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When Healing and High-stakes Meet: Restorative Justice in an Era of Racial Neoliberalism

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University of Massachusetts Amherst

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When Healing and High-stakes Meet:
Restorative Justice in an Era of Racial Neoliberalism

A Dissertation Presented

by

DANI O'BRIEN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2019

College of Education

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Approved as to style and content by:

Kysa Nygreen, Chair

Jason Irizarry, Member

Sangeeta Kamat, Member

Jennifer Sandler, Member

Jennifer Randall
Associate Dean of Academic Affairs
College of Education

DEDICATION

To my teachers who have left but are always with me,

Deborah Lynn O'Brien

Antonio Nieves Martinez

Jameson Greeley Lavoe

Ashley Thomas

Rita Marie Britt O'Brien

Linda and Richard Giguere

To my "Presente" Family

Words cannot capture what it has meant to be in this work with all of you. You have taught me so much about what is possible not only in schools, but in this world.

¡Siempre Pa'lante!

To all people everywhere who believe in and struggle for justice

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nourished my desire to hear the stories those with power try to erase. I have been trying to hear them ever since. Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

**WHEN HEALING AND HIGH-STAKES MEET:
RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN AN ERA OF RACIAL NEOLIBERALISM**

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DANI O'BRIEN, B.A., SIMMONS COLLEGE

M.Ed., AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Associate Professor Kysa Nygreen

Based on a 3-year ethnography, this dissertation documents the story of Presente, an explicitly critical youth-led restorative justice group attempting to dismantle the school-prison nexus and create a more youth-centered culture at their high-reform high school. This dissertation addresses the questions: How does serving as a restorative justice peer leader impact students? What challenges and opportunities arise as the school tries to transition to more restorative practices? And how do the values central to restorative justice come up against, challenge, and get challenged by neoliberal education reform?

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CHAPTER 1

CONVERGENCE

In early January of 2015, the State Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education—citing low state standardized test scores and a low graduation rate—announced he was expediting the district review of Lavoe. Instead of late April as was originally planned, the review was set to begin mid-January, mere days away. Indications to a state takeover were made. If that happened, the district would be put under receivership, in which state appointed officials would take total control of the district. In a city long known for its divisions—between the wealthier and whiter highlands and the poorer mostly Black and Brown¹ flats, between the teachers’ union and administration, between students and teachers, and between ‘old’ Lavoe and ‘new’ Lavoe (racially coded language for the multi-generational white Irish and Polish residents and the comparatively new, but long-established, Puerto Rican residents)—the threat of takeover served as a temporary but important unifying struggle in the city.

Parents, teachers, students, and administration came together in protest of the takeover. Though various groups had different and often conflicting understandings of the causes of—and solutions to—the problems facing Lavoe, the city was largely unified in its rejection of the takeover. Community meetings were held to discuss concerns and to name what many understood as the root causes of the problems being used to justify the takeover, namely poverty and underfunding. The local school committee, and the city council (both notorious for their inter-group divisions) unanimously opposed the

¹ I have chosen to capitalize Black and Brown and not capitalize white out of a commitment to centering the experiences of the people I am writing about.

takeover. And while agreeing on little else, the superintendent and the teachers union both affirmed that a takeover was not the solution to the problems facing the Lavoe public schools. Yet, despite this unified front of dissent, despite even the Commissioner's own review that progress was being made, in March of 2015 the Commissioner put forth his recommendation that the district be put under receivership. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) announced that the final vote would take place at a later meeting.

In anticipation of this vote BESE scheduled a public hearing, with the goal of hearing from Lavoe "parents, teachers, residents, and officials" about whether Lavoe should be designated a "level 5" (chronically underperforming school district) and put it into state receivership. Over 800 people attended the meeting, and nearly all who spoke did so in opposition to the receivership. The next day BESE voted in favor of receivership. For many Lavoe residents, it was a confirmation of their suspicions: the board's decision had been made before the initial review had even even begun.

The state takeover of the Lavoe Public Schools is not unique. Across the country, schools are being closed, taken over, 'turned around,' or privatized. Lavoe is simply another victim of these neoliberal incursions into education that have been occurring—always under the justification of standardized test scores—with alarming frequency since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (Hursh, 2007). Those advocating for these reforms, like the Commissioner, use discourses of social justice to legitimize their policies, without ever attending to the structural causes of injustice. They ignore the role that school-based and structural factors (e.g. lack of funding, inadequate early intervention services, large class size, poverty, unemployment, and trauma) have on

educational outcomes. Instead, the blame for low test scores is put on teachers, students, and community members. Unsurprisingly, while race-based disparities in test scores and graduation rates are used to justify taking over and/or closing schools, the role of racism in creating and perpetuating these disparities is largely ignored. While all schools have felt the impact of neoliberal reform, sites with concentrated racialized poverty such as Lavoe have been most harmed by these policies (Fair Test, 2010).

While the Commissioner was laying the framework for the takeover of the Lavoe Public School District, a framework of a seemingly very different kind was being explored at Lavoe High School. Having the highest discipline rate in the state and the fourth highest suspension rate for Latinx² students in the country, a group of faculty and staff formed an alternative discipline committee that began to research the possibility of implementing restorative justice (RJ) as an alternative approach to the current exclusionary discipline model. During the 2013-14 school year, 17 teachers & staff at the high school were trained in restorative justice practices, and during 2014-15 school year all teachers were trained and began using restorative circles during their advisory sessions with students (Lavoe Public School District, 2015b). While the first two years of the RJ initiative introduced teachers and students to some of the ideas and values underlying RJ, in the summer of 2015 a youth-led RJ program was convened. Calling themselves Presente, the group started implementing RJ during the 2015-16 school year, the same year that the newly appointed state receiver took over the district and began to implement his turnaround plan.

² Latinx is a gender neutral alternative to Latino and Latina that aims to move beyond gender binaries.

The simultaneous convergence of neoliberal reforms such as the state takeover, and the adoption of RJ is, in many ways, contradictory. RJ challenges hierarchical power structures and emphasizes “shared decision making and a commitment to power with rather than power over” (Evans & Vaandering, 2016, p. 52) whereas neoliberal reforms reinforce hierarchical power structures and, in the case of school takeovers, severely limits who has the power to make decisions. RJ challenges punitive approaches to discipline and conflict and instead aims to heal relationships. On the other hand, neoliberalism depends on and gives rise to a “punitive commonsense” (Wacquant, 2009) that normalizes discipline and punishment. In Lavoe, we see this punitive common sense at work not only in the way students are punished and criminalized in school, but in the way low standardized test scores have been used to justify the state’s takeover of the school and subsequent dismantling of the democratically elected local school board.

Given the ubiquity of this punitive common sense within the Lavoe Public School District, it may seem surprising to see a simultaneous rise in popularity in the ideology of restorative justice, as underlying aims and philosophy of RJ are contradictory to those of neoliberal education reform. The convergence of RJ and neoliberal reform raises essential questions about what happens when these contradictory cultural logics meet.

In this dissertation, I explore the contradictions between RJ and neoliberal schooling. I examine how the values of RJ both challenge and get challenged by the neoliberal context of schools. The underlying aims and philosophy of RJ are contradictory to those of neoliberal education reform. Given these contradictions, it is crucial that we examine how these values and practices might be modified, ignored, or co-opted as RJ makes its way into schools. At the same time, we must also explore how,

in this particular moment, RJs presence in school might open up the opportunity to transform our schools into liberatory spaces. Most importantly, it is crucial that we understand the interplay between the two, because in order to transform schools we must first understand how liberatory practices are potentially quashed by the structures they are attempting to transform.

More specifically, this dissertation tells the story of Presente, the student-led RJ group that took root at Lavoe High School during a time of unprecedented State oversight of district affairs. Drawing on an explicitly critical RJ framework, Presente attempted to use indigenous circle process³, and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to dismantle the school-prison nexus, challenge oppression, and create a more youth-centered and relational school culture. Presente has a vision of schools as sites of healing and liberation, and as a co-facilitator of Presente, I share this vision.

Presente's peer leaders are the heart of the program, and as such this dissertation centers their work, experiences, and perspectives. Peer leaders are LHS students who host circles during the school day and who come to weekly after-school meetings to engage in YPAR and community building. From the beginning, Presente has intentionally centered students of color and specifically recruited students who have been on the receiving end of exclusionary discipline policies. While the group has evolved over the three years I worked with the program, it currently consists of 35 high school students, a full-time director, a full-time assistant director, one part-time staff member (who is starting a

³ As will be explained in detail in chapter 2, circle process is, among other things, an approach to community self-governance that has many applications. In schools, it is often used as a means of conflict resolution.

program in Lavoe's other high school), and me⁴. The group is predominantly Latinx students, and is diverse in terms of gender identity, class, ability and sexuality.

Significance

The story of *Presente* is crucial because it captures the possibilities and challenges of trying to do liberatory work in spaces that are, by design, meant to control, coerce, and punish marginalized and minoritized students. Those of us committed to education for liberation must understand what happens when healing and humanizing practices make their way into schools. We must understand the potential they have to create more just schools, but also the ways they can become altered and co-opted in service of neoliberal aims.

I have been in spaces where people have argued that, perhaps, these kinds of critical practices cannot happen in school. I know people who feel that the K-12 public school system is just too antithetical to practices such as RJ, Ethnic Studies, and other healing and critical frameworks. And yet, if we don't figure out how to bring these practices into schools with integrity and fidelity, schools will continue to be dangerous and dehumanizing spaces for all students— especially students of color and other marginalized youth. The story of *Presente* is important, not because it was magically able to change the school (it didn't) rather, studying *Presente* illuminates ways we can move forward in this work.

Furthermore, this study is significant because the introduction of RJ in neoliberal schools reflects a national trend. In January of 2014, under then-Secretary of Education

⁴ My role is explained in detail in chapter 3.

Arne Duncan, the U.S. Department of Education released *Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline* that explicitly recommended RJ as a preferred approach to punitive discipline. Recognizing that “a significant number of students are removed from class each year — even for minor infractions of school rules — due to exclusionary discipline practices, which disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities” (U.S. Department of Education, p. i), the document called for an end to zero-tolerance policies and urged “state, district, and school leaders to reexamine school discipline”. Throughout the document, restorative justice (RJ) was held up as an example of “promising practices and reforms,” and a webinar entitled “Stemming the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Applying Restorative Justice Principles to School Discipline Practices” was included as a resource. While this might seem to be a step in the right direction, that a promotion of RJ practices came from Duncan’s office warrants cautious optimism at best. As CEO of the Chicago Public Schools and as the U.S. Secretary of Education, Duncan endorsed or engaged in excessive standardized testing, union busting, teacher blaming, school turnaround/takeover, school closures, charter expansion, and a number of other practices that can be understood as rooted in the neoliberal punitive common sense. Thus, it becomes critical to understand what happens when RJ is introduced into schools, and how it challenges and is challenged by neoliberalism. Understanding this can help those committed to RJ better understand how to introduce RJ into schools in ways that support its critical and healing aims.

Methods

This dissertation is based on three years of ethnographic research and participation with Presente. My research took place in Presente’s weekly after-school

meetings, with students and staff, and during my time working as the school's advisory coordinator. My methods include participant observation at after-school meetings, community events, staff meetings, and during the school day. I also conducted interviews with Presente students and staff. I had not initially set out to study Presente and was first involved as a co-facilitator of their inaugural summer program. However, after becoming involved in the group and learning more about what they hoped to do, I understood it as a significant site of study.

I position my work as critical ethnography, meaning I am to illuminate and disrupt operations of power and control (see Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2012). As Hardcastle, Usher, and Homes (2006) explain, this approach “aims to link social phenomena to wider sociohistorical events to expose prevailing systems of domination, hidden assumptions, ideologies, and discourses...with the purpose of empowering people and transforming political and social realities” (p. 151). To that end, I also engage in YPAR, a process of critical praxis where those most impacted by an issue research the problem and develop and implement a plan of action to address it. YPAR recognizes that those most impacted by injustice are best positioned to understand and address it. It is also a way for researchers to lend their skills and resources to communities in ways that will support the community long after the research is over the researcher has left the field. During my time with Presente I supported them in using YPAR to study and address school discipline, the use of police in their school, and manifestations of racism at Lavoe High School.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation tells the story of the first three years of the Presente group at Lavoe High School, as they attempt to use circle process and participatory action research to transform their school. In Chapter 2, I provide the context of the study, an overview of Presente, and a description of my research questions and methods. I describe the context of racial neoliberalism and the school-prison nexus, depicting the specific ways they unfold at LHS. Next, I introduce the RJ paradigm that Presente drew on and explain what this looked like at LHS, providing an overview of how Presente operated in the school. I conclude by introducing my research questions.

In Chapter 3, I present the research methods used to examine the questions how does serving an RJ peer leader impact students, what challenges and possibilities arise as the school attempts to implement RJ, and how do the values that inform RJ come up against, challenge, and get challenged by neoliberalism. Positioning myself as an instrument of inquiry, I begin the chapter by situating myself, explaining how I come to do the work I do. Next, I describe my research methods; YPAR and critical ethnography. I conclude by reflecting on my role and positionality with Presente and at LHS.

In Chapter 4, I examine the possibilities that were created as a result of Presente's work. Drawing on Ginwright's (2016) work on hope and healing in urban education, I understand Presente as an approach to healing justice that both focus on well-being and structural change. Separating my findings into possibilities for justice and possibilities for healing, chapter 3 examines both how Presente impacted peer leaders (healing) and the structural shifts (justice) Presente has created. This chapter argues that Presente created the healing possibilities for (1) the love and appreciation of ethnic history, culture, and

identity (Halagao, 2010); (2) commitment to solidarity and community; and (3) collective hope. Additionally, Presente began to shift and transform the culture, practices, and policies at LHS, creating the possibilities for: (1) a shift from the punitive logic to a healing logic; (2) an increased focus on representation and; (3) a shifting view of community engagement.

In chapter 5, I examine what I have come to understand as three important challenges to Presente's RJ work. The challenges of: (1) viewing restorative justice as a tool for behavior management; (2) viewing restorative justice as a panacea for problems caused by structural inequity; and (3) implementing what is meant to be a democratic practice in a very undemocratic space, created tensions and illuminated the contradictions of doing liberatory work in schools. I understand these challenges not as the result of some failing on the part of the RJ peer leaders or staff but argue they arose from the context in which Presente was operating in and the ways in which RJ was and wasn't taken up by the school more broadly. My hope is that understanding these limitations can help Presente and other education activist movements think more carefully about what might move us toward systemic change and transformation.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the implications of my findings and my plans for future research. I begin by introducing a set of critical questions in hopes that they can serve as a guide for researchers, practitioners, and activists who are trying to do this work in schools that are saturated with the punitive common sense of racial neoliberalism. The questions include: Who or what is expected to change? How are the values of RJ taken up institutionally? How is injustice understood and addressed?

I then explore the implications my findings have for the field of teacher education and discuss three areas that teacher education support what Winn (2016) describes as Transformative Justice Teacher Education (TJTE). These areas are: culturally sustaining practices; relationships and community; and activism.

CHAPTER 2

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE MEETS RACIAL NEOLIBERALISM

Using Presente as an example, this chapter explores what RJ is and how it contradicts with neoliberal education. In order to fully understand Presente and the aims of their approach to RJ, their work must be situated within the context of racial neoliberalism and the school-prison nexus, as this is the context in which they were doing their work and the conditions that their work is in response to. To that end, I begin by describing the context of racial neoliberalism and the school-prison nexus and then depict the specific ways this unfolds at LHS. Next, I introduce the RJ paradigm that Presente drew on and explain what this looked like at LHS, providing an overview of how Presente operated in the school. I conclude by introducing my research questions.

Racial Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a political-economic philosophy that values the primacy of markets and redefines the role of the state as a creator and protector of markets (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberal policies include privatization, deregulation, marketization, and public disinvestment. These policies are justified by discourses that frame “free markets” as the most efficient, effective, and just solution to social problems, while defining “public sector” as inherently inefficient, bureaucratic, and stained by special interests. In addition to being a set of political-economic policies and practices, neoliberalism is also understood as an ideological project that produces new subjectivities, behaviors, desires, and moralities (Baltodano, 2012).

While neoliberalism presents itself as a neutral, technocratic, and non-racial economic policy, I align myself with scholars who understand neoliberalism as inherently

racialized and thus argue that it can best be understood as a racial project.(Goldberg, 2009; Picower & Mayorga, 2016, Rhee, 2013; Roberts & Mahtani, 2010) As Rhee (2013) explains, racism is “an inherent part of the neoliberal regime. Race is pressed to work in new — neoliberal —ways, re/generating different kinds of categories and meanings, yet also continuously drawing upon old categories and meanings, to effect and rationalize social arrangements of power and exploitation, violence and expropriation” (p. 561).

Racial neoliberalism perpetuates and depends on radical individualism and punitive common sense (Christianakis & Mora, 2014). Several theorists describe how neoliberal “discourses of individual responsabilization” (Nygreen, 2018) serve to assign responsibility and blame to individuals for a range of social issues that have often been understood (at least in part) as community responsibilities—such as social welfare, public education, public health, etc. In the neoliberal version of individualism, context is ignored, and individuals are viewed as free-floating, fully autonomous selves, on an even playing field, who must continuously compete with other autonomous selves. Wacquant (2009) describes how this extreme form of individualism creates a “punitive common sense” that becomes hegemonic: Since individuals are solely responsible for their fate, failure of any kind (e.g., poverty, school failure, unemployment, eviction) is viewed as the result of individual (ir)responsibility and choice—not as a community or social responsibility, or a result of injustice. As such, failure deserves punishment and shame, and mechanisms of punishment are not only necessary but preferred.

Racial Neoliberalism in Schools

In the last several years, neoliberal reforms have made their way into the educational sphere, leading to policies and practices that both reproduce and reflect

neoliberal ideology. The closing of “failing” public schools, expanded school “choice,” privately run (but publicly funded) charter schools, privately contracted school turnaround, top-down accountability, zero-tolerance discipline practices and pay for performance incentives can all be understood as part of a neoliberal education reform agenda (Lipman, 2004, 2011). Picower and Mayorga (2015) explain that these neoliberal "trends use market-based rhetoric to take power from the majority of people and concentrate it in the hands of few while masking the processes that allowed this to happen" (p.5). While all public schools have been subject to this process, "neoliberalism has spurred the privatization of education in a seemingly race-neutral yet highly racialized manner, resulting in the accumulation of capital and success for some and failure and dispossession for others" (Picower and Mayorga, 2015, p. 6). Thus, the policies and practices of neoliberal reforms function to create a two-tiered system of education in which opportunity and power are further stripped away from already marginalized people while those with power accumulate more control and opportunity.

A key component of neoliberal education reform has been the increased criminalization of students within schools through punitive “zero-tolerance” and “no excuses” discipline policies. In the last several years the number of school suspensions, expulsions, and other exclusionary discipline practices have significantly increased (Losen & Martinez, 2013). During the 2009-2010 school year over two million, or one out of every nine, secondary students were suspended at least once. The majority of these suspensions were for minor infractions such as tardiness, dress code violations and disruptions rather than violent or criminal behavior. Furthermore, while race-based disparities in expulsion have always existed, there has been a disparate increase in

suspension rates by race since the 1970s, meaning there has been a significant increase in the rate of suspension of Latinx and Black students while only a minimal increase in suspensions for white students (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Likewise, gay and transgender youth are three times more likely than their heterosexual and gender conforming counterparts to experience harsh disciplinary treatment in school (Hunt & Moodie-Mills, 2012). Similarly, students from low-income families are punished more severely and more often than their higher-income peers, as are students with disabilities (Pacer Center, 2013; Skiba & Knesting, 2001).

These practices, such as zero tolerance and no excuses discipline, that push students of color out of school and into the criminal legal system are often described as a school-to-prison pipeline. Following Kaba and Meiners (2014), I describe these practices as a school-prison nexus rather than pipeline, to underscore that schools and prisons are not opposing systems but two integrated parts of a larger system that works to criminalize and dispossess communities of color (Vaught, 2017). The concept of a school-prison nexus also illuminates how factors beyond school discipline—including curriculum, instruction, and assessment—serve to control, punish, and criminalize students of color and systematically capture them in the criminal legal system.

While some neoliberal educational practices such as zero-tolerance discipline, increased surveillance, and police presence in schools are easily understood as part of the school-prison nexus, other current neoliberal educational practices such as high-stakes testing, and school closure and/or takeover, among others must also be understood as part of these systems. An examination of the ideological roots of these practices, as well as their impact, illuminates the powerful role they play in the school-to-prison nexus.

While on the surface, practices such as high-stakes testing, school closures, “no excuses” schooling models, school takeover/turnaround, zero tolerance discipline, and other neoliberal education reforms and practices appear to address different things such as curriculum, pedagogy, and school discipline, these practices are all united by the punitive common sense of neoliberalism and individualism. The punitive common sense of high stakes testing can be seen when students who don't pass are not allowed to graduate and when teachers and schools who have low test scores are labeled as ‘bad’ or failing. High stakes testing is used to push out or punish individual students and teachers, without ever accounting for structural barriers such as institutionalized racism and poverty. Similarly, the punitive common sense is at play when school districts are labeled as ‘failing’ due to low test scores and high dropout rates without consideration of unequal funding structures, the impact of poverty and/or other structural causes. The unifying thread of neoliberal education reform, the punitive common sense positions the individual as the cause and/or solution to every problem and thus ‘failure’ of any kind requires punishment.

