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Published online: 24 May 2018.

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Relationships of control and relationships of engagement: how educator intentions intersect with student experiences of restorative justice

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ABSTRACT

The practice and popularity of restorative justice (RJ) in education has been growing in recent years. RJ can be understood in dramatically different ways by those implementing it. For some, RJ is about creating an environment of and for student engagement that challenges traditional systems of discipline and facilitates learning. For others, RJ is simply another tool for solidifying compliance and meting out punishment, albeit in a kinder, gentler way. This comparative case study focused on the use of RJ in one school in Scotland and one in Canada, exploring the intersection between educator intentions and student experiences. I determined that the key element is not the implementation of RJ, but the school's predominant relational objectives. In a school where relational objectives are of social control, RJ is utilized to strengthen that control. Where the relational objectives are of social engagement, RJ is utilized to strengthen that engagement. RJ in schools is a window into what is most fundamental to students: relationships. The study argues that RJ, by itself, does not guarantee certain qualities of relationship, but it does allow us to examine those qualities and ask questions of how school relationships are used to engage and/or control students.

Introduction

Restorative justice (RJ) is an idea whose time may have finally arrived (Hopkins 2004; McCluskey 2011). Although the concept has ancient roots and the term has existed in Western societies since the 1970s, only recently has it gained general public recognition (Wheeldon 2009; Woolford 2009). In schools, RJ's popularity appears to be rising worldwide (Fronius et al. 2016; Mayworm et al. 2016). In fact, schools are the fastest growing area for the practice of RJ (Morrison 2015).

Despite an increasing number of schools embracing the approach, it is not clear what educational RJ practitioners are trying to achieve. Broadly put, RJ is

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an approach to harm and discipline issues that focus on people and relationships, rather than broken rules. Yet, beyond that, there is no universal definition of RJ (Clamp 2016; Johnstone and Van Ness 2007; Woolford 2009); 'restorative justice has come to mean all things to all people' (McCold 2000, 358). The differences in understanding – philosophically and in practice – are dramatic. For some, RJ is about creating an environment of and for student engagement that challenges traditional systems of discipline, facilitates learning, and embodies peaceful and just societies. For others, RJ is simply another tool for solidifying compliance and meting out punishment, albeit in a kinder, gentler way.

This study focused on the use of RJ in one school in Scotland and one in Canada, exploring both adult intentions and student perceptions. While important to understand the intentions of educators in using RJ in schools, those aims must be examined alongside the actual impact that such practices have on students. Part of a larger study, this article seeks to illuminate the intersection between how educators view and use RJ and how students experience RJ. Thus the research was guided by two central questions that speak to this intersection: For what purpose was RJ being implemented in the two different schools? And how did students in each school experience the educators' approach to RJ in their school lives and relationships?

Each stage of this study raised complex questions about the intended purposes of RJ in schools and definition(s) of RJ. This study challenges a common assumption of some RJ advocates that implementing RJ necessarily creates a classroom environment of social engagement (where students are empowered to engage with one another and think critically, and school relationships and hierarchies are transformed). The student experience in this study shows that RJ can as readily be mobilized to create classroom environments of social control (where students are taught obedience and compliance, and authority and hierarchy are reinforced).

This study determined that the key element is not the implementation of RJ, but the predominant relational objectives in a school. Some skew toward controlling students; others toward engaging students. RJ can as readily be implemented for either. How educators view and use RJ fits into their broader understandings of school purposes, practices and relationships. The real strength of RJ, as seen in this study, is for its insight into the quality and character of these school relationships. For students, the school experience is entirely about, mediated through and formed around relationships. This study, by attending to the student perspective, makes clear that how adults view and enact those relationships has significant impact on the school experience of students.

The article begins with a discussion of RJ in schools, drawing on the literature to explore different forms of implementation and philosophical understandings. I then provide a description of the design of the research

upon which this article is based. Against this background, I discuss findings from the research, one theme each drawn from Scottish educators, Scottish pupils, Canadian educators and Canadian students. In the Discussion section, I explore what the findings reveal about the intersection between educator intentions for the use of RJ and the experience of students, highlighting the importance of attending to school relationships.

