

Keeping the Peace: A Study of Restorative Justice Peace Circles in Two Chicago Public Schools



A pilot study conducted by Dr. Michael Maly and students enrolled in a research methods class (SOC 290 – The Research Process). The course was a transformational learning research methods class sponsored by the Department of Sociology and the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation at Roosevelt University. Spring 2014.

About this Report

Restorative Justice has been extolled as an approach to justice and traditional crime prevention strategies throughout the world. In schools, in Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S. there is evidence that restorative justice practices are a more effective, alternative approach to dealing with student behavior (e.g., bullying, disruptive actions, etc.) than traditional disciplinary models (e.g., zero-tolerance practices). For three years, the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation has created restorative justice programming in Chicago Public Schools through structured programming that has place over 200 students, worked with 12 Roosevelt University faculty, and many community partners. In this piece of the project, we set out to understand the experiences of children involved in restorative justice peace circles at two schools: Namaste Charter School and Morrill Math & Science School. We start the report by examining the school and community settings for both schools involved in this study. We then examine the main themes that emerged from our interviews with the children. Here we focus on how peace circles create a safe space for kids to express themselves, learn important values and skills for handling their emotions, help them build trust and relationships among their peers, build confidence, motivate them to do better in school, and develop empathy for others. To round out this data, we also examine the experiences of Peace Keepers (i.e., adult leaders of peace circles) at each school. Here we examine what Peace Keepers see as the positive features of peace circles for students as well as the challenges faced in doing this important work. We conclude with policy recommendations aimed at improving school safety in constructive and peaceful ways.

Methodology

As part of a research methods class, we engaged in an exploratory research project that involved observation fieldwork of restorative justice programming (peace rooms) at two Chicago Public Schools and 10 in-depth, open-ended interviews with students involved in peace circles. Our study expanded to include five in-depth, open-ended interviews with Peace Keepers. We recruited a convenience sample of students ranging from third to eighth grade. The students were asked a series of questions about their experiences in the peace circle, including what they liked or did not like, what they looked forward to about circles, how they feel during and after being in circle, how circles shape their relationships with peers, and what (if anything) they learned from being in circles. We asked the circle keeper questions that dealt with their experiences of doing this work, the training that they received to do this work, how the work influences them, the challenges of leading circles, and any changes they would make to improve the restorative justice work in the school. All interviews lasted no more than 30 minutes and were tape recorded and transcribed. The names of all respondents have been changed to pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

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Executive Summary

- The efforts of the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice & Transformation, Roosevelt University provides trained personnel to staff restorative justice peace circles in two Chicago Public Schools. Interviewing both students and Peace Keepers reveal positive outcomes.
- Examining restorative justice at two Chicago Public Schools provides evidence of the effectiveness of peace circles in the prevention and management of school conflict. Peace circles effectively provide young people a non-judgmental, safe, and trusting space to express themselves. Circles are effective sites of social and emotional learning, where youth learn valuable lessons on how to openly and honestly express their emotions, build strong relationships, develop empathy for others, resolve conflicts, and respect others. Circles successfully create positive personal and behavioral outcomes for students.
- Our research illustrates the significance of Peace Keepers in restorative justice programming. Beyond expanding their own personal and professional development, Peace Keepers witness many positive changes in the students involved. The challenges facing Peace Keepers is also an issue. These include: handling the emotions involved in working with children with significant challenges, timing and scheduling conflicts, and contradictory school policies.

Policy Recommendations

Expand restorative justice programming at both schools. Expand programming to include more prevention circles. Promote the benefits of social and emotional learning that is gained through the peace room.

Integrate restorative justice programming throughout school. Improve communication between teachers and the peace room by integrating restorative justice ideology through the schools. Educate and involve teachers in restorative justice programming, while aligning school disciplinary policies with restorative justice principles, by eliminating use of white notes.

Improve space at schools. Create better peace room space at Namaste, one that is separate and large enough to host more students.

Modify restorative justice programming training. Modify Peace Keepers training through mentoring and improved feedback mechanisms to share knowledge gained from experience.

Conduct a large sample study of restorative justice programming outcomes. Conduct larger study of restorative justice among more schools and respondents. Examine the outcomes of social emotional learning, empathy, self-esteem, and relationship building and academic ability.

Introduction

Throughout the U.S. school disciplinary policy has become increasing swift and punitive in effort to increase safety. The foundation for this is Zero tolerance policy, which mandate harsh punishment often for a first occurrence of an infraction. Instituted in part in reaction to the Columbine school shooting in 1999, zero tolerance policies were devised to mete out fixed punishments when specific violations occur regardless of the context. In many ways, zero tolerance policy was devised to frighten students into obedience and as a result, purportedly, increase safety. Instead, we have seen how schools across the nation have become militarized. Many urban schools in the United States resemble prisons. Some large schools in Chicago have police officers on staff, surveillance cameras, and metal detectors. In fact, some schools have gone as far as to require all students to carry clear or see-through backpacks. The implementation of zero tolerance system in many cases leads students down a path of criminalization. Students can begin building a criminal record for minor offences committed within schools. As we learn more about the problem, we begin to see a pattern of discrimination that targets poor minority students. The message these polices send youth is that adults view them as inherently dangerous and they need to be controlled.¹

Restorative justice is an alternative to the punitive zero tolerance system in our schools. As Howard Zehr notes, “restorative justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible.”² Restorative justice practices find their origins in various cultures around the world, including Native American and New Zealand aboriginals. Restorative justice is focused on a values-based approach. These values are created based on the needs of its participants, they include: respect, empathy, accountability, caring, communication, and honesty, among many others.

In Chicago, violence and gang activity in certain neighborhoods has become national news. It is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper without a story of youth being shot or killed on the streets. Many Chicago Public Schools are indeed surrounded by both violence and crime.³ Such an environment negatively affects students’ social and emotional development as well as their academic performance. In response, some schools have turned to restorative justice as a way to address these issues and the needs of their students. In this report, we look at two schools that are currently implementing restorative justice in Chicago: Namaste Charter School and Morrill Math & Science School. Both schools adopted peace circles as a practice or way to address issues within and outside of school that affect students’ performance and behavior.

Peace circles are safe spaces in which students come together to talk and express themselves freely. These circles help students develop a feeling of community, build healthy social relationships, and resolve conflicts. Within these spaces students build trust and relationships with other students as well as the adults involved in these restorative peace circles. Through open and honest discussion, circles often result in getting to the root cause of a particular behavior. Once identified, circle keepers and other school personnel can deal more

¹ Giroux, Henry. 2012. *Disposable Youth: Racialized Memories, and the Culture of Cruelty*. Routledge.

² Howard Zehr. 2002. *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

³ See, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-06-26/news/ct-met-cps-student-violence-0625-20120626_1_cps-students-students-shot-safe-haven-program.

effectively with the real cause of unacceptable behavior. In conflict resolution circles, students are held accountable for their actions and are given the opportunity to resolve issues without the use of violence. In this open and nonjudgmental space, students learn to understand and respect each other’s lived experiences.