Lavoe

Once a bustling mill city, Lavoe has been in economic decline since the 1960s. Considered to be one of the first planned cities in America, segregation was literally built into Lavoe from the start. Once divided between the rich, who lived in up-hill in the Highlands and were able to look down on the poor workers who lived close to the factories in an area dubbed the Flats, today the city is segregated by race. The Flats today are home to the highest percentage of Puerto Ricans outside of the island, and the Highlands are home to the mostly white and, if not wealthy, upper-middle-class families

of what many describe as “old Lavoe.” Inequity runs rampant in the city, and Latinx in Lavoe are more likely to fall below the poverty level, have significantly lower per-capita income, have higher unemployment rates and are less likely to be homeowners

Educational inequity is an ongoing struggle for the Lavoe Public School District (LPSD). The district is consistently identified as underperforming due to low standardized test scores. Students of color, emergent bilingual students, students with disabilities and students from low-income families have particularly poor outcomes. Proficiency rates in English Language Arts, Math, and Science fall far below the state average. The four-year graduation rate in Lavoe is 60 percent, well below the state average of 86 percent, and the dropout rate of 6.4 percent is well above the state average of 2 percent (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014a). While 77 percent of students in the public schools are Latinx, white students in the district graduate at a higher rate and are more likely to attend college (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). Furthermore, students of color and emergent bilingual students are given in and out of school suspension at higher rates than their white peers (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2014b). Thus, while low state standardized test scores, high dropout rates, and discipline issues impact the district overall, emergent bilingual students and students of color are particularly vulnerable.

Given all of this, the Lavoe Public School District has been the target of neoliberal reform for years. Labeled “failing” by the state, the district has been in a near continuous state of reform for decades. Most notably, in 2015 the district was taken over by the state and put into receivership. This process dismantled the democratic control of

the schools and has destabilized the teachers union. Teachers were let go en masse, and many others opted to find work in less precarious districts. There has been an increased focus on improving state standardized test scores, and alternative paths to graduation programs have been created to increase the graduation rate. While an alternative path to graduation sounds promising, at LHS some feel that it is being used to push out students who are viewed as a problem. In the 4 years since the district's turnaround plan has been put in place, LHS has seen three different principals, each with their own agenda and priorities.

The takeover of the LPSD and the dismantling of the locally elected school board must be understood as part of a broader neoliberal education agenda. Across the country, the punitive common sense is being used to take over schools that most often serve students of color and low-income students. As Pauline Lipman (2015) explains, neoliberal "policies have provided support for closing hundreds of public schools in African American and Latino urban neighborhoods, the loss of thousands of unionized teachers, and expansion of charter schools and other privatized education services" (p.59). Punishing the district and teachers for students' low test scores, schools like Lavoe are being stripped of democratic processes, unions are being dismantled and/or stripped of their bargaining power, and power is being put in the hands of a person or small group of people who have absolute control.

The state takeover is the most recent example of the neoliberalization of the LPSD. However, the neoliberal ideology has been present in district practices and policies over the last several years. This ideology can be seen in the 2013 takeover of the city's vocational school and 2014 takeover of one of the districts eight elementary

schools, in which low test scores were used to hand control over to Project Grad, a Texas-based educational management firm that, among other things, focuses on fundraising via private-public partnerships and increased test preparation. As part of the Project Grad takeover, the school committee was stripped of its powers to make decisions concerning the Project Grad Schools, and Project Grad had the power to void union contracts, meaning teachers had to reapply for their jobs and could be fired without due process (Ferguson, 2015). Going back even further, in 2004 the state required the district to partner with America's Choice, a school reform company who after "three years, hundreds of thousands of dollars and profound disruptions later, America's Choice was forced to admit that it did not have a sufficient curriculum or supports for ELLs and that its overall plan was not appropriate" for Lavoe (Williams, 2015). The takeover of the LPSD, the reliance on private management firms, and the dismantling of the democratically elected school committee and teachers union aligns with the neoliberal aim to apply market logic to the public sector in order to restructure and ultimately erase the common or public sphere. Ignoring the role of poverty, racism, inadequate funding, and other relevant structural factors, the punitive common sense focuses on low test scores and 'bad' teachers to justify these reforms.

In addition to the policies, the practices in the LPSD can be understood within the neoliberal framework. First and foremost, the heightened focus on standardized testing and test preparation are understood by many (Au, 2009; Hursh, 2007; Lipman, 2013) as a means to "portray public schools as failing and to push for privatizing education provided through competitive markets" (Hursh, 2007, p. 501). In the case of Lavoe, test scores were used to justify the takeover, and now for many students and teachers, it feels as

though the goal of schooling is to increase test scores as a way to prove the takeover was a success.

Punitive Commonsense at Lavoe High School

In many ways, LHS can be understood as ground-zero for the school-prison nexus. When I first began working with the LPSD, it had the highest discipline rate in the state, “suspending 21.5% of its students out of school, with 6 of its 11 schools disciplining at least 20% of its students”(p.4). It was home to the 30-day suspension, a punishment that made it near impossible for students to stay on top of their work and had the highest suspension rate for Latinx students in the nation. Police officers were and still are stationed inside the schools, and it is not uncommon for them to be utilized for minor infractions such as cell phone use and noncompliance. While more recently, out-of-school and in-school suspension rates have dropped slightly Lavoe still has one of the highest in and out-of-school suspension rates in the state. Furthermore, the discipline gap continues to persist with 8% of Latinx students receiving in or out-of-school suspensions as compared to 2.1% of White students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015b).

Beyond suspension and expulsion rates, the punitive common sense is part of the school's culture and manifests in a variety of ways. In the morning, students are often greeted by teachers and administrators who force them to throw away any food or beverages they have with them. I was shocked to enter the building one morning to witness a teacher sipping on their Dunkin’ Donuts coffee screaming at students to throw their own beverages out, chasing after anyone who didn’t. If a student is wearing a hat or is not in compliance with the dress code, they are reprimanded and forced to take it off.

Likewise, it is expected that teachers will come out into the halls between classes and address any students who have earbuds in or are out of compliance with the dress code. At the end of the day, students who are not participating in after-school programs are expected to leave the building, and just a few minutes after the final bell has rung administrators will come and kick students out. While on their own, these may seem like minor things together they create a culture that feels cold, unwelcoming, and alienating.

While it could be easy to read this and blame teachers, it is important to point out that punitive common sense of neoliberalism hurts them as well. The school is under-resourced, class size exceeds what is known to be effective, and the constant change in leadership and expectations are a challenge. Public and private discourses around school failure in Lavoe often placed blame on teachers. Furthermore, because the receiver has ultimate control, the teachers lost whatever voice and power the union provided. While I don't these reasons justify the mistreatment of young people, I do think they put into perspective the punitive culture at LHS.

Given this context, the extreme focus on individualism, the school-prison nexus, punitive common sense, and the hierarchical power structure, the introduction of RJ is surprising. As I will explain below, RJ stands in contrast with neoliberalism, and thus the introduction of RJ at LHS raises some crucial questions.

Restorative Justice Paradigm

Like many liberatory practices, RJ is a contested term that looks different depending on who is using, where it is being practiced, and what those practicing it understand as the aims. Presente draws on a critical framework, sometimes defined as transformative justice, that is explicit in its aims to create structural change. Presente's

approach to RJ positions it not merely as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions, but as a paradigm centered on the beliefs that human beings are worthy and that human beings are interconnected with each other and the world (Evans and Vaandering 2016). As Winn (2018) explains RJ “is a paradigm that invites stakeholders to address harm and wrongdoing through building community, consensus, and seeking justice that has been taken up in educational contexts” (p. 219). RJ is a process of conflict resolution, healing, and community building, but more than that RJ is an ontology—a way of being in and understanding the world.

Most RJ practitioners trace its roots to the philosophies and practices of indigenous societies that were structured in non-hierarchical ways. RJ is grounded in First Nations understandings of justice that emphasize the interconnectedness of “humanity with each other and their environment” (Vaandering, 2010, p. 146) and thus rather than judging right from wrong or good from bad concerns itself with healing relationships. As Ross (2006) explains “in the non-Indian community, committing a crime seems to mean that the individual is a bad person and therefore must be punished...The Indian communities view a wrong doing as a misbehavior which requires teaching or an illness which requires healing” (p. 1 emphasis in original). As Zehr (2014) explains, in the punitive paradigm of justice—which is the basis for U.S. criminal-legal system and most school discipline—the process is organized around questions of what wrongdoing was committed? Who committed the wrongdoing? And what punishment do they deserve? RJ approaches conflict from an entirely different perspective. Instead of those questions, RJ proceeds from the assumption that conflict is an expression of unmet

needs. The process is organized around questions of: Who was harmed? How was the community harmed? What can be done to repair the harm?

Central to the RJ paradigm is the understanding that in order to repair harm change and transformation is required not only at the individual and interpersonal level but the social and structural level as well (Zehr, 2014). In this way, RJ is consistent with Ginwright's (2016) healing justice framework, as well as with embodied, humanizing critical pedagogies that take a holistic view of body/healing combined with critical consciousness development of critique and social change (e.g., feminist, womanist and mujerista pedagogies). These frameworks are not just about healing individuals but about transforming society in ways that promote healing at a larger level and which create conditions that sustain wholeness and community

Presente's approach to RJ aligns with critical scholars like Evans and Vaandering (2016) who posit that RJ in schools should have three aims: 1) Create just and equitable learning environments; 2) nurture healthy relationships; and 3) repair harm and transform conflict. As they explain the ultimate purpose of RJ in schools is to create spaces of belonging that embrace everyone in the ways they require. This involves the use of culturally responsive pedagogy and curriculum, diverse instructional approaches, social-emotional learning, explicit, ongoing engagement with human rights concepts in all curriculum, and social interaction that embodies justice and equity not as an equal distribution of resources but as the respectful meeting of needs. (p. 226)

Likewise, Vaandering (2010) argues, "for RJ to be effective and sustainable it must be understood first and foremost through a critical lens that recognizes the systemic,

institutional, and structural dimensions of power relations in school communities” (p. 151).

Taking up this paradigm, Presente aimed to transform LHS. While supporting students in conflict and serving as an alternative to suspensions was undoubtedly one of their goals, Presente hoped to challenge the structural conditions that they understood as the root causes of school push out and interpersonal conflict.

Presente’s RJ

Presente describes itself as a “youth-led transformative justice program that is working to build youth power and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline”. Their work centers around two core practices: indigenous circle process and youth participatory action research (YPAR). During the school day, peer leaders host circles as a way to address conflict and support students who have gotten in trouble or are in need of support. After school, peer leaders use circle as a means of relationship building, storytelling, and community governance. The afterschool space is also where Presente engages in YPAR projects aimed at addressing injustice in the school. In this section, I explain how each part of the program works, and discuss how those pieces fit together to advance Presente’s core mission.

It is crucial to point out that while Presente describes itself as youth-led, adults still play a significant role. Adults in the program do coordinating with teachers and administrators, and record keeping the day-to-day organizational work, such as processing referrals. Budgeting, and grant writing, and other things related to financial operations are also done by staff. While staff and students work together to plan meetings and make decisions about projects and events, there were times when staff would make

those decisions without youth input. Rather than describing the group as youth-led, I would argue that they are in a process of trying to be youth-led and navigating what that could look like in a school system that is hierarchical and bureaucratic.

During the School Day

A core goal of Presente is to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and serve as an alternative to exclusionary discipline. One of the ways this goal is realized is by providing circles to students who are in conflict or are in need of support. Depending on the situation, a student may be referred for a circle by a teacher or administrator. While there are a variety of reasons a student may be referred, the most often reason a student was referred was for fighting or threatening to fight. If students were referred due to a threat of fighting, the circle would aim to resolve the issue so that all of those involved could move forward without further conflict. If the fight had already happened, the circle would aim to repair the harm that had been done and find a way to support those involved so that there were no more acts of violence. At times circles were held to address conflict between a student and teacher, though this was less common. Regardless of the reason, conflict circles and circles more generally all share the same basic structure and process. The process and steps leading up to the process, which I describe below, illuminate the key values of restorative justice.

Pre-circle

Teachers and administrators at Lavoe typically make referrals through Presente's online referral system, which are processed by either Max or Lee, the two full-time directors of Presente. Typically, whoever processes the referral will then take the lead on learning more about what happened and will set up the circle. For example, if Max got a

referral that two girls were verbally fighting during their math class and threatening to fight, he would start reaching out to people to get more details. He would likely call the administrator who made the referral and speak with the teacher whose class it happened in. However, the two most crucial people he would talk to are the girls involved. He would meet with each one separately, first letting them know who he is and what restorative justice is. While each explanation is unique and there is no “script,” it is common to explain something like “Presente is a group that thinks too many students, especially students of color, are getting suspended, expelled, and pushed out of school. Not only is this not okay but it also doesn’t solve the problem that led to the fight in the first place. RJ is a process that brings people together to figure out what happened and what is needed to move forward. If you decide you want to do a circle, you and the student you are having issues with will come together with a student peer leader and with me to really try and solve the problem. However, it is completely up to you if you want to do this. If either you or she doesn’t want to do it, you don’t have to and we will figure out a different way to move forward.” This explanation does a few things that reflect the values of RJ and stands in opposition to what students normally experience. First, it frames school push out, rather than the student, as a problem. It also names racism, a topic that is largely ignored in the broader school. Secondly, it gives students a choice. RJ is and must be a consensual process. If a student doesn’t want to participate, they do not have to. In a school where students have little agency over what happens to them, the power to choose whether or not to participate is significant. Typically, after a student has heard what RJ is, they are skeptical. One more than one occasion, I’ve had a student say “Well, I will do it if they will, but if they won’t I don’t want to” or “I don’t think they

will do it, but I will.” At this point, I would usually just let them know that they can think about it and that if they make a decision to participate and later have second thoughts, they can change their mind at any time.

The next part of the pre-circle conference is finding out, from the students’ perspective, what happened. They will be asked questions like, what happened that led to the moment in the math class? How did you feel? Is there any part you can take responsibility for? What do you want to see happen? What do you need to move forward without any more conflict? These questions, which are similar to the ones that will be asked in the actual circle, help the student and the staff processing with them understand what happened, create space for them to take responsibility if they did play a part in the conflict, and help them think about what is required for healing. It was very common in these moments for students to share things going on in other areas of their lives that led to the moment of conflict. A student has just found out their mom has cancer, another who’s family is being evicted from their apartment, and another who is getting very little sleep because they are caring for their siblings while their dad works the night shift. RJ helps to illuminate these important circumstances that have nothing and everything to do with the moment of conflict that led to the referral. These are the moments that get ignored in punitive approaches to discipline, as they only look at the behavior but ignore the human being engaging in that behavior.

Finally, if the student decides they want to move forward with the circle, they will be asked if there is anyone else they think should be included or anyone they would like to have as a support. We might say something like “if you think having a friend or teacher be part of the process will help you be able to show up as your best self or if you

think there was someone else who is involved in the conflict even if they weren't in the fight during math class, let me know and we can see if they want to be involved" and if they do we will try to include those people as well. Unlike traditional punitive discipline where the goal is to punish, RJ aims to heal and repair harm and thus wants to pull people in who can help in that process. Students would also be asked if there was a specific peer leader they knew and would want to host the circle or if there were peer leaders, they would rather not have involved.

After everyone involved has gone through a pre-circle conference, the adult processing it would meet with one or two peer leaders who are going to co-host the circle. Often, peer leaders are selected for specific circles that seem like they would be a good match. For example, a peer leader who has gone through a similar conflict would be a good fit because they would be able to talk from experience. Alternatively, if a student seems guarded and has a "tough guy" exterior, we might bring a peer leader who can relate to having to put up walls. Part of why it was important for Presente to have peer leaders with a range of experiences and backgrounds is so that regardless of what a circle is about, there is likely a peer leader who can relate or who has a relationship with the students involved. We learned early on that having male peer leaders who were viewed as "popular" or viewed as "hard" was especially important as they were able to connect with male students who might otherwise not have been willing to engage so fully. Once the peer leaders are selected, they would be given the details of what happened and together create a plan for the circle.

The Conflict Circle

Usually, the circle is held within a few days of the event that caused the referral. While each circle is unique, the elements and structure of a conflict are almost always the same. All circles will start with a peer leader reading a quote and explaining why they selected it. Cheryl, a peer leader whom I co-hosted several circles with would often start by sharing a quote by James Baldwin (1962), “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced” (p. 38). She would then explain “I picked this quote because even though it might take time to fix the harm that brought us here today, the fact that you are both here and willing to face what happened is really important. Usually in this school, if people get in a fight, they get suspended and then wind up back in class together, never having solved the issue. You two are coming together and are willing to face what happened, and that is a huge thing to be proud of”. While it may seem like a small moment, Cheryl's acknowledgment that the students have something to be proud of is significant. She is letting them know they are worthy and that in this space they seen for more than their mistakes.

After the opening quote is shared, one of the hosts of the circle will explain some logistics. First, they will acknowledge that these practices come from Native American communities, then they will explain that we are using these practices because we don't want students getting pushed out of school and that we believe “when people are struggling rather than pushing them away, we need to hold them closer.” This is also the time where we explain that circles are confidential, that the goal is not to agree on everything but to understand and listen to each other, and that if there is any violence or threats of violence the circle will stop.

The next step is to explain the centerpiece and the talking piece. All of Presente's circles, whether they are for conflict, community building, decision making, or celebration make use of a centerpiece and talking piece. In circle process, the centerpiece is meant to inspire certain ways of thinking and being. We have also found that a centerpiece creates beauty that disrupts the sterile prison-like rooms in the high school. It is a visual reminder that what is happening is different than what typically happens, and when students sit in circle for the first time, they almost always ask questions about and comment on the centerpiece. The Presente centerpiece has three components: (1) a butterfly tapestry that represents the way Presente is trying to transform the school; (2) a statue of niños holding up a candle that represents the ways young people can come together to hold up the community and; (3) A newspaper by the Young Lords and a book about the Black Panther Party that represents the legacies of young people of color fighting for change.

The talking piece is an object that is held by the person who is speaking. It is passed to the left, and the person who has the piece is invited to speak but does not have to, and everyone else invited to listen. The talking piece serves several purposes. First, it is a visual reminder of whose turn it is to speak. Only one person can speak at a time, and it ensures that no one is interrupted. The process of passing the talking piece also makes clear that everyone will have a chance to share. It can alleviate the stress of having to wonder if you will get to share your side of the story. The talking piece also "levels the structure of relationships from hierarchy to equality" (Boyes-Watson, 2008, p. 94), giving everyone a chance to share, without the risk of being cut off, interrupted, or spoken down to. While the talking piece is always meaningful, it is especially significant when there

are power differences, such as a circle addressing conflict between a student and teacher. In Lavoe, where students have to raise their hand to speak, may or may not be called, and can be cut off or interrupted at any moment by teachers, their peers, or bells, the opportunity to speak and be heard is powerful. Each talking piece that Presente uses was gifted to the program by a peer leader and has a story behind it. When the peer leader explains how the talking piece works, they will also often share the story of the talking piece. For example, one peer leader's talking piece was a dark stone, and when he hosted circles, he'd explain, "My talking piece is this rock that I found on the beach after my grandfather died. When you first look at it, it seems like just a regular rock, with nothing special about it, but when it gets wet, you notice all sorts of colors and beauty. The stone reminds me of grandfather, and it reminds me that there is beauty in everything, you just have to look at it the right way."

Once the talking piece has been explained, we do a check-in round to get everyone comfortable being in circle and using the talking piece. Ideally, it allows everyone in the circle to connect with each other before moving on to discuss the conflict that led to the circle. It can also help lighten the mood and ease some of the tension. Some check-in questions that were common in conflict circles were: (1) How would your best friend describe you; (2) If you could have any superpower what would it be and why and; (3) If you could live life as any animal for a day what would it be and why? The questions are low-stakes, but invite people to share some parts of themselves.

After the check-in question, everyone in the circle will collectively develop some agreed upon values that are important for the integrity of the circle. The peer leader hosting the circle will explain, "Values are important because they let us know how we

want to be together. Unlike rules, which are things someone else makes up and forces us to follow whether we want to or not, values are something we can create about how we want to be. We may not always live up to our values, but they are what we strive for, and we aren't punished if we don't follow through with them perfectly." They will then ask, "What is an important value or way of being that feels important for this circle?" and, because the person asking the question always answers first, they will be able to model by example. While the talking piece goes a round, the peer leader will write down all of the values that were shared. When the talking piece gets back to her, she will read the list back to the group and ask if people can agree to the values or if anything needs to be added or changed. She will once again pass the talking piece, giving people a chance to agree or amend the values. At the end of the round, the list of the values will become part of the centerpiece.

After all of these steps are done, it is now time to get into the reason for the circle. While the situations leading to a conflict circle vary, the questions are always the same. Each question is a round which allows everyone involved to share their understanding of what happened, the impact it had, the role they played, and what they need to heal. Everyone, including those hosting the circle answer all of the questions. The questions include:

- What made you decide to agree to come to this circle?
- What is your understanding of what events or issues led to this circle?
- What has been the hardest part for you?

- Who else has been impacted by this situation and how they have been impacted?
- Have you done anything to make the situation worse, or what can you take responsibility for?
- What can you do to make the situation better?
- What do you need from others to move past this conflict?

