

Perspective

We Cannot Return to “Normal”: A Post-COVID Call for a Systems Approach to Implementing Restorative Justice in Education (RJE)

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Abstract: Given the collective trauma caused by COVID-19 global pandemic, it is more important than ever that schools look for ways to create safe, trauma-sensitive, and restorative learning environments. This article presents implementation science, readiness assessments, and ongoing evaluation as central and integral to all efforts that seek to transform punitive schools into restorative schools. The author first presents five elements of a school’s relational ecology as a framework for comparing a punitive school to a restorative school: structure, leadership, staff, students, and response to behavioral incidents. Then, the author calls upon school administrators, as well as restorative justice trainers who work with schools, to utilize a systems change approach that supports whole-school change. Without a full commitment to systems change, restorative justice in education (RJE) will continue to fall short of expectations and the educational system itself will continue to cause the same harm to marginalized students as it did prior to the pandemic.

Keywords: restorative justice in education; training; implementation science; systems change; school culture



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic, albeit horrendous in a myriad of ways, also allowed the world to pause and for us to rethink the ways in which we live, work, go to school, and conduct business. As the pandemic raged on, organizations and businesses came to understand that there would likely not be a return to “normal”. In America, social justice activists including the Black Lives Matter movement, Climate Justice, and Queer and Trans Liberation movements asserted that “normal” benefitted the white, CIS-gendered, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative dominant culture at the expense of marginalized populations. Progressive movements are currently proposing changes that support more equitable ways of living, being, schooling, and working—some of which may ultimately save the planet, and all of which have a bearing on education.

During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, schools in all 50 states of the United States, as well as schools globally, closed to in-person instruction at some point during the academic year. Conversations on social media that were observed by this author showed that educators, trainers, and practitioners questioned how to use restorative practices during shelter-in-place and in fully online learning environments. At the same time, educational leaders of color, such as Gloria Ladson-Billings among others, offered free webinars encouraging people to take the shut-down as an opportunity to improve upon the educational system and/or dismantle the parts that continued to disadvantage marginalized students and those living in poverty ([PBS Wisconsin Education 2020](#)).

Restorative justice trainers quickly pivoted to online platforms that allowed them to continue training using the same strategies and curriculum they had used prior to the pandemic. It appears, however, that the restorative justice community and its trainers failed to pause and ask, is *our* “normal” effective? Has *our* “normal” ever been effective? (There is a lack of research and evaluation on RJ training, so it unclear if trainers have

ever addressed these questions in a systematic way). RJ trainers, in schools and elsewhere, frequently rely on the “workshop model” established in the 1990s under the BARJ grants (Bazemore and Umbreit 1997), often referred to as train-the-trainer. It is difficult to assert that the train-the-trainer model is effective in any context, as research on the topic generally focuses on specific interventions, some of which demonstrate the effectiveness of the model and others which do not.

In January 2020, Gregory and Evans published a literature review and policy brief providing evidence that restorative justice in education (RJE) was often mis-implemented. They specifically critiqued the train-the-trainer, or what they called the “train and pray” method. Despite their findings, many RJ organizations and trainers continued offering “train and pray” workshops in much the same way as they did pre-pandemic, and schools continued buying them, even when the pandemic forced those trainings to occur online. As trainers, like so many others, struggled to pay their bills during the shut-down, they subsequently missed the opportunity to reflect on their “normal” training approach.

Given the current and ongoing collective trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the murders of George Floyd and other people of color, it is more important than ever that schools look for ways to create safe, trauma-sensitive, and restorative learning environments. If implemented with integrity, RJE offers a way to create restorative schools capable of building the kinds of connections between people that aid in healing trauma and breaking down barriers and inequities caused by racism. If implemented haphazardly, or mis-implemented, restorative practices not only lose their transformational power, but risk replicating or causing harm by failing to create space for educators to understand how white supremacy manifests in policies and is expressed through individuals’ biases (Brown 2018; Parker 2020; Valandra 2020).

This article asserts that a systems approach grounded in critical, change, and restorative justice theories, which incorporate implementation science, readiness assessments, and ongoing evaluation, should be central and integral to efforts that seek to transform punitive schools into restorative schools¹. A punitive school is defined as one that relies heavily on punishment, zero tolerance discipline practices and policies, and other practices that promote compliance and social control (Morrison 2010; Skiba 2001). A restorative school is defined as a school that has rejected zero tolerance as its primary disciplinary approach, as much as legally permitted, and has instead adopted and implemented restorative practices to some degree. This author calls upon the restorative justice training community, particularly those who offer trainings to schools and school districts, to abandon “train and pray” models and instead introduce systems changes, along with insisting that schools that wish to implement RJE agree to embark on a long journey of systems and culture change.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Numerous theories informed the author’s observations of the two schools: critical theory (Freire 2008; Kincheloe 2008; Vaandering 2010); critical race theory (CRT) (Bell 1995; Gilborn 1995; Ladson-Billings 2009; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Zamudio et al. 2011); theories of change (Bryk et al. 2010; Center for Theory of Change 2013; Fullan 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Hall and Hord 2011; Levine and Lezotte 1995; Morrison 2007), restorative justice theory (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Hopkins 2004, 2011; Morrison 2007; Morrison and Vaandering 2012; Wadhwa 2013; Zehr 2002), and critical relational theory (Vaandering 2016). The combination of these theories created the lens through which the author saw, experienced, recalled, and reflected upon her experiences in two urban middle schools with very similar demographics.

¹ There is no standardized or validated way to assess how restorative a school is, although various states, districts, and private consultants have developed a variety of instruments to assess implementation fidelity or “degrees of restorativeness”.

