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"The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom." (hooks, *Teaching to Transgress,* 1994, 207)

Abstract

Restorative justice in schools is becoming an essential set of practices and strategies taken on by schools and school districts to address the disproportionate academic and social-emotional outcomes among students within individual schools and across districts. Restorative justice in schools supports building healthy and supportive relationships among students and adults that serve as the bedrock of growth and development for students, their families and practitioners. While aiming to develop and restore positive and relationships among the most vulnerable and marginalized students (and their families), educators and schools bear the heaviest burden of re-visioning how these students gain access to rigorous academic content and experiences, as well as opportunities to develop behaviorally, socially and emotionally. While restorative justice in schools offers a sturdy foundation for teachers and school leaders from which to begin this complex endeavor, this paper argues that culturally responsive practice must be an essential part of restorative justice practice in schools. The paper also offers insights from my experiences as an educator and school leader in a Massachusetts Charter School that support this assertion.

Introduction

Classroom teachers and school leaders must have a sharper focus on creating access and equity in and beyond traditional classroom settings to serve children who find themselves on the margins of classroom activity. Reconstructing the educational enterprise in the interest of equity for all children is a complex, systemic endeavor. Many educators acknowledge pervading traditional mindsets about instructional methods and academic outcomes of the classroom and veiled punitive approaches to discipline and behavioral intervention. Because of this, a new generation of educators struggle to reconstruct the institutional conditions of our schools, and are challenged to create new paradigms of learning and teaching particularly for our most vulnerable children in our K-12 classrooms. Pedro Noguera highlight in his 2003 article *"*Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices," our most vulnerable children are usually African American and Hispanic/Latino students, students with disabilities and students in English Language Learner programs (Noguera, 2003).

Restorative practice educators aim to reconstruct schooling and educational methodologies that have grown out of institutional structures and systems that quell the most vulnerable students' opportunities for success. Attempts to increase access and participation of the aforementioned student groups, requires a reconstruction of the educational experience that

holds culturally responsive practice, social-emotional development and academic achievement in balance. Educational leaders have been charged to reevaluate and reconstruct the so-called "progressive" pedagogies that liberal policies advanced for African American students, Latino/a students, students with disabilities, and ELL students in the last two decades of testing accountability in schools. Restorative justice approaches to schooling advance the opportunity to frame new instructional methodologies that allow educators to transgress the limitations of racially and culturally unjust schooling that has not affirmed all children's identities as intelligent human beings of esteem and value. As bell hooks advances in *Teaching to Transgress*, we must restore schools and classrooms as places of possibility, places where we teach our children to transgress limitations set for them, using the classroom and school environments as fertile ground for the practice of freedom.

This article is presented as a position paper that draws upon the research and writing of scholars in the field of education, public health and sociology in an effort to draw critical connections among areas of educator practice that support the development of culturally responsive restorative justice in education scholarship. My writing is presented as an interdisciplinary exploration of the common themes across the topics of restorative justice in education, school connectedness and culturally responsive education practice. The themes and topical analyses herein also draw upon the work I have done with a team of school leaders at Prospect Hill Academy Charter School in our efforts to develop a culturally responsive restorative school environment for students, families and educators.

The Purpose of Education

In a previous article submitted to this journal, I claimed that many school leaders are finding it challenging to revisit whole school approaches for creating positive school climate and revamping more traditional school practices that ensure that discipline practices are fair and equitable. Developing and sustaining restorative schools is complex work for school administrators, teachers and school personnel that, in many ways, runs counter to more traditional, and hence culturally acceptable, approaches to schooling. The culture of schooling remains *punitive*. Pedro Noguera noted that schools in the United States are more likely to *punish* (by way of exclusions, i.e. suspensions, expulsions, or removal from classroom or school activities) students of color, males, and low achievers (who are often students with disabilities or ELLs).[1] Restorative Justice and other alternative discipline approaches have been positioned as viable and sustainable strategies for schools building positive and equitable school climates, as well as developing fair and equitable discipline practices. However, this article posits that implementing culturally responsive restorative justice in schools stands to make an impact that does not simply treat the symptoms that show up in discipline outcomes in our schools, but instead more profoundly addresses the way in which we structure and systematize the learning enterprise more broadly.