RJ in schools

RJ in schools fits under the larger umbrella of peace education, in which education responds to various forms of violence (Galtung 1990) and aims to support the building of just, peaceful and participatory societies (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Bajaj, 2015; Golding 2017). Advocates of RJ, in seeking to build such societies, assert that all people are interconnected. In broad terms, in RJ, harm is viewed as a violation of individuals and relationships rather than as a violation of rules or laws (Zehr 2002). In schools, framing problems as violations of relationships rather than of institutional rules requires a significant shift from a traditional approach to discipline where a broken rule leads to set punishments determined by an authority figure. Some schools adopting RJ, view it as a comprehensive approach affecting all school relationships, policies and practices, a way to nurture healthy school communities; others view RJ as primarily a response to student behaviour or harm, an alternative behaviour management tool (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Morrison 2015).

Evans and Vaandering (2016) take the comprehensive approach, offering a holistic definition of RJ in schools as 'facilitating learning communities that nurture the capacity of people to engage with one another and their environment in a manner that supports and respects the inherent dignity and worth of all' (8). For these schools, RJ is a philosophical and pedagogic approach that addresses the individual needs of students in the social context of their relationships with each other, as well as with teachers, administrators and others. Hendry (2009) states that RJ in schools is fundamentally about proactively building, maintaining and repairing relationships. RJ – philosophically and in practice – directs participants into the complex social, cultural, ethical and historical realities that form and inform classroom environments and the students within them.

With this comprehensive relational approach, RJ attempts to understand the needs and purposes behind harmful behaviour by involving all those affected and giving voice to the multiple and complex narratives that comprise an incident (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Drewery 2004; Kecskemeti and Winslade 2016). Ultimately, RJ seeks to address underlying individual and collective needs and strengthen relationships, thus making school safe and engaging for all its members (Hendry 2009; Hopkins 2011). Such an approach can be understood as part of the increasing move in peace education toward a critical

pedagogy in which a commitment to more just and equitable societies involves providing students with the opportunity to engage with the ideas and practice of voice, participatory citizenship and transformative agency (Bajaj 2015).

In schools, comprehensive RJ is actualized through such practices (among others) as classroom circles, peer mediation and multiparty restorative conferences that encompass both proactive measures that build interpersonal skills and relationships as well as responsive ones that deal with incidents of harm (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Hopkins 2011; Morrison 2007). Common to all practices is a focus on dialogue and understanding the perspective of others (Hendry 2009; Hopkins 2011). The practice of comprehensive RJ is guided by empathy, where a better understanding of each other creates mutually supportive environments and robust, resilient learning communities.

In practice, however, the comprehensive approach is not dominant; RJ is more often used to attend to individual student misbehaviour rather than whole school culture (McCluskey 2013). Schools that first adopted RJ, in the 1990s and early 2000s, implemented RJ as an alternative to suspensions and other exclusionary discipline measures (Evans and Vaandering 2016; Morrison 2015). RJ, in many of these schools, was used as a response to student behaviour or student harm; it was – and often still is – predominantly used as an alternative behaviour management tool.

Although an improvement on purely punitive measures, behaviour management RJ contrasts sharply with comprehensive RJ. While its nominal practice might employ the same or similar techniques, the philosophical objectives are narrower: to promote positive change in individual student behaviour. Success is usually measured by reduced expulsion rates, fewer visits to the principal's office and/or increases in attendance (Jain et al. 2014; Lewis 2009; Wachtel 2012). For the most part, RJ is seen as effective for positive change in individual student behaviour (EIS, 2013; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, and Riestenberg 2006; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales 2004). However, Vaandering (2013) points out that this narrow focus on behaviour and discipline (perhaps inadvertently) redirects attention back to rules and blame, and away from relationships and social engagement. What is lost in that re-redirection, advocates would say, is the creation of a school culture in which people and relationships form the cornerstone of safety, belonging and learning (Boyes-Watson and Pranis 2014; Riestenberg 2012; Vaandering 2013).

In short, the same words and similar practices are used by schools implementing RJ. And yet, RJ can look and feel quite different from one school to another (McCluskey et al. 2008a; Vaandering 2014).

