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# Making Knowledge, Making Power: The Impact of Restorative Discipline Practices in Three New York City Schools

Rebecca J. Shubert

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Making Knowledge, Making Power: The Impact of Restorative Discipline  
Practices in Three New York City Schools

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Arts in  
Education Studies

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## **Abstract**

The rise of standardized testing and zero-tolerance discipline measures in the United States over the last decade has resulted in public schools that prioritize order and obedience over deep learning and interpersonal relationships. While detrimental across the board, these austere measures have done particular harm to low-income students of color in cities, many of whom have been pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system for minor misbehaviors-- a phenomenon scholars and activists have termed the “school-to-prison pipeline.” However, resistance to the criminalization of vulnerable students has blossomed in New York City in recent years. One of the primary ways educators and advocates have engaged in this resistance is through discipline practices based in restorative justice, rather than punitive, or retributive justice. This movement for restorative justice in schools is counteracting the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, in addition to cultivating democratic and caring school communities. In this thesis I describe and analyze interviews with nine educators in three different NYC public schools in order to illuminate how restorative justice *actually* works in schools that practice it, and how it constitutes a powerful challenge to the zero-tolerance logic that has permeated the way we think about safety and learning.

*key words:* school-to-prison pipeline, zero-tolerance, restorative justice, public schools, NYC

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## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Table of Contents.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Methodology.....	10
Literature Review.....	17
The rise of surveillance and criminalization in schools.....	18
Restorative justice as resistance.....	20
New York City context.....	22
The “tough love” argument.....	24
Evidence for school-to-prison pipeline.....	26
Chapter One: Hamilton Collegiate High School.....	28
Interview with Jack.....	29
Interview with Julia.....	33
Interview with Fiona.....	36
Summing up.....	38
Chapter Two: Bronx Community for Learning.....	40
Interview with Fabian.....	41
Interview with Ariana.....	44

Interview with Emily.....	47
Summing up.....	51
Chapter Three: John Brown High School.....	52
Interview with Ava.....	54
Interview with Tara.....	57
Interview with Jacob.....	60
Summing up.....	63
Conclusion: Moving Forward.....	65
References.....	74
Figures.....	76
Appendix: Interview Transcriptions.....	79
Jack.....	79
Julia.....	85
Fiona.....	93
Fabian and Ariana.....	98
Emily.....	107
Ava.....	115
Tara.....	120
Jacob.....	127

## **Introduction**

During the summer of 2013, I interned with a nonprofit organization in New York City called Teachers Unite, which was dedicated to training and helping teachers to grow the restorative justice movement in their schools. That experience was formative for me in many ways, as I witnessed educators coming together to dream and strategize about how to make their schools more compassionate places to learn. I participated in a training early in the summer wherein participants from different schools and backgrounds sat in a “restorative circle” and shared with one another hurtful experiences from their own schooling. Many of them had been treated cruelly by their own teachers, which instilled in them a sense of urgency to treat their students with greater respect. It was moving and astounding to see these folks who barely knew each other at all open up that way, trusting that the structure of the restorative circle would create a safe space for them to do so. After that training, I began to think about all that American culture takes for granted about what “justice” and “discipline” should look like in schools. The questions that drove this thesis took root there.

During this same time, I was learning about the waves of high stakes testing, privatization, and youth criminalization of low income students of color, all of which are sweeping through schools across the country. Teachers Unite emphasized the importance of understanding these phenomena as intertwined elements of a larger profit-making project with charter schools, the state, and private prisons. Reading the work of many other scholars and educators reinforced my understanding that these seemingly disparate measures of austerity were interconnected, and contributing to a culture of deep distrust and a breakdown in communication in our education system. Restorative justice seemed a powerful answer to these problems,

because its philosophy emphasizes mutual accountability and healing rather than top-down controlling relationships.

I became deeply immersed in reading and studying the philosophy of restorative practices, trying to wrap my mind around this theory of justice that is so different from the Western default. By the end of summer 2013, I had participated in several more restorative circles, all of which were powerful and unsettling, and instilled in me the desire to write about restorative practices in schools for my senior thesis at Vassar. But reflecting back on that summer in the months afterwards, I came to the realization that the most important part of the summer for me was not immersion in the theory of restorative justice, but the conversations I'd had with the members of Teachers Unite about how restorative justice actually *worked* in practice in their schools, warts and all. I wanted to add to the literature not just another voice extolling the radical potential of restorative practices in schools, but rather unflinchingly examining the joys, struggles, and confusions of this work from the perspective of people who do it every day. I reckoned that this perspective could contribute a more robust understanding of what restorative justice actually is, and gives us a better understanding of how to advocate for its expansion in schools.

At first I considered conducting interviews with teachers from schools with punitive discipline practices as well as teachers from schools practicing restorative justice, hoping to paint a nuanced picture of the different kinds of school cultures they produced. This presented several problem however. One was a problem of access; many teachers from the more “punitive” schools were reluctant to talk with me for fear that they would be discovered and punished by their administration, and others did not want to participate in a project where their school would



be cast in an unflattering light. I also came to the conclusion that my thesis risked falling into the simplistic framework of “good school” versus “bad school” if I pursued this line of research. I decided to focus instead only on schools practicing restorative justice and try to uplift the voices of teachers actually *doing* restorative justice, whose perspective is rarely centered in these conversations. I reached out to teachers at three different progressive schools to interview them, hoping that having a multiplicity of contexts would make for a richer picture without spreading the analysis too thin and risk becoming too generalized.

What I discovered through this process is that restorative justice in practice is far more than a method of conflict resolution, or a community-building tool, or a philosophy, or an alternative to suspensions. To be sure, it is all those things, but the roots run deeper. Rather than conceiving of wrongdoing as violation against some predetermined collective rule, the restorative approach looks at the relationships that have been harmed by the person’s actions and focuses action on the reparation of trust. The harmer is certainly held to account, but *all* parties involved must honestly reckon with their roles in the situation and involved themselves in the reparations. It’s a way of re-centering *people* and humanity in deliberations about how to live together well.

I hope to contribute to the literature an affirmation of that radical interpretation of restorative justice, particularly at this historical moment when it is gaining popularity in the United States. This thesis will add an in-depth picture of the mechanics of the messy translation from theory to practice, which are crucial to grasp if we seek to situate restorative justice as a viable alternative to punitive zero-tolerance discipline. This project will also highlight the specific perspectives of educators who practice restorative justice in their schools. Educators’

voices are often sidelined in debates about education, yet their lived realities are an indispensable piece of this puzzle. Their stories detail how restorative justice has been and continues to be a powerful tool in fighting the school-to-prison pipeline. Using the words and experiences that they have so generously shared with me, my hope is that this thesis is informative and instructive for those seeking to bring about a better and more compassionate reality for New York City public schools.

## **Methodology**

Ultimately, my thesis aims to answer the question: how do restorative discipline practices and retributive discipline practices contribute to different school cultures, and what effect do those cultures have on members of the school communities? To explore this question and reveal some answers I opted to take a two-tiered approach, utilizing the many studies that already exist on school discipline and student safety as well as my own interviews with teachers at three public high schools in New York City. By so doing, I hope to build upon the knowledge that other scholars have collected on this very important issue, and to discuss school discipline practices on a far larger scale than I could hope to study in my project. With my own interviews, I also aim to distill the abstract ideas of restorative and retributive justice and to show how they operate daily in students' and teachers' lives.

To me, as someone who hopes to spend my life making schools safer and healthier places to be, the issue of best discipline practices in schools is neither distant nor abstract. Schools in New York City and the United States broadly are currently experiencing huge amounts of policing and surveillance, which often do more to push students out of school and into the criminal justice system than deter them from breaking rules. Meanwhile, violence (both physical and emotional) in schools is still ubiquitous. It is imperative that educators and education advocates seriously explore alternative discipline possibilities that will make schools safe without criminalizing their students. My thesis seeks to add a voice to the growing body of literature that exists on the subject, and to investigate how restorative practices might constitute one possibility for reforming school discipline.

In researching the effect of school discipline on school culture, I found it imperative to begin with gathering some background knowledge on the current state of school discipline across the United States before focusing in on New York City. I limited my search to studies done in the last ten years, so as to provide the most up-to-date picture possible of the current situation. I found several widely-cited papers discussing the marked increase in police and surveillance in U.S. schools across the board; other scholars used these studies as background texts for their discussions of how such retributive policies render low-income Black and Latino student and disabled students particularly vulnerable to disproportionate discipline responses, and even school pushout. The more I looked, the clearer it became that there was a web of scholars who have all studied the recent effects of school discipline and cited each other-- I used their work to form the basis of my examination of the background of my study.

Next, I researched concise scholarly writing on the philosophical basis of restorative justice, since restorative justice is a comparatively less well-known issue than school pushout or criminalization to those studying education. I found a few particular studies that discuss the ideological underpinnings of restorative justice, as well as the indigenous roots of this practice and the necessity for a strong pre-existing community in order for such practices to have a strong effect. Those writings proved useful in my discussion of what restorative justice is, but did not provide examples of what it actually *does*, or instances where its use has been successful. To address that element, I turned to a book written by Belinda Hopkins titled *Just Schools: A Whole-School Approach to Restorative Justice*, which engages the potential of restorative practices in schools, its beneficial potential for all school communities. Hopkins specifically cites Cole Middle School in Denver, Colorado, which lowered its suspension rates by 87% and

dropped its expulsions to zero in the 2002-2003 school year (2004, pg. 31). She emphasizes that although it is difficult to assert a causal link between restorative practices and an improved school environment, the school staff have expressed across the board that the emphasis on conversation and mediation has helped them to build stronger relationships with students, and avoid simply removing them from the classroom.

In the next part of my research, I narrowed my focus to look specifically at discipline in New York City public high schools in the last ten years. First, I looked at several documents including a report by the New York Civil Liberties Union emphasizing the harm that has been done over the last decade by school policies that have prioritized a police presence over guidance counselors and other important resources. I examined the statistics that indicated that such policies have disproportionate effects on the most vulnerable students in the system. I noted the backlash to these austere discipline practices, including the movement for restorative justice in schools, which is currently enjoying a moment of wide popularity in New York City. I then looked at studies on a few specific schools (Bushwick Community School and Humanities Preparatory Academy, most notably) where the staff has implemented restorative justice practices and woven them deeply into the fabric of the school culture, to great effect.

Although I gave the most voice to those in favor of restorative justice, I also included the opinions of those in favor of more traditional, retributive practices, in order to give fair weight to their point of view and to understand the basis for their arguments. To achieve this, I cited a book showcasing the stories of specific school leaders around the country and their stories of transforming their schools from dangerous schools with “high-risk” students to high performing schools with low rates of violence. Though I disagree that such austere policies constitute best

practices in schools, I think it is important to understand the power of the “tough love” narrative in an exploration of best discipline practices in schools, and to acknowledge the fact that the school leaders in the book truly cared for their students and wanted to do what was best for them. I do not pretend to be a neutral party here; I believe that retributive policies often do more harm than good, especially to students most in need, and that restorative practices can be more successful and humane. However, it would not be fair to focus only on the harm of such policies, and to pretend that no evidence exists in their favor.

The second tier of my research involves interviewing teachers in public high schools in New York City to better understand their perspectives on restorative discipline practices and their effects on students and school culture. I decided to conduct my own interviews because although a growing body of research exists on the effects of school discipline, the voices of educators in the conversation are often shunted to the side. I wanted my findings to add to the growing understanding of restorative justice rather than replicating the work that other scholars have done. I chose to interview long-time teachers in schools that employ restorative practices, rather than retributive practices. The fact that I do not also interview teachers in favor of retributive discipline is in some ways a limitation of my research because it does not give the same weight of personal stories to the side of those in favor of retributive discipline. However, I treat the accounts of New York City schools that employ retributive philosophies of discipline seriously, engaging both their advocates and their dissidents. While my research treats restorative justice schools in greater depth because they occupy an alternative narrative to the more popular “tough love,” I hope to treat the opposing side fairly.

I began the process of finding teachers to interview by reaching out to two organizations I had previously worked with: the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and Teachers Unite. Both of these are non-profit organizations in Manhattan that advocate for fair school funding and an end to the school-to-prison pipeline. Advocates at Annenberg and Teachers Unite sent out a blurb about my thesis and my contact information to teachers they thought might be interested in sitting down for an interview with me about discipline practices at their schools. Within a few weeks, I had heard back affirmatively from six teachers from three schools: the John Brown High School, the Bronx Community for Learning, and Hamilton Collegiate High School.

All three of these schools are public high schools in New York City with a strong commitment to integrating restorative justice into their discipline practices and all elements of their schools' culture. Additionally, while all three of these schools had previously received some coverage from organizations advocating for restorative justice, I could find no publicly available personal accounts from teachers at those schools explaining the basis of their restorative practices and detailing how it works. Thus, I felt that the content of my interviews would add something new to the wider discussion of restorative justice in schools.

Over the winter break from mid-December to mid-January, I agreed to meet with each of the six teachers who had responded to my blurb, and interview them in person for a period of time ranging from twenty to forty-five minutes, depending on how much time they could spare. My aim was to engage them in relatively unstructured conversation about the discipline practices of their schools, their own experiences with that discipline system, their understandings of restorative practices, the effects they perceived that it had on students, and the ways that restorative justice was reflected (or not reflected) in the overall culture and mission of the school.

I also wanted them to identify tensions that existed between the ideal of restorative justice and how it works in practice, as well as any instances where the discipline system had failed to address school problems in the way they needed to be addressed. My aim was to get as honest a picture as possible of the realities of these school discipline systems on a daily basis. I also wanted to capture the passionate belief of the teachers that restorative practices were important, and that they have transformative capacities for schools and students.

I obtained consent from each of the interviewed teachers to record the audio of our conversation on my phone and use it for the purposes of my thesis. After each interview, I uploaded the audio file to my computer and then transcribed it into a document, using pseudonyms in place of each of the teachers' real names. I made it clear to them that they may retract any of the information they have given me during the interview, and that they have a right to see my full thesis upon its completion.

These interviews, in combination with my background research about restorative justice and school discipline will yield some answers about what exactly restorative and retributive justice are doing for students. I hope to learn how these diverging philosophies manifest in actual daily practice in schools, and what they teach students about themselves, community, authority, justice, and accountability. I recognize that the three schools I am looking at through interviews with teachers may not be generalizable to all schools that practice restorative justice, since all schools have unique demographics, locations, and histories. Nevertheless, I anticipate that the information gleaned here will be of great use in exploring how restorative justice can operate in a few different settings, and how it differs from retributive justice both abstractly and concretely. Ultimately, my research and analysis will try to answer the difficult question of what best



discipline practices actually are, and how educators can successfully balance the dignity and growth of their students with safety and accountability.

## Literature Review

The nature of best school discipline practices in the United States has been and continues to be a widely debated issue. It remains eternally relevant in part because it gets at the basic question of what the purpose of schooling should be in the first place. One answer that many scholars and educators have provided is that the purpose of school is to mold students into future productive members of society, and to socialize them into correct behavior with regard to the rules in addition to sharpening their minds. Yet the question of how that socialization should take place remains: how should students be taught what behavior is acceptable? What should be the institutional response to student misbehavior?

This literature review aims to shed light on the current context of that ongoing debate, and to identify a tension between those advocating for tough-love, zero-tolerance discipline practices versus those advocating for school discipline based upon restorative practices. I will discuss some current factors affecting current school discipline practices such as racial segregation and mass incarceration. I will then narrow in on New York City and discuss why the current political climate there has produced a particularly heated debate on the issue of best school discipline practices. The stakes of this conversation are high. Millions of students in New York City attend school each day and learn through the different ways they are disciplined how to relate to authority figures and to each other. By placing the advocates of restorative justice in conversation with advocates of traditional, or “retributive” justice, I hope to illuminate the need to investigate precisely *how* these discipline practices affect students’ lives. In investigating that very question, my thesis will add to the existing literature on that debate.

In their article “The New American School: Preparation for Post-Industrial Discipline,” sociologists Kupchik and Monahan examine how broad shifts in social relations over the past thirty years have given rise to new regimes of discipline in United States public schools. They argue that the phenomena of mass incarceration and post-industrialization have created a social environment that requires schools try to shape their students into docile citizens who relate peacefully to the constant presence of intrusive authority, rather than independent and creative thinkers (Kupchik and Monahan, 2006, p. 617). The presence of police officers, metal detectors, and technological surveillance is crucial to shaping that outcome. Kupchik and Monahan argue that these realities of daily school life socialize students to believe that active crime control and highly-regimented and standardized work environments are natural aspects of social life.

“The New American School” posits that these school practices are neither natural nor benign, but rather active processes that facilitate a sense of apathy in students, and obscure the nature of disciplinary power (Kupchik and Monahan, 2006, p. 624). These austere school climates lead students to believe that authority is not something that can be changed or debated, it is merely an eternal fact of life, and the only way to be successful is play by the rules set by those in charge. Kupchik and Monahan ultimately assert that these new ways of schooling normalize extreme power dynamics and contribute to the maintenance of the neoliberal surveillance state. Students subconsciously come to accept that being constantly observed and monitored is not unjustly intrusive but rather the price they must pay for safety and protection (Kupchik and Monahan, 2006, p. 629).

Renowned scholar Pedro Noguera builds on Kupchik and Monahan’s analysis, but also takes it in a different direction. He agrees that widespread austerity in schools is part of a

neoliberal order that constructs students as pliant subjects, but insists that these practices target the most vulnerable students particularly. Noguera discusses the enactment of “zero-tolerance policies” in schools, and finds that such policies target male students of color and low-income students disproportionately, resulting in the harshest responses for those demographics (2010, p. 342). Such zero-tolerance policies include expulsion, suspension, or immediate removal from the classroom for any significant breach of school rules, although possession of illegal drugs or weapons consistently warrant the most severe punishments. Noguera argues that rather than acting as an effective deterrent for misbehavior, zero-tolerance policies construct the most needy students as those most in need of ruthless policing and force them out of schools and into the juvenile justice system (2010, p. 342). Noguera discusses how zero-tolerance constructs some students as “beyond help,” (2010, p. 342) who must be removed from the school system so they will not contaminate well-behaved students.

Noguera posits that to end this reign of extreme social control over low-income students of color, schools must revisit the core of their mission, and instead create school practices which nurture and rehabilitate struggling students instead of kicking them out. Only this, he says, will end “the deadly symbiosis between ghetto and prison” (2010, p. 349). Noguera thus agrees with Kupchik and Monahan’s assessment of the problem in schools, but insists that we center the needs of the most vulnerable students in our analysis. He also alludes to an alternative method of schooling that would socialize students in empowering and respectful ways instead of treating them as potential criminals and future prison fodder, although he does not detail what such an alternative might look like in practice. These two articles in conversation give me a solid

foundation for discussing how school discipline functions as a mechanism for socialization and social reproduction, and what the most dire consequences of that socialization can be.

Shifting my focus from how discipline in schools can socialize students in harsh ways, I will now discuss one of the alternatives that Noguera alludes to in his article: restorative justice. Sociologists Wenzel and Okimoto define restorative justice as “the repair of justice through reaffirming a shared value-consensus in a bilateral process, whereas retributive justice essentially refers to the repair of justice through unilateral imposition of punishment” (2008, p. 375). They go on to explain that restorative justice is a process through which the perpetrator takes responsibility for their wrongdoing, and works in tandem with a group of others, including the one who was wronged, in order to come to consensus about how to make it right. This, they argue is a very different system than retributive justice (which is exemplified by the modern United States justice system), which involves the imposition of rules from a source of authority above, and punishment enacted by that authority should a person fail to live up to those standards.

They argue that retributive justice is a system that attempts to convey a measure of impartiality, since the interaction of punishment takes place between the governing body and the offender rather than the offender and the victim, and supposedly relies on the equal application of consequences for everybody rather than consensus through active dialogue (Wenzel and Okimoto, 2008, p. 380-381). Thus, a retributive response to theft of property would be the return of that property to the victim and a prison sentence for the perpetrator. A restorative response on the other hand would be a conversation and eventual consensus between victim, perpetrator, and

other members of the community as to how to rectify the situation and provide healing for everyone impacted by the event.

Author and educator Belinda Hopkins applies this broad concept of restorative specifically to schools in the United States. She details how a “whole school” approach to restorative justice can help students *and* teachers by involving everyone in the restorative processes and encouraging a climate of communal learning and interpersonal responsibility (Hopkins, 2004, p. 18). She details a “restorative conferencing” process that has found widespread success in schools, where friends and family members can affirm the importance of the offender as a member of the school community, and talk about their positive attributes. Hopkins argues that this provides a space for offenders to acknowledge their misdeeds, but feel as though their worst actions do not define them as people. They will then be more motivated to participate in the healing process, make honest amends, and refrain from repeating their harmful actions (Hopkins, 2004, p. 40).

Wenzel and Okimoto and Hopkins provide a substantial basis for understanding restorative justice as a philosophy and practice, and for exploring how it can be integrated into the culture of a school to create a more engaged, compassionate, and safe school community. We can see that the zero-tolerance discipline policies Noguera discusses are emblematic of retributive justice philosophy, since they involve the expulsion of offenders from the school community rather than the collective reparation of harm. It is also clear that austere school policies involving police officers, metal detectors, random bag checks, and technological surveillance that Kupchik and Monahan describe are also reflective of the presence of retributive logic in school discipline. Wenzel and Okimoto and Hopkins respond to that austerity by

suggesting that restorative justice constitutes a robust response to this status quo, and has positive transformative potential for our schools.

I will now shift to a discussion the state of restorative practices in New York City schools in particular. During the past decade, restorative justice and other similar alternative discipline practices have found a strong foothold in some New York City public schools. This has been facilitated in part by a robust resistance to the massive police presence in low-income schools. In particular, widespread disciplinary practices that land students in jail or on probation for minor offences such as “defiance” toward a teacher (Safety with Dignity, 2009) have sparked outrage amongst parents, who have fought for more guidance counselors and less law enforcement in the school building. The New York Civil Liberties Union released a report detailing the rise in the numbers of NYPD officers and the rise in student arrests for non-criminal offenses over the last ten years, and concluded that a greater police presence correlates with a higher rate of arrests, but not necessarily a lower rate of in-school violence and drug possession (Safety with Dignity, 2009) The NYCLU report also emphasized the stunningly disproportionate effect that these zero tolerance policies have had on criminalizing young men of color and students with learning disabilities.

The report then shifts to discussing five schools in the New York City area serving primarily low-income students of color who are using alternative discipline practices to great effect. They have found that there are lower rate of violence and school pushout in those five schools than in schools with comparable populations using harsher discipline practices (Safety with Dignity, 2009), and that students report a high rate of trust and respect in their school culture. Strikingly, the principal from Bushwick Community High School (one of the five

schools profiled in the report) states that his school includes members of “Bloods, Crips, Latin Kings, Nietas, and probably every other gang that’s represented in New York. But what I will say is that in four years, we haven’t had a single act of violence. And our policy extends so far that our students know that if you fight in the street a borough away and we hear about it, you will meet with somebody here to discuss why” (Safety with Dignity, 2009). The NYCLU report concludes with the suggestion that *all* New York city schools integrate restorative practices like the ones utilized by the five schools, so as to grow a more compassionate and safe learning environment.

Maria Hantzopoulos, a former teacher at Humanities Prep (another one of the five schools profiled in the NYCLU) further expounds upon how restorative practices have helped cultivate a school culture of respect, democracy, and meaningful accountability. Humanities Prep uses a structure called the “Fairness Committee,” where all members of the school community participate in prescribing appropriate consequences for students who have broken school rules (Hantzopoulos, 2013, p. 8). This might be for an offense as minor as cutting class or speaking disrespectfully to others; the point is to underscore how such acts negatively affect *everyone* in the school community, and to involve the offenders in the process of repairing the harm they have caused. The process of active dialogue in Fairness Committee is of paramount importance, both because it allows all parties involved to speak their truths from their own perspectives, and also because it allows students to participate in a true democratic process, where the voices of all are taken into account. The NYCLU report in combination with Hantzopoulos’s account of Fairness Committee at Humanities Prep demonstrates that restorative justice has garnered significant support in recent years, and constitutes a powerful response to the over-policing and



over-surveillance of low-income schools. Restorative justice is blossoming into a real movement in New York City schools. But the movement has not come without significant opposition from those who feel that zero-tolerance discipline policies are the best way of dealing with “at-risk” students.

On the other hand, Samuel Casey Carter, author of *No Excuses: Lessons From 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools* argues that tough-love discipline in combination with a rigorous academic expectations can work wonders helping “at-risk” kids to succeed. He posits that children lacking a firm family structure and a sound upbringing need resolute authority from the adults in their schools in order to become fully functioning members of society (Carter, 2000, p. 12-13). He also argues that anything other than zero-tolerance, especially when it comes to weapons or drugs in schools, resonates with the defeatist assumption that children from difficult backgrounds cannot learn. In Carter’s view, flexibility in discipline practices sends a clear message to students that such behavior is acceptable, and further perpetuates cycles of poverty and violence. Therefore, for low-income children, a “no excuses” approach to discipline is the most compassionate one.

Carter focuses in on two schools in New York City: The Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, and the KIPP [Knowledge is Power Program] Academy in the Bronx. He admiringly describes a culture of high academic expectations at Frederick Douglass, noting that the schools is open fourteen hours a day six days a week, and that students are expected to spend at least every other Saturday at school for tutoring or homework help (Carter, 2000, p. 83). Principal of Frederick Douglass School Gregory Hodge established “12 non-negotiables,” including rules as general as respect for oneself and others, and others as banal as “no gum chewing” (Carter, 2000,

p. 90) Hodge explains that the harsh disciplinary response for the breaking of *any* school rule ensures that students take all rules seriously, helping to establish Frederick Douglass as a serious intellectual place. Hodge seems to be applying the broken windows theory to school discipline, as well as a zero-tolerance policy. Carter asserts that far from being oppressive or hurtful to students' learning process, these policies make Frederick Douglass the high-achieving school it currently is.