After these questions have been asked, the circle keeper explains that “the next few questions will allow us to develop some agreements that will hopefully allow us to heal and move forward. While the questions are asked, I am going to write down your answers so that we can come to some agreements for moving forward,” and then continues with the questions.

- What can you offer to help make this a reality?
- What are some possible pitfalls to this agreement and how will you avoid them?
- How will you know if this circle improved the situation?

After the questions have been asked, the circle keeper will read the agreements they have written down. A round will be done asking if there is anything on the list that people can't agree to or is there anything that needs to be added to the list. Some common agreements for student conflict include apologizing to each other, agreeing to not post about each other on social media or talk about each other to other people and to go to the student support room to cool down if they feel the urge to fight or yell. Once the list is finalized, the students will be asked if there is anyone else who should know about the

agreements such as the teacher or administrator who referred the student. There will also be a plan for follow up and a plan to circle back up if the agreements are broken.

The circle ends in the same way it started, with a check-out round and a closing quote. A common closing quote in a conflict circle is “what are you taking away from this circle.” While answers vary, it is not uncommon for students to share something along the lines of “I’m taking away, I don’t know, a lot. Like, I thought this was weird at first, and I am not really the type of person who likes to show my emotions, but I liked this. Hearing from everybody and just talking, it’s just different.” It was very common for students who had opened up and shared deeply to say they “aren’t emotional” but that they enjoyed being in circle and hearing everybody. Often the students who were most adamant that they weren’t emotional or into sharing their feelings, were the quickest to open up and be vulnerable when the opportunity presented itself. In a school that was often dehumanizing and alienating, RJ created a container that acknowledged the full humanity of students.

While the impact of circles during the school day was incredibly powerful and effective, they were not taken up as a whole school practice. Students were often not referred for a circle, and traditional punitive discipline was still the norm at LHS. As I will explain more in chapter 4, RJ was often viewed as an add on or supplementary practice, rather than a whole school approach.

After School

The after-school space is where RJ lived and breathed at LHS. Every Tuesday from 3:00-5:00 Presente, peer leaders and staff, came together to connect, learn, and organize. In this space, circle was not a tool for addressing conflict, but instead, it was a

way of being in community. At the start of every meeting, we gathered in circle, our centerpiece in the middle and a bowl of talking pieces, each with their own story, ready to be used. Like the conflict circle, each meeting started with an opening and a check-in round. Typically, a student would volunteer to do the opening and would bring in a quote, song, video, or some other 'text' that resonated with them. After sharing their opening with the group, they would explain why they chose to bring it. While quotes were the most common opening selected, over the years students have opened the space with poetry they have written, music videos that they saw as connected to Presente such as Donald Glover's This is America, video clips about activism, and poetry and passages from books they were reading. These openings not only help set the tone for our meetings but were a meaningful way that students get to share a part of who they are with the group. It was a chance for students to say, "this has meaning to me, and I want to share it with all of you."

After the opening has been shared, a different student will lead a check-in round. The check-in round can vary from incredibly silly to very serious depending on what is happening in the school, the program, and in students lives. If students have had a long day at school and the energy is tired, a student might ask something silly that isn't super deep, such as the surprisingly controversial question "What part of the Oreo do you eat first, the cookie or the cream?" In more serious moments, when the group is struggling with something going on in the world such as the election of Trump or the hurricane in Puerto Rico the check-in round might be more open-ended, such as "How are you doing with everything going on?" or it might create the space for students to focus on something positive such as "what is something that gives you hope during hard times?"

Regardless of the question, the check-in round allows us to connect, touch base with each other, and share a little bit of ourselves.

After the check-in round is done, the meeting can go in a lot of different directions depending on what the group is working on and what the needs of students are. We may do some community building activities, engage in political education, continue sharing in circle, or break out into groups and work on our YPAR project. Generally speaking, the meeting is planned out ahead of time with Max the director and a group of Presente members who serve as the Youth Advisory Board (YAB). Students volunteer to serve on the YAB and meet an additional day per week with Max to plan the meeting.

Regardless of what direction the meeting goes in and what we do when we break out of circle, we will eventually circle back up and process what we did in a round. For example, if we broke into groups and spent time learning about different aspects of the Young Lords, we would come together in circle and do a round on what we are taking away or how their work connects to ours. Community building game and theater of the oppressed activities, which we often did during meetings, would be followed by a round asking what we were taking away from the activity.

During our meetings, circles would also be used to make decisions. Whether we were working on a YPAR project, planning an event, determining how to respond to criticism of our work, or addressing something else, rounds would be used to hear everybody's thoughts and to reach a consensus. At times this would be a quick process, with only a one or two rounds and at other times there were issues and decisions that required multiple rounds done over the course of several meetings.

Our meetings would end, like all circles typically end, with a check-out round and a closing quote. Students would bring in a check-out question, though it was pretty common for students to ask the question “what is something you are taking away from today or what is something you are looking forward to?”. Once the round was over, everyone would move toward the center of the room, standing in a circle around the centerpiece, and prepare to say our traditional closing quote; Assata Shakur’s (1987) famous words “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains” (p. 52).

Done as a call and response, one student would first say it in Spanish, with the group repeating back each line. Then a different student would say it in English, with the rest of the group repeating back. The English version would be repeated three times, getting louder and louder each time. This would close out every meeting.

Youth Participatory Action Research

The afterschool space was also where Presente engaged in YPAR projects aimed at transforming practices and policies in their school. Each year, Presente would generate a list of issues they were concerned about and then select an issue to serve as their YPAR project. During my time with Presente, students used YPAR to transform the in-school suspension room to a student support room, develop a memo of understanding between the school district and the police department that set clear guidelines on how school resource officers could and couldn’t be used, maintain and expand RJ, and address racism and issues of representation at LHS. While most of the literature on RJ in schools does not include YPAR or other organizing tactics, for Presente YPAR was a crucial component of RJ. RJ is rooted in a commitment to shared power, egalitarian

relationships, social change, and healing and YPAR was one means of seeing those commitments realized. Presente's YPAR work acknowledged that the school's practices and policies were harmful and thus healing required that practices and policies be transformed. The use of YPAR was also a way to challenge the top-down hierarchical approach to decision making at the school and put power in the hands of students. While school leadership wasn't necessarily ready to embrace that vision, Presente modeled what was possible power was shared with students.

Conclusion

Presente aimed to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and build youth power at LHS. Specifically, they were committed to challenging racism and adultism and creating a school where "love, justice, and youth are at the center of everything." (Presente Planning Document, 2017). As Figure 1 shows, their use of circle practice and YPAR reflected the RJ paradigm that centers community, healing, collective well-being, and democratic relationships, and thus stands in opposition to neoliberal education, which centers the individual, discipline/punishment, individual conformity, and hierarchical relationships. These differences raise important questions that this dissertation aims to explore. Specifically, I asked:

1. How does serving as an RJ peer leader impact students?
2. What challenges and opportunities arise as the school attempts to implement restorative justice?
3. How do the values that inform RJ come up against, challenge, and get challenged by neoliberal education reform?

In order to explore these questions, I conducted a three-year critical ethnography of Presente. In asking these questions I hope to illuminate the lessons Presente has to offer for doing liberatory work in schools. As challenging as it is to create spaces of healing and possibility, my time with Presente affirms my belief that schools are a crucial site for this work.

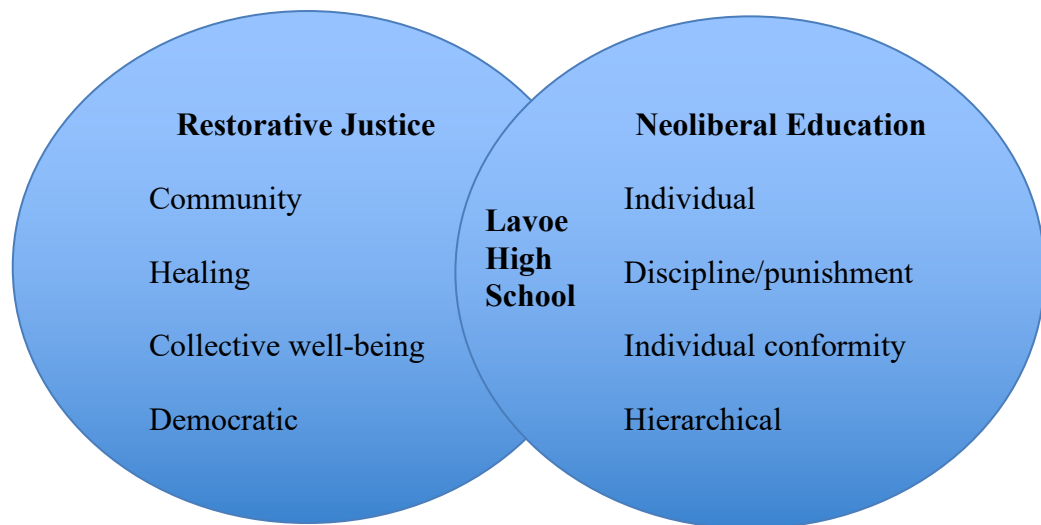


Figure 1: Restorative Justice and Neoliberal Education Venn Diagram

CHAPTER 3

HEALING METHODOLOGIES

In this chapter, I present the research methods that I used to examine the questions I ask in my thesis:

- How does serving as an RJ peer leader impact students?
- What challenges and opportunities arise as the school attempts to implement RJ?
- How do the values that inform RJ come up against, challenge, and get challenged by neoliberal education reform?

Understanding myself as an instrument of inquiry, I first situate myself and how I came to do the work I do. Next, I describe the two methods that I used when working with Presente: critical ethnography, and youth participatory action research (YPAR). Finally, I conclude by reflecting on my positionality with Presente and at LHS.

Self as Instrument of Inquiry

Committed to challenging positivist notions that position knowledge as neutral, apolitical, generalizable across contexts, and researcher independent, I align myself with scholars who understand the self as an instrument of inquiry (Piantanida & Garman, 2009). As they explain:

At the heart of interpretive inquiry is a researcher's capacity for encountering, listening, understanding, and thus "experiencing" the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than assuming the traditional stance of a detached and neutral observer, an interpretive inquirer, much like a tuning fork, resonates with exquisite sensitivity to the subtle vibrations of encountered experiences (p. 59).

From their perspective, the researcher is the instrument of study and thus must reflect on how their identity, experiences, biases, and preconceptions “expand or constrict one’s capacity for being open to and resonating with the experience of the study” (p. 60).

To that end, it feels important to share some of my own story, recognizing that my work with Presente, the methods I use, the questions I ask, and the way I understand and write about Presente are all deeply connected to who I am, what I have experienced and how I understand and am understood by the world.

Road to Research

I first became a teacher in 2008. I worked as a 9th grade English teacher, to students with learning disabilities, in what Milner (2012) would describe as an urban emergent city. Despite my lack of qualifications — I had never taught, was not certified, and did not study education — I was hired to work with students who were, in hindsight, in need of and deserving the best and most qualified teachers. When I first began teaching, I imagined that working in an urban school would be dangerous and that the students would be very different from the suburban youth I grew up with. As a white, upper–middle class female, most of my exposure to urban schools and students of color was in the form of popular media (television, news, movies etc.) that depict, what I later learned to be, untrue representations of urban schools and youth. Soon after teaching I came to realize that while the students I was teaching were not unlike the students in the neighboring upper-class towns, the way they were being treated and educated was remarkably different. I began to feel that the high-stakes accountability measures that were being implemented to help students actually served as a mechanism of control that was harmful and dehumanizing. The school’s use of metal detectors, school uniforms,

frequent test preparation, strict discipline, and highly regimented curriculum guides among other practices stood in stark contrast to what I considered good schooling. I had believed that school could be a great equalizer, but my experience forced me to question if this was true.

During my first two years of teaching, I was also attending a joint master's in education and state certification program so that I would be "officially" qualified to teach. The program was designed for teachers like me, who were working in urban schools. My cohort was almost exclusively made up of white women, and while we were all teaching in schools that predominantly served Black and Brown children, we had no coursework or class discussions about race, whiteness, privilege or identity. There were no classes on multiculturalism, culturally relevant pedagogy, or teaching diverse learners and no opportunities to discuss the inequities I was witnessing in the school I was working at.

My dual awakening regarding the inequity of education and the inadequacy of teacher education raised a lot of questions for me. I was becoming aware of my own miseducation regarding race and the myth of meritocracy, I was recognizing the role of teacher education in maintaining educational inequity, and I was wondering what it would mean to teach for justice. I was able to find mentorship from an experienced white teacher who had grown up and was now teaching in the city I was teaching in. She introduced to me a variety of scholars, books, and resources around teaching for social justice. She supported me in developing my own social justice pedagogies and helped me understand that while schools play a role in reproducing inequity the possibility still exists for them to be sites of transformation and resistance. Ultimately, it was this idea

that led me back to school to pursue my doctorate in education. I was reading about and experiencing firsthand how schools reproduced injustice, and I wanted to understand and learn what it would take for schools to become sites of liberation.

As I entered my doctoral program, I became acutely aware of the ways that research, much like education, has the potential to reproduce inequity as well as challenge it. Thus, I became committed to drawing on methods that were unequivocal in their liberatory aims. Both education and research are inextricably linked to historical and present-day understandings and struggles over what knowledge is, how knowledge is produced, who has knowledge and what/whose knowledge counts. Likewise, both are intimately connected to and influenced by the economic and ideological projects of racial neoliberalism, capitalism, and colonialism. Given the myriad of ways that research can reify existing hierarchies and power dynamics, I aimed to engage in research that was humanizing, healing, and explicitly concerned with equity and justice.

During my first semester of coursework, I was introduced to participatory action research (PAR) and youth participatory action research (YPAR) by Dr. Kysa Nygreen. PAR and YPAR are approaches to research that recognize that those most impacted by injustice are best positioned to understand, challenge and transform it. University-based scholars who use PAR and YPAR work with those facing injustice and support them in using research in order to transform their conditions. Inspired by educators and scholars using YPAR, I sought out mentorship from Dr. Antonio Martinez Nieves, then a professor in the social justice education department at UMass who was using YPAR in an afterschool program at LHS. Antonio quickly took me under his wing and together we facilitated a variety of YPAR projects at LHS.

Through this work, I was introduced to Gloria, one of the staff members at LHS who was co-leading the RJ initiative. Gloria was committed to a vision of RJ that included structural change and believed that YPAR should be a key component to Presente's approach to RJ. Having supported students at LHS in using YPAR through an after-school program I was involved in, Gloria asked if I would want to help out with Presente's inaugural summer program. When I first began working with Presente, I was not conducting research. Rather, I was supporting students in conducting their own YPAR projects. However, as time passed, and I became more deeply involved and inspired by the power of RJ I approached the group to see if they would be open to me researching and writing about their work at LHS. They agreed and I continued to work with them, supporting their YPAR work and getting involved in a myriad of other ways.

Interlude

There are some pieces to my story that feel significant and yet I am not sure where they fit or how to tell them. Throughout my time in graduate school, I have lost several people whom I love dearly. While there is more to say and unpack than this dissertation can allow for, these losses have deeply shaped the work I do, the way I move through the world, and why I seek humanizing and healing approaches. During my first year of coursework, in my critical theories course, I was introduced to Emile Durkheim's theory that suicide was not merely the result of individual personality or mood, but rather has its origins in social causes. A few months later, one of my closest

friends hung himself and Durkheim's theory became real to me. I became deeply aware of the relationships between society and not only suicide but death more broadly.

During the Fall of my second year my mom was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer, by the end of that Spring semester she was dead. The cancer, doctors speculated, was likely caused by a chemical used in a pesticide on potato farms, that should have been better studied and regulated, but wasn't. Growing up poor and housing insecure in rural New Hampshire, my mother and her mother spent time working on a potato farm in exchange for a place to stay. During my third year of my program, my 29 year-old cousin and five of her friends were killed in a fire. The house they were renting, from what many describe as a notorious slum lord, did not have adequate alarms or exits. The landlord was given a minor fine and spent less than three months in jail⁵. Dr. Antonio Nieves Martinez, my mentor and friend whose guidance led me to Presente, committed suicide in 2017.

While all of these losses are incredibly different, I can easily trace the roots of their causes to capitalism and settler colonialism. Stigma around mental health, a subpar healthcare system, racism, toxic masculinity, exploitation, the value of profit over people, inadequate oversight into the chemicals we use every day, these are just a few of the ways I understand these losses. While I was already seeking out liberatory education and research prior to all of this loss, the continual loss of people I love has strengthened my resolve to connect with others and engage in new ways of being, not only in schools and in research, but in everything I do. Capitalism is destructive and dehumanizing. It is

⁵ While I am an abolitionist and don't believe in prisons, I believe his minimal sentencing reflects a system that values profit (ie wealthy landowner) over poor and working-class tenants.

isolating, keeping us from knowing each other and ourselves. It is killing us and destroying our planet. The losses I faced were significant, but are also just a tiny fraction of the wreckage of capitalism.

Education and research have long served the aims of capitalism, but have also offered a means of resistance; an opportunity to build something new. Presente has been, for me, an example of education that is liberatory, transformative, and healing. While I have long been dedicated to that vision, my experiences with Presente reaffirmed my belief that, as Arundhati Roy (2003) reminds us “another world is not only possible, she is on her way” (p. 75). When Presente gave me their blessing to conduct my research, I resolved to approach my work in ways that reflected my values, and sought out methodologies that are humanizing, healing, and explicitly concerned with equity and justice.

While there is no perfect approach to research, and no approach that doesn't run the risk of reproducing inequality, I have found inspiration in the work of critically conscious activist researchers who attempt to challenge inequity not only through the research that they do, but through the ways they do their research (Cahill, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Dyrness, 2011; Green, 2014; Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Nygreen, 2006; Paris & Winn, 2014). While these scholars utilize different approaches, their work shares a commitment to: (a) addressing the socio-structural inequities that are the cause of injustice; (b) giving those being marginalized and most impacted by inequities voice and agency; (c) creating change in the community they are studying and; (d) naming the ways in which the researcher and the research potentially collude with hegemonic domains of power.

In that spirit, my work with Presente draws on two approaches that I feel honor my values and the values of RJ: youth participatory action research (YPAR) and critical ethnography. These approaches not only challenge power but create the possibility for, as Paris and Winn (2014) explain “the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” (p. xvi).

Participatory Action Research

PAR, also known as praxis (Freire, 1970) and critical action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), is an “epistemology that engages research design, methods, and analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation and collective action” (Torre, 2014, p. 1). Recognizing both the political nature of knowledge production and the expertise of historically marginalized people, PAR challenges traditional positivist approaches to research that often aim to observe and describe and is instead focused on change and transformation. PAR is action-oriented research involving people who are “typically seen as research subjects as co-investigators in a collective process of inquiry, reflection, and action” (Dyrness, 2008, p. 24). When young people engage in PAR, it is often referred to as YPAR, the Y naming and centering the youth who are taking up these practices.

In its ideal form PAR offers a means to equalize the power held by the researcher and the participants and ensures that participants have voice and agency throughout the research process. PAR relies on a collective group working together to utilize their indigenous knowledge to research what is of greatest concern to them, and then address this concern through action (Duncan-Andrade, J. & Morrell, E., 2008). In PAR the participants are also the researchers and work to take action on a problem they deem as

important. Over the years, Presente used YPAR to understand and take action on a variety of problems including school discipline, policing in school, and issues surrounding representation of Black and Brown students, among others.

While PAR is framed and approached in a variety of ways across a variety of contexts and disciplines, Alice McIntyre's (2000) framework for conducting PAR offers a useful overview of some of the underlying tenets of PAR which are characterized by:

- (1) an emphasis on the lived experiences of all participants;
- (2) a commitment to look for what has been left out of traditional theorizing about gender, social class, age and other social positions;
- (3) the activist stand of the researcher;
- (4) an emphasis on social change which brings about new, emancipatory relationships among all people; and
- (5) a commitment to researcher-reflexivity (p. 21-22).

At the heart of PAR is the belief that people who are oppressed have critical expertise regarding their situation and are thus best able to understand and transform oppressive structures (Fine, 2008). At LHS students had very little say in the practices and policies that were implemented on their behalf. Through the use of YPAR, Presente was able to assert their expertise and push for transformation that centered their needs and understanding.

It feels important to clarify that YPAR is not *my* method in the traditional way that we might think about methods, but rather it is a practice used by the group that is intricately connected to the way they understand RJ. As a university-based scholar with a background in supporting young people in engaging in YPAR, I was able to support Presente in their YPAR work. I led workshops on interviewing, data collection and analysis, supported students in identifying issues that they were concerned with, and brought students to my university for day-long YPAR workshops. However, the research

they engaged is *their* research. In order to capture the story of Presente, including among other things, their use of YPAR, I engaged in critical ethnography.

Critical Ethnography

Understood as critical theory in action, critical ethnography aims to move beyond description and observation and instead seeks to challenge the status quo and unsettle “both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control” (Madison, 2011, p. 5). Unlike traditional ethnography, which often aims to create a description of the ‘other,’ critical ethnography “focuses on the development of a dialogical relationship between the researcher and participants with the ultimate aim of social transformation from sources of oppression” (Baumbusch, 2011, p. 185). Drawing on this tradition, I aimed to reveal the impacts, challenges, and opportunities of implementing RJ from the perspective of those who are most harmed by unequal and unjust power structures in their schools, the students.

