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Restorative Justice Initiatives in Marin County: Mitigating the Impacts of the School-to-Prison Pipeline on Youth

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**Restorative Justice Initiatives in Marin County: Mitigating the Impacts
of the School-to-Prison Pipeline on Youth**

by

Gina Dudley

A Senior Thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of
California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Social Justice

Dominican University of California

San Rafael

2024

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Abstract

My senior thesis project delves into Restorative Justice's role in addressing the school-to-prison pipeline in Marin County. Restorative Justice prioritizes repairing the harm caused by crime to individuals, relationships, and communities, advocating for offenders to take responsibility and make amends rather than solely facing punishment (Restorative Justice Exchange, 2022). My capstone aims to pinpoint factors driving student exclusion from schools and subsequent entanglement in the legal system while highlighting how restorative approaches can prevent such outcomes. Additionally, it discusses the benefits of removing police officers from schools and reducing reliance on law enforcement within educational settings. My research will use a community-engaged methodology; I want to listen to and understand the community stakeholder perspectives through interviews and engagement. Their perspectives are crucial because of their direct involvement in the Restorative Justice practices currently happening in Marin County.

Introduction

I started my community engagement journey as a service-learning student at the Dominican University of California in the Fall of 2021. My first encounter working with youth was as a teacher's assistant at Marin Community School, an alternative middle/ high school in Marin County that serves almost entirely minority students. In the spring of 2022, I began tutoring at Next Generation Scholars, an organization that helped first-generation students equip themselves with the skillset to achieve higher education. Being immersed in such educational environments for so long and hearing first-hand experiences of students within schools in Marin County made it clear that systematic change is necessary. Several different students described their experiences in public school as unfair and racist. For instance, one student described how she had been harassed for months, and when she spoke up for herself, she was punished. Additionally, countless students prefer being at the alternative school because they feel far more valued as individuals.

After multiple years of serving in the schools, I knew I wanted to spend more time in the legal field. This inspired me to intern in the Marin County Public Defender's office. My internship had me directly corresponding with clients and partaking in jail/ prison visits as I wanted to dive deeper into youth legal experiences. I split my time between the PD Office and Youth Transforming Justice (a community-based organization). Their mission is to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline through the transformation of punitive school discipline systems into trauma-informed and peer-driven solutions (YTJ, 2024). I have become passionate about restorative practices and their benefits for youth in school and the legal system. Oftentimes, conflict and harsh punishments stem from a lack of quality communication. Through

conversations with community stakeholders, it is clear how imperative it is that our systems begin uplifting everyone within our community.

My experience in educational and legal environments has inspired my capstone research into the school-to-prison pipeline and Restorative Justice's role in mitigating it. Restorative Justice prioritizes repairing the harm caused by crime to individuals, relationships, and communities, advocating for offenders to take responsibility and make amends rather than solely facing punishment (Restorative Justice Exchange, 2022). My capstone aims to pinpoint factors driving student exclusion from schools and subsequent entanglement in the legal system while highlighting how restorative approaches can prevent such outcomes. I dive into how these same practices can allow students to return to school and not the legal system. Additionally, I will explain the benefits of removing Student Resource officers inside schools and replacing their role with a highly trained individual, which is crucial for the success of all students.

Literature Review

The school-to-prison pipeline occurs as marginalized communities face adversities inside educational settings and continue to face them should they enter the criminal justice system. It is no secret when looking at the said pipeline that marginalized students are more likely to face difficulties in relation to it. It is essential to understand two core categories in relation to the School-to-Prison Pipeline: demographic and other statistical data and conversational partners within the context of communities impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline. Note that the literature review is divided into these two categories for a deeper understanding. One must visualize adversities within communities by understanding data supported by context. This framework makes it easier to envision certain impacts/ scenarios playing out. As researchers

create visualizations, locating conversational partners or people/ organizations already involved in the community is critical to finding the same answers.

Data: Demographics and Statistics

Marin County is California's most racially disparate county (Race Counts, 2023). In Marin classrooms, Latinx students make up 27.1% of the population yet account for 25.7% of referrals to law enforcement and 26.4% of school-related arrests (CRDC, 2021). This means that the entire Latinx student population is impacted. The Director of Programs for Youth Transforming Justice refers to the system as racist and poverty-driven based on his experience on The Juvenile Justice Commission. He says, “We're looking at some of the data in Marin around disproportionate minority suspensions and expulsions, and they're running the same trend as they are nationally. Kids of color get pushed out of school at a much higher rate than their White classmates” (Personal communication, Feb. 14, 2024). For instance, suspensions remain at 3.5 times the rate of white kids for the same actions, and once they leave the educational environment, it becomes vastly harder to come back and be successful. An executive administrator at Canal Alliance supports this sentiment: “Kids of color go through the educational system in Marin County, and only three out of ten are finishing high school and continuing education” (Personal communication, Feb. 12, 2024). Knowing this information, it is clear that to break down the school-to-prison pipeline, we must also acknowledge not all students are punished at the same rate.

Conversational Partners: Current Theoretical Discourse on School-to-Prison Pipelines

The ACLU characterizes the school-to-prison pipeline as a path to incarceration because it only goes one way. Once youth find themselves involved with juvenile justice, it is highly unlikely they will be able to return to their normal educational plan. Former Marin County Restorative Justice program director emphasizes, “Once a youth is in contact with law enforcement, it is very difficult to get out of that system. And so once there's a problem... if you are not addressing its root causes and constantly punishing the behavior, it doesn't change” (Personal Communication, Feb. 9, 2024). Understanding why certain behaviors happen rather than repeat punishment is important.