1.1.1. Critical Theory

Critical theory is a broad, umbrella theory that encompasses numerous other theories, including multicultural (Banks 1981) and indigenous theories (Cram et al. 2018). Critical theories are sometimes unique to a marginalized and oppressed population, but all provide a means to examine power relations according to race, class, gender, sexuality, and other differences, and to compare those differences to the hegemony of a white (male), Cis-gendered, heteronormative culture. Critical theory looks at the effects of power and challenges the practices and ways of seeing how teachers, administrators, and policy makers have been taught and the ways that knowledge is constructed (Banks 1981; Freire 2008; Kincheloe 2008; Waldon and Baxley 2017). Vaandering emphasized that critical theory is about more than producing further knowledge; it is a commitment to action, or praxis (Freire 2008), that will address injustices.

1.1.2. Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory offers a lens through which to view school reform efforts, while acknowledging that racism is normal in American society, and that structures and policies exist in schools to promote and maintain the subordination of people of color. Critical race scholarship places race at the center of investigations into inequality in American schools and claims that racism has become so enmeshed in the social order, systems, and institutions of American society that it appears more normal than aberrant (Ladson-Billings 2009; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

1.1.3. Change Theory

Theories of change identify the strategies used successfully in education reform by outlining who is involved, the role of all participants and beneficiaries needed to successfully implement change, and the means for measuring the effectiveness of the change at different levels (Center for Theory of Change 2013; Fullan 2008). Change theory relates specific assumptions and linkages connecting the strategies to the desired outcomes of any whole school reform (Fullan 2006b) and provides a framework for implementing school reform initiatives. Implementation science (NIRC 2021) is grounded in change theories and provides a specific and measurable method for change based on strategic planning, ongoing decision-making, and evaluation. Change theory and implementation science require participants to be clear on long-term goals, identify measurable indicators of success, and formulate actions to achieve the goal of improving student learning and creating effective schools.

1.1.4. Restorative Justice Theory

The basic premise of restorative justice theory is that all people are connected through a web of relationships (Zehr 2002) and that restorative processes should focus on reconnecting people, highlighting inherent relational qualities, and emphasizing social engagement (Morrison and Vaandering 2012). When applied to schools, restorative justice theory encourages the building of connections by promoting healthy child development (Hopkins 2011) and creating space for people in schools to speak and be heard across all school environments, especially, but not exclusively, in instances where a harmful incident has occurred. (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Brown 2017; Morrison 2007).

1.1.5. Critical Relational Theory

Critical relational theory is grounded in a comprehensive definition of justice that honors the dignity and worth of all people and consciously uses language and practices that humanize (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Freire 2008; Vaandering 2016). This theory helps educators to move away from practices that see people as objects to be managed or ignored, and toward language and practices that see people as subjects to be honored. The theory calls on educators to ask these questions: Am I honoring the people I am engaged

with? Am I measuring them? What message am I sending them when we are together? (Vaandering 2016).

1.1.6. Application of Theories

The purpose of this article is to assert that a systems approach grounded in critical, change, and restorative theories, which incorporates implementation science, readiness assessments, and ongoing evaluation, should be central and integral to efforts that seek to transform punitive schools into restorative schools. Critical, change, and restorative justice theories not only informed the author's initial research in middle schools (Brown 2015) but also informed her reflections on her experiences as a teacher and researcher, which are presented in this article. The author's epistemological orientation influenced how knowledge was constructed and shared, and how she knows what she knows; this orientation was based on where she lived and worked as well as her race, gender, class background, and educational opportunities (Zamudio et al. 2011). Additionally, to present an alternative to the colonized and oppressive methodologies espoused by many academics, the author stands with multicultural (Banks 1981) and indigenous theories (Cram et al. 2018) that critique the Euro-centric models of knowledge creation and create space for other ways of knowing, including intuition and self-reflection, which informed her comparison and analysis of five specific aspects of relational ecology. Finally, change theory asserts that if school personnel are motivated, trained, supported, and encouraged to adopt new processes and build relational trust, they will behave differently, become more empowered, and subsequently adopt different beliefs. These changes are observable and measurable and contribute to a more positive, caring school climate and to more just and equitable classrooms.

1.2. Methodology

The schools in this article were conveniently selected because of the author's lived experiences in the schools as a teacher (Southern Middle) and as a researcher (Davis Middle). In particular, the stark albeit extreme differences between the schools' physical environments, leadership, staff, students, and responses to behavioral incidents reveal the enormity of the shift some schools will have to make if they choose to adopt RJE. Comparing the differences between the relational ecology of punitive and restorative schools sheds light on the need for schools, consultants, and trainers to facilitate the shift by using organizational change theories and strategies, such as those espoused by the National Implementation Resource Center (NIRC).

After reflecting on the stark differences between the two schools, the author introduces systems thinking, readiness, and implementation science as a framework for whole-school culture change.

1.3. Author Positionality

The author is a middle-class white woman who benefits from privileges associated with white body supremacy, class, and education. In 2008, the author was a 6th grade teacher at Southern Middle School. After experiencing the unhealthy relational ecology of a punitive school and its culture of top-down decision-making, mistrust, and exclusion, this author proceeded to seek and learn to become a teacher, author, researcher, and evaluator of RJE. In 2015, the author spent two weeks at Davis Middle School conducting her dissertation research (Brown 2015) which led to her writing the book, *Creating Restorative Schools: Setting Schools Up to Succeed* (Brown 2018). Her observations and experiences at Davis Middle School are extracted from her dissertation research (Brown 2015).

The author is what Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2000) refer to as a moral activist pursuing an ethical epistemology, or one who seeks to understand the ways of the dominant order that disadvantages people of color for the purpose of altering or changing that very order. Critical researchers reject scientific claims of objectivity and instead embrace researcher positionality, self-reflection, moral purpose, research as praxis, and advocate for

marginalized and oppressed populations being studied to advance the pursuit of social justice and equity (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Kincheloe 2008; Lather 1986; Yanchar et al. 2005). Her lived experiences inform her tone, lack of objectivity, and bias toward restorative justice, all of which are supported by critical research theories that reject objectivity to advance the pursuit of social justice and equity (Denzin and Lincoln 2008; Kincheloe 2008; Lather 1986; Yanchar et al. 2005).

