

Journal of Public Management & Social Policy

Volume 27 | Number 1

Article 3

October 2020

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Recommended Citation

Miller-Jones, Dalton and Rubin, Marilyn Marks (2020) "Achieving Equity in Education: A Restorative Justice Approach," *Journal of Public Management & Social Policy*. Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalscholarship.tsu.edu/jpmmsp/vol27/iss1/3>

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the work described in this article. We are grateful to Beth Hoover, Co-Chair of the Restorative Justice & Equity Group, who provided the first drafts of reports for the three Town Halls we describe in the article and to Rebecca Easton, JoAnn Lawrence, Oscar Gonzales, Lauralei Garrity, Gordon Price Marcus Legrand, and Naomi Crummett. Thanks also go to the Superintendent of the Bend La Pine School District and to the central Oregon organizations Better Together, Embrace Bend, the Latino Community Association, and the Bend Education Association.

Achieving Equity in Education: A Restorative Justice Approach

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The critical role of education in making the United States a more equitable nation underscores the importance of eliminating the persistent academic achievement gap between students of color and White students. A school culture that fosters trusting relationships can play a key role in reducing this gap. This importance of trusting relationships at the core of school culture has, however, not always been recognized nor prioritized in policies and actions. Restorative justice, a philosophy based on repairing harm and creating a sense of belonging in a community, brings the discussion of trusting relationships into the public forum. This paper discusses how restorative practices are being used in a series of town halls for high school students in a central Oregon school district to build trusting relationships for students of color and to give them the tools to create systemic change in their schools around race and ethnicity. The paper adds to the relatively small, albeit growing, body of research on the relationship between the use of restorative practices and increased school engagement among students of color who are most vulnerable to school failure. Given the significant role of educational institutions as engines driving fairness and social justice, the paper also contributes to the literature on social equity, the fourth pillar of Public Administration.

In her book on race and social equity as a nervous area of government, Susan Gooden (2014, xi) writes that "...race continues to be a persistent marker of social and economic outcomes in American society," and that "education is a very important factor in understanding social inequities"(28). The critical role of education in making the United States a more equitable nation underscores the importance of eliminating the persistent academic achievement gap between students of color and White students (NCES 2017; CEPA 2015). Factors identified as contributing to this gap have tended to focus on hypothesized deficiencies in students themselves, and on racial disparities in socio-economic indicators such as income and education (CEPA 2015). We argue that attitudes toward, and treatment of, students of color by White students, as well as by teachers and administrators, can also contribute to the academic achievement gap (Augustine et al. 2018).

Students of color are more likely to be subject to lower teacher expectations (Gershonson et al. 2015); to be disciplined, suspended or expelled more frequently for

relatively minor offenses (GAO 2020; Augustine et al. 2018); and to be sanctioned for behaving in ways that are interpreted as being disrespectful (Losen et al. 2012; Skiba et al. 2013; González 2012). Racial disparities in school experiences can contribute to a negative feedback loop for students of color in which suspensions and expulsions result in lost classroom time leading to less academic exposure that, can in turn, result in lower achievement levels. In contrast, a school culture that fosters trusting relationships can increase school engagement of students of color, and can help to close the racial academic achievement gap¹ (Morgan & Amerikaner 2018). The contribution of these trusting relationships to the core of school culture is, however, not always recognized nor prioritized in policies and actions. Restorative justice (RJ), a philosophy based on repairing harm and creating a sense of belonging in a community, brings the discussion of trusting relationships into the public forum.

This article uses a case study, set in a predominantly White school district in central Oregon, to show how restorative practices are being used to build a more trusting school culture for students around race and ethnicity. The first section sets the context for the article by defining the restorative justice concept and briefly describing its origins, its use in the criminal justice system and its introduction into educational settings. The second section focuses on RJ principles, processes and practices as applied in school settings. The third section discusses how restorative practices are being used in town hall settings in a central Oregon school district to change school culture around race and ethnicity. The final sections provide a summary of the RJ town hall outcomes and suggest topics for further study.

Research on RJ in educational settings has generally focused on its use in addressing disciplinary related issues in large school districts where students of color represent a high proportion of the school population.² This article broadens the research by showing how restorative practices are being used in a comparatively small school district, with a predominantly White student body, to change school culture around race and ethnicity. The case study can also be seen as broadening the research on collaborative governance that "...refers to a framework of policy strategy that seeks to engage multiple 'stakeholders' in governance and decision-making processes...collaborative governance promotes increased inclusion of actors in political and public administration processes" (Clott 2016). Restorative justice, by its very nature, is a collaborative problem-solving process, bringing together stakeholders who have been affected by a specific incident, or by shifts in cultural values, to share their feelings, describe how they have been affected, and develop a plan to repair the harm done.

Finally, the article adds to the body of research on social equity, defined by the National Academy of Public Administration³ as the fourth pillar of public administration along with economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Wooldridge & Bilharz 2017). We see educational institutions as vehicles for driving "...equity and greater social inclusion, or when absent, poorly delivered or unfairly distributed... [as] vehicle[s] for injustice and greater social exclusion" (Busemeyer et al. n.d.). As Arne Duncan so aptly stated more than a decade ago when he was Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education: "The battle for a quality

¹ Other factors that affect the academic achievement gap include the quality of teachers, especially in schools with low academic performance and per-student funding levels (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018).

² See, for example González, "Socializing Schools: Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through Restorative Justice, in *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Equitable Remedies for Excessive Exclusion*." (Losen et al., 2014). Available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2728960>.

