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A Reflective Process for Working Through Complex Restorative Practice Dilemmas in Schools

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OVERVIEW

Designed to accompany *The Toolkit Before the Toolkit* (Trout, 2021), this brief offers a reflective process for individuals and teams to use when facing a complex restorative practices dilemma at their school or district. It aims to help educators consider and bridge the adaptive, relational, and structural elements of restorative practices before moving to technical solutions and strategies. The brief

- begins with an overview of restorative practices;
- introduces grounding research about using a reflective process to transform mindsets and systems;
- includes tips for applying this process in participants' own contexts; and
- briefly describes the main steps of the process, weaving in a fictional scenario to model the process in action.

Intended for restorative practitioners and trainers in education settings, this reflective process may also be useful for individuals and teams tasked with the systemic implementation of restorative practices.

AN OVERVIEW OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

As defined by the International Institute of Restorative Practices, restorative practices include both informal and formal tools, practices, and processes that build, maintain, and repair relationships (Wachtel, 2016). Rather than merely serving to repair interpersonal harm or respond to disciplinary challenges, restorative practices proactively create the conditions for community trust and strong relationships, thereby offering a paradigm shift toward interconnectedness. This orientation toward interconnection and the core beliefs of restorative justice and restorative practices come from many collectivist-oriented indigenous communities across the world who see holistic accountability, healing, and reintegration—not punishment—as central to their conceptions of justice (Mirsky, 2004).

The Toolkit Before the Toolkit contends that although many educators and school leaders take an essentially **technical** approach to implementing restorative practices, effective implementation requires a more holistic approach that centers foundational **adaptive**, **relational**, and **structural** elements (Trout, 2021). Trout's definition of each of these types of elements follows:

- **technical elements:** the practices, programs, and interventions implemented to solve problems or apply new initiatives. Affective statements and dialogue, restorative circles, and community conferences are examples of commonly implemented technical elements.

- **adaptive elements:** the mindsets, paradigms, values, and belief systems that lay the groundwork for the technical elements. As a counterexample, a school that uses restorative circles to punish a student who has caused harm is implementing restorative practices in a way that is inconsistent with the mindsets or values that are meant to undergird restorative practices.

- **relational elements:** the intentional actions that build relationships and foster agency, community, and social capital. Examples include a school's focus on cultivating positive student–teacher relationships, building strong connections between peers, celebrating student successes, developing student leadership and voice, and so on.

- **structural supports:** critical infrastructure, resources, and other policies and practices (such as funding, people, time, and discipline policies). Without the appropriate infrastructure in place, the implementation of restorative practices will remain superficial.

To stay true to the roots of restorative practices and processes, those implementing them *must* center **belonging** and **equity**. While these principles are inherently embedded in the philosophy of restorative practices and processes, they are often sidelined in the inconsistent implementation of restorative practices and processes in schools. Below are two working definitions of "belonging" and "equity" from leading organizations in the field:

- **belonging:** "[B]elonging describes values and practices where no person is left out of our circle of concern. Belonging means more than having just access, it means having a meaningful voice and the opportunity to participate in the design of political, social, and cultural structures" (Othering and Belonging Institute, n.d.).

- **equity:** In educational spaces, equity means "each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential" (National Equity Project, n.d.).

The reflective process offered in this brief will have the most potential for transformation when practitioners insist on centering the principles of belonging and equity by surfacing their biases; considering their own and others' social identities (including gender, race, class, culture, religion, and sexual orientation); and exploring how the interplay between power, privilege, and oppression in the past and present affects the educational ecosystem of which they are a part (Umbreit & Armour, 2010).

To deepen your understanding of equity and belonging, check out the following resources:

- *Colorizing Restorative Justice: Voicing Our Realities* (Valandra & Hokšíla, 2020)
- *Design for Belonging: How to Build Inclusion and Collaboration in Your Communities* (Wise, 2022)
- *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education* (Venet, 2021)
- *The Identity-Conscious Educator: Building Habits and Skills for a More Inclusive School* (Talusan, 2022)
- *The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and US Social Transformation* (Davis, 2019)

INTRODUCTION TO THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

For individuals and groups tasked with implementing restorative practices in educational settings, it can be challenging to know how to move forward. If the technical elements seem easiest to implement but will not be successful without the right adaptive, relational, and structural supports, how does one know what next step to take when facing a complex restorative practices dilemma? The reflective process offered here is designed to help bridge this gap between theory and practice.

Why is a reflective process important?

