

Raising the Power of Relationships: Restorative Practices as a Culturally Responsive Way to Build School Climate

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The success of diverse student identities starts with the power of relationships through nurturing, caring, and compassionate educators who engage student voices. Khalifa (2018) stated, “It is not enough to want to fight for equity; school leaders must establish structures that will infuse all forms of leadership with unique community cultural knowledge, epistemology, and perceptions” (p. 169). Culturally responsive school leaders promote inclusive school environments by building relationships and reducing student anxiety (Khalifa et al., 2016; Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). However, relationship building requires a growth mindset by all educators to affirm all student identities. Restorative practices are a means to achieve that end. Restorative practices are strategies that proactively build community and relationships while addressing conflict (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2024). Practicing restorative approaches in schools could establish a foundation for raising the power of relationships with students while fostering cultural responsiveness within the school climate. I present a school action research project where a group of staff and administrators came together as a committee to engage in an inquiry project to implement school-wide restorative practices. The purpose of the team inquiry project was to establish restorative practices as a strategy to improve staff-to-peer and peer-to-peer relationships and nurture a positive school environment. The following case from the field reveals how a school united to improve interactions with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students.

Method

We applied an action research method, also described as collaborative inquiry, as a practice used in schools to enact change (DeLuca et al., 2015; Efron & Ruth, 2019). I led the action research as the vice-principal overseeing the committee and the chair of the project. We were a school of approximately 1100–1200 students, located in an urban city, and consisted of a diverse population of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students from varying socio-economic circumstances. The committee had six members, and the process taken in our high school to implement school-wide restorative practices included four collaborative inquiry steps. First, we identified a problem of practice. Second, we disrupted the inequity by collecting and analyzing evidence. Third, we demonstrated leadership moves to embed actionable steps to make sustainable changes. Last, we assessed the impact of our culturally responsive work by reflecting on the project outcomes (DeLuca et al., 2015; Efron & Ruth, 2019). I reflect on the collaborative work of the committee by describing each step of our action research project and how we reshaped the school climate to a culturally responsive one.

Step 1: Problem of Practice

Within the diversity that existed in our school, the prevalence of racism against Black and South Asian male students was evident. I observed the students’ unfair treatment by adults in the building which contributed to a hostile school climate, a high incidence rate of their office referrals, removal from the classroom, and high suspension rates. The identified problem was

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two-fold: an exercise of power over these students by the adults in the school building and the false perception that certain groups of students displayed defiant behaviours through their attire, accent, dialect, and cultural style. In many instances, the unjust exclusion of students convinced members of the school community to act on this issue of inequity.

Step 2: Disrupting Inequity

The administration called for action by seeking support from a dedicated group of staff trained in restorative practices to lead improvement in the school climate and the classroom learning environment. We focused on finding solutions to triggers that resulted in negative student-to-adult relationships that led to exclusionary measures on students of colour. We related findings from multiple data sources (e.g., office referrals, suspension rates, feedback from parents of disciplined students) and student responses from a school-wide survey. The survey revealed that students felt they needed to be treated fairly in their school by adults in the building. These were strong indicators that classroom learning environments were not always positive or safe spaces. To create a shift in the school, we focused on improving the school community through empowering our students and co-constructing learning environments to build lasting relationships.

We learned through student feedback that they needed the adults in their school to engage in relational conversations rather than authoritative ones. Through our data analysis, we recognized that we had to balance the power struggles between students and staff, reassess our tone in conversations, and suspend judgment of a child who comes with a rich cultural narrative (Gay, 2010). As a school team, we adapted knowledge from our training on the restorative practice's continuum. The restorative practices continuum ranges from affective statements, relational conversations, and questioning techniques to informal conferences, circles, and formal conferences (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2016). We surmised that our vital work had to center on empathy or the affective components of restorative practices, starting with relational conversations with students and extending it to their families.

Step 3: Culturally Responsive Leadership Moves

Distribute Leadership to Develop Teachers

To establish the foundation for implementing school-wide restorative practices, the school administrators garnered a team of staff previously trained in and interested in training for restorative practices. School administrators are culturally responsive when they distribute leadership to a team of teachers willing to learn new approaches to support equity work in their school (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Khalifa et al., 2016). We designed and delivered professional learning sessions during staff meetings. We supported staff development on restorative concepts through case studies, which piqued their interest and motivated them to try restorative strategies in the classroom. We focused on methods like restorative questioning, using affective statements, and trying out circles. Restorative questioning removes blame when asking an individual questions to process a conflict or incident of wrongdoing (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2016). The following is an example question “what could you have done differently to change the outcome of the conflict?” Affective statements are constructive ways to convey positive or negative feelings such as, “I am happy that you are part of our team”

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(International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2016). Circles is a unique positioning to engage a group of individuals or community in discussion that is safe, and it establishes equality among all participants in the circle (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2016).

We promoted monthly work on implementing different restorative strategies in the classroom by training staff on using them. We collected staff feedback through surveys after they tried each strategy and discussed their effectiveness in groups during school meetings. Staff reflected on their classroom management practices through engagement in professional learning. Our conversations about restorative strategies strengthened their understanding of restorative justice over the semester. When these restorative strategies became common practice in school, the power struggle between students and adults started to diminish. The staff listened more and developed a relational mode of speaking that sought to understand the child and build empathetic consciousness. Freire (2000) considered these elements a part of dialogical praxis which is dialogue that achieves positive action. Freire (2000) stated that, “Leaders who do not act dialogically but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people—they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated; they oppress” (p. 95).