RJ: transformation and/or affirmation

To understand the different implementations of RJ in schools, it is useful to explore the philosophical differences within the field (Aertsen et al. 2013;

Johnstone and Van Ness 2007; MacAllister 2013). Woolford (2009), calling upon Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2000) theory of justice, suggests all responses to injustice can be understood as either affirmative or transformative. Affirmative responses usually deal with individual behaviour without challenging the systemic roots of injustice. This understanding of RJ focuses on addressing isolated incidents of harm and improving individual behaviour. Affirmative practice of RJ might, for example, bring together two disruptive students, hoping through dialogue to change their behaviour and bring order to the classroom. Scholars who advocate for affirmative RJ (among them: Daly 2000; Duff 2001; London 2011; MacAllister 2013; Tonry 2011; Wheeldon 2009) believe RJ improves upon – rather than dismantles – existing systems.

The transformative view, on the other hand, resonates with RJ writers who view RJ as a worldview, rather than just a technique for isolated incidents (Bargen 2011; Eagle 2011; Hendry 2009; Umbreit and Armour 2010; Zehr 2010). This view, aligning with critical peace educators, holds RJ as a radical paradigm shift with the potential to address societal injustices and power imbalances (Bajaj, 2015; Bickmore 2005; Llewellyn 2011; Lyubansky and Shpungin 2016; Sullivan and Tifft 2001; Zehr 1990). Woolford (2009) describes transformative RJ as 'fostering opportunities for individuals and collectives to evaluate their lives and their worlds, and to initiate attempts to bring change into these arenas: to address injustice and to improve the lives of the many' (17).

In the example of two disruptive students, transformative practice of RJ would bring the students, teachers and other school community members together to engage in a dialogue addressing well-being of all involved, the health of school relationships and how everyone's identified needs can be met. Responsive to the actual context and classroom environment, this dialogue could, for example, involve questions addressing and making all the parties aware of: classroom inequities; processes that unfairly target students because of, among others, race or socioeconomic backgrounds; and hierarchies and power relationships. The disruptive behaviour, while not the primary focus, will likely change by effectively addressing root causes. Elliott (2011) succinctly sums up this transformative understanding of RJ: 'In philosophy and practice, restorative justice asks what is necessary to live collectively and as our "best selves"' (5).

How my study enters the conversation

Turning now to how RJ is understood in schools: comprehensive RJ equates with transformation; behaviour management RJ equates with affirmation. The literature suggests that both exist as intentional systems where, depending on their perspectives, RJ theorists and advocates, administrators and teachers see the successful implementation of RJ as either positive behavioural change or increased social engagement.

Morrison and Vaandering (2012) drawing upon Elliott (2011), Morrison (2011) and Zehr (2005), write that institutions embracing RJ experience 'a shift away from being a rule-based institution to a relationship-based institution, or from being an institution whose purpose is social control to being an institution that nurtures social engagement' (145). I argue that this difference in purpose – social control or social engagement – also describes what underpins affirmative RJ and transformative RJ. In my study, I build on but then branch from Morrison and Vaandering's (2012) conceptualization. I disagree that schools that focus on social control are rule-based and those that focus on social engagement are relationship-based. As the students in this study reveal, schools are relational spheres and everything that happens in schools unfolds in this relational context. The defining factor is whether those school relationships are about control or engagement. My research shows that a school that embraces RJ does not necessarily become an institution of social engagement; schools can continue to operate as agencies of social control while embracing RJ. I agree with Vaandering's (2014) later assessment that RJ 'situated in a context of behaviour and management actually reinforces an agenda of control and compliance' (74). Vaandering (2014) focused on educators and their beliefs and intentions. My study is significant in that it holds the educator intentions directly beside the experience of students, providing insight into the impact that differentiated adult understandings of RJ have on students. By attending to students, the focus is then moved beyond RJ to the quality and character of school relationships.

Methodological framework

Participants

This is a comparative case study that examined the intersection between educator beliefs and student experience in one Scottish and one Canadian school. Scotland and Canada were chosen due to their different experience with RJ and significantly different contexts. RJ has deep roots in Canada, tied to First Nations' traditions, Anabaptist religious practice and historical efforts within the criminal justice system (Eagle 2011; Elliott 2011; Vaandering 2009). In Canada, RJ has been applied in schools since the 1990s (Morrison 2007b; Thorsborne 2013). Scotland introduced its first school-based RJ pilot project in 2004, drawing on the experience of other countries to build a specific Scottish model (Hendry 2009; McCluskey et al. 2008b). The schools were selected for similarities in student age (11–13 years old) and duration of their use of RJ (5 years).