³ The National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) is a congressionally chartered, non-profit, non-partisan organization with more than 850 elected fellows. More information available at <https://www.napawash.org/>.

education is about so much more than education. It is a daily fight for social justice" (Duncan 2010).

Restorative Justice Defined

Although there is no singular theoretical construct of restorative justice (RJ), in its broadest terms it can be seen as encompassing "...a growing social movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches for avoiding and addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and collaboratively solving problems" (Fronius et al. 2019,1). RJ is grounded in the traditions of many indigenous communities such as Native Americans, First Nations Canadians, and African communities before their colonization by western European nations. Among indigenous peoples, restorative practices were used to resolve conflicts based on the belief that "...there is a deep connection between justice and spirituality; harmony and balance" (Mirsky, 2004, 1). As Louise Thompson of the *Mohawk Nation of Akwesasnea*⁴ states:

In First Nation and Native American justice, healing, along with reintegrating individuals into their community, is paramount. Native justice involves bringing together victims, offenders and their supporters to resolve a problem. This parallels the philosophy and practice of the restorative justice movement (Mirsky, 2004, 1).

Informed by the approach of indigenous peoples to resolve conflicts, RJ has been used in the criminal justice system since the 1970s in several countries across the globe. It has helped to move the focus in criminal justice from retribution of offenders and their punishment to the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with their victims. Restorative practices have been used through all phases of the criminal justice system from pre-arrest to post-sentence, and in a variety of settings including prisons and therapeutic facilities (Daly 2016; Koss 2014). Victims of crime have generally reported greater levels of satisfaction with the restorative justice process than with the traditional retribution justice process (Latimer et al. 2005). Some offenders have also reported greater levels of satisfaction with the restorative justice process than with the traditional retribution and punitive model, with its focus on the adversarial justice process (Latimer et al. 2005).

The apparent effectiveness of RJ in the criminal justice system sparked interest in using it in other domains, including education. In 1994, Australia became the first country to use restorative justice in a school setting to address student disciplinary issues (Varnham 2008). Since then, it has been implemented in schools in the U.S. and around the world to deal with disciplinary as well as other issues involving harm and conflict. Proponents of RJ in educational settings argue for its use given the types of relationships formed in schools where community members see each other every day and even minor offences can turn lethal if not handled appropriately (Morrison et al. 2005). In the restorative justice framework, student misbehavior is treated as a violation of a relationship, either between the offender and a victim or between the offender and the overall school community (Drewey 2004). Table 1

⁴ The Mohawk Nation of Akwesasnea, also known as the Iroquois or Six Nations Confederacy, is the easternmost member of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, comprised of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas.

highlights the differences between the traditional approach and the RJ approach to handling conflicts in school settings.

Table 1: Resolving Conflicts in Schools: Restorative Justice vs. The Traditional Approach

Traditional Approach	Restorative Approach
Schools and rules violated	People and relationships violated
Justice focuses on establishing guilt	Justice identifies needs and obligations
Accountability = punishment	Accountability = understanding impact, repairing harm
Justice directed at offender, victim ignored	Offender, victim and school all have direct roles in justice process
Rules and intent outweigh whether outcome is positive/negative	Offender is responsible for harmful behavior, repairing harm and working toward positive outcomes
No opportunity for remorse or amends	Opportunity given for amend and expression of remorse

Source: Taken from the *San Francisco Unified School District Restorative Practices: Whole-School Implementation Guide*

Cheryl Graves, Director of the Community Justice for Youth Institute (CJUI) in Chicago, Illinois,⁵ characterizes the movement toward RJ depicted in Table 1 as a fundamental shift in how schools can handle conflicts. She says:

What's fundamental about restorative justice (practices) is a shift away from thinking about laws being broken, who broke the law, and how we punish the people who broke the laws. There's a shift to: there was harm caused, or there's disagreement or dispute, there's conflict, and how do we repair the harm, address the conflict, meet the needs, so that relationships and community can be repaired and restored. It's a different orientation. It is a shift (Berkowitz 2012, 8).

Principles of Restorative Justice

Restorative justice has three core principles: (1) focusing on harm and the resulting needs of the victim; (2) recognizing the obligations of the offender to repair the harm; and (3) engaging the community in the RJ process (Zehr 2015). There are thus three primary stakeholders in

⁵ CJUI, an organization that promotes restorative practices in schools, communities, and the juvenile justice system, works in close collaboration with a number of local and national restorative justice trainers. More information available at <https://envisioningjustice.org/resources/community-justice-for-youth-institute/>.

the RJ process: victims, offenders and the community. Looking specifically at the RJ process used in school settings—the focus of this research—we define victims, offenders and the community as follows.