Our research indicates that when schools use restorative practices students learn to confront the behavior that has been deemed unacceptable. In a situation that does not use restorative justice the punishment is passive. The student gets the consequences from the teacher or authoritative figure and continues to stay mad about the situation because the student now feels victimized by adults. The victim is also passive, left without a chance to confront the person who harmed them. In the end, the student returns to the classroom with nothing resolved. When using restorative practices, students are able to confront unacceptable behavior and accept responsibility for it in a process that is supportive rather than demeaning.

Setting/Demographics

Donald L. Morrill Math & Science School (Morrill) and Namaste Charter School (Namaste) are both kindergarten through eighth grade schools located on the Chicago’s Southwest side in traditionally working-class black and Latino neighborhoods. Morrill is located near Midway Airport bordering both the West Englewood and Gage Park neighborhoods. As a neighborhood public school, Morrill has more than 800 students, ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade. Namaste Charter School is located in the near southwest neighborhood known as McKinley Park. Namaste has a population of approximately 480 students, also ranging from kindergarten to eighth grade. The neighborhood surrounding the schools is typical of many inner city schools as urban neglect and crumbling roadways mark both areas. Also, Namaste receives public funding, but its charter designation allows it to operate independently of the district. For example, Namaste recruits students from the entire city are invited to apply. Students are selected based on a lottery. As demonstrated below, while vastly different on some statistical indicators, they are comparable on others. It does become clear, however, that Morrill faces greater challenges.

As indicated in Table 1, Morrill and Namaste are schools with a majority of black and Hispanic students. While the district wide percentage of white (non-Hispanic) students is 8.8%, only Namaste comes close to that average. Morrill contains a mix of black (46.1%) and Hispanic (52.6%) students, while most of Namaste’s students are Hispanic (83%). District wide percentages of Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and American Indian are extremely low (3.8% combined) with Morrill and Namaste together having only 2% from these categories, and less than 1% from each school representing two or more races.

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	American Indian	2 or More Races
Morrill	0.4%	46.1%	52.6%	0.2%	0.0%	0.1%	0.6%
Namaste	9.3%	5.3%	83.0%	1.5%	0.0%	0.2%	0.7%
District	8.8%	41.7%	44.3%	3.3%	0.1%	0.4%	1.4%

Source: www.cps.edu

Beyond racial characteristics, it is important to examine issues of school culture and climate. Table 2 illustrates characteristics of the student performance, including: attendance, mobility rate (percentage moving in and out of school), truancy, percent with Individualized Education Programs (IEP), percent low-income, and the number and length of misconducts resulting in suspension. The student attendance rate at both Morrill (95%) and Namaste (96.7%) is high, with rates higher than the district average (92.5%). Important in these findings is an analysis of the school's mobility rate. Studies have shown that higher mobility (students transferring in and out of a school) correlates with lower achievement. In 2013, where the district average for mobility was 19%, Namaste was much lower at 1.3% while Morrill was much higher at 27.6%. Truancy rates were also examined. Both schools performed much better than the district average (29.5%) with Morrill and Namaste at 17.2%, and 11.3% respectively. Percentages of students participating in IEP at the district level were 13.2%, with Morrill at 15.2% and Namaste with 19.7%. Both schools are close to the district average (86.6%) in low-income families, with Morrill well above the district (98.7%) and Namaste slightly below (85.4%).

Table 2 – School Culture and Climate			
	Morrill	Namaste	District
Student Attendance Rate – 2013	95.0%	96.7%	92.5%
Mobility Rate – 2013	27.6%	1.3%	19.0%
Chronic Truancy Rate – 2013	17.2%	11.3%	29.5%
Percent IEP – 2013	15.2%	19.7%	13.2%
Percent Low-Income – 2013	98.7%	85.4%	86.6%
% Suspensions per 100 Students (2012)	11.9%	NA	*Average 13.0%
% Suspensions per 100 Students (2013)	12.0%	8.8%	*Average 13.0%
% Misconducts resulting in Suspension 2012	41.2%	NA	*Average 51.1%
% Misconducts resulting in Suspension 2013	17.2%	80.4%	*Average 51.1%
Average Length of Suspensions 2013	3.4 Days	1.9 Days	*Average 2.2 Days
<i>Source: www.cps.edu</i>			

In terms of discipline, both schools appear to be near the district wide average. In fact, the number of suspensions per 100 students in 2013 was below the district averages (13%), with Morrill at 12.0% and Namaste at 8.8%. However, the percent of misconducts resulting in suspension was not as close in either school. In 2013, 17.2% of misconducts at Morrill resulted in suspension (down significantly from 2012), while at Namaste 80.4% of misconducts result in suspension. The district average was 51.1%.⁴ Also, the average length of suspension varied.

⁴ In 2014-2015, Morrill reports that the percentage of suspensions per 100 students has dropped to 4.7%. There were 61 misconducts, 38 of which resulted in suspension. Thus, the percentage of misconducts that resulted in suspension went up 62%. It is important to note that of these 38 suspensions, only 21 were out-of-school suspensions. Also, the average length of suspensions in 2014-2014 has dropped to 1.75 days. Since the school year is not complete, the data reported here is final. Morrill's principal attributes the use of restorative justice practices over the past three years with this significant drop in misconducts and suspensions. He notes, "It required at least two years for faculty and staff to be trained and to buy-into restorative justice, and for students and their families to understand that the school's goal is not to punish students, but instead help them to learn better social-and-emotional skills and habits."

While the district average was 2.2 days, Morrill’s average length of a suspension was 3.4 days and Namaste was 1.9 days.

A final area we examine centers on standard metrics of school performance. Table 3 captures basic information on how Chicago Public Schools measures school performance. This data focuses on issues of organizational standards, family involvement, ISAT test standings, and overall performance in the All States Test. CPS rates all of its schools according to its performance policy and on various other dimensions. Morrill, at the time of reporting was ranked at the districts lowest standard, level three. Namaste was rated higher than Morrill at a level two, mirroring the district average. In terms of school culture and climate, Morrill received a score of moderately organized (i.e., the school has both strengths and weaknesses per student and teacher responses to the “My Voice, My School Five Essentials Survey”). Namaste was rated well organized. When it comes to family involvement, or how well the school partners with families and communities, Morrill was rated as weak, while Namaste has been given a strong rating.

