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Restorative Approach in Schools:
Systemic Approaches to Building Positive School Climates

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ABSTRACT:

The release of new federal guidance for developing positive school climate and equitable discipline practices has created a window of opportunity for schools to revisit their approaches to developing the conditions for student achievement and success. (U.S. Department of Education, January 2014) Recent education leadership literature notes that many school districts' current discipline policies do not lend themselves to more equitable access to learning opportunities and positive school experiences for many students. Recent education leadership literature suggests that restorative approaches to building positive school climate are more likely to lead to more equitable academic and social-emotional outcomes for students of color and students with special needs. This paper argues that such successes are outcomes of restorative approaches to building positive school climates that focus on the development of *school connectedness* and culturally responsive practice of educators. One of the greatest insights of the restorative movement in schools has been that positive climate and discipline outcomes, as well as academic achievement, will result from whole systems approaches to positive climate initiatives. Further, while recent discussion about restorative practices in schools has focused primarily on school discipline programs, developing fair and equitable school climates through the use of restorative approaches can only be accomplished by leveraging continuous improvement of whole school change efforts, as well as long-term investments in educator learning and development.

Historical Foundations of Restorative Approaches in Schools and Communities

In *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*, Howard Zehr provides guidelines for implementing restorative justice in communities where harm of both the perceived victim and perpetrator has occurred. (Zehr, 2002, 8) Zehr asserts that restorative justice is not primarily about forgiveness and reconciliation, this is to say that forgiveness and reconciliation (while they may be byproducts of the process) are not necessarily the end goal. (Zehr, 2002, 10) Instead, the emphasis on *making amends* or *making things right* is one that values the *process* or repairing relationships that become ruptured due to wrongdoing or other harms. As pointed out by Zehr, the traditional retributive view and role of "victim" and "offender" alienates and stigmatizes "victim" and "offender." Opportunities to heal and transform conflict are generally obstructed by adversarial judicial processes. However, a restorative view allows that both "victim" and "offender" and the communities impacted by crime or wrongdoing have an opportunity to heal and learn from conflict and tragedy.

Proponents of restorative justice assert that 'victims' and 'offenders' alike need to be able to share their personal narratives in an effort to contribute to a shared narrative that helps individuals and communities learn and evolve. Although restorative justice prioritizes the needs of victim(s) when wrongdoing occurs, the broader field of restorative practices provides a framework within which one can understand (1) how to build communities that nurture and support building caring relationships across societal divides (including differences across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), (2) the delicate balance of empowerment and accountability among all persons in community with one another, and (3) the complexities of identifying who the 'victims' are when things 'go wrong'. Hence, a restorative approach to building and sustaining communities points toward an ideal of “justice” that is not focused on winning a contest or battle, but instead redefines how the community (made up of individuals and institutions) evolves using the transgression as an opportunity to learn about the needs and obligations of the ‘victim,’ the community, and the ‘victim.” (Zehr, 2002, 65 – 69)

Additionally, restorative justice honors differences in how conflict (or a disruption of good relationship) is perceived and experienced based on persons’ social and cultural contexts and experiences. Restorative practices honor the inevitability of our common and interconnected humanity (i.e., our sociality) while at the same time reckoning with the particularities or differences (for example, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and religious differences), i.e. those characteristics that create the *texture* of communities. Out of these differences emerges strength or power of the individuals and communities affected by conflict, crime or other transgression to together determine how to make things right and identify the resources they need to support the process. This ‘asset orientation’ to particularity or differences (of perspectives, identity, needs, etc.) will lead to the development of more just organizations and institutions that honor the needs and obligations of all persons in the community. (Zehr, 2002)

In the United States, the social science of restorative practices grew out of the restorative justice movement alluded to above. It is also important to note that both restorative justice and restorative practices grow out of the indigenous ways of being in community of native and aboriginal people in communities around the world. Philosophically, native and indigenous beliefs about community presuppose the inescapability of human sociality, and conflict is understood as a natural and inevitable aspect of human existence that spurs evolution. Examples of the interconnectedness of humanity can be found in existing American Indian nations, indigenous African communities, as well as New Zealand aboriginal communities. (Champagne, Duane, 2008; Gyekye, Kwame, 1996; and Kipuri, Naomi, 2009) Whether the context is familial, tribal, village-wide, national or other corporate setting, conflict and harm is considered a natural and important feature of community. Hence, through a process that is aimed at restoring relationships, persons re-envision, make amends for, and/or make restitution for harms wrongdoing to others and/or larger communal institutions.