My research employed ethnographic methods including participant observation, interviews, document analysis, and field notes. I attended and helped to facilitate the weekly after-school Presente meetings. Given the sacredness of circle practice, it was collectively decided that I would not record meetings, but instead take handwritten field notes. I would take notes during meetings, jotting down things that were said. After meetings, I would write extensive notes trying to capture what happened and what was said as well as my thoughts and feelings. It was through these field notes that I started to notice themes and develop the codes that would be used to analyze my data.

During my three years with Presente, I attended 84 after-school meetings. In addition I attended weekly staff meetings, where I also took field notes and captured staff

members thoughts. I facilitated and attended four week-long Presente summer programs; three three-day youth leadership trainings hosted by one of Presente's grant funders; five community building ropes course trainings; a two-night trip with the group in New York City to present at the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCORE) conference; and supported the group in hosting 8 local trainings and events. I was a member of the groups Community Advisory Board (CAB) which formed at the start of 2017-18 school year and met monthly to support, advise and advocate for Presente. Figure 2 presents an overview of the research sites that I participated in, observed, and wrote field notes about. In all of my observations, I attempted to capture the flow of events, relevant details, and contextual information. I paid particular attention to how students described their experiences in schools, their thoughts, and feelings about RJ and the program, the impact this work had on them, and the challenges they faced while doing this work.

Table 1: Data Collection Sites

Participant-observation site	About the site and participants	Number of observations
Weekly after-school meetings	After-school meetings with Presente staff and students that involved circle process, YPAR, community building, and political education.	84 meetings
Weekly staff meeting	Consists of Presente staff who meet to discuss program, circle logistics, and student support needs. Also a place for staff to support each other.	75 meetings
Community Advisory Board (CAB) Meetings	Consists of community members, Presente staff and students who meet to support, advice, and advocate for the program. (started in the 2017-18 school year).	6 meetings
Presente Week-long Summer Program	Consists of Presente staff and students coming together to learn about and engage in circle process, political education, YPAR, and community building.	3 week-long programs
Presentations and Public Events	Consists of student-led trainings and presentations that were held both in and outside of school.	8 events

In addition to attending the previous listed meetings, I also interviewed 18 Presente peer leaders. Utilizing semi-structured ethnographic interviews, I asked questions that aimed to capture their thoughts on Presente and RJ, the impact they felt the program had on them personally and in the school, and the challenges they faced in doing this work. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed, along with the rest of my data.

Drawing on the work of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) I used open and focused coding to analyze my data. Open coding was used to identify potential themes,

ideas, and issues that were emerging in the data. After these themes were generated focused coding was used to further analyze the data and develop more concrete findings.

My Role and Positionality

In addition to examining and challenging structural inequities, critical ethnography calls on the researcher to acknowledge their positionality and examine the connections "between self and community, between community and theory, between theory and justice" (Rowe, 2005, p. 15-16). Furthermore, critical ethnography requires and centers dialogue; moving from an "ethnographic present to ethnographic presence" which acknowledges that knowledge, meaning, identity, and self are not fixed but are forever changing (Madison, 2011, p. 11). To that end, it feels important to explain my role and positionality in this work.

In many ways, I am both an insider and outsider in my work with Presente and the broader LHS community. When I first joined the group, I was not a staff member at the school and, although I had done some work at LHS, had no relationship to the students in the group. While the work we engaged in together allowed us to build deep and meaningful relationships that I trust will last beyond my research, I am a white middle-class woman who does not live in their community. In that sense, I am an outsider. Within the school, however, I was in many ways an insider to Presente and an outsider to the LHS staff. I was not a traditional teacher and, in the work that I took on as an advisory coordinator, I was advocating for the program and for the principles of the program to be infused in teachers' practices. My work as advisory coordinator was understood by the program and by the school as an extension of Presente. Many staff saw me as an outsider and were critical of my role, though once they learned I had been a

teacher in a nearby urban categorized school-district they were usually warmed up to me. I worked in the school, but they did not view me as a co-worker. However, as an adult working in the school whose racial and economic (white middle-class) background was more similar to the teachers than the students I was also in some ways an insider to the staff, even if they didn't claim me as such. In both my work in the school and my work with Presente, I was both a part of and separate from the group.

Despite the critical aims of my research and despite the hope that using circles can offer more democratic and healing ways of being in community, I find I must still recognize and reflect on the ways my identity shapes my understanding of the world and others understanding of me. As a white, cisgender, well-educated woman from a middle-class background, I experience and am experienced by the world in very different ways than the students in Presente. While I hope my research positions and honors the students that I work with as co-constructors of knowledge, I am aware that practices such as member-checking, reflexivity, and dialogue do not erase the differences in power and privilege that exist between myself and the students I am working with.

**Table 2: Presente Timeline
(research period is shaded)**

2012-2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternative Disciplinary Committee forms and starts to look at various models to reduce suspensions and improve school climate
2013-2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17 teachers attend an RJ training Teachers participate in bi-weekly circle practice groups Community circles are held with teachers and students to explore tardy policy and possible alternatives to tradition discipline
2014-2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All staff attend bi-monthly trainings in restorative practices and begin to implement advisory groups Alternative Disciplinary Committee does research on various alternatives to punitive discipline
Spring 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Max green applies for and receives grant to start a youth-led restorative justice program Max uses grant money to hire Gloria as a part-time RJ director Gloria and Max recruit 15 students to attend the inaugural Presente summer program where they will train to serve as peer leaders
Summer 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gloria asks me to help facilitate the Presente summer program 15 students train to serve as peer leaders, attending an 8-day summer program where they engage in circle process, community building, political education, and YPAR
2015-2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer leaders being using circles to address conflict during the school day Presente meets after school every other week to engage in circle process, YPAR, political education, and community building I am hired for 10 hours a week by the school district to serve as the LHS advisory coordinator, developing an RJ informed curriculum for the school's weekly advisory program. I also lead professional develop on advisory and serve on the school's culture and climate committee, all of which fall under the umbrella of RJ Presente receives 120 referrals, holds 82 intervention circles, and 56 follow-up circles Presente conducts YPAR project on the in-school suspension room
Summer 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presente holds week long summer program where students engage in circle practice, community building, political education, and YPAR Presente receives three-year grant to support the youth organizing component of the work

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 students and 2 staff members attend a three-day youth leadership institute hosted by the grant funder
2016-2017	<p>Presente:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receives 144 referrals, holds 150 circles (including follow-up circles) • leads anti-violence campaign and week of action • hosts two regional trainings on RJ • engages in YPAR project on the use of police in schools and the impact of RJ • receives funds to hire Frankie Campos, a full time RJ interventionist • organizes a Latinx Heritage Assembly at the school • My advisory coordinator role is expanded to 20 hours a week • Gloria steps down from her position
Summer 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Max takes over as director • Third annual summer program • Six students and two staff members attend three-day youth leadership institute hosted by grant funder • Presente receives grant and is able to hire Lee Stewart as a part time RJ interventionist
2017-2018	<p>Presente</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receives 165 referrals, holds 132 circles (including follow-up circles) • attends and presents at NYCORE conference in NYC • creates Community Advisory Board (CAB) • hosts 4 social justice community movie nights • creates college access program in partnership with professors from local universities • organizes Latinx Heritage Assembly at school • three students and two staff attend Relational Organizing course at local university • Frankie is let go at the end of the year
Summer 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fourth annual summer program • Six students and two staff members attend three-day long youth leadership institute hosted by grant funder • Program expands to Lavoe's vocational high school • Presente hires part-time RJ interventionist for the vocational high school
2018-2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presente recruits 6 peer leaders for the vocational high school

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Presente creates two RJ Fellow positions, which allows program to hire two Presente alumni in part-time positions
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CHAPTER 4

POSSIBILITIES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

After every circle, I feel as if I'm not taking a step back, I'm learning something different every time and I feel like I take a lot of things from it. Just hearing everybody talk and sharing their experiences, I take everything and, I grow. It's like the values we created. We all have respect for each other. We have integrity. A lot of us will put other people before us, and we know we aren't better than anybody else. We put ourselves all on the same playing field. All of us are generous and would do anything for anybody in our group. Everybody feels they are at the same level, nobody feels ahead of each other. Everybody trusts each other, and we are one. That is our strength; our strength is each other because we all have each other's backs no matter what. –Daniel Arroyo, Peer Lead

In this chapter, I examine the possibilities created by Presente. I attempt to weave both the "what" and the "how" meaning I explore what possibilities were created by Presente and how they were created. When I first began reading about critical practices, I would often feel stuck. Articles extolling the power of critical pedagogy, YPAR, and RJ had me convinced of their value, yet what it meant to actually engage in these practices eluded me. It is my hope that this chapter makes clear not only the possibilities that RJ makes possible, but can provide some concrete examples of how to engage in this type of work.

Borrowing from Shawn Ginwright's (2016) work on hope and healing in urban education, I have come to understand the work that Presente does as a type of healing justice. As Ginwright explains, there has often been a disconnect between social justice organizing and practices aimed at healing and well-being. Historically, social justice organizing has aimed at creating structural change but has not prepared "people to turn inward in order to focus on their own health, well-being, and happiness" (p. 27). Likewise, work focused on healing and well-being has often ignored the broader social context and instead focused on easing individual suffering. Ginwright and others attempt

to bridge this divide through a healing justice framework that understands individual suffering as the "internal consequence of oppression" (p. 28) and thus "requires us to address the institutional causes of trauma, while simultaneously building practices in schools and communities that promote well-being" (p. 7).

Positioning RJ as an approach to healing justice, this chapter explores the possibilities for healing and justice that arose as a result of Presente's work. I have separated my findings into two categories, each with three findings. Healing possibilities describe the ways in which involvement with Presente shaped and transformed students who were serving as peer leaders, whereas justice possibilities describe the ways in which Presente was shaping and transforming the culture, practices, and policies at the school. The possibilities for healing and justice inform and impact each other and are best understood as a continuum rather than a binary. However, because of the extreme focus on individualism within the school and the lack of broader school commitment to RJ, it often felt like there were more opportunities for healing on the individual level than there was for schoolwide transformation and justice.

Possibilities for Healing

As described in Chapter Two, the heart of the Presente program was the after-school space, in which peer leaders came together to be in circle, engage in political education, and carry out YPAR projects based on issues they were concerned about. Meetings included time for personal sharing and reflection, space to learn about the history and activism of people of color—particularly Puerto Ricans and other Latinx communities, and the opportunity for Peer leaders to connect what they were learning to what is happening in their school.

The staff was committed to critical pedagogy and the curriculum we developed contributed to the development of what Freire (1973) describes as conscientização or critical consciousness, supporting students were in both understanding and challenging oppression. As I examined the specific ways critical consciousness emerged, three major themes stood out: Presente created the possibilities for (1) the love and appreciation of ethnic history, culture, and identity⁶; (2) commitment to solidarity and community; and (3) collective hope.

Love and appreciation of ethnic history, culture, and identity

Like most public schools, LHS taught a Eurocentric curriculum that centered whiteness. When the histories and experiences of people of color were included, they were almost always represented in relation to their subjugation. Students learned about slavery and Jim Crow, but weren't taught about the Black Panthers or the Combahee River Collective. Students learned even less about Latinx history and culture.

Predictably, especially given state had banned bilingual education in 2002, LHS positioned speaking Spanish as a deficit. Teachers routinely told students they were not allowed to speak Spanish and Presente students reported getting sent out of class for things such as explaining directions to their peers in Spanish. Signs around the schools further reinforced that Spanish speakers were understood to be a problem. At the front of the school entrance a sign with the words "No Hangeo" greeted Spanish speakers. Improper Spanish, No Hangeo is slang for "no loitering". Even worse than the sign itself the absence of any equivalent English signage, indicating that the school specifically does

⁶ The phrase love and appreciation of ethnic history, culture, and identity comes from Patricia Espiritu Halago's work on ethnic studies.

not want Spanish speakers hanging outside of the school. While the sign was removed in the Summer of 2018 as a result of Presente’s activism, the sign is a powerful indicator of the deficit views of Spanish speakers that permeate the school’s culture.

Many Spanish speaking students at LHS have internalized the deficit messages about their language. While this internalization manifests in a variety of ways, nowhere is it more evident than in the Lavoe regionalism "lingy." Amongst LHS students, lingy is a derogatory term used to describe someone whose first language is Spanish.

Etymologically derived from “bilingual,” lingy is most often used by native-English speaking Latinx students as a stand-in for other derogatory terms such as “dumb” or “ghetto,” reinforcing the view that speaking Spanish is a deficit associated with low intellect, poverty, and bad behavior. Lingy is coded and allows for people to talk about race and class without being explicitly classist or racist. The term also serves as a way for native-English speaking students to distance themselves from bilingual Latinx students, and claim a sense of belonging in their community while positioning bilingual Latinx students as other.

Presente staff intentionally challenged deficit views of Spanish speakers, and remained committed to ensuring that Presente existed as a space that celebrated bilingualism. To achieve this, Presente purposefully recruited peer leaders whose dominant language was Spanish, and recruited and compensated peer leaders who served as translators. We brought in poetry, music, and videos that celebrated Spanish—specifically Puerto Rican Spanish—and taught about colonization and the erasure of language. Latinx staff members also shared their own stories around language. Gloria lamented that she could not speak her mother's tongue and Lee celebrated the gains they

were making at learning Spanish. In all of our public events, students spoke in whatever language they were comfortable in, and translation was offered to all that wanted it. At the end of every meeting, we closed out by chanting Assata Shakur's powerful words, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains" in English and Spanish.

This celebration of Spanish shifted the way students in Presente thought about themselves and Spanish speakers more broadly. Nowhere is this shift more evident than in the story of Cheryl Diaz, a Puerto Rican high school student who joined Presente in 2015, the first year of Presente and her 10th grade year at Lavoe, and continued to be connected to the program even after she graduated. When she first joined, Cheryl, who was fluent in both English and Spanish, would continually deny her ability to speak Spanish. When asked if anyone would like to volunteer to do translation at an event, she would loudly say, "I don't speak Spanish like that." Once, in response to this denial, Gloria said to her, "Really Cheryl? I could have sworn you spoke beautiful Spanish." Cheryl exaggeratingly rolled her eyes in a way that only a teenager can and shook her head no.

However, as Cheryl became more involved with Presente her views on speaking Spanish changed and she began not only to admit that she was fluent but would volunteer to do translation at school-wide assemblies put on by Presente. At the first-ever Latinx Heritage assembly that Presente organized, Cheryl served as the translator and proudly explained that all events at LHS should be in English and Spanish. At the end of her senior year, we spoke about her transition from denying speaking Spanish to volunteering, and she explained:

Honestly, I would lie and say I couldn't speak Spanish because I didn't want to be viewed a certain way. This school doesn't make you feel good about speaking Spanish. Presente was the first place where speaking Spanish was made to feel like a point of pride. It should be seen this way everywhere, but it definitely isn't.

Cheryl denied her language because the school had taught her it was something to be ashamed of. She was a high achieving student, who took honors and AP classes and she knew that speaking Spanish was seen as a drawback, something that might tarnish her image as “one of the good ones”, something she later came to feel was used by teachers to pit her against other Latinx students and justify their poor treatment of students of color who weren't academically successful in the same ways she was. However, Presente created a space that challenged the deficit view of Spanish and Spanish speakers and allowed Cheryl the opportunity to not only feel proud speaking her language but to also challenge the ways the school marginalized Spanish speaking students.

While Presente incorporated students' culture, language, and history all year long, our week-long summer program allowed for a sustained focus on storytelling and learning. Each year, one day of our week-long summer program would be led by Anna Nieto, our teacher of circle practice, who would lead the group in a daylong circle. Throughout the daylong circle training, Anna asked questions about who our people are, where we come from and what our values are. As she asked these questions, Anna, an indigenous queer Honduran woman who grew up outside of Boston, shared her own stories of the different diasporas she is connected to, the ways she was taught to feel shame about different aspects of her identity, and how she came to find pride for herself and connection to her roots. Her sharing modeled for all of us the ways we might share, and as the talking piece was passed, we all had an opportunity to honor and rethink our histories and education.

For many of our students, this is the first time they have been asked questions like these and the first time they have heard someone share their own story in such a deep and compelling way. As one student explained when the talking piece came her way, tears streaming down her face:

I've felt ashamed of who I am, of my background. I haven't ever been in space that made it... not just okay, but something to be proud of. I feel embarrassed that I felt that way and embarrassed that I don't know much about my culture or my family history, I want to know now, and I feel like I can try to learn.

When the talking piece made its way back to Anna, she explained to everyone that there is a reason that people of color are taught to feel ashamed of who they are and reasons they are not taught their histories. She explains that colonization works by making us feel disconnected to each other and our histories, but that it doesn't have to be that way.

Similar moments of appreciation occurred during our radical walking tour of Lavoe. Led by Dolores Medina, a longtime resident considered to be the People's Historian of Lavoe, we toured the city. As we walked past Puerto Rican grocery stores and terraced houses, down the canal towpaths of this post-industrial city, Dolores told us about the often-denied history of oppression faced by Puerto Ricans in Lavoe. She told us about the even-more-erased history of Puerto Rican resistance and moments of community solidarity where residents from various background came together to fight for justice. It was the rainy first day of our summer program, having had most of our group graduate in May, this cohort was almost all new members who barely knew each other or the adults facilitating the event. However, students huddled together some sharing umbrellas, others gladly getting wet in order to hang on to Dolores's words and take in her stories. A true people's historian, Dolores not only knew the stories of the city but knew many of our students' parents and grandparents and was able to make connections

with them. When speaking about a march for educational justice that took place in the 1980s, she pointed to one student and said “did you know your grandma was at that march? You should ask her about it.”

Following the tour, we circled up to share our thoughts on the tour. While students shared many things, Yesenia’s words nicely sum up the sentiment of the group:

The way they tell, we’ve never done anything good, we haven’t contributed to anything. But today we walked through the city I’ve lived in my whole life and learned things I never knew about Puerto Ricans in Lavoe. We fought for housing rights for all people, we stood up against the landlords who were burning down their buildings for profit and to kick us out, we’ve built community gardens. No one talks about this or tells these stories. Do our teachers even know any of this?

Similar thoughts were shared after a day spent learning about the Young Lords, a group of young Puerto Rican activists living in Chicago and New York who organized to fight for the needs of their community. As a closing round, the question “What are you left thinking about after today” was asked and one student, Michael shared.

I’m left thinking, how come we’ve never learned about the Young Lords in school? We’ve learned about Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, which is great, but we never learn about Puerto Rican activist and this school is like, what, 70% Puerto Rican. I mean it’s kind of sad. They were fighting for the same things we are fighting for now. Maybe if we learned about them and if the things they fought for were carried forward we wouldn’t be in this place now.

Both of these quotes offer a powerful example of how Presente created a space in which students could learn about and take pride in their culture and history. Furthermore, what the students make clear is how this space differs from the rest of their school experience. Yesenia's question about whether teachers know this history is an important question. In asking it, she not only makes the point that teachers should know this history, but she also makes it clear that from the way she is being taught it feels as though teachers don't believe that people of color in Lavoe, especially Puerto Ricans, have ever contributed.

Likewise, Kevin's thoughts that we still have to struggle against racism in part because the history of activism is absent in the curriculum is a powerful reminder of schools' role in maintaining white supremacy.

In the same ways that Presente celebrated students' language, history, and culture it was also one of the only spaces in the school that acknowledged the impact of racism in students' lives. In students' classes, racism was almost exclusively talked about as a thing of the past, but when students attempted to discuss the ways it manifested in their lives today, they were often shut down. So much so, that when students of color even mentioned race, they were often accused of being racist. As one student, Lisa explained:

Here [Presente] we get to talk about race and racism and what it is like in this school. In my classes, it's different. Our history teacher showed our class a picture of the founding fathers back in the day and asked us what we noticed and what it made us think of. I pointed out that they were all white and these girls, who were white, told me that was racist. I wasn't even saying it like it was a bad thing, which it is, but I was really just saying I noticed that, and the teacher didn't say anything. In the rest of this school when you talk about race and racism, people say you are racist, or they act like that teacher and just don't say anything.

Similarly, when a peer leader named Sandra read a poem at the Latinx Heritage Assembly that mentioned whiteness and colonization with righteous anger, she was accused of reverse racism by some students and teachers.

While the rest of the school largely ignored racism and adopted a color-blind approach that served to disregard the very real experiences that student of color at Lavoe were dealing with, Presente created an environment that not only affirmed students' racial and ethnic background but also affirmed their understanding of how their identities were used to discriminate against them. In doing so, they gained not only a love and

appreciation for their ethnicity, culture, and history but, as the next finding will attest to, began to understand their struggles were connected.

Solidarity and Community

Given the ways that RJ challenges the neoliberal conceptions of individualism, it is, perhaps, not surprising that being involved in Presente fostered feelings of solidarity and community amongst students. Students often came in with individualistic views, and it was not uncommon to hear students say things like, "yeah, maybe there shouldn't be cops in school, but if a student gets arrested it is their fault. If they didn't do anything wrong, no one would bother them." However, as students became more involved in Presente, and began to better understand the values that inform restorative justice, these views begin to change.

As Cheryl explained when reflecting on what she learned by getting involved with Presente,

Before I became a Peer leader I thought punitive discipline was the only way to solve problems. I thought students who were acting up were annoying and deserved the discipline they got. Now I see that there are deeper root causes to people's behavior and I think the school needs to address those root causes. Even if I am not the one being kicked out, it still impacts me. It impacts all of us. Even if I am not the one being arrested in school, it impacts me because now I see myself as part of a community. There are a lot of students in Presente I wouldn't have ever known if it wasn't for this group like I would have known them but not really. Knowing people's stories and why they do the things they do, I really see things in a different way.