There are three stops on the aforementioned path to incarceration: failing public schools, policing school hallways, and juvenile detention (ACLU, 2023). Knowing these stops is important when establishing how to prevent the pipeline from continuing and how youth can be protected from that final stop. If the court does not support youth before they reach juvenile detention and subsequently hands out inequitable punishments, there is no way for youth to find their way back to regular school.

Two key foundational theories shape the lens in which I see the prison pathway and proposed solutions that benefit impacted youth caught within it. The first theory is Radical Inclusion, a practice that, when implemented, creates a community in which there are no exclusionary barriers on any individual's path to success. There are seven steps to implementing this practice: identify the exclusion, listen to understand/ learn, define your role, build a coalition, pursue advocacy/ action, adapt to a new normal, and see beyond inclusion (Sengeh,

2023). These steps are crucial when changing a school atmosphere and fostering a better environment; change requires adaptation.

Another foundational theory guiding my lens is Guided Autonomy. Guided Autonomy supports Radical Inclusion by proposing that everyone can grow and fight their battles when equipped with the proper knowledge sets. It allows individuals to know what they can do and how to get there, mentoring them in a positive direction and adding specifics from guided autonomy sources. This demonstrates how pivotal educator roles are within a student's life and how beneficial they can be to students' success.

Implementing David Sengeh's steps and Guided Autonomy cultivate a culture shift and are not burdens that should be taken on by just one or two individuals within a school. Students become more empowered and autonomous when they become standard practice for the entire institution. The educators are there to aid them in finding the tools they need to succeed, but ultimately, the student's drive and motivation will determine their trajectory. The key is ensuring all students have the same opportunities and tools to succeed.

Identifying a path forward has already been explored with the shift in leadership style in the San Francisco Public Defender's office. Mano Raju goes into depth about how he shifted the atmosphere to build community within the office and repair the communities in which their clients reside. For instance, he delegated leadership in each area instead of managing every office sector alone. This allowed for attention to be focused and for decision-makers to spend more time working within the environments they are serving. Multiple people are assigned to uphold the responsibilities of a former one-person job. By taking these steps, the legal system becomes more responsive to the issues burdening those within it. Raju's approach demonstrates collaborative leadership developed and maintained by individuals passionate about public service

rather than laying all leadership responsibilities on one person. When individuals are tasked with specific goals within an organization, they can perform meaningful solutions that may not have come about had they been responsible for overseeing every decision (Raju, 2022).

Interestingly, in Ohio, nearly 80% of the time youth are forced to represent themselves in court after waiving their right to an attorney (at the advice of legal professionals) (ACLU, 2006). These are individuals seen as not mature enough to buy alcohol or vote, yet they are seen as mature enough to represent themselves in the court of law. Injustices like this are a common occurrence at that final stop on the school-to-prison pipeline. The concept of youth representing themselves in Ohio becomes scarier once the bias regarding guilt, sentencing, and judicial leniency becomes more obvious (Shaver, 2023). It is the responsibility of individuals in positions of power to ensure that these circumstances are not occurring within their communities and work towards a just future.

It is especially important for Marin County to create a more equitable system for juveniles encountering the system, as it holds one of the highest segregation rates in the state. This data is supported by a tool known as the Divergence Index. This is a decomposable measure of segregation, which measures the difference between the overall proportion of a racial group in a region and the proportion of each racial group in a local area within that region. Using this index, Stephen Menendian and Samir Gambhir found that San Rafael maintains moderate to high segregation and is the fifth most segregated city in the Bay Area.

Positionality

Growing up in Boise, Idaho, and lacking exposure to cultural responsiveness has given me a unique perspective on why working to develop that skill and academic motivation is

essential within public schools. I have grown up both Jewish and female, giving me the knowledge to understand what it is like to have two intersecting subordinate identities. However, since I am White, I also know what it is like to blend in with the dominant identity.

Before I began to examine the meaning of justice in college, I believed it revolved around people having access to their needs, including a safe community. Although my family was comfortably middle-class, I was zoned into a school that was predominantly lower/middle-class and minority students. I had a front-row seat to the inequitable punishments and overall treatment my classmates would get in the classroom, along with hearing about the fear of police and the criminal justice system.

I was bullied for my religion in seventh grade; being the only Jewish student at the school had put me in a vulnerable position. In early fall, a classmate wrote, “Gina Dudley is a dumb jew” on the bathroom wall. I found out because several classmates had taken a photo and posted it on their social media. The feeling I continued to experience after this incident, I now know, was a result of being “Othered.” This feeling was reconciled through leaning on family and finding a stable community to uplift me. The community included members of my synagogue congregation, close friends, family, and a few trusted teachers. To obtain justice for what happened, I filed a report with the school and confided with the in-school police officer. No attempt at a resolution came from this. Classmates began to exclude, harass, and make fun of me for my religious beliefs, thinking it was okay because no one had been held accountable for the first action.

Due to my experience with classmates, school, and exclusion, I can begin to understand how frustrating and isolating it can be to fight against collectives and institutional structures not built to support the whole of the surrounding community. Being surrounded by people who work

against your progress in educational and work-level settings can be very limiting. In his book *Radical Inclusion: 7 Steps to Creating a More Just Society*, David Sengeh describes exclusion as "almost always about power and the need to retain it."