Scotland

This secondary school served 600 pupils,[1] 11–18 years old. Located in an economically depressed area, the number of low-income pupils eligible for

free school meals was more than double the Scottish average of 15%; in 2010/2011, 14% of graduates from this school went on to higher education, versus the national average of 36%. The school was ethnically homogenous, White Scottish. The school was seen as a leader for providing additional learning support and attracted pupils with a wide range of needs from outside the catchment area. I focused on first year pupils, aged 12–13 years old, in the winter of 2013. I was in Scotland gathering data for 3 months and in the school itself for three and a half consecutive weeks.

To set the broader context, there ostensibly was systemic cohesion within the education system: educational leaders, policy makers, and educators cohered around professional educator autonomy and student-centred teaching, two themes in the newly implemented national *Curriculum for Excellence*. RJ was intentionally implemented, introduced via a uniquely Scottish pilot project that considered regional contexts and schooling complexities, not formulaic techniques. All staff in the school received professional development on RJ and, in the first year of implementation, 2008, one-third of the staff were trained as restorative facilitators by regional educational psychologists. Although the initial impetus of RJ nationally and regionally was to improve exclusion rates, there was also a more recent effort to go beyond this metric to enhance the quality of school relationships and establish a restorative ethos.

The tension between the initial affirmative impetus and later transformative efforts was apparent in some documents and practices. For example, the language used on the RJ webpage of Education Scotland suggested transformation, emphasizing relationships created within a supportive and fair ethos; yet the website's videos depicted RJ affirmatively, as 'one of the latest behaviour management tools available to teachers.' In the school's staff handbook, the section on RJ advised the deployment of formal sanctions if behaviour did not improve with RJ.

Several adult participants observed that the Calvinist tradition of relying on punishment to alter behaviour continues to reverberate in Scotland, affecting how RJ was understood and implemented. Corporal punishment officially ended in 1987 (1998 within fee paying schools) and was supplanted by punishment exercises and other punitive practices. The national, regional and school RJ documents reflected some of these contradictory impulses along the transformative-affirmative continuum.

Canada

This elementary school in Alberta had about 350 students, aged 3–12. One third were new Canadians, English was an additional language for approximately 80% of the families, and students came from almost 40 different countries. The neighbourhood had three and a half times as many low-income households as the city average and three times as many food hamper users. Similar to the Scottish school, this school was seen as a leader in working

with children with multiple and diverse needs. I focused on the grade 5 and 6 students, aged 10–12 years old, in the Spring of 2013. I was in Alberta collecting data for 2 months and in the school for 5 consecutive weeks.

In contrast to the Scottish education system's apparent systemic cohesion, Alberta was characterized by systemic fragmentation. Albertan educational discourses eschewed talk of vision and instead focused on damage control in the midst of impending budget cuts. There was no provincial or even regional plan to implement RJ in a cohesive fashion; the few documents that mentioned RJ framed it in criminal justice rather than educational terms. There was little official attention paid to RJ within the board, leaving RJ practitioners to their own devices.

Lack of systemic cohesion, however, is traditionally seen in Alberta as more asset than hindrance. In Canada, Albertans see themselves as mavericks, willing to break rules and embrace contradictions. Albertans tend to prioritize individual rights – especially the right to choose – including within education. School administrators could freely choose how best to meet safe and caring standards, as mandated by the province. Independent of any provincial or regional encouragement, this school staff chose to focus on RJ and Rights Respecting Schools (RRS). Staff all originally received RJ training from a local conflict transformation agency, and new staff were encouraged to attend trainings. The school framed RJ and RRS as a combined effort to: ensure students felt safe; build relationships; and give students voice. In essence, the school was short on systemic support and long on staff's personal commitment.

Data collection

Data collection and analysis were conducted through a social constructionist lens where meaning is constructed within relationship (Crotty 1998, 45). Research was undertaken to determine how understandings and experiences of RJ were constructed, interpreted and made meaningful. Data that spoke to the student experience were gathered through student questionnaires, learning circles and co-researcher activities. Data to understand the broad context and educator beliefs were gathered through document analysis, participant observation, interviews, educator questionnaires and educator learning circles. Taken as a whole, the research attempted to illuminate the complex dynamics of students' experiences.