[1] Pedro Noguera (2003). "Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices." Theory Into Practice, Volume 42, Number 4, 34.

Restorative justice scholars over the last decade recast the purpose of education or schooling by underscoring needed change in the philosophical framework of traditional educational approaches that rely on power and control models of schooling. Vaandering (2004, 64) posits that restorative justice practices in schools, "holds potential for escaping…[the limitation of more individualistic and punitive systems and approaches]…as it relies on a relationship-based, dialogic framework that contrasts with the more common hierarchical, power-based structure." Thorsborne and Blood (2013, 22), seminal theorists of restorative education, note that restorative approaches in schools rely heavily on positive relationships among students and adults in schools, and "is relational and anything but a 'one size fits all,' prescriptive approach to problem-solving and learning." Smith and Fisher (2015, 4) further offer "Healthy and productive relationships between and among students and staff facilitate a positive school climate and learning environment." Similarly, Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015, 18) note "Efforts by adults to use authority to control the behavior of young people frequently backfire because young people resist actions they perceive to be a denial of their personal power….rules without relationship build rebellion." Further, "When children are presumed to be wild, uncontrollable, and potentially dangerous, it is not surprising that antagonistic relations develop with the adults who are assigned to control them develop" (Noguera, 2003, 344 - 345). Hence, a re-articulation of the purpose of education that gives all children to access to needed resources and opportunities to learn in and beyond classrooms is possible within a restorative justice framework. The aforementioned are a few examples of how restorative justice educators and scholars are articulating a new vision for education and schooling that relies on relationship-based, constructive and reciprocal models of school and classroom practice.

Employing restorative justice as an approach to developing more equitable climates that leads to more equitable academic and social-emotional outcomes requires one to revisit the purpose of education. However, while many restorative justice scholars may urge educators to pose the question "What is the purpose of education if not to practice and access freedom and justice?", many have not considered that dire need for new practice even within a restorative frame must engage the culturally responsive pedagogies. Along these lines, scholars like Pedro Noguera articulate the historical purposes of education as subverting the wellbeing and equitable treatment of students of color, males, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Noguera notes that there have historically been three purposes of education or *schooling*: sorting, socializing and social control. Noguera contends that schools sort students "based on varying measures of academic ability" which determines their placement and what roles they play in society, socialize students "by teaching the values and norms that are regarded as central to civil society and the social order," and exercise social control of students by acting as custodians over their care and behavior as well as "exercise considerable authority over students." He aptly points out that the third function of "social control" is necessary for the activities of sorting and socializing, and suggests that the institutional "fixation" on social control has failed not only the most vulnerable students who are often deemed "wild, uncontrollable and dangerous," but also all students. These traditional schooling strategies have not proven to support the achievement and development of marginalized students in our classrooms, and most often replicate inequitable and unhealthy economic, political and social

climates in many of our communities.

Constructing Culturally Responsive Restorative Schools: A Model for Creating a New Vision for Education/Schooling

Culturally responsive restorative justice practices focus sharply on the important reality that to be in relationship with students in classrooms and schools requires that educator become curious about, value and respect the cultural, social and experiential differences among themselves and their students. Implementing culturally responsive restorative justice in schools puts at the heart of school practice "making right" the historical shaming, neglect, stigmatization, and violence toward marginalized and underserved populations in communities and schools in the United States. Classrooms (which are emblematic of the core activity of schools – learning and teaching) represent a microcosm of broader society's institutional and relational strife with students of color, immigrant students and students with disabilities. Educators who choose to implement culturally responsive restorative approaches make their classrooms environments sites for learning how to learn in the context of difference, utilize conflict as an opportunity for learning, and be in more affirming, collaborative and responsive relationships among each other. Culturally responsive restorative justice practices provide a foundation for constructive, deep and transformative learning for the teacher and all students.

