

2018

Master's Project: Restoration and Relationship in the Public School System

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Malik, Aziza, "Master's Project: Restoration and Relationship in the Public School System" (2018). *Rubenstein School Leadership for Sustainability Project Publications*. 9.
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/rslspp/9>

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RESTORATION AND RELATIONSHIP
IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

A Capstone Project Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science Specializing in Leadership for Sustainability

October, 2018

Defense Date: August 23, 2018
Masters Examination Committee:
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ABSTRACT

This project explores the complexities associated with a public school's adoption and engagement with restorative justice. Over the course of this project, I have focused on Circle Process, examining ways to be in authentic, accountable, and reciprocal relationship with Indigenous communities where Circle Process originates.

Introduction

For the past ten years, I have worked in the public-school system in Vermont. In the summer of 2017, my district began the transition to adopt the philosophy of restorative justice. Restorative justice does not have one shared definition. Unlike a program that is meant to be followed, it is a shift in mindset and a set of practices that transitions away from traditional, hierarchical, and punitive systems and focuses, instead, on relationships. Restorative justice values social engagement over social control (Zehr, 2015).

The advent of restorative justice in North American schools stems from its use in the criminal-justice system to engage victims, offenders, and community in dialogue to repair harm. In schools, the philosophy has been extended, so that the intent is not only to repair harm, but also to focus on community building and preventative measures. Restorative justice in schools typically consists of three key elements: 1) Nurturing healthy relationships, 2) Creating just and equitable learning environments, and 3) Repairing harm and transforming conflict (Evans and Vaandering, 2016). Schools that have adopted restorative justice have reported a wide range of benefits, including reduced suspensions, reduced bullying, improved relationships between students and staff, increased student problem-solving ability, improved graduation rates, increased academic achievement, and reduced racial disparities in discipline (Jain, et. al., 2014; Gregory, et. al., 2014).

As the work demands of school staff keep increasing, I have witnessed how relationships have become less of a priority. High-stakes testing, large teaching loads, and zero-tolerance discipline policies are prioritized over building community in classrooms and with colleagues. The transition to restorative justice would require my school community to prioritize centering

relationships. When the opportunity to take on a leadership role to implement restorative justice presented itself, I signed on immediately.

My goal for this project was to take on a leadership role within my district as it transitioned to restorative justice by planning, creating, implementing, and revising Year One of this multi-year process. The primary leadership practices I implemented were 1) Relationship Building, 2) Integrity and Accountability, and 3) Working with Difference, Multiplicity, Ambiguity, and Incommensurability. Using these practices, I implemented the project in phases, starting with internal reflection, moving into practice with faculty, experimenting in pilot classrooms, and, finally, collaborating with district restorative practitioners.

Six months into the transition process, I learned that the usage of a key practice in restorative justice, Circle Process, causes harm to Indigenous communities. It is the cultural appropriation of a sacred practice, secularizing it and claiming it as part of the larger dominant culture without recognizing or paying respect to its origins or including Indigenous Peoples in determining what is appropriate use, if any. In my role as a leader in the restorative justice transition, I recognized that, as a part of keeping in integrity, I needed to address the fact that by using this practice without permission, invitation, or accountability, the stated values of the district--as well as my own--were out of alignment with our actions.

This marked a major shift in the project implementation as I worked to address this gap in integrity. Through this process, a larger pattern became visible to me, that the Indigenous Peoples of Vermont, the Abenaki, have been excluded from virtually all aspects of our school system. To address this systemic erasure, a new phase of the project emerged that focused on inclusivity by forming authentic, accountable, and reciprocal relationships with Abenaki tribal members.

Methods

The adoption of restorative justice has shown great promise in transforming school culture from hierarchical to collaborative. At the core of this transformation is a philosophical and cultural shift to focus on inclusivity in school-community relationships, a direct challenge to deeply held notions of discipline and authority (Blood and Thorsborne, 2005). The deep shift to a restorative-oriented school climate may take three to five years (Guckenburg, 2016). To effectively make this shift, staff must first use these practices themselves before using them with students.

My theory of change was built around this premise: In order to transition a school system from a hierarchical to a collaborative paradigm, there must first be a shift in the mindset of staff. According to Donella Meadows, using this leverage point to intervene in a system is one of the most difficult to implement, but also one that leads to a true transformation of systems (1999).