Challenging Hegemonic Communication

To extend the relational conversations we developed with students, we addressed restorative frames, questions, or talk moves that were less oppressive. To elaborate, hegemonic dialogue affects our ability to build authentic relationships with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students and families (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). As such, school leaders need to encourage educators to re-examine their language for power because it could motivate racism in conversations (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). Furthermore, homogenized language coats an individual’s everyday assumptions, impacting school social relationships. Moreover, students from varying ethnic groups have different communication styles, unique linguistic structures, and cultural features that affect how students use words or deliver speech (Cazden et al., 1985). When leaders do not have this cultural knowledge for communication, educators make assumptions about student communication and perceive them negatively (e.g., being rude) or try to fix their natural way of talking (Gay, 2002). The act of rectifying a student’s communication style contributes to the erasure of their identity (Gay, 2002). Educators need to self-reflect on these contextual and cultural communication factors in building relational conversations with students to affirm their identity.

Learning From Caregivers to Better Understand Students

Despite moving in a positive direction with our work, we encountered some perceived challenges. We identified, in some cases, unwillingness to consider restorative practices by some adults in the school due to their deficit views of racially, ethnically, and linguistically, diverse students and their biases manifested in conversations. For example, some staff had views that disengaged students were either “lazy” or “do not care about school.” Other staff dominated conversations with students by telling them what they were not doing right or not doing enough.

We realized that improving conversations with students included changing our negative views of them. The administration relied and reflected on caregiver input as feedback for cultural knowledge; we sought to know what home looked like for students and the way homelife shaped

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behaviours they displayed in school. Caregiver insights helped the administrative team to dispel those assumptions and biases we held of them and, in turn, to share our learning with staff. We shared some of the homelife structures, as well as cultural, social, and emotional factors that manifest into learning disengagement and behavioral concerns (e.g., skipping classes, disrupting class learning, or acting out) and how the classroom environment may amplify or minimize these factors.

Caregivers valued and cared for their child's education as a top priority and voiced their concern that the adults in schools do not care enough about their child(ren). They emphasized that the calls home were usually about what their child did wrong or what they were lacking academically, without realizing the struggle behind why they act out, or why they are unable to produce enough schoolwork. Khalifa (2018) makes a point that parents and students interpret their school experiences, behaviours, and or school incidents differently than educators, and these differences are starker for Black, Brown, and poor students. Also, caregivers of students of colour or from lower socio-economic classes use approaches not visible nor understood by educators when supporting their children. Their approaches to helping their children reveal the importance of knowing a family's sociocultural values (Auerbach, 2007b; López, 2001; Mehan et al., 1996). Studies reveal that administrators should engage parents as allies through open communication and collaboration because home, school, and community influence a child's learning and development (Auerbach, 2007a, 2007b; Epstein, 1995; Yosso, 2005).

Step 4: Assessing Impact of our Action Research

As a school community, we learned that cultivating an inclusive and welcoming learning environment required a restorative growth mindset, changing from authoritative to relational conversations, and using community voice to shape disciplinary protocols, practices, and decisions. We recognized that this mindset was foundational to facilitating the implementation of restorative practices further in the school. We achieved a 65% implementation rate of restorative strategies in the classroom. Conversations between staff and students improved. We saw a positive change in the daily interactions and conversations between adults and students in the school. Office referrals of students of colour decreased. We noticed an increase in student awareness and understanding of using restorative mediation for peer-to-peer and peer-to-staff conflict. Staff's greater understanding of students' lived experiences shifted their approach to progressive discipline positively with the school centered restorative practices as an initial step to resolving conflict. Staff developed affirming views of students improving connections and conversations with them. Our restorative work aligns with Khalifa's (2018) notion of culturally responsive school leadership and community-based epistemology or as they called it, a process of humanizing students and families. Through the humanization of our practice, we changed how we characterized and treated our diverse students. Therefore, community knowledge is essential for how we relate and connect to students.

Recommendations

The experiential case of this school reveals some recommendations that other schools may consider. The first recommendation is to train staff in restorative practices because it supports culturally relevant work. Restorative practices guide the development of relational conversations which have a positive effect on building relationships with students. When

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students feel included, welcomed, safe, understood, and acknowledged, their negative feelings towards school dissipate. Likewise, when staff develop affirming views of students, their interactions with them become meaningful and positive. The second recommendation is for schools to develop a better understanding of the communities they serve, and it requires engaging caregivers. Involving students' and caregivers' voices and nurturing relationships with them is a culturally responsive behavior and a core component of restorative practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2016, 2024).

Conclusion

Overall, our work adapting solutions-based restorative approaches helped diffuse feelings of hostility or anxiety among students around their unfair treatment in school while ensuring the best interest of the student and family. When we develop empathy, we learn to relate to others. Empathy supports our emotional awareness and may encourage us to reflect on biases and assumptions of students and their families when we speak to our children (Elliott, 2021; Todd, 2009). Through this relational learning and conversations, we affirm students and their families of all backgrounds, co-create positive learning environments, and build lasting relationships. In this school example, relational conversations that came through restorative practices raised the power of relationships.

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