David Sengeh's work accurately illustrates power dynamics, how they can be limiting, and how they are combated by centering the voices of the community. He specifically touched on Marshall Ganz's social change theory, Public Narrative. This is rooted in three things: "... the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now." For change to happen and be effective, individuals must be able to explain who they are, what they are doing, and why.

A common procedure the school officer performed was random locker and backpack checks. Students would be randomly selected to have either checked by him and a K-9 for anything that could be dangerous or illegal; this occasionally involved being removed from class while your item was being checked. From my experience, I have never witnessed a White student have either space checked, let alone being pulled from class for the inspection. Many students receiving these inspections were often suspended, expelled, or sent to alternative schools.

Witnessing many Latinx students in my junior high be impacted by this inspired my research into marginalized communities' adversities inside educational settings and the inequities often faced when they enter the criminal justice system. I am also moved by my engagement with youths through participating in the Peer Solutions program of Youth Transforming Justice (YTJ). This alternative punishment measure can be utilized by either schools or the legal system. Oftentimes, the cases referred to consist of shoplifting, battery, and other low- and mid-level offenses. The goal of YTJ is "to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline is to transform traditional, punitive school discipline and juvenile justice systems into restorative, trauma-informed, and

peer-driven solutions where youth can reflect and learn from mistakes, repair damage, relationships harmed, and move forward successfully.” Youths have ninety days to complete a restorative plan where they are required to support fellow peers in their initial hearings in the program, complete community service hours, and attend drug/ alcohol training. They prioritize the well-being of youth coming through their program and acknowledge their potential to improve from their mistakes.

My involvement in YTJ allowed me to understand the connection between school and prison and how restorative practices can mitigate negative outcomes. Disrupting the pipeline starts at the initial hearing, during which students are encouraged to tell their stories and are listened to with empathy and compassion. This led me to design my research with the Humanization and Appreciative Inquiry framework at the center, amplifying the voices of community members.

Methodology

Having three years of experience in the Marin juvenile education and justice systems, I could see the path I wanted to take in my research. I had the opportunity to work closely with many of the stakeholders I interviewed and within the organizations I highlighted. Notably, I use pseudonyms for all the stakeholders, per the requirement of the Institutional Review Board at Dominican University of California. I believe the findings produced from this research have shined a positive light on the organizations operating with Marin County and humanize restorative practices within our community. For those reasons, I want to ensure no confusion about which organizations are doing the work.

Interviews with Community Stakeholders

The participants in my interviews consisted of community stakeholders such as outreach leaders from Canal Alliance and Youth Transforming Justice, teachers, and deputy public defenders. Participants were chosen based on their position within the youth education and youth justice communities, and participation was entirely voluntary. While recruiting, individuals were contacted through email with in-person follow-up. They received an email outlining the project and expectations for participation and were then given the option to respond to schedule an interview or not participate.

After a one-hour interview, conversations were transcribed and coded into categories, including key terms, background, and personal experiences. When concluding, these codings were kept in the same document and analyzed for similarities and differences.

Procedure

The stakeholders I interviewed were carefully selected based on the community knowledge and connections I have accumulated in the past few years of community engagement in Marin County. These stakeholders are long-time educators, legal professionals, community advocates, and government officials who have worked closely with youth and programs to address the issue of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. I had one 30-minute to 1-hour interview session with each stakeholder over Zoom or in person. Before the interview, each interviewee signed a consent form and received open-ended and framing questions.

At the interview, each participant was asked a variation of the open-ended questions while being encouraged to share personal experiences. These questions consisted of the following:

1. Are you familiar with the school-to-prison pipeline?
2. What is your understanding of attempts to address the school-to-prison pipeline within Marin County?
3. Are you familiar with the concept of restorative justice?
4. How does the school-to-prison pipeline impact the individuals within the community you serve?
5. In what ways could restorative practices be helpful or beneficial within your community or the systems you work with?
6. Do you have an understanding of how justice is being framed within the community you serve or are part of?
7. What vision do you have moving forward with a restorative justice model?. These questions were simply a baseline, as each interview progressed, clarifying and specific questions were asked, the participants always retained the right not to participate.

After all interviews, I reviewed, coded, and analyzed all data produced within them. I drew conclusions from the similarities and differences present, asking clarifying questions when necessary.

My research is grounded in using a community-engaged methodology by drawing off of Appreciative Inquiry and humanizing research (Organized Engagement, 2024). This involves centering community voices and gaining knowledge through experience and conversation. Through interviews and engagement, I want to listen to and understand the perspectives of community stakeholders, including Public Defenders, teachers, CEOs of community organizations, and other people directly immersed in some aspect of the School-to-Prison

Pipeline. I can ask stakeholders questions and dialogue with them to have genuine conversations by performing interviews. With Appreciative Inquiry, our interviews can uncover existing strengths, advantages, or opportunities within the community (Organizing Engagement, 2024). The perspectives of these individuals are crucial because they are directly involved in the Restorative Justice practices currently happening in Marin County.

Centering the community is necessary when researching their lived experiences and the solutions that would improve their circumstances, as it is their life and their story being impacted. Moreover, it enhances information learned as the stakeholders and community problems become humanized. This humanization allows readers and fellow researchers to connect with the information they share and stay motivated to find solutions, making it necessary to implement in my interview process.

