Can Restorative Community Building Circles Be Used To Reduce The Need For Reactive Discipline In Schools?

A Pilot Program Proposal

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Capstone 2015
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"Attention to negative peace, or the simple absence of war, usually results in a diplomatic emphasis on peacekeeping or peace restoring (if a war has already broken out). By contrast, positive peace focuses on peace building, the establishment of non-exploitative social structures, and a determination to work toward that goal even when a war is not ongoing or imminent. Negative peace is thus a more conservative goal, as it seeks to keep things the way they are (if a war is not actually taking place), whereas positive peace is more active and bolder, implying the creation of something that does not currently exist." (Barash and Webel, 2002. Pg. 8).

A great deal of literature has been presented around the concept of positive and negative peace. As the previous quote illustrates, negative peace represents an absence of war. Positive peace is more thorough in its attention to the underlying structures and consequences of violence. Restorative practices (RP) can easily be viewed through the lens of the positive and negative peace motif. Originating from the criminal justice system, RP has recently made an appearance in the school system as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies (Jain, Bassey, Brown, and Kalra, 2014). If we compare positive and negative peace to RP we can see that negative peace is likened to the cessation of violent conflict on school campuses. However positive peace represents a positive change in the overall climate of the school.

A valid question to this concept of positive and negative peace is, “why should positive peace hold such importance? After all, shouldn’t ending violence be enough?” Johan Galtung, who is known as the founding father of peace studies recognized that positive peace involves the integration of the human community. In order to fully experience peace, there must be a change in the way the society is experiencing life as a group. Atack (2009) states that “positive peace is the absence of structural violence” (Para. 1). Structural violence involves the structures that have
been implemented by the overarching entities. Some examples of this may be government bodies or state structures. Structures are considered violent when they disadvantage some groups while providing opportunities to others. Positive peace thus seeks to apportion an equitable balance of resources and opportunities to all (Atack, 2009). Within the school system, we can argue that there is a presence of structural violence in the disproportionate number of students of color who are suspended and expelled as well as the accompanying effects of the school-to-prison pipeline (Khadaroo, 2013). To seek positive peace in the school system would require a redistribution of the opportunities for success amongst all students.

Another way to look at the two forms of peace is that negative peace focuses on what it can take away (i.e., the cessation of violence) while positive peace focuses on what it is adding. Grains of Peace understands positive peace to include “serenity, harmony, well-being, human bonds, shared human values (respect, acceptance, kind heartedness, equity etc.), and strong feelings for a common humanity”. As we will explore later, these are similar to the values and goals of restorative practices.

The National School Climate Center characterizes school climate as the “quality and character of school life” (National School Climate, n.d.). Restorative practice programming is one way to address the issue of school climate. While restorative practices may be conceived of differently and result in various types of programs, some common ones are Restorative Conferences, Mediation, and Circles. Circles, can be used for a variety of purposes. They are sometimes used to address a harm or to help build community. Amos Clifford of Forest Therapy and Restorative Practices states that, “responsive circles (for responding to misbehavior and
harm) work best in classrooms where a foundation has been developed through community building circles“ (Clifford, n.d.).

For the purpose of this proposal, I will seek to explore the benefits of proactive restorative programs and will therefore, be focusing on Community Building Circles which will herein be referred to as “circles”. While research and support for circles do exist, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on the importance of proactive restorative programs in combination with reactive RP programs. This research seeks to provide a well-informed program proposal which includes using proactive and reactive RP programming as compliments to one another versus stand alone programs.

My hope is that this research will emphasize the need to include proactive programming, such as circles, along with other reactive restorative programs. This paper will provide a quick overview of the different types of RP programs, the ways in which it has already been applied in the school system, the benefits and challenges related to its implementation and what needs to be done to provide a holistic and proactive pilot program. Prior data and research from restorative practitioners and my own experiences attempting to implement restorative circles in a school through the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) will be explored. However, this paper will not address in great length the affects of retributive justice or zero-tolerance. Nor will it explore the school to prison pipeline, provide a curriculum for various RP programs, explore other types of circles, or make recommendations for the implementation of reactive programs.

The premise of this paper is first, to show that the implementation of restorative circles have an influential effect on other reactive RP programs in such a way that as one is implemented, the other is not as sorely needed. Hence, as circles are implemented and utilized,
peer mediation and conferencing will be needed less. The second premise focuses on the idea that restorative programming, while it may look different on each school campus based on the needs of the school community, must include proactive and reactive measures to be most successful.