As a result, I knew this work needed to start with me. My strategy was to embody the restorative practices and center relationships to serve as a model to other staff. Staff would be exposed to these principles and practices in an experiential and relational manner, but, in keeping with the restorative philosophy, they would not be mandated to use them. Rather, opportunities and resources would be available for those who chose to take on the individual work to effectively carry the philosophy and practices out. In other words, they would need to determine values and examine power and privilege. In addition, accountability systems would be built in for those who took on this process through school and district gatherings. As more staff opted into this process, more individual mindsets would be shifted, resulting in a paradigm shift within the school.

The project implementation process began with a deep personal study of the restorative justice philosophy. I read material and met with a team of colleagues to discuss core ideas on a weekly basis. During this time I was introduced to Howard Zehr's *Ten Ways to Live Restoratively* (Appendix A), which delineates ways to embody the restorative philosophy. I used this writing to reflect personally, as well as with colleagues and students, upon how these values aligned with my own and to track how I was currently embodying the practices.

While I learned a variety of practices, a key practice was Circle Process, which has roots in Indigenous communities around the world. The process I learned, outlined in the book, *Circle Forward*, by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis (Appendix B), is based on the traditions of the Plains People of North America. A specific form of these circles, known as relationship-building circles, would be used both with staff and with students in pilot classrooms. This type of circle focuses solely on relationship and does not include problem solving or repair of harm. I would later find out that this book, in particular, has been pointed to as an example of cultural appropriation and the systemic preferencing of non-Indigenous leaders in the field of restorative justice.

For the first six months of this project, I immersed myself in the embodiment of the restorative philosophy and the implementation of the practices, including Circle Process. In December, 2017, I presented my work to a group of affiliates of the Masters in Leadership for Sustainability (MLS) program at University of Vermont (UVM). One of the affiliates, Dr. Sayra Pinto, gave me feedback that changed the course of my project. Dr. Pinto informed me that the use of Circle Process in schools is cultural appropriation, a practice in which a sacred Indigenous practice is taken, stripped of the sacred, systemized, renamed, and, in some cases, monetized. In addition, she noted, most of the leaders in the restorative justice field are not Indigenous Peoples,

but rather those with the most power and privilege (Pinto, 2018). This was a highly destabilizing moment in the course of the project. It forced me to confront the fact that a practice I deeply believe does good simultaneously also causes harm. I had to address the gap between my values and actions and work to bring them back into alignment.

To navigate this process, I turned back to the leadership practices of centering relationships, accountability, and working across difference. I also turned to the internal work I had done reflecting on Zehr's *Ten Ways to Live Restoratively*. Three ideas in his writing stood out to me as particularly applicable in addressing this gap: 1) Take Responsibility, 2) Listen, and 3) Be inclusive (Appendix A). Using these practices and principles, I reached out to students, colleagues, district leadership, professors, mentors, fellow graduate students, Indigenous-community members, and restorative justice practitioners and consultants to explore the issues and formulate a plan to move forward. When applicable, I followed the restorative process of taking responsibility and finding ways to repair harm.

Results

This project was intended to document my leadership role in the adoption and implementation of restorative justice within my district. After the first six months of work, however, a blind spot was pointed out to me, and it changed the course of this work. From the first months of the project, there are action plans, training materials, scripts, reflections, meeting notes, and other documentation. There is also the work that came from using these materials with staff, students, and district. Most of these materials were created and implemented before recognizing that using Circle Process is cultural appropriation. Looking back on some of these materials, it is apparent that this perspective was missing during their creation.

Once I became aware of the criticisms of restorative justice and the use of Circle Process in schools, I knew I needed to address the gap between values and actions both personally and within the district. At this point, six months in, the use of Circle Process was widespread throughout the district. The benefits of using this practice were apparent to me. Circle Process equalized voices and allowed space for true relationship building without a specific agenda. I could not ignore the fact, however, that by using this practice without invitation, permission, or accountability, I was contributing to the erasure of the Indigenous Peoples of Vermont, the Abenaki. I had to engage with this contradiction and the tension it caused in order to find a path to move forward.

In the course of this process, it became clear to me that district recommendations needed to be based on those who are affected the most--the people whose land we are on, who have practiced this tradition for thousands of years, and whose permission we had not sought until now--the Abenaki. I began to build relationships with members of the four tribes of the Abenaki Nation in Vermont, going through the restorative process of taking responsibility and asking how I could repair harm. I listened to as many tribal members as I could, in order to hear what was truly important to them, even if it did not align with my own ideas or desires. Finally, I asked them to help in the decision-making process as the district moved forward.