- *Victims* are the targets of an offense and have to be heard, telling what happened from their perspective and in their own words. The RJ process generally takes place in a secure public space so that victims can receive public acknowledgment of the harm inflicted on them, and can relate their perspective to those who caused the harm allowing them to hear the impact of their actions. In school settings, when discussing harm related to issues of race and ethnicity, victims (also referred to as the offended) are students of color who have been subject to disparaging behaviors and ridiculing language on the part of “majority” White students as well as teachers and administrators.
- *Offenders* are the person or persons accused of committing the offense. In school settings when offenses are related to race and ethnicity, offenders include White students who harass, bully or insult students of color, and use racial slurs and abusive slander based on stereotypes. Offenders can also include teachers and administrators who, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate to students of color that they need to be "more like" the western European cultural model of students.
- *Community* can be defined as "... a local neighborhood...a group of people with some common interest or occupation, and more. In restorative justice usage, the word 'community' can point to a 'macro-community,' such as an ethnic group or society in general" (McCold, 2004). A transgression or violation is committed against victims by offenders within a community with its values, beliefs and norms defining the offence that has taken place. When offenders use racist language and/or commit racist acts, it must be determined in what ways the community prohibits, forbids, or distains these acts or sanctions, and condones and tolerates this language and behaviors. In school settings, the community includes students, their families and affinity groups as well as the "institutional sub-community," i.e., the people and institutions that set behavior codes for the schools and rules for student conduct. The sub-community is generally comprised of school superintendents, school boards, teachers and their unions.

In addition to victims, offenders and the community, we argue that those who "facilitate" communication among participants during the RJ process, should also be recognized as critical parties in the process. Although the important role of facilitators has not always been fully recognized, they are essential to the effective functioning of the RJ process by understanding how... “emotion, shame, sadness, [and] intense anger manifest and shape people’s experiences, the way they talk about them and respond to them” (RJC 2018). Facilitators have to track and incorporate corrections or rephrase the experiences being discussed and ensure that victims and offenders propose ways to resolve the harm so that conditions prior to the offense are restored or improved. In school settings where racial and ethnic offences have been committed, facilitators play a vital role in establishing the facts,

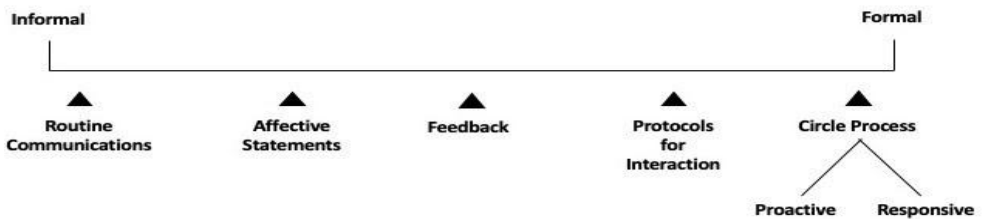
assisting in the formulation of restitutions, and in arriving at the agreed upon resolution and restoration.

Restorative Practices

Restorative justice is built on the basic premise that individuals in a community are connected through a web of relationships. When offenders inflict harm on one or more members of the community, the interconnected web is ruptured. Restorative practices can be used to mend this web. These practices include both formal and informal processes that precede wrongdoings (Wachel 2016). They "...are based on principles that emphasize the importance of positive relationships as central to building community, and involve processes that repair relationships when harm has occurred" (Berkowitz 2012).

As shown in Figure 1, the spectrum of restorative practices can be seen as a formal–informal continuum that ranges from circle processes and protocols for interaction to affective statements and routine communications. Restorative practices are "...most structured and complete" as they become more formal (Wachel 2016, 4), i.e., move to the right along the continuum. Several restorative practices are described below.

Figure 1: Restorative Practices Continuum



Circle Processes

In circle processes, participants sit or stand in a circle that has no hierarchy and enables all participants to see and hear one another. A facilitator, or “circle keeper,” introduces and guides the discussion by using a “talking object” [e.g., a stone, feather, plant, or stick]. All participants take a turn holding the talking object to speak, sharing their thoughts and feelings, or, if they choose, to remain silent. Only the individual holding the talking piece may speak without interruption. The talking piece is used to assure that everyone has a voice and as a way to contain cross-talking within the circle. There are two basic types of circles used in RJ, proactive circles and responsive circles. Proactive circles can be thought of as community building circles in which participants learn to listen to and respect each other; responsive circles are used in response to specific offences.

Protocols for Interaction

Protocols for interaction are a set of rules that regulate inter-personal interactions and establish norms and trust. In an educational setting, these interactions are typically between students, but can also be between students and teachers/administrators. Examples of protocols include:

- facilitators encouraging the use a respectful tone that avoids lecturing;
- offenders asking to identify who has been harmed, what harm was done and what needs to be done to make things right;

- facilitators re-voicing or re-stating what they understand the offended and offenders to have said;
- facilitators eliciting proposals from all parties involved in the RJ process as to how a resolution to the conflict could be achieved and suggesting specific actions needed to repair the harm; and
- facilitators negotiating proposed resolutions by the offenders and the offended by proposing some kind of compromised restitution.

Informal Practices

Informal restorative practices used in school settings include the use of affective statements, e.g. "I statements," to express feelings, and the provision of feedback to those involved in the RJ process in which a distinction is made between the person and the behavior and are specific and concrete (Augustine et al. 2018). "Although a formal restorative process might have dramatic impact, informal practices have a cumulative impact because they are part of everyday life" (Berkowitz 2012).

Studies of the use of RJ in school settings have generally found that both formal and informal restorative justice practices help to narrow racial gaps in attendance and suspensions/expulsions (Augustine et al. 2018; González 2012; Losen et al. 2012; Fronius et al. 2019). It has, however, been more difficult to establish a causal relationship between the use of restorative practices and improved academic achievement among students most vulnerable to school failure (Augustine et al. 2018; Barshay 2019). The limited research that has attempted to explain this relationship has reported inconsistent findings. As noted in a comprehensive review of research on the impact of RJ practices on academic performance in U.S. schools: "Much of this research would not meet the standards...for evidence-based registries in education...The methods employed in many studies make offering any conclusive recommendations a challenge" (Fronius et al. 2019, 33).