**Overview of RP Programs**

A true restorative process does not commence only once a harm has taken place. Rather, a restorative approach can be used unceremoniously. One image that helps to convey the spectrum of restorative practices is the RP Continuum, as seen in figure 1., which was developed by Ted Wachtel of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). The Continuum illustrates a range of informal to formal activities. At the far left exists practices that can be used in everyday interactions, such as affective statements and questions. “I” statements, which are the pinnacle of affective statements, is a way for those in conflict to convey the impact of the incident in a respectful manner so that the underlying needs are recognized and addressed (Wachtel, 2013).

Warren Preparatory Academy in Brooklyn New York has been using restorative practices since 2010. One third grade teacher stated, “Instead of lashing out or hitting, we hear them [students] say, ‘You hurt my feelings.’ They didn’t have the words before.” Helping students and teachers acquire such skills, is the first step in creating a restorative school climate (Mirsky, 2011). Affective questions are nonjudgmental ways of shedding light on who was affected by an

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**Figure 1.**
(Wachtel, 2013. Pg. 4)
action and in which way(s) (International Institute For Restorative Practices, 2006). The Continuum includes small impromptu conferences, circles and then formal conferencing. As the activities on the Continuum veer right, they become more reactive and require more time, organization and community involvement. This paper will provide a greater explanation of conferences, peer mediation and circles. All three programs can be used to address harm although this paper will primarily explore the proactive nature of circles. According to the IIRP, “organizations and services that only use the reactive without building the social capital beforehand are less successful than those that also employ the proactive” (Wachtel, 2013).

**Conferences:**

Restorative conferences are voluntary processes used when a harm has been committed. Its roots take place within the criminal justice system but have been used with success in the school system as well (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2006). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, who refers to the process as Family Group Conferencing (FGC), provides a great description of the background, procedures, and goals of FGC. These processes are similar to other restorative conferences such as those used with the NCRC (Wilson, 2001). Conferencing can be utilized in a variety of contexts, such as academic institutions, the criminal justice system and the workplace. In schools, it has been used to address issues of absenteeism, misbehavior, violence, and residential conflicts in universities. Conferencing has also been a part of many alternative diversion programs within the criminal justice system (Wachtel, 2013).

The purpose of a restorative conference is for those involved in and affected by a harm to gather together and dialogue about the event itself, what led up to it, and what can be done to
repair the harm. For the impacted party, they are able to ask questions of the person responsible, share the impact of the incident and make requests of the person responsible in order to repair the harm. The person responsible benefits from the process by being allowed to make reparations for their harm, restore the relationship when applicable, and reintegrate back into the community in a healthy positive manner (Wachtel, 2013).

There has been some debate as to the effectiveness of restorative practices as it pertains to recidivism. However, anecdotal evidence from various schools implementing RP suggest that when done correctly, restorative practices can help alleviate recidivism rates and contribute to a healthy school climate. Assistant Principal Russell Gallagher from West Philadelphia High School stated, “Before implementing restorative practices, we had a lot of issues of violence, fires, kids misbehaving in class, and disrespect. What restorative practices does is change the emotional atmosphere of the school. You can stop guns, but you can’t stop them from bringing fists or a poor attitude. A metal detector won’t detect that” (Lewis, n.d. Pg. 6). Data retrieved between the years 2006 and 2008 show a 52 percent decrease in “violent acts and serious incidents” at West Philadelphia High School. The following year, the school witnessed an additional 40 percent decrease (Lewis, n.d.).

**Peer Mediation:**

Peer mediation is the process in which students involved in a conflict with one another meet with a trained student mediator. The role of the mediator is to help the students discuss the conflict and jointly decide upon a shared accord which is to the satisfaction of all disputing parties. The process and the content of the discussion are always confidential and the peer mediator is to remain impartial in the dispute (Study Guides and Strategies, n.d.). Peer mediation
exists somewhere within the middle of the restorative Continuum. It is used when there is a victim and offender (although these roles may be interchangeable). The feature which separates peer mediation from traditional mediation is of course that students are trained to facilitate dialogues between their peers (Morgado and Oliveira, 2010).

The benefits of this model of mediation is that both mediators and disputants learn and gain skills through the process. Through the mediation, all parties must utilize affective listening. It has also been reported to influence empathy and self-esteem for the involved parties. Morgado and Oliveira (2010), state that the skills developed through peer mediation training may have residual effects on the home and community life as students come to utilize them outside of the school context. Such an effect was experienced by multiple students from Crawford High School. Many reported improved relationships when they used mediation to address their own conflicts with siblings. For some of them, this extended beyond the conflict at hand and had a transformative result on the relationship as a whole. One student shared a story about how she and her brother had fought some years ago and since that day had not spoken a word to one another. After learning about restorative practices, she decided to take a restorative approach with her brother and they looked each other in the eyes for the first time in years.