Carter goes on to describe the KIPP school in the Bronx much along the same lines, remarking how a culture of tight discipline and no compromises on correct behavior makes the students infinitely more manageable and high-achieving than student in neighboring district schools (Carter, 2000, p. 93-94). Yet the practices of KIPP have recently come under fire from many young teachers who found a job there, and left bitterly disillusioned with the KIPP doctrine. Sociologist Brian Lack describes this very phenomenon in his paper "No Excuses: A Critique of the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) Within Charter Schools in the USA." Through interviewing current and former teachers and observing several KIPP schools sites himself, Lack has come to believe that "by subscribing to a dictum of *no excuses*, KIPP essentially puts the onus on the victims of poverty and institutional racism...and merely preserves the status quo" (Lack, 2009, p. 127).

Lack goes on to argue that the excessively militaristic and routinized methods of learning and discipline in KIPP contribute to a school culture where students are not empowered to break the cycles of poverty, as Carter might argue, but rather learn to submit quietly to authority for fear of punishment. Furthermore, this creates an environment where true intellectual curiosity and spark are stifled under the constant anxiety of producing good test scores in order to keep

KIPP's legacy of high-achievement alive (Lack, 2009). He specifically cites KIPP's monitoring of students' eye-movements in the classrooms (referred to as "tracking" the teacher), the punishment of students for actions as small as pencil-tapping and sighing in class, and the horrifying instance of a female student being made to clean the boys' bathroom as punishment as just a few pieces of evidence of the controlling and borderline abusive discipline practices that emerge as a result of the zero-tolerance logic (2009). Finally, he quotes another KIPP teacher: "They [the students] can't think for themselves, they have no concept of style and author's craft (they're skill drilled their 9th grade year), and they have a very prescriptive method for annotating texts to the point where the students are annotating in the margins *so they won't get in trouble* [emphasis added], but they're not making any meaning with the text. One student today asked me how many annotations per paragraph they needed, and when I told her she needed to note where she saw fit, she looked so confused and upset" (2009).

Brian Lack is not the only one critiquing zero-tolerance and no-excuses policies; the past few years have seen a stark increase in resistance to this dogma. The American Psychological Association released a report in 2008 declaring that there is no statistically significant evidence that zero-tolerance policies made schools safer, or made discipline more consistent (APA, 2008, p. 852-854). Furthermore, there is a plethora of evidence that zero-tolerance policies result in harsher punishment for Black students (engaging in the same misbehavior as White students) which creates a strong link between the education system and the juvenile justice system. The APA terms this connection the "school-to-prison pipeline" (APA, 2008). There are now movements in many cities across the United States focused on removing zero-tolerance policies from schools, and instead employing a discipline system that is more focused on understanding

the root of students' misbehavior and working with them to fix it. The term "restorative justice" has increasingly caught on as a catch-all for those alternative discipline measures. My thesis will situate the cultures of schools using restorative justice as standing in stark contrast to those using retributive policies. I therefore hope to illustrate the diverging ways that these two philosophies of discipline socialize students in relation to authority and to each other.

## **Chapter One: Hamilton Collegiate High School**

### *Background*

Hamilton Collegiate, a small public high school of about 300 students, shares a building with several other schools and businesses a few blocks from Union Square in Manhattan. Established in 2012, it holds the mission of engaging its students in “the natural process of experience, questioning, and the pursuit of precision—how people really learn. We believe in cultivating students’ power to produce and reflect, rather than simply consume, as the fundamental way of being in the world” (Hamilton Collegiate website, accessed Jan. 2015). It is also one of the Consortium Schools in New York State, meaning that they use a system of performance-based assessments which students complete and present to a panel for feedback, as an alternative to completing the NY State regents exams (Hamilton Collegiate website, accessed Jan. 2015). Hamilton places great emphasis on using restorative discipline practices in order to quell suspension rates and to cultivate a positive school community.

As a relatively new school, Hamilton continually grapples with how to adjust the philosophy of restorative justice to fit its particular context and culture. Many of its teachers and administrators have come from other schools where restorative discipline was deeply embedded; others have partaken in trainings run by a non-profit advocacy group by the name of Teachers Unite in an effort to learn more about restorative justice and how to practice it as an educator. Though the staff may differ amongst themselves about what exactly restorative justice should look like in practice, all of them are invested in incorporating restorative discipline into the fabric of the school.

Over the course of several weeks, I visited Hamilton a handful of times, separately interviewing three staff members at the school to learn more about their vision of restorative discipline and how that vision translates into reality. I also had the honor of meeting a small group of Hamilton students and talking with them about my experiences in college. Though I am far from an expert with regard to the inner workings of the school, I began to recognize its particular vibe and culture, and to become more comfortable in that space. The entirety of Hamilton Collegiate is located on one floor of the school building, with large sunny windows. Class projects, student artwork and writing, and advertisements for various clubs plaster the walls. Students communicate noisily with one another in the halls, often using derogatory language, although generally good naturedly. When I asked students for directions, they graciously took me to the room I was looking for (Field notes, Dec. 2014). The adults I spoke with at the school site (both those I interviewed and those I did not) were equally friendly and interested in my work.

The three staff members who volunteered to participate in the interviews are: Jack (a ninth grade math teacher), Julia (the dean of discipline and school culture) and Fiona (an assistant dean).<sup>1</sup> I will detail what I find to be the most telling and poignant pieces from each of those conversations, and thereafter piece together a picture of what a restorative approach to discipline *really* looks like from the perspective of people who do this important work every day.

## **Jack**

*“Hopefully they’re politically engaged in the larger fight for justice. For a sane way of holding people*

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<sup>1</sup> All names of interviewees and schools in this thesis are pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of participants.

*accountable for their actions, which we don't currently have in this country."*

Jack has been a teacher in New York City since 2008. During his undergraduate years he was fortunate enough to hear civil rights activist Robert Moses speak, which piqued his interest in teaching math for social justice. A white man in his thirties, he is cognizant of the complicated political implications of teaching in a public high school comprised mostly of low-income students of color; he feels, however, that despite the presence of this power differential, he can inspire his students to become better and more curious people and to make a positive impact on the world. Jack is especially dismissive of the rise in top-down accountability in the form of standardized testing, insisting that "What I want is for students to question why things are, and then to be active about changing them. You can't really do that if you're bubbling in bubbles on the test" (Personal interview with Jack, 2014).

As in introduction to the way Hamilton thinks about restorative justice, Jack detailed for me the process of the Fairness Committee, which is one of the structures at Hamilton that falls under the umbrella of restorative practices. The Fairness Committee encourages any member of the Hamilton community who feels that another member has in some way violated one of the core values<sup>2</sup> of the school and caused harm in some way to take that other person to Fairness. In Fairness, both the harmer and the harmed give their accounts of the incident, mediated by deans, advisors, or teachers, depending on the situation. Additional students are often encouraged to attend to give input on the situation. The ultimate goal of the Fairness group is to determine how

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<sup>2</sup> "Core Values" is a concept taken from multiple other schools who instituted it before Hamilton. The origin of the concept in NYC schools is attributed to the Humanities Prep school in Manhattan. Core Values is a series of ideals that undergird all aspects of what that school community hopes to achieve. The seven original Core Values that inspired Hamilton's are: "Respect for Humanity, Respect for Diversity, Respect for Intellect, Respect for the Truth, Commitment to Peace, Commitment to Justice, and Respect for Democracy." See figure 1.

the harmer can repair the damage they have done, and “restore” the relationships and trust, which is where the language of restorative justice fits in (Personal interview with Jack, 2014). Fairness plays an important part both in creating and maintaining a positive school culture, and in providing a more productive and compassionate alternative to suspensions.

When I asked Jack to describe how exactly the Fairness Committee fit in with Hamilton’s larger vision of how restorative justice, he replied:

“I think restorative justice is actually a lot more than Fairness. It’s more a philosophy than it is a set of actions. These actions help us enable the philosophy and enact the philosophy, but really it’s about: I value you as a human being, student. I recognize that it’s my job to set boundaries for you, and I set those boundaries in a way that is humane, and recognizes that you have reasons why you’re acting the way you are. I come to that conversation recognizing that I have boundaries to set, and knowing that you have wishes and desires and feelings and I value those, as I expect you to value my boundaries” (Personal interview with Jack, 2014).

Jack emphasized throughout our interview how important it was to see Fairness not as an isolated way of “doing” restorative justice, but rather to look at it as part of a way of relating to one another which must pervade the entire school at every level in order to have the desired effect. He detailed for me several interactions with students outside of the Fairness context-- in hallways, in classrooms-- where he has consciously tried to quell the urge to respond to student misbehavior in a retributive manner. Instead he chooses to take students aside, and discuss frankly with them which of the school’s core values and rules of conduct the student has violated. The student then has the opportunity to give their perspective if they feel he has violated a promise made to the class as a teacher: for example, promising not to call them out and embarrass them in front of their friends (Personal interview with Jack, 2014). This method of



conduct, Jack explains, puts students in position of feeling like they share mutual accountability with him, rather than merely a position of defensiveness and vulnerability. This teaching practice illustrates the ways in which restorative justice is both more complicated and more all-encompassing than the Fairness Committee.

Like most of the other interviewees, Jack mentioned the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, and the emerging Black Lives Matter movement as having a particularly palpable effect on his students. Some have reacted with anger and defiance of any authority, some have put up a jaded front in order to downplay their vulnerability, and some have come out with the defeatist notion that the powers-that-be will *always* treat Black lives without regard for their humanity, so why bother trying to protest anything. In response to this, Jack has referred back to the mission of the school, especially the importance of bringing students to consciousness about their own agency to effect change (Personal interview with Jack, 2014). In his view, this is one of the most harmful outcomes of the top-down accountability testing measures: they increase the pervasive feeling that some higher power will always have a final say over the success of their school, no matter how wonderful and supportive a culture they manage to build. He argues that restorative practices offer a positive alternative to that top-down trend:

“Within our class community, my relationship with the students *is* the most important thing. I need to emphasize that every single day to them. If there’s something that jeopardizes that and things are set up such that someone outside our class somehow becomes more powerful, then we’ve lost that battle... Too often when we talk about restorative justice we get bogged down in individual actions because that’s where we are and that’s where we live, but we have to understand that there are systems that need changing and we have to fight for that” (Personal interview with Jack, 2014).

## Julia

*“The fact that people were doing reconciliation in Rwanda after a genocide occurred, that they were able to bring their bodies to look at someone who did something like that...that always stuck with me.”*

A former student of one of Brooklyn’s grimmest public school’s, Julia emphasizes that her work in restorative education practices is rooted in disempowering experiences. As a Black woman from a working class background, she witnessed her classmates being treated with incredible callousness, though she herself escaped the worst of it as an honor student. Now as an educator and a dean, she vows to help make Hamilton everything her own high school was not: academically rigorous, compassionate, loving. Part of the reason that Julia finds restorative justice so powerful is the existence of:

“the school-to-prison pipeline, the idea that young Black boys and young Brown boys are being sent to prison at such a large scale, and it’s all starting with a lot of the things that are happening in schools. A lot of these kids have IEPs [individualized education plans], so they’re receiving a special ed program, and there doesn’t seem to be a sense of empathetic work towards, how do we function and work with people to make them better people, and not try to lock them up and put them somewhere else. You know? That just hurts me to my core” (Personal interview with Julia, 2015).

Like many other practitioners of positive discipline, Julia stresses the important role that restorative justice has to play not only in establishing a safe and trusting school environment, but also in transforming larger oppressive structures that criminalize and devalue students of color and students with learning disabilities. With this work in mind, she and her co-worker created a student group called CORE (Confronting Oppression through Restorative Education) during her

second year working at Hamilton (Personal interview with Julia, 2015). CORE students regularly sit in on Hamilton Fairness Committee meetings, and also create presentations for all the advisory groups about the transformative potential of restorative justice in schools. Julia reckons that the students who were selected or who volunteered for CORE were already advocates for their communities, and feel empowered to take this leadership role in a school context, knowing that they serve as an inspiration for others. She proudly notes that the group, which meets after school, has over fifteen regular participants, which is highly unusual (Personal interview with Julia, 2015).

Julia is careful and honest in her assessment that “Hamilton is not completely successful at restorative justice *yet*...we’ve so new at it. And it really has to be a constant in order to be successful” (Personal interview with Julia, 2015). In order to improve their practice, she thinks that there must be a consistent conversation about restorative justice as a whole-school practice, rather than just an isolated idea that gets relegated to the domain of “discipline.” Julia is afraid of the possibility that restorative justice will be condensed to a single PD (professional development) session, which would not allow teachers the time to fully comprehend the philosophy and begin to internalize it. Similarly, she observes that it takes a long time for students to begin to really engage with the restorative practices, and that it cannot be conceived of as a solution that will begin to show results immediately: “kids are coming from different environments and only in their third or fourth year of high school do they start to realize, oh, this is why we’re doing this” (Personal interview with Julia, 2015).

When asked to reflect on a moment that encapsulates a success that Hamilton has had in implementing restorative justice, Julia pauses for a moment, then relates the following story:

“The kids-- most of them being CORE members-- they actually did a die-in in school, in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. And they did it completely themselves, they did not tell any of the adults. I was blown away by it. Seeing it happen in real life and seeing it on the news and seeing people do it in New York and around the United States, the kids are like, let’s do something. Like, that’s my goal. To have kids feel empowered to do something that is forward-thinking and forward-moving, you know?” (Personal interview with Julia, 2015).

I found it incredibly touching that Julia would choose this story to relay, in part because it shows the intimate connection between restorative practices and combating oppression, and also because it demonstrates how much she values students’ ownership over the principles guiding CORE’s work. Hamilton’s pride regarding their students’ activism is an example of powerful community-building which strengthens their restorative philosophical foundations.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Julia why she felt that restorative justice in particular has such potential to transform the racist and classist structures which govern our society. She recalled seeing a video documentary on the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s, focusing particularly on the reconciliation committees. Julia was shocked and touched beyond belief that Rwandan people could gather the strength to look others in the eye who had murdered their families, share their grief and rage, and slowly begin to figure out how to live together again (Personal interview with Julia, 2015). This cogent example of the power of restorative practice gave her hope that she could contribute to its realization on the small scale of a New York City public school. Julia is inspired to believe that people can work through the urge to retribute others for their harm, and work instead to build communities based on healing and inclusion.

## **Fiona**

*“The first time might not always be a charm, but eventually it always gets through. It’s like a whole emotional and mind-blowing experience for them.”*

Fiona is a young assistant dean at Hamilton. She works closely with Julia to coordinate Fairnesses as well as student-advisor meetings and reentry meetings, and to conduct trainings on restorative justice with staff members in order to facilitate the development of Hamilton’s restorative practice. Fiona locates the roots of her interest in restorative justice in her experiences teaching at a middle school in the South Bronx, where suspension rates were especially high. The realization that she, a Latina woman, was contributing to the harm and exclusion of students of color and students with IEPs was painful (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015). Furthermore, it made no sense to her to suspend and expel students without helping them understand what was wrong about their behavior in the first place. She had the opportunity to student-teach at the John Brown school, and fell in love with the warm atmosphere there, which was a stark contrast from her other school in the Bronx. When looking for a full-time position, her colleagues at Brown recommended Hamilton Collegiate as a similar place that also practiced restorative discipline (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

Something Fiona especially likes about the way Hamilton structures their restorative practices is the constant reference to the school’s “Core Values.” Core Values are hardly unique to Hamilton-- in fact they came in part as an inspiration from John Brown-- but they function as an important ethical backbone of the school. The three Core Values are: “Commitment to Peace, Commitment to Diversity, and Responsibility for Ourselves and One Another” (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015). In a Fairness meeting, members can thus use the language of

harmer/harmed, but they can also talk about behavior as a violation of one or more of those Core Values. This is helpful for clarifying what about the behavior was unacceptable. For example, if a student has scratched a message into their desk, they might argue that their actions have harmed no one. But facilitators and other students can point out that this action violates the Core Value of responsibility, since the janitorial staff will now have work unfairly added to their regular duties on account of the student's actions (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

Fiona emphasizes that even though restorative justice is highly effective, it often takes a long time to truly get through to kids. She recalls:

“A student had put a swastika sign on the blackboard, and the teacher saw it-- it was very hurtful. That's a level five infraction<sup>3</sup>, and because we still have to go by the DOE guidelines, the student was suspended. However, after the suspension, the teacher took that student to Fairness, because that breaks the commitment of diversity in our school and to get the student to really understand how their behavior impacts that... It took *three times* of coming to Fairness for the student to actually understand, oh. I have done this terrible thing and people got hurt. It's such a hard process. But he was courageous about it in the end” (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

In discussing specific instances of harm at Hamilton, Fiona does not shy away from the fact that the actions of students and other staff members often anger her, and push her to the point where she wishes she could simply take the easy way out and suspend them. But her commitment to the principles of restorative justice means she must honor the humanity of everyone in the school community, even those whose presence is the most difficult (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> The most severe level of infraction. See figure 2 for a full list and description of the five levels of misbehavior for which a NYC student can be disciplined.

Fiona was adamant that restorative practices can *always* yield great results-- as long as the community has adequate time and resources to devote to doing it well. She suggests:

“it would be great if we had a full-time facilitator. And it would be great if we could pay teachers for doing the actual facilitation; I feel like we’d get a lot more teachers interested in doing Fairness if we could pay them for their time. Teachers mostly don’t want to do it because sometimes it takes two hours to do a Fairness. In those two hours you could be grading, or planning, and if you’re in a Fairness then you have to do those things at home. So where’s the compensation for it?” (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

In order for restorative discipline to actually take hold in a school community, time and money must be dedicated to making it a consistent reality. Otherwise, Fiona cautions, it will become another case of wishful thinking that school staff are too busy and overworked to realize. She estimates that in order for Hamilton to be operating at optimal capacity with regard to restorative justice, they would need to employ not only a full-time facilitator, but also eight teachers who are capable of co-facilitating (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015). That would enable there to be one Fairness facilitation for each of the eight periods in the school day, which would free up teachers’ after school time and allow for Fairnesses conversations. If that could become a reality, Fiona reckons, Hamilton could hold Fairnesses *before* crisis points for students, and make it more effective as a preventative measure. As it is now, there is simply not the time for all but the most urgent cases (Personal interview with Fiona, 2015).

## **Summing Up**

Hamilton Collegiate is a school in its fledgling stages of discovering how to fully incorporate restorative practices into every aspect of its daily activities. They take a great deal of

inspiration from schools that have preceded them in this journey-- specifically the John Brown School and Humanities Prep. Yet the practitioners are aware that one cannot simply copy and paste restorative discipline from one school to another and expect great results. Hamilton's context is unique, and the philosophy needs time to grow its roots in this new place. Like many other Consortium schools, Hamilton places a great deal of emphasis on anti-oppressive learning and its connection to restorative justice. Jack, Julia, and Fiona all emphasized the importance of learning about structures such as the prison-industrial complex as a means of engaging students to realize why restorative justice is so important, and what exactly is at stake.

The interviewees also cited Hamilton's exemption from the regents exams as critical part in being able to create a compassionate school community. They reflected that the stressful, top-down atmosphere of accountability would make it enormously difficult to cultivate deep trust amongst students and teachers. But even graced with this exemption, Hamilton struggles to facilitate restorative justice that goes deeper than merely a series of Fairness Committee meetings. Their ultimate goal is to foster an environment where a restorative philosophy of justice pervades *all* interactions, not just the conflicts-- this is something they have yet to bring to fruition, but work towards every day.



## **Bronx Community for Learning**

### *Background*

In the middle of the South Bronx on a quiet street is the Bronx Community for Learning school (BCL). It shares a single building with an affiliated middle school as well as with a Success Academy Charter school which has been co-located with them for a few years. BCL was founded in 2003 by a number of parents, teachers, and community leaders “united by a single idea: students who can express themselves clearly in writing can do better in any path they choose in life” (BCL website, accessed Jan. 2015). With an official enrollment of just under 600 students for grades 9-12, it is almost twice the size of Hamilton-- yet it feels far from impersonal, with staff and students calling out to each other by name, and student work displayed prominently on colorful bulletin boards. BCL is not a Consortium school, and describes its curricula as closely aligned to the state standards, which are the New York regents (BCL website, accessed Jan. 2015).

Unlike Hamilton, the different schools in the building are not separated by floor, which lends a bit of a chaotic character to the experience of entering the building. There is one entrance and one security guard who has the task of signing in all visitors to the multiple schools. Teachers and other staff members carry walkie-talkies with them in order to communicate quickly, since the school is so large that it can be difficult to locate people immediately. Students walk between classes in twos and threes, talking to one another loudly and cheerfully. My presence there seems off-putting to them, but one of them calls out to me loudly “Welcome, miss!” There is a general ambiance of benevolent disorder (Field notes, Jan. 2015). The vast

majority are students of color, whom the school receptionist tells me are mostly from the surrounding neighborhoods of the South Bronx.

Once inside, I met with two members of BCL's dean team to interview them together. Fabian, the dean of students and discipline, is a middle-aged man Latino man, and Ariana, a new assistant dean, is a young Latina woman. Fabian had worked at BCL for many years, as a teachers and now as a dean; Ariana is a BCL alum who was hired just last fall (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). Both were gracious enough to take almost an hour to speak with me in the midst of their hectic school day schedules. The third interviewee from BCL is Emily, whom I interviewed separately at another site. Emily is a young White social studies teacher who has just recently left BCL after seven years of teaching there. These three interviews were particularly difficult and emotional to conduct, given the particular climate at BCL, which I will elucidate when describing the content of the three interviews. The persistence of Fabian, Ariana, and Emily in doing restorative work in the midst of such a difficult situation deeply inspires me. I hope that in recounting their stories I can lift up their voices and call attention to the needs of their school.

### **Fabian**

*“As I shifted toward becoming a dean and the restorative justice stuff I also became a father, and I started to think-- my kid will make mistakes. Even now he'll tick me off as a little baby. But I can't throw him out! People just aren't disposable.”*

Fabian has been an educator in the South Bronx for many years, and has been dedicated to principles of restorative justice throughout that time. He is both an Urban Economics teacher

and the dean of discipline, which is a position that was voted into existence by the UFT membership (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). Though he is particularly dedicated to restorative practices within schools, he emphasizes that all communities he has been a part of have embodied restorative principles, and that he learns from them rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. He describes his work as dean of discipline as: “trying to resolve conflicts creatively, we try to get a sense of what’s going on in terms of school culture, where students are at, what are some possible problems or conflicts that may arise, how can we try and nip them in the bud. And always thinking about how to help a kid avoid being suspended” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). BCL’s method of discipline operates on a referral system; for every infraction such as cutting class or speaking disrespectfully to a teacher, a student will get a referral (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

As deans, Fabian and Ariana will try to meet with all the high school students who have two or three referrals and conduct an “SPI,” or Suspension Prevention Intervention meeting. The SPI functions like a harm and healing circle, including ground rules, a talking piece, and heavy facilitation. Ultimately the goal of the group is to figure out what the harmer can do to repair the damage they have done; “if a student had a really bad run-in with a teacher, they might want to write a letter apologizing and make up work that they’re missing for that class. If they’re caught throwing food in the cafeteria, they might have a week of garbage duty” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). The student is given a week to take those restorative measures, and as long as they have do so, the referrals are cleared out of their system, and they have a clean slate again. Fabian is enthusiastic about this efficacy of this system. The trouble, he explains, is that because BCL operates within the limitations of the NYC department of education, students

sometimes *will* get suspended because their misbehaviors have piled up before the deans get a chance to address it in a restorative manner. Once a student has four referrals, they are automatically suspended for a small number of days (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). This limitation means that the deans are constantly operating in crisis mode, trying to save the most vulnerable students from being suspended time and time again, rather than being able to work in a more proactive way to foster a better school culture for everyone.

Even given this limitation, Fabian speaks glowingly of the effect that SPIs can have on troubled students who are acting out. When asked to recount an instance representative of this transformative potential, he tells the following story:

“We had a situation with a student who was very upset because of something at home. And he damaged the wall, poking holes literally in the wall with an umbrella. So angry, he was just poking holes in the wall. We caught him and it was a situation where we could actually suspend him for a period of fifteen to twenty days. But we talked to him about why, and he explained that he had no food at home and he was really upset about that, he was hungry, he was pissed. And he took it out on the wall. And we said, well, you gotta fix the wall! [laughs] It’s as simple as that-- you messed up the wall, you gotta fix the wall, but you don’t know how to fix the wall, so I want to set you up with a custodial staff person, and that person will teach you how to fix the wall. Are you willing to do that? And the kid’s like yeah, and we talked to the custodian, and the reason we chose that custodian in particular is because the year *before*, that same kid had cursed out that custodian. And it was an intense thing, and I had to talk to the kid about respecting people and their job and who they are and what they do. It was a really cool moment” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

Fabian is proud of the way BCL handled this particular case, but the retelling is bittersweet. He is deeply frustrated with the way that the NYC public school system focuses on punishing

students for misbehavior and removing them from their studies without adequate understanding of where that misbehavior is coming from. He insists that simply suspending students who are regularly going hungry, who are facing abuse at home, who are the primary caregivers for younger siblings, or who have unstable living situations is both cruel and ineffective at creating a nurturing school environment (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

Towards the end of our interview, Fabian emphasizes the need to see restorative justice in schools as part of a larger growing trend to apply these principles-- which have been in existence for millennia-- to combat larger systems of violence. He says restorative justice “gives us guidelines for a better way of living, generally speaking, in terms of building societies, communities, countries, transnational relationships. The school piece is actually a microcosm of what’s a possibility. But it’s all important” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). Navigating practicing restorative justice within a decidedly retributive school system feels “like pushing a boulder uphill” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015), but Fabian sees engagement with youth as a particularly critical moment to begin to disentangle the racist structures which govern the lives of so many students in the South Bronx. Their minds are naturally broadening, already challenging the norms of the society they were raised in. The objective is to make them see that another world-- a world built on compassion-- is possible. But, he says with a bitter smile, “we are not always winning that fight” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

### **Ariana**

*“It’s no longer just people of authority talking down on you, and telling you what it is and what it’s not gonna be. You actually get to say how you feel, you*

*get to defend yourself, talk for yourself, and you get to do things for yourself.”*

Ariana’s perspective as an alumna of BCL is particularly valuable, as she is able to reflect both on her past experiences as a student and her experiences mentoring students as part of BCL’s dean team. As a student, BCL’s philosophy that discipline should not be a one-way street, but rather that students should be able to represent their side of the story and defend themselves was critical in helping her and her friends feel that coming to school was worthwhile. She recalls:

“When I was a student here, I remember we had a club, or a panel or something-- basically if you were suspended, you could fight against it. You would sit with a panel which was usually kids from the student council, and you would argue why you shouldn’t be suspended, and what should be done instead of a suspension. And I definitely remember some of my friends coming out of those meetings either like yeah, I’m getting suspended still, or we worked out something. I never got to experience that. [laughs] But I remember that was an option. But then I left and came back and now there are SPIs. I like SPIs; I think they’re effective and they help kids think of other ways to make up for their mistakes instead of just suspending them” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

Ariana cited the existence of this panel-- which evolved into the SPI structure-- as a critical component of what made BCL different from other surrounding schools. She regularly witnessed those other students telling other students in a blasé manner that they had been suspended, but that it was no big deal; they would be back in a matter of days. It frustrated her that there seemed to be no space for students to actually reflect on what they had done, or challenge their suspension. This system seemed to produce students who, in the face of their own powerlessness,

would emotionally disengage from authority figures in order to protect themselves (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015). BCL, on the other hand, centered discourse as an important part of the discipline process.