Building Restorative Schools

The expansion of the principles of restorative justice into a broader framework of practice into other domains (as a social science) has aided schools seeking to balance proactive and responsive strategies for developing a positive school climate for learning and development. While restorative justice is a response to the wrongdoing of an ‘offender’ and is primarily focused on creating an opportunity for the ‘offender’ to repair the harm done, make amends and *restore* and/or establish good relationship with a ‘victim,’ the values that drive activities in restorative justice approaches are transferrable to the school context. (Zehr, 2002) The use of restorative justice in schools emerged approximately two decades ago in the United States in response to educators and school practitioners (including school counselors, behavioral specialists, etc.) seeking an alternative to zero tolerance discipline policies that marginalized and excluded students of color and students with disabilities. Many researchers investigating zero tolerance policies in schools have noted that there are not enough longitudinal studies to definitively summarize the longitudinal impact of zero tolerance discipline policies on school climate and discipline in schools. However, in 2008 the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance

Task Force noted that despite the positive goal of zero tolerance to improve school climate, "the implementation of zero tolerance has created continuing controversy by threatening the opportunity to learn for too many students." (American Psychologist, December 2008, 857) The prevailing wisdom is that educators seek to invest less of their effort in reacting to discipline or behavioral problems of students in the school context, and more of their time creating the conditions for positive and motivating learning experiences for students.

Credible research on restorative justice and restorative practices with youth has been documented by scholars and advocates like Belinda Hopkins in the United Kingdom, as well as Kay Pranis, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, and Carolyn Boyes-Watson in the United States. These scholars have developed seminal research and writing in the field and worked to equip communities and schools with knowledge and competencies to use restorative practices with youth since the 1990s. Their work is depicted in several publications including *The Little Book of Circle Process* (Pranis, 2005), *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline in Schools* (Amstutz & Mullett, 2005), and *Peacemaking Circles and Urban Youth* (Boyes-Watson, 2008). The work of each of these scholars has been well documented in school districts across the United Kingdom (Hopkins) and in school districts in California, Minnesota, Chicago and Massachusetts (Pranis and Boyes-Watson).

Restorative approaches to building positive school climates are consistent with the understanding that the primary purpose of schools is to *educate.* In the school context, applying restorative practices means that adults and students not only commit to a culture of high accountability, but also commit to developing the necessary cultural and academic supports (i.e. nurture and accommodations) that will provide students and adults with the greatest opportunities for learning. Restorative approaches to teaching and learning honor high expectations and personalization of approach as the basis for developing excellence and equity in educational practice thereby ensuring that **all students** receive the support they need to succeed.

As schools began to seek alternatives to punitive approaches to building positive climate, the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) emerged as one of the forerunners in the restorative schools movement in the United States. The IIRP defines restorative practices as a social science embracing the reality "that people are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes when those in authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them." (Watchel, Ted, 2013) Nonetheless, resonant throughout the wide field of restorative practice is the intentional focus on building opportunities for learning *with* others which include making investments in building systems and processes that create opportunities to deepen connections and relationships among individuals in all kinds of communities. Hence, the restorative movement in schools helps educators focus on proactive measures for building positive school climates and shifting from punitive responses for addressing harm and conflict to those that uphold the principles of restorative practice articulated in IIRP's definition above.