2. Literature Review

Since the 1980s, schools in the United States have adopted a range of zero tolerance discipline policies that have resulted in the exclusion of vast numbers of students from school for behavioral reasons. Students of color, students with special needs, and LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately impacted and are up to five times more likely than white students to be the recipients of punitive and exclusionary disciplinary actions (Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Skiba 2001; Skiba et al. 2011, 2014). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) concluded that zero tolerance policies did not support an effective system of school discipline and, more importantly, were counter to healthy child and adolescent development.

RJE provides an effective and healthier alternative to zero tolerance. Adopting RJE redirects energy toward improving the overall culture of schools, employing culturally responsive and relational pedagogies, and preventing violence. Such a change requires building relational trust between all members of the school community as well as changing priorities, funding, thinking, practices, and organizational behavior (Brown 2018; Bryk et al. 2010; Hopkins 2004, 2011; Morrison 2007; Parker 2020). Despite the complex challenges schools face when seeking to change policies and practices, more schools nationwide are adopting restorative values and practices that teach students prosocial behavior and create positive and safe school environments (Brown 2018; Thorsborne et al. 2019). RJE is changing the ways in which people in schools relate to each other and the curriculum (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Parker 2020), but it is more than just a reform; RJE is about living good values, adopting pedagogy and modeling behaviors, and caring for students in ways that reach far beyond mere interest in their performance on standardized tests (Evans and Lester 2013; Evans and Vaandering 2016).

Evans and Vaandering (2016) use the term *restorative justice in education* (RJE) to distinguish between restorative justice in the criminal and juvenile justice systems and RJ in schools. RJE centers around the belief that all people are relational and worthy, connected by the values of dignity, respect, and mutual concern. The three interconnected components of RJE are:

- Creating just and equitable learning environments;
- Nurturing healthy relationships;
- Repairing harm and transforming conflict (Evans and Vaandering 2016, p. 5).

School-wide restorative practices (SWRPs), then, represent restorative values and processes implemented across all school environments and incorporate both the preventative and responsive aspects of restorative justice (Morrison 2007). Restorative practices lie on a spectrum of informal to formal and can include: mindfulness, restorative language, respect agreements, collaborative and proactive solutions, proactive and restorative Circles, student involvement, de-escalation spaces, re-entry Circles, community partnerships, and formal conferences (Brummer 2021).

In schools where restorative practices have been implemented across all school environments, from classrooms to lunchrooms, all staff are trained to use restorative language, make relationships with students and with each other a priority, and work together to create a community with a trusting environment (Brown 2018; Evans and Vaandering 2016; Hopkins 2004, 2011; Morrison 2007; Morrison and Vaandering 2012; Riestenberg 2012).

School-wide restorative practices strengthen the social ties of young people and children to people and institutions more effectively than restorative practices which narrowly focus on a particular set of disciplinary problems (Hopkins 2004). Reimer (2018) refers to

restorative practices used primarily for disciplinary purposes as affirmative RJ. An affirmative understanding of RJ focuses on individual behaviors without challenging the systemic roots of racism and injustice. A school may have chosen RJE to deal with student behavior or to reduce suspension rates. If so, restorative practices may resemble traditional behavior management practices that seek social control and compliance by employing a kinder, gentler way to punish students (Brown 2018; Reimer 2018). Teachers may look to restorative practices to “fix” students they consider to be a problem, and administrators may look to those same practices to decrease the number of behavioral incidents and suspensions. Schools that implement an affirmative version of RJ may still value relationships and place them at the heart of their work, but power imbalances will remain, and relationships will be based on control and compliance (Reimer 2018). Parker (2020) writes: “If teachers are unprepared or fearful of inviting dialogue that they deem overly controversial, they might hold back on supporting and including perspectives from diverse, marginalized youth” (p. 70). RJ-affirmative schools might define success as having more order, less chaos, fewer fights, and fewer disciplinary referrals (Reimer 2018), but generally, justice, equity, and inclusion remain unaddressed.

On the other hand, Reimer (2018) describes a transformative understanding of RJ as one that suggests a radical paradigm shift with the profound potential to address social injustices and power imbalances. It focuses on social engagement—student voice, empowerment, and responsibility—and is more likely to allow schools to address disproportionate discipline and institutional racism; relationships are grounded in the work. Schools that embrace the transformative version of RJ see improved relationships as a primary outcome and understand that decreased problems are a result of improved relationships and a greater sense of belonging in the school community. Restorative practices are implemented in a way that bring out people’s intrinsic motivation to connect with others in a safe environment, to not cause harm, and to repair any harm that occurs (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Reimer 2018).

Transformative RJE encourages the integration of restorative values and practices across the entire school environment as universal, trauma-informed Tier 1 interventions and links which think and act restoratively to students’ abilities to develop social–emotional learning competencies (Brummer 2021; CASEL 2021; Craig 2016). The transformative, whole-school approach provides a gateway to improving school climate, teacher job satisfaction, student achievement, and cooperation and collaboration among all members of the school community (Brown 2018). It also allows schools to integrate RJE with other school climate initiatives that support prosocial behavior and connection with themselves and others, including trauma-sensitive practices, social–emotional learning, mindfulness, racial equity, and mental health (Berkowitz 2019; Brummer 2021).