Findings

I will present five key findings: Lack Of Cultural Competence and Responsiveness, Restorative Practice In Schools, School Resource Officers, Restorative Practice in Law, and Restoring Communities – Community Building Circles. Each finding is separated by subheadings, which include interpretation/ analysis and path forward sections. The interpretation/analysis sections will connect with information previously presented in the literature review, while the next section will provide my viewpoint on an effective path forward. After the final section, I will provide an overall conclusion of my findings.

Finding 1: Lack Of Cultural Competence And Responsiveness

A standard agreement about the lack of cultural competence and responsiveness was present among every community stakeholder I spoke to. Alex is currently the educational supervisor at Canal Alliance after working as an intern in their youth and adult education programs. She has been immersed in the Canal Alliance since 2018 and was given more responsibility when she received her MBA in 2021. As explained by Alex, being culturally competent means being aware of cultural differences versus being culturally responsive and knowing how to embrace different cultures within one's environment (Personal communication, Feb. 5, 2024). Canal Alliance, a non-profit organization, is a shining example of cultural responsiveness. They have youth programs to support youth because the education system is not meeting their needs and a therapist because many of the families in their community are struggling with their mental health. Canal Alliance has been able to recognize that many mental health struggles stem from community members experiencing poverty and migration. Making this discovery allows their wrap-around services to become targeted to mitigate those circumstances. Simply put, when leaving environments with complex challenges, it's crucial to have support.

Being culturally responsive also includes understanding that a child's environment can seriously affect their behavior at school. For example, the West Ada School District, located in Meridian, Idaho, recognized that some kids need a smaller environment if they have emotional concerns, excessive absences, and/or failing grades. Putting a struggling child into a smaller educational environment allows them to address the root cause of their behavior.

School is oftentimes the escape from environments that hold these challenges and a large part of being culturally responsive is a teacher entering that space prepared to support the

entirety of a student's being. This is something that Dominik, an executive administrator of Canal Alliance, specifically touched on: one of the many reasons our educational system is failing is that many educators are not equipped to absorb the full responsibility of teaching (Personal communication, Feb. 12, 2024). He draws this from his experience growing up in Ecuador and seeing how they educate youth compared to the United States system. He saw that, in Ecuador, teachers were prepared to aid their students in becoming the best version of themselves, and that wasn't limited to delivering curriculum. In the United States, teachers can fail to humanize their students and see them as being beyond their academic capabilities. Dominik has been involved within Canal Alliance for 20 years, 7 of which were spent as an executive administrator. He managed several different programs within the organization and now has the responsibility of overseeing all of them. Not being an American-born citizen and his current positionality within the community affords him the knowledge to provide more impactful service to the community. Similar to how Dominik adjusts his programs to serve the community's needs, some school districts have alternative learning environments for students who need them. Alternative schools can provide students with social, behavioral, and academic support from educators motivated to sustain a positive environment.

Interpretation/ Analysis

From talking to Alex and Dominik, they both share their concerns that the leaders within our educational system lack the proper tools to serve their students. Furthermore, there is inadequate recognition of different students' adversities and how to utilize empathy when dealing with behavior that stems from said adversities. Community educators like Alex, who works closely with youths in the community, also laid out a few more specific factors that perpetuate the School-to-Prison pipeline: A negative home life can put young individuals under a lot of

stress, whether witnessing their parents fight or financial stress. It is difficult to focus and avoid conflict when they are forced to carry this baggage. If the conflict results in the child not receiving adequate attention at home, their behavior will reflect that as they try to receive it at school (Personal communication, Feb. 5, 2024). Based on my experience at Next Generation Scholars and Marins Community School, educators who can recognize these connections can be more empathetic and responsive to the needs of their student body.

Legal and community-based organizations are most impactful when curating wrap-around services tailored to the community's needs. Organizations like Canal Alliance provide counseling, tutoring, housing, or other services to tackle specific stressors. Oftentimes, there is no singular solution to fixing an issue. Rather, it is the mitigation of limiting factors that can be the change an individual needs. For example, immigrant families whose parents need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet and/or kids who have interrupted education because of immigration/ migration are unlikely to be able to find schools with enough resources to support them. Canal Alliance would be able to provide resources to aid them in finding childcare, applying for food stamps, and any other services to mitigate their stress.

Path forward

When I heard from different community stakeholders, it became clear that educators should undergo intensive training focused on developing cultural awareness tailored to the specific communities they will serve within the school environment. This component is crucial to understanding the backgrounds, perspectives, and needs of the students they will teach. With training, educators can foster cultural competence to create inclusive learning environments that cater to their students' diverse identities and experiences. This enhances academic success and improves students' sense of belonging and well-being.

Moreover, similar training should be extended to other community stakeholders, including legal professionals, albeit on a broader scale, given their interactions with entire regions. These stakeholders play a crucial role in supporting the holistic development of young people and promoting social justice. Training programs for legal professionals should include scenarios that challenge them to approach their work with empathy and an understanding of the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of those they serve. The Ohio youth legal process is a blank example of what can happen when the well-being of individuals is disregarded, with nearly 80 percent of youth representing themselves in legal proceedings (Shaver, 2023). This highlights the need for comprehensive training programs that prioritize cultural awareness, empathy, and responsiveness across all sectors of society.

