations and where data was “socially constructed within the interaction of the group” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 114), highlighting a constructivist orientation. Norm setting and facilitation responsibilities usually fell on me as the primary researcher, though I tried to encourage increased responsibility from all members of the group. The size of our group allowed for greater intimacy and ensured that all voices were heard on a regular basis. Even though I was the primary facilitator, everyone felt comfortable sharing and contributing to the discussions. The monthly meetings occurred virtually, using Google Meet, and were recorded, transcribed (using Otter.ai), and shared with all participants to aid in the participatory analysis process. Each meeting lasted approximately one hour.

The primary purpose of the discussions focused on exploring critical incidents and emerging situations, which are understood to be events that create substantial disruption or significant risk or harm (Butterfield et al., 2005; FitzGerald et al., 2008). We evaluated these incidents and our associated underlying understanding, attitudes, and beliefs. To structure these discussions, we informally used the critical incident technique (CIT) as a guiding framework

(Butterfield et al., 2005). As described by FitzGerald et al. (2008), CIT offers the opportunity of turning anecdotes into data by focusing on the positive attributes of the story while the observer and researchers interrogate the incident for meaning. Recently, Philpot et al. (2020) argued “that the use of CIT methodology has allowed us to document rich descriptions of examples of teaching for social justice and to identify teaching practices that resonate with critical perspectives, or what we have come to call ‘social justice pedagogies’” (p. 1). We referred to this framework to help identify how we have adapted, adopted, or resisted practices and policies that harm immigrant youth.

The benefit of this approach lies in the ability to “uncover context as well as capturing meaning” (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 489). This creates an opportunity to record rare, uncommon, or unique events and details while simultaneously focusing on quotidian and everyday structures or routines. Some researchers have noted a variety of challenges associated with this technique, mainly incomplete or fragmented stories due to limited memory of events, a bias towards more recent events due to greater clarity in recall, and partial recall due to an unwillingness or limited experience communicating all elements of the anecdote (FitzGerald et al., 2008). When facilitating the inquiry group sessions, I considered these challenges and sought thoughtful and engaged participation to ensure greater reliability and efficacy in our discussions and analysis.

Since participants varied in school setting (elementary and high school), region (East and West), student population demographics, and years of experience using restorative justice, it was important to recognize the variety of incidents that were recorded and shared for discussion and analysis. In addition, participant cultural backgrounds and orientations varied, allowing for us to interrogate each incident collectively and provide unique perspectives. In truth, this is a primary

reason for the diverse group of administrators as our contexts, experiences, and background allowed for rich and insightful discussions. The dialogue allowed us to learn from one another as we reflected on these events.

Self-Interview Study

A second data source came from an informal self-interview study. It was coordinated with three critical friends (Costa & Kallick, 1993), affectionately dubbed the Trib-Force, who helped interrogate my practice and assumptions related to restorative justice, my experience as a school leader, and my background as an immigrant. As a form of autoethnography (Freshwater et al., 2010; Meskin et al., 2014; Muncey, 2010), the self-interview study was a semi-structured interview process, in which I engaged in a dialogue about the use of restorative justice in schools, interrogated my experience as an immigrant, and reflected on my experience as an educator working with immigrants. As Sara Crawley (2012) noted, the self-interview itself is “a balancing act between modernist empirical science, postmodernist deconstruction of science and subjectivity, and the activist pursuit of recording marginalized ideas and voices” (p. 144). It is in this context that the self-interview produced insights into my experience with the implementation of restorative justice to serve immigrant students. This practice provided an opportunity to interrogate my experience as an immigrant student in the United States, focusing on my encounters with inclusionary and exclusionary practices in school settings. It was necessary to create a space to “make aspects of the self strange” by “becoming separate in order to look at it as if from the outside” (Bolton, 2010, p. 14). It is by taking a critical stance towards my experience and memories that I was able to analyze my beliefs, assumptions, and actions more effectively.

The role and responsibility of critical friends have been developed by a variety of researchers (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Whitehead and McNiff (2006) recognized the role of the critical friend as “both a friend and a critic. As a friend, you are supportive and available to listen to the practitioner’s account of their research. As a critic, your work is to offer thoughtful responses to the account, raising points that perhaps the practitioner has not thought about” (p. 103). The critical friend also operates as a trusted colleague who is willing to “assist researchers in developing trustworthiness through challenging the ways in which they process and develop their ideas and knowledge” (Muskin et al., 2014, p. 9). In this unique study, due to my positionality as an educator and immigrant, I identified critical friends who not only helped me interrogate my practice but also helped me relate my personal experiences as an immigrant growing up in the educational system of the United States.

I have known the three members of the Trib-Force for at least 10 years. I consider them close friends, with special expertise in education and youth development, though none have any background in restorative justice. The members include a middle school science teacher, an executive director of a nonprofit that works with youth on short-term volunteer trips, and the founder of an organization that mentors inner-city youth and provides safe spaces for recreation and socialization. Aside from their background working with youth, they maintain a strong commitment to social justice and are interested in investigating models to support activism.

Throughout the year, we held informal meetings to discuss issues related to this study, where they engaged in thoughtful and critical dialogue. The process of accountability was invaluable as I was forced to articulate my ideas, experiences, and emotions. As opposed to the PAR study group, these meetings centered on my experiences and allowed me the unique space to publicly engage in the process of self-reflection and self-awareness. Though a humbling

experience, it was an invaluable component to this study because it was one of the only spaces where I was allowed to explore my identity and sense-making freely.

We decided not to record these sessions as we noted, early on, that the use of audio recording equipment changed the group dynamics. It seems that we were distracted by the thought that our comments would be recorded, and we would try to posture during these meetings. I am glad that we made this decision as the conversations were rich with curiosity, humor, and accountability and became meaningful acts of solidarity and connection. After these sessions, I would journal to capture new ideas and revelations that were disclosed. This collective process also supported the study's analysis.

The self-study interview incorporated self-generated interview topics for the sessions, often focusing on critical elements discussed in the inquiry groups or questions I was musing about my experience as an immigrant growing up in New Jersey. Topics focused on my journey with restorative justice, my thoughts on current schooling practices and policies that harm immigrant youth, and reflections on my personal experiences as an immigrant youth. It was also the space for me to share my preliminary analysis and findings from the PAR sessions, which were my primary source of data. The topics for the self-study were developed as a reflexive process focusing on the goal of self-investigation (Muskin et al., 2014).

Aside from pre-established interview topics, there was a space for authentic inquiry by my critical friends to interrogate statements and ideas or probe for additional information. These follow-up questions served as a corrective to potential omissions and bias as there is too much opportunity for selectivity in what I recounted, how it was recounted, and what was omitted. As I look back over the year and consider the topics discussed, many of these were memories I had suppressed due to the painful content and feelings of inadequacy that permeated them. The role

of my critical friends in this endeavor was essential to ensure that my analysis was honest, reliable, and trustworthy.

Data Analysis

In keeping with the PAR process, some elements of the data analysis also occurred in collaboration with the principals during our monthly meetings. This iterative process—sharing critical incidents, analyzing them to gain insight into our practice, and participating in dialogues about our findings to inform future action—ensured that the collaborative analysis process aligned with the fundamental values of a PAR study. By maintaining a constructivist stance towards the data analysis process, the participants not only informed one another's practices but also collaboratively identified and described practices aligned with restorative justice that may not have previously been associated with the framework. The analysis also revealed processes that described how incidents unfolded and were influenced by institutional structures and policies, which are critical for informing future action (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

In addition to the group analysis process, I performed additional steps throughout the study to make sense of the data. The monthly meetings were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai, an online transcription application. Using these transcripts and my personal journal, I developed memos that I utilized for open coding after each session (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These codes were then used in the process to develop analytical codes (Richards, 2015), where codes were grouped into similar categories. They were then used to develop a visual organizer that included descriptions and examples that I used during my analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The visual organizer focused on recurring patterns across the data sources and was used to describe themes and interpretations.

Perhaps the most valuable activity occurred during a long drive to Virginia after the study had concluded. During this trip, I was able to listen to all the recordings in one sitting. Previously, I had listened to each recording after the meeting, noting the important themes from each session. Listening to all of the recordings in one sitting allowed me to see the entire arc of our conversations, noting how each participant had special topics of interest or unique comments they would make regularly. More importantly, I was also able to see how the participants evolved over the course of the year, deepening their understanding of restorative justice, growing in confidence during each session, and strengthening friendships with each other. I wanted to bring attention to the broader arc in our development as I also focused on the recurring themes from each of our sessions. I wanted to look at both the forest and the trees. At the conclusion of this drive, I was able to return to my visual organizer and highlight important themes, noting essential connections across the six sessions.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers need to recognize their positionality to identify possible assumptions, biases, dispositions, and worldviews that influence their interpretation of events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This process also aids in recognizing underlying values and expectations that form the researcher's hermeneutical stance (Maxwell, 2013). Herr and Anderson (2015) warned insiders conducting action research, noting that "unexamined, tacit knowledge of a site tends to be impressionistic, full of bias, prejudice, and uninterrogated impressions and assumptions that need to be surfaced and examined" (p. 44). Though essential to help ensure valid and reliable data by limiting the potential subjectivity, identifying the researcher's insider positionality must also be viewed as a strength as it provides a unique perspective when conducting research and analyzing data (Chavez, 2008). In this study, my role as a school leader utilizing restorative justice and my

identity as a young immigrant in the United States are valuable sources of experience and knowledge, and they represent my personal “borderlands” as I use these identities to “discover similar shared beliefs and rituals and am able to construct new ones” (Ernst-Slavit, 2000, p. 251). It is the intersection of my past and present, my experience as an immigrant and educator serving immigrants, that allows me a unique perspective on the impact schools have on immigrant students.

My positionality as an insider in school settings provides me the opportunity to offer a more nuanced analysis of schooling, focusing on the influence of formal and informal structures and policies on immigrant youth. After working as a school leader for over sixteen years, I have gained valuable insights and experiences that inform my practice and my understanding of schooling. While in Illinois, I worked as a school leader in a community that primarily served Mexican immigrants from the state of Michoacan. In New Jersey, I now work in a school with a global immigrant community, represented primarily by students from Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Eastern Asia. The similarities that I have encountered in both settings affirm a general and more universal attitude towards immigrants that I have recognized.

For the last seven years, I have begun to implement practices associated with restorative justice in my school. After learning about restorative justice from a colleague and further investigating it during my doctoral studies, I became convinced of its potential to equip school personnel to address interpersonal and institutional harm. It was in my early experiences with practices associated with restorative justice, primarily community circles, that I experienced the transformative potential among students and staff first-hand. It was the subsequent discussions with my colleagues, where we discussed key observations and highlights, that made us recognize the need to formally adopt restorative justice as a building goal. In my first year, my school

counselor and a fifth-grade teacher explored this topic with me. We then trained five additional teachers from across the building. We continue to look for opportunities to extend this training to the entire staff, though we are frustrated by the limited time and resources available to us for this task.

My status as a childhood immigrant from Latin America provides me with valuable first-hand insights into the immigrant experience in the United States. I was privileged in the sense that I was a documented citizen when entering the country, I attended an American school in Mexico, and my father had earned an advanced degree from the United States. Nonetheless, my experience with exclusionary practices, subtractive assimilation, and deficit thinking had harmful social and psychological effects. For the majority of my life, I have chosen to suppress these memories or refused to interrogate them through the critical lens of xenophobia or racism. Recently, I have begun to reassess incidents in my past using reflective processes developed during my doctoral studies. As I continued through this study, I needed to have the courage to face these memories. I needed to acknowledge and recognize these elements in my development as this study required me to draw out the meaning behind these experiences.

I am aware that my childhood experiences in school fueled my desire to be an educator. I was convinced that I would not allow a child to leave school having faced similar challenges or having similar feelings about their experience. I was committed to ensuring that all students experienced belonging and acceptance and that they knew that there was a caring educator in the building. I cultivated practices that reinforced these goals as a middle school educator, especially when I worked as a bilingual/ESL teacher in Illinois. My students at that time were from Latin America, and many of them did not have formal documentation to reside in the United States. They represented an invisible and marginalized group in public schools—students who did not

speak English, who would not be able to attend or afford college, and who did not have the appropriate authorization to work legally in the United States. Working with this population as a teacher reinforced my need to address school culture and confront repressive school practices and policies.

Ethical Considerations

There are unique ethical considerations to consider when conducting a PAR study due to the nature of this research model. By creating a space for practitioners to act as co-collaborators and experts who contribute to knowledge building that challenges institutional power, researchers must develop processes to “continuously exercise their professional judgment... towards minimizing risks and conflicts” (Herr & Anderson, 2016, p. 144) and “to addressing [ethical conundrums] as they arise” (p. 145). By acknowledging the potential for challenges to arise throughout the study, I positioned myself to respond ethically, ensuring that participants felt protected and safe throughout the study.

The study met the criteria established by the International Review Board (IRB) process. This study was approved through Montclair State University’s IRB, providing clear parameters for the study. In addition, I obtained consent forms from all participants prior to the data collection process. The consent forms acknowledged their commitment to participate in the study and included expectations for their involvement. In addition, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. They also had the right to withdraw their contributions from the study. No one exercised these rights as everyone willingly participated in the study and offered their contributions to extend our collective understanding.

Due to the nature of the information collected, it was essential to use pseudonyms and generic descriptions of the participants and their contexts to protect their confidentiality and

provide them with anonymity. Through the data collection process, participants shared sensitive information regarding their immediate workplace. Hatch (2002) reminded researchers to recognize and attend to the disproportionate power dynamics that may put them at risk and affect participants' willingness and ability to contribute to the study. The nature of the study was to identify institutional policies and practices that harm immigrant youth and describe actions taken by school leaders to mitigate the negative impact experienced. Disclosure of personal information could have caused participants to feel unsafe and insecure in their school-based roles. Ensuring anonymity was vital to establish confidence and trust during our inquiry group sessions.

Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), conclusions drawn from a qualitative study are trustworthy and valid if they are credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable. Similarly, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) highlighted the importance of consistency between the knowledge produced and the realities of the participants, acknowledging the interrelationship between knowledge and experience. The degree of trustworthiness will help ensure that participants and outside sources will view the study's conclusions as authentic (Lincoln et al., 2011) and able to influence and inform leadership practice. Going further, Herr and Anderson (2015) discussed the goal of catalytic validity, or the ability to influence change in professional practice and understanding. Achieving this goal required a systematic process that included frequent and ongoing member checks, explicit and transparent dialogues between my critical friends and I, and the triangulation of data from the various sources in this study. By providing confidence in these procedures, participants and readers will be able to affirm the study's conclusions and use these to inform their practice (Firestone, 1987).

Member checks were a primary source to achieve trustworthiness in this study. Throughout the study, participants engaged in regular member checks during inquiry group meetings, where we shared and analyzed critical incidents. In addition, after I completed each participant's portrait, I shared the document with them to check for accuracy. As they read my description, one participant offered a slight correction to improve accuracy. The other two participants did not request any changes. This collective process affirmed our constructivist stance and encouraged authentic dialogue and active listening (Maxwell, 2013). Member checks allowed participants to question, challenge, or elicit more information as we made personal connections to the information shared. The process of community-embedded sense-making (Herr & Anderson, 2015) helped ensure that the knowledge produced and conclusions drawn from the data were recognized as valid and reliable. Due to our diverse contexts, this process also allowed us to attempt to generalize our findings and identify elements that were transferable across settings as we sought to empower each other's practice.

In addition, during my self-interview studies, the critical friends served to check the impact of my implicit and explicit biases on my retelling of events, the psychological and emotional impact from these events, and the meaning I made about these events (Herr & Anderson, 2015). It was necessary to have multiple critical voices challenging and confronting elements in my reflections to ensure greater personal accountability. In addition, critical friends "ask researchers to make explicit what they may understand on a more tacit level" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 99). In this study, my critical friends helped interrogate underdeveloped ideas or topics that I attempted to avoid and challenged me to go deeper in my reflections and analysis. They challenged me to face many of the painful memories that I had suppressed and analyze

them alongside caring and supportive friends. This element ensured that the findings were shaped by accurate and honest reflections and met the criteria for rigorous analysis.

Finally, I took the information collected from the inquiry groups and self-interview studies to triangulate the data, thus working to identify consistencies or acknowledge inconsistencies across sources and strengthen the internal validity of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). By using the data collected to evaluate other pieces of evidence, I was required to draw connections between the different sources, attend to possible outliers, and confirm emerging findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This final process strengthened the connections between the information developed collectively in the inquiry groups and the reflections and analysis that I uncovered privately with my critical friends.

Conclusion

This section provided an overview of the PAR study in which I investigated school leaders' use of restorative justice in schools that serve immigrant populations. The data collection process focused on the use of an inquiry group with school leaders and a self-interview study with three critical friends. Through a collaborative analysis process, the inquiry group participants discussed critical incidents and helped identify common themes from this data. I used this information in conjunction with the data collected through my self-interview study to identify key findings between all the data. In addition, I identified key ethical considerations to ensure that I am responsible with the information and that I protect the participants in this study. Finally, there was a process in place to ensure the findings were valid and reliable, such as member checks and critical friends' accountability processes. This also included constant monitoring and self-reflection throughout the study to address my potential bias, prejudice, and avoidance.

Chapter 4: Healing that Leads to Action—Participant Portraits

Introduction

The following chapter offers an analysis of each participant, as I create portraits describing the impact of key events and moments in their lives. After spending a year together, I noticed a pattern in our conversations. We frequently moved between our personal stories of harm as children or adults and anecdotes related to initiatives we designed and implemented to create equitable and just learning environments for our students and staff. In all these stories, there was a constant element of institutional harm that impacted us fundamentally, which we attempted to mediate using the tools available to us. One of those tools was participation in this research group, where we were able to share our stories in a safe and supportive environment. This chapter is meant to describe our inward movement of collective self-reflection through storytelling towards healing, acceptance, and restoration.

These portraits offer a glimpse into each participant's story, where we shared our experiences of harm and the impact these experiences had or continue to have on our ability to engage in restorative work in each of our schools. Throughout our year together, as we addressed immediate and pressing issues affecting our schools, we also shared our personal stories of pain and loss. When I pieced together these anecdotes and snapshots, I was able to create a portrait of each participant that highlighted key events and critical moments that informed their understanding of institutional culture. Personal childhood trauma and adverse experiences in schools were inexorably linked to our response to challenging experiences we faced as adults and school leaders. As we committed to healing from these acts of harm, we helped one another identify and interrogate the sources, eventually concluding that institutional culture, mediated through policies and practices, was often responsible. Sadly, we also noticed how many of these

sources continue to operate within our schools, perpetuating similar harm on new generations. Our monthly meetings became a source of resistance and hope as we used our time together to support and encourage one another.

I provide each individual's narrative with the goal of capturing their evolution as educators committed to restorative justice. The use of personal anecdotes to describe the impact of institutional harm and moments of resistance offers glimpses into each individual's experience with restorative justice. At times, I attempt to trace the impact of harms experienced in youth with decisions we made as adults. The stories did not arise chronologically, however, as they were often associated with themes in our discussions or prompted by initial questions to start our sessions. These stories were shared to create connections between us or to offer guidance in managing difficult and stressful situations. As adults and professionals, we see similar patterns operating in schools with familiar consequences on immigrant youth. At their core, these were moments in schools when adults, authorized by the institution, reinforced oppressive assimilationist cultural values by enforcing technologies to discipline and control individuals. As we sat to discuss the cultural shift that restorative justice encouraged in our communities, we listened to one another and confirmed and reaffirmed the harm we carried. This critical space helped us to begin to shift the blame, guilt, and responsibility back onto institutional practices and policies that devalued us as people. We began to note the systemic patterns of harm operating within policies and practices embedded in school structures.

There is also a form of healing that comes from sharing these stories and reclaiming the power they have over our lives. For the participants, at different times, these stories were the source of shame and guilt as we internalized our pain and blamed ourselves for these events. This was especially true for me as I had failed to critically reflect on these incidents.

I live and work in a community that does not value my contributions, does not consistently see my worth, and often silences my voice. Internalized oppression made me believe that I was undeserving of connection, belonging, and respect. Sharing these stories during our principal group meetings, however, offered a valuable alternative to dispel these claims and recognize the repressive control wielded by powerful members of the institution. Throughout the year, we validated one another's feelings and encouraged alternative perspectives that illuminated the role of cultural and behavioral assimilation that was supported and maintained by institutional policies and practices.

Healing That Leads to Action

As a group, we began our first meeting by sharing our moments of critical consciousness, the personal and professional stories where we noted interpersonal and institutional harm. The opportunity to collectively reflect on our unique experiences allowed us to begin to articulate the pervasive dynamics operating across schools within the current educational system. Through this iterative process, we discovered recurring repressive patterns, regardless of the setting. We also celebrated each other's stories of struggle and defiance when we pushed back against policies and practices that harmed vulnerable members of our communities, especially marginalized immigrant youth. My stories, shared in a caring and supportive community, allowed me to turn away from fear and humiliation, which I was internalizing, and begin to acknowledge the intentional design and deliberate decisions that maintained harmful environments for all children.

As school leaders establishing communities rooted in restorative justice, it was evident that we each needed a space to name the harms we experienced personally and professionally. Our first step was to understand the origin of the harm and to interrogate the impact it had on our development. There was a substantial benefit to approaching this task in community with others

who shared common values and beliefs and would challenge and deepen our understanding through honest and critical conversations. Through this collective reflective process, I began to interrogate the harms I experienced, noting similarities and differences with those in the group. These moments of self-revelation and solidarity were a catalyst for our collective liberation. We experienced healing and restoration through one another's validation and affirmation. I did not anticipate the power my past had over me or the freedom that I would experience once I was able to attribute the harm to its rightful source. Rather than continue to take the blame and responsibility for the harm, I began to identify systemic and institutional factors that caused the crisis. This process created the opportunity for us to begin to take focused and deliberate actions to address the harms we identified that continued to operate and impact vulnerable members of our communities.

The harm that we experienced as children mirrored the harm that students experience in schools today. As leaders, we recognized the multiple adverse experiences students endure during their schooling years. Academic, social, cultural, and environmental pressures to conform and abide by institutional norms impact students' self-efficacy and social-emotional well-being, especially students from marginalized groups. Knowledge of and experience with restorative justice allowed us to evaluate practices and structures that did not value children or create environments for flourishing while also acting in ways to support students holistically and protect them from the adverse effects of schooling.

As we began to interrogate how past personal experiences influenced our current decisions, we came to realize that the three of us had adverse interactions with school institutions as children and young adults. We experienced harm and required processes to restore our sense of self-worth. Our experiences shaped our understanding of the institution and informed our

personal and professional values and beliefs, especially as these related to working with marginalized and vulnerable youth, such as immigrants. Though perhaps unaware at the time, our experiences shaped our understanding of the institution and also informed our efforts to imagine it as it could be as we infused hope and a commitment to justice into our role as educators. In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks spoke to the power of interrogating past harms to better understand their role and effects on us.

It is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorizing. It is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location. I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience, to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. (p. 74)

By creating a space to share our harm openly and reflecting on the role of restorative justice to help us resolve the pain, we came to appreciate these incidents as sources of reflective action towards institutional change. As Kathryn Herr (personal communication, March 17, 2022) reminded me in a conversation, “healing is necessary so people can move towards action.”

As practitioners, we understood that restorative justice offers community processes to heal interpersonal conflict with a focus on relationships and accountability, as opposed to rules and retributive punishment. In these intimate contexts, facilitators work towards the restoration of relationships by partnering with those impacted by conflict to name the harm, accept responsibility, and commit to change. When confronting institutional harm and violence, the process becomes more complicated as individuals’ taken-for-granted social assumptions and beliefs emphasize individual failings and shortcomings while also defending and protecting hegemonic ideologies. In this context, restorative justice became a technology of resistance for

us as we participated in processes that challenged traditional deficit notions applied to individuals and critiqued institutional practices that maintained systems of social control. In a journal entry on March 13, 2022, I contemplated the difficulty of healing from institutional processes and practices. “Am I waiting for an apology or acknowledgment that my schooling experience caused me? Who will offer me the apology so I can forgive and experience restoration? Who will apologize so my experiences and their effects are validated?” Until this moment, I had accepted the blame and responsibility, crediting my shortcomings and failures for my pain. Our group’s reflective work offered the necessary corrective that I needed. Though I still struggle to accept that I am not fully responsible for the pain that I have experienced, I am working towards that freedom. Just prior to this entry, I had reflected on the promise embedded in restorative justice.