Much has been learned about the implementation and impacts of restorative justice since it was first introduced to US schools in 1994 (Davis 2019; Riestenberg 2012), and, as a result, restorative philosophy, theory, and practice are evolving. The current thinking about transformative RJE calls for restorative practitioners and trainers to integrate multiple school climate initiatives, including racial equity, by relying on implementation science and organizational change theories. Claiming that restorative justice without racial equity is not restorative justice at all Valandra (2020), Davis (2019) and Parker (2020) promote restorative justice practices that intersect with racial justice and that honor RJ’s indigenous (largely First Nations, Native American, and Maori) roots. Berkowitz (2019) maps out numerous school climate initiatives congruent with RJE to provide a less siloed and more unified way to implement universal Tier 1 climate initiatives with greater integrity. O’Shaughnessy (2019) explains the importance of incorporating mindfulness, a practice rooted in Buddhism, into restorative practices, while Brummer (2021) offers an integrated approach to trauma-informed restorative justice. Burnett and Thorsborne (2015) provide modified practices for students with special needs. Pointer et al. (2020) provide teachers with games, activities, and stimulations for understanding and implementing restorative practices in the classroom. As the field evolves, more ways to create just, equitable, and

inclusive schools are continually presented. However, the field still lacks the widespread adoption of effective approaches to school-wide implementation and fails to evaluate both the effectiveness of training and the fidelity to which RJE is implemented, which have a direct impact on a school's journey toward becoming restorative.

Gregory and Evans' (2020) review of the literature uncovered common mis-implementation models that watered down restorative justice practices and lessened their transformational and healing power, while also providing the field with implementation recommendations. Implementation science is now being promoted to ensure that deep learning, planning, training, evaluation, and reflection are embedded into the implementation process (Brown 2018, 2020; Riestenberg 2015). Additionally, readiness assessments are recommended to help schools better understand the strengths and weaknesses of their organizational structure so that they can better position themselves to successfully implement RJE with integrity and fidelity (Brown 2020; Scaccia et al. 2015). Altogether, practitioners of RJE continue exploring how to best transform schools from punitive to restorative without perpetuating systemic racism or compartmentalizing Tier 1 climate initiatives into silos.

3. The Schools in This Article

Both schools² discussed in this article are situated in urban communities of color. Regardless of their ethnicity, race, or culture, many residents in these communities work low-wage jobs while struggling to pay high rents. More than half of the families live in poverty. Children often attend under-resourced and/or poorly performing schools. While racism, segregation, and the apartheid of schooling impact both schools (Davis 2019; Kozol 2005), each is situated in a community that offers very different histories and influences.

Davis Middle School is in Oakland, CA, birthplace of the Black Panthers and a city with a long history of racial and social justice activism, home to many justice-centered organizations, including, but not limited to, Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) (Davis 2019). Since 2010, the Oakland Unified School District has been working to actively eliminate educational disparities and disproportionate discipline through its district-wide adoption of restorative justice and other initiatives (Brown 2015; OUSD 2020). Most Oakland schools, including Davis Middle, are Title I schools (a designation given to schools where 75% or more of students qualify for free or reduced lunch). Oakland communities of color experience high rates of poverty, crime, police brutality, and violence. Police murders of black and brown men, like Oscar Grant, feed the collective and intergenerational trauma many residents carry in their bodies (Menakem 2017), and for some, especially young people, this trauma manifests itself in fights, gang activity, and violence.

Southern Middle School is a Title I school in Florida, a former slave-state and, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2020), home to more than 16 hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan. The genocide of Florida's indigenous peoples occurred throughout the 1800s via a series of wars and a death march that took place periodically over a 20-year period (Seminole Tribe of Florida 2020). Its deeply embedded racist roots are still apparent throughout Florida, where neighborhoods and schools remain largely segregated by skin color, and access to wealth, property, and resources are almost always determined by race and gender. Southern Middle School was situated in an under-resourced, economically deprived, and highly segregated community, where residents experienced high rates of underemployment, crime, and poverty.

Education, like all systems in the United States, replicates power imbalances and normalizes racism (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Historical and structural racism and racial trauma manifested and came to life in both the schools and the people associated with those schools (Davis 2012, 2019; DeGruy 2005; Menakem 2017; Michael 2015). The levels of gang-related crime, violence, and poverty in the schools' surrounding communities were the products of enduring racist economic, political, educational, criminal justice, and social policies and systems (Alexander 2012; Davis 2012, 2019; DeGruy 2005; Valandra 2020). That

² Both names are pseudonyms for real schools.

said, the districts and schools discussed in this article saw the world very differently, despite their similarities. Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) chose to invest heavily in trauma-informed restorative practices and racial equity initiatives that would provide culturally responsive and empowering methods for building relationships, decreasing violence, and transforming conflict for all members of the educational community. The OUSD recognized that RJE could offer a pathway toward democratizing schools, empowering marginalized educators and students, and changing school culture, provided its practices were presented and implemented by those unafraid and able to acknowledge the racist history of the United States and dialogue about racism, conflict, and oppression (Goens-Bradley 2020; Parker 2020). The Florida district chose to maintain the status quo: to this day it demonstrates continued reliance on racialized zero tolerance discipline policies, armed school police, and an over-emphasis on one-size-fits-all standardized test scores.

4. Comparing Aspects of the Schools' Relational Ecologies

Restorative schools support healthy human development while punitive schools hinder it, or worse, cause harm. By juxtaposing the relational ecologies of a restorative and a punitive school, the distinct differences between them become clear. A school's relational ecology is influenced by complex interactions between numerous components, including but not limited to students, teachers, administrators, community-based organizations and volunteers, parents, and support and service staff, as well as, beliefs, attitudes, values, policies, physical environment, instructional practices/pedagogy, curriculum, and the community (Brown 2015). At the heart of a healthy relational ecology is a strong relational trust among all members of the school community (Bryk and Schneider 2003).

In this section, the author presents five elements of a school's relational ecology as a framework for comparing a punitive school to a restorative school: structure, leadership, staff, students, and response to behavioral incidents.