Hailey, a white 10th grade student shared similar sentiments, explaining, "I used to believe that students deserved most of the discipline they got because I trusted the system but now I think that that are deeper issues and that the school needs to work to create a safer environment for all students, not just some students."

Cheryl and Hailey's experiences attest to the ways that punitive discipline is normalized in school. These students, who were often held up as "good" students by teachers and administrators, believed that the system was fair, individuals were alone responsible for their behavior, and that punishment is the appropriate response to misbehavior. However, as Cheryl points out, getting to know students whom she might not normally know allowed her to understand how these issues impact both herself and others. Hailey similarly begins to understand that school should be a place that supports and works for everyone and that there is an obligation to create a school that supports all students.

Another example of how Presente fostered a sense of community and agency can be learned in the story of the durag. In the fall of 2018 Adolfo, a brand-new peer leader was kicked out of class for refusing to take off his durag. At the following Presente meeting, he talked about how frustrating it was that he was not allowed to wear it. The LHS dress code states that "hats, bandanas, and sweatbands in school are inherently disruptive and are not allowed, with an exception for religious headwear." Adolfo felt like that didn't make sense. As he saw it, the only thing that was a distraction was the attention the teacher was giving his durag, and the fact that he was kicked out of class because of it. Other students were also upset, and many felt that the durag policy was racist because durags are typically worn by Black and Latinx men (though not exclusively). They are both functional, used to protect styled hair and create waves, and a cultural "testament to and marker of blackness" (Street, 2017). As one student, Yara explained:

They are acting like a durag is the same thing as a hat, but it isn't. People wear them for a reason; they have an actual purpose. And because they are only worn by people with like, our hair, they are discriminating against us by banning the durag. Banning durags hurts black and brown students, and we need to do something about it.

It was relatively late in the year when the issue of the durag came up, and students were unsure if they could take on another cause in addition to their time-intensive YPAR project. We decided to use circle practice to see how people were feeling. As the talking piece went around students shared their thoughts about the durag ban and what should be done about it. Many students felt the ban was racist and needed to be addressed, while a few felt that although it wasn't a great rule, Adolfo also made a lot of trouble for teachers. Peer leader Emma explained:

Adolfo, no disrespect but you getting kicked out wasn't just about the durag, that was just the excuse, but it isn't all on the teacher. I don't think the ban is good, but I don't see it really affecting that many students. If we are going to do things and take action, I feel like it needs to have more of an impact.

Another student Amaya, brought up that teachers associate durags with gangs:

They are banning durags 'cause they think they are associated with gangs, but like really, even if they are it shouldn't be their concern. Like, if they are really concerned about if we are in gangs they should talk to us, support us. Kicking us out doesn't help keep us out of gangs. I mean the durag doesn't mean you are in a gang, but if that is what they think and are worried about how does kicking us out do anything? I agree that this doesn't really impact a lot of us, cause most of us aren't wearing durags, but the view they have of us, as being bad and being in gangs, that does affect a lot of us. I just don't know when we can get it done.

Caleb, the only white student in the group at that time, paused for several seconds when it was his turn to speak. In a previous circle that happened over the summer, Caleb had shared his own compelling story of being kicked out of class and targeted by a teacher he felt was a bully. In that circle, Caleb shared that some of his classmates had felt like he should just be quiet and do what the teacher said, but that he couldn't because

he knew the teacher was being mean and unfair, and so he was continually kicked out of class. He had shared that he wished he had been part of Presente then so he could have had support with this teacher. Finally, after a few moments of silence, he spoke.

The durag ban doesn't affect most of us. It definitely doesn't impact me because I don't wear them. But this group is about stopping the school-to-prison pipeline, about keeping students from being pushed out of school. So even if it is only one person or a few people who are impacted, we should do something. The whole reason we go to school is to learn, and if students are being kicked out, especially over something that is connected to their culture, it is impacting their right to an education, and I feel like we have to do something.

At this point, even the students who initially felt reluctant were snapping and nodding their head in agreement. After a few more rounds, it was decided that a small group of students would spend a shared independent study working on the durag issue and our after school meetings would still focus on the YPAR project, with time built in for updates and whole group input.

As “The Story of the Durag” illustrates, Presente creates opportunities for students to build solidarity and understand their own experiences as connected to the experiences of others. Amaya was able to see how the banning of the durag was connected to the criminalization of Black and Brown students at LHS and the belief that students who looked like her were up to no good. She may have never worn a durag, but she did, as she explained, "know what it is like to have some of these teachers be surprised that you are smart" and was able to understand those different experiences as two sides of the same coin.

Another example of how the program fosters solidarity can be seen from a conversation that came up during our second annual summer program. On this occasion, I was leading an activity taught to me by Dr. Jason Irizarry, in which students were to

generate a list of things that make them mad at about school. The name of the activity was, "Tell 'Em Why You're Mad" in reference to a local call-in radio show segment that many of the students knew and enjoyed. In the activity, students wrote down things that made them mad about school on post-it notes. They then shared what they wrote, and as a group classified and sorted their various grievances. As students began to identify themes like school policies, teachers' views, and curriculum they were able to better determine the issue they would focus on through YPAR.

In addition to this activity aiding the students in selecting their YPAR topic, it served to support students in understanding how their experiences are connected, as the following conversation between several students and I demonstrates:

DANI:

Alright, so there are a lot of different things we are mad about it, which is hard because it means we are all dealing with a lot of things we shouldn't have to. On the other hand, there is hope because we are all here committed to trying to change things. Being mad and angry can be destructive, we've all seen that happen. But for me, anger is also connected to hope. If the Young Lords weren't angry about the way Puerto Ricans were being treated, they wouldn't have organized and done the amazing work they did. Every movement for social justice and civil rights has been because people were angry about things and believed that they could be different. Movements for justice have always involved people coming together with anger and hope to fight for something better. We are going to look at what we are angry about so we can figure out what needs to change. So when we look at our list, the things that we are mad about, does anyone notice any connections between them?

NATALIA:

Well a lot of them are related to how teachers in the school treat us. Like some students are mad about being told not to speak Spanish, and some students are mad about being kicked out of class.

MICHAEL:

And I am mad about the rude comments teachers make.

NATALIA:

And I'm mad that there are so few students of color in my AP classes, sometimes I am the only one. And all of these things have to do with how the teachers in the school see us a certain way. They are different, but they are connected to how they think low of us [Latinx students].

DANI:

That makes a lot of sense, can you explain more what you mean?

NATALIA:

Well, like if students are getting told not to speak Spanish it is as though they are saying there is something wrong with Spanish and with speaking Spanish. It shows they have a certain view of it. A lot of times they (teachers) think students who are speaking Spanish are talking badly about them. They assume if you are speaking Spanish you are doing something wrong and if they think that way about Spanish and students who speak Spanish then they probably aren't referring students who speak Spanish to AP classes because they have all these assumptions about who we are and what we are capable of.

MICHAEL:

Yeah, it's like even if some of us are experiencing different things, the things we are mad about are connected to these bigger issues.

Through this activity and others like it, students in Presente who were often positioned in very different ways in the school began to see the ways their experiences were connected. Natalia, a high achieving light-skinned Colombian and Michael a dark-skinned afro-Latino who was often kicked out of class were able to see the ways their frustrations were rooted in deficit views about Latinx students.

While political education and structural analysis of oppression certainly plays a huge role in fostering solidarity within the group, the value of storytelling, and intentional relationship building should not be underestimated. Circle allowed for students to share in ways that do not typically happen in school. Students were able to talk about their dreams, struggles, insecurities, relationships and family lives and bring their whole selves

into the space. It was not unusual for a student to show up to our after school meetings and say, "I know we have a lot to work on, but I really need to talk about something," and share something that they were dealing with in school or at home. The group would then circle up and offer support and affirmations to the student who was struggling. When possible, an additional, more intentional circle would be planned to provide the student concrete support and next steps. Sometimes community building happened in more traditional ways -- such as the yearly ropes course we attended and the community building activities we did. However, most often the process of being in circle and sharing our lives was what created a sense of belonging amongst our group. In fact, students often described Presente as a family.

In creating a sense of solidarity and community, students came to understand how their liberation was bound, and gained a sense of responsibility to each other. As one peer leader, Kimberly shared:

Before I was an RJ peer leader, I didn't see social justice issues as my problem. I always thought that those problems were too far out of my reach to affect me directly. Now I believe that it is my duty to fight for freedom, and it is my duty to defeat all stereotypes and have empathy. Now I can see that the issues I thought were so far out of reach are actually closer, but now I feel like I have a lot more power to fight against them.

Referencing the Assata Shakur chant that Presente ends each meeting with, Kimberly explains that she used to think social justice issues didn't impact her, however now she sees that she is and that even when they don't impact her in the same ways they might impact others, she has an obligation to do something about it. Perhaps most importantly, and this leads to the next healing possibility, she feels that she has the power to create change.

Collective Hope

RJ peer leaders gain not only an understanding of injustice in their school, but a sense of hope that things could be different and that they could help to make them different. Students in Presente routinely expressed that involvement in Presente made them believe that they could work together to change their school and community. As one student, Octavia, explained, "before I became a peer leader, I thought that our school couldn't change, but now I believe that it can and that we will be the ones to do it." Octavia's belief that things can change and that her and the other peer leaders can help to make that change reflect what Shawn Ginwright (2016) describes as collective hope.

Ginwright defines collective hope as "shared vision of what could be, with a shared commitment and determination to make it a reality" (p. 21), and lays out three features that create the conditions for collective hope; shared experiences, radical imagination, and critical action. The first feature is the "*shared experiences* from the conditions of everyday life" (p. 22, emphasis in original). Based on this criteria, we can begin to understand the ways in which Presente serves to instill hope in students. While students in Presente initially were more vulnerable to seeing themselves and their problems as separate from others, as they began to build relationships, share their stories, and develop an analysis of the conditions of their school, they began to better recognize the similarities of their experiences. This transformation was particularly evident in regard to how students understood racism, and deficit views of youth and youth of color specifically. In recognizing this, students developed a shared analysis of their conditions and shared a vision about what needed to change.

Ginwright's "second feature of collective hope is a shared *radical imagination* about freedom, peace, and justice" (p. 23, emphasis in original), in which people develop a shared vision of how things could be. It involves people who have a collective understanding about why injustice is occurring coming together to dream up new ways of how things should be. One way that Presente worked to stimulate a "radical imagination" was by exposing students to the ideas of writers, artists, and activists who dare to imagine what a changed society would look like. For example, at least once a year, students are presented with the following Walidah Imarisha quote:

When we talk about a world without prisons; a world without police violence; a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education; a world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism; we are talking about a world that doesn't currently exist. But, collectively dreaming up one that does means we can begin building it into existence (2015. p. 58).

Students reflect on what the schools and communities of their dreams would look like. They then write or draw their vision on paper plates that to be displayed on our centerpiece, so that we could have a constant reminder of our collective utopian vision. In a similar exercise during our yearly retreat, students create a "Future Timeline" (developed by Gail Taylor of Tomorrow Makers) where they imagine their ideal high school and community 20 years in the future. After coming up with this dream future, they write out a timeline of the various things that happened between now and 20 years later that lead to their preferred future. In doing this activity students develop a shared vision of what school and community could be and start to think about what needs to happen to make their vision realized.

After developing a vision of what they want schools to be like, students are ready to engage in the third feature of collective hope, "*critical action*" (p 23, emphasis in

original). Ginwright explains that critical action occurs when community members act collectively to change their conditions, and work toward a shared vision. The process of working together and creating change helps build a sense of control and strengthens future orientation, both of which are essential for developing hope. When peer leaders engage in YPAR, even when the changes won are small compared to the scope of the problems, it creates a sense of hope that things can change. As one peer leader Antonio explained during a presentation about his group's YPAR project, "before I became a Restorative Justice peer leader, I thought that youth didn't have a voice and that we couldn't change anything, but now that I am involved with Presente I know that we are changing things."

The hope that students developed in Presente was not a naïve hope, where they imagined that everything would change overnight. Students in Presente had a profound understanding of what they were up against and how slow change was. Often, students would share that they were doing this work not just for themselves but for the next generation, for their brothers and sisters that would eventually come through the school. As Alicia explained, "I want things to change for me, but not just for me. I'll only be here for another year, but when my brother comes through, I want him to have it different. I want him to come through and have more spaces like this. I know it can't happen like that (snaps finger), but if we build it, and then they come here, and they keep building it, things will change."

Possibilities for Justice

While Presente clearly had an impact on students, I sometimes felt let down by the lack of school-wide change. The space we had created in Presente was powerful,

affirming, and healing but outside of our "Presente family," it felt like little had changed. School resource officers (SROs) (a sanitized term for a school-based police officer) continued to arrest students for minor infractions, students of color were still not adequately represented in honors and AP level courses, and students continued to be left out of the decision-making processes at their school. At times I wondered if, given the scope and scale of the injustices students faced, Presente had achieved anything beyond small-scale change.

However, after conversations with Presente members as well as with friends and mentors, I have been reminded that Presente has and continues to create change on the structural level. The school may not yet be the school Presente envisions, but the changes that *have* occurred are no small feat, and perhaps more importantly, they lay the groundwork for something bigger. While I don't want to overplay the significance of the changes made given the scope of inequities that continue to exist for students at LHS, I do want to honor and recognize the way that Presente's work succeeded in shifting structure, discourse, and practices not only in Lavoe but in the surrounding communities.

Though often harder to identify, Presente did shift and transform the culture, practices, and policies at LHS in often subtle but significant ways. While the transformation is incomplete; an ongoing work in progress that will likely take years of organizing both inside and outside of the school to be fully realized, Presente's interventions were a catalyst for the transformation to begin. During my four years working with Presente, I witnessed important changes that would likely not have happened otherwise. The three most significant include a shift from the punitive logic to

a healing impulse, an increased focus on representation, and a shifting view of community engagement.

Challenging the Punitive Common Sense

As described in chapter two, the punitive common sense is the governing cultural logic of schools throughout the United States, particularly those serving low-income students of color. LHS was (and continues to be) no exception. Police still roam the hallways. When students "misbehave" they are more likely to be given a suspension than offered an RJ process. And teachers, who themselves are punished and policed through neoliberal reform and policy, often still resort to expulsion from class as a remedy to a perceived disruption. All in all, it's a far cry from some Imarisha-esque utopian society. Yet still, there are also important ways in which Presente challenged this logic and started to create what I have come to think of as a healing impulse at LHS. Perhaps nowhere is the shift from the punitive common sense to a healing impulse more evident than in the student support room.

During Presente's first year, peer leaders recognized that the school's student support room (SSR) functioned as an in-school suspension room and was a vital element of the school-prison nexus at LHS. The room, which consisted of 50 chairs lined up in rows, was in the farthest third-floor corner of the school, and was described by many students as a jail cell. Some even referred to it as Guantanamo. Students would be sent there for a variety of reasons and could be held for blocks (periods), or days at a time. Because the students in the room were technically "in school," students could be confined there without affecting the school's rate of suspension. This workaround helped enable the school to exclude students while artificially keeping their suspension rate low. Peer

leaders identified the room as a problem, and it became the focus of Presente's first YPAR project.

For this project, students engaged in a variety of research activities including interviewing students who were sent to the room, interviewing the full-time substitute teacher who was staffed in the room, and interviewing teachers who did and didn't utilize the room. Students also researched best practices in student support, analyzed LHS's own student support room data, and reviewed the most recent LHS school climate data. After months of engaging in this research, students developed a set of recommendations and presented their work to school administration and department heads. They selected administration because they felt that those were the people who could implement their school-wide recommendations. Department heads were selected with the hopes that they would share their classroom recommendations with the teachers in their departments.

The recommendations they made were:

- Implement practices that address the root cause of the referral
 - Use a combination of one-on-one conversations and circles to support students in reflecting on the reason they were sent to SSR and a plan for how they can repair the situation
 - The SSR coordinator should lead workshops or lessons each day that address a theme that students can connect to
- Develop clear policies and protocols and improve record keeping
 - Clarification is needed on the appropriate reason to refer and steps to take prior to referring
 - Protocol for students to self-refer so they can de-escalate
 - Improved record keeping that includes a description of why a student was referred and which teacher made the referral

- Support for teachers who are frequent referrers such as professional development on classroom management and relationship building, whole class circles, or student-teacher circles
- Support for students who are frequently referred such as a support circle or therapeutic intervention
- Provide therapeutic supports in the SSR such as:
 - Calming activities such as meditation, coloring, art supplies, and exercise
 - Therapists- such as graduate student interns
 - Peer support from students who receive school credit for working in the room
- Increased academic support for students who are sent to SSR such as
 - Student tutors who receive credit for working in the room
 - Access to computers so that students can do research and work on assignments
 - Development of system for teachers to more easily send student work to the SSR
- Make the room a safe and comfortable physical space
 - Clearly posted expectations
 - Fewer desks
 - Area for holding circles
 - Provide a private counseling space for one-on-one conversations
 - Incorporate positive and motivating posters

As a result of their work, many of the recommendations were put into place, and the student support room has become an oasis in the school, offering students support and community they were unlikely to receive before. Artwork and murals created by students welcome and affirm those who are referred. Yoga mats and a recumbent bike are available for students to use, as are art supplies, books, and puzzles. Laptops are available for students who need to complete work or do research. There are also spaces for private one-on-one conversations and restorative circles. In addition to the physical space, there

is also much needed therapeutic support. The room now has a full-time coordinator who is a trained therapist, two graduate student interns who are studying to become therapists that help coordinate the room and provide counseling to students, and two AmeriCorps vistas who provide support to students. Several peer leaders also have independent studies that allow them to provide support to students in the room while receiving class credit. Students who become regulars in the SSR often wind up going through a circle process and can receive support that they would not have received before these changes to the SSR were made.

Every element of the new SSR reflects a healing impulse, recognizing that when students act in ways that are harmful to themselves or others, they need to be held closer and supported. The use of therapists, one-on-one conversations, and the improved data collection also allows for root causes that may have otherwise gone unnoticed to be addressed. For example, now if the data indicates that a specific teacher is frequently referring during a particular block, it is not uncommon for an RJ staff member to reach out and see if that class might benefit from a whole class circle to help strengthen relationships and address issues. Similarly, if a student is being referred or self-referring on a recurring basis, there will be more targeted support for that student to find out what might be going on and what support they might need.

For many students at LHS the SSR is one of the few, if not only, spaces in the school where they feel safe and supported. As one student explained:

This is my spot. I know I can come up here and someone is going to say hello and ask me how I am and like really talk to me. No matter what, I can come up here, and I am going to know someone. There isn't any other place like this.

Likewise, many teachers appreciate the reset policy that was implemented in which they could send students for a brief (10-15 minute) reset as a means of de-escalation. One teacher explained:

I try to really make it clear that they aren't in trouble or being punished, but that I can tell they need a break and that I want them to do what they need to do so that they come back ready to engage. For a few of them, I think it still feels like they are getting kicked out, but a lot of them get it, and I think it helps us avoid conflict.

While the SSR is by no means perfect, with many of the problems that existed before the YPAR project still present—especially racial disproportionality regarding who is referred—its existence points to a shifting understanding in concerns to what young people at LHS need and how the school should respond to perceived misbehavior.

Representation

When you walk down the central corridor of LHS, the first thing you are likely to notice is the Hall of Fame, consisting of rows and rows of photographs of "notable" Lavoe alumni. Picture after picture of white men whose Irish last names reflect some of the Lavoe elite, with two women and one black man included in a way that cannot help but seem tokenized. Communicated through this "wall of whiteness," as it is often referred to by students, is the deficit view that the Latinx community in Lavoe have done little of note and thus do not warrant inclusion in the hall of fame. While it is just one of the many ways deficit views permeate LHS, the Hall of Fame's lack of representation of people of color—and Latinx people, in particular—speaks volumes, serving as a visual representation about who are and are not valued and centered at LHS.

Each year, students in Presente raised concerns about the school's lack of positive representation, and abundance of negative representations, of Latinx and other people of

color. In meetings with administration, students would often cite the school's lack of teachers of color as particularly concerning. In response, during Presente's first year staff coordinated an equity and access committee with teachers and administration to look at issues surrounding the representation of POC at the school. While discussing and addressing issues of representation was always a part of our work, during the 2017-18 school year Presente conducted a YPAR project on racism at LHS and representation became a central focus. For this YPAR project, students asked, "In what ways does racism operate at LHS, and how are different racial identities represented, or not represented at LHS?" Presente students conducted research that affirmed their experiences.

According to their project, they found that: 1.) Visuals in the building are mostly of white people and mostly males; 2.) When visuals in the school do include people of color they are almost always depicted in subjugated positions, such as slaves or in internment camps, and 3.) students of color are underrepresented in leadership roles, clubs, and high-level classes, and overrepresented in programs for struggling students such as summer school and credit recovery. In May of 2018 Presente shared their results and recommendations with school/district administrators and community members at the end of the year event. The event, which served several purposes including celebrating the year, sharing our work, and advocating for continued funding, allowed students to share their results and recommendations in a forum that would hold the administration not only accountable to the students, but to the community members who showed up. Proposed recommendations included placing visuals in public spaces that accurately reflect the student body and celebrate the accomplishments of women and people of color in the

community; taking measures so that clubs, sports, activities, and classes reflect student demographics; and developing a recruitment plan to increase the number of teachers of color at Lavoe High School.