Restorative justice is about healing. I’ve often and usually thought that meant healing for others, those I am helping. Today, I realized that I needed to be healed as well in order to live in harmony with others and the world. I have been harmed by institutional and cultural ideologies, practices, and policies. I need to be healed so I can engage the world in its totality with integrity. I need to be healed in order to live out my purpose. How do I experience healing? Who can offer me this necessary medicine? (March 12, 2022)

The progressive shift in placing responsibility for harm on institutional forces was necessary for my healing. These moments of critical awareness shaped my growing understanding that institutional culture reinforced deficit views and blamed victims for their suffering. In a conversation with my critical friend group, we acknowledged that “the challenge is to ensure that the harm we experienced did not lead to anger, unproductive spaces, or more harm” (personal

communication, June 13, 2022). It was essential for us to identify and describe processes that would lead to the healing of harm, and through this, action to transform institutional culture on behalf of ourselves and others.

The following portraits are my attempt to organize and structure each participant's story to reveal the connections between anecdotes and describe their development. They include my observations and reflections as I made sense of their contributions and used them to help me critically reflect on my own experiences. I aim to describe the movement from harm to healing and action and to highlight similarities in our narratives. These patterns served as a source of connection and an element to unite us through our unique experiences. After writing each participant's portrait, I shared the portraits with them for accuracy and confirmation. I wanted to be sure that they saw themselves authentically reflected in my analysis and reflections.

Frank Williams

Frank knows firsthand the damage that exclusion causes children's sense of worth and esteem. After attending a private Christian school during middle school, he was not invited back to high school. He joked, "I got kicked out of Christian school in middle school. It was a conservative Baptist school and it was easy to get kicked out by just being cool and awesome." Through humor, we could detect the pain and humiliation. After years of self-reflection, he began to see the events for what they were—the use of institutional practices to discipline disruptive youth. According to Frank, it was because he had too many behavioral referrals and just did not fit in. He challenged all forms of institutional control, like the dress code and Christian "moral" values. During these middle school years, he experienced the tension between institutional control and his need to experience independence and freedom. He said, "I was quite disrespectful. I wasn't invested. It was a demerit system. I got so many I got kicked out. I

repeated eighth grade.” Though he was glad to leave the overly restrictive and punitive school, the pain and confusion were also real. As I listened to his story, I was uneasy by the attempts by school leaders to force Frank to conform through punishment and exclusion. “They wanted me to behave and act appropriately, but I didn’t know or agree with what that meant. They would give me detentions and call my parents when I stepped out of line,” he recounted. The use of discipline to coerce change and reinforce community values was apparent in Frank’s story and speaks to insidious patterns in schools. From my perspective, the forced assimilation towards community norms merely led to further marginalization as he rejected and contested dogmatic beliefs and regressive practices that made no sense to his adolescent mind and did not align with his growing awareness of others. The harm he experienced was never addressed, and a change in setting only made him more critical of individuals and institutional practices that did not meet his social and emotional needs.

It may have been tolerable if it only meant following the school’s strict dress code, but students were also expected to embrace behavioral expectations, community values, and social norms while simultaneously withholding any critical stance towards the leadership and the institution. When Frank failed to meet their expectations—and according to him, it was only a matter of time before they got tired of his stubbornness—his family was advised to find a new community. “They didn’t want me around anymore. I was too disruptive and inappropriate. The adults hated me,” he recalled. He reflected on those years with frustration and disbelief. How could adults treat students like that, especially as they professed to value critical thinking and independence? It was clear that these behaviors were supported as long as they aligned with the values of the community and reinforced the ideologies of those in power. These lessons impacted Frank’s development personally and professionally as he continued to confront adults who

maintained strict adherence to institutional values and norms without critically reflecting on their purpose and function.

Frank left his insular conservative community and expanded his worldview in a broader ecumenical Christian setting. He spent his college years in a small liberal arts college, interrogating his Christian faith and developing greater critical awareness of the tools institutions leverage to maintain and expand their authority and influence. Though it was a religious institution, he found a group of like-minded individuals who were likewise interrogating experiences with abusive authoritarian practices. They did not embrace traditional values and actively worked to unlearn years of indoctrination. According to Frank, these were years of exploration, discovery, and growing self-awareness, which prepared him for life after school. Meeting professors and students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives allowed him to gain greater insight into different ways of being in the world. Spending a semester living in rural Guatemala alongside *Campesinos* and indigenous communities, hearing their stories, and learning from their experiences exposed the dissonance he felt as he questioned his Western worldview in light of these new realizations. He no longer idealized his perspective and values but recognized broad interpretations and cultural practices that challenged his taken-for-granted beliefs about work, religion, and education. He rejected and battled against rigid dogmas that he was forced to accept and internalize and that created false hierarchies of deservedness, belonging, and worth. Individuals in these diverse settings embraced his questions and valued his curiosity, creating a safe space for critique and reflection. These experiences allowed him to regain trust in others and heal from his adverse childhood experience. But even more, it provided a new foundation to understand his responsibility when working with diverse communities.

A few years after college, Frank moved to Uganda with a not-for-profit organization, working to support local communities to heal from the violence after their Civil War. During this time, Frank observed the impact of British colonialism on the educational system in the country. He lived alongside the Uganda community, working to support them as they re-established practices aligned with their cultural values and beliefs. Over time, colonialism had erased community resources and communal ways of being, replacing them with foreign worldviews and values. The loss of identity and sovereignty had dismantled native and indigenous practices, substituting them with Western priorities and assimilating native Ugandans into Western culture. Values associated with racism, patriarchy, and materialism, heirs to colonialism, dominated cultural practices. Ugandans had embraced and internalized these values, disciplining those who strayed or deviated from social norms through physical punishment or exclusion. Once formal colonialism had ended, the Ugandans maintained these values by embedding them into many of their social institutions. As a foreign worker, Frank sought to eradicate behaviors rooted in colonialism that had become engrained formally and informally into institutional practices and policies. As Frank reflected on the dissonance between traditional Ugandan values and the impact of colonialism, he remarked,

There are these beautiful Ugandan kinds of indigenous restorative practices that are used in villages and used in communities. But school was like straight-up British imperialism, you know, taken over by the African state in the sixties, and just continuing to beat kids like that.

This position as an outsider, serving alongside Ugandan leaders, allowed him to analyze the damaging impact of colonialism on indigenous and marginalized communities. For the three years he was in Uganda, he partnered with local leaders to address violence using traditional

processes. He left frustrated, however, that he could not do more to address the harm students experienced in schools.

After transitioning to Denver, Frank became aware of similar punitive disciplinary practices employed by those in authority to manage and control immigrant students and their families in public schools. As a Restorative Coordinator and school administrator, Frank began to identify disciplining procedures and practices imposed on immigrant students. In addition, hierarchical partnerships between school officials, families, and community members maintained most of his Mexican students on the margins in schools. Frank saw how many school leaders used their institutional position and power to discipline youth for their inability or refusal to successfully assimilate. For example, disproportionate suspension rates and subtle forms of microaggressions made it clear that certain students were expected to assimilate into the community to experience a sense of belonging.

When I was a consultant, I would go into schools throughout Denver and the area and they would try to impress me with all their equity work. I would ask them to see their discipline data and then point out the differences between White and Brown and Black kids, even when they had decreased overall suspension rates. They were not really committed to address the root causes.

His growing awareness, based on patterns observed in multiple settings, helped him understand the strategies used to reinforce consensus and maintain order in school settings. When working in diverse communities, Frank noted the use of school discipline as a tool for conformity.

Belonging, however, was maintained along power dynamics and those with authority within the institution were selective in their invitation. The blame and responsibility for these failed outcomes focused on individual and community deficits, not institutional practices and

policies. Contrary to his experience in Uganda, however, many in the immigrant community in Denver overtly rejected schooling in Denver and rebelled against the institution. The impact of these decisions has been devastating as families suffer the loss of access to resources and opportunities available to others.

As a school leader in Denver and Mountain Top, Frank identified inconsistencies between his restorative justice worldview and the expectations imposed on him as a school leader in an educational institution. During our first meeting, he reflected, “How do we become a restorative organization; all of our systems, especially our HR system? They are not based on relationships; they are based on rules.” Rules, he would argue, do not consistently meet the needs of all individuals and communities, especially those who experience marginalization within the system, when they are often rendered through non-relational application. Institutional practices and rules imposed on communities prioritize assimilation and have the effect of reinforcing mistrust and maintaining a submissive position towards those in authority. Frank was offering an invitation to reimagine institutional practices to align them with processes and outcomes that value all members of the community. Frank was also reacting against his schooling experience and offering a healthier alternative that prioritized relationships.

As a parent and educator, he continues to see how the American education system is deeply biased against those who deviate from pre-established social norms. Aside from arbitrary rules that work to control behaviors, such as dress codes, students in his community consistently reacted negatively to disciplinary practices, the emphasis on high-stakes testing, and outdated attendance procedures. These practices and policies failed to inspire students to excel and invest in their education, opting to reject the institution and disconnect from any educator who

supported these values. His experience in urban charter schools, public schools, and now a mountain town has revealed fundamental similarities in all settings.

Right now, I am just super struggling as a parent with it. My boys just hate it. Eight hours a day of torture. So, I think it's an interesting question with this restorative justice stuff. You are trying to heal, build community, but you are often trying to restore kids back to an institution that they are fundamentally just super disinvested in. To me, this is always an interesting phenomenon with restorative justice. I felt like I was continually trying to restore kids back to an institution that they really didn't fit into. So yeah, you fix relationships. You fix their attendance. You fix whatever thing it is they are doing with restorative justice. But the fundamental enterprise sometimes itself is flawed. That's always been hard for me. I realized that there were some really deep problems and structural changes. It was just so hard to see so many young people so unsuccessful in high school.

Stemming from his own school experience and carrying over to his professional roles, Frank was highly aware of the need for structural changes to the institution. As a school leader, he saw how basic models of restorative justice were used to attend to interpersonal conflict in schools but failed to interrogate overarching concerns, or "flaws," he experienced that were built into the structures of schools. As I reflect on Frank's story, it seems that he understood that using restorative justice to address conflict or breaking rules was valuable, but rarely did these practices resolve underlying issues that created unhealthy learning environments for students. He would argue that without a deeper analysis and concerted effort to dismantle systems that work against the mutual benefit of all participants, restorative justice was limited to addressing perfunctory issues in schools, such as attendance, grades, and student behaviors/discipline. The

challenge, he would argue, was identifying the obstacles to transformative change embedded within the institution and developing a coalition of stakeholders committed to shifting values and practices.

Nelly Tiger

After many years away from her native western Colorado, Nelly returned home to take over as principal in a local elementary school. She left Colorado after high school to go to the East Coast for college and to escape her small community. She explained, “I went to college in Massachusetts. I could not wait to get out of the Grand Valley. It is an interesting place and super conservative. I was pretty much like, ‘This place sucks and I’m never coming back.’” It was a sentiment the rest of the group could relate to as her progressive values and worldview stood in stark contrast with her neighbors’ and friends’ perspectives. The dissonance and inability to manage social and political tensions were often unbearable. At the time, Nelly did not have the interest, tools, or skillset to navigate a politically complex environment, where diverse perspectives were rejected and ridiculed. She could only manage the constant stream of hyperconservative rhetoric about immigration, the economy, politics, and social values for so long. In her mind, an escape to the East Coast among other like-minded individuals seemed like the safe and affirming space she was seeking.

After college, Nelly returned to Colorado, taking jobs in the Front Range as an intervention specialist and administrator in a charter school. Living and working among like-minded individuals seemed safe and comforting and reinforced her progressive worldview. However, challenging and unexpected life experiences eventually led her to quit her job in search of authentic belonging. She recalled,

It was one of these like, “Come to Jesus” moments. We wanted to reimagine how life could be. We were working all the time and the Front Range just felt really busy and expensive and we didn’t have any family. So we quit our jobs and sold our house and went on a sabbatical for a while and had no idea what the plan was.

As a mother and educator, Nelly articulated the tension many leaders feel as they try to find balance and purpose across multiple settings. Though she was unable to articulate a cohesive plan, the need for belonging was fundamental. She wanted to be known and was looking for authentic connection. It became evident that she missed important elements of the culture in western Colorado, and returning home could satisfy this longing. An opportunity in Hollow Rivers brought her closer to her family. Serendipitously, the school had begun to investigate the use of restorative justice to address some concerning trends in the community. Though she was not familiar with this framework, many of the fundamental elements resonated with her. She valued the emphasis on belonging, inclusion, and acceptance and was invested in learning more.

The previous principal had begun to train the staff on restorative justice practices, and Nelly maintained and led this initiative after she took over. Her predecessor was investigating the use of restorative justice practices after the community experienced “a big demographic shift at our school and [saw] a huge decline in academic scores and a huge increase in exclusionary discipline practices.” Many traditional approaches to learning and punitive disciplinary processes were ineffective, and he acknowledged that they were not positively impacting the students or the culture of the school. As a community that serves a large percentage of immigrant youth, the statistics detailing harsh educational and economic outcomes if they were to maintain the previous plan were unfathomable and irresponsible (Skiba et al., 2011; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2009).

Within her community, Nelly understood the need to “figure out how to do this differently,” as she put it, to create opportunities to improve outcomes among her students. Heavy-handed and archaic disciplining procedures were having a disproportionately negative impact on her school, witnessed in the breakdown of partnerships with the community, disengagement in learning among many students, and teachers’ frustration. The previous school leader began to seek out alternative models with the goal of increasing connections and improving outcomes. As Nelly embraced the process, she discovered that restorative justice was “a way to re-envision things that felt really aligned to my beliefs and provided this structure and this framework to do the work that felt like intuitively the right work to be doing to me.” As a progressive educator, reinforcing democratic values and prioritizing relationships and authentic connections were central to her educational philosophy. She envisioned school-based practices that aligned with these values to experience harmony in her school setting.

As a member of our principal group, Nelly consistency challenged us to move beyond theory into action. “What does it look like?” she would ask. Nelly approached restorative justice pragmatically, looking to improve outcomes among all her students, address teacher frustration and dissatisfaction, and experience greater harmony in her professional setting. In the process, Nelly described how she began to

see really exciting changes, like qualitative changes for sure. When we talk to kids and when we do classroom observations and listen to the language that people now use and how we problem solve. And we are seeing this huge reduction in suspension, discipline referrals, and all that good hard qualitative data. It’s nice to be able to go to my director and say, “Look, see, it’s working.”

The impact had extended throughout her school and began to influence multiple elements in the building. After three years of implementation, Nelly can point to a substantial shift in her diverse community as they grapple with challenges. Though she was new to restorative justice and the member of our group with the least amount of time researching and implementing processes, she was a strong advocate for laying a foundation for establishing a restorative community in her school and constantly sought out tools and resources to continue the work.

Having returned to her native western Colorado, she now accepts living among ideologically conservative neighbors and has learned to negotiate complex relationships with her colleagues. Though she does not always agree with their views and sometimes challenges their opinions, she is settled and confident in certain social settings with her peers and colleagues. There has been a change in the culture of the school as many teachers embrace restorative justice practices, some of which seem “pretty intuitive,” according to Nelly, integrating their heads with their hearts. Community circles, for example, are closely aligned with previous practices, and the focus on relationships aligns with their beliefs. She can begin to point to subtle shifts in teachers’ thinking, now that they have invested a number of years into implementing restorative justice. Though, she is wary of a few holdouts. Even in her school, among teachers who she has been working with intimately, she acknowledges, “We are not working on the same page here.” They still articulate distinct differences in regard to the strategies to achieve their common goals as a community. Nelly understood that the long and tedious work of restorative justice was often criticized because improved outcomes were not always immediate or obvious. Restorative justice processes take time, and changes in behaviors are sometimes difficult to note. Oftentimes, her staff preferred instant consequences and punishments through detentions and suspensions, even when Nelly recognized that these strategies failed to address underlying issues or improve

recidivism among some of the most challenging students. When they were dealing with more complex issues, they often fell back on punitive and retributive approaches to satisfy their notions of justice. “That’s where I’m really struggling as a leader. To help people see that this is the way that we have to be with all situations, not just when it’s pretty easy,” Nelly said. For Nelly, her staff’s commitment to restorative justice can seem perfunctory, as if they are just going through the motions, making it difficult to maintain her motivation and resolve. It is this fear that worries her the most. At times, maintaining the restorative justice initiative, when they are facing challenging situations or deepening the process, feels fragile and teetering towards failure.

To make matters worse, the impact on individuals with institutional authority adds a new dimension to her role as a principal. A recent board of education election worries her as the new hyperconservative members may abandon their support of her work. She fears the unwarranted criticisms and comparisons between critical race theory and restorative justice may derail her school’s initiatives. It is this misunderstanding and reactive nature of the current political discourse that feels untenable. If they choose, they can force her to stop this work, even when there is no financial support from the district. As a leader, she is constantly aware of potential threats to the gains her community has made and often feels powerless to fight back. Like the rest of the group, she is often frustrated by the tension between our locus of control and the impact of those with institutional authority.

There is an important juxtaposition between Nelly’s desire to live in western Colorado, where many of the cultural practices and norms are a source of comfort, and the local hyperconservative political climate that is an affront to her values and beliefs. She does not seem

to be fully aware of this contradiction or the strategies she uses to manage the inconsistency, but she is committed to living and working with integrity in Hollow Rivers.

Though she can point to their progress as a community, Nelly maintains a critical stance towards schooling in general, noting, “I don’t think we have agreement on what’s best for kids. There’s no consensus.” She is not only referring to the outcomes but also the processes embedded in our schools to support student achievement. For example, Nelly noted a recently developed incentive program: “They are having a dance tonight for the kids who met their growth goal for their winter benchmark. There is so much that is problematic in that equation. I don’t even know where to start.” In Nelly’s mind, this incentive program, designed and implemented by others, only reinforces experiences of exclusion by rewarding “deserving” identities and punishing, through exclusionary practices, those that do not meet expectations.

Nelly is right to be concerned. These practices, though seemingly meritorious and based on a school leader’s common sense, are harmful because they exclusively support students who yield to the institution and obey its rules and responsibilities. This can have devastating consequences for those that do not meet the standard. Sadly, in many places, these children include immigrant and Black youth. According to Nelly, many signs point to a redoubled determination towards neoliberal goals, based on individualism and standardization. Current trends that focus on greater oversight of educators, increased parental control, and limited autonomy among educational leaders can result in further marginalization of immigrant communities, ignoring their needs and perspectives within school.

Within this environment, Nelly continues to persevere, working to move her staff on the continuum beyond processes that feel intuitive and natural. Through ongoing informal conversations, deliberate confrontations, and planned professional development, Nelly has

created and found opportunities to confront and address her staff's biases. This has required taking intentional risks when challenging perspectives and finding allies within her school community, such as her school counselor and other teachers. Together, they create tools and resources to support this ongoing work. Most recently, she has developed a reintroduction process, with reflective questions for staff, parents, and students, after students are removed from school. By developing processes and implementing them with success, she has been able to challenge staff members' entrenched beliefs and values, showing them a different way of being in community.

Casey Richards

About fifteen minutes from the iconic Brooklyn Bridge, Red Hook International High School sits on the third floor of a short brick building overlooking Governor's Island. Working with children from over 30 countries, many of whom traveled to the United States without their parents, Casey recognizes the urgent need to provide her students with the academic and social-emotional environment to help them transition to life in the United States. These are children who have been in the United States for less than four years, many of whom are fleeing violence, repression, and poverty in their home countries. Most are still healing from childhood trauma.

Casey started as a teacher in the school, then transitioned to the assistant principal, and now serves as principal. Over the year together, she reflected on her over fifteen years in the community and shared stories that focus on the obstacles and opportunities inherent in the school's unique programs. Her goal is to create an inclusive community, where students experience safety and belonging while also preparing them for life after school. She constantly grapples with the tension of keeping students engaged in school (where opting to work and

provide for family in the United States and abroad is a real and urgent need) and managing student misbehaviors as they adapt to new cultural norms in the United States.

In her first year as a principal, Casey was confronted with a situation where traditional punitive practices failed to achieve the outcomes she wanted for a student in her community. He was a new ninth-grade student at the school and a recent immigrant to the United States from Haiti. In a community that encourages belonging, he was constantly excluded due to his inappropriate behaviors. “He had a lot of behavioral things showing up in terms of, like, stealing, lying, and just getting involved in all sorts of things,” Casey explained. She leveraged her strategies to address these concerns but consistently came up short.

I felt like a total failure because there was this gap between what this young man did and what I could provide. I really struggled with suspensions and how that was all that was left in terms of how to work with him and not wanting to suspend him, but he just kept on getting to the point where the issues are so egregious, and it’s causing a lot of harm to the community. And I just didn’t feel like I had anywhere to go and it felt like a really low point.

What she perceived as a failure forced her to search for new practices to support her students.

The cost of using and maintaining punitive strategies was too great for her. In her search for alternatives, she stumbled on a restorative justice training offered throughout the city and signed up for the intensive week-long program. She was immersed in the practices along with other educators new to this model. After spending a week learning about restorative justice and practicing restorative processes, Casey returned to work in the fall with renewed optimism.

“After that experience, I was full-on. I wanted to learn more and understand more. I had people in our community that were on board with circles. But we didn’t deeply understand the

philosophy. It was more practical at that point.” Casey’s evolution mirrors many initial practitioners’ experiences with restorative justice. Like many, she was looking for new strategies to address student conflict and negative behaviors. She eventually came to understand that conflict and harm were ubiquitous, infiltrating all dimensions of schooling and causing harm in multiple ways. Whereas some practitioners may limit restorative justice to address student behavioral concerns (MClusky, 2013; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), Casey identified sources of harm that were embedded within the structures, practices, and policies of the school.

After that initial experience, Casey hired a restorative justice coordinator “to help me understand more about restorative justice” and support the school’s implementation of restorative justice practices. They worked collaboratively, interrogating school practices and policies and aligning them with restorative justice values and principles. It has been years since she began this journey, and, having cultivated this mindset, she now has “a new set of lenses on. Like, how to understand everything in our school. I can’t talk about grades, I can’t talk about curriculum, I can’t talk about pedagogy. I can’t talk about anything unless I’m talking about restorative justice first.” The training offered her an opportunity to move beyond restorative justice as a tool to address interpersonal conflict towards a more holistic understanding of systemic harm and its sources. Moving beyond the traditional sphere of student discipline, Casey experienced a total shift in her understanding of education and the impact of restorative justice on school practices. While she initially pursued restorative justice as an alternative to suspensions, she was offered the opportunity to explore other forms of harm students experience within school buildings. Though devastating to recognize the various points of potential harm for students, Casey was empowered to partner with her staff to address these concerning trends.

She has developed the skill set to evaluate typical school procedures and policies and articulate how current practices marginalize groups of students and devalue their cultural resources. Though schools often promote collaboration and inclusion, she recognized the devastating effects of competition and individualism operating within schools. She often has to undo the assault students experience in their previous schools, where their cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities are devalued by school leaders who reinforce assimilation. According to Casey, “Our school was founded as an alternative to coercive, assimilationist schooling for English-language learners. We have to counter the harm that students may have experienced in previous schooling by building a trusting, linguistically and culturally affirming environment.” Students who enter Red Hook International High School are often surprised by the climate of the school, where belonging and acceptance are strongly promoted by students and staff. For Casey, the students need to be valued and validated in all elements of the school. Curriculum, hallway signs and posters, and mentoring partnerships with teachers all need to reinforce a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Most recently, Casey has continued to delegitimize standardized testing for her students, especially as a graduation requirement and key to access further education. In a community that has been implementing performance-based assessments for over 30 years, the Regent’s Exam is a reminder of the sad alternative. The Regent’s Exam is New York’s standardized assessment and a mandatory graduation requirement for students who wish to receive their diploma. Through the years, this assessment has received its fair share of criticism (Menken, 2010), especially when one considers the disproportionate impact on students with learning disabilities and ELs. This fact is not lost on Casey, who has seen students struggle to meet this graduation requirement and suffer the consequences.

We are very much against standardized testing. We have a waiver of variance. We fight every effort to make the kids take them. We thought we fought off the last one and then they went around us and now we have to give it. I was furious and angry and lot of feelings. Like I was boiling over with such anger because it was completely not aligned with our values and I know how horrible these tests are.

The use of standardized assessments as a punitive tool has been documented by many scholars (McNeil, 2002; Menken, 2008). Immigrant students, without the necessary language competencies or background knowledge, experience various forms of harm when expected to show mastery on these assessments. According to Casey, this harm can and must be avoided.

In response to standardized testing, she has partnered with administrators throughout New York and advocated for alternative assessment practices to show student mastery in core content areas. This is a group of school leaders who are opposed to the use of standardized assessments for graduation requirements. Casey noted, “We are going to continue to fight this battle where I know they are not going to buckle in the New York City Department of Ed. We sort of decided, in that group of schools, that we are going to go under the radar. We are going to give those tests, but like, not give those tests, you know. It’s going to be very diminished.”