Cultivating reflective practitioners is one way of encouraging more comprehensive systems change. Numerous qualitative studies show that engaging in reflection helps individuals discover ways to improve their practice, increase their self-awareness, and learn from their mistakes, among other skills (Thejll-Madsen, 2018). Just as schools cannot create sustainable models of restorative communities by implementing only the technical elements of restorative practices, individuals are not likely to experience deeper learning by simply focusing on changing their behaviors: "Addressing only behaviors without surfacing, evaluating, and shifting the underlying beliefs and ways of being will not result in transformation or even in sustained change" (Aguilar, 2020, p. 37). By engaging in a reflective process, individuals can begin to see how their ways of being and beliefs inform their subsequent actions.

Furthermore, when individuals pause to bring awareness to their default reactions and assumptions, they can move toward the pursuit of belonging and equity by considering the sociopolitical context of the situation at hand. As Moore et al. (2016) write, "Critical self-reflection can help produce a more equitable and just society because it allows educators to examine practices on a metacognitive level and alter practices which may unwittingly perpetuate power inequities." By making the familiar strange, reflection encourages individuals to reexamine their worldview before making a decision or taking action.

When is the best time to use a reflective process?

The process described in this paper is intended to be used for helping to address a challenge or dilemma in a school or district. Engaging in this kind of critical reflection is a commitment, which

makes it important to consider which situations merit taking the time to use this tool. Ensuring that the dilemma is complex, rather than merely complicated, is a good first step.

A **complicated challenge** may contain multiple right answers with a clear relationship between cause and effect that not everyone can see yet; this sort of challenge calls for the investigation of multiple options (Snowden & Boone, 2007). From a restorative practices perspective, a complicated challenge might look like figuring out how to write restorative policies in a student handbook; although not an easy task, it is doable with sufficient time and key people at the table.

In contrast, a **complex dilemma** has no right answers and has constantly shifting parts and players, requiring individuals to "probe first, then sense, then respond" (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Most situations involving restorative practices are in the complex realm because people and relationships are dynamic, and each person's behaviors have unpredictable effects on others and on the environment.

Therefore, to see if this reflective tool is the right choice for the dilemma you are facing, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the situation a complex challenge or a complicated one?
- Am I open to exploring what I have not yet considered, even if it exposes my biases?
- Do I feel unsure about what step to take next, and/or do I feel particularly stuck?
- Do I need to be particularly mindful about attending to issues of belonging and equity, including my own identities and positionality?

What is the reflective process, and what does it look like in action?

The reflective process described in this section is designed to support restorative practitioners in preparing to facilitate and build a restorative process alongside impacted individuals and groups. You can use this process to engage in self-reflection, or you might ask a trusted colleague to engage with you in a confidential conversation guided by this process.

The reflective process takes inspiration in part from Gibbs's (1988) Reflective Cycle and Gorski and Pothini's (2018) equity literacy case study analysis process. It has six stages with questions to help practitioners explore a complex restorative practices situation with a focus on belonging and equity. The six stages are as follows:

1. **Describe** the complex situation.

2. **Surface** your own emotions and thoughts about the situation.

3. **Consider** the impacted individuals and their specific needs and desires.

4. **Imagine** the different processes, values, and guiding principles that can be used to tend to the situation with a restorative lens.

5. **Identify** the barriers to using specific restorative processes (if any) and/or guiding principles, including those residing in the larger system.

6. **Plan and act** based on the restorative approach that will best fit the need of the situation and people involved.

To show you what the reflective process can look like in action, included with each stage is a fictional restorative practices case study with examples of a practitioner's internal dialogue. Although fictional, the case study is based on a real-life complex dilemma.

Remember: The case study offers *one* way to move through the reflective process, not the *only* way, and the questions accompanying each stage are invitations, not prescriptions. Take what feels useful to you and leave the rest.

A REFLECTIVE PROCESS FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICE DILEMMAS

1. Describe

Describe the situation like a reporter, focusing on the facts (not your interpretations) as much as possible.

- What happened?
- When and where did it happen?
- Who was involved? What are the identities of the individuals involved?
- What was the immediate outcome of the situation?
- What information do I not have yet that might be useful to learn? What important questions do I need to ask?

Today, at Sunnyside High School, a fight erupted during lunch. Five students were involved: Chris, Anne, Elaine, James, and Benji. A few teachers, other students, and a Dean of Students broke up the fight, and the students were sent home. The fight caused a major campus disruption. Many, many students witnessed and filmed the fight, and lots of students ended up going to class late.