Ariana is adamant that increased capacity for self-reflection is one of the most important outcomes of practicing restorative justice-- both for students and for the adults around them. She reckons that it gives kids both ownership and accountability in shaping their surroundings and interacting with others. Self-reflection is a critical component of growing up, and Ariana believes that often schools pass this over in favor of “taking the easy way out” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015), or suspending without having a conversation. She acknowledges that, especially when educators are short on time and energy, that easy way out can be extremely tempting. But ultimately, zero-tolerance produces dysfunctional relationships between community members, and angry, disaffected students who are incapable of seeing very far beyond their own experiences.

This development of agency is far from limited to the school building. When I asked Ariana how immersion in a restorative culture helps young adults beyond just making them better students, she relayed the following delightful story:

“One of our peer mediators, she told me there were two adult women on the train and they were gonna fight, and she actually mediated it! Her story was that they were yelling at each other and they were about to really go at it, and she stepped in and spoke to both those ladies, and they both got off the train and nobody fought. And I was like, that’s what peer mediation did for you? Good! So it’s things like that, you gain skills and knowledge, and now you’re able to leave this building and you still have those skills” (Personal interview with Fabian and Ariana, 2015).

Similarly to Fabian, Ariana's conception of restorative justice makes it impossible and undesirable to view it as just a "school thing." In order to truly honor the communities that BCL students comes from, as well as to strengthen their own school community, restorative practices must be centered around an understanding of students *as people* who have tremendous impact on the world around them.

### **Emily**

*"The aspirational phrase I want to use is transformative justice. Because I think there's lots of potential for schools to be sites of powerful relationships that change us as individuals and communities, but I don't think they ever have been. So to call it restorative isn't really accurate."*

Emily's situation differs dramatically from Fabian and Ariana's in several respects. As of September 2014, she has left BCL and begun work at another Consortium school in lower Manhattan. Though she loved her work at BCL, the high teacher and principal turnover rate made it extremely frustrating and difficult to do the work of building community on restorative principles. When the last principal, with whom Emily was close, announced she was leaving that year, Emily knew the end of her time had come as well. She needed more stability (Personal interview with Emily, 2015). This was a painful decision to make as someone "who believes that meaningful change happens by going somewhere and *staying* there" (Personal interview with Emily, 2015). She still struggles to reconcile this tension in her work.

A queer white woman in her early thirties, Emily has been teaching public school for seven years already, and has no plans of switching careers, though teaching is a tough and often



thankless job. At the very beginning of her time as a teacher, she was “very focused on the classroom, making my curricula and pedagogy socially just. And I realized relatively quickly, probably my first year, that that wasn’t enough. I wanted to figure out how to do with students was how to leverage relationships and content and skill-learning to change ourselves as people” (Personal interview with Emily, 2015). Emily found a community of like-minded educators at BCL, who believed as she does that principles of restorative justice must pervade all aspects of a school in order to take root. Rather than just having individual teachers trying to push these values, they had to be visible in the hallways, extracurricular activities, afterschool programs, and especially amongst the interactions of the adults in that building, so as to set an example for the students.

BCL’s “dean team” represented exactly this kind of whole-school thinking put into practice. The dean team is comprised of school leaders who, in addition to the duties of managing the logistics of the school, are also in charge of handling discipline and conducting SPIs when they are needed. They also commonly work with the families of students who are particularly struggling in order to understand how to best support them (Personal interview with Emily, 2015). Having worked closely with both Fabian and Ariana during her time at BCL, she admires them as deans and also as people who are committed to restorative practices in their everyday lives. She sees this kind of full-time dedication to restorative justice as a necessity to making it actually work, and emphasizes that the New York City DoE should not expect to mandate this kind of thing from the top-down and expect people to truly buy into it or understand it (Personal interview with Emily, 2015).

When I asked Emily to relate a story that she thought exemplified BCL's success with restorative justice, she was at first reluctant to because it might paint Fabian in an unflattering light. But after a moment's reflection, she decided that wasn't quite the case and went on:

“there was this one advisee whom I'd known since ninth grade, who I had a close relationship with, but also-- he's a weird dude. And he-- a senior in high school, Black male, really really hated being greeted in the morning and told to take off his hat and his hoodie. He would have to be told every single morning, take your hat off, take your hat off. One day, I saw on our referrals system that he and Fabian had had a huge altercation. The student had refused to take the hat off, then yelled a profanity like “suck my d\*\*\*” to Fabian, who had thought that he had a relationship with this student, and it was upsetting. And then...Fabian basically went to the student and took him down to the ground. And basically physically made him take his hat off” (Personal interview with Emily, 2015).

It should be noted that Fabian is a jiu-jitsu master, and was careful not to cause any physical harm to the student whatsoever. Still, the student was angry and rattled, and refused to speak to Fabian or attend the class that he taught. Fabian felt deeply guilty and regretful and came to Emily hoping to work with her to make things right. Emily went on to tell me about the “difficult” harm and healing circle that ensued, where multiple students told Fabian that what he had done what “totally not cool” (Personal interview with Emily, 2015), and Fabian admitted blame. To see an authority figure actually relinquish power and admit wrongdoing to his students was extremely powerful. Emily reckons that this vulnerability was what enabled this particular circle to have a powerful effect on its participants, and make those relationships stronger than they had ever been.

Emily is quick to underline the fact that restorative discipline processes cannot be a panacea if the participants are not ready to be vulnerable with each other and truly admit fault. She recalls an intervention with an AP class that had been consistently acting out against their teacher, where multiple restorative circles with the class and teach produced little effect. She reflects:

“Part of the reason that that other circle felt so powerful is because the adult who had overexerted power in a particular situation was able to recognize that and take responsibility for it. Whereas in some of the other things that I’ve seen, especially when there’s conflicts between adults and students, if the adult is unwilling to recognize their own power in the situation, then not a lot will change. And so I felt a little bit hopeless about using those processes for that kind of class” (Personal interview with Emily, 2015).

Towards the end of our interview, Emily opened up about a very recent series of events at BCL that shocked and saddened me. Only two days after I had sat down to talk with Fabian and Ariana, the new principal decided that in order to cut costs for the school, he was going to lay off four staff members, including Ariana and several other members of BCL’s dean team. This unilateral decision was made possible in part by the fact that the assistant dean jobs do not have union protection, and serve at the discretion of the principal (Personal interview with Emily, 2015). All the work and patience that BCL dean team members had put into building the school’s capacity to practice restorative justice was undone in a day. Almost at a loss for words, Emily ended with, “this really, really sucks, and is the reality of what things are like. This is part of the reason that after seven years of trying to do this shit, it was really hard for me to imagine

building things over time when you have *no* consistency. Yeah. Fuck” (Personal interview with Emily, 2015).

### **Summing Up**

It is hard to describe the anger and frustration I felt upon hearing this towards the end of this final interview. I had not known Fabian, Ariana, or Emily very well at all, yet I feel a deep connection and admiration for them and their work. The fact that Ariana was summarily laid off, her connections with students severed, and that she had to try and find work at another school mid-way through a school year is sickening. It serves as a poignant reminder that trying to build the relationships which will make restorative work possible is a near-impossible task when faced with this kind of workplace instability.

Whereas Hamilton Collegiate high school is slowly growing its restorative justice culture and finding its footing, I found Bronx Community for Learning to be a school struggling mightily just to stay afloat and true to its core values. The people who work there every day have put in an incredible amount of effort to do right by their students, and to build lasting relationships built on trust. Yet they find these efforts undermined again and again by a massive teacher and principal turnover rate, and by a lack of time and resources to conduct SPIs and harm and healing circles. Emily’s revelation that the new principal had just fired Ariana and several other members of the dean team is, in a devastating way, the perfect example of how destructive this instability is for restorative work.

## **John Brown High School**

### *Background*

At various points during my interviews with teachers at Hamilton and Bronx Community for Learning, I heard the John Brown high school referred to as something of a shining beacon in New York City, a true embodiment of the restorative principles they aspire to uphold. John Brown seems to be at the middle of the network of restorative justice in schools, roughly ground zero of the movement in the city. Founded eleven years ago by teachers from another progressive high school which shares the same building in the Chelsea neighborhood, John Brown quickly became widely known and respected for its strong academics, as well as its focus on restorative practices (Performance based assessments website, accessed Jan. 2015). The high school is a member of the Coalition for Essential Schools, a network of public schools nationwide devoted to upholding critical thought, depth of knowledge, and democratic tenets (Coalition of Essential Schools website, accessed Jan. 2015). It is also a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, which means that it is exempt from the New York regents examinations, opting instead to measure their students' progress by more holistic means, such as portfolios or extended projects. The fact that it is a transfer school (meaning that only students who have started high school somewhere else and have opted to leave may attend), and that it enrolls a mere 250 students distinguishes it from the other two schools I have looked at.

The handful of times I was actually inside the building that John Brown shares with five other high schools, I was struck by the amount of commotion in that learning space. Students stood talking loudly in groups outside their classrooms and in stairwells; teachers engaged one another in quiet and serious conversation between classes. One student gave another student a

piggyback ride down the hallway for about five seconds before they were apprehended by a teacher; when I passed by, I heard her explaining to them how two other students had hurt themselves doing just that two years ago, which is why such behavior is not allowed (Field notes, Jan. 2015). There was a unique and pervasive sense of camaraderie throughout, which is not altogether surprising in a school so small, but it made me feel quickly at home as it reminded me of my own public high school. The security guard inside the entrance of the building chatted with me about the oncoming snow storm, inquiring after my safety getting home (Field notes, Jan. 2015). On the walls hung student art and projects, including an illustration of the Black Lives Matter movement and a statistics project on racial police profiling in New York City. Even on this superficial level, it was easy to see how seriously John Brown took its commitment to fostering a warm a socially just school community.

The three people I interviewed from John Brown are: Ava (a young math teacher), Tara (the schoolwide restorative justice coordinator), and Jacob (the teacher co-director, similar to a principal). All three offered different perspectives on the work that they do, owing largely to their difference in background and their roles at John Brown. Yet their narratives were closely intertwined by their devotion to restorative justice and by their belief in a more just school system. The picture I extracted of this high school is more complicated than its reputation as a model school amongst the progressive education community in New York City would suggest. Despite these nuances, it is clear to me that John Brown practices the ideals it preaches, and that the work put in tirelessly by its staff for the last eleven years has yielded tremendous results.

## Ava

*“It was very sad to see eleven and twelve year-old students suspended for, let’s say, bringing a knife to school. Not even knowing what their actions really mean. And coming to this suspension center, they always left worse than they came in. More violent, more intense emotionally. It was really damaging.”*

A young woman in her second year of teaching public school, Ava feels she is just now coming into her own teaching rhythm at John Brown. She teaches algebra and trigonometry in addition to heading an advisory class, where she provides academic and emotional support for students. She describes many of their dispositions toward math as “hopeless,” noting that some of them have taken algebra and failed as many as eight times (Personal interview with Ava, 2015). Ava reckons that in addition to a skill deficit in these academic areas, many students also deal with what she terms “educational trauma” (Personal interview with Ava, 2015) at the hands of a school system which has told them for many years that they cannot succeed. Such messaging is very difficult to reverse, especially in such a short amount of time at John Brown, but still Ava feels that she has made great strides in her classes as a whole and that many formerly “hopeless” students are now passing their class. As a white and college educated woman, she knows that her presence at the front of a classroom can often trigger the worst of that educational trauma, which is why she takes great pains to avoid the temptation to assert complete power as a teacher. Though many of her colleagues have advised her to assert authority as a new teacher or risk being taken advantage of, Ava refuses to go against her gut. Instead she gives her students options with exams and deadlines and openly asks them for feedback about her teaching (Personal interview with Ava, 2015).

Resisting the urge to be controlling as a teacher is deeply interwoven with how Ava has internalized the principles of restorative justice. Before coming to John Brown, she completed her student teaching at one of New York City's forty suspension centers, where students who are suspended for a period of time longer than six days are sent to continue their schooling until they are allowed back to their own schools (Personal interview with Ava, 2015). Ava describes teaching there as an upsetting and radicalizing experience. She noted that the most emotionally vulnerable kids were often treated the most brutally in response to acting out, and that the other staff members had no interest in helping their students understand why their behavior was wrong. This skewed her bias away from suspensions as a solution for schools, and towards a more empathetic praxis of dealing with harm (Personal interview with Ava, 2015). This led her to discover the restorative justice movement in schools in New York City, and when her time student-teaching was up, she was able to secure a position at John Brown. Here, Ava feels she is coming into herself more fully as an educator and mentor.

“In place of detentions,” she reflects, “there are usually conversations” (Personal interview with Ava, 2015). Most of her work with restorative practices outside her classroom involves helping her advisees work through harm they have suffered or inflicted on others in the John Brown community. She recalls with fondness the story of two girls in her classroom, one of whom was also an advisee:

“They both came from the same previous school, and they had been in physical fights at their old school. I hadn't known that history. So in class they had a moment where they both stood up to fight, and both chose to not fight in that moment. They did a reentry meeting with me, which means that they couldn't attend class until we had sat down and had a meeting. And in the reentry meeting they shared that their viewpoint was, they *had* to fight to defend themselves and to show everyone around them that they



were powerful. So we talked about what people see when they see a fight and what they think. And now those two girls are friends, sitting together at the same table and everything. Which, I cannot even believe that that's happened. Crazy" (Personal interview with Ava, 2015).

Though she advocates for reentry meetings and other restorative measures as powerful tools for healing, Ava emphasizes that they could be a lot more effective at John Brown if the staff had the capacity to respond to conflicts immediately after they happened so that students would not be in a position of having to miss class because they are waiting for a reentry meeting. She is also a bit uncomfortable with the idea of restorative justice as a "discipline" measure, arguing that the whole philosophy of restorative justice requires its practitioners to move beyond the framework of retributive thinking (Personal interview with Ava, 2015). Instead, Ava posits, we must position restorative practices as both a proactive and reactive method of strengthening the bonds between individuals and their communities. Otherwise, John Brown runs the risk of turning restorative circles into punishments. She remembers that one of her students insisted that she would change her behavior because she would think of sitting in this "uncomfortable" reentry meeting and want to avoid another one. Ava recalls thinking, "oh, for you this *is* a punishment, this is equivalent to detention, maybe even worse. Because two adults are sitting here holding you accountable for what you did. And it's two adults that you care about kind of care about what they think." Ava thus dismisses the criticism that restorative justice is somehow "soft" on students. Rather, it refuses to let them off the hook for thinking about the consequences of their behavior and forces them to truly account for what they have done, using the loving relationships they have formed with others to help them on this path.

## **Tara**

*“In a school like John Brown which is a transfer school, a lot of our population has been pushed out of schools for whatever reason, pregnancy, suspension, sometimes being incarcerated. RJ kind of re-invites them into a school community and lets them know: your voice matters.”*

Tara was a few minutes late for our interview together; she quickly apologized and explained that right as she was about to come down and meet me, a student came to her asking for a quiet space to have a mediation with a friend. Only a few months before, this student regularly fought in hallways and got into serious trouble; now she models harm and healing circles for younger students (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). This situation perfectly encapsulates Tara’s work as restorative justice coordinator for John Brown; her goal is to coordinate the safe spaces for restorative conversations to take place, and to embed restorative practices even deeper within the culture of the school. Rather than having the adults foist these protocols upon them, she explains, it is ideal for students to take ownership and responsibility over them (Personal interview with Tara, 2014).

For Tara personally, the stakes of this work feel high. As a Black woman in her thirties who has been immersed in schooling contexts for the entirety of her professional life, she has seen first hand the devastating effects that zero tolerance policies can have on children. She recalls of her previous position before coming to John Brown: “I was being forced to suspend kids and kick kids out of school and I just couldn’t be okay with it, especially kids that come from the same communities as me” (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). Now as restorative

coordinator, she is able to draw the connection between her daily work and the larger ongoing struggle nationwide against the school-to-prison pipeline.

In explaining to me John Brown's conceptual framework for thinking about restorative justice, Tara cites the central importance of the school's seven Core Values. They are: "respect for humanity, respect for intellect, respect for the truth, commitment to democracy, commitment to justice, respect for diversity, and commitment to peace" (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). Hamilton Collegiate High School as well as several other progressive high schools in the city have borrowed from this very framework in shaping their own. Misbehavior-- which is framed as anything which violates one or more of these Core Values, as opposed to infraction against a school rule-- is divided up into three levels of seriousness. Level one is mere disruption, such as distracting others from learning. Level two is disrespect, such as cursing someone out or using hurtful and derogatory language. Level three, which is the most serious, indicates some threat to the safety of others around them (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). Only a level three instance of misbehavior may result in a suspension-- and even in that case, all effort will be made by the co-directors of the school to create another path to resolution.

Tara emphasizes that as important as these protocols are in forming the basis for restorative practices to exist in a school, they will not have much effect if the overall culture of the school indicates mistrust towards students, such as the presence of metal detectors or police officers. No amount of harm and healing circles or Fairness Committee meetings will be enough to undo that policing presence, so it is imperative that schools begin this work with an understanding that everyone, from the teachers to the cafeteria workers to the school safety

officers, must be trained to interact with one another in a way that is concordant with the Core Values of that school (Personal interview with Tara, 2014).

In underscoring this point, Tara relays the following anecdote:

“For example, there’s this kid who, at the beginning of the year he would cuss anybody out if he felt disrespected. Today he got into it with a teacher, Joe-- he did curse him out, but then he came right to my office and he was like, I need to let you know, I just cursed Joe out. He sat down on the couch and we talked about it, like what could you have done differently. He said, if this happened a few weeks ago, I probably would have walked out, and I’d be in the park smoking weed by now. Now he wants to sit down and talk with Joe about what *both* of them should have done differently in that moment, because Joe spoke to him in a way that he perceived as against the Core Value of commitment to peace. This all was just this morning!” (Personal interview with Tara, 2014).

In positioning restorative practices as true community accountability rather than merely another way of doing discipline, Tara says it is imperative that students feel they, too, can hold authority figures accountable for violating Core Values. Only then can the resulting conversation be honest, not just going through the motions to get out of a more traditional punishment.

When I asked Tara whether there were some kids for whom restorative practices just didn’t work, she answered with an emphatic “no” (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). Rather, she explained, since schools are with students for such a limited amount of time in their lives, they just might not see results as quickly as they might like, especially since some students come in with such negative baggage attached to schooling because of their past experiences. Being a true practitioner of restorative justice means believing in the inherent ability of *all* human beings to be compassionate members of the community-- we don’t get to pick and choose whom we

deem worthy of redemption (Personal interview with Tara, 2014). I confess myself overwhelmed at the resolve and compassion that Tara brings to her work which enables her to see the potential for change in everyone. We concluded our interview on a similar note, talking about the Black Lives Matter movement and the role it has played these last few months in shaping student's perceptions of the world and their power within it. Tara reflects that some students have reacted defensively with hopelessness: "things are always going to be this way for us, so why bother trying to change it" (Personal interview with Tara, 2014), but that others have responded with a renewed vigor for activism and social transformation. She sees this belief in transformative capacity as indispensable for both small scale restorative work in schools, and larger scale healing work for racial, gender, and economic justice.

### **Jacob**

*"It's a good time right now, in the sense that I've been doing this work for eight plus years, and I've never felt more a part of a larger movement. Everywhere I go, people are saying that this is something they believe in, and that we need to do things differently."*

As co-director of John Brown, Jacob is deeply invested in how to realize the school's goal of being a safe haven for students who have transferred from difficult academic and emotional backgrounds (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). In his understanding of restorative practices, the best way to this goal is by means of having honest, community-wide conversations about fraught issues. These could be as massive as the question of whether drone strikes to kill "militants" can ever be ethical, or as small as whether it is acceptable for John

Brown students to smoke marijuana together in the park between classes. The point, Jacobs emphasizes, is to help students realize that they bear an ethical responsibility to one another, and that choices they may think of as “individual” choices can in fact have a huge impact on those around them (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). Jacob cites scholar Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of stages of development to make the point that high school-age kids are at the point in their lives where they need to be able to engage in meaningful dialogue about serious issues with real consequences in order to be successful in the world (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). This, for him, is the essence of what they hope to accomplish in practicing restorative justice.

Jacob tells me that I have caught him at an unusually good moment, because the results of the school’s Performance-Based Assessment Tasks (PBATs) have just come in, indicating that the vast majority of their students, including some of the most difficult ones, are well on track to graduate. Jacobs says: “It’s a time when we get to see the fruits of our labors. I say you caught me at a good time because I feel like it’s because we kept working with them and never gave up on them...we have some kids that I *know* would not graduate in other places” (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). It is a powerful thing for him to see senior students who a few years before could barely make it through the school day without fighting or being removed from class present a high-level research paper to a panel of teachers and peers. He also feels that his work as the coordinator of the peer mediation program and the Fairness Committee is slowly but surely creating compassionate boundaries for his students, boundaries which are often lacking in other parts of their lives. Serving in a disciplinary role for teenagers of color as a white man in his thirties is a politically fraught position, but he tries to navigate it being as firm and as loving as

he would want his own children to be treated in their public school (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015).

When I asked Jacob to relay an instance where it felt difficult to balance principles of restorative justice with students' safety, he relayed the following story:

“A special ed student student of ours was carrying a swiss army knife, which he said that he carries with him every day. Completely had forgotten about it. He argued that he used it as a tool, but other people were like hey, that could also be used as a weapon, it's a knife. So if we had pushed for a serious suspension, we knew what the consequences would be for this student in terms of him falling further behind in his studies, becoming less connected to our community” (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015).

Owing in part to philosophical differences amongst the staff, he said, it can often be difficult to come to consensus about what the right call is to make.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes he fears that students will interpret their decisions not to suspend as proof that the school is “soft” on things like weapons and drugs. He also acknowledges the possibility that school parents will perceive that they are not taking school safety seriously, which is precisely what many students have tried to get away from in transferring to John Brown (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). But ultimately, he believes that it must be up to the judgement of the Fairness Committee to make these calls. Only then can the school truly embody the restorative principle of community accountability and democratic decision-making.

Similarly to Emily from BCL, Jacob tries to use the language of “transformative justice” in addition to or in place of the traditional “restorative justice.” This is because many of the staff at John Brown, including him, “believe it's not enough to just restore to the community-- we

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<sup>4</sup> John Brown has their own three-tiered system for identifying misbehaviors. See figure 2.

need to transform not only our own community but the communities that the students come from” (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). He thus underscores the connection between the skills and tenets that students learn at John Brown and the change they are able to effect in the larger world around them. Thus “restoring” relationships is not adequate; the focus must be on pushing the seams of the imagination to imagine and act for a better world yet to come. Lastly, Jacob muses, it is important to consider the work that Tara and other staff members do from an organized worker perspective. He is also very interested in pushing his teacher’s union to fight for restorative justice in schools and to represent a social justice agenda, not merely their membership’s narrow interests (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). He believes that a union strategy has the potential to move the movement for restorative justice in schools to new heights.

### **Summing Up**

The John Brown high school does indeed live up to its reputation of being a role model for other schools in New York City practicing restorative justice. This is not to say that they don’t struggle with limited resources and time like the others, or that they don’t disagree amongst themselves over the outcome of Fairness Committee sessions. But the fact that they have been growing their practice for eleven years, have cultivated a staff with low-turnover that is committed to the work, and integrate the principles of community accountability and justice into their curriculum has made this a fertile community for restorative justice to take root. The advantages that they have as a result of being exempt from the standardized regents exams, and the fact that they have received extra grant money in order to secure Tara’s position also must be acknowledged as significant factors in their success; these are not advantages available to every



school (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). John Brown continues to work through some critical tension points at their school site, including the fact that their students are not required to go through metal detectors while students in some of the other co-located schools in the building are. This inequality of treatment fosters inter-school resentment and conflict, a problem they are continually working to resolve. But in the decade of its existence, John Brown's unwavering commitment to deepening restorative practices has created a solid foundation to have these difficult conversations and work towards resolution.