Table 3 – School Performance Data -2013			
	Morrill	Namaste	District
Type of School	Neighborhood	Charter	N/A
Overall Rating	Level 3	Level 2	N/A
Status	On Probation (7 years)	N/A	N/A
Culture & Climate Rating	Moderately Organized	Well Organized	N/A
Family Involvement Rating	Weak	Strong	N/A
ISAT Composite (2011-2012)	61.3%	86.9%	74.2%
ISAT Composite (2012-2013)	37.2%	64.6%	52.5%

Source: www.cps.edu

Measures of scholastic achievement—measured in terms of standardized tests—are similar to the trends above, where Morrill lags a bit behind Namaste. Table 3 indicates overall student performance on the ISAT composite score (i.e., scores in reading, mathematics and science) for the 2011-2012 school year. Morrill had 61% of its students meeting or exceeding state standards. Namaste had 86.9% of its students exceeding those same standards. These scores compare to a district average of 74.2%. For 2012-2013, we also look at the ISAT composite score for both schools. Although the ISAT test changed (i.e., Common Core metrics brought all scores down), we find similar trends to 2011-2012. Morrill had 37.2% and Namaste had 64.6% of its students meeting or exceeding standards for grades and subjects tested. With district average at 52.5%, Namaste students perform at higher levels than both Morrill and the overall district.

The Setting for Peace Circles at Two Chicago Public Schools

Most people do not have any knowledge of what a peace room is all about. Our fieldwork begins to paint a picture of both the dynamics of the schools, the students, and the activities of the peace room. To begin, Morrill is a K-8 school located just west of Western Avenue, on 6011 S. Rockwell in Chicago. Visiting the school reveals streets with modest bungalow type houses and a few brick multi-unit apartments in various states of disrepair, including several that are boarded up. The streets adjacent to the school have major divots in them, making driving very difficult. True to its neighborhood school designation, residences surround all four sides of the school.

Entering the school requires a stop to sign in with security. One then goes up to Room 214c, the designated peace room at Morrill. The peace room is a repurposed room that has taken on numerous capacities since Morrill first opened its doors, most recently being transformed from a staff lounge to the peace room. Through the door—hanging on it a construction paper sign with the peacekeepers name written on it—is a staircase that leads to a small cutout of a room including a separate small private office space. The sound of children at play can be heard through the common wall the peace room shares with the gymnasium. Children’s artwork adorns the walls of the main room, along with signs with motivational quotes, peace signs, and other calming décor. The room includes a few tables and chairs with computers, an art supply closet in a far corner of the room, and a designated corner for a peace circle. The circle includes a circle of dark blue beanbags with several children’s toys in the center (stuffed animals, wooden toys, drums, etc.) that serve as the circle’s talking pieces (i.e., tools to regulate the conversation). Along the wall parallel to the common wall shared with the gymnasium are two windows half-covered in tissue paper. What stands out most are the peace room “guidelines” painted in bold black letters on the wall in the center of the room: 1) respect others and yourself, 2) no profanity, 3) no bullying, 4) no blaming, 5) no judgment, 6) what’s said here stays here, 7) respect the talking piece, and 8) Have Fun! The peace room is like a separate realm from the rest of the school up from its staircase entrance, but students still enter and leave at will.

At Morrill, peace circles involve serious topics. Children share stories of broken homes, loss, and the personal effects of gang violence. And while the main goal of restorative justice circles at Morrill is to prevent problems, it is often reactive. Children at Morrill face dynamic factors of family and community, making the experiences of the peace circles unique. Many of the children share stories of the effects of the social dynamics of their communities. And while there is a greater need for a proactive peace keeping process at Morrill, often the dynamic environment means Peace Keepers are reacting to conflicts. Thus, conflict circles are more common than at Namaste. Indeed, the children at Morrill have experiences that many white middle class adults will never experience within their lifetimes. As a result of the factors affecting the students of Morrill, the restorative justice process necessitates on a damage control approach. Numerous factors must be taken into account by peacekeepers that face the task of balancing such against their own personal biases in maintaining a trusting environment.

Namaste, a charter school that draws students from a broader range of neighborhoods, is also located in the Southwest side of Chicago, albeit much closer to downtown (3737 S. Paulina). While the immediate neighborhood is in better condition than the one around Morrill, most of the houses surrounding Namaste are older two and three flats of varied quality. The businesses near the school are sparse including several muffler shops and several large brick buildings that one can assume are factories or warehouses. The building itself while much smaller than Morrill, is clearly very old. Walking into Namaste, one is greeted by a modern reception area and a secretary asking the purpose of the visit. After one’s purpose is announced, one must sign in and wear a nametag for school security. The school itself is small in square footage, and for a school the setup is somewhat unconventional. On the campus, one can see multilingual signs—primarily in Spanish and English—as reference points; the inspirational posters often found in schools are also present in both languages.

Once inside it becomes clear that the Namaste employs restorative justice in its relatively small peace room. The peace room—the area where the peacekeeping and peace circles take place—is located down the stairs at the back of the main reception room. Heading into the room

one finds that the peace room is a room off of that main room, it is a room that almost looks like a closet. This small nook of a space has walls with posters, an area to set materials, an oval set of child-sized chairs, and a set of shelves covered in educational and everyday games along the back wall; the room has no windows. With heaving doors, the peace room is a small, quiet, and private area that looks and feels like a “safe zone.” Inside the closed room it feels like one is in a separate world from the rest of the school. While one is aware that they are indeed within the greater Namaste campus, the room has an aura of privacy; it seems like an area that a group of people will not be disturbed. During a peace circle there are a few students sitting in the chairs and—most of the time—one peace keeper. The table is c-shaped and the chairs surround it.

At Namaste many of the students are on a break from class or awaiting an extracurricular activity; many peacekeepers assert that the fact the children are removed from class can affect the overall setting/attitude of the peace circle, as anxiousness can affect peacekeeping. In one observation the setting of the peace room moved from the normal small and private peace room to the parents’ room. While the parents’ room is bigger than the peace room, it is equally cramped with various teaching implements crammed into wall-cubbies. Namaste’s peace circles, like Morrill, are a private affair where secrets get shared and problems get worked out. Even with the presence of alien researchers the children still share stories that could shock the average adult—most of whom seem oblivious to the actual plight of children, especially those of our inner cities. Anything from self-mutilation to absentee parents are discussed and addressed to various degrees. Neither peace room is an area where students sing “Kumbaya” and bang tranquilly on bongos; the peace circles of Namaste are as serious, emotional, and potentially therapeutic as any psychiatric or counseling office.

Child Experiences on Peace Circles

Our interviews reveal that children have overwhelmingly positive experiences in peace circles, developing both emotional and empathetic skills. For children, ranging in age from eight to 14, the peace room is a space where they are able to express themselves and in the process learn prosocial skills and develop as individuals. In the section below, we explore the main themes emerging from interviews with students about their experiences with peace circles. We divide these findings into three areas: a) what the peace circles meant to the students; b) what students felt that they learned from participating in peace circles; and c) how students felt peace circles could be improved.

For the students in our study, peace circles not only build or strengthen friendships, but also serve as a site where they can express their feelings in a low stress environment. Students conveyed that the peace room was a place where the students can securely express whatever is bothering them and work out problems with classmates. Regardless of what is going on at school or home, the peace circle represents a place where young people can blow off steam or decompress in a trusting environment without judgment. As Mary, a fifth grader, notes: “A peace circle to me is like where you won’t be judged by what you say and you’ll have the freedom to say what you want and what you say stays with only those people in that room.” Another student, Amelia, echoes Mary’s statement by stating that peace circles are good “because when you have hard things, you can’t, you don’t want to talk with your family. It helps.” For Amelia and others,

the non-judging, confidential structure of the circle provides a safe place to express what is on their mind and to seek advice for solutions to immediate problems among peers or at home.