School administrators initially wanted to suspend Chris, who began the fight, but Chris and his parents cited months of reported bullying and harassment tactics on the part of Anne and Elaine. In response to Chris's reports of Anne's and Elaine's bullying earlier this year, the school mandated that these students be separated in their classes.

Unsure of how to respond to the ongoing situation, the school is considering suspending Chris, Anne, and Elaine, but Elaine's parents and Anne's parents are angry their children were physically harmed and don't think it's fair for their children to be punished. James and Benji were physically involved in the fight but insist they were only helping their friends.

> *The school administrators asked me to take the lead on this situation. This is my first year as Restorative Practices Specialist at Sunnyside, which is a new role here.*
>
> *What I know about the individuals involved so far is that all five of the students are juniors, that James is a friend of Chris, and that Benji is friends with Anne and Elaine. I am eager to learn how each of the students has been impacted, and I'll be curious to hear more about what they share with me about their social identities and whom they trust at the school.*

2. Surface

Before further exploring this situation, pause to bring awareness to the ways in which your own identities, experiences, and emotions might be affecting your view of the situation.

- How do my prior (personal and professional) experiences relate to the situation?
- Which aspects of my identity might be shaping my view of the situation and my relationship with the individuals involved?
- Which emotions am I feeling about the situation?
- How is my own relationship to conflict getting in the way of using a restorative process?

> *Because this is only my first year in this role and because Sunnyside is such a big school, I don't know all of the students, and I am still working to earn the trust of many of the teachers and administrators. I don't have a prior relationship with any of the impacted individuals, and I had no idea about the prior bullying incident because the school thought they "addressed" the issue by separating Chris from Anne and Elaine.*
>
> *I don't know why Chris was getting bullied. I was also bullied in 8th grade, and it got so bad that I chose a different high school to get space from the students who harassed me. I remember feeling too ashamed to ask for help from any of the adults in my life.*
>
> *This is something for to me to pay attention to because I need to be open to hearing all of the impacted individuals' perspectives, not just Chris's story. And Chris needs to practice accountability too. Part of me wonders if this situation is too close to home for me to facilitate. I am going to seek support from a colleague I trust at school to confidentially process my initial feelings about this situation. I may need to consider bringing in a co-facilitator at some point.*
>
> *In terms of emotions, I am feeling stressed because the school is pressuring me to start a process quickly that will "fix" the situation. Because I am new to Sunnyside and because the school community is still working to understand what restorative justice is, I really want to get things "right" so that I can show restorative practices have value. But what I have to remember is that what makes a restorative practice "right" is not how I feel about it but how the impacted individuals feel.*

3. Consider

Now, return to the situation at hand. Center the relational elements by exploring the needs, desires, and hopes of the individuals and groups impacted by the situation.

- What are the presenting needs and wants of those involved? What deeper desires might these also point toward?
- How might the impacted individuals' identities and prior relationships play a role in this situation?
- How can I work toward creating a culture of trust in which it is safe here for different people to share their truths?
- Who has power in this situation, and who does not? Why might that be?

I need to first begin checking in with the students and their families individually to get a better sense of the situation. In our meeting, Chris agreed that he had started the fight but was not interested in a Community Conference because he was worried that it would only increase Elaine and Anne's bullying behaviors. Chris and his parents feel that he's been bullied because he's gay.

In their meetings with me, Elaine and Anne each only focused on the physical fight, and they struggled to engage with the larger picture. They both said they were just sitting in the cafeteria minding their own business when Chris approached them and provoked a fight. Their parents are angry that their daughters were physically harmed on campus, and they don't understand why their kids are in trouble at all.

I wonder about the power imbalance between Chris and Elaine and Anne. Chris shares that Elaine and Anne are always together and that he feels outnumbered, which is partly why he felt the need to pick a fight first. He says he always feels like he's on the defensive.

I am hearing the families highlight the gender dynamics here, too, as Elaine and Anne and their parents are outraged that they were hit by a young man, saying that it's never okay for a boy to hit girls.

I also know that being out in high school can be challenging for LGBTQIA+ students, and I can tell that Chris has been deeply bothered by Elaine and Anne's behaviors.

I could tell based on the students' body language that none of them felt very comfortable discussing the situation with me. Chris squirmed in his seat when his parents were discussing the bullying incidents. Elaine and Anne had their arms crossed and wouldn't make eye contact with me. I'll make sure to ask the students who the other people are I could invite into a process so that they might be more comfortable moving forward.