Fulfilling this vision of education requires that we revisit moderate approaches to changing student behavior in the classroom, and take on systemic approaches to creating authentic opportunities for students and teachers to learn from and in the context of their cultural differences, whether these differences are racial/ethnic, gendered, language-based, ability-based, etc. My experiences as a school leader responsible for school culture and family engagement of a K-12 Massachusetts charter school allowed me to work with other educators, school leaders, students and families to collaboratively explore ways in which we could build together culturally responsive restorative school environments. Prospect Hill Academy Charter School, one of the oldest charter schools in Massachusetts and the first charter school in Massachusetts to adopt a restorative approach to academic and social-emotional learning, "Through establishing a restorative school culture, we are best able to help students meet high academic and social-emotional learning expectations." This opportunity for *re-learning* how to be in positive relationship with one another can translate into greater connectedness among students, their families and educators, as well as set students on the course for becoming change agents in their communities.

During my tenure there as the systems level leader responsible for the implementation of family engagement, school culture and culturally responsive practice initiatives, I facilitated the team of educators, students, families and community members who articulated a vision for restorative approach thereby committing the school to "the development of positive and meaningful relationships among students and adults in its school community, by creating safe spaces in the school environment for the exploration of identity and culture, and by employing culturally responsive, student-centered learning and teaching practices that frame school

discipline and academic failure as opportunities for deep academic and social-emotional learning for students."[2] The school, across its three campuses, has since embarked upon a long-term strategy for implementing restorative practices across several school functions beginning with the implementation of restorative circles across campuses for building community in the classroom and addressing harm/discipline issues, a three-tiered social-emotional intervention system that is developmentally appropriate for students on each of its campuses, and investment in leadership and staff learning about culturally responsive practices within and outside of the classroom with students and families.

One of the foundational assumptions of the team of educators at Prospect Hill Academy in articulating the above vision was that students of color, first generation students to the United States, English language learners, and students with perceived disabilities (which collectively represented more than 85% of the school's population during my time there) are capable of performing at high levels and attaining success in all spheres of life in spite of a myriad of social and cultural challenges facing them. Rather than focusing on trying to get our students to merely comply with a set of discipline rules, we aimed to build a positive school climate that students, families, teachers, staff, and school leaders would own and be accountable for supporting. While, like most systemic change initiatives in schools, the now three year journey to implement restorative justice has had its challenges. These challenges included providing adequate professional development to address teacher mindset and pedagogical competencies, broad changes in school leadership at both the systemic and campus levels requisite for leadership of the initiative across functions of the school, as well as balancing the need to develop complementary academic and social-emotional programs and initiatives of the school.

The aforementioned challenges highlight the need for functional school planning, structures and systems that help to facilitate the process of change, as well as creating opportunities to practice new ways of being and learning that culturally responsive restorative justice demands of a diverse body of students, families and school personnel. To begin to meet these challenges, in the first year of visioning the school set up a cross-stakeholder body of students, board members, family leaders/parents/guardians, community members, teachers, counselors and school leaders. This "bringing together" of representatives from all invested stakeholders represents a value that is at the heart of restorative practice and that the school continues to engage in its current practice, i.e. collaboration. Prospect Hill Academy has stayed committed to living the ideals articulated in its restorative vision, while holding at the center of its practice that all students need an environment that is safe, culturally affirming, and encouraging which allows them (and the adults in the school community) to focus on learning with one another.