In fact, students report that the safe space of the peace room is effective in helping them get through hardships. For example, Joe, an eighth grader who has had many issues at home, responds: "I like the peace room people. They help me out a lot, but it's still...it is a good thing helping me through my family thing, but it can get tough." Joe's trust of the circle is a sign that he feels safe and comfortable to talk about problems or issues that he cannot express to anyone else. Dante, a seventh grader, captures the positive effect of participating in peace circles when he states: "we just express our feelings and it's a good feeling, and you think back. If you're struggling on something, you think back and then you like, remember the stuff that they told you and you try your hardest to work hard for what you're struggling with." For both Joe and Dante, feeling safe to express your feelings in a group setting is due in large part to the rules that the Peace Keepers emphasize at each peace circle. These rules give students the freedom to express or use their voice, allowing them to find justice within themselves and relationships that they create or maintain.

Indeed, many students at Morrill and Namaste experience positive outcomes from participating in peace circles. Children from both schools report that learning the importance of and how to be emotionally open has helped them succeed in their daily lives. As Joanie notes, "we talk about what kind of problems we have during the week, and there are important questions, so we have to answer them honestly." In this process, children like Joanie learn that it is important to be open about their feelings. One reason that emerged is that the children see the peace circles as an outlet. For example, Pedra, a sixth grade student at Namaste, reveals a personal change that resulted from participating in the peace circles: "I think for me it was realizing that I could let go of being so secretive from others because I often like to keep to myself." Pedra's situation is not unique as other children noted that they have learned that they do not need to keep everything inside and be secretive. Learning to be open and honest has also helped students find their own solutions to their problems.

Participating in peace circles brought about many positive changes for our respondents. Three of the main changes students mentioned were building relationships, emotional skill development, and empathy. Relationship building has been long recognized as important for reducing deviant responses and conflict. Our data reveal that through peace circles, children learn from each other, gain each other's trust, and in the process, strengthen friendships, and build new ones. Betsy, a fifth grader, talks about the way circles helped build relationships:

The last time I was in peace circles...I was just letting people know who I am. It was friends who I already knew. One was a close friend, but the rest of them I hadn't really talked to that much. So, they got to know me and I got to know them and we talked about how we were doing that day...just random stuff that helped them know who we were.

Another student, Pete, captures the stress he felt going to his first peace circle and the positive experience he had with building connections with his classmates:

I was tense [about first circle] because I didn't know what was going to go on. This was the first time I had ever did it and I was like 'uh-oh' what is going to happen. Are

we going to talk like if we are mad at one another because I didn't know if any of the other girls had problems with me. I knew peace circle was like to mainly solve problems, that's what I learned before I joined it. And then afterwards it was like cool. I got to know more things about people instead of just knowing like what their name is.

While such work is often discounted as trivial or as work that happens in regular classrooms, community building is vital to the emotional well-being of children.⁵ The importance of relationship building through a structured and safe environment becomes even more apparent when conflict arises among students.

When conflicts arise, as they often do in school settings, peace circles provide an effective and mediated space to resolve them. Our respondents were clear about the importance of peace circles in helping to solve conflicts. For example, Marie tells the following story of conflict between her and her friends:

I knew there was some conflict between me and one of the peers. And then I realized that there was more behind it, like more conflict. So, it was going on between the other two and it was going between me and my other friend. So, it was a conflict triangle I would say. That's a good way to describe it. But yeah, it was like a conflict triangle and then in the end, I realized it was all because we had had a lack of communication and trust. Eventually we gained the trust back with each other so I think if we didn't have the peace circle we would have a lack of trust for each other.

Similar to Marie, other respondents saw the peace circle as a useful way to expand their understanding of others. In a space, where students can trust both their classmates and Peace Keepers, it is easier to repair the harm that is caused when conflict arises.

The community building approach of the peace circle not only builds strong relationships between students, it breaks down interpersonal barriers and helps student develop empathy for others. Empathy, or learning to walk in another person's shoes, is a key element in countering the dominant individualistic and punishment oriented models of dealing with conflict and crime.⁶ Evidence also suggests that the presence of greater levels of empathy lead to declines in aggressive behavior and increases pro-social behavior.⁷ Our data reveal that students are learning empathy through their involvement in peace circles. When Frank, a seventh grader, is asked whether listening to friends in circle alters his feelings toward them, he replies: "Yeah, well sometimes it does. You try and see what is different between you and them. So, yeah, sometimes it does." Frank recognizes the role that peace circles play in helping him learn to see the world from another person's eyes, a fundamental element of empathy. Similarly, Nora remarks, "I also like the idea of the peace circle to give compliments and say your true feelings...I think that if we were to do that or if [we] were to do that many more people would be nicer to each other

⁵ Mirsky, Laura. 2011. "Building Safer, Saner Schools." *Educational Leadership*. 69(1): 45-49.

⁶ Calhoun, A. and W. Pelech. 2010. "Responding to Young People Responsible for Harm: A comparative study of restorative and conventional approaches." *Contemporary Justice Review*. 13(3): 287-306.

⁷ Schonert-Reichl, K., V. Smith, A. Zaidman-Zait, C. Hertzman. 2012. "Promoting Children's Prosocial Behaviors in School: Impact of the "Roots of Empathy" Program on the Social and Emotional Competence of School-Aged Children." *School Mental Health*. 4(1): 1-21.

because they don't know their true feelings." Thus, peace circles assist in the empathy building process, as students are guided through a structure that requires them to reach out to others in order to understand how they feel.

Once students learn to hear the way other people feel, it is often a next step to understand how their behavior impacts others. This is a process of both learning and enacting empathy. For example, when Zoe is asked what she learned about others in the peace circle, she notes:

Beforehand I knew there were a lot of different reactions [to issues], but I realized that there were a lot more than I knew about. Like some people can take it really hard when you are bullying them and even if you are not bullying them. If you say something the wrong way they'll take it really hard and like just low...that happened to me a few times as well and like after the peace circle. I realized that they were disrespecting people without even realizing it.

Zoe is learning to be self-reflective in ways that help her understand how her behavior, even when unintentional, impacts other people. Similarly, Ken, a fifth grader, reflects on participating in a conflict circle after having a disagreement with some of his friends. He notes:

I wanted them to know what I was thinking, what I was feeling so we could get it over with. I was really anxious and mad about the whole situation. So that's when I talked a lot to try and get them to understand what was my perspective and what I was doing so I wouldn't be hurt...I was relieved and aware I would say, because I was then aware of what my two other peers were feeling and what was going on in their minds...and how I could like prevent something like that to happen again.

In this case, Ken is not only learning to reach out and understand where his friends are coming from, he is using this knowledge to think about how to alter his behavior in the future in order to avoid these situations. The importance of learning empathy cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to mitigating emotional and behavior problems among youth. The role of empathy is fundamental, as it is a requisite for prosocial (that which benefits others) behavior.⁸ Having empathy for another person often means that we treat people in better, more supportive ways.