School climate may also benefit from peer mediation programs. The implementation of peer mediation “can reduce violence, free up teachers to teach more and discipline less and increase student morale” (Morgado and Oliveira, 2010. Pg. 67). One explanation for the causation of improved school climate can be attributed to the fact that students may feel more comfortable addressing small conflicts in a timely manner when they can discuss it with other
students and avoid the fear of retribution from staff or faculty. As a result, conflicts or ill-feelings do not have an opportunity to fester, leading to larger conflicts (Sellman, 2011).

Circles:

The circle process, while fairly new to many academic institutions, has deep indigenous roots. The Plains Peoples of North America, The First Nations in Canada, The Yukon, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba have all used circle processes within their communities. The purpose of the circles amongst these groups have varied from healing, intervention, or alternatives to imprisonment. However, for many of these groups, circles are a part of living communally with one another; the concept of circles are often applied in everyday life (Living Justice Press, n.d. and Parker, n.d.).

Then and now, circles have been used to gather together in order to build a connection amongst those within the circle. Additionally, the circle structure and prompt help to break down barriers which may be self induced through cliques or assigned through an institutional structure. Furthermore the circle process has the power to address and attend to some of the most basic human desires. Amos Clifford (n.d.), would argue these desires are to be “heard, seen, understood” and I would add, to be known. Circles are based on the premise that all individuals have the desire for connection to a community. The goal to reach a level in which trust is developed so that deeper connections may be made (Pranis, 2005).

One could liken this process to the one which occurs with our “best” friends. All friendships begin at a place of superficial trust and relationship. As individuals begin talking and spending time with one another, they develop trust, and as a result the topics of conversation become deeper. This understanding is supported by Pranis (2005) who states that “one of the
most important contributions of circles is the strengthened web of relationships among a group of people...those connections increase the community’s capacity to take care of all its members and to find solutions when problems arise” (Pg. 60).

There are other types of restorative programs and ways in which the aforementioned programs may be used differently than described. It must be said that the types of programs used and the ways in which they are implemented may look differently and should be taken under consideration of the individual school. Restorative schools should not necessarily take an identical approach to other schools who have already implemented such practices. The most important factors in creating a restorative school is that it includes measures to address and prevent harm. This sentiment is shared by the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan who states that “schools and districts should ensure that clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences are in place, both to prevent and to address misbehavior” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

It is often assumed that RP offers little accountability or consequences to student misbehavior. However the goal is not to avoid consequences. Rather to help students understand the impact of their behavior and give them a role in repairing the harm. Felicia Singleton, Program Manager of Placement and Appeals for San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) works to restoratively reintegrate students after they have been removed from the school community due to suspension or expulsion. Singleton states that a common misperception of restorative justice is that it lacks accountability. That is why it is important to include the impacted parties in a restorative conference before the offending student has rejoined the community. Restorative justice allows the victims to have a voice in the process. When the
impacted parties are able to participate, they are not left feeling that justice was lacking. (Singleton, personal communication, October 23, 2015). It is also important to include training and resources for school personnel to adapt to a restorative approach in all aspects of the classroom and school culture. More will be said on this later.

**How conflict arises**

If we are to suggest that proactive measures can help prevent some conflicts from spiraling upwards, it would be helpful to have an understanding of how conflicts arise and escalate. Thomas (1976) refers to conflict as “the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has frustrated, or is about to frustrate, some concern of his” (Pg. 891). While conflicts are never completely identical, there are basic needs that each person feels are not being met. Common origins of conflict are “identity, dignity, security, equity, and participation in decisions that affect them [the individuals in conflict]” (Ghaffar, n.d. Pg. 214). While conflict usually has a negative connotation, there are benefits to it. Conflicts allow issues to be exposed and addressed. For groups under suppression, this could mean a change in the status quo and a movement towards peace and justice. Conflict can also influence self-identity and group solidarity. We can see this present in countries who have formed alliances against a shared enemy (Brahm, 2004).

Conflict however, can have negative results if not handled properly. Abdul Ghaffar suggests that conflicts arise at an institution level as individuals have repeat interactions with one another. Conversely, Winstok (n.d.). hypothesizes that repeat interaction provides opportunities for individuals to gain a deeper understanding of one another including each other’s “needs, wishes, and boundaries” (Pg. 298). The community building circle process helps to address
conflict sources even without discussing a particular harm that has been committed. This is achieved simply by the premises and structure of the circle process. For instance, a community building circle is conducted in a circle, utilizes a talking piece and begins by establishing ground rules. The circle formation is important because everyone is able to see and be seen, to hear and be heard (Cowan and Adams, 2002).