## **Conclusion: Moving Forward**

### *What Is Working?*

My aim in interviewing nine educators from three different New York City high schools has been to describe the daily work of those practicing and advocating for restorative justice, and to illustrate the differences and similarities between how these three schools navigate that work. The inner workings and cultures of these schools are far more nuanced than I can hope to capture fully in this thesis, yet I hope that what I have managed to glean will shed light upon the current status of the restorative movement, add to the rapidly growing literature on school discipline, and suggest a direction for advocates hoping to move this work forward. As different as Hamilton Collegiate, Bronx Community for Learning, and John Brown are from one another, the accounts that their teachers have given me as to what is working fall closely in line with one another and show a great deal of cohesion. Those points of unity are as follows:

- 1) Continuous trainings for teachers and restorative justice coordinators are essential.

Teachers from all three schools expressed the importance of treating this training as an ongoing project which involves *all* the staff, as opposed to a half-day workshop on occasion for the deans and the restorative coordinators alone. This consistent outside support and guidance allowed teachers and other staff members to reflect critically on their progress. New York City nonprofits Teachers Unite and Dignity in Schools were consistently cited as excellent facilitators of these kinds of trainings.

- 2) In seven out of my nine interviews, educators specifically referred to the recent police murders of Michael Brown and Eric Garner and the emerging Black Lives Matter movement as having a profound impact on their students. They reflected that classroom

and schoolwide conversations about these events helped create an environment where students felt able to be vulnerable and honest about their lived experiences outside of school, which in turn facilitated better harm and healing circles. Creating a safer space and building understanding through these conversations is critical to building a restorative culture.

- 3) Across the board, interviewees were adamant that restorative justice is neither a panacea for all school issues nor a quick fix. In its third year, Hamilton is only now finding its footing in this practice; even veteran school John Brown is still constantly growing and adjusting their structures. Those who successfully use restorative practices in school as a response to zero-tolerance are prepared to take this on as a long term project, and understand that because it takes time to create community accountability, they will not see huge changes overnight.
- 4) The restorative coordinators I spoke with were in agreement that the most powerful circles tend to be peers holding their peers to account, rather than educators lecturing them about their wrongdoing. Additionally, it is essential for students to feel that they can take authority figures to Fairness-- that this interaction is not just a one-way street like every other method of discipline. This requires a serious level of involvement and ownership on the part of students and a willingness to cede power on the part of adults in order to realize this ideal balance.
- 5) In order to make this a truly “whole school” undertaking, sole responsibility for organizing Fairness Committee meetings and holding peer mediations cannot fall on the shoulders of deans or restorative justice coordinators. When there are a large number of

teachers who are trained and prepare to lead these sessions, it keeps the workload manageable and prevents a backlog. It also allowed the coordinators to avoid having too much on their plates; this way they can give ample attention to the students who most need their support.

- 6) “Town hall” meetings, structures of student government, and student-led restorative circles go a long way towards helping students believe that their voices truly *do* matter in serious decision-making. Teenagers are used to being ignored and condescended to by adults; only when they sense that they are being taken seriously will they be willing to fully engage with restorative processes.

#### *What Is Needed?*

- 1) First and most obviously, more time and resources are required across the board in order to establish restorative discipline practices as viable long-term structures. There was not one educator I spoke to who felt that their school allocated adequate staff and funds to practice restorative justice the way they felt it should really be done. I place this element of my findings in conversation with the innumerable scholars who have already documented the devastating effects of underfunding on urban schools in the United States. Michael Rebell (founder of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity in New York which sued the state for failing to provide adequate educational conditions across the board and won in 2007) is prominent among those voices. He notes in his paper “Adequacy Litigations: A Path to Equity” that New York City public schools suffer from underfunding in general, with poorer districts bearing the brunt of those consequences. This is due in part to “state

education finance systems, which have historically have been based on local property taxes, a pattern that inherently disadvantages students who attend schools in areas with low property wealth” (Rebell, 2005, p. 5). Thus the problem of equitable distribution of resources reaches far further than a lack of adequate counselors and staff trainings on positive discipline. Yet I emphasize its primacy in the struggle for restorative justice in schools because the entire existence of the work depends on it. There can be no larger restorative justice without economic justice.

- 2) In order to ensure the stability needed to grow restorative justice in schools, the jobs of restorative coordinators and deans of discipline *must* be union jobs. Otherwise, as we have seen in the case of Bronx Community for Learning, practitioners run the risk of having their positions cut and all their hard work uprooted suddenly because of budgetary concerns (Interview with Emily, Jan. 2015). This position should be centrally created by the New York City DoE as an option that schools may opt to add.
- 3) There is a need for white, elite-educated teachers to fully reckon with their positions of authority over students of color who have suffered educational trauma. The white educators I spoke with this were, on the whole, deeply thoughtful about their positionalities, and committed to taking that into account in their teaching. But many also expressed confusion or helplessness about how to help their students of color work through experiences of racism, especially in the wake of the national Black Lives Matter protests. Schools practicing restorative justice must prioritize honest conversations about race amongst staff so as to form a more honest understanding of how to support one another in fighting racism.

- 4) There is a need to expand access to restorative trainings to *all* members of the school community, including school safety agents, cleaning workers, cafeteria workers, and ideally, parents. My findings confirm Belinda Hopkins' central assertion in *Just Schools: A Whole School Approach to Restorative Justice*: that restorative justice should not be conceptualized as an extra program or series of training sessions, but rather a paradigm shift in imagining what a healthy school culture looks and feels like (2003). Its principles must be infused into every school structure, and every relationship. In order to truly embody this "whole school" element of restorative justice, schools must consider how interactions both inside and beyond the classroom will shape community members' school experiences, and invest in expanding the horizon of restorative practices beyond just students and teachers.
- 5) Schools using restorative practices must be allowed exemption from high stakes testing. It is inconsistent with the principles of community accountability to position students and teachers ultimately accountable not to one another but to the higher authority of somewhat arbitrary exams which are not closely aligned with their particular curricula. My interviews with educators bolsters the findings of a report published by the Advancement Project titled *Test, Punish, and Push Out*. The report posits that although the rise of high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance discipline in schools are often considered separately, they share roots in the "get-tough" policies that arose after the publication of "A Nation at Risk" in 1983, and work in tandem to create the school-to-prison pipeline (2010). In order to have a chance at success, schools building restorative discipline practices must have the freedom to tailor their academic material to

their particular context and the learning styles of their students. Otherwise, the realms of restorative discipline and classroom environments will not dovetail well, and the careful work to ensure a compassionate and safe school culture will be undone. Many schools in the city are already using project-based assessments as an alternative to high-stakes testing-- the John Brown high school is just one example.

- 6) On a similar note, restorative justice tenets preclude the use of metal detectors, surveillance monitoring, random locker searches, or police presence in schools. This conclusion has been foregrounded by Pedro Noguera, who in his article “Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices” emphasized that zero-tolerance cultivates a school culture of disrespect and excessive control (2010). The “no-excuses” rhetoric, Noguera argues, assumes that students of color are inherently delinquent and must be monitored and punished ruthlessly for stepping out of line. The teachers I interviewed have affirmed that this kind of “broken windows” policing of students sends a clear message that they are not wanted or trusted in the school community well before they ever step into a classroom. Therefore, if a school practicing restorative justice requires non-police school safety officers in the school, those officers should be included and centered in the staff’s restorative trainings, so that their interactions with students are based in those principles rather than in distrust and disrespect.
- 7) Lastly, the labor power required to coordinate a school’s restorative discipline programs and facilitate circles and Fairness Committees must be taken seriously as real *work* that is necessary for the school to function well, and which may not be pared down to make time

for other things. Deans and restorative justice coordinators must be paid a good salary, and teachers who agree to take on this work in addition to their classes must be made exempt from other duties so that the work of leading restorative circles and Fairnesses does not place them in a position where they are responsible for more than they can fairly handle.

### *Summing Up*

So far in this conclusion chapter, I have so far highlighted the similarities between the successes and needs of the three schools I have looked at. I wish to stress now that the stories I have gathered in doing this project drive home the point that the contexts and cultures of all schools are so unique that any attempt to create a standardized, top-down, one size fits all program for restorative justice in schools is doomed to fail utterly. The delicate, slow, and emotionally laden nature of this work necessitates that schools be given great autonomy with how they choose to integrate restorative justice into their school community. For example, Fairness Committee and Suspension Prevention Interventions (SPIs) may not fit into every school culture; newcomers to the movement should be encouraged to create alternative structures that better complement their particular contexts.

Another important gist of these nine interviews is that its “grassroots” nature must be a central part of restorative practices, not just a catchphrase. This means that each and every practitioner of restorative justice must be actively invested and involved in shaping these structures at their particular school site. As Emily put it, “the protocol is just a protocol unless people really believe in it and make it work” (2015). The New York City DoE has had a history



in recent decades of imposing top-down reforms that teachers neither fully understand nor take ownership over; when such reforms fail, the winds of policy then blown in the opposite direction in desperation to find something that shows success quickly. Thankfully, the era of zero-tolerance is crumbling. But proponents of restorative justice must be incredibly vigilant that their practice is not co-opted and turned into yet another top-down policy shift that will be given inadequate thought and care and then abandoned in a matter of a few years. Therefore, the New York City DoE *should not* make restorative justice a requirement in any form, but should instead develop it as an standing option that schools may opt into developing at their own school sites.

While I have emphasized the importance of a bottom-up approach in growing the restorative justice movement in schools, the question of funding and resources leads us in quite the opposite direction-- centralization. We need only look at the breaking up of the dean team at the Bronx Community for Learning to see the devastating effects of precarity on this work. Therefore, the Department of Education must relieve this instability by allocating permanent centralized funding and trainings to all schools utilizing restorative practices, and by creating the role of “restorative coordinator” or “dean of discipline and culture” as a centralized, unionized, and well-paid position. By so doing, they can relieve individual schools of the burden of paying for these staff out of their own funds. This will ensure stability for restorative coordinators, guarantee restorative justice as a long term project, and provide greater incentive to schools to opt in if they will not deplete their own money.

Finally, it is imperative to resist framing restorative discipline practices as a mere opposition to zero-tolerance tenets. As many of the educators I interviewed stressed, it is not quite accurate to frame restorative justice within only the realm of discipline. There must be

equal focus on building a strong and loving community with the capacity to respond to harm; otherwise it runs the risk of becoming yet another reactive rather than proactive measure. If there is no community in the first place, Jacob points out, “there is nothing to restore” (Personal interview with Jacob, 2015). In a similar vein, restorative justice is no silver bullet. Without also addressing issues of poverty, trauma, and inequality in the U.S. education system, restorative justice alone cannot fix all that is broken. Rather, it can be one important tool among many to transform our schooling system from one that criminalizes and damages students to one that recognizes and nourishes their humanity.

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## Figures

### Home



#### Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Humanities Preparatory Academy to provide a philosophical and practical education for all students, an education that features creativity and inquiry, encourages habitual reading and productivity, as well as self-reflection and original thought. We agree with Socrates that the “unexamined life is not worth living,” and it is our desire to prepare students to live thoughtful and meaningful lives. We are committed to inspiring the love of learning in our students. This mission can best be accomplished in a school that is a democratic community. As a democratic community, we strive to exemplify the values of democracy: mutual respect, cooperation, empathy, the love of

humankind, justice for all, and service to the world.

**Respect for Humanity \* Respect for Diversity \* Respect for the Intellect \* Respect for the Truth  
Commitment to Peace \* Commitment to Justice \* Commitment to Democracy**

*Fig. 1. Mission statement and Core Values from Humanities Preparatory Academy website*

Responding to Violations of The [REDACTED] School's  
Core Values and School-Wide Norms

<b>LEVEL 1 :</b>	<b>LEVEL 2 :</b>	<b>LEVEL 3:</b>
<p><b>DISRUPTION:</b> <i>Disrupting teaching and learning; Disturbing the learning environment</i></p> <p><b>EXAMPLES (including but not limited to):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not following directions in class and in hallways</li> <li>• Disrupting teacher and/or classmates</li> <li>• Aggressive behavior (including cursing, taunting, staring)</li> <li>• Not returning to class in a timely manner after leaving with a pass</li> <li>• Leaving class without a pass</li> <li>• Being in an unauthorized place in JBS</li> </ul> <p><b>STANDARD RESPONSE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sent to Advisor <i>Options for advisor:</i></li> <li>• Communicate with classroom teacher</li> <li>• Restorative approaches (Re-entry meeting, fairness committee, mediation, circle etc.)</li> <li>• Phone call home</li> </ul>	<p><b>DISRESPECT:</b> <i>Disrespecting self, classmates or adults; Defying or ignoring adults; Instigating conflict</i></p> <p><b>EXAMPLES (including but not limited to):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Repeatedly not listening to or disrespecting an adult</li> <li>• Refusing to leave a class when asked by a Staff member</li> <li>• Cursing at an adult</li> <li>• Using attacking or derogatory language towards another student</li> <li>• Sent to Advisor more than 3 times in a semester</li> <li>• Disrupting Advisor's class when 'Sent to Advisor' by another teacher</li> </ul> <p><b>STANDARD RESPONSE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sent to Restorative Coordinator <i>Options for Restorative Coordinator:</i></li> <li>• Restorative approaches</li> <li>• Phone call home; family conference, if necessary</li> <li>• Meeting with social worker</li> </ul>	<p><b>THREATENING SAFETY:</b> <i>Engaging in behavior that endangers the school community</i></p> <p><b>EXAMPLES: (including but not limited to):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using threatening language or acting aggressively towards an adult</li> <li>• Loud or threatening confrontations</li> <li>• Trespassing in parts of the building do not belong to JBS</li> <li>• Sexual harassment (e.g., sexually suggestive comments, unwanted touching, posting sexually suggestive messages etc.)</li> <li>• Possession of drugs or alcohol or intoxication</li> <li>• Fighting or Play-fighting</li> <li>• Refusing to give co-director electronics after being asked to do so</li> <li>• Destruction/defacement of school property</li> </ul> <p><b>STANDARD RESPONSE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Sent to Principal Co-director <i>Options for administrator:</i></li> <li>• Phone call home; family conference, if necessary</li> <li>• Restorative approaches</li> <li>• Suspension (Sent home immediately, re-entry meeting with family member required)</li> <li>• Potential legal response</li> </ul>

*Fig. 2. Depicts the John Brown High School's breakdown of behaviors included in level one, level two, and level three offenses, as well as some possible restorative consequences.*

## PROGRESSIVE DISCIPLINE

### Infraction Levels

The Citywide Standards of Intervention and Discipline Measures holds students accountable for their behavior. Infractions are grouped into five levels based on the severity of the infraction. Whenever possible and appropriate, interventions should begin with the lowest level of disciplinary response.

Principals, teachers, school staff, students and parents need to know the disciplinary measures that can be taken when a student misbehaves or substantially disrupts a classroom. The Discipline Code is divided into two sections Section A Grades K-5 and Section B Grades 6-12 to ensure that the age and general maturity of the student are considered. Some infractions may not apply to students in grades K-3.

Progressive Infraction Levels	
Level 1	Uncooperative/Noncompliant Behavior
Level 2	Disorderly Behavior
Level 3	Disruptive Behavior
Level 4	Aggressive or Injurious/Harmful Behavior
Level 5	Seriously Dangerous or Violent Behavior

Each level of infractions contains possible guidance interventions as well as a minimum to a maximum range of possible disciplinary responses that may be imposed by a teacher, principal, the Chief Executive Officer of the Office of Safety and Youth Development or other designee of the Chancellor or Community Superintendent.

*Fig. 3. Summary of infraction levels from the New York City Department of Education website*

## Appendix: Interview Transcriptions

*Jack*

Great. So, my career sort of in a nutshell: I'm from North Carolina. During my freshman year in North Carolina, I heard a guy named Robert Moses speak, Robert Moses is a civil rights activist, and he started the Algebra Project. I got really excited about the idea of teaching math for social justice. So I was involved in a program in undergrad, I studied education, and then taught for two years in North Carolina, and fell in love with a woman who's an actor. Not so many acting jobs in North Carolina, so that brought us to New York. I met through my school in North Carolina someone who was connected to a school in New York. This was 2008, which was sort of the second wave of small schools, the first being where they were shutting down large schools and opening up small schools in the Bloomberg era.

Which is something that has some problematic aspects to it, but for me it was a really exciting time to come here, because there are a lot of people thinking about, how can we do education differently? I ended up in a school called the Bronx Lab School. There I met Steve, who helped to start this school. I knew Steve and I knew his philosophy around education, and things at Bronx Lab, for a number of reasons, got sort of focused on testing. Things that I wasn't really interested in, so Steve said, why don't you come to Hamilton, and that's why I'm here.

Yes. So I'm interested first and foremost in helping people think critically about the world. My avenue into that is through mathematics and quantitative reasoning. What I want is for students to question why things are, and then to be active about changing them.

You can't really do that if you're bubbling in bubbles on the test. [laughs]

Part of the problem in the world, as we've seen quite upfront recently, is that society at large isn't really focused very much on justice. We have a system of discipline in the world that's very focused on punitive measures and getting people out of society who we don't want. So we criminalize people's behavior, like selling cigarettes for example, and then we go after them and adjudicate them, often times ruin their lives, and sometimes strangle them to death in broad daylight. So clearly that's a problem.

As someone who's interested in getting students to look at problems and think about problems, think critically about the world and change it, what we need is a system for discipline that is different from that one. Restorative justice is one way that we can engage students in social and emotional learning, such that they can do that analysis in the broader picture.



So here, there are a few things that we do. The main avenue for restorative justice that we have here is called Fairness—this is not unique to Hamilton. It's modeled after—Kate comes from Humanities Prep, and they have a really robust system of Fairness there, and we are in the process of implementing that here.

However, I think restorative justice is actually a lot more than Fairness. It's more a philosophy than it is a set of actions. These actions help us enable the philosophy and enact the philosophy, but really it's about: I value you as a human being, student. I recognize that it's my job to set boundaries for you, and I set those boundaries in a way that is humane, and recognizes that you have reasons why you're acting the way you are. I come to that conversation recognizing that I have boundaries to set, and knowing that you have wishes and desires and feelings and I value those, as I expect you to value my boundaries.

I think we're trying to set up a community of people that are interested in—I mean, our habits of heart and mind guide all our work. So we're interested in developing a community where people can become more curious, become better providers of evidence, become better creative contributors in the world.

How successful are we at doing that? That's a really interesting question. So adolescents' job, developmentally, is essentially to do what we don't want them to do. [laughs] That's a little oversimplifying, but it's not totally untrue. Erikson calls it differentiation, that's a much nicer way of saying it. It's really important that students do that; students are engaged in that process at Hamilton.

We're a small school, trying to do tons of things, it's really hard for us as a school, every time the students test those boundaries, it's been hard for us to be there and say, nope! Here's the boundary. We also have this idea, which is great, but also counterproductive, which is, we really value what students think and we want to understand *why* students are acting out the way they are, not just "kids stop doing that." So it's great, but it takes a *ton* of time to figure that out. Students are not particularly great at expressing themselves, particularly when they're in moments of crisis or stress or anxiety. Most of our students who act out at any given point are in one of those places.

Our culture right now is not doing for our students what we want it to. We have students who are acting out in some normal teen ways, and some whose behavior indicates something more serious. We've had violent incidents; we've had some incidents of sexual harassment. That's not good. But it poses an interesting problem for us which is we *can't* go to every—we have now 300 some odd students. At any given moment, some small but significant percentage of those

students are in crisis. They're in a moment of differentiation, they're not able or willing to do what we want them to do. When there were 100 students, the principal knew everyone, we had a social worker. We used to be smaller—the way that schools phase in in New York City is they start with a ninth grade.

So the current eleventh graders started as our first class of ninth graders. Next year they'll be twelfth graders, and we'll get a whole new class of ninth graders. So it will be the biggest it's going to get next year. That class of eleventh graders hasn't gotten any bigger, in fact it's gotten a little smaller because people have moved. But the school as a whole has gotten bigger.

Interestingly, and this is something that we all, as citizens of New York can advocate, in some ways our hands are tied when it comes to level three and level four incidents. If a student gets in a fight, the chancellor's regs, as written now, there's a certain mandated minimum. It's a real problem, and the chancellor recognizes it as a problem.

There's this great organization Teachers Unite, they're doing some real advocacy around that. A friend of mine, Matthew Goulden, he works with them. He's the man. He helped start a restorative justice program that I worked at in at Bronx Lab. He was an outside consultant, and I was sort of on the ground. So Matthew is the guy to talk to about where they're going, I mean, he has had meetings with the deputy mayor, and various other people. Mayor de Blasio is behind it, Carmen Farina is behind it, we need to push them to do something about it, it's a real problem. Change the mandatory suspension for level three and level four. One, it doesn't have to be mandatory, two, which things land there. For example "disobedience" becomes a level three after a certain number of times, that's a real problem. And it's overused.

So there's that advocacy piece. But so okay, a student gets into a fight at Hamilton, there's requirements that we have to do, and we follow the rules [laughs] you hear that, Farina? We follow the rules! But when the student comes back, what happens? That's the interesting moment, right? So a student has been sort of banished from the community, how do we get them back in? So every student has a re-entry meeting with an administrator, and hopefully their advisor. We talk about what happened, and how we're going to do this. We also set up meetings with individual teachers because students have missed class. So we need to integrate them into each one of those mini class communities.

What work have they missed, are they able to do it, how can we help support them in that way? Then, ideally, there's a mediation between the two students who had the altercation. Now, it's not always the case that that can happen, given people's emotions. But when that can happen, that's definitely the most powerful. You know, it's really about recognizing one another's humanity, and recognizing that both people were having a hard time in that moment. We have

our facilitators for mediations, our social workers are amazing, our administrators and our dean are great at it too.

At Bronx Lab, I had students who went through, so we had respect reps who are now out in the world. I mean hopefully they're—and some of them are—politically engaged in the larger fight for justice. For a sane way of holding people accountable for their actions, which we don't currently have in this country. So political activism around the justice system has been something that engages a lot of students. We teach urban kids of poverty, or people who have a lot of interactions with the police and justice systems individually or as families—giving them a frame to understand that and understand those interactions is really helpful.

We did “Know Your Rights” campaigns at Bronx Lab, had students who later were stopped by the police, and brought in the badge number. That's great! That's what we need—if all police knew that all citizens were ready to take their badge number and fight for their rights, things would look very different. Everyone would hold one another accountable in a new way. I also think just developing the thinking skills that one needs to analyze this very complex, very unjust system, is helping students think about other problems. One of my favorite students from Bronx Lab is in an environmental law program right now. So yeah, justice for Earth, which is kind of as big as you can get! [laughs] The Earth needs some justice.

So restorative justice, Fairness, and general restorative practices aren't going to work—particularly with adolescents—unless they are people who are ready to engage in that. We have students who come with so much baggage associated with power. And they don't trust that people are going to treat them fairly. And so they will act out, in that situation. Our job, I think, as a school, is to build a culture in which they see this happening with all of their friends, and with all of the people. And we haven't hit that tipping point yet. We're not doing it enough, we haven't committed enough resources to training in restorative practices. And also, enough resources for just paying people to do Fairnesses. There's a lot of things that we want to do. So yes, there are students for whom *at this point* it's not working. But there's not, in my opinion, a case where it wouldn't work if we were doing our job *system-wide*, then students would be able to fit within that system, all students.

Yeah, so the biggest barriers are essentially time and money. How do we have—how do we get staff? Our staff, without exception, is philosophically on board with this, but the moves that you make and you know, how you deal with your own stuff as an adult. I mean philosophically I'm right there, but if students act—students' actions come from somewhere. I need to understand that. I shouldn't just knee-jerk punish. But sometimes a student acts out in class, and I've got stuff that I want to do in that class. I come to class every day really prepared, really ready for students to learn. A student acts out in a way that affects her or his education and the educations

of the twenty-five people around them. That's not okay! You know? That's *not* fair. And it's important that we name that as an unfairness, and name it as something that's not okay.

Also important that we name it in a way that is respectful of that young person's humanity, but sometimes, I go, "What are you doing?? " You know? [laughs] "How could you do this, this is so important!" So one of the trainings that I need is, how do I deal with my own emotions around these situations. Teachers aren't automatons. And we *want* teachers to be emotionally engaged. Sometimes people who are emotionally engaged act like jerks. [laughs] I'm one of them.

But at Bronx Lab, with the campaign that Matthew set up, the very first thing was we started listing, what does respect mean, students to students, students to staff, and staff to students. And that third list was by far the most important, in terms of engaging with students because students were able to name that staff did that made them feel disrespected. Like calling them out in front of class. My favorite one that they did, they said don't hold my past mistakes against me. Which is so profound, and something that, as adults, we do all the time. And it's unfair, and it's disrespectful. And I still do it. But what was great is, I could go into a conversation, and these lists were everywhere. And I was lucky enough to have one in the hallway right outside my room. So one of the things I do when a student acts out, I say, can you please step outside, we need to talk about this and other people don't need to hear it.

So we go outside, and there are these lists. And I started saying, okay, you're upset. Name the things on this list that I have done. And they said, well, you called me out in front of class. You're right, I did that. I said I wasn't going to do that, I shouldn't have done that, please forgive me. Then that's the way the conversation starts, and all of a sudden the kid goes, oh wow, this is a different kind of conversation! [laughs] And it sort of knocks them out and—now I say, look at these other lists. Are there any things on here that *you* did? Well right here it says don't use hateful language, and I, you know, yadda yadda yadda. And then, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry too, let's go back in and learn. So that's not a Fairness, it's not a— it's a three or five minute conversation that is powerful and is changing the way people relate to one another in the school.

This is something where Teachers Unite and I sort of diverge. So I think we have to attack this whole problem holistically. The neoliberalization of schools and education is the problem. So there are a lot of charter schools involved in Teachers Unite—I certainly recognize there are a lot of good things going on in charter schools, but as an institution, it's part of a really problematic component of schools and privatization and people-as-product. Testing is very similar. So at our school, located in the northeast Bronx, we had a really tough group of kids. And for several years in a row, we had a huge turnover in teachers. So we had new teachers, we had really tough kids. This was when Bloomberg was doing the A, B, C grades—our grades started going down.