Our interviews also reveal that students learn a number of other valuable social and emotional skills. Social and emotional learning is about acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, to care and be concerned for others, form positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations.⁹ Evidence suggests that social and emotional learning strategies are key to preventing mental illness and aggressive behaviors long after the interventions end.¹⁰ Students in our study informed us that they were learning a variety

⁸ Schonert-Reichl, Kimberly and Mary O'Brien. 2012. "Social and Emotional Learning and Prosocial Education," in Brown et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Prosocial Education*. Rowman & Littlefield.

⁹ Greenberg, M. R. Weissberg, M. O'Brien, J. Zins, L. Fredericks, H. Resnik and M. Elias. 2003. "Enhancing School-based Prevention and Youth Development through Coordinated Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning." *American Psychologist*. 58(6-7):466-74.

¹⁰ For further reading see: Hawkins, J., R. Catalano, R. Kosterman, R. Abbot, and K. Hill. 1999. "Preventing adolescent health-risk behaviors by strengthening protection during childhood." *Archives Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*. 153(3):226-34; and Greenberg, M. 2010. "School-based Prevention: Current Status and Future Challenges." *Effective Education*. 2:27-52.

of social and emotional skills by participating in peace circles. A principle skill, as noted above, involved learning to express their emotions in an open and honest manner. Empathy for others is an equally important skill to develop. Other less obvious skills were also being learned, including how to express and handle emotions, the value of respect of others, and learning to implement this learning in the everyday.

For students in our study, learning how to express and handle emotions was an important lesson communicated through the peace room. For some students, the experience of expressing their emotions in a group setting provided them insight on ways to express their feelings. In particular, peace circles taught students how to control negative emotions and use their voice to communicate in clear ways. For example, a fifth grader named Manny told us, "I think the peace circle...the main thing it did was help me be more like vocal of what I am feeling and more up front about stuff." The students learn to control and express their emotions through simple conversations with friends and trusted adults. Manny goes on to suggest that these skills have proven useful for controlling negative reactions. He says, "yeah, I just remind myself to think about what I'm about to do. Like, think before I do an action and think about the consequences that might happen and then I just get out of it...it sort of relates when I'm about to do a bad choice." Here Manny realizes that controlling any negative feelings will keep him away from trouble.

In a peace circle, students are allowed to express their feelings openly with a certain structure of rules. The main rules center on having respect for themselves and others. The two rules that seem crucial involve respecting the talking piece and respecting the privacy of others in the circle (i.e., what is shared there, stays there). The talking piece is the tool that ensures that each person gets a chance to be heard, without having others talk over him or her. In a circle, only the person with the talking piece is allowed to talk. The use of the talking piece also teaches students to respect others, particularly when the Peace Keeper enforces the rule. Also, the rules of the peace circle require students to keep conversations in the circle private. The focus on privacy is teaching students the importance of respecting other people and their experiences. When Michelle, a sixth grader, is asked what she liked about the structure of circles, she says:

I think the sense of privacy because like before I didn't know the two other girls very well and through the project I got to know them more. One I knew was a chatter box, so I was afraid of that part, and after that I was like cool that she wouldn't say anything because it will be against the program rules and they will penalize her not me... and I was able to trust her.

The value of respecting others and the feelings of others is an important lesson here. Tonya, another student, also sees the role of respect in the circle when she notes: "The important conversations are when we have to be respectful to each other when they ask us a question about privacy and we should respect what they are saying." She is learning to respect the privacy of her classmates' or friends' emotions and problems.

Whether or not these lessons take hold and predict future outcomes is beyond the scope of this study. We do, however, have some indication of positive outcomes from the student self-assessments. Many of students interviewed report greater self-confidence in expressing

themselves and positive behavior changes. For example, Bernard, a student at Morrill, indicated that “the [peace circle] made me say stuff that I usually wouldn’t...I feel more confident in myself.” Others, like Mandy, note, the peace circles have motivated them scholastically and at home. She notes, “they [peace circles] give me motivation and think back and have respect and bring my grades up. Or whatever is happening at home.” And finally, when asked about the effectiveness of the peace circles, Tony responds: “Yeah, because like I said I think towards the beginning...I’m more open than I was before and that’s really helped me. I’m not getting into as many conflicts as before because I want to talk it through and let people know what’s going on.” Clearly, learning to express their feelings in a structured environment elicits positive changes in students. Thus, in important ways, the lessons of the peace circle extend beyond the circle itself.

Both the importance and the lessons of the peace circle at their school are not lost on the kids. For one student, participating in the circle is essential for him to succeed in his academic work. When Billy, a fifth grader, is asked if he feels that the peace room is distracting him from his studies, he notes: “I have to figure out my problems so I can focus in class...[I feel better] because I don’t have to worry about the problems outside of class.” Thus, for some students being able to attend to their emotional and social needs, makes it possible for them to focus on their studies. Also, students reflected on seeing the real life consequences of not having the social and emotional skills that are taught in the peace room. One student, Walter, captures what schools are like without peace rooms when he notes: “sometimes other schools don’t have peace circles and the kids go outta control. The principal let’s anything happen. The peace circles help kids out.” Similarly, when Tina, a seventh grader, is asked if she likes peace circles, she notes: “I do, because I know I have conflicts with other people outside of the school that go to different schools and they don’t know how to express their feelings at all. They like express it through violence.” While a larger study with a larger sample size is required to assess outcomes of participating in peace circles, our data suggest that the circles have tremendous value.

Finally, we asked our respondents for their thoughts on how to improve the circles. While most responses were brief, students did raise some salient issues. A main complaint, particularly at Namaste, was the physical space. Tommy, a fifth grader at Namaste, captures this when he suggests that the peace room should be in “a bigger space, because last time 10 people came and we couldn’t all fit...a lot of people want to come but when they come they can’t fit.” Our fieldwork corroborated this statement, as the space is not very welcoming and conducive to peace circles. Also, while children express overall satisfaction with peace circles, several respondents mentioned logistical concerns. Many kids wished the peace circles could be longer in order to not feel rushed, particularly when dealing with serious issues. Wanda, a student at Morrill, notes that “[schools should have longer time for circles] because you would have more time and won’t have to worry about what class is next and you don’t have to be like ‘we only have 30 minutes, so let’s talk about this.’”

The Peace Keepers

Early on in our fieldwork, we realized the fundamental role that the Peace Keeper plays not only in the peace room, but in the lives of the students they interact with. Peace Keepers facilitate the rules of the circle as well as listen, gain trust, and give advice to students when asked. In more open-ended circles (or talking circles), Peace Keepers are involved in drawing out students to share aspects of their lives. In the process, as children build trust with the Peace

Keeper, a bond develops. In conflict circles (circles aimed at resolving specific conflicts), Peace Keepers play the role of mediator and in the process model alternative ways of resolving conflict that avoids violence. In order to deepen our understanding of peace circles, we conducted five interviews with Peace Keepers from both schools. Most of the Peace Keepers at Morrill and Namaste are third or fourth year students at Roosevelt University. Each Peace Keeper interviewed for this project served in this role for almost one year. As we present below, Peace Keepers gain tremendous benefits and face a number of challenges. Exploring the nature of the role further illuminates the dynamics of peace circles in schools as an alternative model of conflict management and discipline.