Applying Restorative Justice in a Central Oregon School District

The literature on RJ in school settings has generally focused on its use in disciplinary actions in large school districts where students of color predominate.⁶ As stated earlier, our article broadens the research using a case study to look at how restorative practices are being used in a comparatively small school district with a predominantly White student body to change school culture around race and ethnicity.

A case study is a research methodology that has commonly been used in social sciences. [It is] an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context...based on an in-depth investigation of a single individual, group or event. to explore the causes of underlying principles...(Press Academia 2018).

The main limitations of the case study method are that conditions under which the research was conducted cannot be precisely replicated, and the research findings cannot be substantively corroborated or generalized. On the other hand, case studies, such as the one used here, provide a unique opportunity for investigating the application of concepts or

⁶For example, see Davis (2019) Ch 4.

principles in an authentic context that can reveal critical dimensions of a problem, and provide insights to inform more controlled research methodologies.

The Central Oregon School District

The school district in this case study is located in central Oregon, a state in which people of color, particularly Native Americans and African Americans, have been subject to racial discrimination since before the State's entry into the Union in 1859 (Johnson and Williams 2010). Clauses in the State's Constitution, approved in 1857 when Oregon was still a territory, ironically both prohibited slavery and "...prohibited Blacks from being in the state, owning property, and making contracts. Oregon thus became the only free state admitted to the Union with an exclusion clause in its constitution" (Nokes, n.d.). In 2002, almost 150 years after Oregon became a state, a ballot measure proposing the removal of racist provisions and language from the State's Constitution was approved by voters, but almost a third of Oregonians voted to keep the language as it originally existed (Sannes-Pond 2015).

Looking specifically at racism in the central Oregon School District⁷ in this case study, high school students of color⁸ have frequently reported that they have been targets of racial epithets and slurs and of excessive bullying. The results of a "Racial Climate Survey" administered to students participating in the town hall symposiums discussed below corroborate their anecdotal accounts. The questions and student responses to the survey were:

Question 1: Do you feel unsafe at your school because of your race or ethnicity?

- 33% reported that they sometimes or often feel unsafe at school because of their race or ethnicity.

Question 2: Do you feel like you belong at your school?

- 8% replied that they did not at all feel like they belong at their school; 9% felt like they belonged a little;
- 42% said they felt like they belonged at their school either quite a bit (28%) or a lot (14%).

Student responses to question 2 question differed by their race/ethnicity:

- ✓ A majority of Latinx (58%) and Asian (57%) students said that they felt like they belonged either quite a bit or a lot;
- ✓ 50% of White students felt like they belonged at their school either quite a bit or a lot;
- ✓ 14% of Black or mixed race students felt that they belonged at their school quite a bit; 57% said they felt like they belonged only a little or not at all.

⁷ We refer to the central Oregon school district throughout the rest of the paper as the "School District" or as the "District."

⁸ Students of color account for about 10% of all high school students in the District. In 2018-2019, of its 18,400 students, 89% were White, 7% Latinx, 1% Asian, 2% mixed race and less than 1% Black, Native American (the Excellence and Equity Review, 2019).

Question 3: How often have you heard racist remarks used in school by students?

- 87% said that they hear racist remarks either frequently, often or some of the time.

Question 4: When racist remarks are made and a teacher or other school staff person is present, how often does the teacher or staff person intervene or do something about it?

- 74% said that when they hear racist remarks, and a teacher or staff person is present, either never (30.5%) or some of the time (43%) do they say or do something about it.

Question 5: Do you think that your school clearly defines what bullying and harassment based on race or ethnicity are, and everyone understands that these behaviors are not acceptable?

- 68% said that their school either did not have a clear anti-bullying/harassment policy or that students did not know what it was.

Question 6: Everyone knows what will happen to you if you bully or harass another person based on race or ethnicity.

- 60% said that the consequences for engaging in bullying or racial harassment are not known by students.

Survey responses clearly reveal that students of color in the School District see themselves as targets of what John Powell and Stephen Menendian (2017), experts on racism and civil rights, describe as "othering." Powell, Director of the Othering and Belonging Institute⁹ at Berkeley University, and Menendian, Assistant Director and Research Director of the Institute, define othering as:

...a set of dynamics, processes and structures engender[ing] marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities....Dimensions of othering include, but are not limited to, religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone.

Othering can produce a sense of alienation and feelings of rejection by the targets of prejudice, can contribute significantly to students' lack of academic engagement, and can have deleterious impacts on their lives. At the extreme, in the School District in this case study, the parents of a deceased African American student are suing the District on the grounds that their son "...was bullied and racially harassed to the point [where] he killed himself..." (Andrews 2019). Several students at the deceased student's school are also subjects of the lawsuit on the grounds that they called him "...names including racial epithets and committed

⁹ For information about the Othering and Belonging Institute, see <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/>. Note that John Powell does not capitalize the first letters of his first and last names.

physical violence against him" (Andrews 2019). This tragedy not only illustrates the potential harmful impact of othering, but is also consistent with findings by the Division of Violence Prevention of the U.S. National Center for Disease Control (CDC) that "Bullying can result in physical injury, social and emotional distress, self-harm, and even death" (CDC 2018).