The recommendations made by the Abenaki tribal members I spoke to regarding the use of Circle Process in schools have been integrated into future training for the district. Educational leaders from one tribe, the Missisquoi, expressed a desire to continue to be a part of the planning and implementation process of restorative justice. I was able to facilitate a connection between the Missisquoi Parental Advisory Committee for Title VII Indian Education and the district restorative justice leadership team. As a result, the district team has been invited in Fall, 2018, to

the Missisquoi Abenaki's ancestral land in Swanton, VT, for a meeting to establish a partnership as the district continues the process of adopting restorative justice.

During my conversations with Abenaki tribal members, another issue emerged. Many of the people I spoke with identified the erasure of the Abenaki voice within schools as a larger systemic issue. A look through the policies and curriculum of our district confirmed this, for I found only a small, superficial, and out-of-date amount of inclusion. There was virtually no mention of Abenaki students, of Abenaki history, of Abenaki cultural and other contributions. In addition, the material and policies we had within the district were not created in partnership with any tribal members of the Abenaki Nation.

As I used the restorative process to identify and repair harm with the Abenaki tribal members I spoke to, it became clear that what was needed was the creation of an authentic, accountable, and reciprocal partnership to begin to undo the erasure of this community in the curriculum and in school policies. Three members of one Abenaki tribe in particular, the Elnu, have discussed at length what this type of partnership would look like and have expressed a desire to move forward to create this relationship with the district. As a result of these outreach and liaison efforts, the Director of Curriculum supports this partnership and is currently working to allocate funding for the development of an integrated Abenaki curriculum for the 2018-19 school year. In addition, I have secured funding and additional resources from one local non-profit to assist in this partnership process.

To address the issue of the exclusion of Indigenous voices in the restorative justice movement, I started with the restorative justice leaders in my district. I initiated a conversation about the materials the district is using for training and questioned the exclusion of Indigenous voices. I facilitated several open-space sessions to explore this topic during our monthly

meetings. As a result, the leadership team met with me to discuss the issue at length and explore the ideas of permission, invitation, and accountability. The meeting ended with a mission for the participants in this group to continue conversations with Indigenous Peoples, specifically from groups that use Circle Process as a sacred practice.

This is an ongoing topic of discussion, and a series of conversations that includes Indigenous Circle-Keepers is being planned for Fall, 2018. In addition, one of the restorative justice consultants reached out to non-Indigenous national leaders about my questions around cultural appropriation and the exclusion of Indigenous voices. This resulted in an ongoing email thread exploring these topics, and several of the participants have shared their experiences, recognized their privilege, and expressed a desire to be part of a larger conversation around these issues.

Evaluation

During the project proposal phase, I indicated that I would use a combination of qualitative and quantitative feedback to track the success of the restorative justice transition. As the project was implemented, it quickly became apparent that the quantitative measures would not be sufficient to reflect the complexity and the shift of goals in the work that I was taking on. While I do have some numbers about various aspects of implementation, such as the number of circle scripts facilitated, self-reported readiness level of teachers, and responses to training materials, these are irrelevant to the project at this point and are not included in this final report.

After realizing that a gap between values and actions existed, my focus on assessment shifted from the success of the implementation process to how I was embodying the restorative principles and the three leadership practices identified in my goals. To assess these goals, I used

a variety of techniques, including personal reflection; coaching; and peer, student, and community feedback.

I met with my advisors from the UVM MLS program to regularly update them on personal goals and activities, discuss dilemmas, seek advice, and request connections to affiliates that could coach me through specific issues. I met with two specialty coaches during this process. They critiqued my work and provided me with guidance as I sought to integrate their feedback. In addition, I met monthly with a peer coaching group from the UVM MLS program. This group used a variety of protocols to respond and provide feedback to one other as we implemented our projects and worked on our personal goals. In addition, staff, students, district leaders, and community partners were included in the feedback process through emails, as well as group and one-on-one meetings.

During the project implementation, my goal shifted from simply carrying out the transition to creating a transition that was in alignment with district and personal values. During this time, the leadership practices of relationship building; integrity and accountability; and working with difference, multiplicity, ambiguity, and incommensurability helped stabilize me as I did the work to address the gap between values and actions.

These were the key practices I used as I worked through these deeply destabilizing issues. In particular, I had difficulty reconciling the fact that something that I believed could do so much good could also do harm. The idea of incommensurability was new to me, and it was difficult to think beyond the binaries of good and bad. It was these personal leadership practices that helped me forge a path forward while holding my values in alignment. It was also the work of many accountability partners, including my colleagues, students, community partners,

coaches, advisors, and peer feedback groups that helped reflect whether I was in alignment or not.