To appreciate the role of Peace Keeper, it is important to note that Peace Keepers receive intensive training over two days on various therapeutic techniques and peace circle processes. Peace Keepers learn how to run a piece circle by participating in a peace circle themselves with other trainees, while taking moments during the training to critically analyze the processes they perform. As Gwen notes,

We all just sat in a circle and did a peace or call...[the leader] would stop us at moments and be like "oh, here you'd want to do this," and "here you'd want to do that." So basically we were acting as the students and she was the peace keeper, and that's how we learned what to say and what to do and all that.

In addition to learning the actual processes of a peace circle, Peace Keepers are also immersed in the language of therapeutic communication. As Sarah notes, "We talked a lot about language and the kind of language to use in the peace keeping dialogue. It was a really rewarding experience in itself." This training equips the Peace Keepers with skills that enable them to serve the children that are a part of the program.

While Peace Keepers found intrinsic value in the formal training, it is clear that the bulk of their learning comes from actually serving in the role. The Peace Keepers we interviewed emphasized that they were "learning on the fly." Thus, improvements and progression throughout the school year came as they gathered more experience facilitating circles. A Peace Keeper at Namaste, Don, reflects on his training:

I was given sort of the process, but I think a lot of times you just got to learn as you go. And I think a lot of the situations you will have to think on your toes and let's just hope things work out. There're definitely times to say things and not say thing...So, I think you learn as you go...I think that the best education is experience.

Lynette, a Peace Keeper at Morrill, echoes Don's ideas when she notes, "It's a continuous learning process, because it's never, you never walk into the same [circle]." Overall, their training appears to adequately prepare Peace Keepers to facilitate peace circles. It does seem useful, however, to provide spaces to reflect on this applied knowledge in more formal structures to help them and others refine their skills.

Our interviews also reveal that Peace Keepers find tremendous personal benefit from serving in this role. All Peace Keepers interviewed report finding their restorative justice work as beneficial in three areas: a) increase awareness around the everyday reality of social issues; b) professional/career development; and c) personal transformation. As a result, Peace Keepers

find themselves more in tune with how social structures impinge on individuals, particularly the children, particular neighborhoods, and the local education system. Lynette comments on the eye-opening experience of knowing about social problems and experiencing the everyday reality:

We read about this stuff. We know this stuff is going on. But to have a 3rd; 4th; 5th; 6th; 7th; or 8th grader talking to you and telling you like you know...what's going on at home or what just happened the other day. This is their real-life experience and...to sort of be a person that they depend on.

The reality of witnessing the young people's experiences of inequality and poverty was eye opening for all Peace Keepers. Similarly, Frank, a Peace Keeper at both Namaste and Morrill, notes:

I tell the kids all the time - "You guys are teaching me stuff that I have never learned before." I would have never learned all this stuff if I had never got into peace keeping, working with the Mansfield Institute and stuff like that. I've benefited tremendously.

Finally, Lynette goes on to express the deeper appreciation for the challenges facing those lower down the socioeconomic scale. She states:

In higher income schools, they're not coming to school worrying about if they are going to eat or not. They're not coming to school worrying about if somebody's going to be at home or not. And that's what these kids worry about. When you don't worry about that, you just end up punishing them, suspend them, and you just sort of condition them to be treated that way. And you condition them for constant discipline, then you move them into the high schools where it's police actually in the schools, all sorts of things that sort of set them up to be more likely to be criminalized at an older age.

And yet, this first hand knowledge for many Peace Keepers strengthens their sense that many of the issues facing students in the two schools (e.g., zero tolerance policy, discipline, expulsions, inequities in schools) are matters that could be improved through increased use, or introductory use, of restorative justice practices.

Peace Keepers also expressed the value of the Peace Keeper role in terms of professional development. For some Peace Keepers becoming involved with an unfamiliar community and school gave them "insight" into career trajectory, aims, and goals. Reflecting on this issue, Don comments, "I feel like I'm definitely a stronger and a more emotionally aware person and being able to connect within a community setting and different people has given me a lot time to work on my career path and my professional development and personal development as well." For some like Don, the work is training for a future careers. This is the case for Lynette, who expresses a desire to start a non-profit, one where restorative practices are a central element. Other Peace Keepers note that their work also increased their networking opportunities that Peace Keepers expressed. It is clear that Peace Keepers looked at their work and their involvement with restorative justice organizations as a gateway for their futures.

As reflected in the quote by Don above, personal development is also a key benefit in their work. For some, the work led to personal improvement in their personal lives as well as

improvement in the understanding and handling of their work. In their time working at the schools, Peace Keepers notice differences in themselves. For example, Patty, a Peace Keeper at Namaste, notes:

It's definitely increased my patience...working through other peoples' problems, especially students/youth, it takes awhile to get to the root of things. So I've had to be more patient to work through things and it has also made me be okay when things don't always go my way or work out. Sometimes I always want a conflict to work out; I always want people to understand everything. I want the students to come out of the circles feeling great and like they learned so much, and that doesn't always happen because. [With] students it takes a little to realize or to learn from something or to understand their conflict, or how they've affected other people.

Similar to Patty, other Peace Keepers note experiencing personal development in becoming more patient, handling emotions, and even a sense that they are more "emotionally and mentally aware." Working in the field of restorative justice also allow Peace Keepers to connect with people that are, in many ways, different from themselves. As they work and interact with different people in different places they develop a sensitivity and understanding of other cultures. Several Peace Keepers noted that the experiences gained through the peace room are unique and cannot be received in a classroom.

The positive changes that the Peace Keepers see in themselves reflect the changes they see in students, a rewarding element in and of itself. For some, the work in and of itself is the reward. As Don suggests, being there for students is inspiring: "A lot of these students want somebody to trust, they want to be able to come to someone, and be honest, and be open, and talk however they like to, express without judgment, without fear, without punishment, without discipline. They need, they want to be exposed to someone who understands them, someone who reaffirms them, and reassures them of their safety, of their beauty, of their knowledge." Being this person for young people is a very rewarding experience. For others, observing changes in the students involved in the peace circles at their schools was a benefit that made the work fulfilling. Lynette, a Peace Keeper at Morrill, captures it this way: "Gradually, they realize the consequences of their actions and they want to do something about it. I think it takes time because of the things they go through, but I really do think they benefit." Likewise, Patty saw a lot of progress among the kids in the peace room. She notes:

I saw students open up to their peers when I did not expect them to. It was really nice. They definitely increased communication...I don't feel like the students necessarily have like a lot of time to communicate directly to their peers [outside the circles]...where everyone is heard and has a chance, but I saw that happening...and I saw other students holding each other accountable for their actions. I also saw peers holding their friends accountable for their own values, and good things about themselves. You know they would point out good things about their friends and be like, "You are... a great person."