Though she acknowledges her limited influence to prevent students from taking the exam, she leverages her role to minimize the negative impact on her students. Her stance is aligned with her restorative justice values as she seeks to protect her students from the harm they experience from taking and being measured by an inappropriate assessment.

What she articulated in this example was the critical role of principals when it comes to interpreting and implementing directives and initiatives from local or state authorities. As she described it, “the art of being a principal” is the ability to navigate harmful policies and practices

and ensure that children and communities are minimally impacted by these decisions. Casey models this role perfectly, partnering with school leaders throughout the area to strategize and act on behalf of her students. Having developed the critical capacity to evaluate policies and practices, she is better equipped to proactively minimize the harm students and communities experience. This capacity is born from her years of experience as an educator, and now, her role as a mother.

As an educator, she has gained valuable insights into schooling practices and acknowledges the pervasive and recurring trends occurring within schools. As a parent, she knows that she wants a different experience for her children.

I very much agree with everything Frank said that schools can be an apparatus of violence and repression and destruction for children. They are sort of designed to put kids into a box. I mean, as a parent, I struggle so much with young children because I see when they come home with their experiences, and I'm like, "Oh, my god, like that is not what school could or should be like." And yet, there's so much conformity, so much repression, and just like, destruction of imagination. I feel like I'm constantly pushing back against the structures for the sake of the kids, so we don't replicate the harm that's happened to us.

Casey's insider understanding and experience with the schooling process allow her to interpret the purpose for diverse school-related practices. She knows that she has cultivated different practices at Red Hook International High, which merely reinforces her belief that schools can operate differently. She sees the damaging impact of schooling on her children as their sense of belonging, self-worth, and self-efficacy are diminished. In her professional setting, Casey has

used restorative justice as a lever for broader school change and reform, which she believes can positively impact education and reduce the harm students experience in schools.

Casey also reflects on her own experience as a child to inform her work as a school leader. In her previous comment, Casey points back to a high school experience where a confrontation with a coach made her question her sense of belonging and safety in school. She recounted an episode where her cross-country coach wrote and mailed a defamatory letter to her parents and school leadership. Though she could not understand how she had offended him, she remembered the feeling of confusion and vulnerability throughout the experience.

My cross-country coach hated me so much. He wrote a five-page letter about me and sent it to the principal, vice-principal, and my parents about why I should not be in the National Honor Society. That was pretty pivotal in my experience as a high schooler.

Wow, adults can really hate kids and this is what it looks like, they want to destroy them.

And these are people that are supposed to care for you. So that was like a real reckoning in my high school.

It is not lost on her that she experienced harm through an individual who was given a position of authority, who then used his role to harm her and ruin her reputation. It is fair to wonder, how often do students experience similar situations where the abuse of power and authority is legitimized by the institution?

Jose Celis

While in Chicago at a conference in 2022, I co-led a presentation discussing the urgent need to provide immigrant youth, especially ELs, with the necessary support and resources to successfully transition to the United States. The start of the presentation focused on traditional approaches to address the needs of ELs in many schools across the country. My co-presenter was

discussing the strategies schools employ when they have not invested resources or gained expertise to support ELs. He noted that research showed that many of these schools resort to regressive strategies that focused on “remediation, retention, or removal” to deal with the “problem” of ELs (Kelsey et al., 2015; Lowenhaupt & Reeves, 2015; Valenzuela, 1999). As I sat to wait for my turn to present, for the first time in my life, I was aware that these were the strategies used to address my needs when I first moved to the United States.

After the conference, I immediately called my older sister and asked about my experience coming to the United States as an immigrant. “Jose, you didn’t speak any English. You were barely in school when we came,” (personal communication, March 5, 2022) she told me while I walked around the airport, waiting for my flight home. This information came as a revelation as I had always assumed I was an English speaker when we moved to the United States. My thoughts then turned to understanding the confusion and shame I still carried after being retained and placed in remedial classes in elementary school. When asked how our mom could let this happen, she reminded me that she was in culture shock, too. She was also in a foreign country. She did not speak the language, and she did not have social or emotional support from family or friends. She could not take care of herself, so how was she supposed to care for us? It suddenly struck me that I was a six-year-old immigrant child with limited proficiency in English, attempting to manage an extremely foreign and complicated situation with inconsistent support and guidance from the trusted adults in my small world.

As I separately shared this revelation with my critical friends and the principals in the study, they responded with curiosity and interest for me but also for many of the immigrant students under their care. They validated my story, acknowledging the negative impact of institutional practices and the role school leaders played in reinforcing negative views of myself.

I valued the ability to invest in this task in a supportive environment, with colleagues who helped interrogate and situate my experience within repressive institutional culture. Forty-five years later, with the support and encouragement from these individuals, I was able to revisit these memories, recognizing the institutional harm that resulted in years of suffering. This process was the first step towards healing.

I have now reflected on my childhood experience in greater depth, looking to understand how these events informed beliefs I held about myself and the world around me. I arrived in the United States when I was six years old, after living in Uruguay, El Salvador, and Mexico. I remember a happy childhood in Latin America, filled with family and friends. I was surrounded by a supportive family and parents who were well-connected in our community. My family moved into a small suburban town in northern New Jersey when new opportunities presented themselves to my dad. We moved to be closer to his parents and a secure job in New York City. He had immigrated to the United States when he was only thirteen years old from El Salvador, and, I imagine, he assumed our move would be similar. We moved in late summer, and I started first grade in September.

As a school community, the educators had limited experience with ELs at the time and no formal programming or strategies to support ELs. Without the resources to support linguistically diverse students, school leaders decided that retention and placement in remedial classes was the best option for me. Similarly, my sisters were also placed in remedial classes and forced to memorize vocabulary flashcards in the hallway. As I reflect on this experience, it was clear that the school leaders struggled to develop a comprehensive and appropriate plan to support my transition into my new setting. With no formal instruction for ELs and no adequate support in place, I was expected to learn English through immersion and develop the cultural competencies

necessary to survive on my own. Though I do not recall making the deliberate decision, I chose to abandon my Latin American heritage and language, adopting English and American culture in its place. I could quickly see that speaking Spanish was not going to help me at all. I could not have foreseen the consequences and harm of this choice and began to struggle to effectively communicate with my mom and other relatives, creating fissures in essential relationships and developing a growing negative self-perception. I resented my identity as an immigrant and Latino.

As I look back as a school leader, I can now recognize the inadequacy of school-based plans that should have supported me socially, stemming from a limited understanding of the social-emotional needs of immigrant children and a pervasive attitude of assimilation by immersion. In my first year in school, I was placed in two different classrooms, where I struggled to make connections with my classmates and teachers. I was in kindergarten in the morning and first grade in the afternoon. The following year, I was in first grade all day. The staff's limited cultural competence foreshadowed my withdrawal from many social settings. I struggled to make and sustain friendships. I was quiet and withdrawn during class activities. I refrained from participating in school programs, and I still remember the awkward moment when I refused to go onto the stage to participate in the State Capital Bee, for which I had been preparing for months. The fear of humiliation paralyzed me as the school principal repeatedly called my name. In a journal entry, I wrote, "Was I afraid of failure and reinforcing their views of me? Was I afraid of reinforcing these views of myself? I can see how this would be true. I did not want to reinforce these negative views. I already believed them and I did not want to make things worse." Though I blamed myself for these behaviors over the years, I can now begin to

recognize the systemic failure, where processes were not in place or resources leveraged to encourage social connections or a positive self-identity.

Growing up in the United States in the 1980s, I was aware of the cultural stereotypes projected onto Latin American immigrants through children's cartoons and on the news. I was regularly bombarded by these images on television and at school. Through humor or fear, descriptions included illicit activities, questionable work ethics, and colonial characterizations that reinforced submission or exploitation (Chavez, 2008). As I look back, it was evident that the school did not have a plan or strategies in place to counter these pervasive negative cultural stereotypes that reinforced deficit views of immigrants and Latinos. I wonder if many of the curricular resources reinforced these views of immigrants as research has shown (Ndura, 2004). As a child, I isolated myself from my peers due to the harmful and negative media representations that were reinforced socially and never corrected during school. My peers constantly joked with me, impersonating cartoon characters, such as Speedy Gonzalez, as I was conflated with comical representations from Mexico. My classmates fabricated imagined futures for me, where I would be a Latin dancer, landscaper, or manual laborer, all drawing from stereotypical depictions of Latin American immigrants. They drew on current events and media representations, such as drug cartels and illegal immigration, questioning my legal status and legitimacy, which further marginalized me. In an era before initiatives that supported diversity, equity, and inclusion, educators remained silent, informally reinforcing these beliefs, and did not offer other possible representations that would counter these stereotypes. With no one to question these practices and to reinforce a different narrative, I internalized these perspectives and assumed their accuracy. Who was I to question my community? In an attempt to gain

acceptance, I reinforced these cultural representations with self-deprecating humor. The dissonance I experienced continued to grow and further isolated me from my community.

I can now recognize the harmful impact schooling had on my socio-emotional development and self-efficacy. My ability to speak Spanish and navigate multiple Latin American cultures were not valued, and I quickly saw it as an obstacle and hindrance to future success. My mother, who was also not fluent in English, could not provide me with the protection I needed or the support and guidance to navigate our new home. My father was not available as work demands kept him away from home. As I reflected on these experiences with the principals in this group, I commented on the impact these decisions had on me as a child. “What does that do to the psyche of a child who is just beginning to transition from Latin America? Safety, security, doesn’t speak English, and doesn’t have the supports in place. Well, my mom didn’t speak English and she is just agreeing with whatever they are saying,” I reflected. I was dependent on the school, its practices, and its structures to offer important opportunities. As I completed my education and transitioned to professional roles within schools, I vowed to address these harms and ensure they did not happen to other children. As a professional, it was harder than I imagined.

I relived my experience as an immigrant student in my first job as an educator, noting that some schools continued to fail to formally support an inclusive environment for immigrant youth. Limited teacher training on diversity and the ability to set expectations among teachers allowed harmful practices to continue. As a teacher in a diverse suburb in northern New Jersey, I encountered colleagues who held deeply offensive and discriminatory views of their students. I recall a formative incident in my first year as a teacher. After school, I was standing with a group of educators, when I heard one refer to a quiet and unassuming immigrant student from Haiti as

“Dumb-as-Dog-Shit Downer.” Rather than confront this colleague, many of the other teachers laughed, encouraging his behavior. These pervasive sentiments were reinforced by multiple teachers about students, many of whom were poor Caribbean immigrants who did not meet their academic or social expectations. Reflecting on these early years, I journaled, “I learned so much when I was teaching in Maplewood. I had no experience working with Haitian immigrants and refugees. I also did not expect to encounter such disdain among my colleagues. Why do they want to work here if they hold those attitudes?” As I continued to reflect on this experience, I began to draw parallels with my experience and questioned my teachers’ motives. “How did my teachers feel about me? It must not have been easy to have a non-English speaker in the classroom. Though I do not remember any negative experiences, were they sending me implicit messages?” It is never easy as a child to doubt your teacher’s attitude or belief about you.

These sentiments extended to central office leadership, who at times, fabricated barriers to making our schools more inclusive and equitable. Whether rejecting opportunities for diversity training for my staff and district personnel, denying opportunities to participate in restorative justice pilot programs, disinterested in district initiatives focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, or disciplining me for maintaining initiatives that support restorative justice, I have had little confidence in their willingness or desire to create authentically inclusive and equitable learning environments. I notice that “there is still a reluctance and a resistance to really embed some of these practices and invest in these values in our community,” as I stated in one of the principal group meetings.

As a principal in New Jersey, I noticed the marginalization of Muslim and Arabic-speaking students due to hostile media representations, stereotyping ethnic and religious practices. Post-9/11 sentiments continued to impact staff and spur conflicts and violence, both

nationally and internationally, heightening distrust and fear among educators and families. I recalled moments when “my staff was reacting in a way that was working against the culture of our community, asking me to police parents, asking me to go through their bags whenever we had performances.” This was in stark contrast to the community culture, emphasizing connectedness, empathy, and partnerships, that we celebrated.

In an attempt to provide my staff with a safe space to learn from experts on Muslim and Arabic culture, I connected with a local mosque and invited one of their community workers to meet with my staff. I was not prepared for the barriers central office administrators would fabricate to prevent this workshop from occurring or the hostility I would experience for planning this event. I was told that it needed to be approved by my board of education before I could organize this event, an invented procedure to stall our progress, or worse, derail the activity completely. It would be months later until it was finally approved, after multiple requests and evidence to justify our needs. Though central office administrators leveraged their positional authority within the organization to block this plan, ultimately, we prevailed. However, it came at the cost of our time, resources, and especially enthusiasm and confidence in the central office leadership team.

Whether for personal reasons, pressure from board members, or fear of backlash from the community, the fact that this learning opportunity was denied to teachers points to a troublesome trend in the United States. There is a history of marginalizing unwanted immigrants, limiting their access to educational spaces, and utilizing hostile and overly punitive practices to discipline them (El-Haj, 2015; Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). Muslims in Twin Ponds were unwanted immigrants to many, and opportunities to humanize them within the institution were met with fear and hostility. The use of institutional policies, even those that are fabricated by

those in authority, to control discourse and marginalize Muslim immigrants is not uncommon in communities across the United States (El-Haj, 2015).

I was again confronted by a similar situation a few years later, where we were denied an opportunity to expand and center equity through inclusion in our school and community. I was encouraged by a member of the central office administrative team to pursue a grant opportunity from the Department of Education to participate in a restorative justice pilot program. Excited about the opportunity to highlight our commitment and expand our vision, a small group of teachers and I worked on the application, which was aimed at providing training and support to elementary and middle school teachers on the use of restorative justice practices among our students. We were delighted when we learned that our application was selected, and we would be partnering with fourteen other districts across the state. I was wary of the good news, however, as current political trends in our community were opposing initiatives that seemed to align with critical race theory and “woke” liberal agendas. My past experience in Twin Ponds taught me that this initiative may be conflated with so-called liberal agendas and rejected on principle. Sadly, I was correct.

A few weeks after receiving the news of our acceptance into the pilot program, I received a call from the superintendent, telling me that “the time was not right to pursue this activity” and that I could not advocate to have them reconsider this decision. I later learned that, at an informational meeting between the Department of Education and university representatives selected to lead the training and central office administration, activities on the school-to-prison pipeline were shared, which ultimately led to our withdrawal. There is substantial research supporting the impact of suspensions and expulsions on students of color, pointing to institutional and individual bias and discrimination (González, 2012; Hass-Wisecup & Saxon,

2018; Hogan & Emler, 1981; Wadhwa, 2015). These conclusions stood in contrast to the hyperconservative rhetoric prevalent across our community, where individuals were solely responsible for their choices and behavior. In a politically contentious environment, the superintendent decided to pander to hyperconservative board members and similarly aligned members of the community and avoid potential criticism. It would be more convenient to withdraw from this opportunity and avoid the possibility of letting the community know that training occurred that focused on institutional and historic patterns of discrimination.

Because of my advocacy work on initiatives to support diversity and my willingness to address oppressive situations in the district, I was disciplined by district leadership. This is a common trend when individuals push against institutional cultural values (Lopez et al., 2006). The loss of support and understanding forced me to withdraw from active participation in our meetings and withhold my opinion in many cases as I reexperienced forms of marginalization within my workplace. It was years since I had experienced this level of exclusion, and sadly, I initially wondered if I was not to blame. False claims and skewed perceptions further eroded my self-confidence, and I constantly internalized these messages. I reflected on those discussions and questioned their rhetoric in a journal entry: “Why do I feel like I am constantly being watched and disciplined when all I am doing is creating opportunities for my staff and students? Why am I constantly being rejected and devalued?”

It is not easy to reject these personal deficit narratives when for so many years, I had learned to devalue myself and took the blame and responsibility for the harm I experienced. I have internalized forms of oppression and still struggle to see how institutional practices are and have been leveraged to control and discipline me as both a student and educator. It seems that I can always find a way to dismiss others’ culpability, thus turning the harm in on myself instead.

“If it’s not them, then it must be me” is a common refrain. I fail to acknowledge the sources of harm operating in schools and other institutions, sources responsible for the harm I have experienced and the harm children and communities continue to experience.

Thankfully, I established strong connections with members of the principal group who acknowledged the biased attacks and manipulations. Their support and encouragement have been a source of healing. I require a great deal of creativity and courage to persevere in this environment.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of our year-long study, there seems to be a fundamental need for healing within a critical and supportive space. It can become a generative process, where the pain and sorrow we carry, often hidden due to shame or guilt, can be used as a catalyst for action. Until I was able to review the transcripts of our discussions, I was not aware of the essential need for this collective process, where we were accepted and validated by our peers and guided to acknowledge alternative perspectives and conclusions from those we had accepted about ourselves. The similarities across all our stories speaks to a common theme: the negative role and impact of institutional culture to forcibly assimilate individuals or discipline outliers through rejection or exclusion. We bear the scars, but they no longer define us. Through our collective reflective practice, we began to see how this action allows us to reclaim our stories and use them for generative purposes.

In the different stories and anecdotes, school leaders had access to institutional policies and practices that defended the use of punitive approaches to address concerns. These were sanctioned by the institution and approved by those in authority over us. In fact, many leaders relied on these approved technologies to maintain order and to discipline those who did not

conform to standard behavior or expectations. Authority and power were used to enforce assimilation among individuals and communities to reflect the values of the dominant society through formal and informal school-based practices and policies. However, because of our experience, we felt conflicted by the use of these technologies because we knew they would not produce the educational or social outcomes that we valued, nor were they aligned with our beliefs about education as a space for belonging and inclusion. Rejecting these practices resulted in harsh retributive practices levied against us. By challenging institutional culture and rejecting its values, we became targets, and we had to learn to strategically navigate a hostile environment.

We rejected conformity to the institution, not as iconoclasts, but because we recognized the flaws and limitations the system provided to address the needs around us. We continue to identify and reject practices that are not aligned with our restorative justice worldview, challenging practices such as standardized testing, code of conduct protocols, and parent-school partnerships that are one-sided, coercive, or manipulative. This process has allowed us to continue to challenge different elements in our schools that are not aligned with our restorative justice values. As our understanding of harm expands to include institutional policies and processes, we are no longer able to ignore aspects of schooling that negatively impact immigrant students and their families. As our understanding of restorative justice deepened, so did our critical understanding and analysis of the harm our educational institutions inflicted on us. As our practice using restorative justice increased, so did the hostility and aggression by institutional forces because we rejected their retributive and punitive relational stance.

Chapter 5: Collective Learning and Action

Introduction

This chapter describes important themes aligned with our commitment to restorative justice that were discussed during this year-long study. The previous chapter focused on the aspect of healing, both individually and collectively, from institutional harm. This chapter speaks to the action that leads to transformed spaces and relationships. The chapter focuses on the outward movement towards self-efficacy, mutual support, and the transformation of our school spaces. Through critical incidents, we analyzed key elements in each event and offered guidance and feedback to support change in our unique contexts. Many of these discussions centered on key moments when we were frustrated by superintendent and board of education decisions that went against our goals for inclusion and equity. Others focused on pervasive cultural practices and policies embedded in institutional structures that maintained systems of control. Rather than ignore the dissonance, we committed to reflecting on these moments and identifying those elements operating in schools that were not aligned with our beliefs and values. Restorative justice provided a harmonizing alternative to retributive school processes that offered processes for accountability and healing to address harmful policies and practices embedded within the structures of schools.

Restorative justice became a subversive tool to delegitimize these technologies, offer alternate strategies to challenge a highly retributive and coercive environment, and create a system to support the authentic inclusion and belonging of all participants. We knew that we were confronting ideologies and assimilationist strategies that disenfranchised many of our students, especially those from immigrant backgrounds. In my journal, I noted the harm caused by assimilationist ideologies:

Assimilation was not the natural process that occurs within a diverse society. I, however, knew it was a process necessary for my survival. I had to abandon my culture and language to gain access and acceptance. In the process, however, I lost myself, my source of identity and well-being. I abandoned my source of security and belonging because these qualities would not serve me in my new context.

To replace assimilation, I was advocating for establishing a community grounded in restorative justice as a healing space filled with hope and promise. In my journal, I continued,

Restorative justice challenges the coercive process of assimilation. It is an invitation to experience authentic belonging, as we create a new community. It is an invitation to experience intimacy with others, those who are different. It is an invitation to belonging, where all are welcome in a new society.

As leaders, we were all working towards this shared goal, though, working in unique spaces with different levels of support and resources. As we came together regularly, it was our willingness to share our stories, offer encouragement, and discuss strategies for change that made our monthly meetings so beneficial. The following section highlights some of the important themes from our year-long partnership. Perhaps as important, our discussions and the conclusions we drew together not only informed our practice but also further developed our critical understanding of restorative justice and its application across multiple school elements.

The following section highlights the main recurring themes in our conversations. I begin with the need to be consistently restorative, even when circumstances and factors outside of our control pressure us to reject processes aligned with restorative justice. The next section focuses on the importance of creating an authentically inclusive community, especially when political partisanship threatens from outside and inside our organizations. The need for strategic action

follows, where we share unique strategies to navigate complex situations with diverse stakeholders. I next discuss the importance of working with teachers, to equip them and model restorative processes authentically. This chapter ends with the boundaries and liminal spaces where we can use restorative justice to support immigrant students.

Consistently Restorative

As a group, we began to interrogate the difference between the use of restorative practices as a strategy to control students versus a commitment to embody restorative justice values holistically and consistently in our communities. This difference was critical to understand as we had all seen and experienced the use of restorative practices that merely reflected a kinder approach to traditional punitive disciplinary processes. In these processes, adults maintained their control and influence, dictating consequences, imposing perfunctory interventions, or orchestrating inauthentic peer mediations. An authentic restorative approach to harm and wrongdoing would flip traditional practices on their head, emphasizing equity within relationships, healing as a source of transformation, and accountability to others. However, we encountered significant challenges and obstacles to living with coherence and integrity in our districts, such as the need to defend our actions to those in authority, managing time restrictions, or working with limited resources. The reality we experienced as school leaders, marked with time and resource pressures, hung heavy on us.

As educators, we discussed strategies to go beyond traditional responses to typical conflict and code-of-conduct infractions to establish communities of belonging that aimed to restore relationships, build authentic community, and productively address harm and conflict within our school settings. Far from moving us towards the transformative and regenerative promise of restorative justice, maintaining a set of punitive practices would sustain an oppressive

and coercive environment. “It is not just the technology, but the fear of retribution for failing to meet expectations that maintains systems of control,” I wrote. To work towards a goal that affirms each individual’s value outside of a retributive paradigm, we would need to cultivate support from those in authority throughout our communities, which was harder than we imagined.

As a group, we also struggled to consistently match our actions with our words. Our ability to adequately address concerning behaviors while maintaining our integrity weighed on us. Nelly, for example, was frustrated by the tension she consistently experienced when suspending students for physical altercations, even when she believed that these consequences were merited. She felt that these decisions went against her training in restorative justice. “We have just started suspending kids because we do not have the capacity to do the restorative work. And because there’s such harm being caused to classroom communities that not having kids take some time away, it’s feeling like it’s causing more harm and I’m really struggling.” She believed that students who caused significant physical or emotional harm to others, especially to girls who were more vulnerable to abuse, required temporary removal. She could also read her teachers, who were looking for help in addressing significant behaviors in their classrooms. She felt it was an impossible situation as she tried to maintain her commitment to practice restorative justice faithfully while also meeting the immediate needs of her teachers.

I’m just feeling kind of defeated with a couple of our high fliers feeling like, it’s not changing. And I don’t know what to do about it. People are burnt out, you know, people were just all I think feeling like, “Yep, we’re trying, trying, trying, trying not to shift in behavior.” And it’s just, like a lot right now.”

She sought guidance and support from the group in determining the best course of action in these situations. Frank and Casey acknowledged the challenges of leading schools where this level of conflict impacted the entire community and when temporary removal from the community was merited. I, on the other hand, struggled to justify any form of suspension, fearing that removal from the community could have significant detrimental consequences. We debated the benefits and drawbacks of exclusionary strategies to address harm.

In response to this discussion, Frank suggested potential limitations to the use of restorative justice to address harm in school settings: “Implementing restorative justice to be clear that it’s not for everything. Like there are things that are just like, here’s the quick administrative response.” Though Frank consistently lived out of a restorative justice mindset, he articulated obstacles to its effective implementation: “I want to implement restorative justice and revolutionary ways to treat children. But I do have to also run this building that is uniquely challenging.” According to Frank, high-level offenses required a punitive approach, noting also that limited time and resources would impact the integrity and effectiveness of living out his restorative justice values. When considering the multiple demands on school leaders, especially unscheduled interruptions during the school day, consistently fulfilling the time-laborious expectations of restorative conferences and meetings did not seem feasible or a responsible use of time.