The project had many community partners in its development, yet none of them recognized the exclusion of the Abenaki. It took an additional layer of the UVM MLS community to provide this missing perspective. As the district moves forward into Year Two of the process, this invaluable feedback has been incorporated into the action plan. The Abenaki community has been named as a key stakeholder, and relationships with individual tribal members are being cultivated. As partners in this project, the district has now built in accountability to the Abenaki community through this relationship, an essential ingredient in moving forward.

Key Learnings, Recommendations, and Next Steps

Among the many key learnings that emerged for me as a result of this year-long project implementation, the primary learning is that internal reflection and external accountability is key to shifting behavior. I believe all teachers should be actively examining their thoughts and actions and evaluating whether they align with their values. Included in this reflection should be extensive work to examine power, privilege, and oppression. This work needs to be done individually, but also in collaboration with a learning community, so that there is built-in accountability. If we truly want to see a culture shift, we must each begin with ourselves and be the change we want to see.

I now recognize the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples, such as the Abenaki, not only within our district's process to adopt restorative justice, but also within the statewide and national processes. In addition, I recognize this exclusion throughout all aspects of our school

system, including curriculum and policy. Moving forward, I have made a personal commitment to use my power and privilege within the school system, in collaboration with the Abenaki tribal leaders of Vermont, to illuminate and address this systemic erasure. I will use the restorative principles and my leadership practices with the Abenaki community to build and maintain partnerships that are authentic, reciprocal, and accountable.

The issue of using Circle Process in schools is still a complex one. There are many questions that need to be answered before using this practice. Who gives permission? Does that permission extend to all? What does it mean if someone disagrees with this? How do you know if you are ready to be a Circle-Keeper? How do you know if you are ready to teach others? How will the various communities, both within and outside school, be included in this process? Who will keep you accountable? What is lost or gained as Circle Process is systematized? I have attempted to begin to answer these questions, knowing that they may never fully be answered.

By leaning on the restorative principles, engaging in dialogue, repairing harm, and cultivating relationships with the Abenaki community, I have begun the process of addressing the issue of cultural appropriation to bring my district's practice into closer alignment with their values. This project is by no means finished. As I reflect on it, I see a connection to one of the core precepts of Zehr's (2009) restorative philosophy: View conflicts and harms in life as opportunities (Appendix A). Though it has been difficult to navigate the conflicts within the implementation process, these conflicts created the opportunity for something truly transformative to occur.

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APPENDIX A

10 Ways to Live Restoratively

Howard Zehr

Retrieved from: <https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/2009/11/27/10-ways-to-live-restoratively/>

1. Take relationships seriously, envisioning yourself in an interconnected web of people, institutions and the environment.
2. Try to be aware of the impact – potential as well as actual – of your actions on others and the environment.
3. When your actions negatively impact others, take responsibility by acknowledging and seeking to repair the harm – even when you could probably get away with avoiding or denying it. (To craft a letter of apology, see the [Apology Letter](#) website developed by Loreen Walker and Ben Furman.)
4. Treat everyone respectfully, even those you don't expect to encounter again, even those you feel don't deserve it, even those who have harmed or offended you or others.
5. Involve those affected by a decision, as much as possible, in the decision-making process.
6. View the conflicts and harms in your life as opportunities.
7. Listen, deeply and compassionately, to others, seeking to understand even if you don't agree with them. (Think about who you want to be in the latter situation rather than just being right.)
8. Engage in dialogue with others, even when what is being said is difficult, remaining open to learning from them and the encounter.
9. Be cautious about imposing your “truths” and views on other people and situations.
10. Sensitively confront everyday injustices including sexism, racism and classism.

APPENDIX B

Essential Elements for Constructing the Circle

Kay Pranis

The Circle is a structured dialog process that nurtures connections and empathy, while honoring the uniqueness of each participant. The Circle can hold pain, joy, despair, hope, anger, love, fear, and paradox. In the Circle, each person has the opportunity to speak his/her truth but cannot assume the truth for anyone else. The Circle welcomes difficult emotions and difficult realities, while maintaining a sense of positive possibilities. The Circle is deeply rooted in an understanding of profound interconnectedness as the nature of the universe.

The Circle Keeper uses the following elements to design the Circle and to create the space for all participants to speak their truth respectfully to one another and to seek resolution of their conflict or a greater understanding of one another's perspective.