Addressing Othering in the Central Oregon School District

After several years of hearing about the experiences of students of color in the School District, members of the Restorative Justice and Equity (RJE) group,¹⁰ a volunteer advocacy and watchdog group in central Oregon, approached school officials to discuss how the ramifications of othering in the high schools were being addressed. Over a three-year period, beginning in 2015, RJE members met frequently with the District's superintendent and his administrative team to express their concerns about othering, and about the slow progress being made by the high schools in closing the racial academic achievement gap. Informed by RJ practices being implemented successfully in several Portland, Oregon, high schools, RJE pushed to have a RJ position created at the School District level and a part-time RJ "point person" appointed at each of the District's seven high schools. Although supportive of the concept of restorative justice, District officials, and the Board of Education, turned down RJE's requests, arguing that top-down administratively imposed changes do not generally lead to sustained changes in pedagogical practices. The officials also opined that the District was already implementing the kinds of changes being requested by RJE through its encouragement of teachers to use Positive Behavior Interventions Support¹¹ and Trauma Informed Educational Practices.¹²

Seeking alternative ways to address othering in the schools, RJE decided to look into organizing a "Town Hall Symposium on Race" where students of color would be able to describe their experiences with othering, and gain a sense of "belonging" or connection to their school community. RJE's decision to hold the Town Hall was based on what group members had learned about similar events held in the Eugene School District in response to the Oregon Education Association's (OEA teacher's union) call for educators "... to bring together students of color, to listen to their voices..." (Bessko 2016).

Holding a town hall that would focus on changing school culture in the District required that RJE engage in equitable collaborations with many agents of power and decision-making in the "institutional sub-community" described earlier. This sub-community included the School District's teachers' union, its administrative leadership team and members of the District's elected School Board. Engaging all of these groups with different professional roles and experiences, along with students in the District, was critical for "creating positive and equitable relationships of trust and respect" (McCulloch et al. 2016), both vitally necessary for achieving restorative justice success in effecting systemic change.

Engaging the Institutional Sub-community

Once RJE decided that it was interested in holding a Town Hall Symposium on Race, members of the group contacted the president of the District's teachers' union to seek formal endorsement of the symposium. Subsequently, the president and vice president of the Union,

¹⁰ For information about RJE, see www.restorativejusticeequitygroup.squarespace.com.

¹¹ Positive Behavior Interventions Support (PBIS) "... is an evidence-based three-tiered framework for improving and integrating all of the data, systems, and practices affecting student outcomes..." (Center on PBIS 2019).

¹² "Being trauma-informed in schools means being informed about and sensitive to trauma, and providing a safe, stable, and understanding environment for students and staff." (Education Law Center n.d.).

along with several RJE members, attended a town hall meeting in the Eugene School District where they observed more than 100 students from different racial and ethnic groups participating in their 6th town hall. Based on its observations in Eugene, and a presentation by a central Oregon School District teacher familiar with the town hall format, the union agreed to give its support to the RJE town hall, and provided a \$1,500 grant to fund what would be the first of three town halls on race.

The second component of the institutional sub-community that RJE engaged was the School District's leadership team, comprised of the superintendent and his top administrators. Although the team had not been receptive to RJE's request for the creation of new RJ positions in the high schools, it was committed to pursuing equity for its students and supportive of holding town halls on race. The leadership team demonstrated this support in several ways including:

- enabling students to participate in the RJE town halls by permitting them to be absent from classes for an entire day;
- providing bus transportation for students to attend the town halls;
- helping to pay for release time for teachers attending the symposia; and
- directing the principals of each of the District's high schools to support the town halls and related follow-up meetings of multicultural and diversity club activities at their schools.

After attending the first Town Hall and meetings of diversity clubs at their schools, the principals would commit to providing financial support for club activities from their own operating budgets.

The School District's leadership team also demonstrated its commitment to equity by establishing an "Equity Cadre" charged with defining the District's equity policies. The Cadre, in partnership with the District's Board of Education and Better Together, a community advocacy organization, conducted a large-scale "Excellence and Equity Review" in the District.¹³ As part of the Review, 36 focus groups were held with students and parents; principals at all 33 District schools led listening sessions for staff; and the District's teacher's union conducted interviews with its members. In addition, more than 2,000 family members living in the District participated in a survey in which they described their experiences with the schools and students' sense of belonging (or the lack, thereof). Student academic performance data were also examined by the Cadre. Low-income families, as well as members of Latinx, African American and First Nations communities, were over-represented in the review to ensure that their voices were heard.

A third component of the institutional sub-community that RJE engaged was the District's seven-person elected School Board. In collaboration with other community groups, RJE members had made presentations at several School Board meetings, advocating for: (1) actions to reduce school bullying and students' feelings of exclusion; (2) the need for the District to hire more teachers of color and to provide a supportive environment for them in a predominantly White cultural climate; (3) the support of the Board for the inclusion of a multicultural curriculum; and (4) the need to provide teachers with materials and professional development opportunities for using culturally responsive practices.

Prior to the first Town Hall in 2018, the School Board had not taken any steps to address these issues. Since then, through the collective effort of RJE and other community organizations, four new members committed to an "equity agenda" have been elected to the

Board. Their commitment is illustrated in a letter to a local newspaper written by Melissa Dholakia, one of the newly elected Board members, about the Excellence and Equity Review referenced above. She wrote: "Four priorities emerged from my review—a focus on relationships, belonging, teaching, and cultural awareness and sensitivity" (2019). Dholakia's letter voices the mission of RJE's Town Hall initiative.