Belinda Hopkins, in *Just Schools: A Whole School Approach to Restorative Justice,* notes that restorative approaches to schooling create safer and happier school environments. Hopkins advances a framework of practice for schools that not only reduces conflict among students and school personnel, but also helps students develop critical social-emotional skills (that are the building blocks for becoming confident learners and responsible citizens). Focusing on a continuum of practices that aid the social and emotional skill development of students and adults, Hopkins discusses the uses of "restorative enquiry", "restorative circles" and "restorative conferences" to shift *punitive* school cultures to *restorative* school cultures that address harm and conflict with a focus on learning and building deeper community. (Hopkins, Belinda, 2003, 25-28) Boyes-Watson advances restorative circles as opportunities for promoting accountability in "three interrelated ways": adult and peer modeling of accountable behavior, youth developing a vision of themselves in the future (evolving from mistakes they made), and youth getting the vital support/direction they need to make better choices and turn "their vision into realities." Boyes-Watson warns against the negative effects of shaming and belittling as tactics for creating positive change with youth. (Boyes-Watson, 2008, 122 - 123). Amstutz and Mullet also provide guidance on implementing whole school approaches to building restorative schools that focuses on restorative circles and conferences as anchor discipline practices. They note that these practices help students and adults to understand conflict as valuable in the learning process. (Amstutz & Mullett, 2005, 33-34) Finally, Meyers and Evans assert "restorative school discipline represents a school culture that permeates all aspects of school organization and relationships within the school as well as relationships between the school and its community." From their view, restorative discipline is not an "add-on" program focused on behavior management, but one that permeates all school practice. (Meyer, Luanna H.; Evans, Ian, 2012).

A restorative approach to discipline allows individual students and the school community to understand conflict and the inevitability of harm and failure as opportunities for deeper learning about the consequences of one's choices and the impact of one's choices on others in the school community and beyond. Restorative school discipline is an approach to using social and emotional and behavioral learning interventions that allows students to reflect upon their interactions with others and themselves and to develop critical social, emotional and non-cognitive skills that help them to navigate their peer groups, their interactions with adults and the community outside of the school. To achieve these outcomes, school administrators and personnel who seek to utilize restorative approaches for building positive school climate must also use culturally responsive strategies in the administration of school discipline (which should be used as a tool for student learning). The relationship between culturally responsive education practice and restorative practices will be talked about a grater length in the section to follow. Further, in the same way teachers and administrators must support the social and emotional learning embedded in healthy discipline practices, the same care must be taken in utilizing culturally responsive strategies to support students' academic learning to create restorative classrooms.

Restorative Approaches, School Connectedness and Culturally Responsive Practice

At the heart of restorative approaches to building positive school climate is the intentional enterprise of *becoming community*. In addition to an emphasis on effective systems and structures that facilitate high achievement for students, restorative schools are characterized by positive and caring relationships among students and adults who together feel responsible for the climate of the school and accountable to one another for individual student and school success. Generally, students experience success in school when they have a strong sense of connection and belonging in the school community and have outlets to develop social and emotional wellbeing as a part of their academic experiences. Blum notes, "Critical requirements for feeling connected include high academic rigor and expectations coupled with support for learning, positive adult-student relationships, and physical and emotional safety." (Blum, Robert, 2005). Within positive and supportive relationships with adults in school, students develop a sense of belonging, trust and safety that allows them to take risks and develop resiliency in the learning process. *School connectedness* (i.e. the belief of students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals) is a key factor in student academic success and the development of social and emotional health. (Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., 1997; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010) For every student, the school is acknowledged as a social community where they each belong and where academic and behavioral failures and challenges are addressed through supportive, educational interventions.

Further, the racial, cultural, linguistic, social, and historical backgrounds of students (and their families), in relation to teachers' and school leaders' backgrounds, have a significant impact on how students acquire knowledge and learn, and on how they perceive school. A critical factor to consider is how cultural differences among students and adults in the classroom and school environment impact *school connectedness*. It is important that instructional strategies for students are developed with the understanding that both teaching and learning are influenced by cultural backgrounds and experiences. In districts with a wide variety of cultures, languages, and races, establishing connections with students may be challenging. However, teachers must learn and consistently employ culturally responsive strategies for engaging students in both academic and social-emotional learning. Ladson-Billings notes, "using a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" is an important part of creating esteem and confidence in the classroom. (Ladson-Billings, Gloria, 2009)