Casey, however, challenged Frank to recognize that adopting a restorative justice worldview required a shift in attitude and values that extended to all aspects of our work: “Frank, I actually do think that it is a restorative justice conversation. I feel like all of it is the relationship. If you are restorative like 95% of the way and then suddenly you come down heavy and authoritarian, that resonates with the kids. It’s like you are showing your true colors.” Her

warning sounded true to the group. Consistency mattered when living out our restorative justice values.

Casey warned us to be wary of falling into patterns where we use restorative justice in certain circumstances while maintaining a punitive approach to discipline and control in other situations. The danger, it would seem, would be that we would view certain conflicts and harm as outside of the sphere of restorative justice, or worse, we would be selective in identifying individuals who would not receive the benefit of restorative justice approaches. This resonated with Frank, who recognized the disparity in treatment between students of different races:

You're already doing this good news. What you're doing is you're doing it for White kids. Right? We have been restorative for White kids in public schools in America forever. Right, he's got to work it out. Man, man up and shake hands like that's part of the thing we have been doing our RJ in schools forever. It's just done for the White kids. And we've saved the punitive system for the Black and Brown kids. So we do it for everyone.

In reflecting on this exchange, it seems that Casey was concerned that educators could be tempted to fall into this pattern due to the frequency of conflict, the disposition of the individual, pressure from outside individuals or groups, or worse, based on the race or ethnicity of the individuals involved. The harm that would ensue, however, would reinforce the fact that some students are deserving of the time and energy used in restorative processes, while others would not be afforded the opportunity to benefit from a more relational and understanding approach. As educators, we would continue to mirror historic patterns of deserving and undeserving individuals in our schools and reinforce systemic discrimination in our institutions.

To counter these trends, Casey proceeded to discuss the primacy of relationships and how to cultivate practices aligned with this value. By taking the time to connect and discuss each individual's needs, there would be opportunities to ensure that we remain restorative in our interactions. "If you tell them ahead of time, and you talk about it, and you sort of do the social contract piece, it's still embedded in the restorative work, right?" Casey asked. Beyond specific practices, for Casey, the foundation for restorative justice is healthy and authentic relationships. Frank agreed, noting the change in attitude that reflects a restorative mindset: "If you change the quality of the suspension or the way you suspend. I can give a kid a big hug on the way out the door. Yo, bro, you messed up and I will see you tomorrow and we'll get this fixed." Accountability and consequences are productive if all parties are engaged in trusting relationships and are committed to working towards healing. It also required school leaders who were reflective and insightful, placing appropriate responsibility on the individual while also confronting institutional practices and policies that undermine our collective commitments.

These insights resonated with Nelly. This discussion offered her an opportunity to reflect on criticisms she had heard and experienced first-hand—specifically, the lack of accountability embedded in restorative processes. As her understanding evolved, she recognized that accountability and consequences were embedded in restorative justice processes, but the emphasis on relationships rather than rules was key. "Helping our staff know, we can be restorative and we can also be really direct with kids. I'm going to let you know in my firm voice you don't get to do this in our community. When you have the relationship to have those really firm direct conversations, that's when I think we see it hitting kids in a different way," she said. The goal to address conflict by setting limits and inviting participants into a shared space for accountability and self-reflection offered a necessary corrective in her school.

Contrary to traditional punitive approaches, restorative justice practitioners place an emphasis on caring relationships as a fundamental element to achieve accountability. Evans and Vaandering (2016), for example, name nurturing healthy relationships as one of the three integral elements in restorative justice in schools. There is ample evidence that critiques punitive disciplinary practices, such as the removal from class or exclusion from activities, as ineffective strategies to reshape individuals' behaviors or restore the relationship between individuals because of the loss of relationships. Rather, the harm caused by these practices can have a major impact on a student's sense of security and belonging (Parker, 2020; Wilson, 2020). Any exclusionary practice would need to be grounded in relationships and supported by reflective processes to successfully address harm and transform behavior.

As a group, we agreed that the temporary removal from the community can serve as a necessary break to create the opportunity for self-reflection, understanding, and empathy when relationships exist. In these cases, the consequence becomes the interpersonal process for restoration, where harm is named, restitution is offered, and commitments to change behaviors are developed in partnership among all participants. In response to her concerns and commitments, Nelly developed a set of reflective questions for students, families, and staff to consider and planned reentry meetings to discuss the conflict and review the reflective questions. She explained, "It gives them a structure to use to have the conversations while their kids are home. It certainly helps the reentry feel more structured and productive." Throughout the year together, she consistently challenged herself to identify strategies and processes for greater self-awareness and responsibility that aligned with the goal of building and sustaining relationships.

Reflecting on the group's discussions and insights, my own thinking began to evolve and deepen. I was constantly challenged, however, to find the time to live out this ethic with integrity

in my community. I often wondered, “How do I live out these values and principles consistently, especially, when I only have two minutes? How do I live out these values in the midst of the time constraints or other responsibilities?” Limited time and resources are a fact in schools and need to be acknowledged. This, however, does not need to serve as an excuse for abandoning a restorative justice mindset.

At a recent board of education meeting, I was confronted by a board member who questioned my restorative approach to an incident where students were caught in a cycle of peer conflict. After describing the incident and our response to address the harm, she questioned the lack of consequences. She wanted to know about the punishments I administered in response to the wrongdoing. After I described our approach—mainly, structured restorative conferences between the students—she shook her head in disbelief. I found myself stumbling over my words, trying to describe and validate our approach while also trying to show her we were “tough on crime.” Rather than defend the support students were receiving through restorative justice processes and highlight the positive impact it was having among many students, I vacillated and affirmed her views. I tried to convince her that we were not “weak on punishment” and that the students received consequences. It was clear that this board member believed children’s behavior could only be changed through punishment and traditional consequences, not through restorative processes. She failed to recognize that traditional disciplinary models do not satisfactorily reinforce accountability, decrease recidivism, sustain relationships, or build connections. I failed to defend our approach, worrying about how I would be perceived by those in leadership and authority across the district. Oftentimes, our goals and processes, which seem counter-cultural to traditional disciplinary models, were misunderstood by many members of our community.

Restorative justice models are often disputed because those in authority fail to recognize their merit to both address harm and change behavior.

Frank offered a valuable reminder to the group when he prioritized relationship-building, even while acknowledging organizational structures embedded in our institutions that did not support this goal. He said, “The relationships have to be really strong. I feel like you can push your limits with kids if you really build a relationship with them. In some of the big modern public-school systems, where you have thousands of kids and a team who doesn’t know them all. The structure itself and how some of ours are designed make restorative stuff difficult.” As educators, we all could identify elements in schools that inhibit, or worse, work against our ability to practice restorative justice holistically. Whether we are dealing with limited time due to highly structured schedules, limited resources, such as trained staff, or having to make time for additional tasks and initiatives, schools are often organized in such a way that deprioritizes and limits opportunities to build and maintain meaningful relationships or work through conflict with students and staff.

In response to this challenge, Casey added, “You have to make space for this work, you have to get rid of stuff. Teachers and schools are already so packed with stuff, get rid of things to build [a restorative community].” The need to allocate time and resources to support the development of a restorative community can go against many of the values prioritized in schools. We had all encountered school leaders who favored immediacy and a top-down approach when dealing with conflict, high test scores on local and standardized assessments, and check-the-box attitudes when facing multiple demands. These leaders seemed authoritarian and regressive, dictating expectations and talking *to*, not with, those around them. We also had experience with permissive leaders, whose hands-off approach and lack of accountability translated to low

expectations for students and staff. The restorative justice work we were advancing went against many of these held priorities. We advocated for shifting time and resource allocations, which inevitably meant reallocating resources away from some district priorities.

The ability to build and sustain relationships, understand the root causes of conflict, and work through reflective practices to build empathy and empower all individuals required time and personal commitment. As leaders, we took responsibility for identifying and pursuing opportunities to create the necessary space for this work. This inevitably led to conflict with institutional goals and priorities because they were often mutually exclusive. By centering restorative justice in our communities, we sometimes drew unwanted attention to our practices and routines.

Consistency, at times, also meant delegating critical responsibilities to trusted colleagues. Through our ongoing discussions, we became aware of the disproportionate support and resources members had to embed accepted restorative justice practices in their communities. Frank, Nelly, and Casey all had access to restorative justice coaches and facilitators to support students and staff. I, however, was trying to implement restorative justice initiatives with limited support and resources. Frank acknowledged the challenge that I faced without the support of a restorative justice coach:

Wow, I think it's hard, Jose, if you don't have that person who can facilitate those conversations? I mean, I think principals can do a lot around like, you know, reinstatement from suspension, I'm gonna be restorative. You know, but you do need the person to have the time and the bandwidth for it.

The frustration that I experienced continued to grow as I was denied grant opportunities to fund training or coaching for myself and my staff. As I aired my frustrations with the limited support I

received, Casey recognized, “I don’t think the principal can do that on their own.” Frank added, “That’s structural. You have to create that person in your building. Who is given the time to be that person? You have to create structures around that person to be the restorative space in your school.” The implementation of restorative justice initiatives was significantly hampered by the limited support and resources I received from my central office.

Consistency also required us to evaluate the role and capacity of restorative justice coaches in each setting. According to Nelly, Frank, and Casey, this position varies based on the expectations of the school leadership and the comfort level of district personnel. Frank, for example, understood the need to hire someone from the community to lead this work: “I think a big piece of it is to get someone from your community and get someone who looks like your students to be in that role. And you really want someone who’s from the community and who has the buy-in of the teachers, kids, and families.” Though they may have less degrees and formal training, their direct connection to the community was highly valued.

Casey and Nelly, on the other hand, used their coaches to directly support students and staff. Casey went even further, noting that the coach also served in an informal leadership role in her school, where they would discuss the use of restorative justice to address all elements of the school. “So that’s one thing that’s been really important for me, actually working with my restorative justice coach to facilitate sort of conversations for the adults,” she explained. These varied roles point to the institution’s comfort with change and the acceptable roles and responsibilities within the organization.

Maintaining consistency in our unique spaces required intentionality and evaluation of the institution’s comfort with the decisions we were making and the use of resources available to support this work. We understood that the ability to cultivate and embrace a restorative justice

worldview would need to be prioritized in our daily lives, which meant that we would need to intentionally shelve other building or district priorities or delegate to colleagues who could advance these projects. As a group, we recognize the need to anticipate the tension we would face when performing our professional responsibilities with limited time and resources.

Everyone is Included

According to Evans and Vaandering (2016), a central tenet of restorative justice is the commitment to create an inclusive space for diverse individuals, where power is shared and distributed equally among all participants and where learning to listen to different opinions and perspectives is valued. In practice, however, maintaining this tenet can become extremely complicated as leaders navigate various forms of conflict among stakeholders, which can be compounded by those with power who refuse to share or recognize marginalized opinions and perspectives.

The current culture war between liberals and conservatives has had a significant impact on our ability to lead our school communities, with partisan politics influencing community perceptions that affect our ability to create more restorative processes in schools. As psychologist Victoria Parker (2021) notes, “partisans are likely to believe a caricatured version of the opposing side’s attitudes. These misconceptions have hardened into enduring stereotypes: liberal snowflakes and free-speech police, conservative racists and ‘deplorables’” (para. 9). Restorative justice is merely the newest casualty as projects and initiatives have been targeted from hyperconservative members of the community for promoting what they call a liberal agenda. In a society that has become increasingly hostile and aggressive, maintaining a counter-cultural stance that promotes love and inclusion can be seen as a threat because we are decentering those in privileged positions. As restorative justice practitioners, we have attempted to position

ourselves beyond these partisan debates and provide guidance and direction amidst these volatile circumstances. The false dichotomies offered by conservative and liberal debates ultimately undermine our overall goals to establish inclusive communities.

Casey offered a valuable alternative to divisive politics, describing the role of the restorative justice leader amidst the current political climate. According to Casey, leaders can play an influential role in addressing power imbalances within our communities, informing critical decisions or creating spaces for honest dialogue among multiple stakeholders. “My politics is us being real together in a school and learning and dismantling the hierarchy. You have to do it in community, with the people that you care about, and all of us together. And that’s the path through that serves everybody, right?” The emphasis on sustaining her diverse community by naming and deconstructing hierarchies of power and systems of control within the school is central to her leadership practice. Her goal is to create an authentically inclusive environment, where

we all have to be there. No one’s excluded. We’re all going to work with each other. And that’s when we can do the equity. But for me, like it was sort of justice for me is like an umbrella that I can understand and make sense of everything and sort of like frame my conversations with staff members and each other and heal and make sense of this really complicated world.

This attitude marks a radical alternative to traditional approaches in schools, where experts make the decisions and authority is limited to a few core individuals. Drawing on Freire’s ethic of hope, Casey reminded us that to maintain “hope in this world, everyone has to be the people and everyone belongs there. We all have to.” She recognized, though, the existing power imbalance

that influences decisions in schools and the need to create spaces for equitable decision-making and action. She explained,

All school systems are structured on power. How do you literally break that apart, destroy that and share power with kids? What does assessment even look like when it's not the teacher who's doing it? When it's kids and teachers together? What does curriculum look like when kids and teachers are creating it? All those are power shifts. When it's not about punishment, or segregation, or sorting or authoritarian measures.

Inclusive environments oftentimes require the redistribution of power and control among all participants, which may feel threatening to those whose perceived credentials have maintained their role and influence. It becomes a source of discomfort to those in power as relational dynamics shift and retributive processes are rejected. However, when given the opportunity, there is a growing awareness and appreciation for the renewed environment.

To illustrate this point, I shared my experience with community circles, a proactive approach to building community within classrooms. Though classroom meetings were common in my elementary school, they maintained the hierarchy of power and authority, where adults controlled and facilitated conversations and invited vocal and confident students to the center of discussions. The subtle shift to community circles had an immediate impact on students and staff. The act of sitting together as equals in a circle, the invitation to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to participate as the talking piece went around to each individual, and the focus on listening to understand one another shifted power away from the adults and overly vocal students and distributed it among all participants. Though, initially, students who were well-versed in school procedures raised their hand to participate, they quickly saw that the routines and circle

processes ensured that everyone was invited to share and participate in the conversation.

Reflecting on this experience, I wrote in my reflective journal,

Students talked about their discomfort with the process. Everyone is watching and listening to me and “I’m shy.” Karen and I responded, “but you answered the questions anyway. You participated and created the opportunity to be known and heard. You were not allowed to be invisible because your voice and ideas matter.

Though I was excited to see how students responded to the community circle, I was more interested in watching the staff’s reaction. They commented on the students’ participation, highlighting the contributions made by quieter students and trying to capture the positive energy and mood in the circle. I pointed out their own initial discomfort, as well as the important revelations they made at the conclusion of the activity. “Teachers learned to trust their students and trust the process. It was counter-cultural, but a necessary corrective to encourage authentic inclusion” I journaled. The move towards shared leadership and ownership of community-building processes has since served to solidify my staff’s commitment to initiatives that promote inclusion and build on students’ presumed competence.

While working in politically and ethnically diverse communities in Denver and Mountain Top, Frank gained valuable insights into navigating partisanship at the local level. Though he would identify as a liberal, Frank was wary of allowing restorative justice to become a partisan tool to support a limited political agenda. Through years of experience, Frank gained the insight to recognize the path restorative justice offered to bring together liberal and conservative values, and through this process, the opportunity to connect individuals from diverse backgrounds. He stated, “There are very legitimate concerns within the conservative perspective that restorative justice does speak to. I think we do ourselves a disservice if we allow restorative justice to be a

woke liberal cause.” Moving beyond partisan debates around social and educational issues, Frank was able to identify and respect political elements from both groups in the hope of unifying his community. Frank identified a real threat from within the restorative justice community that would seek to use liberal values and principles associated with restorative justice as a divisive strategy in schools. The language conflating liberal and conservative with good and bad, so common in cultural contexts, was counterproductive to his goal of uniting his community around equity and justice. In response to liberal critiques, Frank was able to identify elements aligned with conservative values:

I think there are conservative values that are better served by restorative practices. Like the exclusionary process is layer upon layer of bureaucracy. It’s very exclusionary to parents and I think conservatives want parents to have a role to play in schools. They want the parents to be connected to their kids’ schools. Restorative justice allows parents to have a voice in the process.

Active engagement and meaningful participation by all became key elements to shifting attitudes aligned with restorative justice. The ability to listen, understand diverse perspectives and opinions, and appreciate their contributions became an essential attribute among our restorative justice leadership practices.

In response to Frank’s reflections, Casey considered her personal experiences in Red Hook and added, “Racial justice perspectives can actually get very authoritarian. Restorative justice is about being vulnerable and real. All these problems that are showing up, we are going to stay together and I am not looking to kick anyone out.” Citing recent racial justice movements operating in New York, she noted the pressure these groups applied to allies and sympathetic supporters. They required full commitment to the movement and did not seem to allow

participants to question those in authority. In her experience, there were no meaningful opportunities to engage in thoughtful and honest debate.

Far from marginalizing perspectives that did not align with his, Frank embodied a critical capacity to understand and value individuals with diverse views. Frank offered a personal anecdote to express the impact of this sentiment among his teaching staff:

There's like a super huge deadhead. Really liberal, like super liberal, and she took this crazy swing to the right. She felt like there was an authoritarianism in our district, around being a certain kind of woke. What was she rebelling against? We did have kind of a "we're smarter than everyone culture" in our school, amongst our teachers, that then caused this really strong backlash for her and other members of our community.

This teacher's experience of marginalization and exclusion had a significant impact on her social connections, affecting her attitude towards those around her. Her perception led to an extreme reaction and rebellion against decisions made in favor of equity through inclusion. One is left to wonder how outside stakeholders, such as students and their parents or guardians, experience this pattern of exclusion. Frank reminded the group that "there is an element of our society that feels very excluded and unlistened to and unsuccessful. They are reacting in ways based on how they feel." The limited opportunities to participate were the most damaging elements to relationship-building among members of the community.

In contrast, Casey positioned groups aligned with restorative justice as creating productive spaces for community-building and went on to add, "We are going to work through whatever is happening. It's not about exclusion, right? Or you're just replicating the entire power dynamic and we are actually trying to get rid of it. That's why everyone needs to be invited into that." Among restorative justice leaders, the process of building and maintaining an inclusive

community becomes as important as the final product. Restorative justice practices are designed to deconstruct authoritarian power dynamics and confront processes that marginalize diverse perspectives. The use of restorative justice in schools has the potential to address punitive elements operating in schools, such as grading and attendance policies or standardized testing practices, which have become embedded in the values of many communities and taken for granted by many leaders. As an example, Casey highlighted the topic of curriculum but warned of the impact of coercive strategies to control processes and outcomes: “It doesn’t have to be this top-down curriculum that’s like, ‘Oh, this is the better not-racist curriculum.’ You are taking away the power from children, from teachers, from me.” She would advocate for a community approach to the development and implementation of practices and policies, where the diverse voices from the community are prioritized, and the unique needs of the community are centered.

Nelly applied these insights to a challenging situation impacting a dual-language immersion program in her district. The program had shifted language away from “multicultural” to “socio-cultural,” producing strong opposition among many members of the community. Nelly recognized that many parents had enrolled in the optional program because

[they] want kids to learn Spanish and hang out with Latino kids for friends. But [they] don’t want to talk about any of the actual stuff that we could be talking about in this context. It feels really manipulative in a way, like leveraging that context to meet the needs of our kids to just become bilingual. These programs have been designed around multicultural values, which are not wrong, except that they don’t go far enough in terms of really helping.

Rather than criticize the parents who held these attitudes, she acknowledged the need to create a space for authentic dialogue and understanding. She did not lose her critical reading of the

situation or ignore the racialized elements in their reaction but acknowledged the negative impact of limited participation and collaboration among all stakeholders. She added, “What about if there had been this engagement of dialogue with families before? We know what this community is like, right? Where are their voices in this?” She hoped that a collaborative space for reflection would allow for a deeper understanding of the underlying goals for the immersion program and the need for a shift in the language to align with the values of the program. An intentional dialogue with all those invested in the success of the program would have created a space to crystallize the range of outcomes envisioned by those involved. Nelly reflected on the communication approach and asked,

Could this school or district have been more strategic about how they rolled it out and the language they used? Could there have been more engagement with the parent group and more dialogue in education prior to doing that to prevent such a strong reaction? How can we be authentic and also pragmatic about leading this work in really conservative communities?

Her reasoning would not only serve the goals for the dual-language immersion program but also address the challenges of leadership in the community. In her mind, approaching communication with stakeholders through a restorative justice framework would create the optimal environment to openly discuss and plan for programs and discuss their outcomes. Moving beyond limited socio-political outcomes or theoretical debates, Nelly envisioned education aligned to authentically democratic ideals and sought out opportunities to make these explicit to her broader community. She understood the need to develop partnerships with a variety of stakeholders to build strong and lasting coalitions in her community.

Building leaders are consistently managing demands and expectations from central office staff, building staff, families, and students, among other potential stakeholders. These multiple views and priorities are not always aligned or consistent, requiring the building leader to cultivate the skills to negotiate potential conflicts. Though Nelly had her political views on the situation, she also understood the critical role in helping to bring a diverse group of interests together and mediating a collective response. Through her experience, she recognized that dismissing perspectives or marginalizing sectors of her community would compromise her overall capacity to lead effectively. Her work is grounded in her strong personal convictions and her ability to open a space for authentic dialogue.

Acting Strategically

As leaders, we are oftentimes dealing with conflicting priorities from diverse stakeholders. The job has become increasingly more difficult for leaders who maintain restorative justice values as they need to simultaneously identify strategies to achieve restorative justice-aligned outcomes, manage diverse perspectives, and create opportunities for diverse groups to gain a deeper awareness and understanding of one another. The goal of fostering an inclusive community implies that all individuals are valued, which makes navigating extreme opinions and positions a central job responsibility.

Nelly expressed concern after a local election shifted her board of education towards more hyperconservative values and perspectives. Many officials ran on platforms combating inclusive and progressive initiatives, including those prioritizing LGBTQIA+ and immigrant needs. She had to consider how to navigate the hyperpolarized political landscape in her community, recognizing the complexity of her environment. “You know, that this is like a super triggering thing for our community, too. So it’s like working within, like, our school context.

And then our, the context of our valley is a lot of layers to that.” She worried that the shift would compromise her school’s restorative justice project and undermine the growth her teachers had made as board members would conflate restorative justice with a liberal progressive agenda. She interpreted the hostile takeover of the local board of education from right-wing community members as the latest trend destabilizing democratic and justice-oriented gains in education. She was afraid that teachers would abandon the restorative justice initiative and refuse to participate in activities to support the development of a culture of care in her community. She asked, “How will this impact our staff engagement with these practices? If they were like, ‘Yep, this isn’t something that I’m really believing in anyway’ now. So, they have the backing of the board to really disengage from the work.” Her fears were not merely conjecture but drew on similar trends we had experienced as educators when initiatives were abandoned with changes in leadership.

Personally, I resonate with her fears. As I continued to champion initiatives associated with restorative justice processes, I became aware of the rhetoric associating restorative justice with a liberal “woke” agenda and critical race theory. As previously explained, the refusal to accept a Department of Education grant made me wonder if district leadership was concerned with the growing unrest and concern among hyperconservative voices about inclusive education and the inaccurate conflation of restorative justice with critical race theory. Ultimately, I was told it was a proposed seminar on the school-to-prison pipeline for teachers that closed the door on this opportunity. I wondered if district leadership was concerned that this seminar would serve as an example to community members, who had criticized the district in open forums for promoting critical race theory. Perhaps, they were just afraid of the potential optics and discussions among hyperconservative community groups, who had a strong presence in the community and were

well-organized. The concerns felt by many of the leaders in the district resulted in the loss of this opportunity for my staff and highlighted my growing worry about the political tendencies of the newly elected board. Rather than focus on the benefits of the program or highlight the opportunity to be part of this highly selective state initiative, the mistrust directed at progressive initiatives was maintained.

Initially, Frank was confused by the decision and inquired about our governance structure. In my district, the superintendent had the authority to reject the opportunity, though, this was not the case among the other participants. Frank and Casey, for example, had greater autonomy to make these decisions. Due to his close alliance with the board or fear of retribution, he often acted in ways to avoid conflict or appease powerful board members. Frank offered this valuable insight after hearing that my district had refused to participate in the restorative justice pilot program:

Your superintendent who is deciding not to do restorative justice is still going to hold you accountable to all kids learning in schools. You are still accountable for being a school principal. And basically, what public schools exist for is equity. I am actually accountable for the restorative justice outcomes. We have to be restorative, it's in our job description. Reflecting on this comment, I had to consider that my superintendent was also concerned with equity and equitable outcomes for all the students in the district. I wonder if the superintendent maintained a logic that held that equity among immigrant youth could be achieved through assimilation and standardization, rather than through restorative processes. The argument goes that when immigrant youth achieve a degree of acculturation, they are more likely to experience success and become meaningful contributors to society (González et al., 2006; Moll et al., 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). This view shifts responsibility for improved outcomes onto the individual and

blames them when they fail to meet expectations. In this logic, character or community deficits are weeded out through assimilationist strategies. The danger is not in striving for equity; rather, the process for equity requires a loss of identity and cultural capital among immigrant youth.