4.1. Physical Environment

4.1.1. Southern Middle School

Southern Middle School, cement grey in appearance and lacking any aesthetic architectural features, is situated in the heart of a neighborhood consisting predominantly of African American and Haitian American working-class families. It consistently ranks in the lowest 50% of all schools in Florida (Public School Review 2020b). When the author taught there, a cement wall surrounded the parking lot to protect people from bullets shot from the apartments next door (those apartments have since been torn down and replaced by a new high school). The school grounds were entirely fenced in. Posted around all entrances were metal signs that directed visitors to go to the main office or warned trespassers, drug users, and others about a myriad of potential violations and penalties. Armed police officers were present and visible before, during, and after school, and their police cars were parked conspicuously around the building. Inside, several administrators patrol the hallways, sometimes yelling at students through bullhorns: "Move along. Get to class".

At lunch, students were required to line up to be escorted to the cafeteria by their teachers where they were seated together as a class. This was consistent with research showing that "students from a lower socioeconomic class were provided an education designed to make them compliant, obey requirements, and take orders—preparing them to be laborers" (Zamudio et al. 2011). The assistant principle screamed non-stop at the students over a microphone which only stressed those suffering from unhealed trauma (Brummer 2021; Craig 2016) rather than allowing them time to relax, eat, and be social with each other. There was no fresh air or natural sunlight, and students did not go outside except during fire drills.

4.1.2. Davis Middle School

Perched atop a hill in one of Oakland's more affluent neighborhoods sits Davis Middle School, a multi-story, bright yellow building. The school is surrounded by a metal fence except for the main entrance, which is open. The campus is sprawling and includes numerous buildings, a large open courtyard filled with picnic tables, and several basketball courts behind the school. To enter the school, one walks through open doors, up the stairs, and into the main office. When the weather allows, doors and windows are left open to allow the fresh air to blow through the school. Windows allow natural light to fill the school. Colorful posters made by students hang on the walls and express positive messages, including "Be the change you want to see in the world", "Black Lives Matter", and "Be kind". Lockers are painted different colors throughout the school and student artwork is prominent. Several large walls inside and outside the building display hand-painted murals that depict the culture and spirit of the community. This school has consistently ranked in the top 30% of all Oakland schools ([Public School Review 2020a](#)).

Sounds of the school's award-winning orchestra and the laughter of students playing outside in the courtyard during lunch waft through the air. On special days, a DJ spins hip-hop tunes during lunch while students and adults alike eat, socialize, play, and dance together. Teachers, staff, and School Resource Officers (SROs) casually interact with students and each other while enjoying the sunshine.

4.2. Leadership

4.2.1. Southern Middle School

At the time that this author taught at Southern Middle School, the principal was a quiet, soft-spoken, and approachable African American man. He was new to the school, having just been promoted from an assistant principal position at a local high school. At his former school, he had the reputation of being a good and kind man and was well-liked and respected by students and staff. At Southern Middle, he appeared fatigued and sometimes sad. Each day posed new conflicts and challenges among the faculty and the students, both inside and outside the school walls. He was visible and present in hallways and classrooms, but the author did not observe students or teachers interacting with him regularly. He was sometimes in the hallway directing students over his bullhorn, which seemed contrary to his nature; yet when he observed this author's classroom, he was happy to engage in discussions with students.

Each grade in the middle school was supervised by an African American assistant principal, whose main responsibility was student discipline. Discipline problems were ongoing, so the assistant principals' offices were filled with students waiting for a parent to pick them up or come in for a conference. They processed office discipline referrals while attempting to counsel students who were being suspended for any variety of infractions, most frequently willful defiance, dress code violations, disrespecting teachers, and fighting.

4.2.2. Davis Middle School

The principal of Davis Middle at the time of the author's dissertation study was a charismatic and energetic white man. He spoke to the author about his values and leadership practices and read research and other books that challenged his worldview and influenced his thinking. This principal admitted that when he came to the school, he attempted to use heavy-handed techniques but that the staff rejected that approach. Because several teachers were union leaders, they encouraged him to adopt a more democratic form of governance. Subsequently, he became an advocate for restorative justice after experiencing for himself the difference between heavy-handed and restorative approaches in leading a school. Both student-led and teacher-led committees served to promote RJ, demonstrating that decision-making power was shared. Several teachers noted that the principal was good at allocating resources and ensuring that the restorative justice initiative was adequately funded and staffed.

The male and female assistant principals of the school were ethnically/racially diverse and were also staunch advocates of restorative justice. They were approachable, open, and caring people whom the author observed speaking naturally and easily with students. Although each administrator oversaw different aspects of the school, they worked well together as a team and demonstrated an observable respect for each other, the staff, students, and parents. They all served on a School Culture Committee and actively worked on creating a healthy and peaceful school environment (Brown 2015).

4.3. Staff

4.3.1. Southern Middle School

Of the 53 staff at Southern Middle, 75% were African American and the remaining 25% were white. More than 90% of the faculty were female. There was little camaraderie among teachers and staff, but they shared a sense of hopelessness and exhaustion; cliques, gossip, and mistrust abounded.

The faculty lunchroom was chaotic due to the sound of the assistant principal screaming at students mixed with the most vocal and unhappy teachers sharing daily laments about various students and the ineffectiveness of administrators. Some teachers formed professional friendships with others who shared the same hallway or who taught the same subject or grade level. Many were still passionate about teaching but were also frequently frustrated by disengaged, disruptive students and the general chaos that permeated the building. White teachers, including this author, often spoke in white code, referring to “those kids”. The author also witnessed several black teachers cautioning students to not let the white teachers “steal their education”. Teachers felt administrators and support staff were either ineffective or incompetent. The author did not experience or observe a love of the job or school, and joy was similarly absent. Armed school police served a singular purpose, which was to patrol the grounds and respond to incidents in the way that police are trained to do. Racial tension among staff was palpable and the relational gap between white and black teachers was wide.