As a result of Presente's ongoing focus on representation, there have been some significant developments that, while by no means sufficient, indicate a much-needed shift in practice, policy, and discourse. Since Presente first started advocating for representation in AP classes, enrollment for students of color has risen by 13%. While students of color are still underrepresented in AP classes, there has been an increase each year since Presente first began advocating for increased representation. Although Presente is not the only voice advocating for this, and should not receive sole credit for making it happen, Presente's continual focus and advocacy work have certainly played a role. Likewise, the district has begun to express a commitment to recruiting diverse candidates, naming it as a strategic objective and initiative in the 2018 District Turnaround Plan. While we have yet to see how the district will follow through on this commitment, its existence reflects a shifting understanding about the importance of representation and why it matters that students have educators who look like them.

While some of these changes undoubtedly come as a result of Presente's advocacy, I also believe that Presente serves as a model in the school that teachers and administrators are learning from. Since the beginning, Presente has had a vision of being led by community members of color and is in a continual process of making that vision realized. When the program expanded during the second year and we were able to hire a full-time staff member to host circles, Presente prioritized hiring a former LHS student of color. Having attended LHS, having grown up in Lavoe, and having experienced many of

the same things current LHS students face including racism, Frankie connected with students that teachers and administrators often struggle to reach. While it would be selling him short to say his race and his hometown are the only reasons he has reached so many students, it is certainly true that many students “see themselves” in Frankie. As one student explained at his going away party:

This school won't be the same without you. You are like the big brother or the Tio, that guy who is going to be giving us a hard time but out of love. You know what it is like here and you know what we are up to outside of here. You really know what it is like for us.

Even teachers who at times have made it clear they dislike Presente and are upset by some of our efforts around representation have recognized that many of the students Frankie mentored made considerable strides in their classes.

While Frankie leaving was a huge loss to the program, lessons learned from his time at LHS, and the weight of his absence inspired the formation of the Presente Fellows Program, which created two part-time positions for Presente alumni. Recognizing that students of color from Lavoe have much-needed insights and skills, this new initiative serves as an example for how Lavoe might support the leadership of students and create a pipeline back to the school for students from the community. The fact that school administration approved the hiring of 18-year-old alumni, just out of high school, is significant and represents a shift in how the school understands both representation and the young people who graduate from LHS.

Another way in which Presente shifted how people of color were represented in the school was through their creation of the Lavoe Hidden Legends exhibit. Wanting to create a more welcoming space that challenges the lack of representation and the myriad

of deficit views perpetuated in the school, peer leaders sought to create a hall of fame that reflected and celebrated the achievements and contributions of community members who too often go unrecognized. During the 2018-19 school year, as a continuation of the YPAR project from the previous year, peer leaders solicited nominations, examined historical archives and interviewed community members in order to identify people to include in the Lavoe Legends exhibit. The criterion for being included in the hall of fame includes a deep connection to Lavoe and a demonstrated commitment to resisting oppression. While this work is still ongoing, they have begun to identify and interview community members who will be featured in the exhibit. The exhibit will feature pictures and biographies of all the hidden legends and will be hung throughout the school so that every area of the school celebrates the contributions of community members who have historically been ignored and undervalued by the school. As part of the exhibit, Presente will host a variety of events with the school and Lavoe community that will both celebrate these hidden legends and allow for ongoing and much needed conversations around racism and representation at LHS.

While the exhibit itself will play a significant role in shifting representation in a symbolic sense, Presente's ongoing conversations around representation and the need for this exhibit have also shifted the way administration, and some teachers are thinking about representation. In a recent meeting with school administration, the associate principal Rose Saunders spoke about the need for the school to be intentional in what it communicates to students and parents through visuals and signs. Speaking specifically about the lack of signs in Spanish and the lack of people of color in pictures and artwork around the school, she explained, "we say we want parents to be involved, but if we don't

create a space where they feel welcomed and that they feel a part of, why would they trust us?" In saying this, she recognizes that the school has not built trust with Latinx parents and rather than taking a deficit view about parents not getting involved she understands that the onus is on the school. While it will undoubtedly take more than having signs in Spanish and including more people of color in the school visuals to repair the harm that LHS has caused over the years, the understanding that representation matters because it reflects what and who is valued and seen as having value is significant.

Rethinking Community Engagement

As the associate principal attests to, the administration was eager to involve parents. In fact, family and community engagement was one of five strategic priorities outlined by the district in the turnaround plan. Despite this aim, LHS and the district more broadly struggled to engage community members in part, I believe, due to the deficit assumptions that undergird the districts engagement strategy. Research continuously shows that schools tend to take deficit approaches to community engagement that position parents of color as not caring or not knowing how to support their children (Auerbach, 2007; Manzo & Deeb-Sossa, 2018). The Lavoe Public School District is no exception, and their first family and community engagement goal reflects this view, stating a plan to, “focus engagement activities on preparing families to better support their children’s learning at home”. This goal suggests that families are not prepared or able to support their children and is rooted in a deficit view that fails to acknowledge the myriad of ways minoritized parents are involved in their children's education. The district's own culture and climate data affirm that the high school is struggling to engage parents, with only 34% of participants responding favorably to

questions regarding family engagement. That same survey found that only 36% of respondents felt that the school frequently or always reflect their family's cultural background in a positive way (e.g., through celebrations, school décor, etc.). While the school often struggled to engage parents and community members, Presente was able to engage community members in a variety of ways, and over the years community became more involved and eventually took more ownership over the program.

One of the early ways Presente engaged community members was by hosting an end of the year celebration. The event served multiple purposes; it was a space for students to share how they had grown over the year, a chance to share their YPAR work with the administration and the community, and an opportunity to make demands in a public forum. These events were bilingual, welcoming of small children, and Puerto Rican food was provided for dinner. The event would always start with students sharing their stories, which resonated with many of the community members in attendance who had themselves experienced racism and punishment at LHS and/or have seen the harm done to their children.

At the conclusion of our second year, the end of the year celebration marked a turning point in community involvement and shifted whom we saw the program being accountable to. The district had yet to agree to continue funding the program and at the news of this Denise Morales, a tiny Puerto Rican matriarch of the city who among other things, serves as a city counselor raised her hand and said “it is not much, but I will give my stipend as city counselor if it helps to keep this program going”.

Following her, Iris Vélez stood up, crying as she said, "I am a school committee member, my stipend is even less than Denise's but I will give it and I know there are

others who will do the same. My son is an example of the school-to-prison pipeline, and all I can think about is what if he had had a program like this. What would his life be like? What would our family's life be like?"

Someone else raised their hand. "This program is too important, we can't let it go. We will do whatever it takes," they said.

To this the receiver replied, "We are obviously going to fund this program, this is a priority for us." The mayor agreed, and it was decided that the city should provide 50% of the funding for the position, in order to lower the cost that the school district paid.

This moment was significant for many reasons, but perhaps most significantly because it served as a reminder to who we were accountable to. Trying to critique and transform the institution in which we exist is an ongoing challenge for Presente. The risk of going too hard and losing funding is real, and on more than one occasion, the district has considered letting staff go as a result of Presente's activism. However, this moment was a turning point, a reminder that we could and should be accountable to students and the community.

Following the event, we convened a Community Advisory Board (CAB) that would both support and guide Presente. When it first formed, though many were invited it mostly consisted of community members who held some position of power or privilege in the city. School committee members, university-affiliated people, and local politicians came together monthly to meet with Presente students and staff, engage in community building circles, and to develop plans to support our work. As time has passed, we recognized that parents were missing from the CAB and have recently been able to hire

Dolores Medina, the People's Historian of Lavoie, to serve as a parent and community outreach liaison. While she is just taking on this role, it is our hope that with her support we can strengthen our relationship with parents and be led by their vision.

Another way in which Presente engaged with the community was through community movie nights. These seemingly simple and insignificant events were actually important and powerful opportunities for community engagement. During the 2017-18 school year, Presente decided to host three social justice movie nights that would bring students and community members together to watch a movie with a social justice theme. The nights would start in the school cafeteria with peer leaders serving Puerto Rican food to all who arrived. While people were eating, peer leaders would give a brief presentation about who they were and what Presente is, and then everyone would make their way to the auditorium to watch the movie. Each of the events brought out over 100 people, many of whom were not previously connected with the program. For the last movie of the series, the peer leaders selected *Moana* and explained the connections between the themes in the movie and RJ. Throughout the movie, toddlers, teenagers, and parents could all be heard singing along.

The simple act of coming together, eating good food, and singing along to a movie may not seem like much, but it is actually quite significant. Schools often frame engagement in dehumanizing ways. Parents are called when their child is struggling, but rarely when things are going well. Schools use open house as a way to tell parents information they need to know, often assuming like the turnaround plan implies that parents are lacking. It is very rare that schools like LHS create opportunities for parents, students, and staff to come together in joyous ways. At various times we have heard

parents say that sometimes just coming into LHS brought back memories of their own bad experiences of being a student there. One woman described it as a type of post-traumatic stress disorder but noted, "when I come to Presente events it is the only time I've ever really felt comfortable in the school. Not just as a parent, but even when I was a student."

Presente's evolving approach to engagement, the staffs growing recognition that we should be, above all else, accountable to the students and community members who are most impacted by injustice, and the understanding that parents, students, and teachers/administration must be in community together reflects a shift in how engagement is traditionally approached. While the broader school community has not necessarily taken up this shift, our approach has not gone unrecognized. The director of the school's Ethnic Studies program, another beautiful space of possibility at LHS, serves on the CAB and has expressed interest in setting up systems so that the Ethnic Studies program is informed and directed by the community. The school district has also hired a CAB member to serve as the Equity, Family, and Community Partnership Manager, which suggests, in some small way, that the district recognizes Presente's success in engaging community and a commitment to thinking about community and partnerships in ways it previously was not. It also means that Presente now has an ally in a leadership position in the district who can and will advocate for the program and a vision of engagement that understands the assets of the Latinx community in Lavoe.

Conclusion

As this chapter shows, RJ, as practiced by Presente, served as a profound and powerful approach to healing justice at LHS. Students who served as peer leaders

developed a deeper love and appreciation of their ethnic histories, cultures, and identities. The group fostered a commitment to solidarity and community building that challenged the ideology of individualism so central to neoliberal schooling, and allowed them to see how their experiences were connected. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, peer leaders gained a sense of collective hope that allowed them to collectively understand and act on the conditions of their lives. The existence of Presente also created conditions for justice within the school; small but essential shifts in culture, practice, and discourse. The three most significant include a shift from the punitive logic to a healing logic, an increased focus on representation, and a shifting view of community engagement. While these shifts are in their nascent stages and it cannot be known what direction the school will head in, I understand them as crucial sites of possibility that Presente will continue to tend to and effect over time.

CHAPTER 5

LIMITS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

I really don't think he (the superintendent) understands who we are or what we are about. He is always saying he supports us and that he is on our side but whenever we do something that is remotely political, or activist oriented he tries to shut it down. It is as though there are two Presentes, one that does circles and addresses conflict, and one that does organizing work and they only approve of the first one. Sometimes I think we could get more done if we weren't operating in the school and at the same time there is so much we are able to do and so many students we are able to reach because we are school-based. Either way it is a compromise, but hopefully, we are making the right compromise.
(Max Green, Director of Presente)

In this chapter, I examine three critical limitations to Presente's transformative justice work. They are (1) viewing restorative justice (RJ) as a tool for behavior management; (2) viewing RJ as a panacea for problems caused by structural inequity; and (3) implementing what is meant to be a democratic practice in a very undemocratic space. The culmination of these things caused tension between Presente and Lavoe High School administrators, ultimately hindering some of the program's goals. It quickly became clear that doing any sort of liberatory work within the existing public school model is something of a contradiction. These limitations are not the result of some failing on the part of the RJ peer leaders or the adults who were supporting them, but instead arose from the context in which Presente operated and the ways in which it was and wasn't taken up by the school more broadly. Understanding these limitations can help Presente, and other education activist movements think more carefully about what might move us toward systemic change and transformation.

RJ is committed to looking at the root of the problem and understands behavior or misbehavior as not the problem in and of itself, but symptomatic of more significant

issues that need healing. In that spirit, it is important to understand the root causes limiting Presente's impact and to think through what processes of healing might help resolve them. Furthermore, by approaching the causes of these limitations from an RJ framework we may begin to move away from scornfully assigning individual blame, and instead – through analyzing the contexts and structures that lead to certain behaviors – formulate a plan for meaningful, tenable change.

During the course of this study there were occasions, as will be discussed below, where teachers and administrators acted in ways that were oppressive and directly undermined the work Presente was trying to do. In my field notes, there are times where I wrote things such as "why is this person allowed to work with children?" and "this guy has got to go." Similarly, there were meetings where students in Presente expressed a desire to "fire all the racist bad teachers." As deep as our commitment to RJ was, it was easy to fall back on traditional punitive ways of addressing problems when someone did something we deemed as "bad," particularly when those "bad" people held positions of power and privilege within the school.

While these impulses are real and understandable, a restorative approach asks us to move away from individual blame and towards a structural analysis. Rather than firing the "racist teacher" who will most likely be replaced by another, just as racist teacher, RJ pushes us to ask questions that address the root problem such as "how are colleges of education preparing teachers to work with students of color?", "why does our school hire so few teachers of color?", "why doesn't the curriculum reflect students' culture?" , "why are teachers who say and do racist things not held accountable in our district?", "how does our education system perpetuate racist beliefs?" and "how does institutionalized

racism legitimize itself?" These are not easy questions to answer, and they point to problems that are not easy to address, but they are precisely the questions that those of us committed to transforming schools need to be asking. To be clear, this is not to say that adults inflicting harm on students should continue to get to work with them but rather, I do not think we can use punitive approaches to build socially just and restorative schools. Furthermore, it is essential to clarify that a restorative approach can only be successful when it equally represents both those with power and those who struggle. Far too often, the call for understanding and healing approaches is answered only when it can help keep those with power stay in power.

While the three limitations discussed below play out in particular ways and have distinct implications, I believe they are all connected to what Max describes in the opening passage of this chapter. Generally speaking, district leadership supported Presente in their efforts to lead circles as a means to address conflict and hold students accountable. While various factors may have played a role in the district's support for circles, it is crucial to note that the district stood to benefit from the reduced rate of suspensions and expulsions that are associated with schools that have an RJ program. In 2012, the Civil Rights Project published a report showing that Lavoe had the fourth highest rate of suspensions for Latinx students in the country, and in 2015 the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) cited the high suspension and expulsion rate as one of the justifications for putting the school into receivership. Thus, the district had a vested interest in implementing practices that could serve as an alternative to suspension.

Though the administration supported the use of circles, the values and aims that informed that work was not necessarily supported or understood by much of the LHS community. RJ, as understood and practiced by Presente aimed to challenge power dynamics, name and disrupt oppression (e.g. racism and adultism), and to build youth power and center student voice. Presente had a long-term vision that imagined LHS as a school "where love, justice, and youth are at the center of everything" (Presente Planning Document, 2017). Having experienced the possibilities that Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) creates, peer leaders imagined school as a space where students could explore and act on problems being faced by their community. As Octavia, a peer leader who had been with the group since the beginning put it, "we want school to be like Presente."

Presente's vision and aims directly challenge what many critical scholars have come to understand as the primary purpose of schooling: social reproduction (Apple, 1996; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Green, 1990; Haber and Sakade, 2009; Lipman, 2013). While schooling is often positioned as a tool of social mobility, in practice education has relied on authoritarian and hierarchical structures as a means to "inculcate habits of conformity, discipline and morality" and thus serves to perpetuate and normalize class- and race-based inequity (Green, 1990, p. 59). While education has long been a tool for control, compliance, and social reproduction, under neoliberalism the mechanisms by which they do so have been both intensified and made more obscure (Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Lipman, 2013).

Presente's goal was to reposition school as a space that challenged – rather than reproduced – inequity. Its impact was limited, however, due to issues stemming from the

social structure and milieu at LHS. In this chapter, I will discuss how limitations surrounding (1) viewing restorative justice as a tool for behavior management; (2) viewing restorative justice as a panacea for problems caused by structural inequity; and (3) implementing what is meant to be a democratic practice in a very undemocratic space limited the scope of an RJ approach to educational reforms, so that we may begin to understand the structural changes necessary to transform education. Much like RJ positions disciplinary infractions not as misdeeds that require punishment, but as relational harms that require healing, these limitations offer us an opportunity to understand the systems and structures that need transforming and healing.

Limitation 1: Restorative Justice as a Tool for Behavior Management

Administrators and teachers at LHS often considered RJ as one of many means of changing students' behavior. During various professional development meetings as well as during a circle with the RJ peer leaders, the principal explained, "RJ is not replacing traditional discipline, it is just another tool in our toolbox for addressing student behavior" and "Some people are worried that RJ is taking the place of traditional discipline, but no, that is not what is happening. RJ is just one more tool we can use to try to support students who are misbehaving." The view of RJ as a tool for addressing student behavior suggests that school administration and faculty understood RJ as a mechanism of compliance and control and that they positioned students, rather than structures and systems, as a problem.

The language used in the district-wide turnaround plan (2015) to describe RJ exemplifies the district leadership's misconceptions about what RJ is and what Presente is trying to accomplish. Within the turnaround plan, RJ is first referred to under the goal

of enhancing “the district’s positive behavior management and disciplinary approach” (p.33), indicating that the aim of RJ is to discipline students, albeit in a more positive way. The use of RJ at LHS is referenced again under a section labeled “Steps to improve or expand child welfare services and, as appropriate, law enforcement services in the community, to promote a safe and secure learning environment” (p.58). This section explains that “The district has piloted the use of a restorative justice protocol at Lavoe High School. The district is committed to analyzing the successes and challenges of the pilot to date to determine whether this protocol has reduced problematic student behaviors” (p. 59). The language of safety and security, much like Ronald Reagan's "law and order," have long been used to justify harsh zero-tolerance policies and points to, at best a misunderstanding of Presente’s aims and at worst a purposeful co-option. This misunderstanding is further solidified by the fact that the district's analysis of the RJ program focused on “problematic student behaviors” rather than system-wide transformation (p. 59). Equally troubling is what’s omitted from the turnaround plan. With the exception of an appendix that includes recommendations from local stakeholders and teachers’ union, terms including race, racism, poverty, and diversity are excluded from the document. This exclusion further exemplifies the tensions between the district’s understandings of restorative justice and Presente’s.

The district’s view of RJ positions student behavior as the ultimate target in need of change, rather than as a symptom of a bigger issue. From this perspective RJ, like traditional punitive discipline, is merely a mechanism of control and coercion for getting students in line. As Vaandering (2014) points out “RJ, situated in the discourse of behavior and classroom management, inadvertently reinforces an agenda of compliance

and control rather than its intended purpose of building relationship, interconnected and interdependent school cultures” (p. 65). Drawing on Foucault’s concepts of the panopticon and the confessional, Lustick (2015) makes a similar argument, explaining that implementing RJ without attending to issues of power and inequity can serve to “reproduce the power dynamic of traditional discipline” (p. 10). In some sense, this softer version of traditional discipline may be worse than the zero-tolerance policies it is meant to replace in that it is done under the guise of social justice and equity.

Presente’s vision of RJ was, among other things, aimed at creating systemic change at LHS and transforming existing power dynamics. Rooted in a belief that ‘misbehavior’ or perceived misbehavior are manifestations of deeper issues—systemic racism, teacher’s deficit views about their students and their students’ culture, individual, and collective trauma, and a lack of student/teacher relationships, to name a few—Presente envisioned RJ as a means of transforming relationships and transforming school culture rather than a means of simply changing student behavior. However, this vision was undermined by the school district's view that the purpose of RJ is merely to control student behavior.

Positioning RJ as a tool or protocol aimed at controlling student behavior effectively negated the underlying values that give it its critical edge and undermined the possibility of RJ as a means of achieving school-wide transformation. Presente's RJ was rooted in a set of values and beliefs common to many indigenous communities across the globe such as interconnectedness, egalitarian relationships, solidarity, and shared power. However, the school as a whole did not share these values. The view of RJ as a tool positioned it as something that was optional and meant only for specific students and/or

specific issues. As “one of many tools” it was an option only sometimes given to students, with no clear criteria for who it was and wasn’t offered to. Most importantly, the view of RJ as a tool reflected a lack of commitment to the values RJ is built on. As the editors of *Rethinking Schools* (2014) point out:

Restorative justice does not work as an add-on. It requires us to address the roots of student "misbehavior" and a willingness to rethink and rework our classrooms, schools, and school districts. Meaningful alternatives to punitive approaches take time and trust. They must be built on schoolwide and districtwide participation. They are collaborative and creative, empowering students, teachers, and parents. They rely on social justice curriculum, strong ties among teachers and with families, continuity of leadership, and progress toward building genuine communities of learning (para. 5).

From this perspective, RJ is not merely about holding a circle when a student has ‘misbehaved,’ rather it is an underlying belief that needs to permeate every aspect of the school. While there were undoubtedly people that understood the relational foundation of RJ, the school more broadly did not take up this commitment.