Because when you have younger teachers and hard-to-teach students, they don't do as well. So we got into this place where, if we didn't start performing—and we had a principal who wasn't particularly courageous when it came to bucking that system.

So we got into this place where it was really clear that—said explicitly, but every day implicitly, that those things which come from outside of our community and are put onto us are more important than those things which come from within our community, and come out of us. So regents exams are more important than teacher tests. That's something that all students at that school knew. That is the problem with—this is the exact same thing. So within our class community, our relationship, mine and Eric's relationship, *is* the most important thing. I need to emphasize that every single day to Eric. If there's something that jeopardizes that and things are set up such that someone outside our class somehow becomes more powerful, then I've lost. Then we've lost that battle.

Then it's just going to be, well, I'm going to send you to the principal's office! And why would he engage with me and build a deep relationship with me? So that's in a nutshell, the problem with top-down accountability. It doesn't come from within the community, and therefore devalues what does come from the community. I think we need teachers doing this, and we need systems advocating for these and people need to plug into the system in a way that both honors individual actions and systemic change. Too often when we talk about restorative justice we get bogged down in individual actions because that's where we are and that's where we live, and that's what we're talking about, but we have to understand that there are systems that need changing and we have to fight for that.

*Julia*

Okay. I'll start with two parts. One, I was a psych major undergrad and Africana Studies undergrad. So then I decided by my junior year I wanted to become a teacher, because I felt like the high school that I went to was a failing high school, it's actually closed now, and it felt like there was no care or concern for the majority of my classmates. I luckily was in an honors program, but I went to a large school with thousands of kids, and I felt very mentally imprisoned, and I felt like I didn't become aware until I went to college, and it was scary to know that some of the things that I became conditioned to that I later on became conscious of, a lot of people didn't. In fact, still haven't become conscious of. And so I felt like it was important for me to enter education in order to create an awareness for students, an awareness that what's happening to people and students of color is not something that's okay, so that's why I decided to enter education.

So I started teaching about six years ago, but when I came to Hamilton, actually, I applied to become a special education teacher, but my principal Kate was very-- she liked a lot about what I had to say about justice, she liked a lot of what I had to say about stuff like that, so she asked me to become the dean and I accepted that position. So that's how I became dean here.

I grew up in Brooklyn, I went to South Shore high school, and I taught at Facing History before I came here.

That happens often. Unfortunately we're rarely able to catch who does it in the moment, so at the times where we have been able to find students who do it, either myself or the teacher sits down and has a conversation with the student as to why that's graffiti, why it's not okay, what their reasoning was for doing it, and for the most part it's, I don't know, I just wanted to doodle or I just wanted to write something. And we let them know that it's their responsibility to clean it up because it's our community, and if they make a mess, it's their job to clean up that mess. So that's what happens in the cases we're able to catch. Cases where we're not able to catch who does it, we like to list that as one of the restorative actions that kids can do when they're in trouble for other things. So it's like, you have a choice of a restorative action, of helping a teacher clean up a classroom or clean up a desk. And some students have chosen to do that, so they can help clean it up even though they're not the ones who did it.

What I'll do is, I'll speak to them first about whatever the action was that they engaged in, and then I will give them the choice. I'll say, well I actually want you to come up with something, some type of restorative act you can do, if you can't think of anything-- I try to give them the night to think about it-- if you can't think of anything, then I have something for you. It goes 50-50. Some of them will say, all right, I'll let you know tomorrow, and they'll give me

something that they think they can do, or they don't want to bother thinking about it, and they'll say I'll do whatever you ask me to do. I did a lot of that last year and it actually worked really well. The idea behind it also, though, and this is my own purpose, is to try to demystify this idea of staying after school. They're engaging in a consequence, but it's also like, staying after school actually isn't that bad, and if I have to stay after school I can actually get some work done, I can do this, I can do that. Trying to make it a place that doesn't feel negative to be in. So that's my own purpose in trying to get them to do things after school.

One student who I think was throwing water around in the lunchroom at another kid, he came back the next day and said that he would come up with-- make signs in the lunchroom about why it's important not to waste food. So that's one thing that someone came up with. A lot of what kids come up with is to go to the person that they committed the act against, whether it's a teacher or another student, and apologize to them. At the beginning I really liked that, but I'm at the point now and I think our school is at the point now where that's just not enough. Because I think a lot of them see that as-- I don't think apologizing is an easy thing to do, but I think some of them find it to be an easier way out of engaging in an act that's not okay. And so I like to couple that with something else, but those are some of the things that kids have come up with on their own.

We're at 360 students. It's hard to say because not everything all teachers do will be funneled through myself or the assistant principal. I would say, if I had to guess, maybe about twenty kids? Because there's about that many who are high-fliers, who are constantly engaging in some type of act that requires them to engage in some restorative action. I would guess about twenty.

That's part of the ideal. So the ideal is that it becomes where only the higher level issues that I'm dealing with and the AP is dealing with. Right now-- because when it started off, it was the principal and myself who started with it, and it was just 100 kids. So a lot of even the low-level things were coming through me. And that's been kind of the standard that's been set. We're trying to change it and flip it around with the advisors taking care of the low-level things. So in that way, myself and the AP aren't inundated with a bunch of things that essentially the advisor can handle. So it's a mixture of high level things, it could be as low level as a kid walked into my class when he wasn't supposed to, to kids getting into a fight. Obviously the fight thing I have to be a part of. If a kid's walking into your class that's something that the parents and advisor can kind of deal with before it gets to the point of dean.

It's hard to say an ideal-- the ideal way would be everyone is aware of it. I think. I don't think there's everyone partaking in it, but everyone's aware of it. Everyone is conscious of what restorative justice means, what restorative acts mean, and what the purpose is. That would be my ideal. I say that because it can't exist in a bubble. Kids are coming from different environments,

both at home and in terms of education experiences. And because all of that exists, restorative justice is kind of combating against that, or trying to work with it. And I don't really think that the ideas behind it will work until kids are in their third or fourth year of high school. Where they've been around it so often that they're starting to realize, oh, this is why we're doing this, this is why I am a part of a community, this is why my actions affect someone else's. There has to be a give-and-take kind of experience there. And if we're combating against a larger aspect of like media and of personal life, where it's me me me me me, and as teenagers, it's all me me me me me, restorative justice requires *us*, you know? So my ideal I don't think is something that's huge, but I think it's something that's difficult to attain quickly.

The way that I see it working-- that was the second part of your question-- I think it needs to work with what kids have experienced already. Because restorative justice kind of combats the idea of suspensions, but I don't think that you can completely throw that out and act as if it doesn't exist. Because there has to be a hard line for certain things. Like, I'm not going to allow a kid to just apologize to someone else who maybe jumped another kid, who maybe beat up another kid. Like that's just not good enough, you know? That can be a part of the process, but there has to be a hard line for students to understand that these things cannot and will not happen at our school. I also think that kids are used to being-- how do I put it-- I try to use a mixture of being serious but understanding together in a way that they know that there has to be boundaries. So part of what I think our struggle is that people don't understand that when using restorative justice doesn't mean that, let's just talk about it, and then we walk away, and everyone's feelings are hurt, like that just can't exist on its own. There has to be an understanding that we have a boundary, we have a set line, and it has to stop here. But we have to understand each other so that that way we don't go and continue to do the same thing over and over again. And so that requires you to take this kid's experience already, and try to use that in a more positive way that doesn't come off it completely.

I don't think we're successful at that *yet*. I think that it takes a lot of work to get there and I'm realizing that every day that we try to get to that point. I think there's a multitude of reasons why not, like some people don't buy into restorative justice, some people don't know how to communicate with other people. Which might sound crazy because like, teachers are supposed to engage with other people, but I think it's surprising to find how some of them-- like some of them are really great at teaching content, but not necessarily knowing how to work with behavioral issues in class. And I think that's a big reason why it may be difficult for our school to be completely successful at it yet. Again, it's not an experience that kids are used to, it's not an experience that they are much aware of yet. Like it's some junior high schools doing it but not enough just yet. And I think that's another thing we're combating as well. And just education, like it can't just be like restorative justice is this one thing and that's it, like you have to understand that there's so many different pieces to it, and that all adults and students need to



constantly be learning about how it functions and how it works in your school. And it can't be just one PD-- a professional development-- and then let's move forward, like it just has to be a constant in order for it to be successful.

Even if it's not tacked on at the end, even if it's something that everyone's like yeah, we need to talk about it, talking about it once a semester isn't going to make it work. Because some people may sit in a meeting and say, you know what, sounds cool. They're not going to talk about it but they don't really buy into it. I think if there's a constant conversation, you can hear everyone's concerns and everyone's worries, and then create a buy-in. And then once everyone has bought in to it as a functional way of moving, then we're able to make it successful.

I was first introduced to the idea of restorative justice, and restorative circles more particularly-- do you know Facing History? It's an organization separate in of itself that created a school. And the idea behind the school is to force student to learn about what's happening around the world and to learn about injustices happening around the world, and how they can be a part of changing it. And one of the things that we studied at Facing History was what happened in Rwanda with the Hutus and Tutsis and how neighbors were killing each other, and how it turned from a community that was once one into-- I mean, not once one, that's just a pretty way of making it look-- but after the genocide was happening, how people sat around in a circle and actually talked to one another, and that like blew my mind. I was like, I would never be able to sit in front of someone who murdered a family member of mine and tell them how I felt. That just seems so insane to me. But the fact that people were *doing* it, after a genocide occurred, just seemed to me like if you're able to do this, if you're able to bring your body to look at someone who did something like that, it's something that we can do-- and I don't want to say that this is small scale, but it's something that we can introduce in the school and try to actually make it work. Just watching that video and image always stuck with me.

And so that's part of the reason that I believe in restorative justice, and acts of restorative justice. The school-to-prison pipeline is the biggest thing, the idea that young Black boys and young Brown boys are being sent to prison at such large numbers, at such a large scale, and it's all starting with a lot of the things that are happening in schools, a lot of ways that we address or approach-- a lot of these kids have IEPs [individualized education plans], so they're receiving a special ed program, and there doesn't seem to be a sense of like, empathetic work towards, how do we function and work with people to make them better people, and not try to lock them up and put them somewhere else. You know? And so, that just hurts me to my core, and it's completely problematic to me, and the fact that schools follow this penal system that exists at large. You did something wrong, I'm kicking you out of school, you're out of school, you're in the streets, you're committing a crime, like it just creates this cycle that's just disgusting, it's just the fact that all we want to do is put people in this wheel, and put people in this system, it's just a

terrible thing for me. I'm not the kind of person who just sits idly by and says, oh, that's cool, that sucks, and just move forward. So that was part of the reason that I felt like restorative justice was something that was important.

My definition of it? I look at it as like a large title that has a lot of different pieces under it. Restorative justice is, how do we we restore our community, bring our community to a place where we are functioning and working as one? How do we understand that my acts affect you and your acts affect me? How do we understand that this belongs to us, and by this I mean our community, and it is our job to take care of it. We are by no means perfect until that day when something happens, we need to own up to it, and work towards becoming a better person. Another thing that attracted me to restorative justice is the fact that the harmer has a voice. And so we try to use the language of harmed, harmer, I don't really like the idea of victim and perpetrator. Again, it's perpetuating the idea of how the United States penal system works. The harmer has a voice, like if they're engaging in an act that violated someone else, there's a reason for that, and we need to hear what that reason is, because if we don't, they will do it again, like statistically that's just going to continue happening. And so that's why-- you're familiar with Fairness?-- that's why we do Fairness here, that's why we try to make sure that people understand that we're not ex-communicating you from our community, you are a part of this community and we cannot, you know, just put you to the side. And so that's my definition and why I believe that it's something we really need to work on.

I'll answer the last part first and then I'll go to the first part second. I think that the effect on the school culture, like you said, we haven't seen it completely yet. But I think that's it's existing and I think that it's working. In regards to the first part of your question about how has it affected the students, so we started we doing Fairness in ninth grade, and we weren't doing it on a large scale, but enough that kids were hearing about it, oh, I got to sit in and I got to hear what was going on here, but I can't talk about it! Doing things like that. Kids started saying, I want to sit in, like kids coming to me and asking me to sit in, they didn't even know what the idea was, you know? Kids didn't really buy into it just yet then. Then their sophomore year-- I'm talking about our first class-- their sophomore year, we tried to develop it a little bit further, and we created, myself and my co-worker, we created a group called CORE, Confronting Oppression through Restorative Education. And so there were kids who we saw that seemed to be advocates for their community, so we wanted to tap in on that, so we invited them to join the group, and they felt special to be hand-picked. From there I think it just lit a fire for some kids. And so now our group has doubled in size, like I'm impressed that an afterschool club can have more than fifteen kids show up. You know? And that's not a constant attendance, but enough kids want to be a part of it. And their junior year, now, people are requesting to do a Fairness, like I want to be in that Fairness because it's not okay, what they did. And I want that to be the language that most kids are saying. And teachers are doing a good job of talking about it in class, and teachers are doing

a good job of requesting Fairnesses, to bring kids to Fairness. And I think if we keep doing that, it will definitely be deeply embedded in our culture. Again, like I said, and I think you acknowledged it as well, we're such a new school that we're not there yet, but I feel like it's happening. We had the group CORE put together a presentation and they presented it in the advisories last year, so people of it. And a lot of people-- well not a lot of people, enough-- to me, any person who's resistant to the idea bothers me, I like need to keep getting at them until they understand it. But there was some pushback around it, it was like, well, this percentage of people who are being locked up, it's not the majority, so why does it matter. And it's like...that's a problem! You know? But kids are aware that it exists, and kids are aware that it's an option. I want everyone to feel like this is something they can turn to. But now when I bring up Fairness, I don't feel like I'm explaining it as much as I did last year or the year before.

I was thinking about this yesterday actually. Because it's one thing to come up with a plan; it's another to execute that plan and it's another thing to have the manpower to make that happen. So I can give you an example-- one form of restorative justice that we do is with students who are constantly getting into low-level trouble in class, but it's happening so often, like walking out of class all the time, walking around the halls. It's not making our school fall apart, but it's setting a certain tone that is not okay, like we don't want kids thinking that that's the kind of school that we run. So I would do a contract with the student, I would sit down and say, I need you to tell me what you feel like is happening in class, because I can't keep telling you what's wrong. So they go over what they feel is happening, I'll have them look at the comments that their teachers write out, and we come up with the contract. And the contract has, you know, you're going to stay after school this amount of time, you're going to do this restorative act, you're going to follow through with this, and we try to set up follow-up meetings every week. To come up with that is great, and then to be able to have that conversation with the student is great. But then the follow-up, like I would love to have someone else doing that part so that way I could keep doing the initiating and doing the planning and having someone constantly meeting with that kid for fifteen minutes every week. I feel like that would be important in terms of if I had my own way. having more presence around the school and in the halls-- not presence as in being policed, but in a way that makes kids feel safe. And so in my ideal-- and it's not something huge, it's something as small as like, I make a point when I see kids in the halls in the morning to never talk to them about anything behavioral. All I'm going to say is good morning, I'm hoping that your day is good, because I don't want them to enter the school feeling like something's bad. I would like to have more people around doing that and making people feel like they're welcome, coming into school. Things like putting up signs about what the expectations are around the school, ways you can deepen your understanding of something as silly as...how music is put together, like things that are engaging that makes it feel like a learning space and not like a penal space. Which sometimes you can't avoid because kids will always look at school that way, some kids will always look at school that way. Yeah, just more people to just help execute certain things, like

it's not enough-- right now we just have dean and assistant principal and it's not enough in terms of doing those things. We would just need more people to help make those things happen.

It definitely has a role in dismantling the current levels of oppression that exist. Just in the simple fact that those levels of oppression exist under this idea of who's in power, certain power structures continue and have to be maintained. Almost as if the youngsters have to continue functioning in this way, and it forces, you know, Black and Brown people to always be at the bottom, to always be disenfranchised, like the fact that you can just kill people and that's essentially what happened, you just kill people, and it's okay, that's just the way things are. It's clearly angering to kids, but luckily we get to have that as a constant conversation. That's why I feel like with the Mike Brown and Eric Garner that recently happened, it's been a constant conversation for us, but the realities of it are jarring, like it's just hitting us in our face on a regular basis. But the kids wanted to do something about it. And so some kids who are in CORE and some kids who are not in CORE-- it wasn't CORE-run-- they actually did a die-in in school, and unfortunately I was home that day, I was sick, yeah, I was so upset. But they did a die-in and I was so proud of them, my principal like texted me and showed me a picture. And they did it completely themselves, they did not tell any of the adults. I was blown away by it. It's, I think, part of the fact that we have this as a constant conversation in the group, and seeing it happen in real life and seeing it on the news and seeing people do it in New York and around the United States, the kids are like, let's do something. Like that's my goal, that was my goal. To have kids feel empowered to do something, to do something that is forward-thinking and forward-moving, you know? After that we also did-- this was CORE-run, but we did-- we don't use the loudspeakers often, we only use it if there's a fire drill. So the kids actually wrote up a small statement about what happened and wanted to do a moment of silence. And when I checked in with kids later on how it went in classes, they said it went really well, they said there were some kids who chose not to honor it, but for the most part they were like, people were really happy that it happened, people were silent during that time. And I think that's a lot to ask high school kids to do, to be silent for a minute, you know? It's going to be very hard. And to know that kids did that and that we acknowledged it as a school I think was really important to feel like our school is not separate from what happens after school, like it all functions together. And it's just a different experience for them than it was for me, going to high school, and so I always try and compare the two, and it seems that they feel empowered, it seems that they feel like they can do something, you know? They have a starting point.

I just want to make sure that I answered the question of the school-to-prison pipeline and restorative justice. It's a constant work and constant effort. And it's, some of the kids you wanna hit and you wanna hit hard, are the kids who are struggling the most and are the kids who are not willing to hear or understand that they're part of a system that is going to be damaging for them. And so I was reading an article the other day about the school-to-prison pipeline and I had a kid

who had just been getting in a lot of trouble recently. So I had him sit here because I just was tired of him walking around, I'm like, you know what, just sit in my office, I have some work to do, just sit here. And so I printed out the article for him and I just gave him to him like you know what, I'm reading this, just read it as well. And it was a difficult article to read so I don't know how much of it he was able to get, because I tried to talk to him about it after I had him read a couple of paragraphs. But my hope with restorative justice is to get at the young men-- and girls as well, not to say that they're not a part of it as well but just the numbers show that Black and Brown boys are the ones going to prison at higher rates-- trying to get them to understand that there's a larger picture happening and it's important that you become conscious and aware of it, and how you can, one, remove yourself from it, but two, also be an advocate for those who are not aware of it, you know? And that's just like, part of my bigger goal with restorative justice, that's my bigger goal in just making sure like, once a consciousness level exists, then it's your choice to do what you do after, but if you're not aware, the how can you ever do anything? And that's just my hope with restorative justice, that it creates a conscious level for kids.

*Fiona*

When you say “this work,” you mean restorative education? So when I first started teaching I worked at a school called the John Brown School. And they have a Fairness model in their school, and that’s when I first became introduced to restorative education and to Colberg. So I became interested in what restorative education was, and it being used as a different model than suspension. And I didn’t realize how impactful that was until I started working in a New York City public school-- a middle school in the South Bronx where it was mainly discipline focused and so that’s when I started to realize how important restorative education was because most of the students in the school who were being suspended were students of color, especially students who had IEPs. None of them were understanding the implications of what they did, and what behavior they needed to work on and what ideas they could have worked on. They weren’t growing, in a sense. Like it was punishment and that’s it, there was no growth. And so I realized that restorative education should be a model that’s used to address discipline in schools because if you don’t have that conversation with students, how will they learn if they don’t know what it is they did wrong and what it is they could do better.

No, I student-taught at Brown first, then I taught at the school in the South Bronx, and that’s when I realized the value of restorative education.

No, I work with the dean. So the dean and I co-created the restorative education model at Hamilton. We do have Fairness, we also have an organization called Confronting Oppression through Restorative Education, that’s held after school. And we train about ten kids to be Fairness Panelists, and we also do a February intensive about the Prison-Industrial Complex, and restorative education as a response to zero-tolerance policies.

When we teach the class we are explicit about that connection-- well, we try to be. That’s one of the things that we needed to improve on. We taught it for the first time last year, and that’s one of the things that we realized needed to be modified a bit, making that connection. It was clear to some students, those students who were in our afterschool organization understood more than those students who weren’t. But they still understood the Prison-Industrial Complex, and understood restorative education as a response to just punishment.

I feel like John Brown, the school I taught at in the Bronx, and Hamilton are very very different. One, because the school I taught at in the Bronx was a middle school, and two because both John Brown and Hamilton are schools that I consider to be progressive education, and the school I taught at in the Bronx was very much-- they don’t take the regents because it was a middle school, but it was very much test-prep and test-centered. It wasn’t so much focused on students’ learning and growth, it was about students passing tests. Which also changes the dynamics and

students' investment in the school. So I feel like at John Brown, restorative education also worked because students felt like teachers valued their education, because they put so much work into the classes they taught. And they felt like the content was actually real, like teaching a class about the Prison-Industrial Complex and about restorative practices meant so much more than just teaching students how to take a test. And it made them more invested in wanting to be a part of Fairness.

Well when you student-teach you don't have an official position, but I was offered a part-time position at Brown. So I student-taught in the fall, I taught part-time there in the spring, but I still wasn't in the system because New York City has a very weird way of getting into the system. [laughs] So I had to change schools if I wanted full benefits and a full teacher's salary. So I then taught at the school in the Bronx, which gave me a foot into the door, and I *hated* it because it wasn't anything that I was taught. I wanted to work at a progressive school and I felt like most of the teachers there had settled-- and that's fine for them, there are schools and places for different types of people-- it was not for me. And so I started to contact people that I knew in John Brown. I looked at the consortium website to see what schools were hiring, and I started to apply. Luckily, Kate, our principal, taught with the person I worked with in Brown, and she gave me a very good recommendation and I got a job here.

So my role in discipline here is-- and this is actually something that we've been talking about and grappling with-- where does Fairness play in discipline? I don't think Fairness should be considered discipline because it's not supposed to be a disciplinary tool, it's supposed to be a tool for students to actually reflect on their actions, how it's affected the community, and make amends to the community. It's not really supposed to be disciplinary in that way. And so I've pushed for Fairness not to be completely related to our school's discipline ladder, but I've not completely won on that side! So what has happened is that Fairness is sometimes used in conjunction with the discipline. So for example, a student had put a swastika sign on the blackboard, and the teacher saw it, it was very offensive. That's a level five infraction, because they still have to go by the DOE guidelines, so the student will be suspended. However, after the suspension, the teacher will take that student to Fairness, because that breaks the commitment of diversity in our school and to get the student to really understand how their behavior impacts that. It's also a precautionary measure, so like, for example there was a student who had made a really really sexist remark in front of the entire class. And I could have suspended him-- that was like the fourth time he had done it. I could have advocated for him to be suspended or some other thing; instead I took him to Fairness like three times. To get the student to really understand, this is what you did, this is how it impacted me, the community, women in our community, female teachers. In the end, after like the fourth one, the student was like, okay, I think I get this now. After he interviewed like three other teachers in the school building about what feminism was, he had to read a book about it, interview his family. You could tell throughout the whole process he

was grappling with why it's not okay to make really sexist remarks about your teacher in the middle of class. That doesn't mean he's completely taken away his sexist thinking, he still says pretty sexist things in the hallway, but at least it started a conversation about it. And other students would be encouraged to take him to Fairness as well. I think that's one of the things we need to work on in our school, having teachers and students use Fairness as a precaution-- before it goes to the disciplinary level. So before students are suspended or held for detention.

So this is our second year of doing Fairness at Hamilton. Well, really the third year, but the second year that we are doing it more full-force. So we've had about ten Fairnesses since the fall, which is actually pretty little, if you go to other schools they've probably had like forty. I think the difference between a Brown framework of Fairness and Hamilton is that Brown has about 200 kids, and we have almost 350. So it's *really* hard to organize Fairness here, because there's just way too many students, and way too many people doing way too many things. So theoretically, you could take a student to Fairness five times for a similar action. There's actually a teacher here who went to Humanities Prep. And she talks about how she was taken to Fairness like five times in one week for similar behavior. So the first time might not always be a charm, the kid who made the sexist remark, the first time he didn't really understand. The second time it looked like he was still thinking about it. The third time, he interviewed his mom and he was like, damn, I really don't know where I have to play in this because it feels like I'm sacrificing my culture if I agree with this ideology. And the fourth time he said, okay, now I see how I play a role. It's like a whole emotional and mind-blowing experience for them.

I don't know the exact number. I just know that we in our school have held about ten Fairnesses since the fall. So in a Fairness there would be the harmer present, and the one who's taking them to Fairness. There would also be two student panelists, a teacher facilitator, and that's it. Maybe a teacher observer, if there's an extra teacher who wants to sit in on it. Jessica and I are usually the facilitators. We're trying to train other teachers, so Andy D----- who's another teacher here, he's trying to be a Fairness facilitator. I think Tyree, our parent coordinator, he wants to be.

I think the benefits to restorative education are that it provides students with an opportunity to actually reflect on their behavior, and make amends to their community, rather than just punishing them, them thinking about what it is that they did that impacted the community, and then trying to restore the harm that they did to their community. I think one of the drawbacks is the Fairness and restorative education requires your whole school to be on board, and requires a *lot* of people to be involved. So me and Julia just doing it is really hard because you can't just have two facilitators in the building. There should be at least four or five people who want to be facilitators. We have eight periods in the day, so there really should be eight teachers, so there's one teacher every period and someone's not doing three in a week. There should be a lot more



people supporting it. And it's not that teachers in the school don't necessarily want to support, it's just there's so much other stuff that's going on, it's hard to take on multiple responsibilities.