4.3.2. Davis Middle School

Davis Middle School’s 40 academic teachers were diverse, both in terms of gender and ethnicity. The faculty included white, African American, Asian, Filipino, Latinx or Hispanic teachers, and more than a quarter of the teachers were male (Brown 2015). They were close-knit both in and out of school. A bulletin board in the main office displayed photographs of the entire staff and labeled the 21 support staff as, “Everyone else who we can’t live without!” Focus group and survey data revealed that the majority of teachers trusted and respected each other, held positive opinions about the school and its students, and were satisfied with their jobs (Brown 2015).

At the time of the author’s dissertation study (Brown 2015), Davis Middle had two full-time Restorative Justice Coordinators, both of whom were African American males. The senior RJ Coordinator’s responsibilities included training and overseeing a group of student peer mediators; training teachers; facilitating Circles at staff meetings; responding to requests for restorative interventions, such as mediations and Circles; coordinating and planning harm Circles; and being available to students who just needed to talk. The other RJ Coordinator’s role was quite different; he spent his entire day in the On-Campus Reflection (OCR) room, supervising students who had been sent out of class, de-escalating conflicts, holding conferences, and assisting students with their academic work. Both RJ Coordinators provided support across the entire school community and worked as a team.

Two African American School Resource Officers (SROs), one male and one female, provided security at Davis Middle. This author observed that the SROs moved throughout different areas of the school, both inside and outside, ready to respond to calls from teachers and administrators as needed. Both SROs were trained in restorative practices, and neither carried weapons. Although their primary job was security, they provided another level of

support for struggling students and were observed to treat them with respect even when escorting them out of classrooms.

4.4. Students

4.4.1. Southern Middle School

In 2008, 91% of Southern Middle School's 920 students were Black, 5% Hispanic, and 1% white. Its diversity score was 0.38, less than the state average of 0.70 ([Public School Review 2020b](#)). Eighty seven percent of students received a free or reduced lunch a standard poverty indicator; students were also provided with free breakfast and free after-school care. Additionally, 19% of the students were diagnosed with a learning disability and had Individual Education Plans (IEP) ([School District of Palm Beach County 2008](#)).

Students lived in nearby public housing or in the working-class neighborhoods surrounding the school and came to school wearing the mandatory uniform consisting of a green polo shirt embroidered with the school logo and khaki pants. In this author's sixth grade classroom, students' ages ranged from 11 to 14 years old, which was the direct result of the district's policy to hold back students in grades three and five who did not pass the state-mandated standardized test.

4.4.2. Davis Middle School

At Davis Middle School, of its 827 students in the 2014–2015 school year, 30.1% were African American, 28.8% Asian, 20.8% Latinx and 13% white. Its diversity score was 0.78, which was higher than the state average of 0.64 ([Public School Review 2020a](#)). The student body was racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse, and included special education students with Down's syndrome, autism, and other emotional, learning, or physical disabilities, who were taught by several well-qualified special education teachers. The majority (68%) of students who attended Davis Middle were not from the immediate neighborhood surrounding the school, so students reflected the rich ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the entire Oakland community. Still, 70% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch, a standard indicator of poverty ([Education Data Partnership 2020](#)).

Davis Middle had a team of seventh and eighth grade students trained to conduct peer mediations. These Peer Mediators were the subject of several local and national news stories before, during, and after this author's visit with them. They were leaders in their school and community and were always on call to assist other students with their problems. Peer Mediators spoke of how being in that role made them more confident, better leaders, better students, more empathetic, and gave them hope. Teachers also reported that of all the students, Peer Mediators seemed to be the most positively impacted by RJ ([Brown 2015](#)).

Students at Davis Middle were not required to wear school uniforms, but a dress code was in place to deter clothing that was deemed inappropriate by the administration. Some students the author interviewed felt the dress code was biased against girls of color ([Brown 2015](#)).

4.5. Response to Behavioral Incidents

4.5.1. Southern Middle School

Upon first being hired at Southern Middle School, several administrators told this author that if a student was disrupting the learning environment, they should be sent out. Exclusion and suspension were standard operating procedures and the preferred disciplinary responses. In 2008, the unduplicated In-School-Suspension (ISS) rate was 32% while the Out-of-School-Suspension (OSS) rate was 47% ([School District of Palm Beach County 2008](#)). This means that one in three students received at least one ISS and almost one in two received OSS. The duplicated rates were even higher, revealing the impact of the same students being repeatedly suspended. For those students, conferences with primary caregivers sometimes occurred after school, but only if those adults were able to attend. Generally, even after a conference, behavior did not improve, as there were no processes to

get at the root cause of the behavior and support struggling student. Instead, there was only reliance upon exclusion and punishment.

4.5.2. Davis Middle School

Davis Middle School responded to behavioral issues restoratively; the school's principal at the time told parents that they "do not try to punish the bad out of kids" (Brown 2015). The school had two rooms where RJ coordinators worked with struggling students. One was a comfortable room with a couch and numerous chairs arranged in Circle around a ritual centerpiece with talking pieces. One RJ coordinator was usually in this room ready to receive students who came to him to Circle up or talk things out.

The second RJ Coordinator supervised the On-Campus Reflection Room (OCR), where he played the dual role of teacher and peacemaker. OCR was a place where students could go instead of class if they thought they might have a problem with a teacher or student in that class; where they went if they were sent out of class; where they served lunch detention; and it was another room in which students could have restorative conferences or mediations. OCR differed from typical in-school suspension rooms in that it provided a welcoming environment where students were greeted with the scent of lavender aromatherapy, the sounds of calming new age music, and the sight of inspiring posters. It was both a calm room and a calming room. The RJ coordinator counseled students, helped them with their schoolwork, and facilitated restorative processes. Because this was a restorative school, suspension rates were among the lowest of all middle schools in the district (Brown 2015).