It is no revelation that students in school classify one another based on membership to one group or another. There are athletic teams, after school clubs, “in-groups” and “out-groups”. There are so many avenues in which students are segregated and divided in schools. The Social Identity Theory helps to explain why groups respond to others outside of their group in sometimes hostile ways. One reason is that membership in a particular group helps to solidify our identity. Furthermore, the more robust the connection to a particular identity, the stronger the potential for conflict is (Pruitt and Kim, 2004).

Inevitably, there will be bonds that tie students together as well as disconnect them from others. Yet, this does not in and of itself lead to conflict. Pruitt and Kim (2004) provide an illustration, as seen in figure 2, of two separate cases representing a community with overlapping and crosscutting bonds. A community with overlapping bonds as illustrated in Case 1 is indicative of a capricious environment. This is produced by connections which exist only between similar groups. For instance, Case 1 could illustrate the connections between two Israelis (A,C) and two Palestinians (B,D). Conversely, Case 2 represents connections between all groups. While not everyone is connected in every way, every one has at least one link. As a result, a secure environment has been forged (Pruitt and Kim, 2004. Pg. 141).
An environment homogenous to Case 2 can be achieved in the classroom through the inclusiveness of the circle. Circles provide a space for individual life experiences to be shared so that each person’s story becomes apart of the others’. Cowan and Adams (2002), state that “When engaged to its full potential, the Talking Circle transcends individual egos, exclusive dichotomies (e.g. us versus them), and fragmented, disconnected outcomes, and instead provides a whole story” (Pg. 4). When we foster an environment in which each voice is heard, it allows the crosscutting ties to be cultivated and thus establishes the foundation for conflicts to be handled in a healthy and productive manner. One way this is done is through what Riestenberg (2012) calls “collective narratives” (Pg. 103) in which storytelling enables individuals to resonate with an experience of someone else, thus creating an additional tie. As individuals begin to recognize themselves as part of the community, they will seek to keep a healthy relationship with others. Therefore, proactive measures arguably decrease conflict and needs for intervention. The opposite is also true; if interventions are properly done and put in place, it should also help establish community cohesiveness (San Diego Unified School District, 2014).
Another way of understanding how deleterious conflict escalates from a classroom or school community perspective is through the Unmanaged Conflict Cycle as seen in figure 3. The conflict cycle is comprised of five stages. Stage I, Change: Confusion/Tension, represents a change to the environment or operation. This doesn’t have to be significant or unexpected, it could simply be a transition between activities. Conflict commences at this stage when such change prevents us from doing what we want to do. This prevention which can be referred to as “blocking” (Claassen and Claassen, 2008. Pg. 29), may be perceived or real. An example of this in the classroom is a student returning from lunch being told they can not finish their meal during class time. At this stage conflict has not yet escalated. Often the signs of conflict are missed or ignored which means it is not addressed, thus allowing the following stages (Claassen and Claassen, 2008).

At Stage II those involved in the conflict begin to search for the source or instigator of the conflict. Since we are less comfortable acknowledging our own fault in a situation, we naturally blame the other(s) involved. Since we believe we have located the source of the conflict, all other interactions are filtered through this perception. We then begin to concentrate on the negative aspects of a person which informs our narrative of them. In Stage III of unmanaged conflict we silently accrue an arsenal of wrong doings and our own perception of victimhood is established (Claassen and Claassen, 2008).
The Confrontation Stage (Stage IV) in the cycle is when our sense of injustice is spontaneously expressed to the other party. Due to the spontaneous nature of this stage, our frustrations are rarely expressed in a constructive manner. As a result, the other party feels the need to defend themselves especially if they have already gone through the last three stages of the cycle themselves. Each party is likely feeling unheard since everyone is focusing only on their own victimhood, therefore each person begins speaking louder or yelling which “is an unconscious response when one thinks the other is not listening. Speaking loudly is an unconscious attempt to get the other to listen” (Claassen and Claassen, 2008. Pg. 31).

The root of the issue is rarely addressed at this stage. Usually, each party will try to modify the situation, often separating themselves from one another. This modification is how Stage V is formed. The issue here is when there is a lack of closure to a conflict, it often festers and the negative feelings which evolved through the course of the cycle still remain. Here we can see the issue with traditional discipline policies. When we suspend students involved in a conflict or do not provide a way for them to properly address conflict, they return to class with one another still experiencing a feeling of victimhood for themselves and blame for the other party (Claassen and Claassen, 2008).

**How it has been applied in the school system**

The terms Restorative Justice (RJ) and Restorative Practices (RP) are often used interchangeably though they denote different things. Restorative justice exists as an entity under the umbrella of restorative practices (Wachtel, 2013). Restorative justice in practice refers to a reactive model. For this reason, peer mediation and restorative conferencing would be under such a subset. Figure 4 illustrates the degree to which students should experience each phase of
The first tier represents 100 percent of the student population who should be engaged in community building circles. Tier 2 represents approximately 15 percent of the student population requiring some form of conflict intervention either in the form of mediation or conference. This tier is non-punitive and focuses on repairing any harm that was committed. The third tier should focus on only about 5 percent of the student population after a harm has been committed and the student was removed from the school community and has returned to the school (Jain, Bassey, Brown, and Kalra, 2014).