First Town Hall Symposium

The first Town Hall Symposium, "Let's Talk about Race," was held in October 2018, sponsored by RJE in partnership with the District's teacher's union; Latinx, Native American, and Afro-Centric multicultural clubs of Central Oregon Community College (COCC); and several community organizations. It was decided to use a restorative justice approach as the framework for the symposium. However, reflecting that "...restorative justice is not a cut-and-dried system with prescribed steps to follow in every situation" (Gonzalez 2018), symposium planners made the decision to use a variant of the traditional RJ process. There had been no specific incident in the District that would have occasioned the use of the traditional RJ process in which offenders are identified and brought into the process to hear what the offended experienced. Instead, it was decided that the focus would be on the offended, i.e., students of color who were the targets of racial and ethnic bigotry. This decision was also informed by the awareness of the Town Hall planners that White students often "take over" conversations without intentionally meaning to do so (Diangelo 2018), and the planners wanted to discourage this from happening.

A total of 110 people attended the first Town Hall, 67 of whom were high school students of color. Other participants included 12 students of color from Central Oregon Community College's (COCC) Ethnic Associated Students; seven District teachers who had worked as chaperones and advisors with students in high school multicultural and diversity clubs; 10 local leaders of color who served as discussion group facilitators; and eight RJE members. Other participants included six representatives of the District's institutional sub-community; representatives of the District's Equity Cadre and of central Oregon community organizations. A local mental health therapist of color was available to provide emotional support for students who might have been upset by the process of reliving traumatic experiences.

Local leaders of color facilitated three, 45-minute, RJ "circle table" discussion groups with seven students in each group. The students were randomly assigned to tables to avoid having friends clustering together. Students stayed with the same group for all three circle table discussions. In the first round of discussions, students responded to two prompts:

- What is your name, where do you go to school, and how comfortable are you talking about race?
- Why?

In the second round, the prompts were:

- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like you were being treated unfairly because of your race, ethnicity, or culture?
- What impact did it have on you?

In the third round, the prompts were:

- What do you want to see happen as a result of this event?
- Share ideas in small group and provide written feedback.

In addition to the circle table discussions, students at the Town Hall participated in a “Chalk Talk” exercise in which they moved around the room writing their thoughts on chalkboards about several terms associated with racial and ethnic discrimination. Box 1 shows comments made by students to some of the terms. Each group reported a summary of the chalk talk comments to all Town Hall attendees. Students also viewed two videos on racism, one put together by students at Portland’s Grant High School and the second about racism at a central Oregon high school.

Box 1: Examples of Chalk Talk Responses to Terms of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

Race

“A social construct created to divide the people of the world”

“No such thing as race; it was made to classify people.”

Bias

“Not wanting to view things from another perspective.”

“Coming into a situation with a mindset for and against something.”

Stereotype

“Usually false statements against a certain group.”

“Hateful words, something someone expects of someone of color/religion.”

Racism/Racist

Not being treated equally.”

“Created mainly by whites to oppress other races.”

“Downgrading someone for who they are.”

Prejudice+Action+Discrimination

“Someone making you feel worthless.”

“Unfair. Can’t do certain things because of skin color.”

“Occurs as much with staff as it does with students.”

Second Town Hall Symposium

The District's second Town Hall Symposium on Race was held in April 2019, six months after the first Town Hall. Prior to the second Town Hall, a Student Advisory Council (SAC) was established, comprised of two-three elected student representatives from each of the District's four largest high schools. Creating the SAC was important for empowering students to share information on what multicultural clubs were doing at each of their high schools, and to participate in the decision-making for designing the upcoming Town Hall. SAC members provided input and guidance for RJE's discussions around issues such as how to support students of color and/or students from low-income homes who face critical challenges including transportation, medical care and substance abuse at home. All of these issues impact students' ability to fully engage academically and socially. The exercise of student leadership on the part of SAC was an intentional outcome of the town halls.

A total of 120 individuals participated in the second town hall, including 68 students of color and nine White students who were invited at the request of the SAC and of students who had attended the first Town Hall. Also participating in the Town Hall were six Central Oregon Community College (COCC) students; 21 facilitators and session leaders (all but two of whom were people of color); and 17 adults from the institutional sub-committee, including

four principals (three high school and one middle school) and two assistant superintendents. Of note, two facilitator preparation workshops were held prior to the second Town Hall to increase facilitators' effectiveness in promoting student participation. Donations from individuals and local charitable groups were used to pay a token stipend to the community facilitators.

One goal carried over from the first Town Hall was to provide a safe, secure space where students of color could share their experiences as targets of prejudice, and could build support networks among themselves. A second goal was to provide more content instruction and skill building around understanding, interrupting, and confronting racism to help students gain leadership skills and a sense of self-efficacy that they could use to effect changes to the culture at their schools. The format of the second Town Hall Symposium was similar to the first with some new elements added. These included power point presentations by students from each of the District's high schools about what was being done through their multicultural/diversity clubs, and a panel discussion by the COCC Latinx, Afro-centric and Native American students about their experiences with racism in high school and what they found difficult in their transition to college.

Small RJ circle tables were used again for discussions of issues around race and ethnicity, facilitated by local leaders of color, with student groups of nine at each table. There were two 45-minute discussion sessions with two prompts:

- Describe the first time you noticed being treated differently because of your race or ethnicity; and
- Discuss what changes are needed at your school to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment that would respect your culture and racial or ethnic identity.