Underlying restorative approaches to building positive school climate is the expectation that education in schools generally goes beyond a focus on helping students develop academic proficiency, cognitive skills, and subject area knowledge. Social and emotional competencies that lead to greater success in school and beyond, including the mastery of self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relational and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2012), are a part of the teaching and learning that happens in schools. Teaching and learning focused on social-emotional skill development are critical building blocks for supporting students in their navigation of the learning environment in the classroom and in the world beyond the school. Hence, instructional practices must ultimately yield to students' ability to utilize both academic content knowledge and social emotional competencies to problem-solve in their real world contexts, as well as make responsible and ethical decisions through active engagement with others in their communities.

To support the above outcomes for students, it is critical that teachers and school administrators develop safe classrooms and school environments within which students feel comfortable taking the necessary risks to explore opportunities to apply both types of learning. The ability of teachers and school personnel to utilize students' cultures and experiences as assets for learning is an important competency for developing a restorative school environment. Adults in restorative school environments are responsible for helping students develop the sense of belonging and esteem requisite for motivated learning in and beyond school communities. It is important to help school personnel understand the impact of cultural assumptions about students and their families in the administration of discipline as well. Teachers and school personnel who wish to develop restorative schools must re-conceptualize traditional approaches to school discipline, by developing and implementing new discipline strategies that are culturally responsive. Learning and development for teachers and school personnel must encompass opportunities for teachers to learn about the historical cultural and social impacts of schooling and traditional discipline on target student groups, particularly students of color and students with disabilities.

Internal Assets and External Opportunities for Leveraging Restorative School Change

Recent federal policy guidance focused on developing positive school climate and discipline equity has opened up new dialogue among school district administrators and researchers that can serve as platform for changes in the way that school districts and administrators begin to build more restorative schools. One of the most important aspects of the dialogues happening within state and local policy discussions is the allocation of resources and time to support the success of restorative initiatives in schools. Implementing restorative processes and frameworks of practice in schools are complex and long-term change initiatives that will require the active support of all school stakeholder groups, significant financial commitments of a school's budget, and professional development/coaching (that includes ongoing feedback as a part of monitoring, assessment and evaluation of educator practice). Therefore, public schools hoping to implement and sustain restorative practices must think of their work in terms of long-term systemic change.

With respect to developing organizational change strategies, school administrators leading restorative change initiatives should identify strategies that will not only lead to the best student achievement outcomes, but also lead to students' ability to succeed in colleges and universities or post-secondary careers. Many current state level policies and initiatives, and therefore school (and district) structures and systems must be aligned with the practice of restorative approaches in schools and communities. Alignment requires both a focused and intentional effort to shift the broader consciousness of policymakers and the mindset and individual practice of educators. Districts must plan for long-term financial and human capital development to create new paradigms of practice. Many states, including those who have been early supporters of restorative practices in schools, such as California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania, are finding that there are historical patterns of school administration (driven by outdated state education policies and district structures) that threaten their efforts to develop more restorative school environments for students. Long held ways of "doing school" embedded in traditional state education policies and district systems and structures threaten the improvement of instructional practice and building positive school culture using restorative approaches. Hence, best practice models from the aforementioned states must be disseminated across the country supported by partnerships between district schools, private foundations and universities.

It follows that the shifts in practice for school administrators, teachers and other school personnel choosing to develop and sustain restorative initiatives will require thoughtful and strategic engagement of existing structures and systems that once supported more punitive approaches to culture-building and discipline in schools. Opportunities to yield measureable positive impact will require thoughtful resource and human capital investments. District-level leadership teams must facilitate and provide ongoing professional development and coaching for school administrators, faculty and staff. Specifically, district-level leadership teams or school leadership teams can focus on the alignment of core areas of teacher practices in particular (such as instructional practices, social and emotional skill development, classroom management/culture-building, etc.) to restorative approaches to building and sustaining healthy classrooms and school environments.