Felicia Singleton of SDUSD further states that RJ at the reentry phase is crucial to contributing to a positive school climate. Providing a conference between the responsible youth and impacted parties “helps everyone to move forward. It provides closure for everyone involved instead of letting the conflict fester” (Singleton, personal communication, October 23, 2015). At every level of interaction whether disciplinary or otherwise, students should be experiencing the restorative process. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has developed a comprehensive restorative justice program guide which includes an explanation of the purpose and goals behind restorative justice, and explanation of their program, a timeline for
implementation, various training materials, and evaluations. This is one program that may be
drawn upon as an example of effective implementation (Jain, Bassey, Brown, and Kalra, 2014).

Their program model includes a heavy emphasis on training and incorporated additional
positions to support their movement. These include the District Program Manager, Site
Supervisor, Program Coordinator, Youth Leaders and an Advisory Team. Additionally, they train
and identify RP advocates amongst existing staff and faculty. This has a few important
implications. For instance, while it is most effective to have RP as a school-wide initiative, one
cannot mandate a paradigm shift to occur. Therefore Oakland Unified provides the education and
training opportunity to all but leans on the support of those who have bought in to the program

The Bushwick Campus in Brooklyn New York, is a wonderful example of a student led
initiative for restorative practices in the school system. Students on this campus first distributed
a survey to their peers and staff to identify types of conflict on campus and ways in which it
could be dealt with in a positive manner. Following their research, student leaders received
training on Restorative Practices, Aikido and Mediation from various organizations. With the
help of campus staff, the students were able to enact a number of proposals to address campus
conflict. Some of these proposals were to provide workshops and after school programs to pass
along the training they had received in conflict resolution. The group was also very intentional
in targeting the freshmen class and teaching them what conflict is, how to deescalate conflict and
find mutually agreeable solutions to their problems. Another important component of their work
was providing these workshops to black and Latino students from their school - two groups
experiencing consistent conflict with one another (National Economic and Social Rights
At Lyons Community School, RP has been applied in every area of the school community. They exemplify a whole school approach. This begins with establishing a restorative practice outlook as a part of the school’s ideology. Secondly, they employ a teaching and disciplinary approach which reflects the International Institute for Restorative Practice’s model of doing things alongside students rather than ‘to’ or ‘for’ them or neglecting them all together as seen in Figure 5. Practically speaking, restorative practices are used in a variety of ways, some more overtly than others. For instance, RP concepts are used in classroom structure and set up so that students learn basic academic lessons and other skills in circles. A bit more obvious is to start off each student’s day in a community building circle and to use restorative justice measures to address disciplinary proceedings (National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, 2011).

The circle concept can also be integrated into classroom curriculum. In the book *Circle in the Square* (Riestenberg, 2012), one teacher shares about her struggle to get students from her English class, at the alternative school where she taught, to share their written pieces. The teacher waited until the start of the next year and began by implementing community building circles in order to build a sense of community and establish trust in the class. Secondly, she began using circles during their class discussions and then began incorporating them in what she calls a “read around” (Pg. 131). The read around consisted of each student sharing a piece they had written
once they received the talking piece. Students could share as little or as much as they felt comfortable with. The other students in turn would take notes and provide feedback to the presenter. Students felt safe to share their work and began taking pride in what they created. This led to an increased interest in learning in order to hone their writing skills so they could produce and share their best work with their classmates (Riestenberg, 2012).

While circles can be used during a class lesson, they can also be helpful in setting the tone of the class. Riestenberg (2012) shares some stories of teachers who used circles for a part of the lesson or just to check in with students at the start of class. This resulted in students focusing on the class topic and helped introverted students feel comfortable speaking. In another example, circles were used in a health lesson about HIV. A student was able to share her knowledge of HIV because of her ten year old sister having contracted it at birth. For the rest of the lesson, students looked to the student for information and opinions on the subject. This is an example of how circles can also positively serve students by empowering them in the classroom (Riestenberg, 2012).