There were seven 30-minute workshop sessions held, at the request of, and designed with, students to provide more content knowledge and skills. The topics of the sessions are shown in Box 2. Each workshop was offered twice during the day so that all students would be able to attend their top two choices. Adults at the Town Hall, who were not acting as facilitators, were not permitted to participate in the small RJ circle table discussions. They were, however, permitted to observe all workshops with the exception of the "Sharing Your Story" workshop. The Town Hall closed with a large student RJ circle, with adults forming a supportive outer circle.

Box 2: Second Town Hall Workshop Topics

Understanding Racism and Tools to Talk about Racism - origins of racism and how it is perpetuated;

Interrupting Racism and Tools for Confronting racism - strategies and techniques on how to respond, identify and discuss the progression of racism;

Activism 101 - strategies/activities to consider as 'next steps' to combat racism, bigotry and all forms of hatred in high school communities;

Cultivating Diverse Leadership - ways for students to organize, connect with administration and get the support needed to improve their school community;

Share Your Story in an RJ Circle - for students who want to delve more deeply into their own experiences;

Waking up White - mandatory workshop for White students to explore where they fit into the story of race and how they can become part of the solution as their schools

Empowering Student Voices - how students can express themselves and use their voices

Third Town Hall Symposium

The third Town Hall Symposium on Race was held in February 28, 2020. Participants included 116 students from five local high schools and the COCC, along with 41 adult facilitators, presenters, and helpers. At the request of students who had participated in the first two Town Halls, White students were invited to participate, but were limited, by the Student Advisory Council, to representing no more than 20% of participants from each high school.

The institutional sub-community representatives at the Town Hall included two School District assistant superintendents, four high school principals, a middle school principal, and four School Board members. All of the sub-community representatives were supportive of an increased focus on "belonging rather than othering," and the implementation of restorative justice and equity practices. Of note, prior to the third Town Hall, two workshops for facilitators (each lasting two hours) were held to ensure their use of restorative practices during table discussions and break-out sessions. The stipends for facilitators and workshop leaders were paid for with a grant from the Oregon Community Foundation.

The third Town Hall followed the same format as the second. Students participated in two RJ small circle table discussions and were given two prompts:

- Think back to the first time you were aware of your race and/or ethnicity and share what you remember about your experience, thoughts and feelings.
- How do you feel about your racial/ethnic identity right now? What would be helpful to explore your identity further?

There were 14 workshop sessions offered that were designed around culturally responsive curriculum not available in regular school offerings, with students having the choice of attending two. Topics of the workshops are shown in Box 3. Of note, the *Practice Allyship* workshop replaced *Waking Up White*, a workshop topic from the second Town Hall that many White students had found unsettling and disturbing. One of the new agenda items in the third Town Hall, and a highlight for the students, was the appearance of local spoken word artist

and the first Central Oregon Creative Laureate, MOSley Wotta, aka Jason Graham.¹³ He presented an opening icebreaker with all of the students entitled “Giving Voice to Our Intentions,” that endorsed the focus on students having their voices heard. He later conducted a whole group workshop on vulnerability entitled “What We Risk.”

Box 3: Third Town Hall Workshop Topics

Activism 101 - interactive workshop to explore types and levels of activism;

Cultivating Diverse Leadership - ways to organize, and get the support needed to improve school communities;

Interrupting Racism - strategies on how to identify and respond to the continuous progression of racism;

Empowering Student Voices - how students can express themselves and use their voices;

Practicing "Allyship" - learning how to support without speaking over those being helped, and learning best practices when taking action;

Sharing Your Story - sharing personal/family stories in a supportive circle using restorative justice principles to facilitate exchange;

Understanding Racism - history, facts and definitions of racism. Individual experiences and ways to dismantle everyday racism;

Celebrating Indigenous Culture and History - learning about the impact of colonization of Indigenous peoples and exploring traditional medicines of Indigenous peoples;

Celebration of African American Achievements - contributions of African Americans to the history of the US;

History of Racism in Oregon - laws and events throughout Oregon's history and their impacts on modern day society;

Latinx Peoples in the Pacific NW - history of the Latinx people on the west coast and their contributions to its way of life;

Privilege, Oppression, and Intersectionality - consideration of how different aspects of individual identities provide unearned advantages and disadvantages, and learning to recognize the privilege and power granted based on these identities.

Town Hall Outcomes

A primary goal of the three Town Halls was to provide a safe space where students of color could share their experiences with racial and ethnic prejudice, and where they could acquire skills to deal with this prejudice. The goal was met as evidenced by responses to a survey conducted of participating students at the end of the third Town Hall:

¹³ For samples of spoken word artist and the first Central Oregon Creative Laureate, MOSley Wotta, aka Jason Graham, go to: Moving To Higher Ground <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIPIAWPkifQ> ; and What Comes After - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWyvRPCusGQ>.

- 98% said they felt that the Town Hall environment was a safe place where they could express themselves;
- 87% said that their Town Hall experience would help them to deal with prejudice when they were personally affected; and
- 96% reported that their Town Hall experience would help them to deal with racism when it affects others.

A second goal of the Town Halls was to provide instruction and skill-building around understanding, interrupting, and confronting racial and ethnic prejudice. The intention was that students would develop leadership skills and gain the confidence to address prejudice and effect changes in the culture of their schools. This goal, too, was met as evidenced by student responses to survey questions related to whether the Town Halls helped them deal with racial and ethnic prejudice:

- 76% said that the Town Halls had given them ideas about how to respond to racial and ethnic harassment or bullying; and
- 98% said that the Town Halls had given them ways to get help when they confronted racial and ethnic prejudice on the part of teachers or school officials.