Creating Restorative Schools Relies on Culturally Responsive Practice

As I articulated in a previous article submitted to this journal, "At the heart of restorative

[2] http://www.phacs.org/apps/pages/restorative-approach

approaches to building positive school climate is the intentional enterprise of *becoming community*" (Archibold, 2014, web cited). When the school community becomes a place where students feel like they belong, are respected and valued, and cared for, they are more likely to take the necessary intellectual, social-emotional and psychological risks that lead to academic achievement and positive social emotional development. Several contemporary restorative justice scholars advance a mosaic of educator best practices that support the kind of risk-taking that is required for deep academic and social-emotional learning. In the *Teacher's Guide to Restorative Classroom Discipline*, Evans , Ian and Meyers articulate a four dimensional framework that supports the activity of restorative classrooms and schools. These dimensions of educator practice are safety, pedagogy, relationships and environment, and are mutually supporting. However, fundamental to developing and maintaining restorative climates in schools, "relationships in the classroom [and beyond] highlight respect for diversity, shared decision making, and the value of each classroom as a learning community. Teachers and students are connected to and feel good about their school" (Meyer, 2012, 7).

If students (and their families) are to become assured that academic and behavioral failures, as well as social-emotional challenges will be addressed through supportive learning interventions verses punitive action, teachers and school leaders must become more culturally responsive. This is a more challenging proposition than might be acknowledged by many. Becoming culturally responsive is not simply a matter of learning a discrete set of skills that are to be employed at strategic moments in the development and execution of the learning enterprise. Instead, being culturally responsive requires educators and students to struggle with and learn from each other's cultural differences while simultaneously striving to incorporate new learning into the constructive activity of the classroom.

Students must be a part of caring school communities in which all adults (school personnel, as well as parents/guardians) will hold them to high expectations and provide them with opportunities to learn from their mistakes when they make poor choices, and build on successes that lead to deeper appreciations of what it means to achieve at high levels.
In recent years, scholars have named this quality of schools, *school connectedness* (the belief of students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals). Scholars, such as Robert Blum have identified school connectedness as a key factor in student academic success and the development of social and emotional health (Blum, 2005). In order for students to feel *connected* to their school, they must feel respected and not stigmatized. Over the course of my practice as a restorative educator and school leader, students of color and their families (particularly those matriculating in schools where the teachers and school leaders were predominantly white) would often comment that their teacher or the school leader did not respect them and treated them (or their child) differently than other students. I heard this most prominently from boys of color and their families.

While many might say that the above scenario is common among students (particularly adolescents), in restorative circles with students and their families who opted to participate as a part of repairing their relationship with their teacher, school leader and (sometimes) other students, this theme resonated very clearly. When asked about their experiences and

engagement in the classroom, many of these students would comment that they just did (or would just try to do from now on) what they could to stay out of trouble, which mean they would just stay quiet and undetectable in class. If *connection* and *freedom* in the service of learning provides a strong foundation for student growth and development in classrooms and schools, many of these students will be disadvantaged.

One of the most powerful examples of culturally responsive practices that have seen implemented grades K-12 at Prospect Hill Academy is "listening conferences." While listening conferences have long been a staple of progressive elementary educator practice, often not highlighted is the opportunity for students, teachers and family members to begin learning and inquiring about one another prior to the inevitable push and pull of student-teacher dynamics in the classroom. Intentionally creating a listening conference format that allows families, students and teachers to talk about their cultural and social values and experiences can begin to lay a firm foundation of respectful inquiry about differences and creates opportunities for building relationships. Also, activities like listening conferences before or after school with students and their families, or with students throughout the school day, can lay the groundwork for demonstrating an educator's interest in the core identity and well-being of students even when needing to have difficult conversations.

Scholars who have focused their research on the education of students of color within classrooms and schools (predominantly led by white women) like E. R. Hollins have asserted that "culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content" are requisite standards for culturally responsive classrooms and learning environments (Hollins, 1996, 13). Further, the racial, cultural, linguistic, social, and historical backgrounds of students (and their families), in relation to teachers' and school leaders' backgrounds, have a significant impact on how students acquire knowledge and learn, and on how they perceive school. As a result, (and as noted by Ladson-Billings), "using a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" is an important part of creating esteem and confidence in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 20). Without attending to cultural particularities among students and adults in the classroom and school environment, it is virtually impossible for adults responsible for student learning to help students develop the sense of belonging and esteem requisite for motivated learning in and beyond school communities. Hence, the ability of teachers and school personnel to utilize students' cultures and experiences as assets for learning is an important advantage for developing a restorative school environment.