**Benefits and challenges**

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) has recently declared that it wanted to take on restorative practices in its schools (Magee, 2014). Crawford High School has been the home of one of two teen courts in San Diego California for the last four years. They have also been using a peer mediation program to address student conflicts and in the last year have incorporated circles into their restorative repertoire. I had the pleasure, as an intern with the National Conflict Resolution Center, to help train students and implement circles at Crawford this past year.
While we experienced great success at Crawford, it was not without challenges. We struggled to get full buy-in from all school personnel, had a lack of mentors and support, and had limited time to engage students in circles. Part of the pilot program at Crawford included an evaluation conducted by the students. Therefore, students from the classes who hosted the circles were asked to complete a survey on their experiences in the circle. The surveys asked whether the circle was a positive experience and asked students to share comments on their experiences in circle. Ninety-two percent of students stated they had a positive experience in the circles. Some of the less favorable comments we received on the surveys were “No one really talked and it was awkward” and “I find the circle unnecessary but the idea is a good thing. I like the fact that we’re trying to get to know each other but I don’t want to be part of it because of work that I want to finish” (Crawford High School Students, survey, May 2015). These can be explained by some of our other challenges such as structural factors with scheduling.

In particular, our project would have been strengthened if we were able to visit with the students on a more regular basis and had a greater time frame to hold the circles. Allowing for a dedicated time and space for such activities would help students to compartmentalize their other activities or assignments so they could focus on participating in circles instead of being torn by other responsibilities. This sentiment is affirmed by the positive feedback we received from the student surveys. Some responses to the surveys included, “It is really about sharing each others’ story and trying to connect with each other and get along with others. We have a circle so that there won’t be a lot of bullying and I think it kind of helps”. Other comments included, “Not many people have anyone to ask how their weekend went or what they’re interested in so I thought that was really nice”, as well as, “When we did the circle I
really had a better day than when I don’t talk about my day.” (Crawford High School Students, survey, May 2015).

One of our main partners in Restorative Practices at Crawford High School was Steven Luttbeg, a teacher at Crawford. Luttbeg has a background in civil litigation and all forms of alternative dispute resolution. In 2010 he came out of retirement to help create the Crawford High School Academy of Law, a California Partnership Academy. He was primarily responsible for creating a student led restorative justice program including Teen Court, Peer Mediation, and student facilitated Community Building Circles. He is currently a consultant working with the SDUSD to replicate the Crawford program in other urban high schools and amongst others interested in restorative practices. While reflecting on the past five years of RP implementation at Crawford, Luttbeg has created a list of recommendations; some of which are being considered as Crawford is coming into its sixth year of RP implementation.

Some of his recommendations are to receive financial support from the District for restorative activities, training and on-site personnel. A restorative framework should be utilized at the district level and with staff and faculty to proactively address conflict. Additionally, measures should be put in place to intervene when conflict has already occurred amongst students and staff. Luttbeg recommends that weekly circles be conducted in various classes and should be student led. According to Luttbeg, “adults need to provide students with the necessary information and then get out of their way”. Student led circles would include teams of two seniors serving as primary facilitators, two juniors who would slowly transition into a co-facilitator role and two sophomores who would serve as participants in the circles and collect data for evaluation of the program. Weekly debriefs are imperative for student circle facilitators
and time to prepare for the upcoming circles. Luttbeg also recommended Saturday school
training for students who have been identified as “at-risk” or in need of intervention, as well as
students expressing an interest in learning about RP but may be restricted due to class or
scheduling interference (Luttbeg, S., personal communication, October 27, 2015).

Considering the overwhelming evidence for the benefits of Restorative Justice Practices,
one might wonder why there has not been a larger movement towards its implementation. One
reason is that RJ takes time to incorporate into the school system and can take some time to see
the results. In addition, a lack of funding can be a barrier. Individuals who facilitate must be
trained, which also takes time and money to accomplish. Another challenge that holds back RJ
and RP in schools is a lack of understanding of restorative practice. It may be difficult for some
to envision the practical ways in which it is to be adopted in a school setting. Furthermore, it is
difficult for people to transition to a new practice when they have been operating and viewing
things from a particular lens. (Evans, Lester, and Anfara Jr., 2013. Pg. 61).

A common misperception of RP is that students are not held accountable for their actions,
thus making it a futile endeavor. The New York Post recently published an article attempting to
discredit the effectiveness of restorative practices. The article included quotes from educators
dissatisfied with the process and stated that RP meant a lack of consequences for students
(Sperry, 2015). However, this could not be further from the truth. Justine Darling of NCRC
explains that RP holds students more accountable for their actions than traditional zero-tolerance
policies such as suspensions or expulsions. These types of consequences reward students for
misbehavior, allowing them to “hang out alone at home, perhaps playing video games or
watching TV while missing school” (Magee, 2014).
Amos Clifford acknowledges that some students involved in restorative programs may recidivate. While it may be tempting to use recidivism as evidence toward the ineffectiveness of RP, Clifford likens the experience to other academic learning challenges. When a student appears inept in an academic discipline, we do not presume that discipline to be ineffective. Clifford states, “Consider what would happen if we gave up on mathematics because students don’t solve all problems correctly. Would we then say, “Obviously, math doesn’t work! and give up?” (Pg. 8). Students, he claims, are in a process of comparing alternative responses to the world around them. At times they may revert to old habits but learning is still taking place (Clifford, n.d.). While such critiques are less applicable to circles than reactive programs, they are still relevant since both types of RP programs should be implemented together.