Finding 2: Restorative Practice In Schools

A restorative practice consistently mentioned and utilized by every community stakeholder is restorative circles. These can be problem-solving or community-building; in either case, they are meant to improve communication and awareness of the broader impact of the offender's actions. Community building circles lay the foundation for a restorative culture by encouraging a conversation with intimacy and vulnerability. It is a conversation with open-ended questions such as How was your weekend and How are you doing (Personal communication, Feb. 9, 2024). The more comfortable the people within the circle become, the more they share and connect. Problem-solving circles are voluntary and focus on repairing harm, taking accountability, and making amends. These are often smaller, including the victim/ offender and a few other people at most (Personal communication, Feb. 9, 2024). By practicing restorative circles within the classroom, teachers can gain a better perspective on what their students are

going through and respond to their behavior accordingly. It allows for the question of why the behavior is happening to be asked instead of being punitive towards the student. Youth Transforming Justice has begun to pilot a program in a first-grade classroom where students are led through community-building conversations. By building relationships and a sense of belonging for every student, the educational environment allows every child to thrive. If they are supported as whole human beings within the environment, they become more comfortable asking for what they need. A community-building circle within the school environment is relatively simple. Any combination of educators and students sits together to connect. In questions, explanations are encouraged with open-ended framing. As everyone opens up, the environment creates a sense of connection between people facing similar adversities (Ray, Personal Communication, Feb. 9, 2024). This is best performed when the students lead the circle and actively participate.

Ray, an executive administrator of Youth Transforming Justice, described a specific example of this restorative method: Two boys drew pictures of pigs, and one of the pictures had eyelashes. They then showed the pictures to different kids and said, 'This is you,' in an attempt to tease them. When addressing the situation, the counselor had them draw, cut out a heart, and then crumble it. To resemble an apology, she flattened it out and said, 'Okay, when you hurt somebody, this is what happens to their heart it gets crumbled, and when you apologize, you can still see some wrinkles there.' The kids understood that the situation called for more than an apology. This sparked the initiative for a restorative circle with the victim (Personal communication, Feb. 9, 2024). It was crucial for the boys to own their actions and be empathetic about the impact it had on others.

Jennifer, a professor and advisor at San Rafael High School, states that “a lot of work has been done with YTJ to help with facilitation and circles [at the high school level].” This comes as an advocacy class where students learn how to lead conversations and instill them within their social culture (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2024). Equipping classrooms with these tools shows how beneficial community-based organizations are by equipping these environments with new skill sets. However, Elton states that YTJ aims to empower the students to develop this skill set well enough to where services are not needed (Personal communication, Feb. 14, 2024). Elton has been an advocate within the San Rafael juvenile justice community since he was young, having been born and raised in the Bay Area and attending schools such as Marin’s Community School. He now holds the Director of Programs position at YTJ, working closely with its founder, Ray, and serving on the Juvenile Justice Commission. Another benefit outlined by Elton is that the circles “allow you to have a peek, have a peek into that kid's life, and understand maybe some of the different stressors and traumas that they're dealing with, and we can start providing services to those kids that are in need a lot earlier” (Personal communication, Feb. 14, 2024).

Some schools have been able to mitigate adversities faced by their student body by implementing homeroom or study hall periods. These are time blocks once a week or daily where students can get assistance on homework or anything else they may be struggling with. The teacher in charge may not be one of the normal teachers they have, same with the students present in the period, which gives a heightened opportunity to grow a student's sense of community. They can work with and spend more time with people they usually would not and build a broader understanding of community while supporting and being supported by peers or

teachers not in their usual support circle. The way to truly end out-of-line behavior is to create an environment wholly supportive of the student.

Interpretation/ Analysis

San Rafael, being the fifth most segregated city in the Bay Area, is a community that can significantly benefit from restorative circles/ practices within their schools. When students arrive between those walls, they are surrounded by individuals of different socioeconomic backgrounds with whom they may not cross paths in another context. When restorative practices such as community building circles are utilized, it provides an avenue of connection for the youth as they may be experiencing similar adversities. Moreover, in a highly segregated county like Marin, it is unlikely that either group understands the lived experiences of the other, making these conversations essential for cultivating belonging.

By beginning restorative practices when people are young, a constant space for positive communication moves within the culture. One that will demand these practices be put into place when necessary. These practices create a culture shift that urges the community to be open with one another. While at Marin's Community School, a place where restorative practices are commonly used, I experienced a tight-knit community environment. Students were seemingly unafraid to start or join conversations with other students, and when one student was opening up about a particular experience, others would jump on the opportunity to connect. Moreover, it was inspiring to see how these connections were encouraged as a part of the educational process and how educators wanted to maintain this environment to benefit their students. This experience was vastly different from what I saw in my classrooms growing up or heard from students as the experience at their previous schools.

These restorative practices in schools are similar to David Sengeh's seven steps and the more just society they work towards. The first steps in Sengeh's outline are identifying the exclusion and listening to understand/ learn. Both of these can be approached within problem-solving or community-building circles when students are given the space to communicate their experiences. Young people must develop communication skills that they can bring into their lives as they age, either in school or the workplace. Moreso, restorative practices equip them with the skillset to handle difficult conversations necessary for resolving/ preventing conflict.

Path Forward

After hearing from several community stakeholders who utilize community-building circles, one can see how implementing in classrooms as young as first grade (as done by YTJ) hugely benefits youth. I recommend blocking out 30 minutes to 1 hour every Monday morning for these circles, referring to them as 'weekly check-ins.' If a school implements homeroom or advisory periods in their structure, they can use part of that time for restorative circles. Using that time would benefit the effectiveness of the circles because the students are the same students each week. If homeroom/ advisory is not already in place for a school, they can dedicate time during an existing period for the circles. Students will be given the space to talk as much or as little as they are comfortable with. Even though they are from different socioeconomic backgrounds, these circles will surprise students in terms of how similar they may be. Some issues have no socioeconomic status, such as witnessing parents arguing, financial stress, or the absence of one or both parents.