- **Seating all participants in a circle (preferably without any tables)**
- **Opening ceremony**
- **Centerpiece**
- **Values/guidelines**
- **Talking piece**
- **Guiding questions**
- **Closing ceremony**

Seating all participants in a circle – Geometry matters! It is very important to seat everyone in a circle. This seating arrangement allows everyone to see everyone else and to be accountable to one another face to face. It also creates a sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of 'sides'. Sitting in a circle emphasizes equality and connectedness. Removing tables is sometimes uncomfortable for people but is important in creating a space apart from our usual way of discussing difficult issues. It increases accountability because all body language is obvious to everyone.

Opening ceremony – Circles use openings and closings to mark the Circle as a sacred space in which participants are present with themselves and one another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting or group. The clear marking of the beginning and end of the Circle is very important, because the Circle invites participants to drop the ordinary masks and protections they may wear that create distance from their core self and the core self of others. Openings help participants to center themselves, bring themselves into full presence in the space, recognize interconnectedness, release unrelated distractions, and be mindful of the values of the core self.

Centerpiece – Circles use a centerpiece to create a focal point that supports speaking from the heart and listening from the heart. The centerpiece usually sits on the floor in the center of the open space inside the circle of chairs. Typically there is a cloth or mat as the base. The centerpiece may include items representing the values of the core self, the foundational principles of the process, and/or a shared vision of the group. Centerpieces often emphasize inclusion by incorporating symbols of individual Circle members as well as cultures represented in the Circle.

Guidelines – Participants in a Circle play a major role in designing their own space by creating the guidelines for their discussion. The guidelines articulate the agreements among participants about how they will conduct themselves in the Circle dialog. The guidelines are intended to describe the behaviors that the participants feel will make the space safe for them to speak their truth. Guidelines are not rigid constraints but supportive reminders of the behavioral expectations of everyone in the Circle. They are not

imposed on the participants but rather are adopted by the consensus of the Circle.

Talking piece – Circles use a talking piece to regulate the dialog of the participants. The talking piece is passed from person to person around the rim of the Circle. Only the person holding the talking piece may speak. It allows the holder to speak without interruption and allows the listeners to focus on listening and not be distracted by thinking about a response to the speaker. The use of the talking piece allows for full expression of emotions, thoughtful reflection, and an unhurried pace. Participants are free to speak or pass when the talking piece comes to them. The talking piece is a powerful equalizer. It allows every participant an equal opportunity to speak and carries an implicit assumption that every participant has something important to offer the group. As it passes physically from hand to hand, the talking piece weaves a connecting thread among the members of the Circle. The talking piece reduces the control of the keeper and consequently shares control of the process with all participants. Where possible, the talking piece represents something important to the group. The more meaning the talking piece has (consistent with the values of Circle), the more powerful it is for engendering respect for the process and aligning participants with their core selves.

Guiding questions – Circles use prompting questions or themes at the beginning of rounds to stimulate conversation about the main interest of the Circle. Every member of the Circle has an opportunity to respond to the prompting question or theme of each round. Careful design of the questions is important to facilitate a discussion that goes beyond surface responses. Questions are often designed to invite participants to share personal stories relevant to the theme raised.

Closing ceremony – Closings acknowledge the efforts of the Circle, affirm the interconnectedness of those present, convey a sense of hope for the future, and prepare participants to return to the ordinary space of their lives. Openings and closings are designed to fit the nature of the particular group and provide opportunities for cultural responsiveness.

Keeper's role – The role of the facilitator(s) or keeper(s) of the Circle is to assist the participants in creating a safe space where each can speak and listen from the heart. The keeper—and sometimes there are two—helps the Circle create the space and then monitors the quality of the space. The keeper is not an enforcer of Circle guidelines but the guardian of them. Every member of the Circle bears responsibility for the quality of the dialog. If the dialog becomes disrespectful, the keeper invites the Circle to discuss what is happening and how to move toward a more respectful interaction.

The Circle keeper is a participant and can speak in turn in the Circle. Sometimes the keeper speaks first in a round to model the kind of response being invited or to model the sharing of personal stories. At other times, the keeper speaks last in a round to reduce the risk of the keeper influencing the dialog inappropriately.

The Circle keeper attempts to hold an attitude of compassion and caring for every member of the Circle, regardless of behavior.

Circle dialog – Circles are never about persuasion. They are a process of exploring meaning from each perspective in the Circle. From that exploration we may find common ground or we may understand more clearly why another person sees something differently. The more diverse the perspectives are in a Circle, the richer the dialog and the greater the opportunity for new insights will be. The keeper does not control this process but helps the Circle work through uncomfortable moments by maintaining the use of the talking piece going in order around the Circle and by engaging the Circle in reflection on its own process when needed.