**Whole-School Application**

Restorative practices are not only a way to redirect undesirable student behavior; they are about a cultural shift. Restorative programming is most effective when the shift occurs throughout a school community. This does not only mean that new referral policies are enacted but that at every level students, staff, and faculty are experiencing and operating from a restorative lens. One important aspect to this is educating and training school officials on how to respond restoratively with one another. It is laughable to expect students to behave in such a manner with their peers if the adults mandating restorative practices are not practicing it themselves. Secondly, is whether staff and faculty are attempting to educate the whole student, not just the academic side. If we want students to be successful as members of the community and within the work force, then social and emotional learning are just as important as becoming proficient in math and science (Stutzman and Mullet, 2005).
The kind of language we use is an important factor in creating restorative responses from students, staff, and faculty. For instance, Stutzman and Mullet (2005), state that schools who “rename their lunchrooms as dining rooms often report greater respect and civility than when cafeteria is the common descriptor” (Pg. 37). Other questions to ask are: What other structural components are in place to allow students the agency to act restoratively themselves? How is collaboration encouraged and implemented into the curriculum? Some schools provide designated areas for students to discuss and resolve issues before an intervention is needed. A curriculum should be incorporated into the classroom to help teach students how to be empathic, kind, respectful and to resolve conflicts with one another (Stutzman and Mullet, 2005).

As previously discussed, the switch to RP is not just a matter of reformatting referral forms or telling teachers and students to behave more restoratively. Rather, it is a paradigm shift which takes time. As a result, “it is likely there will be resistance to restorative principles or that restorative practices will be implemented but co-opted by more punitive approaches” (Evans, Lester, and Anfara Jr. 2013. Pg. 61). Yet, because “children live what they learn” (Clifford, n.d. Pg.1), it is important that RP is a holistic part of the school community. Circles can be applied as a part of the classroom curriculum before or after a conflict arises (Clifford, n.d.).

An important factor in the implementation of RP in schools is whether the suspension and expulsion requirements are addressed. It will not be very impactful to incorporate these programs if students continue to be expelled and suspended at alarming rates. While there is still work that needs to be done, SDUSD has seen an incredible decrease in the number of suspensions and expulsions as a result of implementing RP in schools. One cause for this change is that the district has decreased the type of offenses which lead to a mandated expulsion. Previously, there
were 15 offenses that would cause school officials to refer a student for expulsion without regard to the context of the offense. For instance, a student caught fighting for the third time would be removed from school. Often such situations were a result of bullying and/or self-defense. At present, there are now only 5 offenses that are mandated expulsions, which are “sexual assault, possession of a gun, possession of an explosive, brandishing a knife, and selling a controlled substance” (Magee, 2014. Para. 7).

While not all of the 15 offenses resulted in expulsions every time, many did. In 2013, there were 400 referrals issued and 134 of them led to expulsion. By May of 2014, after the fifteen mandated expulsions were reduced to 5, only 178 referrals were issued, resulting in only 58 expulsions (Burks, 2015). Seeing a drop from 134 to only 58 expulsions is significant and a testament to the effects of Restorative Practices.

A common argument for the use of suspensions and expulsions is that they are necessary for the educational benefit of non-combative students in the class. It is popularly believed that classroom disruptions have a negative affect on the learning of others and therefore, the most logical answer is to remove the disruption. An article published by the American Sociological Review studied the affects of suspension and expulsion amongst peers in the class.

The study analyzed the math and reading scores of students who had not been suspended but were attending schools with high rates of suspension and expulsions. The study controlled for variables related to student’s circumstances such as poverty, previous suspensions, gender, race/ethnicity, and special education needs. At the school level, confounding variables that were controlled for included the rates of drug offenses, campus violence, and classroom misconduct. Math and reading where used as the defining factors because of the link between test results,
students repeating grades, drop out rates out, and success in higher education (Perry and Morris, 2014).

The study showed that as the rate of suspension and expulsions in a school increased, math and reading scores of the “good” students decreased. When the rate of suspensions and expulsions were low to average, scores did not appear to be negatively affected. One theory for this correlation is that a retributive system contributes to feelings of “anxiety, distrust, and uncertainty, even for students who do nothing wrong”. The article also stated that, “in 2010, more than 3 million students were suspended from school” (Perry and Morris, 2014. Pg. 1070). If high rates of suspension and expulsions are contributing to low math and reading scores, we must consider the alarming implications that this many suspensions can have on our students and community as a whole.