Witnessing these changes make the work rewarding, helping connect the Peace Keepers to the students and providing psychic benefits that help them weather some of the challenges that come with the job.

Peace Keepers did detail challenges that they face in doing this type of restorative justice work. The biggest challenge involves handling the emotional burden of this type of work. Peace Keepers are involved in serious work, negotiating and resolving conflict situations, and often comforting children with complex and often difficult family situations. As it is with almost every profession, burn out is a possibility and self-care is a crucial part of maintaining a high level of service. Lynette epitomizes the feelings of the other Peace Keepers when she says:

At a certain point, I just have to take a day off because...as much as we're engaged in the work and we've all been through, you have to take some time for yourself at some point. And it's really hard because you get invested in these kids. I've gone home and cried over these kids multiple times because of the level of things they go through that nobody should go through. Some of the things that they've been through, I didn't go through it until I was 18, you know. And it's just hard. It takes a very special kind of person to be able to do this and not...quit.

A few Peace Keepers talked about the importance of finding an outlet. Don talks of getting together with other Peace Keepers to "just kind of take a few minutes and breathe." Frank states, "I think everybody need somebody to talk to...we can't hold it all in, we'll eventually snap. Everybody needs an outlet." Fortunately, the group organizing the peace circles – the Mansfield Institute at Roosevelt University – has a monthly get together to touch base. As Frank notes:

One of the things that is really helpful...[we meet with] all the peace keepers at least once a month, we get together and have a reflection...We back up each other about what we are going through."

It would appear that close ties and the congealing of trust amongst the peace keepers has created a helpful opportunity for peace keepers to obtain the type of self-care needed to provide a high quality of social service.

Another challenge expressed by some of the Peace Keepers is the issue of boundaries. Managing boundaries between the Peace Keeper and students is important not only when it comes to self-care, but when it comes to managing one of the main tenets of the peace room: confidentiality. When asked about the emotional toll involved in serving as a Peace Keeper, Lynette shares:

Well first, you know, and I already said this – it's just like reminding yourself that there are boundaries. At a certain point, we're not psychiatrists. We're not social workers and there's only like two social workers at a school. At a certain point...we can't fix everything. We're there to build relationships. We're there to restore relationships and to restore some of the harm that has been done. But there are times where we have to breach confidentiality for the sanctity of the child. If they're in a position where they are going to put themselves at harm or put someone else at harm, we do have to do something about it. Because that's their life and that might be someone else's life. And it's really hard when you've got a kid that trusts and confides in you and we have to let them know that we are doing this as a matter of safety.

Building trust with students is necessary for all Peace Keepers. Respecting confidentiality while also looking out for the best interests of a particular child is a delicate balancing act. Creating

support networks among the Peace Keepers and possibly school staff who are trained to handle these cases appears vital.

Beyond handling emotions and boundaries the Peace Keepers face practical concerns of working in an educational environment. A major issue confronting Peace Keepers is that of timing and scheduling. Peace Keepers often have to fit in circles in between classes or over lunch in effort to not take away too much time from class. This may not give enough time for the needs of the peace circle to be fulfilled, leaving gaps in progress and requiring children to resolve conflicts in parts, rather than as a whole. Time constraints and conflicting schedules make it difficult to resolve conflicts and repair relationships. This is particularly true at Morrill, where there is more conflict between students. Many times this conflict arises and has to be dealt with on the fly. Lynette explains:

We're starting to develop a more strict schedule but the thing is that...at Morrill it might be quiet and you have circles going on, then there are like these fights. So, something has to be addressed and sometimes we have to let go of the structure for a little bit to make sure these kids are okay. As much as we would love to stick to the structure all the time, somebody just got punched in the face...somebody's mother is at the school yelling at a child. This is something that needs to get handled right here and now before the damage gets worse. And sometimes we've got very limited time for that you know...we don't like pulling [them] out of class for too long.

As conflicts occur, peace circles are called. Thus, a good number of peace circles are unscheduled due to necessity. With the timing and scheduling issues noted above, handling such spontaneous conflict also means that Peace Keepers are reacting rather than being proactive in their efforts.

Timing and scheduling issues also connect to relationships between the Peace Keepers and classroom teachers. Peace Keepers report that it is often difficult to bring the right people together for a peace circle. The peace circle might need to involve children in different classes and grades, posing problems as children are on different schedules. Additionally, if the children are all in the same class, a teacher might oppose a handful of his or her students missing class-time. As Patty notes, involving teachers is not always easy:

We've had teachers do their own circles to see how the process is like. We try to get as many people from as many different sections of the school and communities to understand what we are doing. I think we may face issues as far as timing and trying to get people together at one place in time, having everyone have the same respect for each other, because a lot of times this, a lot of teachers are used to being a head authoritative figure. They don't want to give up that authority because it keeps a level of...a way to control the class but we try to give the teachers a way to look at things differently...

Getting to teachers and parents to buy into restorative justice practices is essential for the program to be a success. Peace Keepers do reach out to make alliances with teachers and parents. As Don notes:

Yeah, we made it a priority to try to get more teachers, more parents involved in the process. We've had parents sit in on circles. We've had teachers do their own circles

to see how that process is like. So, we try to get as many people from as many different sections of the school and communities to understand what we are doing.

While Peace Keepers report that not all teachers are on board, some of the outreach efforts are successful. This is particularly true at Morrill, where Lynette maintains:

Some teachers are just all on board for it. They support us. They work with us. They'll call us down to have a circle. They will email us to say 'I need you guys to talk with this group because this is going on and things need to be resolved.' So it's sort of mixed and it's really just a matter of also developing relationships with them the same way we do with the students so that it doesn't become us against them [teachers]...we don't want to pull your kids out of class...In the short time I've been there, the relationships are getting better.

Continued efforts at building relationships between teachers and the peace room are important. And while Peace Keepers report a few connections with parents, such efforts appear as a logical next step.

A final and perhaps more daunting challenge Peace Keepers realize that they face is that restorative justice ideas do not permeate through the entire school. At both schools, there are some contradictions that work against the successful implementation of restorative justice practices. One example involves a lack of knowledge on the nature of the peace room. Patty reports this lack of knowledge when she says:

The organization and the implementation of restorative justice in schools could be better...I know that everyone at the school is already busy with their own job, you know...I think there could be some like training or some...established leadership for implementing peace circles. Because it took kind of a lot of work to get everybody on board at Namaste and *still*...not everyone is sure what peace circles are, but there're working on it. And a lot of teachers were super into it and some teachers were like, "Oh what's that? We have class going on, we can't have this..." But if that were better organized and planned out beforehand.