Equity through restorative justice, on the other hand, values diversity and encourages authentic inclusion in school settings. As leaders, we place a high value on co-creating spaces that reinforce our understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence among students and staff. By leveraging the epistemologies and transnational knowledge of immigrant youth, we diversify community funds of knowledge. In turn, we choose to interrogate elements in schools when we fail to achieve equitable outcomes, placing responsibility on the institution rather than individuals.

For Frank, like most of us, many accountability outcomes, such as improving standardized testing scores, addressing disproportionality in discipline, or referrals to special education, could be aligned with restorative justice values and principles. The misuse of these elements to harm children and punish divergent behavior did not fully negate their value or purpose. Frank was referring to our commitment to interrogating the systemic elements that resulted in disproportionate outcomes among students and to considering contextual factors and institutional practices that maintained systems of inequity. Given the opportunity and resources to confront these harmful elements, Frank was convinced we could improve outcomes among all our students, especially those most often marginalized in our communities.

I agreed with Frank. As I reflected on my personal and professional experiences, I noted the harmful and damaging impact of assimilation on my own development. In my journal, I reflected on this theme:

I am becoming more convinced of the need to address systemic values and priorities in schools if restorative justice can develop deeper roots for transformative change.

Teachers, administrators, Central Office administration, are focused on accountability measures that are not consistently aligned with restorative justice values and principles.

As long as these forms of accountability continue to be prioritized, focus on relationships, healing, and restoration will be secondary. They are not mutually exclusive but prioritized in the wrong order.

Later, I continued,

Restorative justice practices are viewed as additional tools to address behaviors rather than resources to ensure restorative justice values are embedded in our school cultures.

This shift in understanding can help address ineffective implementation efforts. The goal is to change school culture, not student behavior. If the culture changes, then the entire community will internalize the values and reflect them in their behaviors.

It was clear that we were inviting our students, staff, and community members to envision a community established on a different set of values. As school leaders, we experienced the devastating effects of assimilation in our local contexts. Most often, students rebelled against these plans and defied many of the rules established in our communities. We wanted to offer an inclusive environment that valued their unique personalities and cultural resources, but we faced challenges from district leaders and vocal community stakeholders.

As leaders who were confronted with a highly complex and unstable political environment, we recognized the need to use language strategically and avoid politically charged terms, especially as we felt hyperconservative perspectives were being prioritized. The “cultural wars” we were watching on television and reading about in the news between political ideologies

were continuing to encroach into public education (Zimmerman, 2022). Nelly and I shared our concerns and experiences of working in politically conservative environments with the group, hoping for validation and guidance. To avoid getting caught up in this debate and avoid hyperconservative obstruction, Casey advised me to “give them what they want on the outside and keep doing all the work. Continue all the practices, but use different language. It’s all the same stuff.” If the language becomes problematic for those in power, then it becomes imperative that school leaders negotiate this concern without compromising initiatives that further our commitment to justice and equity. Frank offered a more concrete example:

Avoid lightning rod phrases that I think have become meaningless. Gravitate to the actual work. We don’t actually talk about equity. We would like to make sure our graduation rates are equitable. We need to make sure that Brown kids starting at Colorado Mountain College finish in the same ways that White kids because right now we are really good at graduating White males and they are doing really well and everyone else is like not finishing.

By approaching conversations on the goals and outcomes that all members of the community can support, we created opportunities to continue to embed restorative justice practices into the daily structure of our schools and communities. By avoiding theoretical debates, we could focus on the substantive work, but we had to play by hyperconservative rules. Frank noted, “I don’t know if I’m, like, chickening out or if I’m being smart by avoiding some of the words that have become just so charged and so challenging and difficult to make progress with. But I think the work is still the work, right?” This concession allowed us to continue to dismantle hegemonic and oppressive policies and practices in schools. We were able to use restorative justice authentically yet discreetly to engage in transformative work that was inclusive and equitable.

We recognized, however, that to achieve and advance our goals, we would need to develop a coalition of stakeholders from across partisan lines to support this work. It is the subtle art of the principalship that creates opportunities for conflicting perspectives to rally towards a unified vision. It is about listening to diverse perspectives and identifying unifying elements to create authentic partnerships. For example, Frank shared his personal experience in Denver:

One of the things I worked on a couple of years ago is really finding framing for conservatives around restorative justice. One of the frames we use a lot was like government intervention in people's lives is so unpleasant and this is a community-based solution. We don't want to escalate to judges, lawyers, and courts involved. Just do it through community at the grassroots level. We don't need to get more government in people's lives.

He saw the success of this approach as it pointed back to "Leave It to Beaver" America, where "If you broke the neighbor's window you had to fix it and look them in the eye and shake their hand. They are stories we can tell that really appeal to conservative folks because restorative justice is a very human right and I think there are conservative values that actually are important to me." His ability to move beyond partisanship, identify elements that align with diverse groups of individuals, articulate these ideas to all involved, and create a space for shared ownership of initiatives speaks to his capacity as a school leader.

Rather than allow himself to get trapped in partisan discourses, he leveraged his understanding of creating a coalition of stakeholders aligned to restorative justice to move his community towards shared outcomes. He encouraged the other participants to "use the language that is also going to appeal to them." He recalled some of his successes in highly conservative communities as a basis for his suggestion. "We did have a lot of success getting through the

committee. There was a Republican controlled committee and there were some of those narratives around government intervention and addressing some real problems without our government in our lives.”

Though I appreciated his intentions, I wonder if succumbing to these strategies may reinforce hierarchies of control as we genuflect to those in power. It is a difficult tension to manage as achieving our ultimate goals requires access to resources and support from those in power. Regardless, there is value in helping colleagues bridge into restorative spaces and inviting them to partner with us in daily activities as they become more aware of the benefits for all students.

As Frank took over as principal in Mountain Top, he identified the school’s athletic director as the one person who was most dismissive of restorative justice practices. It took multiple conversations and experiences to change his attitude towards restorative justice. In particular, a fight during a soccer game was the catalyst for his transformation. Frank offered an alternative to the traditional retributive approach for student athletes and offered students an opportunity to meet with the other team and participate in a community circle to address the harm. After the circle, students returned to school and shared their experiences with their classmates. It was after a second fight during a football game that the shift in understanding began to impact the students. Without adult prompting, the captain of the football team took responsibility for the fight and articulated to his teammates, “Mr. Cairns is trying to show us a different way.” According to Frank, the athletic director actively participated in both events and drew new insights from the students’ responses. The students’ shift towards relationships with accountability resonated with him. In describing the athletic director’s change, Frank added, “He found his own way to think about it, talk about it that makes sense to him. But if shit goes

sideways, that's what he's going to do, circle up and talk to kids." It was not a philosophical debate that convinced him of the benefits of restorative justice. It was his personal experience with transformed individuals, reimagined outcomes, and accountability with one another that convinced him to support these processes.

As leaders, we consistently negotiate decisions from multiple stakeholders and try to limit the negative impact on our students and communities. Whether by continuing to advocate for resources to support restorative justice from central office administrators or developing alternative processes for the code of conduct, we are convinced that this is a necessary dimension of our work. Throughout our year together, I would often come back to a central theme for me—the need to resist and adapt to serve our communities. “How do we resist policies that are not in the best interest of students? How do we adapt those policies because we are still responsible for implementation, to make sure that we are following through whether it's district mandates, state mandates, or federal mandates? How do we create those opportunities?” I asked. As leaders who can see the harmful impact of many institutional practices and policies, we found ourselves evaluating spaces that needed to be addressed and resources to invest in these projects. As we identified new initiatives, we needed to identify the appropriate action to begin the transformation, without drawing too much attention to ourselves. At times, we acted inconsistently. In a moment of self-reflection and honesty, Frank shared,

The stress on school leaders who are justice-minded and want to create safe spaces for children to be their best selves is really, really hard. You will find yourself in some really morally complicated situations where you are trying to figure out like, what's the strategic smart way to do this versus like, am I kowtowing into a perspective, totally immoral? Am I compromising in ways that are smart or ways that are immoral?

We rarely found adequate answers to these rhetorical questions. Acting strategically did not always align with our values, and sometimes, we found ourselves off course. Our monthly meetings became essential spaces for collective self-reflection as we came together for validation and accountability. As I reflect back on our year together, I realize that it was our vulnerability and willingness to confront our decisions in community that offered hope. It was our willingness to be honest about our limitations and fears that gave us the confidence to chart a way forward together.

Partnering With Staff

The implementation of restorative justice initiatives in our schools requires support and commitment from staff, who are often the ones responsible for the daily application and reinforcement. However, as leaders, we recognize that there is a challenge to trust our staff with counter-cultural initiatives because many may not fully embrace restorative values, reject other values, or fail to understand how to implement strategies with fidelity. When coupled with the daily stress of negotiating multiple stakeholders, district initiatives, and other responsibilities, the slide away from restorative justice can be inevitable. In addition, there were situations where we found ourselves falling short of our own ideals as our response to multiple demands and pressure made us act in non-restorative ways towards our resistant staff. In this section, I will discuss processes to deal with our frustration with teachers' limited capacity to implement restorative justice, moments when we, as leaders, were "unrestorative," and the challenge of equipping all staff members with strategies and values associated with restorative justice.

As leaders, we all faced challenges as we invited teachers to partner with us. We relied heavily on their ability to carry out the initiatives, whether by dedicating time or prioritizing restorative practices in their days. Though they were often supportive of the goals, the demands

on their time, the pressure to perform, and multiple district-level projects were prioritized. To be honest, there were times when we were frustrated by their limited understanding or willingness to follow through with our vision for restorative justice. Nelly, for example, reflected on her staff's growth but recognized the limitations:

We are deepening our work. The adults who are supporting the work are being asked to engage in the work actually still have some fundamental conflicts with it. They will do the surface because that feels comfortable and pretty intuitive. Where you are really calling them forward in a way that challenges their own beliefs. It feels, like, very natural for teachers to do the low-level problem-solving. But then when, like, big shit hits the fan, people are sometimes struggling to not just go right to like, they need to be suspended. That's where I am really struggling as a leader to know how to do that next, like a nudge to help people see that it is the way that we have to be with all situations, not just when it's pretty easy. Even with all their learning around this, they are still resistant to this work.

Limited support and follow-through had the potential to jeopardize the work. As Nelly described it, her staff was on board when they "felt" they had the time and energy to address the conflict. However, Nelly saw a change in their behavior when the conflict demanded more time and resources than her staff felt appropriate, when the expediency of retributive responses was more efficient, or when staff believed the students were less deserving. I wonder if underlying their feelings were beliefs about students' merit and deservingness and the efficacy of the intervention.

Frank's experience was similar when he encountered teachers whose "let's do some restorative justice to those kids" attitude belied a message of control. In these contexts,

restorative justice practices are understood as strategies to do “to” students rather than an invitation to engage these practices “with” them and other members of our community to address the harm. Reluctant educators often fail to see that this use of restorative justice practices reinforces patterns of control, masking punitive strategies in kinder and friendlier processes. The outcomes, however, are often the same, where students are unempowered, their voices marginalized, and their relational needs unmet.

At other times, we were the ones responsible for creating a hostile culture that did not reflect the values of restorative justice. In frequent conversations and discussions, I noticed two glaring issues that prevented our work from rooting itself in our community. The lack of time and resources to support accountability turned teachers off to the use of restorative justice. In my attempt to enact discipline that was not punitive, I often fell into a permissive stance. Limited time to devote to restorative practices and the lack of a designated professional to work alongside me through all these processes was a burden. In response, my approach became more problematic and erratic when facing higher-end offenses, where my permissive stance consistently failed to achieve outcomes that allowed me to maintain consistency and help students learn from their behavior. The lack of accountability and follow-through placed the burden of responsibility on the teachers, who had to manage difficult student behaviors while also fulfilling their other responsibilities in the classroom.

In an attempt to protect the initiative, I reacted harshly to many of the staff members who were articulating concerns, ignoring their requests for support and dismissing their suggestions. A difficult conversation with an experienced and caring teacher helped me to shift my attitude and recognize the flaws in the current plan. In a journal entry, I wrote,

I need to take responsibility for these failures and acknowledge how my attitude added to their stress. If I want to embody restorative justice values, I need to take responsibility for my actions and apologize to my team. I need to invite them into the process and trust them to help us find a way. I need to acknowledge that I am lost and don't know where I am going anymore.

It was in this reflective space that I recognized that I had the opportunity to model authentic restorative processes by taking responsibility and asking for support. I acknowledged my limitations and opened space for others to shape the school culture around restorative justice. I had to take deliberative steps, much of which made me feel vulnerable, with my staff to internalize this important lesson.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Frank similarly acknowledged that the pressure to run a school amidst the changing circumstances impacted his ability to live consistently with his restorative justice values. He was exhausted with constant changes to routines and managing teacher frustrations. At our first meeting, he openly shared his feelings about his relationship with his staff:

Come on, man, let's just work this out. And I couldn't do that. Right, the structure did not allow me to have honest conversations with my staff because I'm worried about whether or not they've filed some of the HR for their health. I'm worried if they would think I'm discriminating against them based on their health. In my situation last year, it made it so I was not very nimble, or creative or restorative in how I dealt with my team.

He pointed to their constant complaining and unreasonable requests as the source of his impatience. In reality, as a group, we recognized that his inability to listen, understand, and respond to their needs was due to the glaring flaws in educational practices and institutional

procedures that failed to meet the needs of students. His inability to respond to his staff's needs, however, became a source of harm.

I felt myself being very non-restorative. My relationships with my staff were broken. I think part of it was on me. I was not being very compassionate or empathetic to their feelings and their journey. In order for that to happen, we need to do restorative justice ourselves as leaders with our teachers. I became pretty not very restorative with some adults. I was just like, teach the damn kids. I lost my kind of restorative approach and it caused a lot of damage to myself and my staff. I spent the last half of the school year trying to repair a lot of that myself because I wasn't being that restorative.

As administrators, Frank and I struggled to recognize that restorative justice offered processes to work collaboratively with our staff and navigate difficult situations. Embedded in these processes were values that encouraged collaboration and strengthened our mutuality of purpose. When we finally recognized the impact on our teachers, we began to empathize with them and correct the coercive environment we were reinforcing.

Restorative justice processes also became invaluable when helping teachers navigate interpersonal conflict with one another. Casey, for example, saw the value of using restorative justice processes to support teachers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Casey, teachers, who were unable to manage personal and professional demands, became hostile to one another. Rather than focus on the problems, Casey saw it as an opportunity to model restorative processes with her staff. She recalled, "We had adult stuff coming up. We had more and more adult conversations. There was a lot of conflict. We thought that it was a really good opportunity because the people who had resistance to restorative justice were experiencing conflict. They can experience it." In response, she partnered with her restorative justice coordinator to evaluate the

needs of her staff and schedule restorative conferences between those members who were experiencing hostility. She or her restorative justice coordinator would facilitate dialogue between teachers and mediate the conflict. The dual benefit of addressing conflict and modeling healthy processes had a transformative impact on her staff. First-hand experience with restorative processes helped convince many of her cynical staff members, who failed to understand and see the benefit of relational approaches to harm and conflict. For Casey, this was a turning point for many of her teachers. If it could work with them, it could definitely help students and reshape the culture at the high school.

Nelly shared a wonderful experience where she was able to model a restorative process between her school counselor and custodian. The school counselor was a strong advocate for restorative justice and was involved in ongoing training. The custodian, however, fell among those staff members who had not received any training and were not exposed to the language or practices. A conflict arose when the counselor caught the custodian looking through her files after school one day. The custodian was trying to help another teacher but was embarrassed and afraid after the encounter.

Nelly offered the two staff members an opportunity to meet and discuss what happened using a restorative conference. The custodian was reluctant, afraid of the disciplinary action she would face.

I followed back up with the custodian who is in like, such a triggered space that she was like, “Nope, I absolutely cannot have a conversation right now. I’m like, really offended by some of the things that were said.” But it got me thinking about how our teachers have had all of this learning so some of our teachers, even with all their learning around this,

are still resistant to that work. And then you take our custodian who I think comes from just a very different paradigm about how we navigate conflict or relationship.

It took a lot of encouragement from Nelly to convince her to trust the process. In reflecting on her custodian's initial reluctance, Nelly acknowledged,

Like, can you just remember that the, the limited trust, right, that some staff members still feel because of their position and their positionality in the school, even though like there's these attempts to create equity and parity, your job title doesn't matter? Like, it does matter. And how do we continue to find to be intentional about, like, deconstructing those barriers that are separating these different groups?

Nelly was not expecting the invisible hierarchical structure embedded with the school to have so much influence over this situation. The power imbalance, coupled with limited exposure to restorative justice, were elements that needed to be addressed prior to moving forward. In addition, she recognized that people approached conflict differently, based on a variety of factors. Their experience with conflict and resolution informed their reaction and reinforced their sense of self-efficacy and their views of one another. Nelly said, "Your whole staff and people have such varying levels of exposure and family culture around how they are navigating any kind of conflict and relationships." She learned to see the interplay between power imbalances embedded in school structures, limited exposure to restorative justice, and previous experience with conflict as playing a critical role in establishing the initiative in her school community.

This situation highlighted the opportunities to train and equip all her staff with a basic understanding of restorative justice. She identified several staff members, including office staff, paraprofessionals, and custodians, who were not involved in the training.

But it got me thinking about our teachers, who have all of this learning. What are the implications for engaging other staff members who have all the same interactions that teachers do? I mean, our front office interacts with kids all day long. When we're thinking about building this community in our school, you can't not include those very critical staff members.

Aside from giving all staff members a basic understanding of language and processes, there is also a focus on equity, which is a fundamental value in restorative justice. The training would begin to address the relational elements between adults and deconstruct unhealthy barriers among staff.

The story has a happy ending—the custodian and the counselor were finally able to meet and address the conflict. Nelly was excited to share the outcome as she often felt like she forgot to recognize the successes in her school.

So we had another conversation and it was, like, beautiful and amazing and there were, like, tears. Our counselor just set the tone. This is all about us moving forward in a positive way, and it was able to be this beautiful model. I think this vulnerability that our custodian isn't naturally inclined to show and so it was really her just being willing to come into the situation like that. I think that switched the tone. It was really awesome. Nelly was able to celebrate the positive encounter using a restorative process. When I asked about other benefits, Nelly was able to share, "It's this continuation of building trust with her, which has been a long process. But I feel like that was a pretty important and pivotal point. We handled this situation in a way that was about true repair." Nelly had to invest her time and that of her counselor and custodian over multiple days to work through this intimate process. It was a worthwhile sacrifice that aligned her values with the envisioned outcomes for her community.

Though Nelly was able to celebrate this positive experience, she maintained a realistic stance towards this work.

More often than not, that's not my experience with it, especially as we get, like, deeper into the work and are really talking about real things. Not just like, the more surface level kid issues. How do we continue to stay in community, doing these practices, but knowing that there is a level of discomfort and lack of resolution that will often be there?

As school leaders, we have experience with the success and challenges inherent when working with harmed individuals. It is healthy and productive to acknowledge our limitations and frustrations.

It is also important to provide spaces for them to heal from situations where they feel disempowered and unheard. After we learned that the superintendent decided to decline the restorative justice pilot program grant opportunity, I was encouraged to discuss this decision with the team of teachers that helped write the grant. Though I was initially reluctant, probably due to my own hurt and disappointment, I convened a meeting with the team. I reflected on the moment with the principles in the study afterwards.

And it was actually really good for them as well. I felt like it was really just a great opportunity for us to both, you know, kind of share the frustration and the resentment that we didn't accept the [grant] and I think they needed that catharsis as well. But then, of course, like moving on, talking about, "What are we going to do about this?" And like, "How are we going to continue the work that we're doing? What are the opportunities to train the staff? What are the opportunities to continue to invest in some of these different processes in the school?" So no, I think that it was I really appreciated being challenged, I think that back then I was just kind of a, I don't want to say unmotivated, but just

definitely didn't feel the need to or didn't realize how valuable that time could have been, or was going to be.

I could not have foreseen the benefits for all of us. My natural inclination was to avoid this discussion with my staff and allow my disappointment to turn into unproductive anger. However, accepting this advice from my colleagues allowed me to transform this situation into new opportunities for connection and healing. Ultimately, it also led to a renewed drive to seek other opportunities for our community.

As principals, we continued to struggle to find opportunities to not only partner with staff but also model the benefits and potential to create a healthier community based on restorative justice in our schools. Though we could recognize the natural and intuitive connections, we recognized the challenges of going deeper to embed sustainable practices within the structures of our schools. We found greater success when we listened to the concerns, addressed misconceptions, and provided hands-on models. The adage, "seeing is believing," rang true in our spaces.

RJ is Not Everywhere

Individually, we have spent years implementing restorative justice practices and processes in our schools with mixed success. Some of us have been able to hire restorative justice coordinators, develop processes for reintegration after suspension, embed community circles as a regular practice, or utilize alternative assessment strategies to gauge student learning and progress. We have experienced moments when we were encouraged and inspired by the progress we made with students and staff, showing them an alternative example to structure relationships. We have also experienced frustrations as community members and central office leaders have rejected opportunities to access resources to support new initiatives. That is the

nature of our work. Our ideals give us hope, recognizing the modest transformations occurring within our communities and among our students and staff. We are motivated to expand our reach to other areas within our communities. However, at one point in our discussion, we acknowledged the limit to what we can achieve in our communities. Our influence can only extend so far, and there are spaces where restorative justice is not practiced.

As a reminder, Frank talked about the differences between educating students in a community that values restorative justice and the experiences many of these children will encounter outside of school. He explained, “You can do this in school, but be super real with the kids. This isn’t how it always is. And don’t for one second try to let kids think that when they act like this out in the world, that they’ll get this restorative option in other circumstances beyond our schools.” Jokingly, Frank mused over a hypothetical situation where an individual would approach their boss to address a conflict and say, “Hey, employer. I feel more comfortable in a circle where we are all equals.” There is a real danger when students experience a restorative community and then confront spaces that do not align with these values. They may fail to recognize the rules and procedures that govern each unique environment and experience different forms of violence.

Casey echoed the sentiment, noting the dichotomy between our schools and spaces beyond our boundaries. “What do they call it, the greenhouse effect? Where students are in these really loving, nurturing environments, and then when they go out into the real world, they just wither and die because they are out of the greenhouse.” Even intimate spaces, such as home environments, do not always operate using restorative values or processes. “[Our kids] go back to their families and they might be very punitive. It’s very much in opposition to all these other worlds that our kids are navigating.” It is important for our students to recognize that not every

community operates using the same principles. Different values and priorities govern those spaces, which change their perception of the individual. I acknowledged, for example, that “individuals become consumers in commercial spaces or threats and criminals in policing spaces.” Not every community is restorative.

The goal is to provide students with a rich experience of belonging, centered on inclusion and equity. The hope is that they will be able to take the valuable lessons learned and apply them within new environments. Frank reasoned,

The thing is to help kids understand the racial justice reasons why we’re doing restorative justice. And then hopefully, own that in a way that they do take it with them. “Hey, I was treated restoratively in this space and I learned to treat others restoratively in this space.

And this is how the world should be. And now I’m engaging in other spaces.”

As they begin to move beyond the protective borders of restorative communities, students will challenge institutional practices and policies that foster inequity and maintain harmful power dynamics. Later, Frank added, ““The problem is not with me. I was treated well in high school. The problem is that this new space is not treating me well.’ A lot of restorative justice kinds of schools do produce students that are activists, who come out and want to change things.” This is a necessary undertaking for all those participating in the restorative process as those involved reflect on the institutional factors that lead to harm.

One of our goals is for students to see what is possible and to continue the work in spaces beyond school. Their experiences in a healthy and supportive environment will lead them to question why other spaces are not restorative. This will lead them to confront any institutional practices and policies that maintain inequitable environments. Moving beyond individual responsibility and culpability, the emphasis broadens to focus on institutional responsibility.

Conclusion

The movement towards action was our natural response to systems that maintained inequitable school environments after having confronted the harms we suffered from various forms of trauma and adverse experiences. Through this collaborative process, we gained new insights into the systemic sources of harm embedded in school cultures, operating through policies and practices that promote cultural assimilation, and found allies to support our struggle to transform our communities. It was our responsibility to offer a different vision for healthy school communities and to strategically manage the hostility from members of our community or our inconsistency when we were overwhelmed by multiple demands and pressures.