Another existing practice that can be utilized in classrooms is problem-solving circles. Since a positive communication space will have already been created during the Monday

check-ins, students will understand what to expect when re-entering that space. The adults facilitating these circles will be well-trained in best delivering information to young students, whether the aforementioned drawn hearts method described or something similar. While these circles could be more challenging because they deal with present conflict, their structure taps into the existing communication with the prior implementation of community-building circles.

A problem-solving circle has been influential when the student has been able to understand the impact of their actions, and a genuine apology stems from it. Additionally, the victim, or other student in the situation, has been able to communicate the harm caused and has been given what they need to feel whole again. This type of communication takes time and patience from all parties involved. Still, the more often community-building or problem-solving circles are held, the more comfortability increases, and they become a part of the school culture.

Finding 3: School Resource Officers

According to the community stakeholders I interviewed, a student's first contact with legal authority is inside the school due to the presence of student resource officers. These are police officers stationed inside schools to assist the administration in dealing with serious incidents that may occur. The issue is that the more they are present at the school, the more reliance there is on them from administrators. This allows them to have the officer handle situations that could be handled in-house. Moreover, having law enforcement in schools can adversely affect students who have had or seen negative interactions with them in their community. It is a relationship with no trust, forcing the student to operate in an environment in which they feel targeted.

Jack, a principal at an alternative school run by West Ada, has set a prime example of a positive use of/ relationship with his school's student resource officer (SRO). He has established himself within the district, having been there for 18 years since his school was founded. He worked as a teacher and a principal before becoming a full-time administrator. Jack's school shares the SRO with seven schools, and he is only at the school one afternoon a week unless he is called to come for something (Personal communication, Feb. 6, 2024). He rarely involves the SRO unless it is necessary to have a legal perspective on a situation or if a severe law has been violated.

Most importantly, he describes the relationship between himself and the SRO as collaborative, working together to benefit the students. This relationship is similar to what Elton describes as the role of a school liaison officer (LESL), a position similar to an SRO. The JJC describes the role of a LESL as an additional adult on campus trained to handle situations in a culturally responsive manner. Still, they are not police officers and present themselves the same way an educator on campus would (Personal communication, Feb. 14, 2024). It is essential to have an adult trained to deal with specific issues affecting the student community, who also has the language to bridge new relationships within the educational environment.

There are several criteria when defining the role of a Law Enforcement/ School Liaison Officer

(LESL):

- Collaborative relationships with school administrators must clearly define when they will be called onto campus.
- LESL will only be utilized in serious crimes, not low-level discipline.
- Students should not be expected to create or maintain relationships with the LESL.

- A safe and anonymous reporting system should be put in place where students can report any misconduct by the LESL.
- LESL should be highly trained in trauma-informed policing and racial profiling issues.
- LESLs are expected to respond to calls on campus in a non-violent way (when possible) to encourage a positive relationship between themselves and the students.
- The actions of the LESL should be reported according to the Racial Identity and Profiling Act.
- LESL must prioritize kids as KIDS first and maintain a demeanor of kindness, approachability, and compassion.

(JJDP, 2021)

The role of this individual is extremely important as they can be an additional pair of eyes keeping the school safe. Still, they are not an intimidating factor within the overall environment. The relationship between them and the students is minimal but positive, as they are not intended to interfere with the student experience. When they are called to handle a situation, they are not limited to punitive actions and have the tools to tackle them empathetically.

San Rafael High School, as of 2021, discontinued its SRO program and replaced it with a position similar to that of a LESL called a 'Campus Supervisor.' These individuals are on campus to help oversee the general day-to-day environment. They are dressed in regular teacher attire and are meant to build trust/ relationships with the students and assist with disciplinary matters. Stacey describes the former SRO presence as "a visible presence on campus, and the presence was felt and wasn't always welcome." This connects with a critical point by Alex, who emphasizes the struggle of marginalized students when they are forced to work in an

environment where they feel the administration is working against them (Personal communication, Feb. 5, 2024).

When San Rafael High switched to the campus supervisor model, there was much more openness to their presence and focus on the student's well-being. Stacey describes the Campus Supervisors as a presence of adults to form connections with students and provide guidance/direction.

Interpretation/ Analysis

After hearing from community stakeholders and spending time within school environments in Marin, it is clear that putting a law enforcement officer inside of schools is not the most effective way to handle discipline. Not only does their presence lead to an unnecessary reliance upon them from school administration, but it also adds stress on students who have witnessed/ been a part of negative situations with law enforcement. It is clear that their presence also puts an additional target on marginalized student's backs; Latinx students make up 27.1% of the population yet account for 25.7% of referrals to law enforcement and 26.4% of school-related arrests (CRDC, 2021). This goes to show how this reliance from the administration has furthered the disproportionate punishment of minority students. A school environment needs to nurture students' individuality and be a safe learning space; this is not achieved with a law enforcement officer on campus.