Developing Culturally Responsive Practice in Restorative Schools: Lessons Learned

Prospect Hill Academy articulated and committed to a vision for cultural responsive education in its school. Among the school's eight core values is Cultural Proficiency seen in their values statement by the following: "We see, honor, and embrace differences. At Prospect Hill Academy, we actively challenge the historical lack of cultural and linguistic minority

representation in curriculum, organizational decision-making, and hiring practices. We strive to be an inclusive community where all members explicitly commit to fighting racism and bias at the personal, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural levels."[3] In the school's journey to align its mission, vision and values with a restorative vision of education, educators at the school continue to challenge themselves to develop and master competencies to manage and learn from conflict as well as develop and support a climate that engenders a growth-mindset f or students and adults in the school community (i.e. "the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your effort"…the idea that "everyone can change and grow through application and experience"(Dweck, 2008, 7).

To date, one of the most important lessons I learned during my tenure at the school, was that there must be critical attention paid to the ongoing learning of leaders, teachers, staff, families and students in this area of practice. Professional development plans must include opportunities among stakeholder groups to learn about anti-bias education, modern oppressions and racism, white privilege, and transforming conflict. In addition to the aforementioned, there must be opportunities for teachers, staff, students, families and school leaders to reflect on their engagement with one another as regards unconscious beliefs about the myriad of cultural differences among them. Curriculum, traditions and rituals of the school are steadily transforming to include the opportunity for students, families, teachers, staff and school leaders to share their cultural experiences through essays, project-based assignments, book circles, annual cultural fairs and performances, as well as community circles celebrating the achievements of students and adults in the school community.

The abovementioned activities become opportunities to share stories for all school community members, learn about each other's cultural backgrounds, and weave a new cultural fabric of their experiences with each other within the school community. Geneva Gay highlights narrative or story as an important conduit for culture sharing and developing empathy in the classroom and in school communities. She notes that stories are "a powerful means for people to establish bridges across … factors that separate them (such as race, culture, gender, and social class), penetrate barriers to understanding, and create feelings of kindredness" (Gay, 2010, 3)[4] This "kindredness" or connectedness among school community members creates fertile ground for students to access new knowledge about the world around them, and themselves as they experience a safe environment within which they can take risks without fear of punishment for failure. In restorative schools, students, teachers, family and staff together feel responsible for the climate of the school and accountable to one another for student and school success.

Providing students and adults in schools an opportunity to share their stories resonates profoundly with restorative approaches to building positive and equitable school climates. More importantly, sharing stories provides teachers and educators with an opportunity to

[3] http://www.phacs.org/apps/pages/mission-vision-values

[4] Geneva Gay (2010). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice.* New York: Teachers College Press, 3.

develop the empathy required to construct activities in the classroom and beyond that help to facilitate the positive racial identity development of students. Noguera notes "in the United States we have very deeply embedded stereotypes that connect racial identity to academic ability, and children become aware of these stereotypes as they grow up in the school context" (Noguera, 2008, 10). In describing the identity dilemma of young men of color in schools, he suggests that educators who venture to develop relationships with their students can help their students overcome (what he calls) "anti-academic tendencies" characteristic of many students of color (and other marginalized students) who perceive themselves as non-academic and non-intellectual (Noguera, 2008, 15). When students perceive themselves as non-academic, they often reason that they are unable to access the academic material presented in the classroom. Hence, the hope that the classroom presents for students to *transgress* the limitations that society ascribes to them (i.e. the possibility for them to access and create knowledge that allows them to navigate and transform the inequitable realities of their experiences in society) becomes impossible to fulfill.