This lack of commitment manifested in a variety of ways, including the continued use of police in schools, the development of a behavioral support team (BST) whose sole purpose was to discipline students who were misbehaving, as well more pernicious ways, such as a lack of commitment to culturally sustaining practices and engaged pedagogies. The district's own cultural and climate survey found that while 100% of teachers said LHS emphasizes showing respect for all students’ cultural beliefs and practice and 88% of teachers said they draw on students’ cultural and community resources when designing curriculum, 77% of students said that books and materials at LHS do not have people who look like them and 78% of students reported not feeling connected to adults at LHS. Equally disturbing was the pushback both students and adults from Presente got when they presented this data during professional development on circle practice and

relationship building. Multiple teachers argued that Presente should not use that data because not every student took the survey seriously or understood what was being asked. One particularly brazen teacher went so far as to claim that “some of these students are thugs and brag about being gang bangers, they don't deserve to have a relationship with me.” Clearly, there was a disconnect between the values that inform RJ and the Lavoe milieu.

The district's view of RJ as a tool for addressing student behavior also led to several instances where Presente's YPAR projects and explicitly activist-oriented work were challenged and critiqued. District leadership was often vocal in their support for circles as a means to address student conflict but were quick to ask the group to change their approach or tactics when they were engaging in more traditional organizing techniques and campaigns. On several occasions, Presente has had to organize community events to help ensure the program would continue to be funded. Interestingly, our first time organizing such an event came after the superintendent met with students and told them, “I support you and want to be able to fund you, but you are going to have to work for it and make it happen.” After this meeting adults and students were left with the impression that he would need community pressure in order to justify funding the program and we started to plan a rally with the slogan “Solutions Not Suspensions” that would occur before the next school the committee meeting. When the superintendent caught wind of the event, he called the program director to say that he felt the rally was confrontational, and that it wrongfully suggested to the public that he didn't support us. In an attempt to defuse tensions, Presente ultimately rebranded the event as a teach-in as opposed to a rally.

Less than a year later Presente's funding was once again under threat. We planned another public event to share our work and show school leadership that the work is supported by the community and thus worthy of funding. The superintendent once again tried to dissuade our efforts, claiming that an event in support of funding should not be held before the budget was finalized. Understanding that any pressure put on district leadership after the budget was complete would come too late, Presente held the event anyways, but made a point to thank district leadership for their ongoing support and made clear that any funding uncertainty was not the fault of leadership or reflective of a lack of commitment on their part.

The most egregious example of the district's understanding of RJ as a means for behavior management but not as a project of whole school change came in the wake of the Latinx Heritage Assembly that Presente has hosted for the last two years. The event—which includes Puerto Rican bomba dancing, student poetry, talks from Latinx community leaders, student music, and other Latinx centered activities—has been organized and hosted by Presente for the last few years. In October of 2017, the assembly included a poem written and read by a 17-year-old Puerto Rican peer leader named Sandra. In her poem, she expressed rage toward white supremacy and colonialism, while praising Latinx culture. The poem seemed to resonate with many of the Latinx students at the school, but a small cadre of white students and staff felt upset and hurt by the poem. Someone (it is unclear who) leaked a video of the poem to a right-wing website and the school, program, and most of all the student poet were subject to an onslaught of brutal, racist, and sexist online attacks. Leadership in the school were quick to distance themselves from the poem, and from Presente, explaining that while the sentiments might

be true, the assembly was the wrong time and place for it. Max was told he might lose his job for allowing the poem to be read. The superintendent and the principal sent out a letter, which read:

While well-intentioned and consistent with the Lavoe Public Schools' and Lavoe High School's commitment to celebrating and encouraging a diverse and inclusive school environment, it is clear that some of the performances were not subjected to sufficient review in advance of the required assembly. For this, we express our regret and take full responsibility. We also provide our assurance that we will be revising our protocols and procedures for the review and approval of proposed student presentations at such school-sponsored events going forward . . . There has been, and will continue to be, no place for intolerance or divisiveness within the Lavoe Public Schools. (Lavoe Public Schools, 2017)

For Presente, LHS staff and students, and community members this apology and the decision to more carefully vet student poetry was taken as a silencing. If, when students of color express their experiences with racism they are viewed as intolerant and divisive, then what possibility exists for the school to address the racism? As one peer leader explained at a Presente meeting following the assembly "they are so quick to apologize and change how things work moving forward when white people are upset or uncomfortable, but we've been talking about racism at LHS forever, and it feels like nothing gets done."

Following the backlash, the school committee included the assembly on the agenda for their next meeting. Max, the director, was immediately contacted by the superintendent and told not to come and not to have students come. There would be, he felt, many critics and he did not think the program or students needed to be subject to that. In both disavowing the poem and in pressuring Presente staff and students not to attend, it became clear that the school leadership did not understand or support restorative justice as a means of challenging power.

Limitation 2: Restorative Justice as a Panacea

On the other hand, RJ was also often seen as a panacea, a new approach that could “fix” the Lavoe schools. However, for many of the RJ peer leaders and students who were referred for a circle, RJ alone wasn’t enough. RJ can work to provide some support for students, and it can work to change policies and practices in really significant ways, but it does not mitigate the impact that poverty, trauma (both historical and personal), and structural inequity have on students. RJ is a powerful way to illuminate what is happening and why, but that alone cannot solve everything.

The view of RJ as a panacea was often manifested in the expectations of change that teachers had for students who were referred to a circle for misbehavior, as well in the expectations teachers put on students who were serving as RJ Peer leaders. Teachers and administrators often expected that a student who was referred for a circle should, after the circle process is complete, not engage in the behaviors that led to the referral in the first place. While some issues that came up could be addressed and remedied through a circle and some follow up, many times the circle illuminated more significant issues that could not easily be fixed through circle process alone. When the expectation that a circle should resolve all of the issues a student was having was not met, teachers were quick to conclude that RJ doesn't work or wasn't beneficial and that perhaps, traditional punitive discipline was more effective. Thus, viewing RJ as a panacea allowed the administration to both ignore more substantial structural inequities that were at play, and to fall back on punitive approaches.

For example, during a circle between two girls whose math teacher, Ms. Jennings, referred them because they had been threatening to fight each other in class it came out

that one of the girl's mother was dying of cancer. While the girls were able to resolve their particular conflict, the girl whose mother was sick, understandably, continued to struggle. Presente provided additional circles and tried to connect the student with a therapist, but the student continually skipped her math class, argued with her math teacher, refused to do her math work, and threatened to fight other students. The math teacher, who had 33 students in her class and who often expressed concern that she wouldn't have her students ready for state standardized test they would have to take the following year explained to me in desperation, "she's had circles, we've had circles as a class, I don't know what else I am supposed to do if she doesn't want to do the work. I want to be patient, but when she disrespects me in front of the class, all I can do is kick her out."

This example is illuminating for several reasons. First, it is a reminder that what we think of as misbehavior always has a root cause that is hidden underneath the surface. Secondly, it shows that while RJ circles can be a beneficial practice for uncovering and understanding the root cause of behavior, RJ alone cannot always address or solve the problem. When a student is confronted with the impending loss of a parent, they often require multiple levels of support including counseling, support groups, modified curriculum, a school support team, and space to process in whatever way makes sense to them. While the circle offered a means of support, it was not the only support the student required. It was, unfortunately, the only regular support she was receiving in the school. This example also offers insight into how school policies and education reforms can function to make punitive discipline the default. Ms. Jennings bought into circles, at least as a means to address student conflict, but when her student's behavior didn't change she

fell back into the punitive default mode of kicking students out of class and writing referrals for detention—not because she wanted to, but because the school’s practices and policies made it feel impossible not to.

At the start of the 2016-17 school year, Ms. Jennings was hired to teach in the newly designed Freshman Academy. Recognizing that how students did in their first year of high school was an indicator of how successful they were in high school, the district created the Freshman Academy as a way to support students in their transition to high school. When initially proposed, teachers had been under the impression that Freshman Academy would have smaller class sizes so that teachers could provide more one-on-one attention and build meaningful bonds with students. However, when the year started class sizes were as big or bigger than usual with many teachers having more than 30 students. Ms. Jennings, a former middle school teacher, taught Pre-Algebra to students who were identified as not having mastered the skills needed to be successful in Algebra 1. In almost all of her classes between one third and one-half of the students had individualized education plans (IEPs). In accordance with these IEPs, she was supposed to have a paraprofessional in the classroom, but for a variety of reasons there often wasn't one available. In Presente, we would often discuss how the system felt like it set students up to fail, and I think the context in which Ms. Jennings was operating in can be understood similarly. Large class sizes, lack of reliable resources such as paraprofessionals, and pressure to prepare her students for the state standardized test left her with little time or resources to bring restorative practices to her students. Given the understandable stress of this context, she had hoped RJ could be the solution she needed, and when it wasn't, she fell back on punitive approaches.

Similar patterns occurred within the administration, which was often in the role of determining who was referred to a circle and who was disciplined in the more traditional, punitive way. Iris Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican vice principal, was very supportive of RJ and an advocate for Presente within the school. At one of our events, she expressed her support of Presente explaining, "I honestly cannot imagine what we would do without restorative justice... in a short period of time, the program has dramatically decreased suspensions by addressing the root causes of issues that impact student engagement in our school." Iris took the initiative to attend RJ training being offered by a well-known restorative justice education consultant. She also showed up at Presente events and referred more students than any other administrator. However, there were several occasions where she would choose not to refer a student who had already participated in a circle for a different perceived misbehavior. Much like Ms. Jennings, she felt that if a student had already had a circle and was still misbehaving than the process wasn't right for them. As she explained about one student whom she decided to suspend, "he has done a circle, we've tried being restorative, now something more needs to happen." From Ms. Rodriguez's point of view, if RJ didn't change student behavior immediately, then punitive discipline was necessary. Again, much like Ms. Jennings, looking at the conditions of her job can contextualize Ms. Rodriguez's quick return to exclusionary discipline. In a school of 1,300 students, she was one of two administrators responsible for student discipline. She expressed on multiple occasions that two people could not effectively manage the behavioral issues of so many students, and that she was constantly being pulled in different directions. She knew that some teachers were upset by what they

viewed as a lack of consequences for students who misbehaved and felt pressured to punish students in more traditional ways, especially those who were "repeat offenders."

Teachers were not the only ones who envisioned RJ as a panacea. In fact, the Presente staff, myself included, initially assumed that involvement in Presente could remedy whatever struggles a student was dealing with. We had explicitly recruited students, who for a variety of reasons the school was not reaching, to serve as RJ peer leaders and therefore many of the peer leaders were not doing well academically. In the Presente setting, these students thrived. Passionate, focused, hardworking and brilliant students who often checked out of their classes were fully engaged in our first YPAR project. They analyzed school survey data, researched best practices of in-school suspension, interviewed students and staff, and presented their findings to administrators and the community. Having seen the transformation in the Presente space, we naively expected that it would carry over into the classroom. Unfortunately, and in hindsight understandably, it did not. At the end of our first year none of our seniors went on to college, and only two received their diploma. We had assumed that having access to Presente would make up for whatever a student wasn't getting elsewhere in the school but learned the hard way that this was not the case. While involvement in Presente had a positive impact on students, it alone was not enough to override what was going on in a student's life outside of Presente. This realization was, for Presente staff, a reminder of the urgency of our work and the need for whole school transformation.

The view of RJ as a panacea, like the view of RJ as a tool for behavior management, is rooted in individualism and the tendency for schools to focus on the individual rather than the structural. There was a tendency to view RJ as a way to address

individual struggles, such as misbehavior or bad grades. However, this view assumes that individual struggles are rooted in the individual alone and masks the institutional contexts that shape student behavior. Presente has come to understand that while RJ can offer healing when interpersonal harm has occurred, one of the most critical aspects of RJ is the way that it unmask structural issues that need to be addressed. When holding circles, Presente often opened with Adrienne Marie Brown's (2016) quote, "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil", as a reminder that a crucial part of RJ is the uncovering of injustice. RJ is not a cure-all that can solve all of the problems a school is facing; however, it can help unmask the root causes of those problems so that deep and meaningful change can occur. One of the structural issues that was unmasked, and leads us to the final limitation, was the lack of democracy in the school.

Limitation 3: Lack of Democracy in School

One of Presente's biggest struggles was a skepticism and lack of support for the program and its goals from LHS teachers. While some of this undoubtedly arose from adultism and racism—two issues that Presente actively tried to push back against—I believe a part of teachers' resistance to RJ grew from a lack of agency and democracy within the school itself. As one supportive teacher said during Presente's teacher advisory board meeting, "it is great that you [students] are fighting for a voice and trying to get involved...a lot of the complaints you have, well we [teachers] have the same issues." Within the context of the takeover, the constant change in leadership and multiple top-down initiatives that performed teacher input but did not actually practice it, RJ was painted as yet another thing teachers *had* to do, another critique about what they were or

were not doing, another reform that would probably disappear in a few years when the next big thing took its place. Presente did not start as a result of the takeover and formed from the recommendation of teachers and staff, but the broader lack of democratic and healing processes within the school impacted how it was perceived and taken or not taken up.

RJ aims to disrupt traditional power dynamics and attempts to situate power as something that is shared, rather than something that some yield over others. However, as numerous scholars point out, schools are hierarchical and authoritarian by design (Green, 1990; Harber & Sakade, 2009; Evans & Vaandering, 2016). According to Carl Rogers (1995):

Students do not participate in choosing their individual goals, the curricula, or manner of working. They are chosen for them. Students have no part in the choice of teaching personnel nor any voice in educational policy. Likewise, the teachers often have no choice in choosing their administrative officers. Teachers, too, often have no participation in forming educational policy” (p. 297).

Perhaps nowhere is this absence of student and teacher voice more real than in high-reform urban school districts like Lavoe. After the state takeover in 2014 the locally elected school committee, which in theory served as a mechanism for community control, was stripped of their power. Additionally, while the teachers union maintains some of their power, the receiver has the authority to make changes to collective bargaining carte blanche. Students may have never been allowed a voice at Lavoe, but the state takeover stripped whatever semblance of democracy may have existed for teachers and community.

I think some of the contradictions between the values of RJ and the hierarchical and authoritarian structure of schools are exemplified by a conversation I had with John

Peterson, the director of secondary redesign at LHS. We met to discuss why the school-wide restorative justice advisory program was not going well. I explained that one of the issues was that some of the teachers at LHS don't see relationship building as their work. They see themselves as content teachers and are upset by what they are being asked to do. I was explaining that we really need to support teachers in understanding that relationship building is part of their work and that strong relationships can help their instruction of content material. As I was talking, he was nodding his head in agreement and responded, "next year teachers need to know that they will build relationships, *or else.*" His belief that we could foster strong student-teacher relationships through mandates and threats completely contradicts the values of RJ.

Similarly, during the summer of 2018 the new school administration—the third administrative team since Presente began in 2015—met with Presente to learn about the program and to hear from peer leaders why Presente mattered to them and what needed to change about the school. Using the talking piece, students shared stories about the various ways they felt targeted by teachers. One student told the story of a teacher physically confronting them when they stood up to throw out a piece of trash without asking, "he put his face about an inch away from mine and screamed in my face. I could tell I was going to lose it, so I just walked out, so I didn't say or do anything bad. I still got in trouble." Another explained:

Teachers don't know us at all. They don't understand what we are feeling, but they are entitled to tell us how we should feel, how we should act, and who we should be friends with. So many teachers make smart remarks about what I am wearing or what I do, but we aren't allowed to respond.

Still another pointed out:

They are always saying we need to grow up, but they are the ones who treat us like children. How can you tell us to grow up and then not allow us to use the bathroom when we ask? They are supposed to be preparing us for the real world, but where in the real world do you get told you aren't allowed to use the bathroom. Where else do you even have to ask to use the bathroom.

When the talking piece got to the new associate principal, she reflected on what the students had said and responded,

A lot of what you have shared has to do with teachers not having relationships with students, and I want you to know that that is going to change. We have already come up with a list of things we want to see teachers doing to build relationships and in the first few weeks of school myself and the rest of the leadership team are going to be walking around looking for really specific things and if teachers aren't doing those specific things we are going to do something about it.

In some sense the acknowledgment that relationships matter is a step in the right direction. However, the belief that relationship building is a mandate with a check-list of proofs that needs to be satisfied reflects the traditional hierarchical structure of schooling. It is yet another example of the neoliberal logic distorting the values of RJ, an extension of an audit culture that reduces teaching, learning, and now relationships into discrete tasks that can be evaluated and are thus punishable. The idea that relationships can be built and nourished using a punitive approach suggests a lack of understanding of the values or the purpose of RJ.

Furthermore, viewing relationship building as a set of observable practices to be checked off during classroom walkthroughs also ignores the various factors that may be preventing relationships from developing in the first place. For example, the teacher who believes his students are gang members and don't deserve relationships may be able to perform relationship building with those he views worthy while continuing to ignore and harm those he views as unworthy. Even if he does not satisfy the checklist and is thus

'dealt' with, it is unclear that the school has a plan to address the underlying and, in my opinion, racist views he has about particular students. Instead, he will be forced to comply and likely feel all the more frustrated and resentful toward the very students he is meant to be supporting.

Equally unsettling is the fact that students and teachers were not included in the creation of the checklist, meaning their voice, knowledge, and experience about what meaningful student-teacher relationships look like and what gets in their way were excluded. As many students brought up in the circle with the new administration, the lack of supplies such as paper and books, the large class sizes, and the focus on testing all impacts them and their teachers. As one peer leader aptly pointed out: "

We are the mill city, and our teachers aren't even given enough paper to make all the copies they need to make. We can't take home books. The teachers are uptight, but think about how they feel, having to fight just to get more copy paper.

These factors, which certainly play a role in how a teacher runs a classroom and what they prioritize, are ignored through the creation of a relationship checklist. In addition to the lack of resources, an arbitrary checklist ignores other structural factors that impede relationships such as racism, implicit bias, and adultism.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Evans and Vaandering (2016) argue that RJ in education is rooted in the values of respect, dignity, and mutual concern and it is aimed at nurturing healthy relationships, creating just and equitable learning environments, and in repairing harm and transforming conflict. When relationships and RJ are mandated, and people are made to feel like they are under surveillance and at risk of being punished, authentic RJ becomes impossible. RJ relies on power with rather than power over, but at

Lavoe administration attempted to implement RJ and relationships by wielding power over and thus undermined Presente's work.

Conclusion

Given the punitive logic of neoliberalism and the ways in which schooling is rooted in and perpetuates an ideology of radical individualism, these limitations are not surprising. The limitations that arise due to viewing RJ as a tool for behavior modification; viewing it as a (failed) panacea and thus a scapegoat or justification for punitive approaches; and the lack of democracy in school are examples of how the contrast between RJ and neoliberal schooling described in chapter two unfolds on the ground.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Magic

During my time with Presente, I often heard peer leaders explain that they wish school could be like Presente. I share this wish, and as my time at LHS comes to an end, and I move on to the next phase of my life it feels increasingly important to distill the lessons learned from this work so that I can carry it forward wherever I go. In a school governed by the punitive common sense, that is so often dehumanizing and routinely positions students as a problem, Presente is, to many of us, a magical space; an oasis in the arid hallways of Lavoe. However, as magical as it feels, the impact of Presente is not happenstance or stroke of luck, but the result of deep thinking and intentional planning around educational injustice and liberatory education. When people come together across difference to heal and collectively address injustice, magic is created, but that magic can be created in many places. It feels magical because it is rare, but it does not need to be.

RJ is not a mere tool for behavior and control, but rather a paradigm of justice that aims to challenge oppression and create relational, interconnected, and healing schools. In order to help carry this paradigm forward, this chapter serves two purposes. First, it offers up three critical questions that can guide scholarship as well as practice and help advance the underlying aims of RJ. Second, it offers three specific ways that teacher education can advance the practice of RJ.

Critical Questions

Understanding the contradictions and tensions inherent to RJ in school-based spaces, I have developed a set of guiding questions to support scholars and practitioners

with assessing whether or not RJ practices are being used to affect structural transformation, or if they are merely reinforcing and maintaining the status quo. In this section, I introduce these questions in hopes that they can serve as a guide for researchers, practitioners, and activists who are trying to do this work in schools that are saturated with the punitive commonsense of racial neoliberalism. The questions include: (a) Who/what is expected to change? (b) How are the values of RJ taken up institutionally? And (c) How is injustice understood and addressed? Attending to these questions does not guarantee that the practices are free from ideological influence or neoliberal co-optation; however, they can help us understand, think about, and reflect on how we might move closer to transformation.

Who or what is expected to change?

As more schools attempt to implement restorative justice programs, it is imperative that we consider the question: Who and/or what is expected to change as a result of RJ? While the surface level answer may be "everyone," examining how those in positions of power understand and espouse the aims of RJ, paying particular attention to how those aims may differ from those on the receiving end of RJ policy, can help illuminate potential contradictions and vulnerabilities. Is RJ attempting to change the behavior of individual students to better fit within the structure of schooling, or is it being implemented to change schooling itself—school culture, relationships, pedagogy, assessments? Is it reduced to a tool or protocol, or is it a set of values that is infused into every aspect of school culture?

How are the values of RJ taken up institutionally?

The underlying values and beliefs of RJ need to be infused into the whole school, including but not limited to, pedagogy, curriculum content, evaluation, teacher professional development, physical space, and decision making. With this in mind, it becomes imperative that as we implement, advocate for, and research RJ in schools, we must attend to the ways the values are or are not being taken up.

How is injustice understood and addressed?