Proponents of officers on campus will advocate that it is an additional safety measure in the case of an active shooter. I disagree. There must be ways to ensure the safety of students without forcing them to exist on edge. While tragedies like an active shooter happen far too often, and an armed individual on campus may seem like the right option, we must prioritize the

everyday well-being of our students. Nobody can learn in an environment lacking belonging; this must be provided to young students. It is the responsibility of the community to provide this.

Path forward

The community can protect their students inside the school by creating a safe and welcoming learning environment. This starts by taking the police officers out of the school and uplifting the needs of every student. The officer's role can be replaced by a LESL (Law Enforcement Liaison Officer) who is highly trained to protect the student body and empathetically respond to challenging situations. This can be seen in San Rafael High School's practice with their campus supervisors. They maintain close relationships with the administration and have their responsibilities clearly outlined. Most importantly, there is an accountability system where students can report instances of prejudice or misconduct from this individual. The role of the LESL or school supervisor is to prioritize students' safety and welfare, and it should remain adaptable and responsive to ensure it effectively addresses students' needs.

Finding 4: Restorative Practice In Law

During his time living in and running a residential treatment program for youth, Ray describes how they “would have three [restorative] circles a day and the first thing we did the circle is when we brought somebody new in we all told our stories in the circle matter last 5-6 hours every individual would tell their story so the new young person would feel everybody else has been vulnerable maybe I can be safe here, and then they would tell their story” (Personal communication, Feb. 9, 2024). Ray is currently the founder and CEO of Youth Transforming Justice, having been heavily involved in youth justice for over 45 years. He was the director of

Youth and Family Services for the YMCA and ran a residential treatment program for at-risk youth. He has dedicated his life to restorative justice and its benefits for youth.

Rafa, an attorney in the Marin County Public Defender's office, has led unique restorative initiatives for youth within the legal system. He began his career as a Public Defender with the Alameda PD office, working with post-conviction juveniles, now totaling over 13 years as a defender. One of the most notable things he did for his young clients was locate wrap-around services such as educational, housing, and work opportunities that serve their needs. Uniquely, he helped them find services to remove gang tattoos on their faces and necks (Personal communication, Feb. 6, 2024). When working on any given client's case, his goal is to fight for the best possible outcome for the client. Sometimes, this involved advocating for them to be sent through the restorative justice program to repair harm and take accountability.

The Marin County Restorative Justice program was a victim-offender dialogue program that used restorative circles to repair harm. These were conversations that the victim and offender must actively participate in, the victim laying out explicitly what they need to feel whole. Carly emphasizes that victims often seek information, and holding the space for this dialogue allows them to get it (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2024). Carly has been focused on restorative justice initiatives since she was in college in Montreal. Since graduating, she has worked with police departments and courts to facilitate victim-offender dialogue. In 2016, she was asked to start a victim-offender dialogue program in Marin County; she ran the program until the end of 2021. She has now relocated to Southern California, starting another program. Offenders must listen to the victims, take accountability, and repair the harm that was done. Typical outcomes include monetary compensation, anger management course, or replacement/ repair of property. The restorative program could occasionally be completed with probation duties to lessen or

eliminate their overall probation period. It is important to remember that no restorative circle can be executed without the willing participation of both parties.

Amy has a unique place within Marin County, working as President of the Parent Teacher Association at her children's school and as a Deputy Public Defender. She spent her early career years helping undocumented immigrants mitigate legal situations. When describing her experience handling legal disputes, she sees how the person filing charges often does not want the most punitive punishment for the offender. However, that is often the only solution they are given (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2024). She has learned that unnecessary harm can be mitigated by allowing community members to communicate what they need to feel whole.

Another aspect of these dialogue programs is how many offenders do not understand the caliber of their actions until confronted by the parties impacted. While running the Marin County Restorative Justice Program, Carly describes a particularly impactful experience facilitating a victim-offender restorative circle. The offender had been in and out of jail for various burglaries yet consistently insisted that he was "not like the other guys" who committed similar crimes. He always ensured that no one was home when he entered and that what he took could be replaced by insurance, failing to realize any other impacts of his crime. It was not until he was confronted in a restorative circle by one of his victims that he discovered the vast impact of his actions. She described her fear of being targeted and how every time she heard her husband come home, she thought there was an intruder. The offender left this circle, asking Carly to help locate his other victims; he needed to apologize. To her knowledge, he has not made contact with the criminal justice system again (Personal communication, Feb. 13, 2024).

The most interesting part about Carly's departure from Marin County is that the restorative program left with her. Simply put, the reason why this program fizzled out when she

left is led by the fact that no one with experience and education in restorative programs would replace her. The program requires continued collaboration from several departments, including the District Attorney, Public Defender's offices, and the probation department. If one is unwilling to take a restorative approach, the program cannot operate. A change in leadership for individuals who did not value restorative justice and the loss of a passionate program leader led to the program being shut down, a true loss for the community.

Interpretation/ analysis

Restorative justice has a more significant impact on both the victim and offender when used as a part of a dialogue program. The victim can get the answers they desire and the offender is able to recognize and take accountability for their actions. This is similar to how we should handle conflict within our schools, addressing the root cause of the behavior instead of immediately being punitive. Unfortunately, this option does not exist for offenders and victims within Marin County at the adult level. Instead, the most punitive measures, such as excessive or unnecessary jail time, seem to be taken.

Path Forward

An impactful first step is educating community leaders on the benefits of restorative practices and finding alternatives to the current punitive punishment system. In order for a program to be effectively carried out, active participation from both the District Attorney's and Public Defender's offices is needed, as both agencies must agree to have a case sent through an alternative program. This was seen as the case with Marin County's previous program, where agencies worked together to send cases to restorative justice, and can currently be seen within Youth Transforming Justice.