This is a hard question to answer because I feel like my answer is not full-fledged yet. Because this is only the second year that we've done it so I feel like I'm still trying to see what impact restorative education has had on our students. I do think it has provided a space for students to feel like they could-- that they have have a space to express their discontents. There was a girl who was offended by the sexist remark that her classmate made. Instead of sitting there and feeling really bad about it, she had the opportunity to bring that student to Fairness, and the teacher could advocate for that. So there was a space for the student to express that emotion, so it wasn't just festering inside her and she felt like she didn't have support. I think it helps our community build support for students when they feel like their community has been harmed-- or even when they feel like they personally have been harmed. And it does get them to reflect on how their actions affect not just the people around them. And I feel like Brown would be a better example of looking at it, because they've had it for so many years. I think it would be interesting to come back and look at it in five years and see how much more developed and ingrained Fairness is within our community. I mean I worked at Brown and it just seemed like everyone was advocating for Fairness when they saw something that did not uphold the values of the school. We're starting to see-- well, I mostly feel like you see teachers doing it, we haven't gotten enough students to be like on their own without teacher encouragement. Hopefully that's where we'll go.

We do have Core Values within our school. So it's commitment to peace, commitment to diversity, responsibility...I'm sorry, there's like seven of them and I can't remember all of them right now. [laughs] I'll get you the form later. The seven are the habits of heart and mind, the actual Core Values are just those three. Those are the ones that most students are brought to Fairness for. Not really the habits of mind.

I...I don't know. I would have to talk to those kids four years from now. I feel like there's been an impact, especially on kids who have taken the Confronting Oppression through Restorative Education class, and/or are involved in the actual organization. Those students being a part of the implementation of Fairness-- and they are part of the process, but they're just not the students who've been taken to Fairness. I think it has had more of an impact... at this point, I don't know. Maybe five years from now I'll have a student come to me and say how much they learned from an actual Fairness.

I think one of the main things that a restorative education needs in a school-- it would be great if they had a full-time facilitator. It would be great if we could pay teachers for doing the actual facilitation; I feel like we'd get a lot more teachers interested in doing Fairness if we could pay

them for their time. Teachers mostly don't want to do it because sometimes it takes two hours to do a Fairness. In those two hours you could be grading, or planning, and if you're in a Fairness then you have to do those things at home. So where's the compensation for it?

I do think that it will have a very large impact on the students because it focuses, like I said before, on students' developmental growth rather than on punishment. Which, just by reading a lot of work on restorative education, should be the purpose of a teenager, and a youth's life. Learning that sexist thinking in general is not okay and why. It can be offensive and hurtful to a group of people. That may not be the student's intention, but that's what the result is. So I feel like the possibility is rethinking the way we punish students, and what punishment actually means. And is it actually effective or helpful? I think the limitations, like I said before, is that you need support from your whole staff to do it, and you need money to be able to pay people to facilitate and sit in on the Fairnesses. And if you don't have that...you don't really have a Fairness program at your school. [laughs] Which is kind of why it's very difficult here, because it's mainly Jessica and myself, and although there's other people involved, some people have decided not to do it anymore because they're not getting paid for it. It's very tough, yes. It's very tough.

*Fabian (in green) and Ariana (in red)*

I can start. So I was first hired at this school as a teacher, and I was hired to teach government and economics. I had been a teacher at that point for just under a decade. I've been here for five. What attracted me to this school is that it was a small school in the South Bronx-- I had been working at another small school in the South Bronx, that had a really good history of restorative justice work, but it was slowly falling apart, unfortunately, due to outside pressures on the school. That school was Banana Kelly high school. So I was hoping to work at another school that was good in terms of serving kids, and I had heard good things about this school. I hadn't heard it was progressive, I didn't hear any of that, but I definitely knew that the kids who graduated from here were really prepared for college. I wanted to see what made this place tick. So I started teaching here. Honestly, teaching Urban Economics was kind of frustrating, you know, with all the ups and downs with politics in the U.S. and the world, so I thought it would be awesome if I could get out of the classroom and really do stuff that I thought was important in terms of teaching people skills to be active in the community they live in. And so when the opportunity to become a dean arose, and the conversation here was around trying to explore more restorative approaches to discipline and school culture, I said, if I can do that, I'm down to jump on board to that side of things. That was a big merging of my politics and my work.

So I am a dean, officially the dean of discipline or the dean of students, depending on who you ask. And I'm also the restorative justice coordinator, which is a position that was basically voted in by the UFT membership, so the teachers and the parents and folks. Voted to make sure we could at least have two deans, because it's a small school, so we should only have one dean, but they wanted to secure there being a dean position and a restorative approaches position. I think all the deaning drudgeries, like we open the school, we're there for entry, and we supervise lunch, and we supervise transitions, and we supervise dismissal, and we handle suspensions. Thankfully not detentions, but we do all of these kinds of things. But beyond that, we try to resolve conflicts creatively, we try to get a sense of what's going on in terms of school culture, where students are at, what are some possible problems or conflicts that may arise, how can we try and nip them in the bud. I've helped assemble a team-- so there's two pedagogues who are deans and there's two assistant deans who are really skilled at helping build relationships with young people and finding out what's happening and pulling kids in for mediations. Also thinking about how to help a kid avoid being suspended. Because we have a very well-detailed system for suspensions, if a kid does a certain number of things wrong, they *will* be suspended, but we created a way out, if you will. So that's a lot of the stuff we do here.

I actually graduated from BCL in 2011. And I always joked with Emily, like "I'm coming back! I'm going to be working here, eventually." And the opportunity came up, she emailed me like hey, we're hiring for an assistant dean. And I sent my cover letter and my resume to the

principal at the time, Jeffrey G-----, he called me in for an interview, and a couple of days later I got the job. So in the beginning, it was just getting to know the kids, and that's when I sat with Fabian and Emily and we spoke about restorative justice. It was something they were already doing, and then they looped me in, and I thought it was a great idea and a great thing, and I was like, this wasn't here when I was here! So I was like, down for it. So we do peer mediation programs and SPIs, which is suspension prevention interventions. So that's how I got into BCL, I came back.

So as far as what peer mediation is and SPIs, peer mediation was something that, again, started with Fabian and Emily. So what happened, you get sent out an email to teachers and they nominated students?

Yeah, we went through a process where there were teacher and student nominations to get a cadre of kids who'd be trained. We got some money from the Dignity in Schools Campaign. so we were one of the small pilot schools that got a small pocket of money when there were \$6,000 grants available, I believe. And so we got that pocket of money to a) get some of the teachers trained on circles training, I believe, and we did some trainings with Teachers Unite institute a few summers ago. Then after that we linked up with Mass Transit Street Theater, which works in the Bronx. They do a bunch of amazing theatrical stuff, but they also run these trainings on peer mediation, so we got them in and they trained a few of the adults, and a cadre of young people to become the mediators. Since then, Ariana has coordinated a lot of like, the club, and getting students together for mediations.

Last year we had like, club time, so there was a whole bunch of different clubs like dance, cooking, and there was a peer mediations club. So the peer mediators that were certified were coming like every other Wednesday or something like that, and we would sit and talk about what mediations we've done, what can we do to make them better. Then we would like a fishbowl activity, which is just practicing, you know, to make a mediation really flow. We went to outside meetings with other schools downtown. So that's peer mediation. They still do it, and usually how that goes if there's a peer mediation form-- I can show you when we're done-- and a teacher can ask a kid, do you want a mediation here, fill a form out. So the form gets filled out, it gets handed to one of us, and we figure out what date and time, and what two mediators we're going to pick out. And sometimes we mix it up, so it might be two high school mediators if it's like a high school issue. Or if we mix it up with one mediator from the middle school, one mediator from the high school. They'll facilitate the mediation, and me and Fabian might be in the room while they talk it out with the help of the two mediators. So that's that, we keep a binder, we keep a file. There aren't any more Wednesday clubs for peer mediation, but every Wednesday it's a shorter day so kids come out at 2pm-- middle school is 2 o'clock, high school is 2:50.

We'll meet in the library or something and we'll talk about what we're going to do with the peer mediation program now, like what needs to be better, how can we move it forward.

That's probably been the tough part, with the reorganization of the week, and there not being club time, so no official time to meet. And all the transition in leadership-- we have a lot of transition here. There's a teacher turnover rate of around fifty to sixty percent for the last couple years. And there's been-- since Ariana was a student here til now, we've had how many principals? Four. So this is the fourth principal. So we're really, really struggling to be quite frank with you, about how to continue programs that we've begun. So peer mediation got started about two years ago-- it was two Junes ago that we got the training. It really functioned well, and the pilot year was last year. And this year we were hoping it would be even stronger, we've actually taken a whole semester to regroup and begin to figure out-- how do we begin to relaunch and move forward? So the mediators have been meeting and we've been doing skills and capacity training and stuff. We actually have not done mediations this year amongst the peers. Now, Ariana has done a lot of mediations and I've done a few mediations to try and stave off some of the crises that sometimes occur in middle schools and high schools between kids. But it has been difficult just trying to find the time, given the lack of resources. Budgetary concerns and shifts and whatnot.

We have about 600-- about 180 are middle schoolers.

It's different. So we're not really doing mediations with our mediators, but we do SPIs, and I'll talk about that. With SPIs, I'll sit with two girls, two boys, or whoever it is. I'll sit with them and try to mediate it myself. To give you a number, I'm not really sure, but throughout the week I'm sitting with at least two kids and trying to figure out what's happening in the hallways, what is this tension? SPIs, before the Christmas break we were doing them and then we kind of just stopped. I haven't done an SPI since we've come back. But they do still exist, other folks are doing them. Advisors are doing SPIs. We have a referral system. So if you're out of uniform, you're cutting class, there's a whole bunch of things you can do to get a referral. If in high school you get two or three referrals, Fabian sends out an email like every day, and it shows you which kids have two or three referrals. Then it's up to the kid and the advisor to set up an SPI meeting. The SPI meeting is the advisor, maybe one of the assistant deans or the deans, they always push for like another teacher or a student to support the student that's having the SPI. And it's done in a circle process, so there's like ground rules, there's a talking piece, there's a paper that we fill out. And we go over the referrals they got, and how to work it off. So let's say a student had a really bad run-in with a teacher. They might want to write a letter apologizing, they might want to go to that teacher's office hours and make up work that they're missing. If they're caught, like, throwing food in the cafeteria, they might have a week of garbage duty. So they have all these community service giving-back things to do, and at the end of the week a

teacher will sign off on it, make sure they actually did those things. We check it over, and then one of the deans will clear their referrals out of the system, and it's like they are back at zero. But there are some kids who get referrals like, *every* day, and you can't really catch those kids, and by the time you log back on to BCL, you'll see a kid with like, four referrals. And for high school, once you hit four, you're suspended. But advisors have been doing SPIs, I went to an SPI yesterday, I was like, good! When did we start SPIs? Were they always around?

No, that's another thing we created about two years ago. Just because it was very clear that we had a system in place to deal with issues that came up, but that system was all about removing a student from a classroom for a few days, and we wanted to think of ways that were more creative and more restorative. And that's where this process came about. It's always difficult because it's a conversation between all these different parties, right? Like some teachers will say, I want kids out of my classroom right away, some teachers will say, no, I never want a kid out of my classroom, I need them in the classroom. Some kids will say, I think you guys are way too strict and others will be like, no, you're way too lenient. And the same with parents and the same with admin, and the same with like everybody. So it's a really difficult things to negotiate all the different desires and needs and what people think is supposed to happen in a community. So it is a tough task, but I feel like we're more or less comfortable with the systems that we've set up to address these varying, and sometimes opposing viewpoints in the school culture.

When I was a student here, I remember we had a club, or it was something, basically if you were suspended, you could fight against it. You would sit with a panel and they usually were from the student council, and you would sit and argue why you shouldn't be suspended, what should be done instead of a suspension. And I definitely remember some of my friends coming out of those meetings like yeah, I'm getting suspended still, or we worked out something. I never got to experience that. [laughs] But I remember that was an option. But then I left and came back and now there are SPIs. I like SPIs; I think they're effective and they help kids think of other ways to make up for their mistakes instead of just suspending them. Because you hear kids all the time saying, I'm going to get suspended and I'll come right back, and it just doesn't work for a lot of kids, I know a lot of them are frustrated. There's a disconnect between the classroom work and the student, and they fall behind. By the time they get back they don't even want to try to catch up and do the work.

I also think it's been powerful in shifting the conversation with adults. I think adults are like, I just need a break from this kid. And I hear that, I mean I taught for many many years. But I also think like, if you have a conversation with an adult about it, it's like, I can take a kid out of your class for two days but that's easy. So easy for me to take a kid out of your class for two days, but if you need a two day break, on day three the kid's coming right back, and you have done

nothing to build a relationship or repair a relationship that's been harmed. So if we go the SPI route, where you sit down and talk with the kid about the harm that was done or the wrong that was done, and think about ways to fix it-- there are kids who will write a letter of apology, and that's one thing. But I love it when kids are like, I recognize that I did something in this room, how can I work with this teacher in the room, and maybe in the process, in the off-time in a different kind of space, they're building a relationship. You know, they're deciding to build these connections and they don't want to burn bridges. So a lot of it has been like that, I mean we had a situation with a student who was very upset because of something that happened at home. And he damaged the wall, poking holes literally in the wall with an umbrella. So angry, he was just poking holes in the wall. We caught him and it was the kind of thing where dude, you just did some damage to the school, we could actually suspend for a period of fifteen to twenty days. That's one of the things that could happen in New York City, we could send you to another school because you've damaged school property. And since I've worked here, there have been cases like that, a kid will be mad, he'll punch a clock, and will be sent away for the whole month for having damaged school property, which is kind of ridiculous. Our version of disciplining or dealing or doing stuff differently, in this scenario where the young man poked holes in the wall, and we talked to him about why, and he explained that he had no food at home and he was really upset about that, he was hungry, he was pissed. And he took it out on the wall. And we said, well, you gotta fix the wall! [laughs] It's as simple as that-- you messed up the wall, you gotta fix the wall, but you don't know how to fix the wall, so I want to set you up with a custodial staff person, and that person will teach you how to fix the wall. Are you willing to do that? And the kid's like yeah, and we talked to the custodian, and the reason we chose that custodian in particular is because the year *before*, that same kid had cursed out that custodian. And it was like an intense thing, and I had to get on it and talk to the kid about respecting people and their job and who they are and what they do. But then, fast forward to this moment, it's an opportunity for this kid and the custodial engineer to get together and there be a skill-sharing, an opportunity to build a sense of respect, and for dignity to be practiced. It was a really cool moment. And honestly, I think having the kid fix the wall was more fruitful than suspending him for two days while the custodian fixes the wall. It's as simple as that for us sometimes. Sometimes it's not that simple.

I know that it's important to me, and it's important for kids to practice and hear about. Because it helps with the school community, with how the kid feels about coming to school, how the kid acts in school. Because it's no longer just people of authority talking down on you, and telling you what it is and what it's not gonna be. You actually get to say how you feel, you get to defend yourself, talk for yourself, and you get to do things for yourself to make things better. And also like, if you're about to fight, and then we say hey, let's have a mediation, you don't get suspended, you don't fight, you get a day off, you come back and talk about it. It gives kids a chance to just really think about what they were about to do, and just self-reflect on things. And I

feel like if more kids are exposed to that, things can run smoothly and people can be a little more mature and own up to things, and conversations between students and teachers and admin would go a lot smoother. It's just better. It's a better vibe, it's a better feel. That's why I like restorative justice.

It allows for the kid to really think and self-reflect. I guess if I was still a kid here and these options were being given to me, I would be a little more comfortable with coming to school, a little more comfortable with like, talking to a teacher and being like hey, can I talk to you, can we set up a meeting? It gives kids more ownership and responsibility to think things out and think before they move, and think before they speak. And that helps kids for when they leave, like when you graduate from here you're gonna bump into people you don't like, you're gonna mess up, you're gonna get a job and possibly screw up there, and now you have these skills and this experience at your workplace or at home, and you can say, let me think about this. You can have a flashback, and that flashback can help you. I've had kids tell me-- we have a peer mediator, and she told me, there were two adult women on the train and they were gonna fight, and I mediated it! Her story was that she spoke to both those ladies, and they both got off the train and nobody fought. And I was like, that's what peer mediation did for you? Good! So it's things like that, you gain skills and knowledge, and now you're able to leave this building and you still have those skills.

I don't think I would say anything differently. In terms of what it gives, what it offers the participants: a new skill-set, a greater capacity to see others in the midst of drama and trauma as human beings. So it helps for the possibility of building community. I think why I like restorative justice as a framework for functioning, for why I like it as a set of principles to guide the work I'm doing in schools, is like, at the end of the day, we can't outsource all the problems. We can't excommunicate people. People are part of the community, and they will continue to be part of the community, and they're not disposable. So whereas a lot of time in society, if you do something wrong, then you are a *wrong* person and we just get rid of you-- put people in prison, put people in a mental institution, send someone out of the church if it's a church, send someone to another country if they did something wrong in this country I mean there's all these ways of just outsourcing the problem, externalizing the cost. I don't wanna deal with you anymore. We can't always really do that. We shouldn't do that. We should engage in resolving conflicts and we should take on the challenge. So I think restorative justice sets up a framework for saying, okay, people aren't disposable. People are going to make mistakes. People are going to hurt one another and get into conflict, and we've got to get past that somehow, some way. So it forces everyone to think about what has been done, how do we get beyond it, and how do we create some win-win situations, where people feel good? How do we grow from some negative situations? I think that's a lot of it. The other thing that's interesting is, as I shifted toward becoming a dean and the restorative justice stuff I also became a father, and I started to think



like-- my kid will make mistakes. Or he does make mistakes, he'll tick me off as a little baby. But it's like I can't throw him out! [laughs] You can't just say, you deal with him, or maybe you can for a moment, but you still have a responsibility to that other person and they have a responsibility to you and you gotta work it out. So it's remembering that, that very essential piece about human beings, that we live in community, we have to *communicate*, we have to come into some form of communion. We can't just say eff off, I don't want to deal with you anymore. I think that's what different. A lot of times people just get suspended, they disconnect from schools, they connect with all types of elements that are far more alluring and attractive than schools. And they end up in jail, or maybe in other situations. But I think what we do here is hopefully try to give kids a connection to at least a set of people if not an institution that cares about them, will look out for them so they can do some positive stuff.

I think it only takes like one thing and then you can tell when that one incident kind of effects a student. I think I'm describing that wrong. So I had a student that had slapped somebody, and this was the first time me and her ever spoke. So I had sat her down-- she did get suspended because she did slap somebody. I sat the two kids down, we had a talk about it, and then they both walked away from that meeting feeling better. Ever since then, she sees me and it's like, oh hi, how are you doing miss, I gotta tell you what happened. So now we formed a relationship. And now every time she sees me she's telling me something new! [laughs] Something that's happening in the 130s wing. That's better for me too because now I'm getting put on to all of these things that's happening, and I can spread the word and tell teachers and tell admin. You form relationships with these kids and now the kid has somebody to go to. Because I'm pretty sure if something else happens to her, she'll come and look for me.

If we had the resources-- I think it's a couple of things. We would have people working full-time all year around doing this work. And that would be supported and sustained, and not at the risk of being cut due to the risk of budgetary constraints, which is something we grapple with on a regular basis. We've fought hard to have a team, and to do this kind of work. And we're not always winning that fight. There are things that need to be done, like there has to be someone at the door, there has to be someone in the cafeteria, there have to be people doing these drudgeries that are really important to keeping people safe, generally. But there would also then be a lot more time and a lot more people so that we could do those things and also do more proactive kind of work. We would be running restorative circles and developing these skills broadly across the student body, not just amongst a cadre of maybe a dozen or less peer mediators, who then service maybe 20% of the population if you're looking at numbers. We need some kind of mediation where it's not just a few adults working with a couple of kids who are in trouble to do a couple of SPIs. So maybe if there was more capacity in terms of time, money, or staffing. Like every time a kid commits an offense-- like at referral one, there could be a conversation, a time dedicated to dealing with that offense and then nipping all of the things in the bud, so that we

don't even *have* a conversation around suspension. Although we have some zero tolerance, like violence? You're suspended. Because it's a safety thing, and we think it's good to keep people separated for at least a few days, and then bring them back together for a conversation around mediation. Those would be some of my wishlist things, if I ruled the world. [laughs]

We would have somebody for SPIs and setting up mediations. Somebody who could like pull kids out. So yeah, if we had unlimited resources and money, exactly what Fabian said.

Peter M----- is somebody who comes to mind immediately. Oops, if you wanna change the name. I still think it was useful to have like six or seven SPIs *a year* for him. For two years. I do kind of think that having conversations around-- because if it didn't change his behavior, like for the other students in the meetings who'd be like Peter, you're really fucking up, like dude what's going on, take it seriously. And so those kids are still with us and it's amazing just from being there in solidarity with their buddy who was being a real knucklehead.

And then his mom, in the beginning I know she was like, my son, he's getting suspended, she like babied him. She was like, there has to be another way. And I remember having a conversation like, Peter is in the middle of an SPI. He has a copy, I have a copy, his teachers know about it. Because one of the agreements was he would help Miss Overton in the library with the books, and I was like, he was supposed to do this five days ago, and we keep rescheduling it. So now she knows that we're trying to work with her son-- he's not trying. And then she looked at him like Peter, they're working with you, come on, and then I guess they had their own conversation separately. But now parents don't feel like no, you guys are doing this on purpose, you must not like my son. No, we like him, we're trying to work with him, he's not working with us. So now the parent knows that they have this awesome opportunity-- Peter what's wrong with you.

You're right. I think in some ways-- he's no longer in our school, he's somewhere else-- but it helps shift the conversation at home to mom and son. Maybe this is not the right place, like will every single school work for every single kid? I think there needs to be a school for every single kid, but not every single school will necessarily serve every single kid, unfortunately. I mean that's just a reality that I've come to grips with after a decade of being in education. When I first started I thought oh my god, we can serve everybody, right here! And sometimes you're like oh my god, I don't even know if I can, if we have the resources. But surely, it did not help him unfortunately, achieve success *here*. And he's not the only one, there are others. Who may still be with us, and we constantly go through it. I think a lot of times it's difficult, for instance, with kids with IEPs, individualized education plans. Certain emotional or even learning disabilities sometimes get in the way. For us as well, I mean we need more trainings with sensitivities and

working with the needs of all our young people. It's a challenge but I still think it's a worthy challenge even if it sometimes feels like pushing a boulder uphill.

The conversation around restorative justice, in my experience, in schools is newer and younger. And our emphasis on it is noble in and of itself, but we're not kicking this off. This is coming from communities across the U.S. historically and outside the U.S. definitely. I've visited places and met with folks who come from from different models. It's like okay, you did something wrong to her, well then you've got to fix it somehow, we'll figure it out in community. Doesn't mean you're gonna go to a jail, doesn't mean we're going to kick you out. We've got to sort it out, because-- families do that, all the time. Some families do it better than others. But I think restorative justice as a framework gives us guidelines for a better way of living, generally speaking, in terms of building societies, communities, countries, transnational relationships. The school piece is actually a microcosm of what's a possibility. But it's all important. So if we do it at the school level, then it will interrupt some of the school-to-prison pipeline stuff for sure, which is critical for us to do. But I think it also comes from that other model, like if you committed a crime you are put in jail, but if you could resolve the crime committed through other means and avoid jail, it's probably a lot more productive than, you know, wasting taxpayers money, living in this secluded situation. So I think that we in schools are learning from looking at models that came before, or outside of schools.

I don't know if we have time for last thoughts, I feel like the pressures of going back to the drudgeries of being dean, we've got to shift a group a group of kids. [laughs]

*Emily*

That's perfectly enough guidance and I can talk probably a lot, but I want to hear first a little more about your project so I can tailor my responses.

What brings me to this work is, I became a teachers because I believe that teaching-- well, first of all because I really like teenagers. I wanted to be a high school teacher specifically, and I believe strongly that history content can be transformative. So for me it made sense to pursue teaching for those reasons, but also I could have been lots of different kinds of teachers, and the reason I specifically wanted to be a high school history teacher for public high schools in the city is because I think that those are sites of potential interpersonal and structural change. In a way that is based around relationships, which is the way I think that change gets made, period. I've always thought that, in terms of a theory of change, it matters to me that I have a role in making change that involves being somewhere and *staying* there. Being somewhere and making long-term relationships, and schools can be-- or at least I imagine them to be-- a place where that happens, for me but also for other people. And I also think that schools are interesting in that they are a place where every possible social problem but also every wonderful thing that happens in the world can happen in schools. I know that's kind of romantic, but some of my best and worst experiences were in public school. I learned a lot of content in school, but also had a very particular experience-- not every student has the experience of recognizing the ways that they're learning to interact with people. Especially people who are different from them. But I really did, and I think that that experience made me want to be that for my job, and made me believe that that's a site of possible change in the world.

I was very classroom-focused when I first started teaching. I wanted to make my content, my pedagogy, as transformative as possible, I want to make sure that students are getting the skills that they need, but it was very focused on the classroom. And I realized relatively quickly, probably my first year, that that wasn't enough. Or that wasn't even really what I wanted, that some of what I wanted to figure out how to do with students was how to leverage relationships and content and skill-learning to change ourselves as people. And that had to happen in the hallways, it had to happen with extra-curricular activities, it had to happen with figuring out how to make relationships with other students in the classroom. It couldn't just be about an individual student learning to read better, or becoming familiar with James Baldwin when they hadn't been before. It wasn't just about that. It was about learning to interact with the other people who were in their building. And coming to understand power in the school building so that they could apply it outside of the school building. A lot of that recognition from me came from what was and wasn't working with classroom management, and discipline structures, and managements. When things felt good, culturally, in the classroom and the school and when they didn't. And when learning happened around when people hurt each other, and when it didn't.