Drawing on the work of scholars who advocate for an explicitly critical restorative justice that is transformative on the intra, inter, and structural levels, I believe it is imperative to examine how injustice, and in particular racism, is being understood and addressed within the contexts that RJ is operating. Are the school's administrators and teachers engaging in explicitly anti-racist anti-oppressive work? Does school staff have institutionalized practices for reflecting on their own identities and biases? Is the curriculum culturally sustaining? Are, as circle process practitioner and trainer Dr. Sayra Pinto calls for, those implementing RJ engaging in "thoughtful, meaningful, challenging and difficult conversations about race, oppression, privilege, and power" (Pinto, n.d.)? Are school leaders and teachers challenging practices and policies that reinforce inequity, such as high-stakes standardized testing, tracking, and other methods that are used to sort and separate students? RJ and its focus on healing and repairing harm requires that those implementing it address the injustices and oppression that marginalized groups have experienced for years such as racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism, or, as Evans and Vaandering (2016) point out, RJ will likely be ineffective.

Central to the question of how inequality is being addressed is the question of how the indigenous roots of these practices are being honored, and in the context of North American schools if/how topics such as colonization, settler colonialism, and indigenous resistance are being taught. While there are various accounts as to how RJ was taken up by the criminal legal system and eventually schools, most recognize that the values, practices, and principles of RJ harken back to indigenous cultures. Given the history of colonialism and the use of schooling as a tool for assimilation, I believe that schools using these practices have an obligation to learn and teach about where they come from, and to address how the injustices native people have and continue to face are present in our institutions today. While RJ practices are rooted in indigenous concepts of justice, they should not be viewed as replicas of indigenous practices. Not only do practices differ across varying First Nation communities, but they are also inherently changed when taken up by institutions that are controlled by non-indigenous people. The indigenous roots of RJ must be honored but in ways that do not, as Meiners (2014) explains “function to reproduce stale stereotypes of noble indigenous savages.”

While asking the questions of who/what is expected to change, how are the values being taken up, and how is injustice understood and addressed doesn't guarantee that RJ is not being co-opted or used for neoliberal aims, I do feel that these questions offer a helpful and needed framework that can push the field of RJ further. Given the ease in which radical practices are taken up and distorted, purposely or accidentally, to advance neoliberal aims, it is imperative that those of us researching and/or practicing RJ attend to these questions.

Implications for teacher education

In addition to these questions, which should be taken up by researchers and practitioners alike, I believe that my findings have important implications for the field of teacher education. While my findings have implications for a variety of areas including school culture and climate, school-community organizing, and the field of restorative justice more broadly, all of which I hope to write on moving forward, I have decided to focus on the implications I see this work having for teacher education. I have chosen this focus not only because I understand teacher education as a critical site of resistance but also because as I move forward in my career, I will be working as a teacher educator. Thus, my findings are not merely academic theorizing; I plan to act on them.

However, given the tendency for education reform policy and discourse to position teachers as the cause and or solution to the problems facing education, I should further elaborate that this is not my view. Drawing on the work of Jean Anyon (2005), I understand that addressing educational inequity in schools requires addressing structural inequity in and outside of schools, such as housing, employment, and transportation. Like Anyon, I believe that this change requires social movements that address these issues but place education and educators at the center. As she explains:

Educators are in an excellent position to build a constituency for economic and educational change in urban communities. Teacher and principals have continual access to parents and urban youth. If they are respectful, caring, hardworking educators, trusted by students and parents, they have a unique opportunity to engage residents and youth in political conversations and activity. (p. 178)

To that end, I see teacher education as a significant site of struggle and resistance. As someone going into teacher education, it is my hope that I can prepare future teachers

who are up for the task of connecting to and building social movements aimed at economic, racial, and educational justice.

My view of teacher education takes particular inspiration from Winn (2018) who advocates for a Transformative Justice Teacher Education (TJTE), describing it as:

A model that views teaching as a justice-seeking endeavor and learning as both a civil and human right for all students. TJTE in the US context asks what it means to teach in the age of mass or hyper incarceration and the increasing criminalization of children in our schools, especially, but not limited to, Black, Latinx, Indigenous, differently abled, queer, trans, Muslim, immigrant, and “undocumented” children (p.145-146).

Her vision of TJTE tasks teachers to unlearn racism; hold high expectations for all students; resist serving as gatekeepers; and hold equal concern for students and their families. My findings support her call for teacher education that begins "with the premise that all children and their families are worthy...of engagement, empathy, and compassion” (p. 147).

Building on Winn’s vision, I have identified three specific areas of focus that should be given higher priority in teacher education: (1) culturally sustaining practices; (2) relationships and community and; (3) activism. Reflecting on my findings, these three areas make it possible for teacher education to expand on the possibilities and address the limitations to create the conditions that allow for, what students often called for, “schools that are like Presente.” While I present each area separately, I understand them as interrelated and necessary to a vision of TJTE.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

As explained in Chapter 3, Presente was a rare space that affirmed and celebrated the ethnic histories, cultures, and identities of its peer leaders. Presente staff engaged in

culturally sustaining pedagogy, which builds off of other asset pedagogies such as culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy but “has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers” and “seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 88). The benefits of asset pedagogies have been well documented as both an equity practice and in terms of dominant norms and measure of student achievement. Despite these benefits, teachers struggle to bring these practices into their classrooms. Research continues to show that teachers often think they are drawing on their students’ cultures and engaging in asset pedagogies when in reality their practices and what students experience suggest otherwise. Much like the teachers at Lavoe, where 100% of teachers surveyed said the school emphasized showing respect for all cultural beliefs and practices and 88% said they draw on students cultural and community resources when designing curriculum but where a majority of students reported that teachers do not understand, value or incorporate their culture, teachers’ intentions and teachers’ practices are not always aligned. The disconnect between intentions and practice can be understood from multiple perspectives. Surface level understandings that reduce culture to “heroes and holidays,” deeply held but unrecognized deficit views of minoritized students and their communities, simplified definitions that equate culture only with race and heritage and ignore community practices, neoliberal demands that pressure teachers to view students as test scores and a variety of other factors can all play a role in the disconnect between

what a teacher wants to do or thinks they are doing and what is happening in their classroom (Guerra & Wubbena, 2017; Irvine, 2009; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Those of us in teacher education should understand this disconnect as both a mandate and an opportunity. Teacher education programs must provide in-depth instruction on and opportunity for engaging in culturally sustaining practices. Pre-service teachers must not only understand the theory behind these asset-based pedagogies but must have the opportunity to integrate them into their curriculum, enact them in their classrooms, and reflect on this enactment as part of their coursework. As Katsarou, Picower, and Stovall (2010) make clear, a central component of this work includes developing an intimate knowledge of the sociopolitical context in which one is teaching as well as an integration of one's own identity and likely held but unrecognized deficit ideologies.

In chapter 3, Yesina asks, "*Do our teachers even know any of this?*" She has a point. Students in Presente continually made it clear that teachers did not understand or incorporate their cultures into the classroom. Furthermore, teachers often positioned students and their communities as having nothing to contribute. Teacher education must support teachers in understanding and honoring the communities they are teaching in. Central to this work, teachers must be supported in understanding "the systemic nature of racialized and intersectional inequities and their own relative privileged or marginalized position within those systems" and the role that education can play in either reproducing or challenging those inequities (Paris, 2016, p.8)

Another key tenant of culturally sustaining pedagogy—and this brings me to my next point—is an understanding that teaching and learning require humanizing relationships of dignity and care.

Relationships and Community

Presente fostered a sense of family and community amongst all those involved. Students felt supported by each other and by the adults in the program, and both students and adults continually acknowledged that Presente created a space in the school where they could show up as their full selves. The significance of this sense of belonging has been well documented, with research continually suggesting that a sense of belonging and connectedness at school promotes both well-being and positive academic outcomes (Juvonen, 2006; Shochet, Smith, Furlong, & Homel, 2011), teacher education programs tend to give little attention to relationship, trust, and community building as a vital component of the work of teaching.

When relationship building is addressed, it is almost always within the context of “classroom management,” and even then, it is given inadequate attention. A 2014 report by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that:

- Instruction and practice on classroom management strategies are often scattered throughout the curriculum and typically do not receive connected and concentrated focus
- Most teacher education programs are not drawing on research when deciding which classroom management strategies to teach. Classroom management strategies that use praise and other methods to reinforce positive behavior were least likely to be taught
- Instruction is generally divorced from practice and vice versa. Only one-third of programs require the practice of classroom management skills as they are learned (Greenberg, Putnam, & Walsh, p. ii)

Rather than advocating for a more explicit focus on classroom management, a concept which is, as Casey, Lozenski, and McManimon (2013) rightfully explain, “rife with neoliberalism and racism” (p. 36), I believe that teacher education programs must shift their focus from classroom management to relationships and community building. The concept of and discourse around classroom management views students as objects that must be controlled in order to impart knowledge. It brings to mind what Freire described as the banking model of education, and positions behavior rather than learning as the primary aim in the classroom. Casey, Lozenski, and McManimon explain that “pedagogically, management is an attempt to separate curriculum from human interaction...Classroom management positions student behavior and motivation, or lack thereof, as factors that are irrelevant to pedagogy” (p.50). A shift from classroom management to relationship and community building disrupts the view that the work of teaching is to control, coerce, and manage students. It recognizes, as Crownover & Jones (2018) point out, that “education occurs not in the mind of the student or the actions of the teacher, but in the relational space that connects them” (p. 20). I would go a step further, recognizing that the relationship between the teacher and student is not any more significant than the relationships that students have with each other, the classroom community-at-large, and the relationships that students and teachers have outside of the classroom that come with us regardless of where we are.

The shift from classroom management to relationships and community building creates space for questions that would otherwise go unasked and unanswered. What does it mean to be in community? How do we build relationships that are reciprocal despite power differences? Why does community fall apart at times? How do we put it back

together? What are the conditions that allow for a healthy community? How do we honor and bring in the relationships and communities we are a part of outside of our classroom? Drawing on Nell Noddings' (1992) work on caring we must ask, what does it mean to care for the people we are in community with, and how do we know if those in our community feel cared-for?

These questions, which should be both central in teacher education programs and in the classroom, recognize the full humanity of students and teachers. The shift from classroom management to relationships and community challenges the neoliberal logic that views students as individual academic competitors and teachers as merely interchangeable and easily replaceable deliverers of instruction. Furthermore, when taken with Winn's vision of TJTE this shift asks us to be in relationships with our students' families and communities.

When we expand our notion of classroom community and relationships to include the broader community in which one teaches, it allows us to grapple with questions that would otherwise go unasked. How does what and how I teach create justice for the community I teach in? How am I accountable to the community I work in? Who in the community do I see myself accountable to, and why? In what ways am I a part of or not a part of the community I am teaching in and what does that mean?

These questions are imperative not only for pre-service teachers but for teacher education programs as well. Those of us in teacher education must ask: who in the community does our work serve? Are our decisions informed by education reforms we may not even agree with, or are they informed by our relationships with parents and students? When engaging in 'community partnerships' do we align ourselves with school

districts, or with community organizations? How are we showing up for community members? Who are we in solidarity with and who are we preparing our students to be in solidarity with? Who in the community are we preparing to become teachers?

The shift from classroom management to community and relationships does more than allow for new questions. Ideally, this shift should also mean that educators draw on the communities they are teaching in when they design their curriculum and use their classroom as a way to address the issues being faced by students and their families. Teacher education programs can support teachers in this work, providing opportunities for pre- and in-service teachers to learn from parents, youth, and community members. As Katarou, Picower, & Stovall (2010) argue, "education programs need to rethink who is in a position to educate teachers" (p. 148). Teacher education programs should provide opportunities for candidates to connect and learn from local grassroots organizing efforts, eventually having them develop curriculum connected to and informed by this experience. Finally, when the work of teaching and teacher education centers community and relationships it requires us to show up in ways we otherwise might not.

Activism

Restorative Justice demands shared power, egalitarian relationships, and democratic processes, all of which are largely missing in public schools. While teachers may be able to create classroom spaces that move toward that vision, teachers themselves are often excluded from decision making and (like the teachers at LHS) can feel powerless to change the conditions that they and their students find themselves in. Across the country teachers have been organizing to create liberatory schools, challenge inequality and oppression, and to demand a voice in what is happening in their schools.

Teacher activist organizations such as the Teacher Activist Group (TAG), The New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCORE), the People's Education Movement, and the Education for Liberation Network—to name a few, are engaging teachers in political education and action to address issues such as high-stakes testing, privatization, neoliberalism, and other manifestations of injustice. The last few years have seen unprecedented union activism, with teacher unions organizing strikes and walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, North Carolina, Colorado, Los Angeles, and Oakland in 2018 and early 2019. Both the teacher activism organizations and many of the teacher unions have been working with families and students to fight for social justice, recognizing both that teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions, and that education for social justice requires activism outside of the classroom.

A crucial component of TJTE must include preparing teachers to organize for change. Pre-service teachers should understand what it means that to be in a union, understand the history of teacher unions, and be familiar with present-day social justice unionism. Likewise, teachers should have an understanding of and experience learning from teacher activism that happens outside of the union. Drawing on the work of Katsarou, Picower, & Stoval (2010) and Mayorga & Picower (2018), teacher education must be in active solidarity and prepare educators who are in active solidarity with movements for justice and who understand that “participating in social movements is part of their role as educator” (Mayorga & Picower, 2018, p. 225).

Teacher education programs cannot just support their students in becoming activists but must also be engaging in activism for educational justice. While research

with social justice aims is undoubtedly part of this work, much like teachers work must move beyond the classroom so too must teacher education. When schools engage in practices that we know are harmful to students we must stand with parents and students to push back. When local and national policies are harmful, we must speak out, using whatever institutional clout we have to speak back. We must use the resources we have access to in support of community organizing efforts.

Future Research

As I move on to the next stage of my career, I foresee my work going in three interrelated directions. First, I hope to look at my practice as a teacher educator and what it means to implement the vision I have described above. I am committed to a vision of TJTE and intend to study what it takes to prepare restorative justice educators. As part of this work, I hope to continue to support young people in using YPAR as a way to challenge injustice in their schools. Ideally, I would like to develop a dual enrollment course where high school students and pre-service teachers collectively engage in YPAR related to educational injustice. I see this course serving several purposes. First, this would ideally create a school-to-teacher pipeline where historically underrepresented students build deep and meaningful relationships with teacher education programs and have a pathway into the teaching profession if they so choose. Secondly, this program would provide pre-service teachers the opportunity to learn from and with students, the opportunity to engage in culturally sustaining pedagogy, and develop pre-service teachers' theory of change, providing them with hands-on experience in supporting student activism both in and outside of the classroom. Finally, as part of my future

research, I would like to develop opportunities for community informed teacher education.

Final Thoughts

When I first began this dissertation the Obama administration, under then-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, was advocating for restorative justice as a way to address racial disparities in school discipline. Today, as conclude my final chapter, a co-authored report by the Federal Commission on School Safety, a group convened by President Trump in the wake of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, delivered their research and recommendations for advancing school safety. Chief among these recommendations, they advised that the Obama era guidelines that, among other things, recommend the use of restorative practices and attending to racial disparities in discipline, be rescinded. The report made no recommendations regarding access to guns or gun control, but did advocate for increased security, the intentional recruitment of veterans and former police into the teaching profession and recommended that school districts "consider arming some specifically selected and trained school personnel" (DeVos, Nielsen, Azar, & Whitaker, 2018, p. 106). The report's position that the Obama-era policies aimed at addressing racial disparities in discipline have made schools more violent as well as its focus on increased security and surveillance, suggest a doubling down on zero-tolerance policies that target minoritized students. Reading the report, one can't help but remember how the Columbine shooting in 1999 led to an expansion of and public support for zero-tolerance policies which disproportionately targeted students of color.

As is typical of the media, the discourse around school safety is now being framed as a dichotomy, a choice between the Trump approach and the Obama approach. Lost in the coverage is an analysis that helps us understand that despite the reversal of Obama era policies, in many ways Trump is “less a break from the Bush and Obama administration...than an expansion” (Anderson, 2017, p.1006). This is not to say there are no policy differences, but, as the editors of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* (2017) explain:

If we understand the Trump victory solely as a rupture with the political past, our acts of resistance may too narrowly target the individual leader himself rather than the underlying systems of oppression that enabled, fueled, and legitimized his rise to power (p. 344).

Rather than a return to the education policy of the Obama era, (which included using test scores to evaluate teachers, an expansion of charter schools, the closing of public schools, a narrowing of school curriculum, and an increase in school resource officers), our work must be aimed at transformation. As tempting as it may be in the darkness of these times, our work as educators, academics and activists cannot be to restore things to the way they were, but instead, we must work to transform the systems and structures that created the conditions we now find ourselves in. It is my hope that the insights raised in this dissertation can help us to do that.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER

Parental Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

College of Education – Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies

To Whom it May Concern,

My name is Dani O'Brien and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am currently conducting research for my dissertation and am hoping to include your child in my study. My study aims to look at what happens as Lavoie High School attempts to transition to a more youth-centered school culture through the use of indigenous circle practices and restorative justice. I spent the summer working with your child as they prepared to serve as Restorative Justice Peer leaders and now I am hoping I can interview and observe them as they bring what they learned to the school. I have outlined the details of the study below. If you consent to having your child participate in the study please sign the consent form and have your child return it during their advisory period. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call or email me.

Respectfully,
Dani O'Brien
University of Massachusetts Amherst
deobrien@educ.umass.edu
413-512-1375

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY: The purpose of this study is to examine what happens as Lavoie High School attempts to transition to a more youth-centered school culture through the use of indigenous circle practices and restorative justice.

RESEARCHERS: Dani O'Brien, Doctoral Candidate at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

DATA COLLECTION: The data for this study will be collected through classroom observations and recorded student interviews. I will take fieldnotes and interview notes, and I will collect materials used and produced during classroom instruction. Data may be collected using audio and/or video recording devices.

USE OF RESULTS: This study will be used for my dissertation. Additionally, the results may be used in articles on education and/or academic presentations. You and your child have the right to review the results prior to publication upon request.

PRIVACY: Every effort will be made to protect the privacy of your child. All data containing confidential information will be kept in a safe place in the possession of the researcher. Unless you request otherwise, your child's name and the name of the school will not be used in any research reports about this study. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to mask the identity of participants.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I expect that any risks, discomforts or inconveniences are unlikely or will be minor. The possible benefit is that your child will contribute to building knowledge about restorative justice and youth leadership.

YOUR RIGHTS: You should decide on your own whether or not you want your child to participate in this study. There are no consequences, should you decide not to have your child participate. If you do decide to let your child participate, you have the right to withdraw him or her from the study at any time.

QUESTIONS: Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Dani O'Brien at: deobrien@educ.umass.edu or call at 413-512-1375. You are also welcome to contact my advisor Dr. Kysa Nygreen at: knygreen@educ.umass.edu or call 413-545-0541. You may also contact the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, Dr. Linda Griffin at 413-545-6985 or lgriffin@educ.umass.edu.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT and SIGN BELOW

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study and my questions have been answered. I have read the information in this consent form and I agree to let my child participate in the study.

Check YES if you allow your child to participate

Check NO if you do not want your child to participate

YES _____

NO _____

Participant name (Please Print)

Parent/Guardian name (Please Print)

Parent/Guardia Signature

APPENDIX B

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Student Assent Form

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Graduate School of Education – Language, Literacy, Culture & Society

To Whom it May Concern,

I am a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am currently conducting research for a class that I am taking and am hoping to you in my study. My study aims to look at the experiences that students have in a turnaround school. A turnaround school is a school that has performed consistently low according to state tests and is now implementing a plan to improve. Commerce high school is currently implementing a turnaround plan with the hopes of improving academic performance and student achievement. I have outlined the details of the study below. If you consent to participating in the study please sign the consent form and return it to Ms. Fontaine. If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to call or email me.

Thanks,
Dani O'Brien
University of Massachusetts Amherst
deobrien@educ.umail.edu
413-512-1375

STUDY TITLE: Experiencing Teaching and Learning in a Turnaround School

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY: The purpose of this study is to understand how students and teachers experience school during the process of turnaround. During the initial phase of the study classroom observation and teacher interviews will be conducted.

RESEARCHERS: Dani O'Brien, Doctoral Student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

DATA COLLECTION: The data for this study will be collected through classroom observations and recorded student interviews. I will take field notes and interview notes, and I will collect materials used and produced during classroom instruction. Data may be collected using audio and/or video recording devices.

USE OF RESULTS: This study is being done as part of my graduate coursework. The results will be used in a paper I am writing for school. Additionally, the results may be used in articles on education and/or academic presentations.

PRIVACY: Every effort will be made to protect your privacy. All data containing confidential information will be kept in a safe place in the possession of the researcher. Unless you request otherwise, your name and the name of the school will not be used in any research reports about this study. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used to mask the identity of participants.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I expect that any risks, discomforts or inconveniences are unlikely or will be minor. The possible benefit is that you will contribute to building knowledge about student and teacher experiences in turnaround schools.

YOUR RIGHTS: You should decide on your own whether or not you want to participate in this study. There are no consequences, should you decide not to participate. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

QUESTIONS: Should you have any questions or concerns about this study, please contact Dani O'Brien at: deobrien@educ.umass.edu or call at 413-512-1375. You are also welcome to contact my advisor Denise Ives at: dives@educ.umass.edu.

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT AND SIGN BELOW IF YOU AGREE

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study and my questions have been answered. I have read the information in this consent form and I agree to participate in the study.

Participant name (Print please)

Signature

Date

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