Further, new restorative practices must be monitored and evaluated which will also require and investment in restorative practices research, the development of expertise in education administration and teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities, and a commitment to longitudinal studies conducted by districts that take on restorative approaches. As with other proposed approaches for creating positive cultures of achievement for students, the implementation and continuous improvement of restorative practices needs to be supported by researchers, practitioners and advocates who are in continual dialogue about the impact and outcomes of restorative approaches to school development. In addition, district and school administrators must learn how to measure the impact of restorative practices in order to monitor the efficacy of restorative approaches in schools. Fostering continuous improvement of restorative practice requires developing credible key performance indicators that are a part of integrated plans for school improvement. These metrics should include measures of student academic performance, social-emotional skills development, non-cognitive skills development, and college and university completion.

Finally, there must also be close alignment of public resources and community supports with whole school restorative change initiatives. In addition to recently administered federal grants for state and local education agencies that wish to focus on school climate transformation initiatives, private funding to support school climate and culture initiatives in public schools (including public charters) may be available from foundations like the Robert Wood Foundation, and other state and local foundations. This funding can support both training from regional and national centers like the Center for Restorative Justice (CRJ) at Suffolk University in Boston, Massachusetts and Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) in Oakland, California, as well as provide an opportunity to join networks of schools and community agencies that work in partnership such as in the case of Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice (IBARJ).

Systemic Challenges to Restorative Movements in Public Schools

Many school administrators and personnel do not yet have the competencies to develop restorative school communities and administer restorative (and therefore, less punitive and non-exclusionary) discipline programs for students. Ongoing professional development for school administrators, teachers and school personnel (focused on developing culturally responsive practice and learning how to nurture school connectedness for students) is critical for implementing and sustaining restorative school practice. Currently, many school districts and school personnel are not adept with typical organizational development and management skills. The allocation of financial and human resources required for the management of change processes in schools has not historically been a priority in many school districts. Some scholars have noted that change and process management practices in schools are largely dysfunctional and ineffective. Many of the practices that will help schools to manage whole school change are not a part of the repertoire of typical school administrators.

Similar to earlier restorative movements in the criminal justice system, the lack of effective federal, state and district-level funding strategies at the beginning of whole school change using restorative approaches could be problematic for schools. As alluded to in the previous section, among other issues that limit the ability of school administrators to successfully implement restorative initiatives are the resources needed for professional development of school personnel, new systems development and managing change. While state departments of education and local education agencies were recently offered opportunities to apply for a limited pool of federal funding to support the development of positive school climates (Federal Registry of Grants, May 7, 2014), broader impact on school outcomes across the United States will require deeper investments of federal and state funding in partnership with private foundation funding. Lack of access to federal and state dollars for charter schools (that have received increased criticism for their inequitable discipline practices and must compete with school districts for the limited funding opportunities) may also cause financial and resource stress as charters consider changes in their approach and practice.[1]

Lastly, there are competing mandates from states to raise teacher/administrator competency in critical and important areas of practice, including developing common core-aligned curriculum and teaching, new student assessment preparation (like PARCC), as well as the administration of new educator evaluation frameworks that more clearly measure the impact of administrators and teachers on student learning. In many of our public schools (both traditional and charter), there are several areas of needed focus and growth that compete for valuable administrator and teacher time and resources.

Conclusion

Developing and sustaining restorative schools is complex work for school administrators, teachers and school personnel that is, in many ways, countercultural to more traditional approaches to schooling. The shift toward restorative school development requires professional development that allows school administrators, teachers and school personnel to make critical shifts in their mindsets and approaches to enhancing student efficacy in an outside of the school environment, including (but not limited to) fostering school connectedness and developing culturally responsive practice. Opportunities for school administrators and teachers to learn and develop new restorative approaches to developing schools must be supported by intentional changes in the way communities and policymakers understand the ‘schooling process.’ Creating needed changes in state and district-level policies and leadership practices, allocating sufficient financial and human resources, revising teacher preparation and education administration program curricula, creating dialogue among researchers, advocates and practitioners, as well as refocusing district and school-based professional development programs on restorative practices, are among the strategies required to support the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools and the long-term positive impact on school connectedness and student achievement.

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[1] Current public charter school funding is largely dependent on per pupil allocations and the relative wealth and affluence of the city/district from which students come.

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