Student Initiatives

After participating in the Town Halls, students undertook several initiatives designed to bring about changes in the culture of their schools around race and ethnicity. In the District's four largest high schools, students designed projects to raise awareness of racist behaviors and practices. These projects included showing student-generated videos on racism, conducting small group discussions on their personal experiences with racism, and holding large group presentations on microaggressions.

Students from one high school requested permission from their principal to allow them to hold a panel discussion at a teacher/staff meeting where they would be able to share their experiences as targets of racist behaviors by other students and some teachers. In another high school, students who had participated in the Town Halls invited members of their Diversity and Equity Club, as well as members of multicultural clubs from three other high schools, to present a workshop for teachers and library staff at the host school. The presentations ended with students proposing changes that needed to be made to improve school culture to make it more welcoming and inclusive for all students. The principal committed to a \$2,000 budget for the Diversity and Equity Club for the upcoming year to fund activities including a program to be presented to teachers at the District's middle schools as well as a series of presentations on African American history to be presented to middle school students.

Students from a third high school, who had already held two of their own town halls prior to the District's second Town Hall and another one prior to the District's third Town Hall, planned to hold additional town halls in their school during lunch hours and two daily open periods. These times were intentionally chosen to ensure that students who had after school commitments such as jobs, or stayed after school for sports, clubs and other activities, or had no way to get home other than by school provided transportation, would be able to participate in the school town halls.

All of these student initiatives have led to the increased engagement of students of color in their schools. Students have also had their voices heard in the larger central Oregon

community through TV, newspaper and radio interviews in which they discussed their experiences as targets of othering. For example, several students were interviewed by a local radio station¹⁴ to discuss their Town Hall experiences and the changes that they would like to see made in the schools to provide a more welcoming environment.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

The pervasive educational achievement gap in the U.S. between students of color and White students is a critical social justice issue. Establishing a positive school culture that fosters caring, trusting relationships is a way to narrow the gap. Our article describes the efforts undertaken in a central Oregon School District to create a more positive school culture for students of color in the District's high schools as an important first step on the road to equity in education. Specifically, the article describes how restorative practices are being used in the School District to provide high school students of color with a more positive sense of self, and with the tools they need to change their school culture around race and ethnicity.

It was not expected, however, that three town halls, held over an 18-month period, would immediately result in a narrowing of the racial gap in suspensions, expulsions, rates of attendance and tardiness, or in reducing the racial academic achievement gap. However, the Town Hall organizers, i.e., the Restorative Justice & Equity Group, see them as a place to use restorative practices to provide students of color with a safe environment in which they can gain an understanding of how to provide the leadership to make their schools more welcoming and to reduce their sense of being treated as "others." The following comments from students illustrate their positive reactions to the Town Halls:

“This event was extremely helpful. I believe because students of color are already isolated at school and around others, being around people who share the same problems is helpful.”

“This event made me feel that I’m not alone and that there are other people that have the same problems with racism/culture.”

“I want to see people have a better understanding of our problems.”

Based on the positive responses of students and other stakeholders to the outcomes of the town halls, it is the intent of RJE, along with other community-based groups, to continue holding these events, and to continue using restorative practices to give students the tools to create systemic change in their schools around race and ethnicity. The use of restorative practices over time can provide much needed evidence-based data on the causal relationship between these practices and improved academic achievement among students of color. The town halls also provide a rich source for research on how collaborative governance, that seeks to engage multiple stakeholders in governance and decision-making processes, can be used to promote racial equity in education.

In closing, we suggest that other communities consider using restorative practices to improve school culture for students around socio-economic class, religion, gender, race and

¹⁴ For KPOV Podcast go to <https://kprov.org/radical-songbook-podcast/2018/12/18/student-town-hall-on-race>.

ethnicity. We especially extend this suggestion to communities with little or no racial and ethnic diversity. Students attending schools in these communities will have to interact in a nation and world that are becoming increasingly diverse, and will have to understand the struggles and successes of people whose lives may be vastly different from theirs. We further suggest that if a community decides to use restorative practices, it should shape their implementation to meet its specific situation and its specific needs. The decision by the sponsors of the town halls in the central Oregon School District to focus restorative practices on students of color—the targets of racial and ethnic prejudice—illustrates such a decision, as well as the adaptability of these practices.

Applying RJ principles in other educational settings will necessitate adapting them to the specifics of each school community. This will require the identification of the institutional agents that hold the decision-making powers and engaging them in collaborative partnerships in the design of RJ initiatives. It will also require that all participants, especially students, recognize the importance of engaging collaborative partnerships to help bring about "...community and systems changes that modify local conditions" (Community Tool Box n.d.). And, most of all, it will require that all those in the process realize that it takes time to effect major systemic change.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the work described in this article. We are grateful to Beth Hoover, Co-Chair of the Restorative Justice & Equity Group, who provided the first drafts of reports for the three Town Halls we describe in the article and to Rebecca Easton, JoAnn Lawrence, Oscar Gonzales, Lauralei Garrity, Gordon Price Marcus Legrand, and Naomi Crummett. Thanks also go to the Superintendent of the Bend La Pine School District and to the central Oregon organizations Better Together, Embrace Bend, the Latino Community Association, and the Bend Education Association.

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