Once I realized that there was a way that people were already combining those things, combining skill and content with recognizing the way that relationships can be used to change power dynamics and learn from our own mistakes, which is how I understand restorative practices and restorative approaches to discipline, I totally went for it. I was looking for structure. It also fits well with my general way of being a teacher, which is that I'm very structured. I like planning, I like structures, I like protocols. But *not* just in the interests of keeping people quiet. In the interests of teaching people how to interact. So I guess I first learned that there was a name for some of these practices and that there was a movement already beginning through Teachers Unite, like five years ago. I'd already been involved with Teachers Unite because I was involved with the union, and Teachers Unite first focused on union leadership. At my last school we had so many different administrative changes that the union was very important. But I actually got a lot more involved in Teachers Unite once we started doing restorative approaches, and focusing on that as a campaign.

So first let me also just say that at Bronx Community for Learning, for the last two years that I worked there, the school years 2012-2013, and 2013-2014, I worked as a part-time restorative interventions coordinator in addition to teaching, so that meant that I taught one less period a day, and then was responsible for working with a dean team. I think you've interviewed a number of other people who were part of this team we were trying to create. I knew at the beginning of last year, 2013-2014 that I needed to leave BCL. And the reason was because, as I mentioned, I believe that change happens by going somewhere and staying there.

So I'd stayed at BCL for seven years. And we were about to get our-- I had a sense that our current principal, who was a friend of mine, who had always been a friend of mine-- we co-taught my very first year at BCL-- and he was very supportive of restorative approaches. He came to a Teachers Unite training. I knew he was leaving at the end of the year. Like I just had this sense, especially because I had already experienced two other principals come and go in my seven years. And I was like, I can't handle a fourth principal, especially as union rep. It was too much pressure on me and it wasn't enough time to do the other things that I cared about. I felt like I was 30 and managing everyone. You know what I mean? It was draining and the difficult work of building relationships over time kept having to start all over again. And it was very painful. Also it was the year that my second advisory-- I'd gone through with my first advisory and my second advisory was graduating that year, and I'd known them since they were in sixth grade. So the timing was like, if I'm going to leave, then I have to do it now.

So I started looking for schools and I did a lot of research, and if I was going to teach, I wanted to work at a consortium school that didn't have regents exams. So I did a lot of research and ended up coming to City-As because there was a lot of flexibility in the content and a lot of

flexibility in what I could teach. So I imagined that it would be a good hybrid role for me, where I could still be teaching in the classroom, teaching social studies. But that I could also do a course on developing student leadership around restorative interventions. And students here have internships, so I also imagined that this could be a way for me to develop internships with the Dignity in Schools Campaign, or Teachers Unite, and sort of fuse my activism with my actual full-time job. So that was why I decided to go with City-As-School. I do think that eventually I would like the role of being a restorative coordinator. But the reason I think I was successful at that at BCL is because I'd been there for so long. So I knew students and parents, and I had relationships with them as a teacher. So the kind of relationships that I had with them was caring but also... you gotta do better. You gotta do different, you gotta do better, you've seen my in classes, you've heard about me as a teacher, like the relationships and reputation that you develop from being a classroom teacher, I think is my way of doing effective restorative approaches coordinator. That isn't necessarily true for everyone, but that's the kind of restorative approaches coordinator that I am and could be. And so I would want to do that after being a teacher at a particular school-- or, you know, simultaneously.

So I'm going to tell a story about Fabian. He'll read it and know it's about him and that's okay. [laughs] But I think one of the most powerful moments I had was both with a colleague and with students. So early last year-- and again, Fabian is somebody that I worked with for four years-- and someone that I trust really fully, as a colleague and a person. He was a social studies teacher first, but then considered himself a restorative dean, doing a lot of things that you have to do in a bureaucratic system that he doesn't always philosophically or politically agree with. And I know that that's true, and I know that he struggled with that. I also know that different people in the school building have relationships with each other in different ways. And so something that happened at the beginning of last year was that particularly difficult advisee, an advisee whom I'd known since ninth grade, who I had a close relationship with, but also-- he's a weird dude. And he-- a senior in high school, black male, really really hated being greeted in the morning and told to take off his hat and his hoodie. He hated it-- this experience was really uncomfortable for him. And the way he would exert what he felt as his marginalization or lack of power in this situation was to wait until the very last moment to do this. Other students are taking their hats off, getting ready for school on their way into the door, and he would have to be told every single morning, take your hat off, take your hat off.

One day, he and Fabian just had a... so Fabian came to me. I saw on our referrals system that this student had been given two referrals and then left for the day, sent home for the day. And when I read the account it was really confusing to me, and I was worried, because the student had refused to take the hat off, then yelled a profanity like "suck my dick" to Fabian, who thought that he had a relationship with this student, and it was upsetting. And then...Fabian basically went to the student and took him down to the ground. And basically physically made

him take his hat off. And Fabian is like a Ju-Jitsu-- that's what he does with his life. So he did it in a way that was not causing injury to anyone, very physically responsible. But he came to me and was like, I don't know why I did that. I feel bad about this, and I need help making it right. I had seen the referral, so I reached out to the student. So all parties agreed, plus two other individuals from my advisory, and another adult, and we had this difficult circle, and it was something that was initiated by the dean. It was really hard for everybody, it was hard for me, because I think both me and Fabian were surprised that that had even happened. And it reminded me of all the times I've said or done things with students that are against my own politics, or that I'm like, why did I even do that? And trying to figure out how to learn from that myself. Anyway, this was one of our earliest circles in the year. And I think it was really powerful for me. Because I believe at that time, Fabian was teaching a class that the student was in, and the student was then, until the circle, not coming to class because he was mad or felt unsafe or whatever. The language that he used was basically like, I'm not going to be near him, ever again. He tackled me in the hallway! That was the student's response to it.

But I think that what was transformative about that experience for me, and what made me believe in the process, I was like look at the relationships and trust that we've built here. This is a difficult thing, this is a really difficult thing. I felt such intense care for everybody who was there in the circle, and the other students who were there who were just like, that's not cool, Fabian! And they were also like, that's so surprising, why did you do that? And being able to talk about it in that way, with students and adults-- that is *not* normal. Schools do not usually allow for that kind of setting. And the combination of the fact that it was this advisee that I really cared about and this colleague that I really cared about, so early in the year, it was really foundational for me for the rest of the year. It really made me believe in doing these kinds of interventions.

I think the most regular thing is....there's sort of two that stand out to me from last year. One is that me and another colleague did several interventions with a class, we did whole-class interventions with another teacher's class, because it was an AP class class, and it was completely....students weren't ever going, and if they were there, they were juniors and seniors making animal noises, the class was basically a total shitshow. We went in a couple times and it sort of changed, but didn't really. And I think part of that was because it didn't involve the teacher. I mean the process itself did, but I don't think she really believed in it. Some of it is like, it's not going to change immediately, but also it's not going to change unless *you* change your behavior as an adult. Part of the reason that that other circle felt so powerful is because the adult who had overexerted power in a particular situation was able to recognize that and take responsibility for it. Whereas in some of the other things that I've seen, especially when there's conflicts between adults and students, if the adult is unwilling to recognize their own power in the situation, then not a lot will change. And so I felt a little bit hopeless about using those processes for that kind of class.

Both for your thesis and also because I've only been at City-As for six months now, I'm going to focus on BCL because I was there for seven years, and also because I think things need to happen there. And I'm being very intentional and slow about stuff at City-As too. I believe it requires some consciousness-raising, not just for buy-in which is a big deal already, but also because as I've mentioned, the protocol is just a protocol unless people believe in it and make it work. It's about relationship building, and so if you don't want to have those relationships or don't believe those relationships are possible, I think the possibilities for change are very limited. Which is also why I believe that some top-down policy change isn't going to work. Ever. So like, *mandated* restorative justice. If the city comes in and just says, okay, everyone needs to have this-- and also without mandated long-term training. I don't mean a week-long training or a day-long training. You have to have ongoing support and you have to have teams of people at the actual school site. That's not to say-- I think there's some training that can be accessed externally, and that schools can learn from one another. But ultimately, if you don't have people *in your building*, with how little time you have, we can't actually build something that will function.

So let me be clear: I think the kind of support that restorative justice movements need externally in order to promote the kind of growing that I think needs to happen at a school site and the individuals who are living and working and learning there are: money for restorative justice coordinators at each school, whose full-time job is to coordinate restorative approaches. That means earmarking and setting aside a full-time position that schools can opt into. And that isn't a hybrid role, necessarily, and to do it as a UFT position. the reason I think it's especially important to keep it as a UFT position is because the restorative coordinator has to be able to work with the teachers. If there isn't trust there, there's not a lot that can get done because there's so much changing understanding of what your job is as a teacher to do restorative interventions. And I think that by having a restorative approaches coordinator who is either not unionized at all, or who is DC37 both is a danger in terms of job security and people are going to not want to do it, and also then because they get seen as a pawn of admin. They can't push back against admin, and especially in our current climate, admin switches almost as much or more as our teachers. So you can't build anything long-term unless you have a restorative coordinator who is able to build that with the staff and the students. The reality of Tyler's position is, if admin is dissatisfied with her, they can remove her next year! She has *no* job security. And it's not just about her for herself, but also politically a problem. Admin created that position, but what they giveth they can take away, you know? That is not a sustainable solution for the city and for our schools.

So that is something that policy can create. That space and that money and that structure is something that the UFT can be responsible for negotiating, if it were a priority for the UFT. Also actual money that is taken from NYPD school safety to be given to continued training or to



additional personnel at the school site. Those things would also be good policy-level changes. And part of the reason I left BCL is because there was such high staff turnover-- building this at the school level can't happen unless people are staying for longer, so policy changes that would allow for schools to not be under permanent assault...so even changing tenure policies or changing the kinds of things that get measured at the school site of a successful school, so that BCL doesn't feel like we're in danger of getting closed down because we are focusing on relationship development rather than regents tests. Those kinds of external things can be done outside of the school and at a policy level. The kinds of things that can't be done are the kind of long-term relationships that need to happen to make any of this work. Nobody should be a consultant that comes in-- especially not *only* that, like if there's somebody who works there full-time and there's also a consultant that could help a team of people already in place at a school site. It has to be people working at an individual school site who are designing a program that works for them. Because it's not even really a program, right? It's a way of interacting, it's having to reimagine relationships in the building in order to make people feel accountable to one another. And we don't right now. We only feel accountable to our jobs and to a top-down structure.

Well again, probably a lot of people have said this thing because it's a formative thing for us when we were making the Growing Fairness movie-- I am hesitant to use the phrase restorative approaches or restorative justice when it's not that thing. And the aspirational phrase I would want to use, which I've used a number of times here, is transformative justice. Because I think there's lots of potential and possibility for schools to be sites of powerful relationships that change us as individuals and the community, but I don't think they ever *have* been. So to call it restorative isn't really accurate. I do think that there are some restorative approaches that can restore relationships that did exist. So for example, the story that I told of the dean and the student. I think they *did* have a relationship, and then it was broken or harmed, and then they repaired it, they restored that individual relationship. In terms of restorative justice as a whole, I use it because that's what people are using right now. But I imagine that transformative justice looks like-- literally, it's community accountability models. And that's about changing the behavior of all the people in the school building. And making us feel accountable to anyone and everyone. So it would look like principals designing evaluation methods that allow students and teachers and support staff and guidance counselors to evaluate *them*. It means teachers feeling comfortable and competent talking about difficult things in order to become better. And I imagine that those can happen through the restorative protocols and approaches as they are used. But on a larger level...it means wanting to be better people for one another. Regardless of who those people are. It means relinquishing some power in society, and changing who gets to determine what happens in schools. I think that's the bigger long-term vision for me, about what transformative justice can do in a long-term way. I don't think it's doing that yet, although I see moments of it. And even this year when I'm not doing anything outside of the classroom that is

specifically restorative, I try to use those things and I try to remember how to feel accountable to my students and to my peers even when I'm being asked to do many many things from my administration.

I was sort of just saying this in passing, but I think your thesis should be about what we do and don't need in terms of external support in order to make restorative interventions work. I think that framing is both simple and complex. I think that is what I would want at this moment of possible trendiness and co-optation. I think that is what I would want to read. That's an important project in New York City right now. Because there's been a lot of excitement...and disappointments. Because the kinds of things that Dignity in Schools Campaign and Teachers Unite has asked for from policy makers have been too much local choice. We've been shut down and promises have gone unfulfilled because we've said we want schools to be able to make some of these choices at the school level. And the DoE has been like, oh, nevermind nevermind nevermind. We're not ready to let you all make your own decisions. Or the other way around: we're not ready to change a policy for the entire city, but we're also not ready to let you make your own decisions, so there's just been...nothing. Let's just talk about it more. I also want to say that I personally have had some really good trainings, that have been done even by consultants. I just think that that's not a model for the city to make structural change, but I do want to say that I think that I've had-- especially in Morningside, there's been a lot of people who've had really different experiences, and I've had two Morningside trainings with the same person and that person has been wonderful. And I just happened to have done the one training with her three years ago, and the other one recently, and *she's* gotten so much better. Not just better, but her consciousness around why we're doing this work has changed a lot and I really appreciate that, and it makes me feel like there is... I just wouldn't want to make a blanket dismissal of what can happen through training.

So at the end of last week, the new principal of BCL announced that he was laying off four PERAs. And so Ariana last Thursday got laid off, and is looking for other jobs. So they dismantled the dean team as of last week, at the end of last week. She went to an interview this morning at another school base that also does restorative interventions, but literally, literally, literally...I spent Thursday and Friday talking on the phone with Ariana and Fabian and I mean, what do you do? That's the kind of instability, and the point I was making about Tyler and job security, like what are they going to do at school without having a team anymore? Now it's just two deans. Mr. C, who they may have talked about, was given a full-time position, and everybody else was laid off. Which really, really sucks, and is the reality of what things are like, and is part of the reason that after seven years of trying to do this shit, it was really hard for me to imagine building things over time when you have *no* consistency. Yeah. Fuck. That's the realest thing you can say about the instability of trying to do this work on your own without any support. We know a lot of other schools at least-- she applied to two other schools that we met

through this work. BASE and Bronx Compass are both connections made through Teachers Unite restorative stuff. So hopefully she gets one of those other jobs, but it's like...Ariana lost her job, but also basically Fabian did. Most of Fabian's work is done in this team that now doesn't exist anymore. In the middle of January. Maybe you'll be hired somewhere where restorative approaches aren't part of the language at all.

*Ava*

I've always wanted to be a teacher a little bit, and when I was in high school I kind of decided I was too smart to be a teacher, so I got away from it for a little while, but in college, I started thinking about teaching again. Because I like helping people and I like learning a lot. But I never really thought of education as a social justice thing, didn't hear of restorative practices. I guess in some of my undergrad work we thought about multicultural education, and that was maybe the closest to thinking about where students are coming from and what their perspective on different things is. So that was my undergrad education, and then I started teaching and started thinking about being a white teacher in schools that mostly aren't white, and so that led to conversations with different people about that. And then as I got my master's I heard a little bit about restorative justice and heard about some schools doing some practices, and as I've worked more and more in schools I've realized that I classify education more and more as a social justice issue. That's kind of made me think about how we act in our schools. The first school I worked at in New York City was a suspension center, so the opposite of restorative justice, and I felt like it was really damaging to students. It was very sad to see students come in for let's say bringing a knife to school-- you know, if you're eleven or twelve years old, not even knowing the consequences of what that means-- and then leaving school, coming to this suspension center, and I felt like they always left worse than they came in. More violent, more intense emotionally. It was really damaging. So that really skewed my views against suspensions, and when I heard there were other options, I was very interested.

If students receive a certain number of suspensions, or if they do something that is like a really high level violation, so bringing a weapon to school, or a lot of the students I worked with had attacked an adult, physically, then they are sent to this alternative school. Because all students have the right to education, so they have to find a place for them. So I think there's like thirty, forty, of these sites throughout the city. And you can go for a year, you can go for a month, I think it might be sort of through a court system. I'm not sure exactly how you're placed. But yeah that's how it works. Principal suspension is what it's normally called.

Let's see, there's a lot of pieces to that. [laughs] There's no detention system. In place of that is conversations. And there's different levels of informal to formal conversations. So you are an advisor to a group of students, so if there's something that happens in a class, you will mediate a conversation for that student and teacher, or sometimes that student and student. If it's more intense, then other people will get involved, so the restorative coordinator or even the co-directors of the school. Then there's also a few other aspects of it: students are expected and encouraged to resolve their conflicts through peer mediation, or something called Fairness Committee. So I think of that as kind of preventative of other things. Then I think there's a lot of communication between teachers and families of what's going on, so if something happens in

my class, I'm calling the family to say this is what's going on. I'm not saying necessarily, they have to stay over lunch with me for five days because that's my consequence, it's more of a conversation where we try to resolve whatever happened, and then think about why it happened so it doesn't have to happen again.

Yes. I would say yes, if we can contact them. Sometimes I can't get a hold of families-- I would say like fifty percent of the time.

Yeah, so I have an interesting situation in one of my classes, where one student came from a school and another student came from the same school, and they had been in physical fights at their old school. So they're now both in the same classroom-- I didn't know that history. So in class they had a moment here they both stood up to fight, and both chose to not fight in that moment. Which I think is really meaningful, because they had done that before. And I don't even remember what it was about-- it was something outside the classroom that they were talking about. So both of them did peer mediation, and both of them did a reentry meeting with me, which means that they couldn't attend class until we had sat down and had a meeting. And in the reentry meeting we talked about classroom expectations, and in that moment what can you choose to do, what are your options? Because for both of them at that point their viewpoint was, they *had* to fight to defend themselves and to show everyone around them that they were powerful. So we talked about what people see when they see a fight and what they think. So those conversations were really good-- hours of those conversations. And now those two girls are friends, sitting together at the same table and everything. Which I cannot even believe that that's happened. They had two small incidences in class, and then went through all this, and now they're friends. Crazy. So it's good. Really good.

I have had reentry meetings with students, not in my classroom, but my advisees, go poorly, and we redo them. And I have had Fairness Committee experiences where someone doesn't really respond to it, at first, but they've all always come around. So I haven't had a bad experience. I think the biggest challenge is finding time to do it quickly because the conversation usually takes at least half an hour, forty-five minutes to do it well, and to find a time when you, the student, and whoever is involved which is normally at least one other adult, maybe two-- to find a time when you can all meet is next to impossible. So it's a lot of time.

So one of the girls involved in the other incident that kind of resulted in this friendship, she at first had what I felt like was a really interesting response. We were doing the reentry meeting and her advisor asked if this would happen again, and she said no, and we were like, okay, why, what's going to be different next time, and she said she's going to think of sitting in this really uncomfortable meeting, and she will know that she doesn't want to be here again. [laughs] So I was like, oh, for you this *is* a punishment, this is equivalent to detention, maybe even worse.

Because two adults are sitting here holding you accountable for what you did. And it's two adults that you care about kind of care about what they think. So that was an interesting perspective, where I always feel like it's giving the student a chance and it's really fair and it's a place where they can say what happened from their perspective, and she really thought it was a pain to be there in that room. Now thinking about it in that way, I would not be surprised if other students feel the same way.

Yeah. I think that's a big part of it. And in detention, you can just go to detention, right? Or suspension even-- it hurts students, I think, but you don't have to talk about what you did, and owning up to what you did is really difficult. So I think detention is easier for most kids.

To me, the smallest level is a conversation with just me and the student, where I go to the student and I say this is what happened, is that what you think happened, yes or no? And we try to work it out. So that's like smallest level. Then if it's a little more intense-- a little more intense to me is threatening language or repeated behavior sometimes-- then I'm like okay, this isn't working, and that's when I get someone else involved. And we basically do the same thing but now it's two people, and maybe the restorative coordinator is talking to the student ahead of time and preparing them for that conversation. And maybe debriefing it after. Then if it's actual physical violence, there's things that as a school we need to do. So sometimes a suspension will happen-- I don't know exactly how that works, I think the co-directors have reentry meetings with the students when they come back, that's my understanding of it.

I feel like it makes students feel empowered. Because they have a perspective. And I've heard some teachers and people say-- I've heard students say this to each other actually-- if I pull a student aside and say hey, we just need to talk right now, I sense things are getting out of control and we need to talk, and the student doesn't want to, the students will tell each other, it's different here, it's okay. That conversation doesn't mean everything's over and I'm sending you out and I hate you! It feels a little more compassionate than other places I've been.

I feel like I give students some voice in what they're learning as well. And I'm working to do that more. So I will allow students to help with the process of choosing deadlines, as well. And I'll let them kind of choose options, I try to have a lot of choice. So I think that that environment where your perspective as a student and what you're bringing into the classroom isn't ignored-- I think that's really related to restorative justice. So that's curriculum and lessons. I don't know, I find myself asking-- and part of this is because I'm a new teacher-- I find myself asking them for a lot of feedback. And I know some people say you shouldn't do that as a new teacher. I've been told not to do that because it kind of opens the door and like, shows that you're not the all-powerful teacher. I think that giving that power and control away to the students is more powerful for me. I feel like I'm not really a controlling person, and that's related to restorative

justice too, because I'm not just-- this is my domain, this is my classroom, come in and this is how it's going to be. In each of my classes it's different based on who's there.

I teach math, and then I also have advisory here-- so how has it gone just in general? It's interesting. So I teach a trigonometry class, it's my first year teaching trig, so for me that was a big challenge because I hadn't even thought about trig since high school. And we're teaching to-- I don't know how much you know about our school, maybe not a lot, but we don't have the regents exams, so we're teaching for a final paper and presentation. So students just completed fifteen, sixteen page papers about math, and I did that for college math papers, but I never did that in high school, so thinking about how a high schooler approaches that is really interesting. So that was my morning class. My afternoon classes were algebra, and so that's for students who have failed algebra over and over again, so for example I have a student who's taken algebra *eight* times. And is still not passing. So that's been interesting-- they have really low confidence about their math skills, but they're really capable, and some of them did it this semester and some didn't, as expected. Yeah, and then their work habits are really poor. Poor attendance, students don't know how to ask questions or get the help they need. So they may know they're failing, but they don't know what step to take after that. That's really tricky, I find myself talking a lot about that. Like okay, where are you? Here's where you are, here's how you get to the next place. But one thing that really helps and that I really like about this school is we have learning targets instead of a traditional grading system. I think a lot of schools are moving towards that. So for example, in my class you have to know how to solve systems of equations. And there's many opportunities to show me that you know that, many different ways to show that you know that, to learn that, and once you show me that, good. You have to have mastery across learning targets to some degree in order to pass the class. That's confusing for some students who are just used to doing work and turning it in. And it's also confusing for some students who don't do a lot of work, but because they've been in algebra for *eight* semesters, already know a lot, like they're already actually at mastery on a lot of things. So they're going to pass my class even though their work habits are horrible. But I don't know, I'm passing them. [laughs]

I think the biggest challenge from my perspective is time. So being able to immediately react to something, that would be really nice. Like if something happens now and by the end of the day we've had a conversation about what just happened-- or maybe the next day, because I think the time sometimes helps students to calm down a little bit and get ready for that conversation. But yeah that would be really nice. And I think it would be interesting to train the kids more because they're coming in from different schools, most of them have never done this, most of them don't know what's about to happen until it's happening. They have a sense of the culture and how it feels, and I think they feel mostly supported, but it would be nice to talk to them about what we're doing and why.

I think it's a peaceful way to resolve conflict that respects different peoples' perspectives in a situation. And I think the goal is not always to determine a consequence or even to apologize, but to find a way to move on from a situation. And I think that's very beneficial to a community like this one where people are coming from all over. And also personally, not to think about paying someone back, like you did something to me, I'm going to get you back! But to find ways to move on and let you know what my experience was in that, and also to let go of it and move on. That's something that a lot of people in my life are not good at and I'm getting better at it by being a teacher in a restorative justice school.



*Tara*

Well, my name is Tara. I work at the John Brown School in Chelsea, New York. I'm a restorative justice coordinator; my official title is actually community coordinator because some politics with the DOE. What made me want to work there is I was getting frustrated with my previous position because I was being forced to suspend kids and kick kids out of school and I just couldn't be okay with it, especially kids that come from the same communities as me. I realized how important school was in terms of giving you access to the next level and obviously [mumbled] less successful, so it wasn't the best place for me to be in.

So we have what's called a Core Value Response Protocol, and we tie everything back into the seven core values of the school. The Core Values are: respect for humanity, respect for intellect, respect for the truth, commitment to democracy, commitment to justice, respect for diversity, and commitment to peace. So we've got everything back into those seven core values, and we've divided infractions into level ones, level twos, and level threes.

So depending on what the infraction is, if it's a level one, the crew advisors are like the line of defense, and the student is given a pink pass for the reflection center, and their advisor comes and the conversation is held there. And the crew advisor then determines what the options are, whether it's a phone call home or a meeting, what have you. Level two offenses are sent to me and I interact with the student, I have them fill out a reflection form, and because it's a level two, there needs to be some type of re-entry conference where I would facilitate and the teacher and the student come together with me and we figure out like what the problem was, why it happened, and make an agreement as to what the consequences should be. Level three is usually like some kind of threat to safety, the co-directors or principals handle those, and sometimes those do end in suspension, but there's always a re-entry conference or some type of—I always meet with the students to determine what the plan will be while they're out of school and how they're going to be reintegrated into the school community.

So level one is more disruption, so like tapping on their desk or calling out in class, leaving without permission, like the lower level offenses. Level two is disrespect, so like an argument, cursing at somebody, so that's where it escalates. And those would be sent to me but it doesn't mean they're going to be suspended, it's more so I meet with them and depending on their history and whatever interventions have been applied, we can come up with some sort of agreement as to what the punishment should be. So I had a student who has been getting into arguments with the security director every time he comes into the building. And so, it was actually he came up with this idea, he was like well, I want to have a meeting with this guy. And so the conversation was basically we tried to figure out, well, what happened, you know, what

were you feeling when this happened, like just trying to get them to identify, is your problem with that person, or was it a bigger situation that was a trigger for you?