Action also required us to become more self-reflective and aware. During our monthly meetings, we openly discussed the challenges and opportunities to embed restorative justice initiatives into our school communities. In the safety of our group, we learned to trust one another, validating experiences and holding each other accountable when necessary. We also experienced frustration, anger, and disappointment when a member of the group struggled through difficult situations. Far from being perfect, we acknowledged our limitations and flaws, authentically modeling restorative justice processes and values.

Chapter 6: Findings

Introduction

At the conclusion of this PAR study, I reflected on the research questions that informed this study and considered the learning that occurred and how we grew as leaders in our unique environments. As principals, what did we learn together and from one another about the use of restorative justice to establish environments that support the development of a culture of care for immigrant students as we continued to grow and evolve in our capacity as school leaders? How did we, as school leaders, manage and negotiate policies and policy decisions to align them with restorative justice values and principles? How did we, as school leaders, leverage restorative justice to confront formal and informal practices to create more inclusive and equitable environments for immigrant students?

The centerpiece of these answers lies in collective restorative contemplation, a practice that guided our monthly meetings. In the following section, I detail four essential elements that informed the efficacy of this practice: practicing vulnerability, “head and heart” integration, collective accountability, and strategic action. Collective restorative contemplation offered the space to authentically engage in our healing processes while also allowing us to discuss action items necessary for institutional change. Our rich conversations, dialogues, and collective learning were guided by these four essential elements.

In addition, I discuss the development of the restorative conception model, a tool to organize strategic action into transformative encounter and transformative reparative conceptions. This innovation reduces the current understanding of three conceptions, articulated by Cremin (2013) and Johnstone & Van Ness (2007), to two by highlighting the transformative impact occurring within the encounter and reparative spaces, thus eliminating the need for a

transformative conception. I extend this model by describing two important limiting factors that impacted our ability to advance important initiatives: conceptual and practical understanding of restorative justice and organizational willingness and support for initiatives aligned with restorative justice.

Collective Restorative Contemplation

Our monthly meetings served as an affirming space, where we would bridge feelings, ideas, and decisions rooted in our past experiences and current situations. As I reflect on our year-long study, our PAR group fostered what I am describing as collective restorative contemplation. Contemplation can become a catalyst for healing and action when individuals openly and honestly bring into harmony their multiple dimensions, “head, mind, and body” (Ross, 1996). Though often associated with individual religious reflection through meditation or mindfulness, there is a growing understanding that contemplation can also refer to engaging our multiple dimensions in all aspects of life through collective processes (Morgan, 2015). In my understanding, a healthy, healed, and engaged individual is someone who is striving for balance and unity and who maintains practices to sustain this order.

Contemplation offered a holistic approach to self-reflection, drawing me into a process where I was fully present as I considered the role of my past and the impact of the present on my current actions and behaviors. In Western society, contemplation has challenged the polarization of dualistic thinking and the prioritization of the rational mind, offering a holistic alternative that is better suited for self-awareness and understanding others. Through collective restorative contemplation, we willingly opened ourselves to one another’s critical gaze. The Center for Action and Contemplation (n.d.) offers this description, which, at times, seemed tailored to describe our group’s work:

This is how you come to love things in themselves and as themselves. You learn not to divide the field of the moment or eliminate anything that threatens your ego, but to hold everything—both the attractive and the unpleasant—together in one accepting gaze.

During our monthly principal discussions, in courageous acts of vulnerability, we shared our highs and lows with one another, finding comfort, support, and guidance. I came to experience both freedom and empowerment in this process as I practiced honesty and transparency. After a thoughtful exchange with my critical friends group, I journaled,

Restorative justice has helped me move beyond a dualistic way of being and knowing, and allowed me to begin to practice contemplation—the ability to listen to understand and experience the world through someone else’s perspective. This opens up the realization that the world is experienced by different individuals and communities in multiple ways. I want to continue to practice receiving from others—their perspectives, their understanding, their interpretations so I can grow more inclusive.

Our monthly meetings were unique, and I acknowledged that other groups did not hold the same values. In contrast to our monthly meetings, I regularly find myself withdrawing from others and limiting what they can see and hear from me for fear of shame, guilt, embarrassment, or hostility. I can also find myself adopting a more antagonistic posture towards colleagues as I seek to debate their ideas and challenge their ways of thinking. In professional settings, this can lead me to undervalue my expertise and withhold important information that I feel may cause others to question my integrity, competence, or commitment. Additionally, I may come across as standoffish or confrontational. Both situations are counterproductive towards my goal of creating an inclusive environment.

As I reflect on our monthly meetings, I can see that this was a unique contemplative space, filled with questions, wonder, confession, and humor. This was a space where our past was as important as our current situations because we came to understand the impact of our childhood stories on our development, which also informed us of the decisions we would make as leaders on behalf of our staff and students. For me, many of the stories I chose to share were ones I had buried and was too ashamed to face or expose to others. These were stories that reinforced deficit views of myself, where I was undeserving and responsible for my own marginalization. There were two benefits that I encountered by sharing these stories with trusted colleagues: I began to take power over these stories to redefine my identity, and I received words of healing and affirmation.

Our monthly meetings were informed by a commitment to collective restorative contemplation, a collaborative process in which we engaged in critical reflection and strategic action. This process was grounded to a commitment of healing, addressing harms rooted in personal, interpersonal, and systemic causes. The group dynamic, grounded in trusting relationships, allowed us to receive affirmation and encouragement once we had opened ourselves up to one another's critical gaze. This also created opportunities for accountability because we came to recognize our limited perspective in interpreting difficult situations.

Our monthly meetings reflected values described by Rochelle Arms Almengor during one of the presentations at the National Conference for Restorative Justice in Chicago in 2022. During her session on "Restorative Action Research with Practitioners from NY and Guatemala," she described unique restorative action research (RAR) values that she identified from her study in Guatemala and New York: establish trust, heal moments of harm, leave no one outside of the circle, and the personal and professional are not separate. These values aligned

closely with my findings yet did not account for important nuances and a deeper investigation into additional principles that informed our study. Embedded in her understanding was the invitation for collective restorative contemplation and the goal of healing that leads to action. Through my research, I concluded that collective restorative contemplation is informed by four essential values: practicing vulnerability, integrating head and heart, collective accountability, and strategic planning.

Practicing Vulnerability

As we practiced vulnerability, I am now cognizant that it was an invaluable element in our monthly meetings that led to healing and action. At the moment, I believe that Brene Brown has the best working definition of vulnerability. According to her (2021), “vulnerability is the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (p. 13), and yet, “our greatest measure of courage” (p. 14) because it requires confidence, self-awareness, and trust. There is often a negative connotation to vulnerability, focused on the fear of being attacked or harmed and requiring a defensive posture. In my professional experience, limited trust, self-serving reciprocity, and inauthentic mutuality between individuals can erode healthy environments. Yet, there is an alternative that aligns with Brene Brown’s understanding and points to intimacy and connection. During the year together, we were given the opportunity to interrogate our beliefs and learn from one another because we were open to share successes and failures. We attempted to maintain a posture of honesty and trust as we shared personal and professional anecdotes that often highlighted our limitations, inexperience, and misunderstanding. We were open to one another’s critical gaze, engaging in thoughtful discussions and reflection and gaining greater insights into one another and ourselves.

The anecdote that most accurately reflected this posture was the discussion between Casey and Frank. Though Frank had suggested the limits to acting restoratively, Casey pushed against this narrow understanding. Rather than respond defensively, Frank was open to her correction, and after the meeting, he shared privately that he appreciated the challenge to his views: “I really appreciate Casey. She is super smart and was so on point.” In reflecting on the incident, I noticed how both participants were honest about their views yet open to understanding the other’s position. There was a lack of hubris and antagonism during the exchange, which can be unique in many settings where competing ideas and values are aggressively defended or attacked.

I am aware that practicing vulnerability is uncommon as in many of my professional settings, I withhold critical information because I do not fully trust all the participants in the room. That is why our monthly principal meetings were valuable. We all shared a similar understanding to the role of vulnerability within our critical space. I recognize that practicing vulnerability throughout the year required initial connection, deliberate modeling, and a regular commitment to maintaining the practice.

The invitation to participate in the group ensured we held some basic elements in common, such as our interest in restorative justice, our work with immigrant youth, and our experience as school leaders. Initially, the participants sought additional connections with the other members of the group that felt safe and comfortable. It was not uncommon for Frank and Nelly to celebrate their love for Colorado on a regular basis while Casey and I listened with envy. I wonder if these additional connections lowered our inhibitions and encouraged greater transparency. As the connections were strengthened, we invited one another into deeper exploration, and differences became a source of curiosity and investigation. We wanted to learn

from one another and understand how we each navigated our unique contexts. We were open to asking questions and interrogating one another's experiences, maintaining a posture of humility.

During our fifth session, I made the deliberate decision to invite the participants to disclose memories of harmful experiences from their youth, thus continuing to claim our shared space as a safe space in which we could practice vulnerability. The participants had to trust one another with their stories and their pain, having confidence that we would be gentle and caring with one another. We each had to make the deliberate decision to share with honesty and transparency. Through humor and curiosity, we began to explore one another's stories and make connections. Frank disclosed that he was held back in high school, while Casey shared the story of her high school track coach. I was open about my own self-exploration as an immigrant, new to the United States. This invitation reinforced central practices that we maintained during our time together: leaning on one another, sharing moments of pain and failure, and expressing our limitations. We could ask deep and probing questions, with limited fear that we would offend one another or discourage authentic dialogue.

Vulnerability became an essential element in our monthly meetings but was also something that we needed to practice on a regular basis. I could feel the pressure to withhold embarrassing stories that showed my limitations or could open me up to criticism. It was essential to model honesty and transparency to invite the other participants to do the same. At different times throughout the year, I found myself sharing stories that highlighted mistakes, stories I would have preferred to keep to myself. It went against my need to project competence and success among these professionals. I had to make intentional choices to share both the dark and the light, the good and the bad, to maintain their trust and sustain a culture of vulnerability among us all. Allowing myself to be open about these limitations created the space for others to

either empathize with me or share ideas to move forward. This also encouraged them to do the same with one another.

“Head and Heart” Integration

Beyond the cognitive process of analyzing and evaluating our stories and ideas, offering opinions, or confirming decisions, our principal group shared a common disposition that integrated our “head and heart.” As professionals, we cultivated a deep understanding of educational theories, processes, and policies that informed our work. We understood the system and how it operated. This “head” knowledge was coupled with a commitment to social justice and equity, or “our heart.” We had first-hand experience with the devastating impact that schooling can have on children and acknowledged consistent patterns operating across our four institutions. Our “heart” knowledge was a driving factor to incorporate restorative justice processes into our schools as a way to reinforce values of equity, inclusion, and belonging. Our emotions, especially those associated with frustration, disappointment, and hope, were driving factors as we shared and listened from “our hearts.” They moved us to interrogate policies and practices and dismantle systems of oppression operating in our communities. They also encouraged us to reinforce restorative justice values within our schools, even when this seemed dangerous.

As I invoke the memories and emotions associated with our monthly meetings, I can see how we shared from our “hearts” when talking about the harm we suffered or watched our students suffer. Our unique stories of harm at the hands of teachers and administrators left us wounded. Frank and I, for example, initially internalized the harm we experienced and saw personal deficits and character flaws as the source. We believed that if we were better or behaved appropriately, we could have avoided this pain. As we shared our stories and looked back over

the impact on our development, we grieved the consequences, knowing that it could have been different. Sadly, organizations rarely are self-reflective or take responsibility for the harm they may cause children.

Throughout our discussions, we shared our anger and frustration, directed at the institutional culture that maintained and protected inequitable and harmful practices and policies and our limited power to influence broader change. Our frustration was often directed at the board of education or the superintendent, who were responsible for maintaining systems of control and the hierarchy of power. At times, our frustration was directed at ourselves when we acknowledged our own inconsistencies in dealing with students, staff, and families. There was a necessary catharsis that came from venting frustrations and finding sympathetic ears. Even more so, we saw that our frustrations were universal as leaders in other schools felt the same way.

Though we often vented our frustrations, we did not remain in that unproductive space. Our collaborative process was infused with hope as we discussed and navigated difficult situations. Hope shaped the possibility of change and motivated us to persevere, even under some challenging circumstances. Hope was always rooted in prior experience and anchored to positive outcomes. Nelly, for example, was able to leverage her experience with her custodian and school counselor to affirm the productive impact of restorative justice. Frank, on the other hand, noted the change in attitude among students and staff as a basis for hope. Their ability to experience a different path or engage in restorative justice processes affirmed the prosocial changes occurring within his school. Listening to these positive experiences encouraged me to maintain my focus, even when I encountered countless rejections. Hope was a generative emotion, rooted in experience and cultivated between the participants.

In addition to sharing from “our hearts,” listening from “our hearts” became a vital element during our monthly meetings. When I begin a community circle with my students, I always remind them that during restorative processes, we listen with our ears, our eyes, and, when we are intimately connected and engaged with others, our hearts. In our monthly meetings, this meant that we openly chose to refrain from judgment, criticism, or hostility while we listened to others’ experiences, ideas, and opinions. We listened to members of our community who were impacted by restorative justice practices, we listened to ourselves and how we retold our stories, and we listened to one another as we openly shared our successes and challenges.

During our monthly meetings, we would often talk about the impact of restorative justice on our students and staff. We learned when we listened to their experiences. By actively listening to their stories, we were able to draw important insights into our implementation efforts. Oftentimes, we were encouraged by breakthroughs and successes while also noting the culture shifts that were occurring in our schools. More challenging, however, was when we listened to their frustrations, as Frank could attest. After reflecting on an experience with a dissatisfied teacher, who felt “unheard” by progressive movements, Frank recognized the pervasive dismissive attitude that he was projecting during his interactions with this teacher. I encountered a similar experience with my teacher after I acted permissively when dealing with significant behavioral concerns from students. Rather than react defensively, we approached the situation with a posture of openness and understanding, leading to a positive outcome with our teachers. We refrained from drawing conclusions and negating their experience. More importantly, we recognized that we were being nonrestorative with staff and used this encounter as an opportunity to recenter ourselves and refocus.

We modeled the ability to listen to ourselves, our inner compass and value system, and our emotions in a healthy and productive space. Much of our self-reflection was done in collaboration with those in the group. Once again, as we practiced vulnerability and opened ourselves to one another's critical gaze, we participated in a collaborative process of constructing self-knowledge and awareness. Nelly alluded to this process when she would use the language of "intuitive" to describe restorative justice practices, pointing to the synergy between her beliefs, values, and actions. I, on the other hand, needed more support. I had developed a powerful internalized oppression, and my inner voice was often condemning and critical of myself. I needed others to help guide me through the grief and anger that I had internalized, eventually leading me to refocus these emotions on institutional practices and policies. It was a liberative moment when the shift occurred, and I was able to redirect the guilt and blame to the institutional culture.

Finally, as we listened to one another, we were present and thoughtfully engaged in discussions and reflection. Though these sessions happened virtually in the middle of busy personal and professional lives, we looked forward to our monthly meetings and respected the intimate space. We were cognizant of scheduling the meetings to avoid distractions and interruptions, away from the noise of daily life. Frank would often remind the group at the end of every session, "This is my favorite call," to which we would all agree. The goal was not to convince or argue our points but to enter into the moment with one another in solidarity, understanding, and love. This was true even when we disagreed with one another, as Casey and Frank demonstrated. More important than the outcome, being present and available, empathizing and caring for each other, marked our contemplative practice.

Collective Accountability

Beyond empathizing with one another, we embraced a culture of collective accountability, a general consensus that we were mutually responsible for one another, which took the form of validation or confrontation. During our discussions, there was an invitation to actively participate in one another's struggles. As I reflect on the situations we discussed, I can now begin to see that sharing was a form of solidarity—not because we engaged in similar experiences but because we acknowledged harm is universal, conflict is ubiquitous, and care and tenderness allow us to empathize with one another and locate the original source of the harm within institutional culture. Similarly, seeking validation from one another was also a form of unity. Though we operate in distinct environments, the common threat of institutional power served as a unifying element in our discussions. At the same time, we were open to confrontation, knowing that the challenge to reconsider our position or decisions was rooted in love and affirmation.

Validation from group members was a common response to stories of harm. There is a form of healing that comes from the validation that comes from others who recognize and articulate care and justify our emotions and reactions. Our PAR model became a valuable healing process because the feelings, emotions, and reactions associated with our personal stories of harm were acknowledged and confirmed by our colleagues. When others acknowledged the multiple times I was treated poorly, that what happened to me was wrong, and that the system worked against me to undermine the impact I could have on others, I was able to shift away from personal blame and self-accusations and towards healing. Nelly sought confirmation that suspending students did not make her unrestorative. Casey was able to offer her validation,

acknowledging the necessary steps to protect her students from aggressive classmates. Rather, it was the necessary and responsible response to some forms of harm.

At other times, however, we engaged in thoughtful and caring confrontation. The ability to disagree and challenge one another's interpretations or response to difficult situations was a necessary corrective in many of our discussions. Grounded in trust, confrontations were never personal. They merely reflected an alternative form of caring and compassion. Our colleagues helped us acknowledge that we were not always right and did not always respond with the right type of thinking or action. It was a necessary responsibility, and we were committed to one another's growth in this area.

One of the most valuable exchanges was between Frank and Casey. After Frank discussed the limits to being restorative when dealing with violent student behavior, Casey challenged Frank to acknowledge the dangers to his way of thinking. The possibility of acting inconsistently towards students can erode important relationships and discourage honesty. According to Frank, that was a transformational moment for him when he acknowledged her point and enlarged his understanding. Both Frank and Casey were open to the discussion and refrained from taking a defensive or offensive posture towards the other. Instead, through humility and concern, they modeled a healthy and appropriate exchange to broaden their understanding. Accountability, to be restorative, needs to be imbued with love and affection.

Strategic Planning and Action

The final element in collective restorative contemplation is strategic planning and action. Action must challenge systems of inequity and confront harmful and hostile institutional policies and practices. Resistance is contextual, and our response to harm is dependent on the resources available and our understanding of the conflict.

Restorative justice and progressive initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized communities and dismantling systems of oppression are a threat to those who benefit from current dynamics and enjoy a privileged status. As Kathryn Herr reminded me, “In a hostile and aggressive world, restorative justice is a threat to those in power” (personal communication, February 13, 2023). There is something unsettling about promoting a loving, kind, and inclusive response to harm to those with power who are committed to maintaining current systems of control through retributive paradigms, and who have rejected alternative forms of care. Though I often asked myself, “What am I doing wrong?” in response to limited support and open hostility from the superintendent and board of education members, Kathryn flipped the question and encouraged me to consider, “What are you doing right?” (personal communication, February 13, 2023) to gain this much attention and to make them this unsettled. It seemed that restorative justice processes were anathema to them as their experiences reinforced retributive paradigms of justice and interaction.

Our monthly meetings became informal spaces for community organizing, where we adopted values and principles used to enact change across other sectors. The Interfaith Council for Peace (n.d.), for example, offers six principles for organizing that closely resemble the purpose of our PAR group: focusing on activism, organizing around relationships, meeting people where they are at, defining success, focusing on action, and building diverse coalitions. Without formal training through our education programs or graduate studies, our monthly meetings became a site to participate in these principles. The challenge was, and still is, the limited number of individuals supporting progressive initiatives in our local sites. Nonetheless, through ongoing support and encouragement from the participants, we are dedicated to fostering environments that support values associated with restorative justice.

It seems that restorative justice especially unnerves community members who maintain hyperconservative views, aligned with strong anti-educator/education opinions. Their fear of a liberal agenda that undermines American values and promotes guilt and shame among White students has positioned them as adversaries to many progressive ideals (Alfonseca, 2023). Conflation between critical race theory and restorative justice, encouraged by hyperconservative media outlets (Grossman, 2022), has turned them off to processes that encourage equity through inclusion in educational spaces, misunderstanding the democratic goals and ideals promoted by restorative justice. At its core, restorative justice promotes equity through inclusion and belonging rather than standardization and assimilation.

The biggest threat to restorative justice initiatives are superintendents and boards of education who frequently reject or limit the scope of projects intended to graft equity into educational processes. In our experience, we shared countless examples of interference that denied us opportunities to embed restorative justice processes into our schools. Personally, the most glaring example came when our participation in the New Jersey Department of Education's restorative justice pilot program was revoked. Our innovative proposal was selected in a highly competitive process. Two years later, we were the only district to withdraw from the project. Nelly, likewise, faced concerns from her hyperconservative board of education. The fear and concern we experience is real.

To strategically manage this environment, Frank encouraged us to cater to the needs of hyperconservative superintendents and boards of education. One of our responses to this dilemma was to find language and examples that would appeal to the superintendent and board of education. The strategic framing of restorative justice to align with hyperconservative political values was a necessary survival strategy among those of us who worked in politically

conservative communities. They were still the gatekeepers and had the authority to reject these initiatives. Perhaps without recognizing it, he encouraged maintaining the hierarchy of power and indulged the needs of white supremacy. To be fair, to function in schools nowadays, it is essential to adjust our strategies to cater to hyperconservative voices to support these initiatives. We would need to gain legitimacy by those in power to further our goals.

The space we want to create is inclusive, where all views, opinions, and perspectives are invited and encouraged. Casey beautifully epitomized this idea when she said, “Everyone has to be there. Everyone has to be included. Otherwise, it’s not restorative.” It is difficult to maintain this stance when we prioritize the needs of hyperconservative members in our communities because of their political power.

Strategic action also took the form of empowering our colleagues to practice restorative justice authentically in our common spaces. By equipping staff to use restorative justice and embedding the language into our daily lives, we were moving our communities closer to inclusive ideals. These opportunities were orchestrated through both professional development and the role of a restorative justice coach. At other times, we found ourselves in situations where we could model a restorative process authentically with our staff, such as Nelly’s experience with her custodian and guidance counselor. Regardless of the situation, both scenarios created opportunities to authentically embody a restorative justice ethos and guide our staff to see the value in these practices.

Restorative Justice Conception Model

To visualize opportunities for change, I developed the restorative justice conception model as a valuable tool for me to support strategic action. In my formulation of restorative justice, it functions less as a worldview or lens (Zehr, 1990) and more as a technology of

resistance, offering processes to counter the hegemonic practices embedded in structures of schooling. As we engaged in daily activities to support students and staff, I was able to recognize how these activities challenged existing institutional values and offered important alternatives to school-based practices and district policies. We were promoting a transformational cultural shift through the implementation of restorative justice initiatives in everyday processes.

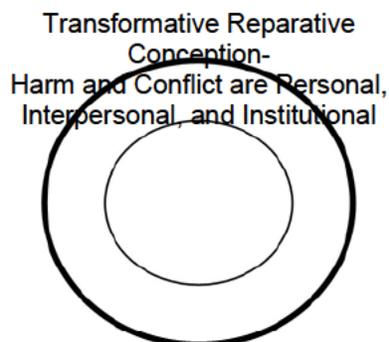
The literature on restorative justice describes three conceptions, as discussed in Chapter 2 (Cremin, 2013; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Van Ness, 2013). The encounter conception is focused on community building through connection. Relationships are prioritized, and processes focus on building and strengthening interdependence. It is based on the premise that the better we know each other, the more likely we are to avoid conflict. The reparative conception emphasizes models to address conflict and restore relationships when harm has occurred. Processes focus on addressing the cause of harm and restoring relationships. This conception focuses on individuals participating in mediations, reparations, or other forms of reparative processes. Finally, the transformative conception moves beyond interpersonal harm and analysis to interrogating institutional practices and policies that are the source of conflict and that sustain inequitable and unhealthy power dynamics. This final conception directly confronts institutional patterns of harm and systemic practices that create ideal opportunities for harm.

Though current research describes three conceptions for implementation (encounter, reparative, and transformative), I theorize the need for only two conceptions that point to the personal, interpersonal, and systemic changes occurring in school environments. The transformative encounter and transformative reparative conceptions allow us to comprehend a broader understanding of institutional change inherent in initiatives at these two implementation levels, without the need for the transformative conception. I can simplify the three conceptions

by omitting the transformative conception because it is subsumed in the previous two conceptions. As an example, engaging students in community circles, a practice commonly understood in the encounter conception, becomes transformative when students and staff realign relational dynamics and reassess essentialized views of one another. There is a disruptive culture change that occurs when community circles become an authentically inclusive practice.

Individuals and communities are no longer valued through Western ideologies of power and control. Rather, there is a renewed appreciation for every person's ideas, opinions, and contributions, regardless of distinctive attributes or features.