While developing a culturally responsive restorative school is a journey, educators must decide to commit to a long-term plan for nurturing their students and students' families, themselves, and the school community through both growth and failures. Across my experiences at Prospect Hill Academy, I witnessed an amazing school community transformation. Fueled by the vision, desire and commitment of students, families, teachers, staff and leaders for a more equitable, culturally responsive and restorative school, Prospect Hill Academy strives to provide our children with opportunities to construct meaningful and transformative ways to engage a world that too often limits their access to esteem and the resources required to thrive. Most schools have not proven to be places where this can happen, yet.

Accessing Freedom: Moving Culturally Responsive Restorative School Agendas Forward

Culturally responsive restorative justice in schools, as described in this article, presents a promising vision and educational framework that helps students, families, teachers, school staff and school leaders deconstruct harmful experiences with inequity and institutional violence. Among the requirements for building transformative learning experiences for students is that educators and students must acquire the skills to develop authentic relationships that support student learning. While focusing on building authentic relationships and *school connectedness*, educators must remember that culturally responsive practices lie at the heart of restorative justice practices.

We must reevaluate and reconstruct the "progressive" pedagogies that liberal colleagues devised for students of color, students with perceived disabilities and English language learning students in the last two decades of testing accountability in schools. Teaching to these tests of academic achievement leave our children unable to know who they are as fully capable and intellectual agents of success and change. Further, these endeavors to sort, socialize and socially control our students often subvert authentic opportunities for learning, and thereby compromise the opportunity for all students, and especially students of color, to

achieve at their highest levels (Noguera, 2003, 5). As a result, our children leave K-12 experiences unable to navigate a society deeming them unworthy of justice.

I dedicated my career as an educator to restoring how young people come to know and understand who they are and worked hard to develop opportunities that transcended the current limitations of classrooms and schools, so that my students saw themselves as agents of their own freedom and justice. In my practice as a school leader, I have coached and supported educators who are themselves a part of marginalized or underserved communities. I have been coached and supported by mentors who can identify with these experiences, just as I do. Many of us empathize with our students and their families, and can relate to their experiences with inequity inside and beyond the classroom. In solidarity, and in an attempt to learn from and heal the social and emotional trauma of our experiences as learners and teachers in school settings, we often reflect on our historical experiences in public school classrooms sometimes fraught with emotional strife and on our attempts to transgress inequity and practice freedom as adults in educational contexts (both as teacher and student). What many of us seek are structured opportunities in the school environment to share our stories with our more privileged colleagues.

Finally, I think of the bold and courageous act of Britnee Newsome in South Carolina, who gracefully ascended a flagpole at the statehouse grounds to tumble any remaining authority of the Confederate flag. She practiced her freedom to resist attempts to impose the romanticized identity of slave to master that still pervades the consciousness of many of our institutions. I also think of the bold and courageous efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement leaders who increasingly confront escalating violence in communities of color and scrutiny from a critical mass of our citizenry that lacks empathy for the experiences of communities of color. Where did they learn how to do this or even that she could do it? Where did they unlearn justifications for injustice and inequitable treatment? Quite simply, as hooks advances, we must restore schools and classrooms as places of possibility, places that are tilled as fertile ground for the practice of freedom…places where we teach our young people to transgress limitations set for them and where they can work in partnership with us to re-establish justice. Culturally responsive restorative justice in schools offers educators an opportunity to reconstruct experiences in the classroom and beyond such that students and educators acquire and construct opportunities to transform their own experiences and the communities they are from.

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In order to ensure that all children can access the freedom that good school experiences help to afford, freedom in the classroom is the fertile ground for exploring the ways in which they must learn to navigate and respond to the cultural differences they encounter. have equitable opportunities that help them thrive in our communities, restorative justice culturally responsive school access to the resources and support that will ultimately give them the intellectual and social capital to freely choose life experiences in and beyond school that.