I also need to check in with James and Benji. They were involved and impacted, and I know it's often the "secondary" and "tertiary" people who have a role to play in the situation turning out as it did.

4. Imagine

It is time to get creative! Imagine all the potential restorative options available to the group by centering the adaptive (values, mindsets) and relational (relationships, social capital) elements. Dream up approaches both small and big that you might take to address the root causes of the harm that occurred.

- Remembering that restorative practices do not "live and die" in circles, what options are on the table in terms of formal or informal processes?
    - Is a Community Conference appropriate? If so, who should be involved?
    - Are simultaneous, separate support circles a better fit?
    - Does this situation require something different altogether that still aligns with restorative values and guiding principles (i.e., collectivism, harm repair, holistic accountability, and centering those most impacted)?

- What does it mean to *tend to healing* in this situation?
    - For those most impacted?
    - For those who caused harm?
    - For the larger community?

- How can I bring to bear the right relationships, community supports, and structures that move people toward safety, trust, fairness, and authenticity in addressing harm?

So, what are all of the restorative options available to us? Of course, we could run a formal Community Conference, but Chris specifically said he did not want that, and I can tell that Elaine and Anne are not in a place to engage with openness about their role in the larger harm that contributed to the fight.

I have heard of other restorative facilitators using a simultaneous "support circle" model, where the harmed individual and their supporters engage in a circle and the individuals who caused harm engage in a separate circle within roughly the same time frame. That might be a good first step.

I'm also wondering if there are other restorative values and principles outside of circle processes I can lean into. For instance, I'm thinking of all the other students and teachers at the school who were affected by the fight. There were so many students in the cafeteria who witnessed and filmed it. Teachers were frustrated their lessons got shortened by trying to get everyone back into class. At this point, the whole school knows the details of the fight. How did this feel to LGBTQIA+ students who know Chris is out? What about students who have experienced physical violence in their lives, especially young women who have been hurt by men? How might we create a process to help repair this more collective harm too?

I wonder if I could work with the teachers to create some circle prompts to take back to their classrooms as a way of processing the fight.

Those are some initial ideas, but I need to keep checking in with each of the individuals to determine what will be the best fit for this group and dynamic.

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5. Identify

After determining the potential restorative options, identify what might be getting in the way of adhering to a restorative paradigm.

- What are the barriers to a restorative process(es), formal or informal, occurring? Consider the adaptive, relational, and structural barriers (such as overall level of community understanding of restorative frameworks, administrative support, existing school policies, and so on)
- What other inequities and biases might be present here that I can try to account for or mitigate?
- What might be some of the root causes of the harm that occurred?
- What kinds of support might I need now?

Community Conferences are inherently voluntary, and Chris's reticence to participate and Elaine and Anne's body language help me know that we aren't ready for that step right away. Chris' distrust of me as an unfamiliar adult is also a barrier.

Another barrier is that I am feeling pressured by parents and administrators to take immediate action. They want to keep the students out of school until a decision is made. This time urgency is making it hard for me to take the time I need to really listen to the students.

LGBTQIA+ phobia is certainly one of the root causes of the harm here, as is the fact that the school's prior intervention with the bullying took a superficial approach that clearly hasn't worked. I wonder how sexism is playing a role in this situation; would Chris have lashed out with violence if Elaine and Anne had been boys? There are internal factors, interpersonal factors, and systemic factors all playing out here; some of them are in the group's control, and some are not. Also, the fact that none of the students seems to trust adults in the school is also an issue.

I know that as I build out a process, I am going to need to create a lot of relational supports for the students since the adults are not necessarily inherently "safe" people.

I think I am going to need some help supporting Chris and the school community with regard to LGBTQIA+ bullying and harassment and gender-based violence. I am going to reach out to the teacher advisor of the Gay–Straight Alliance at the high school, the school psychologist, and some local community organizations to see if anyone could come support us in these conversations.

6. Plan and act

Now that you have taken the time to reflect on supports, relationships, and facilitation tools you need, identify a first action step you will take. After trying something, you can always return to this reflective process to cycle through it again based on the emergent complexities in how participants respond.

- What process will meet the needs of the group or situation in restorative ways?
- How will I design and/or facilitate this process so that the group has the trust, agency, and ability to define and address the harm in ways that are meaningful for them?

- Is it possible that this process could cause more harm? If so, who or what can help mitigate the potential for more harm? How?