An important consideration however, is that the success of a restorative school lies not just in reducing suspension and expulsion rates. There must be an alternative intervention in which the more formal pieces of the Continuum are utilized. The change within SDUSD came from the understanding that,

“Restorative Justice is...holding offenders directly accountable to the people they have violated, and providing a range of opportunities for dialogue, negotiation and problem-solving, which can lead to a greater sense of community safety, social harmony and peace for all concerned” (San Diego Unified School District, 2014).

**Recommendations**

My recommendation is that schools moving towards a restorative approach place a heavier emphasis on circles in such a way that they are experienced amongst students, faculty
and staff alike. This requires that training be provided for the school community as it was in OUSD, and that advocates self-identify. In order to create a sustainable program, a “train the trainer” model must be used. Schools can also use registration or Freshmen Orientation as an opportunity to introduce the concept of RP amongst the students. This will create a restorative environment for the students from the start of their school experience. Ideally, if such programs could be utilized throughout the feeder schools (elementary, middle and high schools that feed to one another), students would enter into secondary education familiar with restorative practices. Classroom structure could also be arranged, when feasible, to emulate restorative concepts such as having classes taught in a circle formation. Circles could be a part of the morning routine as in the case of Lyons Community School, and could help identify how students are feeling and what they need in order to be their best selves that day. Lastly, as previously mentioned, circles should be used in conjunction with other reactive programs.

One need in future research is to provide evaluations of restorative schools before and after circles are added to the restorative programming. This would help provide insight as to how proactive measures influence the need for intervention on school campus. Misbehavior and crime may not be completely absent from the school community. Rather, it is expected that conflicts requiring mediation and conferencing will be sparse. Evaluations could include data on the number of reported conflicts, number of interventions, and number of action plans from conferences which have been completed. In addition, pre and post surveys from students, staff and faculty are needed. Similar to that which were conducted at The Bushwick Campus, these surveys would assess the following: Perceptions of the types of conflicts occurring, feelings of safety, and additional measures needed to increase the sense of safety. Currently at Crawford,
there has been an increase in student requests and initiatives to use circles to address conflicts. Increased interest in restorative approaches and programs could also be monitored through attendance of peacebuilding and restorative programs.

**Conclusion**

A restorative school is not built over night, it is a process. Circles are imperative in the process as it aids in other restorative practices. Circles set the foundation for harms to be addressed by establishing a safe space to discuss issues or conflicts. As relationships in the school are strengthened and as youth and adults begin to see themselves as equal participants and beneficiaries of the community, there is more incentive to seek a restorative outcome when conflicts do arise. In looking at the words: community, building and circle, we can extrapolate the core values. The process is about attending to each individual as a part of a larger group, the community. Building implies a process. One of the weaknesses in the implementation of circles at Crawford was that we met with each class every other week. Many weeks we were unable to facilitate circles because of testing or field trips. Circles operate best when trust has been developed and trust happens with time and exposure. Finally, the shape of a circle is such that every part is connected. No one person is valued more or less than the others and every individual is necessary to maintaining the wholeness of the shape (Riestenberg, 2012).

Tom Herner, former President of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDE) once wrote,

“If a child doesn’t know how to read, we teach. If a child doesn’t know how to swim, we teach. If a child doesn’t know how to multiply, we teach. If a child doesn’t know how to
drive, we teach. If a child doesn’t know how to behave, we...teach?…punish? Why can’t we finish the last sentence as automatically as we do the others?” (Fox and Lentini, n.d.). This sentiment illustrates the awareness that behavior, just like all skills, are learned and can be taught. Just as we do not wait until a child nearly drowns before we teach them to swim or wait until they crash a car before we teach them to drive. Likewise, schools should not wait until children experience violence before we teach them how to behave respectfully.

The power of restorative practice lies in the acknowledgement that we are not only a part of a larger community but that we are also responsible for the wellbeing of that community. As stated by Paul McCold of the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice (1995), “Conflicts are the property of the victim, the offender, and their local community” (Para. 12). While circles are a necessary part of building a restorative school, the reality is that conflicts will still arise but the concepts that are present in circles can be used in the types of interventions we choose. We expect children to include other children, to speak respectfully, to give the benefit of the doubt, etc. Yet, when they misbehave, we push them out of school. We yell when we feel we aren't being listened to. We expel or suspend without regard to context or how it will affect the student and the greater community. How then can we expect children to learn from our words if they cannot learn from our actions? Implementing circles into the school community is a necessary and low-risk way to introduce the concepts of restorative practices. The strength of a restorative community will come when we seek to provide proactive and reactive measures in order to build a community that can successfully come together to resolve conflicts.
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