In addition, some of the schools in which the Peace Keepers work are not consistent in their support of restorative justice. While individual administrators are very supportive, this support is not reflected in some school policies. For example, Peace Keepers reported that some policies are based on rewards and punishments and not the "value-based actions" that restorative justice encourages.¹¹ To begin with, students are not taught about restorative justice, even in the schools observed where peace circles are conducted. Students learn about restorative justice from the Peace Keepers, perhaps during their first time in a peace circle. Peace Keepers expressed a desire for teachers and staff to get on board with restorative justice so that students experience restorative justice throughout the school and not only within the Peace Room. While there appear to be strides in this direction, there is more work to be done.

Also, and importantly, at one of the observed schools, Peace Keepers report the existence of "white notes," a disciplinary measure that students received when they violate school policies.

¹¹ Pranis, Kay. 2003. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. Living Justice Press.

Peace Keepers feel that white notes are used “too liberally,” as students can receive a white note for such small actions as wearing a uniform incorrectly, having their head on their desk for too long, or for talking to someone in the hallway for too long. These white notes are placed in student records and are never expunged often following them as they apply to enter different high schools. White notes are particularly problematic in schools with peace rooms as what often occurs is that when a student gets in trouble and receives a white note, they are then sent to the peace room to discuss why they did what they did. This type of disciplinary measure stands in contradiction to the principles of restorative justice and the lessons Peace Keepers try to convey in peace circles. As a result, this, according to Peace Keepers, makes students “resent the process” and, as such, the students care little about the peace circles. The practice of using white notes and connecting them to the peace room is not a restorative practice.

Conclusion

In response to cases of increased violent incidents in schools, school disciplinary policies have become increasingly strict in effort to increase safety. One component of most of these policies is zero tolerance – a policy where preset punishments are dispensed when specific violations occur regardless of the context. And while safety is something on the minds of students, parents, teachers, and administrators, there is little evidence that zero tolerance disciplinary models are the best way to increase safety. In fact, research suggests that such policies that focus on suspension and expulsion are linked to many negative outcomes, including an increased criminalization of youth often for minor offenses.

Alternatives to the increasingly punitive model of discipline in schools do exist. One particular alternative model, restorative justice, has gained traction within schools. Restorative justice approaches to school discipline – in its varied forms (e.g., peer mediation, talking or “peace” circles) – create safe, non-judgmental, and supportive spaces for students. In restorative justice circles, the students who broke the rules, those that have been impacted by the rule breaking, and other school members are brought together to discuss the event, build accountability, and work together to find solutions to the harm. As a result, students are empowered to be leaders in the prevention of violence, conflict resolution, and safety, while building valuable social and emotional skills.

In Chicago, several public schools have experimented with restorative justice models. The two we examined, Namaste and Morrill, have had programs for several years, organizing both talking and conflict circles. Kids participating in these circles overwhelmingly report positive experiences. Circles provide important spaces for kids to be heard and to learn how to express their feelings in healthy and constructive ways. Valuable social and emotional skills are also developed in these circles, including how to build stronger relationships, empathy for others, and how to handle their emotions in more positive ways. Also, the value-based approach of the peace room with its emphasis on respect, empathy, accountability, caring, communication and honesty, serves an important site to reinforce prosocial skills. All those involved, both students and the Peace Keepers, stand to gain from such programming. In the process, circles build community and increase safety in more healthy ways.

Recommendations

Expand restorative justice programming at both schools. The benefits of restorative are considerable both to individual students and the larger school culture and community. Programming could be expanded to ensure that circles are not simply reacting to situations but working to prevent situations. Expansion should involve a culture shift to ensure that social and emotional learning are equally valued as academic learning.

Integrate restorative justice programming throughout the schools. Find ways to improve lines of communication between teachers and the peace room. Integrate restorative justice ideology through the schools by broad education among teachers on the value and values of the peace room, hosting peace circles among teachers, and implementing peace circles within classroom. Finally, align school disciplinary policies with restorative justice principles. Eliminate use of white notes at Namaste and in their place use restorative model.

Improve space at schools. Namaste needs an improved space that is dedicated for the peace room. A separate space that is large enough to host over 10 students is required. Similar to Morrill's peace room, providing this space will improve the sense of community that students feel when they attend circle.

Modify restorative justice programming training. Modify the training of Peace Keepers by connecting new leaders with more seasoned veterans for mentoring. Run part of the training at the schools, so leaders get actual experience. Finally, find ways to communicate knowledge gained from experience to other Peace Keepers.

Conduct a large sample study of restorative justice programming outcomes. Build larger study involving more sites, a larger number of respondents, and on examining the following variables: social emotional learning, empathy, self-esteem, and relationship building.

Additional Resources on Restorative Justice

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Alternatives

http://www.alternativesyouth.org/restorative_justice

Restorative Justice Online – Prison Fellowship International Centre for Justice and Reconciliation

<http://www.restorativejustice.org/>

Dignity in Schools Campaign

<http://www.dignityinschools.org/about-us>

Implementing Restorative Justice: Victim, Offender, Community

State of Illinois / Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority

<http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL%20BARJ%20GUIDEBOOK.pdf>

National Centre for Restorative Approaches in Youth Settings

<http://www.transformingconflict.org/content/restorative-approaches-0>

Community Justice for Youth Institute

<http://cجي.org/cجي-services>

FixSchoolDiscipline.org

<http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/toolkit/educators/restorative/#>

Center for Restorative Process

<http://www.healthiersf.org/RestorativePractices/Resources/documents/RP%20Curriculum%20and%20Scripts%20and%20PowePoints/Classroom%20Curriculum/Teaching%20Restorative%20Practices%20in%20the%20Classroom%207%20lesson%20Curriculum.pdf>

Longmont Community Justice Partnership

http://www.lcjp.org/files/ure_restaltexpulsion_final.pdf

Restorative Practices International

<http://www.rpiassn.org/practice-areas/what-is-restorative-justice/>

Restorative Practices International (Key Principles of Restorative Justice)

<http://www.rpiassn.org/practice-areas/principles/>

Restorative Practices International (models of Restorative Justice)

<http://www.rpiassn.org/practice-areas/rj-models/>

Living Justice Press

http://www.livingjusticepress.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B51F9C610-C097-446A-8C60-05E8B4599FE7%7D

Alameda County Health Care Services Agency – School Health Services Coalition

<http://healthyschoolsandcommunities.org/Docs/Restorative-Justice-Paper.pdf>

International Institute for Restorative Practices Graduate School

<http://www.iirp.edu/what-is-restorative-practices.php>

PEACE CIRCLES

Project NIA

http://www.project-nia.org/docs/Peacemaking_Circles_overview.pdf

Peace Power

<http://www.peacepower.info/modules/PeaceCircles.pdf>

Restorative Justice and Circles Blog

<http://www.circle-space.org/2011/11/14/different-types-of-restorative-justice-circles-and-a-practitioner-perspective/>

Restorative Justice and Circles Blog (Middle and High School Circles)

<http://peacecircles.com/peace-circles/middle-high-school/>

Restorative Justice and Circles Blog (Talking Circles)

<http://peacecircles.com/peace-circles/tlc-talking/>