Nesting the two conceptions into one model (Figure 1) describes the relationship between core values at the transformative encounter level and elements and practices at the transformative reparative level that address systemic harm. Our year-long study offered me an opportunity to listen to a variety of initiatives used to build community and address harms that individuals and communities experienced within school settings, noting that the breadth of these projects fell under the transformative encounter and transformative reparative conceptions. Some of the initiatives were proactive, working to establish healthy communities of care, connection, and mutuality, while others were in response to the harms individuals and communities faced or were experiencing. These projects countered institutional practices and policies, thus informing systemic cultural changes. I wanted to be able to not only place each initiative within the model but also reflect on the ways the initiative challenged organizational and institutional practices and policies that were the underlying cause of many of the harms. What became apparent was the countercultural reframing of relationships and school structures, recentering the entire organization on inclusive and equitable partnerships.

Figure 1*Restorative Justice Conception Model*

Though I initially took this concept for granted, I became more aware that this stance is unsettling to those who have historically maintained positions of privilege within the organization. The idea, “When you are accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression,” is a warning that I need to attend to as I continue this work. We became more aware that this work struck at the core of privilege and dearly held beliefs and attitudes about deservedness and the “otherness” of immigrants. Institutional practices and policies were protected because they sustained and reinforced deficit views of others, shifting responsibility onto them and protecting the privileged position of those in power.

There is an intentional mirroring between the restorative justice conception model and the ecological systems model, described in Chapter 3. Just as the ecological systems model can be used to describe the transmission of assimilationist and nationalist ideologies through institutions to influence the identity development of individuals and communities, the restorative justice conception model points to the role of restorative justice as a technology of resistance to form healthy relationships within an inclusive environment, address conflict, and confront underlying

institutional sources of harm. Our experiences suggested that countering hegemonic practices embedded in school cultures required intentional processes and courageous leaders.

What we were missing was the fact that we were addressing institutional practices and policies when focused on initiatives organized under the encounter and reparative conceptions. I interpreted the transformative conception to mean that systemic change could only occur within this conception, which prevented me from seeing the transformative change occurring within our schools through simple and basic restorative justice practices, such as community circles and reentry meetings after suspensions.

Extending the Conceptions

As the year-long study concluded, I revisited the updated restorative justice conception model and considered additions and extensions related to my growing understanding. What were the transformative elements in these two conceptions that led to institutional change? How did these elements challenge existing institutional values and priorities that harmed immigrant youth? I began to understand the critical role these two conceptions play in reshaping school culture and informing strategic action to rebuild systems aligned with inclusion and equity.

In our work to enact restorative justice, it was essential to work on the level of broader transformation, interrogating institutional structures and organizational practices that led to harm. As we moved beyond interpersonal harm and conflict, there was a realization that institutional discrimination is embedded within the structures of the organization, such as my experience as a new immigrant. As school leaders, we had first-hand experience with policies and practices that protected standardization and assimilation, maintaining control and disciplining individuals and communities that failed to conform. One-size-fits-all policies, such as code of conduct or attendance, could not take into account the unique circumstances affecting immigrant youth. As

Frank noted, students rebelled against basic policies after COVID-19 because they were arbitrary and disproportionately impacted immigrant youth. As restorative justice leaders, we began to act against these disciplining elements in schools and looked for correctives or alternatives within our locus of influence. There was a risk we took when naming sources of institutional harm, creating substantial disruption to coercive institutional practices and policies.

Transformative Encounter Conception

The core in the restorative justice conception model is the transformative encounter conception because cultivating healthy relationships and building inclusive environments are two of the foundational goals for restorative justice practices (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). In contrast to traditional community-building practices in schools that focus on assimilation (how we are alike) and hierarchies of control (teacher-centered and directed), restorative justice emphasizes authentic inclusion (acknowledging difference as inherent within communities) and belonging (all are welcome and invited to participate as equals). Beyond mere lip service or superficial application of these values, restorative justice practices offer specific processes to reinforce and embed them into the community. Individuals begin to see one another beyond utilitarian needs and make space to recognize and celebrate differences in a non-judgmental or antagonistic space. Researchers and practitioners would ask, “How do I know we are cultivating healthy relationships among members of the community? What are visible examples that demonstrate the impact of our inclusive practices and focus on equity within the classroom and across the school?” This is primarily achieved through community circles, where the process emphasizes key restorative values, such as equity, interconnectedness, and listening to understand. There is a focus on cultivating relationships by reinforcing understanding and intimacy in an inclusive environment. The transformative encounter conception speaks to the

primacy of relationships for belonging and wellness as individuals working cooperatively develop a greater sense and awareness of self and others while also seeking opportunities to enhance relationships. Even more, it speaks to the intentional disruption among social hierarchies of power in schools as essentialized values of worth and belonging are upended through inclusion.

During our year-long study, we each described examples of how we sought to nurture healthy relationships within our communities and identify practices to cultivate connections among students and staff. Though we struggled to consistently live up to our own expectations, we attempted to return to relational values that served as an anchor. Working in diverse communities, we were aware of social, political, and cultural tensions that affected perceptions and influenced attitudes among multiple groups. We saw how immigrants were positioned in our communities, reinforced by hostile national discourses, and oftentimes marginalized and devalued by their peers in local settings. Even more so, the COVID-19 pandemic and related structural changes, along with national political tensions, affected our relationships with our staff. These shortcomings were not failures but merely reminders that faithfully living out an ethic of love and care required us to be vigilant, centered, and self-reflective. Relationships can deteriorate quickly if not cared for or maintained through daily practice. Thankfully, our monthly meetings created an ideal space to share the moments when we did not live out our values, to recenter our practice and renew commitments to act according to our values, and to experience the healing that comes from others.

When there is a culture shift that prioritizes people and relationships, there is a natural decentering of rules, practices, and policies. In this context, institutional change is unsettling because historic foundations are questioned, and systemic practices and policies can be seen as

barriers to progress. Though structure and accountability are maintained, they are at the service of relationships—not the other way around. Individual stories are heard, background information becomes central to understanding unique situations, and the leader's response becomes contextual. Standardization then becomes the antithesis of inclusive and equitable outcomes for the community.

It was through intentional design and application of restorative justice practices that opened opportunities for authentic relationships. As leaders, we had to make space for it within our busy schedules and convince our staff of the value and merit to reinforce these routines for our students. Sometimes, I needed to give them permission to step away from the pacing guide or district mandates to meet with their students in a community circle or reinforce relationships among students through special inclusion activities. There was a consistent message that sought to prioritize relationships and follow-through to reinforce the importance of these goals. There was also the need to explicitly state the important underlying values of these activities as a reminder of the community we wanted to establish.

In collaboration with our colleagues, we worked to imagine and create unique spaces for connection, especially among individuals who did not have a framework for participating in restorative justice processes. I invited students and staff to participate in community circles, where we focused on community building, affirming relationships, or engaging in celebration and recognition. These monthly practices were primarily responsible for culture shifts within my community. Students and staff began to see one another through different lenses (Zehr, 1990), resulting in enhanced relationships across school environments. The visible demonstrations were also the catalyst for discussions among the staff, who interrogated their deficit beliefs about their students. There was a shift in students' presumed competence, creating new opportunities for

inclusion across multiple learning environments. Each of the principals engaged in similar processes to reinforce the community values. Whether formal or informal, one-time or ongoing, these processes reinforced key values, such as belonging, understanding, and equity.

Shifts in behavior and relationships were evident and possible, such as Nelly's example of her counselor and custodian. Though Nelly had regular contact with her custodian, she would describe it as superficial and inconsistent. This changed, however, through the use of restorative justice practices. As Nelly worked and prepared the custodian to remediate the conflict, there was an opportunity to get to know her better. She also recognized that this process began to dismantle the social hierarchy in her school as the new relationship fostered a sense of equity and belonging. "We were equals," she would say. Title no longer had much value as she intentionally flattened the social pyramid. She noted this as one of the most important outcomes from the restorative process.

Transformative Reparative Conception

In the restorative justice conception model, the outer layer is the transformative reparative conception, where the focus is on mediation processes to address conflict and harm. The emphasis on understanding the underlying causes of conflict became a critical element in our ability to restore relationships. Though traditional processes seek to punish individuals for rule infractions, restorative justice shines a light on the relationships that were affected and seeks to establish obligations to restore the individual back to their community. This becomes even more critical when institutional policies and practices are the underlying cause of conflict and the source of harm. The courage and capacity to imagine reparative and educational interventions to change behavior, shifting away from traditional processes that relied on punitive technologies, was key.

Through our experience, we agreed that traditional disciplinary processes do not satisfactorily address interpersonal conflict, do not hold students accountable to one another, and do not satisfy the need for restoration among victims and aggressors. Though there is no prescribed process to address conflict, restorative justice values informed the development of local and organic interventions. As a leader, I had to identify the resources that were available and design interventions to respond to specific situations. Frank's approach to addressing the fight at the soccer game is a clear example of the confidence and creativity necessary to address harm within a restorative framework. Rather than respond with traditional punitive measures that would make the players passive participants, Frank recognized the opportunity to empower his students to make the necessary obligations and do the hard work of transforming conflict. Even more so, his ability to convince his staff and students to follow through with this plan highlighted their interest in exploring alternative approaches to discipline.

The challenge we consistently noted was the use of restorative justice processes that could be time consuming and laborious, when traditional practices seemed more efficient and timely. Frank could have addressed the fight quickly by suspending students and removing them from the soccer team. This would not have addressed the underlying causes of harm or provided his students with a valuable experience. Additionally, they would have been vulnerable to the devastating impact of the school-to-prison pipeline (González, 2012; Hogan & Emler, 1981; Wadhwa, 2015), given that exclusionary processes further marginalize immigrant youth. Instead, he chose to engage in a time-consuming process that required extensive planning, ongoing discussions and preparation with students and staff, and a bus ride back to the neighboring school. That was all before they engaged in the emotional process of a restorative justice conference, where students listened to one another and responded with essential obligations to

restore the relationships. As Frank joked, “They would have gladly opted for the traditional model if they knew how much work restorative justice was going to be.” As a transformative practice, Frank ignored the code of conduct and community expectations. Though it was lauded by many community members, the fact remains that he challenged institutional culture and norms, opting for a restorative justice response. This may signal the desire to pursue alternative approaches to conflict because individuals are tired and disheartened by callus institutional demands and potential life-changing consequences (Gottlieb, 2016).

Even when relying on traditional disciplinary practices, such as suspensions, restorative justice values can be embedded in each step of the process. A change in focus from rules to relationships marks this shift. Nelly demonstrated this beautifully when she developed tools for students and families to use during the suspension and then invited all participants into a restorative reentry meeting. Families had access to guiding questions to complete with their children as they reflected on the incident and the choices that were made. The suspension was viewed as a necessary break, not a punishment, from others and as an opportunity to recenter and recalibrate important community values. The thoughtful design and implementation, focused on restoring relationships, signaled a fundamental shift away from retributive processes.

These alternative approaches to conflict are oftentimes accepted and encouraged by district leaders and stakeholders. District leaders often herald initiatives that decrease suspension rates, boost test scores, and improve school climates. They are held accountable for these outcomes and support action that can impact issues of disproportionality. When looking into these decisions more closely, however, it is clear that district leaders fail to adequately address the underlying causes that lead to disproportionality or to make policy-level changes to address institutional causes of harm. Though Frank and Nelly created opportunities to respond

restoratively and invited broader support for these approaches, they both recognized the limited interest in changing institutional culture. “The institution does not want to change,” Frank acknowledged, while Nelly feared roll backs after the local board of education introduced new hyperconservative members. I even had one of my directors support our limited use of restorative justice practices, as long as we only focused on addressing student interpersonal conflict. “We have different values and different value systems. They are incompatible,” I wrote in my journal.

There were occasions when recovering from forms of institutional harm was a more complicated task as the absence of individuals to offer amends left a void in this process. In these situations, the role of collective restorative contemplation became a critical process to access healing for us as individuals. As I faced my childhood harms as a new immigrant to the United States, I needed a process that would be a source of healing for me as an adult. By investing in the process of collective restorative contemplation, I entered a space for self-reflection and was able to receive the recognition and validation I required from my colleagues.

Limiting Factors to Change

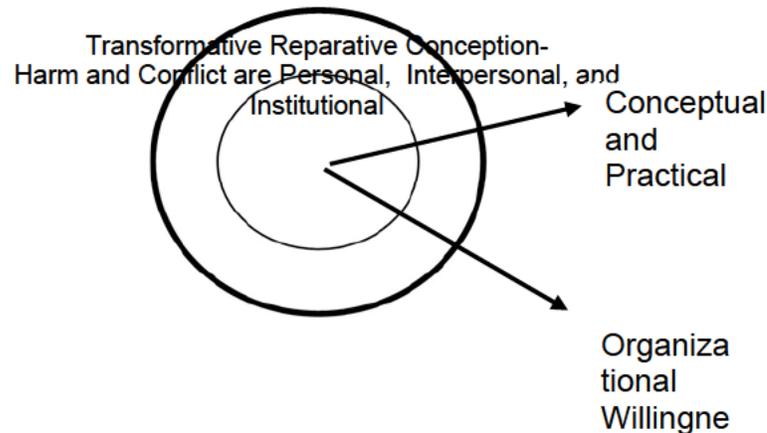
Restorative justice functions to illuminate an alternative model to the retributive paradigm that governs school culture and informs school policy and practices. As noted during our discussions, restorative justice acts as a technology of resistance, hope, and promise that is built on inclusive values and prioritizes equity across all dimensions of schooling. As a technology of resistance, we used it to counter oppressive and hegemonic cultural practices infused into the structures of schools. Leveraging this technology to sustain institutional change required our ability to understand and strategically navigate constraints and barriers associated with two important limiting factors: our conceptual and practical understanding of restorative

justice and the organization's willingness to support initiatives aligned with restorative justice (Figure 2).

By describing these two elements, I was able to crystallize the challenges we would face that would affect our ability to implement or extend initiatives. To be clear, we felt we had limited power within our organizations, and creating opportunities to further our goals was the substance of many of our conversations.

Figure 2

Restorative Justice Conception Model



This model became useful to me as I began to wonder about the opportunities and limitations I experienced within Twin Ponds. More specifically, I wanted to learn to navigate my unique context, manage local resources and support, and extend the impact of these initiatives. I also found the model useful to identify the limits I was experiencing when trying to advance initiatives in my school and community. I asked, what opportunities exist to enhance and extend our impact? What factors are inhibiting progress? This model served as a visual aid to inform my decisions and to make sense of the obstacles I was confronting as a school leader in a community that was often hostile to restorative justice and progressive initiatives. Specifically, it was useful to interrogate the impact of the superintendent and the board of education—proxies for the

community they were selected to serve and gatekeepers to institutional policies and practices—on advancing local initiatives and identifying strategies to open pathways of dialogue for understanding and support.

Conceptual and Practical Understanding

There is extensive research that details the failure to implement restorative justice effectively due to limited understanding or misunderstanding of this counter-cultural worldview (Anfara et al., 2013; Cremin, 2013; Gregory & Evans, 2020). Sustaining institutional change required extending our (and key stakeholders') conceptual and practical understanding of restorative justice. Through formal and informal channels, we worked to equip ourselves, our colleagues, and others on the benefits of restorative justice. As we reflected on our progress, we also noted important omissions that often limited our collective impact.

Each of the participants in this study shared frustrations with traditional retributive processes, which did not satisfactorily address patterns of conflict because they failed to address the underlying causes of harm and further marginalized immigrant youth. Additionally, we pursued alternative processes to address high rates of recidivism while strengthening relationships, limiting exclusionary practices, and reinforcing prosocial behaviors. We wanted a relational model that would serve to establish consistency and safety for all our students and replace failed strategies and approaches with new ones that would reinforce healthy relationships, connectedness, and mutuality. We were not satisfied with traditional processes and were frustrated by the dissonance we experienced between our values and the outcomes we were noting.

Early on in my career, I explored relational models of discipline, but I had not formalized my understanding or organized my language to describe what I was doing and what I was hoping

to achieve. I believe this sentiment was true for many of the participants in the study. Through our years as school leaders, we were aware of many systemic practices that disproportionately affected many of our marginalized youth, students who were vulnerable to strategies that worked to force their assimilation. The effects of institutional barriers and bureaucratic processes were clearly impacting immigrant youth, many of whom felt disenfranchised, marginalized, or attacked within the community. Over time, I began to see these practices subtly operating within my school community, often enacted by caring and thoughtful educators. Sometimes, I was responsible for reinforcing these harmful strategies myself. As we gained greater insight and experience in our schools, we began to experiment with alternative approaches to support our students and staff with mixed results. I recall an immigrant student who was diagnosed with oppositional-defiant disorder who spent countless hours in my office. Teachers would criticize my approach, claiming that he was playing in the office rather than receiving some form of punishment. “Students should be afraid of going to the principal’s office” was a common criticism and one with which I wholeheartedly disagreed. As this example shows, these approaches were usually unconventional and contested by our staff, while traditional models were accepted and defended as the norm. To be honest, when we deviated from these norms, our practices were often questioned and confronted by our colleagues. When we discovered restorative justice, we were given a formal framework, supported with research and embedded with language and processes that aligned with our values. As Nelly expressed countless times, “it felt intuitively like the right work to be doing to me.”

A deeper understanding of both restorative justice and its application in schools was initially gained through study and experience, primarily through community circles. Each participant found multi-day workshops and trainings, both in-person or virtual, as we sought

proficient guides to give us a basic understanding of restorative justice, processes, and practices aligned with these values. Interestingly, these workshops were conducted in groups as the collective process was an essential component, and modeling was a necessary element. There was value to participation in a collaborative process, where readings, video simulations, modeling, and controlled exercises offered us our first opportunity to engage in restorative justice discussions and practices. We began to broaden our understanding of harm, describing various forms that impact students on a regular basis. This opened the opportunity to begin to interrogate the sources of conflict, leading us to identify institutional practices and policies. We learned to question taken-for-granted elements in schools, such as the code of conduct, grading practices, and attendance policies and noted the language and underlying logic that reinforced a retributive paradigm.

A major contribution to my learning occurred through our participation in the year-long study. The collective dialogue through restorative contemplation reinforced key ideas and opened up new spaces for self-reflection and application. The monthly meetings were a space for personal reflection, where we shared anecdotes that influenced our development and processed the feelings associated with these events. This was also a space for accountability, where we disclosed shortcomings and inconsistencies in our practice. As we gained a deeper understanding of harm, especially institutional harm, and its consequences, we began to envision a community formally organized around different values and principles. An ethic of care and belonging had begun to replace performative ethics, which were based on rules and organizational values.

The biggest challenge we consistently faced was not only our learning but inviting our staff to learn with us and explore the use of restorative justice in schools and classrooms. Through invitation, or sometimes expectation, we encouraged our staff to partner with us to

explore the use of restorative justice in our schools. This was usually met with mixed results as teachers fell across the continuum of interest. As Nelly recognized, her teachers agreed to follow through with the easy situations but demanded a more retributive response on severe behavioral incidents. This resonated with me as I had teachers question my practice, demanding I be hard on kids.

Nelly, Frank, and Casey all had the benefit of a restorative justice coordinator working with them to model the use of restorative practices with staff and directly engage with students and staff. This guide and instructor was invaluable to teach explicit processes, highlight visible demonstrations of values and principles, and model aspects of the ongoing work among students and staff. They recognized the value of this individual, noting the difficulty of embedding these practices into the school without them. I, on the other hand, did not have access to additional trained staff to support our initiatives. A small group of teachers went through a formal training, and it was difficult to extend the learning to others. For me, despite multiple requests, the lack of resources for adequate training and broader support for restorative justice limited our ability to expand our impact to other members of our community.

A second challenge we noted was the unintentional omission of key staff in our training. As school leaders, we focused on equipping our classroom teachers with the skills to implement restorative justice in the classroom. We noted that additional staff, namely office personnel, custodians, and paraprofessionals had not received any formal training. Casey noted the integral role these individuals play on a daily basis, interacting with students, families, and staff. By not including them in our training, we also sent a message to the rest of the staff, reinforcing the social hierarchy in schools. Though unintentional, there was an impact on community dynamics. In response, Casey made a conscious effort to call all employees “educators,” including

custodians and office personnel, acknowledging their role and contributions. I followed closely behind, deconstructing the arbitrary social hierarchy by articulating this change. Though there is still more to accomplish, the cultural shift within the school could be felt immediately.

We were sometimes frustrated by the limited time allocated to staff development and the resources available to support their learning. As a key goal in my community, I sought and created opportunities to embed the learning process organically among my staff, with mixed results. I did not consistently have time during formal teacher in-service days to support this initiative. Casey was right to question this obstacle: “It’s such a critical part of our community and like, how do you intentionally build in time for that?” I noted how my district prioritized accountability measures, such as improved test scores, decreased office referrals, or increased attendance rates during these days. This inevitably resulted in the prioritization of activities that directly impacted these measures. When the limited time for professional development had been allotted, there was little to no time available to support inclusive efforts. Sadly, it seemed that there was a misunderstanding of the impact restorative justice can have on these important school measures.

In this environment, there was an apparent need for ongoing learning and training to implement restorative justice processes with fidelity and integrity. Initially, we needed to personally work out the shift from retributive systems of control to restorative environments. I began this journey tentatively because I did not fully understand the scope of the work that was necessary. I began with a focus on interpersonal conflict and a cursory understanding of harm. It was by participating in community circles and debriefing with my staff that I began to experience the positive impact and the potential to rearrange social relations among students. If this simple process could create opportunities for children to value one another, patiently and

kindly accepting one another's limitations, reinforcing every person's capacity to contribute, if given the appropriate space, then there was much more to learn by sitting quietly and listening. This opened the dialogue between teachers to discuss the extension of these social dynamics within the classroom and into other learning spaces. By leveraging relationships, I was able to expose arbitrary systemic practices that limited opportunities for students and invited teachers to reimagine learning spaces organized around inclusion and equity.

To instill lasting institutional change, there is also the added need to educate community members, the board of education, and the superintendent about restorative justice and its benefits. In discussion with the other participants, I shared school and district opportunities to embed restorative justice initiatives into the schools, but I failed to convince the superintendent of their worth and merit. In hindsight, I failed to engage him and the board of education on the value of restorative justice practices. I quickly learned that without their support, I would not have permission to invest in these activities or access to resources to further our implementation. It seems that they were influenced by their limited understanding and misinformation from various media outlets as stories decrying the failures of restorative justice gained national attention (Lanum, 2022; McKay, 2020). What I did not foresee was their active rejection and overt hostility to opportunities to support these initiatives. My growing understanding of the micropolitical climate in Twin Ponds and national trends in education against progressive initiatives helped me recognize the real obstacles that I was facing in suggesting systemic change. Many disinterested and disinvested members of the community, after all, leveraged their positional authority and control to make decisions that opposed inclusion and equity.

Current political trends continue to conflate restorative justice with progressive "woke" initiatives, such as critical race theory (Grossman, 2022). In polarized communities, such as

Twin Ponds, there is little to gain and much to lose when openly supporting these projects. Fear and retaliation from community stakeholders, who elect and monitor board members and the superintendent, is reason enough to distance oneself from these initiatives. Frank noted that when policy changes are not mandated by the state department of education and without real conviction from the superintendent or the board of education, the adoption of restorative justice practices is often abandoned. In my attempts to further restorative justice initiatives in Twin Ponds, I failed to pursue the opportunity to have the superintendent endorse our projects and openly support them before the board of education. His limited understanding of restorative justice, the influence of hyperconservative media outlets, and his unwillingness to spend his political capital to support these projects frustrated our efforts. It was clear that without a strong advocate at the central office, the board of education would not appreciate the goals, nor would they support this work.

A call to support restorative justice processes initially frustrated members of our school communities as retributive conceptions of discipline were the only paradigms that they knew and had experienced. As new strategies delegitimize prevailing institutional practices, there is a harsh and pointed response by members of the community who value and uphold traditional processes. Teachers, parents, board members, and central office staff did not fully grasp the new proposition that we were promoting or the overall benefits to all members of the community. Their experience, after all, had reinforced traditional models of discipline, and they believed in its ability to maintain order and control. It seems that members of the community believed that retributive justice and hierarchies of power constituted a stable foundation to support the educational process, since rules and policies of control have historically shaped the educational enterprise. A reorganization to prioritize people and relationships felt unstable.

Organizational Willingness and Support

The second factor that informs implementation is the organization's willingness to support initiatives by investing resources and partnering with us. Each of us had varying levels of commitment from district leadership, and this support depended on their comfort level with each initiative. The level of commitment informed the strategies we were able to use to engage our communities in restorative justice.

It was obvious that we all had various levels of support from the superintendent, and we feared potential disruption from board members who did not grasp our goals. The national political climate, in a reversal of previous support of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives after the death of George Floyd, had soured against initiatives that challenged the social hierarchy by pointing to inequities in important systems. Strong support in meritocracy, American exceptionalism, and American nationalism shifted resources and support away from pedagogies that challenged disproportionality. In this wake, growing support for restorative justice waned. Nelly and I, for example, constantly feared decisions by newly elected board members that would reject our initiatives. I was frustrated by arbitrary obstacles and constant rejection from the superintendent.