5. The Journey from Punitive to Restorative

The differences between the two schools were striking. Southern Middle had a toxic relational ecology; its pedagogy focused on deficits, rather than strengths (Banks 1981; Waldon and Baxley 2017); and the disciplinary methods established to gain social control disallowed space for methods that promoted social engagement (Morrison 2010). Davis Middle School had a positive relational ecology; a strong and cohesive leadership; pedagogies that supported students' creativity and cultural expressions (Waldon and Baxley 2017); and restorative approaches that helped students learn how to solve problems and conflict without violence (Brown 2015). The question is: how is it possible for a school like Southern Middle to become more like Davis Middle? The answer is by committing to systemic change over a long period of time using processes that facilitate, support, and sustain the change process; in other words, by applying a systems approach to RJE implementation.

RJE provides the values, structures, processes, and policies that, when implemented with integrity, have the power to address problems in ways that allow people to be heard, empowered and respected, and in ways that repair harm and promote healing (Davis 2019; Evans and Vaandering 2016; Parker 2020; Vaandering 2016). The work of transforming schools from punitive to restorative begins with building and nurturing relationships among staff, faculty, and administration (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Riestenberg 2012). When implemented with integrity to its values and processes across all school environments, RJE provides a viable alternative to the traditional oppressive, punitive, and racially biased educational systems. RJE achieves this by incorporating values, policies, and practices which intentionally seek to remedy and transform historic and institutional racism and harm, as well as harm between individuals (Davis 2019; Evans and Vaandering 2016; Parker 2020).

RJE requires a fundamental paradigm shift regarding how educators think about relationships, interconnectedness, and punishment (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Evans and Vaandering 2016; Zehr 2002). That said, the work of shifting paradigms needs to be conducted within a framework that supports the process of organizational change (Fullan 2006b; Hummelbrunner and Williams 2010). It cannot be left to enthusiastic teachers and administrators who received some "training" in the use of restorative practices (i.e., those

trained who are now expected to train others even though they may lack the experience and theoretical knowledge about what is needed to bring about genuine organizational and cultural change). Implementation science offers a much-needed framework for systems change.

5.1. A Systems Approach to School-Wide Implementation

The literature on change theory, school reform, systems thinking, and organizational learning and readiness provides a framework for setting up well-functioning schools capable of managing change and implementing sustainable reform efforts like RJE (Fullan 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Hall and Hord 2011; Hummelbrunner and Williams 2010; Levine and Lezotte 1995; Noga and McEathron 2018; Scaccia et al. 2015). A system may be defined as a group of interacting, interrelated, and interdependent elements, connected and joined by a web of relationships, that work together to form a whole. A system works to achieve a purpose. In complex systems like education, the whole will always be different from, and greater than, the sum of its parts (Noga and McEathron 2018). Schools can broaden their understanding of their relational ecology by mapping their intra- and inter-organizational systems and relationships. Otherwise, barriers to change could remain hidden. For example, forgetting to review discipline policies could result in policies directly conflicting with the changes the school wishes to make. Excluding parent groups could result in serious pushback from parents who believe that RJE is “soft”, and ignoring students’ voices and agencies will result in a school missing out on hearing the most critical and enlightened voices (Gilborn 1995), as students are the ones who must navigate the complex system of education every day.

One of RJE’s goals is to disrupt systems that disproportionately discipline students of color, students with special needs, and LGBTQI+ students. Unfortunately, too many schools fail to take a systems approach to change, and thus discriminatory systems remain in place. Without systems thinking (Fullan 2006b; Hummelbrunner and Williams 2010), schools have the potential to reduce student behavioral issues to individual students who are in conflict with individual teachers or with other students. Such schools tend to default toward the affirmative form of RJ (Reimer 2018) and use restorative practices as a kinder, gentler way to punish individual students. Trainers and training organizations are all too eager to respond to a school’s request to train staff to use restorative practices to deal with struggling students, while leaving culture and systems changes unaddressed.

Systems thinking creates space to examine teachers and their methods and beliefs: Are they authoritarian? Do they lecture, or use collaborative and relational pedagogies? Do they hold implicit bias that informs their treatment of and responses to certain students? Systems thinking creates space to review educational content: do all students see themselves in the curriculum, or is one dominant perspective being taught? Systems thinking creates space to review the learning environment: is it colorful, fun, and welcoming, or dreary and oppressive? Systems thinking creates space to review the expectations for students: are students there to fully develop as human beings and learn critical thinking and problem-solving skills, or are they there to pass a standardized test? Systems thinking creates space to review how the school is funded and organized: Are resources scarce? Are intraorganizational relations strong? Is leadership visionary and supportive, or punitive with a focus on compliance?

A systems approach may reveal that some behavioral issues are caused by students feeling that they do not belong to the school community. After all, behavior is a form of communication. What has been labeled “willful defiance” may in fact be how some students push back against a system that they perceive is hostile and unwelcoming to them. RJE requires an understanding of how the current system works or does not work effectively for everyone and how this system aspires to transform schools into just and equitable places where everyone belongs, everyone is respected, and all students get the quality education that they deserve.

5.2. Implementation Science

Implementation science promotes a systems approach to organizational change and breaks down the adoption and implementation of a new initiative into four stages: exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation (see [Brown 2018](#)). During the exploration stage, a school or district spends time learning about RJE and moves toward making the decision to adopt and enact the necessary processes and procedures to support implementation with integrity. Collaborators and contributors, including teachers, administrators, parents, district officials, and student leaders, create a values-based shared vision that embraces diverse perspectives and allows for the nuances of an individual school culture and context. Developing a restorative community of support is a priority ([Brown 2018, 2020](#); [Riestenberg 2015](#)).

The following questions are helpful to guide discussions about systems during the exploration stage:

- What are our internal systems?
- How do they relate to each other?
- Whom do they involve and impact?
- Do they work well together, or do they conflict with each other?
- Are staff overextended? Can internal systems be consolidated or streamlined?