What could you have done differently, like if you want to get better, what are some different options, what are some ways it could play out? What are you planning to do to move forward? That's sort of how that conversation goes, and once I prep them there, I need to try to bring the other party into the room, so in this case I'm going to try to set up a Harm and Healing circle with the security director who's downstairs to see if we can move forward, and then as a group figure out what the consequence should be for that student. And in that way the student is held accountable and they understand where the consequence is coming from, and why it happened. And to me that makes it a little more valuable in terms of getting them to think about their behavior, versus just an arbitrary suspension. No, otherwise it's going to make them angry, yeah. And especially if they're a teenager, just trying to get them outside of their own head.

Because a lot of times it's just very "me, me, me, and this is how *I* was feeling, and he should have known," and it's just getting them to understand like, your actions also affect the larger community. And you always have to be responsible for yourself because we take care of each other, so if one person is hurt or doing something that, you know, affects everyone else, it has bigger consequences than just you being suspended or you missing class, it affects the larger community, we always tie it back to the Brown community. We're 250 students-- on paper. Probably about 200 on any given day. At some point, I think every kid has had some time where they've been through the restorative process. But some of them I don't ever get to see because it's a low level-- it's the crew advisor who takes care of it, and so those can be settled with informal conversations or in a group, or things like that.

We keep track of it in a system called Jump Rope. It's like an online database system, you can put like, anecdotal records about the students. I monitor those to see if there's a kid that is like, consistently having level ones, or if there's a teacher that's consistently having level one interactions with students, because maybe there's something the teacher needs to change and not just the student. I think the benefits are, just teaching students how to have difficult conversations. I think that's an important skill to learn before you get to the real world. Nobody's going to hand-hold you through those. And it changes the vibe in the community.

People hear the word "conflict" and it immediately puts them in like a tense place, but with all these systems in place it lets students know that even if there's a conflict, there's a way we can fix it. So we have a Fairness Committee, we have peer mediation, there's my office, there's social workers. And so it gives them a lot of outlooks, and they don't get stuck in this place of, "everything's wrong and there's nothing I can do about it." One of the drawbacks is time. It takes a lot of time. I was late coming downstairs because a student came to me and she was like,

I need to have a mediation with my friend. She was like, I don't necessarily need you to facilitate it, I just need a quiet space to talk. This is a student who used to fight in the hallway. So to see her taking responsibility here, yeah. So in that sense, it takes a *lot* of time.

To me, restorative justice teaches every kid that they have a place in school. Especially in a school like Brown which is a transfer school, a lot of our population is coming from, they've been pushed out of schools for whatever reason, suspension, sometimes being incarcerated. So they're already coming with a jaded attitude towards authority, and so it kind of re-invites them into a school community and lets them know, your voice matters. We're not always going to agree, but there's a way you can handle disagreements. So in that sense I think it's a huge plus. It's not going to say a kid is never going to get in trouble ever ever again, but how they respond when they get in trouble, I'm seeing a big difference. For example, a kid today, at the beginning of the year he would cuss anybody out, I don't care who you are, if I feel disrespected I'm cursing you out. Today he got into it with a teacher-- he did curse him out, but then he came right to my office and he was like, I need to let you know, I just cursed Joe out. He sat down on the couch. I gave him a few minutes, and then we talked about it, like what could you have done differently.

He said, I know. I'm just in a really bad mood, I had a terrible weekend. And so now he has the skills to sort of unpack and process why he's making certain decisions. That's not a fairytale ending, but to me that's huge for that kid. I was like let's find some positives, he was like you're right. If this had happened a few weeks ago, I probably would have walked out, and I'd be in the park smoking weed by now. Because then he was starting to beat himself up over, I should have handled that differently. I was like yeah, you should have, but let's find some positives in what you did do. And so in that sense like, small victories. Just this morning!

At my old school, I had this kid who got superintendent suspensions, literally, served four superintendent suspensions in a year. Some background: the way the DOE works, a principal suspension is anywhere from one to five days. A superintendent suspension can range anywhere from six to 180 days, depending on what they did. So those are for either repeated violent behavior, or... there are certain things where the discipline code says you have to have a superintendent suspension. And when I reflect on it, we had gotten to a place where we were just so frustrated with this student that it was just like nope, he did it again, another superintendent suspension. And so he had served three already, and it was like March and he came to school and he had gotten into it with with a teacher, and I took him into my office and he was like, I know. I'm getting another superintendent suspension. And I was just like, well, let's have a conversation. I actually apologized to him, I said, I feel like I haven't given you a chance to reinvent yourself. Suspensions clearly don't work so let's talk. And he was *so* shocked that somebody wanted to like, have a conversation with him.

His response was just like, well, I act this way because that's what's expected of me, so why even bother. Like I know that if I come into school and I say the wrong thing, I'm going to get suspended. So that day, we started talking about how he could do things differently, and he came to school later, he was in his uniform. He didn't necessarily make it through the whole day, but the fact that he was attending regularly and started be to a part of the school community made him realize that like, suspensions didn't work. I think that was the story that really got me going on this path. Because a lot of people think like, oh, restorative justice, that's easy, or it's soft, or it's the touchy-feely stuff. But this made me realize there's real potential. So it made me think about, if we had started this kind of discipline years earlier, where might he be today?

I would make it a part of the graduate education program for teachers, so that when teachers come into schools, they're already trained. Because I think right now, it's kind of like a reactive measure, like the DOE is seeing a certain type of supervised suspension rates, and the new buzzword is "school-to-prison pipeline," and everyone's like oh! Restorative justice, let's push that in. But I think if people came in with the mindset *before* anything happened, like a proactive measure. Training teachers before they even get into a classroom about what RJ is and what the benefits are.

I wouldn't say there are any students for whom restorative justice doesn't work, I would say we don't see results as quickly as we might like. And I think it's because, especially at my school, some of these kids are like 20 years old. And so they've been through a school system since they were babies for 20 years and the only thing they know is, I do something wrong, I get suspended. And so, if it takes 20 years to build a bad habit, it's going to take a long time to unpack it. And I don't have that kind of time. So there are certain situations, yeah, where they're either too far down that lane or there's just not enough time in the day to get it to work. But I would say, in a perfect world, if I could give them the time that they need and the attention that they need, they would move along a lot more quickly. At least I think so.

There are certain, like, infractions that if you look at the discipline code-- [we stop to eat, resumes about 20 min later]

Well I think it was, yeah, two things we were talking about. The first was, if I could improve the system, I would think anyone who works in a school should be trained in RJ, from the lunch lady, to the guidance counselor, to the school safety agent because the school community is bigger than just the teachers and the students. Everybody plays a role. And so if you haven't included everybody in that process, when a fight breaks out and a school safety agent has to arrive and they're not on the same page, it could cause that whole system to crumble. Especially

because the whole system is built on trust and relationships, so if it's not constantly infused, it will be very difficult to do like the tier two work, where you're talking about harm and healing.

And then, in terms of metal detectors, when I think of RJ, it covers the entire school. So metal detectors, I think, have a very negative effect on school culture. It's teaching kids that you don't trust them. And again, if RJ is based on trust principles and relationships, walking into a school that you're starting your day by saying, hey, we don't have a good enough relationship that I can trust that you're going to handle yourself professionally, so let me see what's in your bag. Like, I don't know how strong your RJ strategy is going to be in that case.

So my school is a consortium school, and we do what's called a PBA, and it's like a performance based assessment, they're working on it all year, from the first day of class. And our classes are even different, like they're not just called "Algebra," every class has a title and students elect into it depending on which credits they need. So there's a lot of student choice and from the very beginning, before they even start the class, they're being held accountable and they know what they're getting into. And so all year long, you're working on a project that you have to stand in front of a panel and defend. And so I think that teaches them that you're a part of a larger community, because some of it is group work, and some of it is partner work and you have to find evidence, support this and prove that. Whereas a regents exam is very individualized, like I could do nothing all year long, get a Barron's book, sit for, you know, a few hours and study, and pass the regents exam. So it's very disconnected, and I think through a PBA, you have to be in class every day, you have to work with partners, they have to do the group work, and so it kind of brings you back to that community. It reminds us that we're part of a larger community, and if you don't buy into this community, you're not going to be able to move forward.

Well this is my first year here, so... but I do have kids like, there's one young lady from the first day of school, she was not feeling me. At all. And I would say good morning, and she would just look at me with like a stank face. And I just kept pushing, just kept pushing and pushing, no matter what she wasn't going to break me, I was going to keep saying good morning. Now, she's always in my office, she has a locker in my office, she comes and says good morning to me, she stops in to check on me during the day. And the other day-- she's about to graduate in January-- she was like, Tara, when I graduate, I'm going to make sure that I come back and visit you. This is a young lady that I couldn't get to say two words to me a few months ago. So I think in that sense, it brings them back to the community. But a social worker and I were talking about this this morning, but that's also very dangerous because... I don't know if we've created such an awesome community that you might not be able to find it outside in the real world. And I don't know-- like some kids might not be able to handle that. And so we have to make sure that while we're providing some support and things like that for them, we're not giving them too much of a crutch that when they're outside on their own it's like culture shock. And so that's why it would

be nice to see, like, different strategies, like outside schools, afterschool programs and other organizations, if this could just be like a society thing.

None in particular yet, but we were talking about doing workshops and stuff and inviting like coaches and other outside organizations to come in and doing parent workshops so that parents can start to learn about it because sometimes parents work in schools, or they work in places where they can take this information and they've learned and now they bring it there. So we're trying to get some of that going for the spring semester.

That is an excellent question. I went to a small workshop a few weeks ago where Angela Davis was speaking where I was talking to her afterwards and she was saying, the reason it was so successful in Oakland, is because it didn't come from the top down, it came from the parents and the teachers and the students who are tired of being treated this way, and *they* made the decision to change things. And so if there was a way to just like motivate people to look at the circumstances and make them realize-- I mean, honestly, with all the stuff that's going on with Ferguson and Eric Garner-- now is the right climate for that change to happen. And I think a lot of kids are thinking differently, a lot of parents are thinking differently, so the more motivated the people who are on the ground are, we can force that change to come.

Just um... what was it that a student was telling me? We were having a conversation about... basically he was just in a place where he was saying, well, this is just how it is, and what can we do about it. And I was explaining to him how powerful the youth are and like they're really going to be the force behind this movement. People who are my age, we can sit around and talk and say, this is what's going to happen, but the power really lies in their hands, they can motivate each other and start checking each other. It will force us to start looking at them differently, and when the teachers and educators and all the adults in their school start looking at them differently, we can enforce change for the administration to start treating us differently and-- you know? So I was trying to get him to think like, you *do* have power, and you have the weight for something to happen. So you need to be a part of this conversation, you need to be at the table when these things happen. So they're just talking a lot more, the way they check each other at school is just-- the language and the-- it's different. Because they're starting to see like, no, something has to change. And it's going to start with me. It's just been really cool to watch.

Traditional discipline teaches kids that they can't-- they can only have things done to them, they can't like be a part of the conversation, they can't be a part of moving anything forward, it's just a matter of like whether somebody else is going to respond to them or not.

So we have this setup, like a survey kind of, it's on our website. And students are encouraged to go and fill it out themselves. And a request is generated and it's sent to the peer mediation

facilitator who's one of our co-directors. But sometimes, students come in and say they have a problem, and I'll just redirect them to-- oh, you should handle this in peer mediation. Or, how are you feeling, the Fairness Committee is another way. Fairness is kind of like a panel. We meet, a group of us meet, it's an elective class, we meet once a week. And it's basically a place where if a core value has been violated, whether it's by a teacher or a student, you get to bring that person before a panel and discuss the incident, and the panel works together to come up with a solution. So sometimes there is a consequence, but the student was a part of like, building that consequence.

Or sometimes it's the reverse: students can bring teachers to Fairness, and it's a powerful influence, teaching them how to use it-- and we know they're going to use it regardless! So teaching them about, like, helping them refine their voice and how to use it in a productive and professional way. And it's, your emotions are always valid, your feelings are valid, but it's how you deliver it. So it's giving them the space to kind of work that out and learn how to use that space.

I'm just excited that you're doing-- like, I think it's amazing that you're doing a paper on this. Like I said, I think it's a movement that needs to be outside of schools, and the more people and the more places that keep talking about it, the better off we'll be. I was at Teachers Unite's fundraiser, and I was talking to some guys, they were like rugby coaches [laughs] and I walked over to them to say something like, oh, do you want to donate to blah blah blah. And I was telling them about restorative justice, and the guy was like, that's so weird, we were just sitting here talking about it. What are the odds? So to see a bunch of rugby coaches sitting around talking about it, like that makes me feel good. It's not just a school thing, it's a life thing, it's somewhere that our society needs to move towards.

*Jacob*

This is my fifth year at the John Brown School-- what drew me to teaching or what drew me to the John Brown School? I come from a family of educators, a community of educators. It wasn't actually the first thing that I thought to do, but whatever I was going to do, I knew I wanted to be in the service, to give back to a community. And it became clear to me that teaching was a good way to do that and I became aware of the John Brown School by teaching at another school in the performance standards consortium, and learned a lot about our sister school, Humanities Prep through different people and through reading about it. I thought very highly of the community that was created there, so when the opportunity arose to come to John Brown, I was interested. Both our schools I think philosophically are about-- we were talking about this-- the belief in a just community, and a more positive approach to discipline. I was attracted to that.

Well, I am very interested in the writings of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg really suggested that in order to create a democratic society and foster democratic principles and people that you have to adequately and effectively teach it and create situations where people can actually engage in democratic decision making. He also really argued in terms of young people's moral development that you need to be able to wrestle with real world moral dilemmas, and the best way to do that is to take them from things that happen in a community. Also he believes that these kinds of opportunities-- having community meetings, having some kind of a Fairness Committee, having small group discussions about moral dilemmas, is the best way to create caring, loving, and just communities. There are very few schools that have actually tried to take that on and provide those situations. I'm very taken with those schools, I think they're really idealistic and amazing. It's really hard to do, but I was impressed with the structures that exist, the fact that Humanities Prep and John Brown have these community meetings, we call them Town meetings. I was excited by the prospect of working with people who are interested in having students have those kinds of conversations about real school issues. My very first year, we were having kids talk about things like, is it okay to go out and get high at lunch? What kind of impact does that have on the community, not just the individual. I think that's so important because it's a real dilemma, it really does meet kids at different developmental stages, and then they're able in the dialogue to grow in a much more meaningful way than if they don't have the opportunity to have those kinds of conversations. And they were student-led too. So in terms of teaching to the whole child, a school like this is so much more than just social studies and English as our priorities, we're really trying to create a more well-rounded individual. But we do the disciplines well too, we go into real depth in our courses too. But that's typical of all consortium schools.

It's part of our mission to be a safe haven for students who have struggled in other places-- we're a transfer school-- so we take on kids who are sort of anti-authority and struggle with their ability



to communicate or are often in conflict. And we understand that our job is to work with this population of students and we know that they're not going to benefit from the kind of traditional schools discipline approaches that they're coming from because-- as we experience, because we're a transfer school-- they're more likely to get pushed out and end up without an education or maybe even into the criminal justice system. So our fundamental underlying philosophy is that we have to do something else. We do that in a number of different ways, we can refer to something that we started this year, we have a series of expectations about what should happen in our school and then what should be done if there's a violation of our norms. So as you can see, Level One, Level Two, Level Three, there's sort of a progression of behavioral issues and the lower level things we're trying to address through students' advisors, mediating and intervening with classroom teachers, reentry meetings, our Fairness Committee meetings, and things like that. And as the situations get worse, our responses continue to progress, but we do what we can to reintegrate and restore the student back into the community as opposed to things that are just pushing them out of class and out of school. We do have suspensions; we know that at times there is no other alternative and they are required of us for certain infractions of the discipline code like drug use and fighting and whatnot. So it's not that we don't suspend but we try to take an approach of how are we going to heal relationships or provide opportunities for relationships to be healed, and for students to consider alternative kinds of behavior when they encounter those types of situations again. And to be empathetic and consider different perspectives so that they can more likely grow from this situation. We also try to use the language of transformative justice as opposed to just restorative justice-- many of us are deeply concerned about inequality in our society and believe it's not enough to just restore to the community, but we need to transform not only our own community but the communities that they come from.

Well you're getting me at a pretty good moment [laughs] because it's our PBAT week. It's a time when we get to see the fruits of our labors. It's messy. Because even within our community it's not like we're all philosophically completely on the same page, but in a traditional school you might see potentially a little more order in the hallways and in classes. You might see an expectation that things have to be done a certain kind of way, and we find that if we're constantly confronting norm violations that we're just antagonizing students, we're escalating conflict. So there's a lot of struggles we have with kids who are disaffected or just not learning and they're frankly in the hallways. It's hard. At the same time-- you asked the question earlier about what my direct role is-- I'm the teacher co-director and I do a lot of management of student behavior, I'm constantly pushing kids into where they're supposed to be, I also coordinate the peer mediation program, I have a long history of working with the Fairness Committee, I used to coordinate that. I do a lot of work with promoting circles in classes. And I work closely with Tara, our Restorative Coordinator. So some of our most difficult kids are currently on the verge of graduating-- and I say you caught me at a good time because I feel like it's because we kept working with them and never gave up on them that-- and they made our lives miserable

sometimes, there were times when I was like, I don't know if we're serving their needs, if we have the right approach. But we have some kids that I *know* would not graduate in other places, and I know that they're growing from the experience of having been with us. It's a very powerful thing to be able to see that kid present a high-level research paper and to graduate after just really really struggling for so long. So I feel really really good about that, because we do have plenty of struggles.

Nothing is jumping out at me this year. I can certainly think about things in previous years because I can't say that I was involved in a Fairness where somebody had an "aha" moment in this particular year. And we're sort of in our infancy with this peer-mediation program, so we haven't yet had any high-leverage, high stakes mediations that we've been doing. But in terms of previous experiences I can think of, I've seen students share their own thinking about how they have learned about how to behave in a classroom, and they've had opportunity to talk with younger students who are struggling-- in a Fairness scenario specifically. The space to have that conversation, to me-- I can think of a student who was a very serious academic student who was also like the class jokester was in a Fairness Committee where he was the twelfth grader and there was this other kid who was a ninth grader who was always joking around. And he said to this kid, you know, there's a time and place to make people laugh. I've learned that, it took me a while to learn that, but I've learned that it's just not okay to be constantly cracking jokes on people. I figured that out, now you need to figure that out. It was amazing because it's possible that these kinds of things are going to happen without the restorative approaches, but they probably won't happen on the same timeline. And in a way that's so much more meaningful, where peers are counseling their peers.

I can also think of a Fairness situation where this student was a non-attending student. So we'll have these Fairnesses where it will be almost more like an intervention. So we spent about an hour and a half just trying to uncover what was going on with this student--and nothing else had worked. No other type of intervention had worked with her. But after that, literally just an hour and a half of probing and not giving up, the student finally yielded to give some explanation about what was going on with her life, and shared some very deeply personal things. Now it wasn't really the place of the Fairness Committee to help her and support her, but to say to her, I think you really need some help and you should get some counseling, I think the student's attendance really picked up because of it. So a lot of it is just belief in a philosophy that time is needed to have these conversations, to put different stakeholders together in the same room and just the willingness to talk things through, that isn't really presented enough in educational settings, you know?

Any of our kids who drop out would probably be a good example. It's hard for me to remember specific interventions, but I have one student in my mind now, and I'm pretty sure she was taken

to Fairness and reentries and all kinds of things, we employed everything that we do. And she left us. And to me, realistically, we're only with students for a certain part of their lives, for a certain part of their development, and we're unable to address the inordinate amount of real world problems that they're facing, that we can be there with them when they leave us, that we can't account for the challenges that they're encountering, and so when we fail it's not because there's something wrong with the approach or the philosophy, it's because we can only do so much. Now that being said, it doesn't mean there isn't room for growth on our part, I think we're constantly pushing ourselves to get better at the work, and this is a brand-new thing that's still very much a work in progress, I mean we're working on it right now to make it clearer to students, to make it more effective. But it's a response to the fact that we were lacking clear-cut expectations about behavior, and you can see [gestures to chart] it really spells out what's supposed to happen. So we really push ourselves, and we spend a lot of our professional development time thinking about, how can we make it even better. So sometimes it might fail because we haven't figured out the best approach, but a lot of time it fails because we're just unable to address the much more structural inequality that exists in our society.

I think every school would benefit from having more counselors. More support. A lot of our support right now rests in our crew advisor-advisee relationships, and we're struggling there. I think they need support, I think probably some of the things they do could be outsourced. We actually applied for a grant and didn't get it to get a lot of funds to improve students' attendance. I've heard of schools that have like, five to ten case workers that are like, literally working with the most struggling students when it comes to their attendance, trying to figure out ways to help them get to school more often, and right now our crew advisors are over strapped, so if that was taken off their plate at some level, they might have more time to do these kinds of things. We could benefit from having more time in our schedule to ensure that this work could happen on a regular, everyday basis. Because what will often happen is that we'll have a Fairness Committee, but in order to participate, you have to be relieved of other duties that you're doing. So if there was a block of the day where nothing else was happening, you didn't have any responsibilities, if you didn't do it, you wouldn't be able to do other things. Things like that. Every school would benefit from having more time, more teachers. Our restorative coordinator comes out of our budget-- we've been advocating for not just our school but any school that wants one to have a centrally funded restorative coordinator. Because essentially the money that we give to her is not here for us to hire more personnel, we're short on special ed, there's other positions that we could really benefit from. Or, you know, we barely have enough money for supplies. So we're prioritizing some things over others, but we'd like to not make that choice.

This also speaks to the philosophical differences that I mentioned before. There have been times where my colleagues and I have questioned either the length of suspension, or why didn't a suspension happen. There's a lot of gray area, interpretation of is this actually a weapon? A

student was carrying a swiss army knife which he said that he carries with him every day. Completely had forgotten about it. He argued that he used it as a tool, but other people were like hey, that could also be used as a weapon, it's a knife. So if we had pushed for a serious suspension, we knew what the consequences would be for this student in terms of him falling further behind in his studies, becoming less connected to our community. He's a special ed student, so we're aware of the statistics that show that special ed students are more likely to be suspended. Other people thought that was a poor choice, and that's just one example, but yeah, people are frustrated. Like I said, no firm cohesive belief about how we're supposed to push things.

Oh yeah, we've had superintendent suspensions. We can't expel. But last year we had a superintendent suspension for a very serious fight that turned into multiple people fighting in the hallway, and a few students for the severity of the fight were... now the way it works is that you can ask for--but that doesn't mean it's granted-- a superintendent suspension at the discretion of the superintendent. So there are checks and balances but I mean we've pushed for serious responses, and we find that it's in line with the discipline code. We don't ignore the discipline code! We follow it. But the discipline code has progressed, it does allow for a range of options including restorative approaches. There are parts of it that we'd like to see changed to become more restorative, there are some schools that are supposedly not soft, but are suspending kids for being late and wearing hats, and generally being supposedly "defiant." There's this one part of the discipline code, B21, that we agree with different organizations that are pushing to have that eliminated. In fact our principal wrote a letter to a newspaper saying that it should be eliminated. But it's a balance, it is-- because the other thing is, there's this. But there's no way that every time this happens we can always respond exactly with it, because then it just becomes another way of escalating conflict. The thing about restorative approaches is that there has to be a sense of the whole child and that not everybody is exactly the same, and different approaches work well with different people. Any way that you're teaching, you can't teach every child the exact same way. That's sort of formally accepted now. So we think that you can't use the exact same approach with everyone, and there's some patience needed. Makes things a little hard. But that being said, we believe that young people need structure and consequences-- I often say to students that get upset or frustrated with me, did you prefer that teachers-- and everyone's had that teacher-- that just let you do whatever you wanted? You might think that you had fun, but at the end of the day, how much did you really get out of that class? And most of the time they'll say yeah, you're right. The school I came from where we just did whatever we wanted was a complete mess; I left that school for a reason. Young people crave boundaries, and restorative approaches and a philosophy that advocates for that is by no means like, we don't need boundaries and we don't need structure. It just has to be accompanied by a more holistic approach to how you work with people.

Let me speak a little bit to a larger philosophical belief that I have. So I am someone who believes very strongly in changing society and attacking racist structural inequalities that exist today. Income distribution, poverty, the amount of African-Americans and Latinos that are currently wrapped up in the criminal justice system. I believe that there's a real school-to-prison pipeline that exists in many of our schools in this country, and so sort of an initial stance of how do I fight racism, I think that you have to take a stand against zero-tolerance kind of approaches because the evidence clearly shows that it's happening in schools. I also would say that it's not benign, it's not just sort of happening, but that it serves a larger purpose. A lot of people don't really believe that everyone should really have an equal education, I don't think that-- without going on too much-- I'm taken with the writings of a person by the name of Lois Weiner, who suggests that in our society today, not everybody is expected to get a high school diploma because they don't really need that in the workforce, they don't need everyone to be highly educated. And so it's not a coincidence that not just the zero-tolerance approaches, but also the type of education that is being offered in these highly segregated schools is so inferior. And couple that with the funding and whatnot. This is just one way that I can sort of strike back at that racist and classist phenomenon. But I also believe that it can't just exist in one school, I can't just go about doing this and think that that's enough so I'm an active member of Teachers Unite, which I know that you have experience with, and I believe that it has to be part of a larger movement in order to affect any kind of change. And it's a good time in the sense of, I've been doing this work for eight plus years, longer even, and I've never felt more a part of a larger group. Everywhere I go, people are saying that this is something they believe in, and that we need to do things differently, and they're interested, and they come to visit us and we go to visit them. We meet and talk and it's very inspiring in that sense. I'll just end with a union perspective because I'm active in the union that I believe that the best way to impact the quality of our schools, and even to fight inequality, is from an organized worker perspective. So I'm also very interested in pushing our union to take on this work and very interested in transforming my union to represent a more social justice agenda.