> *I decided to ask the students and their families about starting a process with two separate support circles. With Chris, I shared with him that he got to decide who was in the room with him and that the goal would be to focus on what he needed for healing from the experience of being bullied and to support him in accountability for using physical violence. On Chris's recommendation, I invited James to this meeting, and having his friend's presence there visibly relaxed Chris. Chris still seemed worried about the girls continuing to bully him, but he agreed to the support circle when I reassured him that the purpose was to move toward repair and safety for everyone.*
>
> *When I invited Elaine and Anne to consider a support circle, they were initially reluctant. Their parents wanted to know how Chris also would be held accountable for his behavior. I explained that if everyone wanted to participate in a Community Conference to talk about that together, this was an important first step to making that happen. I shared that this process was not about getting into trouble but a space to reflect on the conditions that contributed to the fight and make steps to address those conditions. They agreed to participate.*
>
> *I did worry that having separate circles might actually make things worse—maybe Elaine and Anne wouldn't really understand how they had harmed Chris without hearing from him, and maybe Chris wouldn't understand the harm he had caused by starting the fight. But I knew that trying to force a formal Community Conference wouldn't work by putting Chris in a more vulnerable spot. We needed to center his needs and desires.*
>
> *So, I got to work organizing the support circles. Chris's circle happened to get scheduled first. I knew that it would include Chris, James, their parents, some school representatives, and a few LGBTQIA+ and gender-based violence resource people. The circle's goal would be to build relationships and trust and to share ideas that would support the school being a safer place for students with minority sexual orientations. Equally important, the group would also support Chris's capacity to take accountability for the physical harm he caused. The group would also offer him resources to avoid physically fighting when he was dysregulated or being harassed and to consider the role gender played in the altercation.*
>
> *The second circle, a few days later, would include Elaine, Anne, and Benji, their families, school community representatives, and a few LGBTQIA+ resource people to support their movement toward accountability for their harassment. Having those resource people in the room would help invite the students to unpack some root causes of their beliefs and behaviors around LGBTQIA+ people in a space that is nonjudgmental, safe, and geared toward learning.*
>
> *I'm not sure how all of this will go, but it's feeling like an appropriate first step. If we can support the students in ways that move toward healing, I think they will eventually want to collectively sit down together in a Community Conference.*

FINAL REFLECTIONS

By offering an opportunity to consider a complex dilemma from multiple angles, this reflective process encourages you not only to imagine and try out new ways of working alongside the impacted individuals in a given situation but also to go beyond the technical strategies and locate the values, relationships, and structures that move toward repair and healing.

Transformative justice and disability justice trainer Mia Mingus (2019) invites individuals to collectively work toward creating institutions where situations of harm lead to deep learning and action by asking, "What are the skills we need to be able to prevent, respond to, heal from, and take accountability for harmful, violent, and abusive behaviors?" Cultivating a school community where individuals support each other to practice these very skills is at the heart of a restorative paradigm.

> *After the separate support circles and when all the students and their families are ready, we meet collectively in a Community Conference to address the fight and harassment. I lean on my restorative training to facilitate a space where the group will decide how to address the harms. Because we have the right relationships, school representatives, and community supports in the room, I feel confident the space can be held with trust and safety and that the outcomes of this conference will feel fair to the participants.*
>
> *Because Chris feels safe to participate, he is able to fully accept responsibility for initiating the fight, and this acceptance seems to support his growth toward avoiding physical fights in the future and to honor the fear that Elaine and Anne felt. Because Elaine and Anne have had safe spaces to reflect on their behavior and their learned phobia of LGBTQIA+ folks, they are able to take responsibility for their role leading up to the fight and apologize. James and Benji also take responsibility for their roles in the fight. As a large group, they make agreements about repairing the harm and creating structures to prevent the harm from happening in the future.*

Further, to support the rest of the school, I am able to work with the teachers to create circle prompts to take back to their students to help them process the fight that many of them witnessed. As classrooms, they discuss what happened, how it felt, how the school community was impacted, and what could be done to prevent fights and harassment from happening in the future. I have asked teachers to share back what they learn since I want their learnings to inform a conversation I have with school administrators about the structures and culture that would make youth feel safer and more connected and help prevent future fights like these from happening. For instance, I wonder if LGBTQIA+ students or students who have experienced gender-based violence have adults and peers at school they can talk with about their experiences.

In all, this process took a lot of time, involved many different people, and was labor-intensive, but I do think we were better able to address some of the root issues underneath the harm caused.

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