While mapping out existing systems and determining if those systems need to be changed, consolidated, or eliminated, it is also important to determine if current systems are aligned with restorative values, or if changes need to be made so that they do.

Only after this work is done should schools move into the next stage of implementation—installation. During this phase, *all* staff are trained in RJE and trauma-informed restorative practices. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides free resources on training development that can easily be applied to RJ training. A quality training is one that meets all eight standards of effective training: (1) a needs assessment is conducted that informs training development, (2) clear learning objectives are established, (3) content is accurate and relevant, (4) the training includes opportunities for learner engagement, (5) the training is designed for usability and accessibility, (6), the training evaluation informs improvement, (7), training includes the opportunity for learner assessment, and (8) training includes follow-up support for the learner ([CDC 2021](#)).

Additionally, during the installation phase, schools set up the infrastructure required to successfully implement school-wide restorative practices. Schools purposely seek out and invite involvement from students, staff, families, and community members, and create a core team to plan, hold the vision, implement RJE, and collect data ([Brown 2018, 2020](#); [Riestenberg 2015](#)). During this phase, it may be appropriate to assess the school's readiness for implementation ([Atrill et al. 2019](#); RJA Consulting). The R = MC² Readiness Assessment, for example, provides all school community members with an opportunity to assess the three main components needed for change: the school's general capacity for change, the school's capacity for RJE specifically, and the motivation of the staff to embark on the long, hard road toward systemic change ([RJA Consulting 2020](#); [Scaccia et al. 2015](#)). Should the results of the assessment show that a school scores low in one or more of the three essential components, schools can work toward addressing the issues that are most likely to interrupt or hinder implementation before moving ahead to the initial implementation stage. Once the initial implementation stage begins, it is vital that feedback loops and other evaluative processes are implemented so that the school can recognize where things are working and where they are not working so those issues can be addressed. Over time, the goal is to change the systems that support punishment and affirmative RJ to systems that support repair, restoration, and transformational RJ ([Reimer 2018](#)). This involves systemic change beyond the school itself and invites community, district, state, and even federal agencies to collaborate and provide the resources needed to support the transformation.

Finally, evaluation and progress monitoring need to be incorporated into the implementation plan ([Brown 2020](#)). Process evaluation methods should be implemented for

the first three to five years to track a school's progress toward its goals and determine the degree to which RJE has been implemented with integrity. Circles can supplant traditional focus groups and be used to assess the progress of implementation efforts (Brown and Di Lallo 2020; Tachine et al. 2016), as can surveys, observations, and other methods to gather data. The data which will be collected and analyzed, and how results will be utilized, should be determined in early stages of implementation, and adjustments made as needed. No matter the method, feedback loops are vital. Outcome evaluations should not be conducted until at least five years into the implementation process, and even then, only if restorative practices are being implemented with a high degree of integrity across all three tiers. The degree to which restorative justice is implemented has a direct bearing on outcomes (Brown 2020).

Generally speaking, the field of education has failed to utilize organizational learning and change theories, despite the proliferation of literature, seminars, and practices. Some speculate that it is because administrators are often on yearly contracts and feel they must produce big results within that timeframe. That might suggest that short-term thinking may be a direct result of short-term employment contracts; however, this only reinforces the need for democratic governance and the empowerment of teachers, staff, students, and parents to say: "This is how we do things here. This is a restorative school", as observed at Davis Middle. Ultimately, schools and districts must understand at the outset—during the exploration stage—that systemic change takes time and that the full implementation of RJE can take five years or more. Even then, leaders and staff changes, and those new to the school must be on boarded and educated by a dedicated group of faculty and staff who practice RJE and can help others learn. Changing how we operate schools and creating a more just and equitable school system cannot be achieved in a year. While this article cannot address the short-game employment structure and mindset currently embedded in education, it does invite district and school administrators to commit to long-term systemic and culture change, even if they are not personally there to see it come to fruition.

For RJE to reach its full transformational potential, individual trainers need to build collaborative networks and teams comprised of people who specialize in various aspects of organizational change and evaluation, who offer different levels of training, coaching, and support. Additionally, districts may choose to contract with RJE consultants to develop and build professional development courses³ that provide all district personnel the opportunity to experience the deep learning, which supports the very restorative practices introduced by trainers. Courses that allow educators to understand the theory and research that supports RJE enhance the work of trainers as courses explain "why we do RJE," while training demonstrates "how we do RJE".

6. Conclusions

Restorative justice in education is not and should not be solely about Circles, about repairing harm between individuals, or about "fixing" students that adults perceive as "broken". RJ's very essence, deeply rooted in indigenous beliefs, values, and practices, calls for ending white body supremacy and the oppressive systems that feed it, while at the same time acknowledging and healing historical harms (Davis 2019; Goens-Bradley 2020; Valandra 2020). This author's personal journey that began with multicultural education and restorative justice, and now includes healing trauma and anti-racism, is testimony that RJE can facilitate individual *and* institutional transformation—including those institutions that prepare teachers and school leaders. Because schools are not structured to allow RJE to fit into them comfortably, any desire to implement RJE must be done by careful design with attention to systems thinking, implementation science, and evaluation. Only when implemented holistically and systematically does RJE have the potential to transform a school's culture and the people in it.

³ This author built one such course for a large school district who realized that "train-and-pray" was not moving them toward their goal of whole-school implementation.

Systems change requires courage on the part of school administrators and RJ trainers and consultants. RJ practitioners and trainers need to understand how systems can be changed and provide services that facilitate such change. Schools can no longer ask for and enter into short-term (one year or less) contracts with trainers who “train and pray.. We cannot return to “normal”. Full implementation takes time and ongoing coaching and support. Schools, then, must commit to the long game, which means multi-year contracts with training teams and larger budgets to cover the costs. Without a full commitment to systems change, RJE will continue to be the subject of criticism, never reaching its full potential to transform individuals and educational institutions.

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