The recent culture shift in public education, away from democratic values associated with inclusion and diversity, has complicated our ability to further change. Education has become the latest battlefield, where strong political polarization and toxic partisanship unravels initiatives focused on equity. It seems that there is a strong swing towards promoting and defending the American imaginary (El-Haj, 2015), where values of assimilation and fabricated stories of our diverse past are promoted, and issues related to diversity and inclusion are seen as obstacles. In a recent communication with Frank, we discussed this shift, noting the negative impact on diverse

communities, where the political climate has reversed many progressive initiatives. Interestingly, we noted the slow response from district leadership to counter this movement or defend important initiatives that support equity through inclusion. It seems as if they are unaware, unprepared, or unwilling to mediate the polarization that has compromised our schools (personal communication, February 21, 2023).

Within this context, it became apparent that board members and superintendents would minimize personal risks and not support radical initiatives that disrupted the status quo. For them, there was little to gain and much to lose from supporting initiatives that members of the community rejected, even when these initiatives had the potential to positively impact marginalized students. After the board of education made the decisions to invest in an equity audit for the district, purchase library resources to increase the representation of marginalized communities, and hire a consultant to support building leadership, there was a quick reversal due to community pressure. These were, after all, voluntary decisions, and they were not pleased with these attempts to subvert traditional American values and narratives. The strong political swing back has had devastating consequences in my community as racism and discrimination went uncontested.

This stance limited the opportunities to extend our work. The superintendent would tolerate local-level projects that would not interfere with his ability to manage the school district. Once these projects grew in scale, however, he would not hesitate to use his positional authority to eliminate or obstruct their expansion. I was well aware of these practices, after facing opposition to my diversity training and restorative justice pilot program grant. Moving forward with these initiatives came at great personal and professional costs as I experienced heightened surveillance and formal disciplining.

At times, we return to the status quo of operations when we allow the organization to operate in its natural form. There is ease and efficiency when we fall in line. The status quo, after all, is sustained by institutional practices that protect dearly held values through daily operations. We knew that disrupting homeostasis required a great deal of energy, intentionality, and consistency. Sustaining these elements became nearly impossible when we experienced time pressure, limited resources, and overall stress. For Frank, the demands of managing the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis sapped his energy, and in his words, “[he] was not restorative.” We all shared similar experiences. When I added personal family stress to the equation, maintaining and sustaining restorative initiatives no longer felt like a priority.

In our discussions, it was evident that Casey was one of the only members of our group able to challenge and change institutional and district policies. Through years of resistance and coalition building, she had cultivated the necessary power and influence to contest practices that discriminated against her students, such as standardized testing. She would add that previous leaders had used their professional capital to create the opportunities she needed to challenge taken-for-granted practices within her school community.

She enjoyed minimal district-level interference. Though the structure of New York City schools differs greatly from small suburban or rural school districts, there were additional elements that allowed her to address harmful institutional practices and policies. She would point to the strong coalition that she had developed among other international school principals across the city. Serving a solely immigrant population, these schools shared common characteristics and beliefs about the educational process. The principals leveraged this commonality to consolidate their power and exercised their influence over decisions that would impact them. Having

organized, they were able to leverage their collective power to support inclusion and equity in their schools.

There was also a long-standing pattern of autonomy, for which she thanked her many predecessors. Previous generations of school leaders had eroded the city's control over their decisions, allowing Casey the freedom to pursue progressive initiatives, such as restorative justice, to influence her community. This also allowed her to challenge institutional policies, creatively checking the impact on her students. "I do believe that, like, it's easier for me to talk about restorative justice, do restorative justice, because it's something that I can implement on every level...because we have autonomy," she said. District policies lose their power when they are unsupported by local school leaders and become meaningless. Though she is still mandated to adhere to these policies, Casey can leverage her autonomy to minimize the impact on her students and staff.

Epilogue: Six Months Later

On Friday, January 20, 2023, I had the opportunity to meet up with Casey and Frank through Google Meet. Nelly was unavailable due to an emergency in her school. It had been six months since we had presented our preliminary findings at the National Conference for Restorative Justice in Chicago. Casey and Frank were working from their respective offices in Red Hook, New York, and Mountain Top, Colorado. It was good to be in community with them again, though the meeting served as a reminder of the difficulties we faced to sustain practices that allowed us to engage in collective restorative contemplation. A comment Casey made during our study seemed appropriate once again: "You have to make space for this work, you have to get rid of stuff. Teachers and schools are already so packed with stuff, get rid of things to build."

Frank started the conversation by updating us on his children. Matt, his oldest son, had spent a few months in Costa Rica, learning the language, surfing, and doing yoga. It was a valuable experience as his Western worldview was challenged by people from other parts of the world. There were different ways of doing things, and he was beginning to understand the nature of diversity and diverse perspectives. He was back in Mountain Top, finishing up his senior year and taking classes at the local community college. The partnership between the public school and community college allowed students to get hands-on training while completing their coursework to earn their high school diploma. He was learning snow grooming and forest fire prevention.

His journey challenged many of the beliefs and assumptions that Frank and his partner have held about schooling and education. Though they continue to wrestle with the value of high school requirements in English and science classes, they are learning to give him the space he needs to explore his interests and develop the critical thinking skills that will practically serve him in the future. They are open to the possibility that these skills can be learned in different ways and that the traditional model of schooling does not meet everyone's needs. Jake, their younger son, who is an apparently gifted student, has also explored different forms of learning through the school, community college, and online. Sadly, though Frank and his partner continue to advocate for his children and their learning, they often threaten the use of legal counsel when individuals reject proposals that are not aligned with institutional culture, policies, and practices. Though Mountain Top High School has adopted restorative justice practices, they continue to fail to see the harm they cause when they limit opportunities for children who do not conform to their standards or make the necessary accommodations without legal threats from parents. There is still more work to do within this institution.

Casey shared positive news as she updated us on Red Hook International High School and the large number of immigrant youth enrolling in her school. Staff have continued to access resources to support their students and offer creative programming to meet their needs. She identified the benefit of working in New York City, where students are given multiple options for high schools. “There is a school for everyone,” (personal communication, January 20, 2023) she shared, as over 500 city high schools offer a variety of models, programs, and designs to meet the unique needs of over 300,000 high school students. This model, however, cannot be reproduced in many suburban and rural communities, where students have limited options. Privileged families can seek out private and parochial schools, but most families have no other option than to send their children to the local high school in a one-size-fits-all model.

Over the last six months, I have gained new insights into the comments Frank and Casey shared during our year-long study about high schools. I was naive to assume that schools at each level—elementary, middle, and high school—operated under similar values and priorities. I have a daughter who is now a sophomore in high school, and a recent experience revealed the prioritization of policy and practice over care and concern for children. Though she has a 504 plan for a medical condition, teachers and school leadership refused to offer her the necessary protections because it went against their grading policy. The school principal doubled down on this decision, choosing to support his teachers rather than ensure equitable treatment for all his students. I am gaining new insights into high school culture, the prioritization of content areas, and the limited relational approach among many members of the high school staff towards their students. Outliers continue to be marginalized through practice as institutional culture, though acknowledging their unique needs and profiles, refuses to change policies in an effort to maintain fairness and equality.

Chapter 7: Implications and Recommendations From the Research

Introduction

I began this study with the broad question, “As principals, what can we learn together and from one another about the use of restorative justice to establish environments that support the development of a culture of care for immigrant students as we continue to grow and evolve in our capacity as school leaders?” As I look back over the year and consider the valuable lessons learned with dedicated colleagues, I am both encouraged by the potential to shift school cultures into new inclusive spaces and concerned about the growing political polarization impacting our schools. The combination of a media campaign aimed at conflating restorative justice with critical race theory and other “woke” liberal agendas with the growing influence from hyperconservative members of our communities does not bode well for future implementation efforts. As leaders, we find ourselves constantly trying to navigate a complex and complicated educational landscape, where equity and inclusion occupy a liminal space.

This study drew attention to the strategies school leaders use to minimize the impact of subtle technologies to control and discipline immigrants and their communities who reject traditional structures of schooling that don't recognize or value their experiences. These technologies have become accepted and protected elements in our schools, maintained by those in authority who hold institutional privilege. At the same time, this environment is a contested space, filled with hope and reinforced by our developing critical awareness and growing coalition of supporters. I journaled,

The study is interested in capturing school leaders’ practice, aimed at addressing assimilationist agendas in schools through restorative justice. Schools are envisioned to be sites for transformation, growth, and curiosity, with the purpose of equipping children

with the skills and knowledge to engage as democratic citizens. The problem, however, is that assimilationist ideologies, enacted through technologies of control and discipline, negatively impact all members of the community.

This study was never a study to document our capacity as school leaders. It was a testament to what is possible within our schools under current polarized political circumstances to support some of our most vulnerable students. As a researcher and practitioner, this project was about informing and enhancing my practice.

In this final chapter, I will discuss the implications of this study on principal practice and offer recommendations for future research into restorative justice and school leadership. I believe these contributions can inform current dialogue and practice in schools and shape future research into restorative justice in education.

Implications for Practice

As I consider the practical implications from our PAR study, I constantly return to three critical conclusions drawn from this study that offer hope and optimism: learning how to manage our hyperpolarized educational spaces, the use of collective restorative contemplation to heal and develop strategic action, and the role of restorative justice in schools that serve immigrant youth.

Managing Hyperpolarized Educational Spaces

I regularly read through the news and scan articles about school districts that are wrestling with the implementation of restorative justice, often opting for harsher and more punitive measures to manage students when they feel these initiatives fail or lose support from the community. Headlines read, “Schools face pressure to take harder line on discipline” (Chamberlain, 2023), “COVID is making it harder for schools to practice restorative justice” (McKim, 2022), and “Schools face pressure to step up discipline” (Ma & Finley, 2023), citing

high rates of discipline referrals, mixed results using restorative approaches, and continued growing public opposition to restorative justice. I wonder if it is just poor, inconsistent implementation, limited support from district officials, a lack of adequate tools to measure progress, or unclear expectations that continue to raise concerns about the role restorative justice can have in our communities. Sadly, it seems that growing movements focused on progressive initiatives are too often derailed because of the influence of hyperconservative community members who advocate for nationalistic community values, such as “tough on crime” attitudes. Their sophisticated use of technologies to control and discipline students and staff who challenge institutional cultural norms is nothing new.

These criticisms, confirmed by the participants in the study, can affect attitudes and support for restorative justice as individuals from across the political landscape honestly question restorative justice’s efficacy, coupled with their responsibility to the broader community. When society is working to address pressing social problems, individuals look for guidance to know what to support, whom to listen to, and how to respond appropriately. At the moment, there is a lot of noise around restorative justice, with substantial unfair criticism, but there are also important questions to consider.

For the participants in this study, this was not a distant concern as we had first-hand experience navigating a hyperpolarized educational landscape. As leaders working in diverse communities, we constantly encountered opposition from various stakeholders as we tried to advance initiatives rooted in restorative justice. We could see and articulate the positive impact initiatives were having in our communities. Improved relationships, attitudes towards learning, and overall satisfaction from students and staff were markers that encouraged continued

investment. Getting the message out is sometimes complicated, and pushing against institutional policies that maintain systems of control can be dangerous.

Through our year-long study, we learned how to work strategically to support these initiatives, leveraging our skills and resources to make space for them. More importantly, we discussed how to get buy-in from important stakeholders, who are the gatekeepers, validating these projects and providing resources to maintain the work. Though, at times, this felt like we were catering to their unique needs, it seemed like a necessary compromise to advance these initiatives. Other times, we learned how to mask these projects, using language that was not offensive, to hide the transformative impact on our communities. We knew we were disrupting unhealthy power dynamics and challenging systems of control, offering a new way to relate and promote different community values.

As we continue to see the attacks occurring in educational spaces from ideologically hyperconservative individuals, it is imperative that we continue to discuss how to navigate this complex landscape. Misunderstanding and distrust have eroded relationships between school leaders and community members to a critical level. A new way forward is necessary, which will require a great deal of courage and creativity. Restorative justice can offer a solution if we remember to maintain an open posture and invite all individuals with their unique perspectives to the table as equals. This space is defined by inclusivity and equity, or as Casey reminds us, “Everyone has to be there. Otherwise it’s not restorative justice.”

However, we need to also recognize the growing threat from hyperconservative members of the community and respond appropriately. We are proposing a new paradigm for institutions, which can become extremely unsettling for those accustomed to power and privilege. As practitioners and educational leaders interrogate existing institutional practices and policies,

calling attention to ways they maintain systems of control and discipline immigrant youth, we draw more criticism and attention to ourselves and our work. We cannot underestimate the visceral response or the lengths people will take to undermine these projects.

What became apparent to me throughout this study was the lack of formal training focused on community organizing as a strategy to create lasting change. These skills would allow us to leverage our collective power to support and protect important initiatives, especially when we faced opposition from powerful groups. Without clear goals, and without understanding basic organizing principles to inform action, we will continue to be limited in our response when we face opposition. As a principal, I have often operated in a silo, disconnected from broader social movements and organizations working towards change. This is a dangerous position because as an individual, I can be easily controlled, silenced, or marginalized within the institution. From my experience, those in power can disrupt initiatives or co-opt the work. School leaders can fail to access and utilize valuable resources to support ongoing implementation efforts. I see the need for collective action within districts, but there is also value for developing coalitions across districts. Regardless, a space to practice collective restorative contemplation is a necessary and valuable first step.

Collective Restorative Contemplation

An important element to the success of our PAR study was based on our ability to engage in collective restorative contemplation. More than a professional learning community, collective restorative contemplation offered a combination of unique elements to reinforce solidarity, understanding, and encouragement. Grounded in four key principles—practicing vulnerability, “head and heart” integration, collective accountability, and strategic action—collective restorative contemplation served as an important catalyst for change.

It is important to create spaces where individuals can deliberately invest in cultivating these values and consistently put them into practice. On a regular basis, we were pulled to attend to emergencies and pressing issues in our schools. In school environments, it is often difficult to create a space for thoughtful reflection, especially when you are trying to coordinate schedules with other school leaders, some who live in a different time zone. During the study, our monthly meetings served as a valuable oasis, where we could find connection, share our concerns, and ultimately learn from one another. As a principal for 17 years, I can appreciate how unique this space really was. Sadly, once the study had concluded and we were done presenting at the NACRJ Conference, our busy schedules took over, and we did not make the time to continue to meet. It has been a real loss as I recognize that I could constantly count on this group for support and direction. Though we failed to prioritize our monthly meetings, I can still appreciate the need to maintain intentionality and a commitment to this collective process.

This study also underscored the opportunity to extend the invitation to create additional groups focused on collective restorative contemplation. There was value in broadening my network to include other school leaders who are working to make substantive changes in their schools. I can appreciate the need to identify partners in similar roles who will support and encourage these practices. Their unique perspectives and experiences are valuable resources for strategic action.

Schools Serving Immigrant Students

Finally, school leaders that serve immigrant students and their families will continue to need to create inclusive spaces, where all children can experience authentic belonging. Leaders will need to continue to identify and confront assimilationist practices and policies that are grounded in essentialized notions of nationalism. Subtractive strategies and coercive

relationships will need to be questioned and challenged. These technologies have only reinforced deficit views of immigrant youth, their families, and their home cultures and have been a source of harm for countless generations.

This study highlights the need to pursue equity for immigrant youth through inclusion, not assimilation. Restorative justice is a technology of resistance rooted in equity through inclusion. As noted earlier, I would be surprised to find school and district leaders who do not support the notion of equity. There is a massive investment of time and resources to improve outcomes for all students and address disproportionality. However, equity through assimilation is a failed response, as documented through important research. The use of subtractive strategies and coercive relationships among immigrant youth only reinforces a deficit mindset and results in the loss of important sources of cultural and social capital.

On an individual level, equity through inclusion positions individuals in healthy relationships and addresses their underlying social and emotional needs. New spaces are created where individuals are valued for their unique contributions, opinions, and ideas. Students learn to listen to understand one another and reinforce practices that support belonging. In these spaces, school leaders learn to leverage their professional knowledge and community resources to make lasting change.

On an institutional level, equity through inclusion confronts various forms of systemic injustices that maintain systems of control. The use of restorative justice practices models the intentional reorganizing of society by explicitly addressing social injustices, confronting policies and practices that maintain systems of control and discipline, and centering relationships over rules within organizational culture. There is an opportunity to redress historic injustices and current trends that continue to marginalize immigrant youth in American institutions. We are not

just addressing the symptoms of disproportionality but attacking the underlying causes that maintain this system. Restorative justice can offer a path forward if we have the courage and creativity to take it.

This study suggests that the literature on culturally responsive school leadership can be extended with a renewed focus on inclusionary practices through restorative justice. The narrow focus on shifting practices to include the needs of culturally diverse communities fails to acknowledge the opportunity to transform schools into inclusive communities. Though I can appreciate the need to incorporate practices to support and sustain diverse youth, it feels that advocates for this work are only elbowing and jostling for room in overcrowded educational spaces. These isolated strategies do not substantially address multiple underlying causes that lead to disproportionality in schools. According to Kramarczuk Voulgarides and Zwerger (2022), “existing beliefs, policies, and practices have created the environment for inequity to thrive” (p.2). Restorative justice redefines the entire educational space and all the elements incorporated into schooling and refocuses them on the goal of belonging, acknowledging the need to establish processes to address personal, interpersonal, and institutional conflict and harm. Restorative justice works to abolish historic and systemic patterns of control and offers a reimagined space where policies and practices that support immigrant youth are embedded into the structures of schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

At the conclusion of this study, I recognize the need to continue this work and extend it into new areas for research. Specifically, there is an opportunity to better understand the role and responsibility of school leadership to support restorative justice, especially in environments that are opposed to equity through inclusion. This radical shift, moving away from hierarchies of

power and privilege, can be a target of hostility and aggression. In addition, the positive impact of restorative justice initiatives on other marginalized groups can provide guidance to researchers and practitioners. As our understanding of harm continues to grow and the effects of harm become more visible, school leaders can leverage the healing properties of restorative justice with the transformational qualities embedded in critical practices to change institutional culture and outcomes for marginalized youth.

Continue Investigation into School Leadership and Restorative Justice

As we look to the future of restorative justice, the obvious first step is to acknowledge the scarcity of literature with a focus on school leadership. There is a need for research focused on implementation efforts, case studies, and general topics related to restorative justice in education with an emphasis on school and district leadership. There are unique perspectives that need to be captured and recommendations that need to be considered as restorative justice becomes a viable alternative to traditional retributive practices and policies. This study begins to fill in the gap, but more work is necessary.

In addition, there is an opportunity to document the use of restorative justice as an alternative approach to specific elements in schools. A big picture look at schools is necessary to understand how schools operate to maintain power and protect privilege. However, as we continue this analysis, there is an opportunity to explore specific elements in greater detail and illuminate the transformative role of restorative justice. Namely, I believe it is necessary to interrogate specific systems of control and coercion, such as policies focused on the code of conduct, attendance, and grading to discipline students, from the perspective of those who are most responsible for implementation and who are best positioned to advocate for change within local contexts.

For example, with a group of teachers, I have begun to explore the use of restorative consequences as an alternative for dealing with student misbehavior. There is a need to interrogate the underlying values associated with the district's code of conduct and offer an alternative disciplinary model that focuses on educational, reparative, and therapeutic interventions to deal with conflict. Rather than respond with traditional retributive practices, how can a new framework for restorative consequences offer hope for improved outcomes for all members of the community? This future study will inform school leader practice and school district policy as I continue work to formally recognize the role restorative justice can have in our schools.

Extending Restorative Justice Research to Other Marginalized Groups

The focus of this study was also to document the use of restorative justice in immigrant communities. Our working definition for "immigrant" included anyone who is positioned into this category by others. It is how they are perceived by members of the dominant group that define them as immigrants. This group is not monolithic as there are multiple identities subsumed within this definition. In addition, we must recognize that the impact of retributive policies can be informed by the country/region of origin and the local context for each group. There are some groups that may be considered less desirable than others based on a variety of factors. Though this study did take into account some of this diversity, the small sample size limits our broader understanding.

Research focused on different immigrant groups would be helpful as we continue to refine our ability to understand the impact of restorative justice on different communities, especially when one takes into account their unique cultural values and relationship to those in authority. In addition, extending the research to focus on specific states or regions throughout the

United States can offer more explicit feedback to practitioners in those communities. There is no secret that Colorado, for example, is a leader in restorative justice movements and has access to important resources. Their national recognition is based on decades of work in restorative justice, formalizing practices and processes in schools. New Jersey, on the other hand, has less to draw from when implementing restorative justice in schools and a less supportive environment state-wide. This difference can account for substantial variations in the work that is being conducted and research that is being documented.

This work can also be extended to consider other marginalized communities in the United States who suffer the consequences of disproportionality. The use of restorative justice to attend to the needs of individuals with dis/abilities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and the intersection of multiple identities within school settings is necessary. These communities suffer unique harms, locally and nationally, and require the support from committed allies. Building inclusive communities through restorative justice may take unique forms in these contexts. Within school settings, we have only begun to scratch the surface.

Conclusion

“Healing that leads to action” was an invitation to an alternative process and journey, where school leaders from New Jersey, New York, and Colorado pursued restorative justice initiatives to support immigrant youth through inclusive practices. In our intimate school settings, restorative justice became a tool to counter the hegemonic and oppressive structures that continue to marginalize immigrants. As a technology of resistance, restorative justice practices served to delegitimize structures of power and hierarchies of control that have failed to meet the needs of diverse communities. By centering relationships at the core of educational practices, our

communities maintained a counter-cultural stance, though often facing threats that sought to destabilize initiatives focused on inclusion.

Practices and policies supporting assimilation and essentialized notions of nationalism remain accepted and unchallenged in many of our school settings. They are protected ideologies as they form the core of many belief systems in the United States and are embedded into institutional practices and policies within schools (El-Haj, 2015; Valenzuela, 1996). There is a real danger in maintaining them as individuals and communities develop internalized oppression and deficit thinking as a result. As I can attest, without being checked, these beliefs can have devastating consequences through the loss of identity, community connections, and cultural capital. Our failure to interrogate these beliefs and insidious practices, has resulted in the disproportionate impact on diverse communities. Contrary to some positions, I believe equity through inclusion is the only effective path to redress the injustices of the past and to create systems of support for immigrant youth and their families. Restorative justice can offer the template to achieve this goal.

“People are worthy and relational” stands at the core of restorative justice in education (Evans & Vaandering, 2016) and marks a substantive deviation from traditional models of schooling. It should be no surprise that schools are organized around retributive paradigms for social control and discipline. This is evident when you read policies related to code of conduct, attendance, standardized testing, and grading, for example. The goal to achieve standardization and assimilation have become bedrock beliefs, protected by those in power and privilege and maintained through institutional culture. In these settings, restorative justice, as an alternative model, is vehemently challenged and contested. However, there is a deep misunderstanding of restorative justice and the benefits it offers all members in our communities. I journaled,

Restorative justice is about projecting a new and radical view of relationships and inviting others to participate in processes that support this utopian perspective. It is about recognizing that the template of the world is relational, mutually giving and receiving to and from one another. It gives the world order and structure. When we invite participants into a circle process, we recognize and recommit to establishing a community on these principles. Society and current ideologies associated to neo-liberal priorities stand in contrast to the world we create through restorative justice. We deemphasize hierarchies of power, power imbalance, meritocracies—all ideologies that prioritize the individual—and embrace a form of communalism, where everyone is recognized and valued for their ideas, opinions, and contributions. This is truly counter-cultural and radical and dangerous as it challenges many of the strongly held and protected beliefs and systems in our country.

Transformational practices, embedded in everyday practices, can reshape institutional culture and foster new relational dynamics between students and school staff. One cannot fully appreciate the impact of subtle changes using restorative justice practices over technologies of discipline and control.

At the core of this study was a focus on relationships to create a space for healing and action among school leaders. It was through trusting and nurturing relationships with other leaders that we engaged in collective restorative contemplation, a process that allowed us to recognize the harms we had suffered and engage in transformational healing processes. Without initially recognizing it, this process was essential to move us towards sustainable and ethical action.

Through dialogue and collective self-reflection, we worked to maintain a liberatory posture within our schools. Freire's warning remained a vital concern for us: "Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress" (Freire, 2018, p. 178). Through processes that deepened our critical consciousness and expanded our capacity, we were positioned to lead for institutional change. Through our year-long study, we cultivated essential skills that allowed us to navigate the hyperpolarized political climate and build coalitions to support this work. As we continue to build communities founded on restorative justice, the lessons we learned from each other and with each other will serve to maintain our commitments and refine our processes. We will sustain hope.

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