I recommend implementing a new victim-offender dialogue diversion program outside our current court systems, similar to Youth Transforming Justice. When a case that fits the program's criteria is filed, and the victim, offender, and judge are all on board, it can be referred over. If one party backs out or the offender cannot take accountability or repair harm, the case can be returned to the litigation system. This program must be community-based and not run by an already broken system; that way, accountability is more manageable to uphold, and the organization can be more responsive to the community's and impacted parties' needs.

Finding 5: Restoring Communities - Community Building Circles

Encouraging community participation is pivotal to tackling issues in schools and legal systems. The most impactful restorative practice utilized when looking for change is holding space for community-building circles. Another similar practice is the way Canal Alliance utilizes restorative practices; they hold community forums where anyone can voice issues that are going on. Individuals who participate get stipends and free childcare throughout the meeting while they attend. These strategies are essential when encouraging participation because they eliminate barriers that stop people from attending. Youth Transforming Justice practices a similar approach by offering paid positions to youth participating in hearings.

By hosting forums, the issues stay relevant, and the community can come together for issues that matter to them, acting as community-building circles. Forums also include a leadership Academy that trains community members to advocate for their needs. Giving a voice can make their value felt within the community, and real change can start. Community issues can not be adequately addressed without knowing the individuals experiencing the setbacks. By allowing a space for knowledge to be shared, there is vastly more understanding between

changemakers and the community on what needs to be done. Most importantly, establishing comfort and support in a struggling community can be pivotal for effective change. While community forums resemble community-building circles, they are also vastly different. Since there is a clear power differential between policymakers and the community, expressing true feelings can be intimidating and/or difficult. It is also a much more formal environment where the opportunity for open dialogue is not always there.

Interpretation/ Analysis

David Sengeh defines radical inclusion as creating a community without exclusionary barriers hindering individuals' paths to success (Sengeh, 2023). Hosting community forums as a restorative practice is vital in cultivating this ethos within local communities. These forums provide community members with a platform to elevate their voices while those in positions of authority listen attentively to gain insight into critical issues. Ideally, these forums become a constant space with open communication and collaborative problem-solving.

It would be unrealistic to expect community issues to be adequately addressed without the active involvement of those affected. Forums promote participation from all community members and amplify the voices of the most marginalized individuals. It is within such spaces that tangible progress is achieved and where policymakers can be held accountable for their actions. Restorative practice being instilled in community forums can foster impactful change.

Path Forward

After extensive research within Marin County's educational and legal spheres, a recurring theme of a lack of community engagement emerges. It's evident that when community voices are

prioritized and amplified in crucial discussions, meaningful connections and solutions emerge. However, this necessitates a culture encouraging all individuals to speak up.

Community members have the opportunity to voice their concerns in various contexts, such as city—and state-wide forums. Unfortunately, these settings often feature stark power dynamics, with leaders at the forefront and others waiting their turn to speak. This intimidating environment leads many to either downplay or entirely omit their struggles.

To address this, I propose establishing recurring community-centered restorative circles, facilitated by community advocates across governmental levels. These circles provide platforms for community members to express their challenges and emotions, collaboratively devising solutions. Advocates would actively listen and document insights, conveying them to government officials akin to the community forums hosted by organizations like Canal Alliance.

At the county level, monthly circles could convene, with bi-monthly meetings at the state level, ensuring accessibility through rotating venues. Advocates appointed for two-year terms within the community would provide consistency and responsiveness. Additionally, community members would be empowered to request additional meetings as needed.

Effective implementation of these restorative circles would pave the way for community empowerment and voice amplification. Individuals would grow more comfortable sharing their experiences and needs with each gathering, empowering them to advocate for themselves. These circles ensure community voices are heard and acted upon, fostering a culture shift towards active participation.

Hosting inclusive community meetings facilitated by community advocates ensures that voices are amplified and needs are addressed. Advocates, selected from and accountable to the community, act as liaisons at state and national levels, ensuring representation and

responsiveness. With such a program in place, we aspire to cultivate a culture where community voices are consistently heard and valued, fostering a meaningful shift toward active engagement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey through service learning, spanning from Marin Community School to the Marin County Public Defender's office, has profoundly shaped my understanding of systemic injustice within educational and legal institutions. Witnessing firsthand the repercussions of unjust treatment in these settings has highlighted the critical importance of fostering communication and community to mitigate the adverse impacts on students who are often marginalized and voiceless.

Engaging directly with students and community stakeholders has underscored the multifaceted nature of the school-to-prison pipeline, revealing its varying impacts and timelines. This complexity necessitates diverse solutions tailored to each unique situation, emphasizing the need for inclusive and participatory approaches to effect meaningful change. My in-depth exploration of restorative justice through my capstone research has further reinforced my conviction in its potential to break punitive cycles and cultivate environments of inclusivity and accountability. Restorative justice offers a transformative pathway toward reconciliation and empowerment for individuals and communities by prioritizing healing and dialogue.

Ultimately, my journey has underscored the power of community-driven initiatives and collaborative efforts in addressing systemic injustice. By amplifying the voices of those most affected and centering their experiences in pursuing change, we can strive towards a future where every student has equitable opportunities for success, unencumbered by discrimination and punitive disciplinary practices.

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