Questionnaires

The student questionnaire focused on direct and indirect indicators of RJ and student perceptions of school. It was based on RJ literature, covering: adult–student school relationships (Blood and Thorsborne 2006; Cavanagh 2011; Morrison and Vaandering 2012); peer school relationships (Bargen 2010;

Cavanagh 2011; Hopkins 2011); handling of conflict (Amstutz and Mullet 2005; Hendry 2009; Hopkins 2011); and decision-making processes (Cronin-Lampe and Cronin-Lampe 2010; McCluskey 2013).

Of the 90 first year pupils in the Scottish school, 47 (52%) completed the questionnaire. In Canada, of 85 grade 5 and 6 students, 38 did (48%). The questionnaires were then used to identify pupils interested in the next research activity: the learning circles.

An educator questionnaire was developed to ascertain how RJ was understood and used by teachers, members of the management teams and other staff. The questionnaire built on Woodbury and Gess-Newsome's (2002) Teacher Centered Systemic Reform model, emphasizing teachers' practice, knowledge, beliefs and goals.

Out of 85 Scottish staff, 25 (29%) completed the questionnaire, 17 identifying as classroom teachers. Out of 47 Canadian staff, 23 (49%) completed the questionnaire, 12 identifying as primarily working as classroom teachers.

Learning circles

Learning circles are focus groups conducted like restorative classroom circles, eliciting stories and thoughts (Kitzinger 1994; Wilkinson 1998). Participants are deemed experts, teaching each other and the researcher about their reality. Student circle conversations focused on their general schooling experience and one of three themes drawn from RJ literature: communication, rules or community. I introduced circle time to students as a chance for me to learn from them and for students to learn from each other. With the educator learning circles, I wanted to learn how teachers perceived RJ and its effect on their students and the school. What sorts of messages did they want to communicate to students through the use of RJ?

Nineteen pupil participants (8 male and 11 female) returned consent forms and participated in learning circles in Scotland; 20 (7 male and 13 female) did so in Canada. In Scotland I ran four pupil learning circles, with four to six participants. In Canada I had five circles, with two to five participants. The shortest was 18 min and the longest 42 min. Circle discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

With the Scottish educators, three circles were held with a total of ten participants (9 female and 1 male), each lasting between 35 and 45 min. With the Canadian educators, four circles were held with a total of 15 participants (14 female and 1 male), each lasting between 45 and 90 min.

Co-researchers

At the end of each student learning circle, I recruited co-researchers. This was described to students as similar to being detectives. The concept of co-researchers built on Grant's (1993) idea of shadowing, where teachers follow

a student in school for a day to better understand the student experience. As a co-researcher, I could *shadow* students as they recorded their experiences and then explained their findings to me in interviews.

In Scotland, out of the 18 learning circle participants, 11 pupils (2 male and 9 female) were co-researchers. In Canada, of 20 learning circle participants, 19 (6 male and 13 female) were co-researchers. Each participating student was given a notebook and chose a pseudonym. They were asked to pay attention for 3 days to their school experience, taking note of everything they saw or heard that felt significant. Taking note entailed whatever they were most comfortable with, including: writing detailed observations, drawing pictures, and repeating direct quotations. I retained the notebooks for analysis.

After the 3-day observation period, I met students individually. In 5–30 min interviews, they explained what they had taken note of, how it related to their general schooling experience, and about the experience of taking notes. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach, I coded the data based on six phases: become familiar with the data; generate initial codes; search for themes; review themes; define and name themes; and produce the report.

TA in my study was a mixture of deductive analysis, driven by my conceptual framework, as well as inductive analysis, driven by the data. The large amount of data collected for this study afforded the two approaches. Data collected from adults in the study – educators, management teams, those outside the schools – were analyzed in a deductive fashion, attending to the affirmative-transformative continuum. Data collected from students, on the other hand, were analyzed inductively. Inductive analysis means that the identified themes are strongly linked to data (Patton 2002), sometimes bearing little relation to the questions asked of participants (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data were coded based on repeating ideas that emerged, regardless of whether they fit within my conceptual framework. It is important to note, however, that my conceptual framework was present even if not used explicitly; data are never coded in an 'epistemological vacuum' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84).

Limitations

In this project, student co-researchers were invaluable to the study of student experience of RJ. Understanding the actual student experience of RJ – rather than the one intended by adults – assists educators in considering more deliberately how to translate their intended message into student experience.

Yet, even in the research described in this article, my adult voice appeared dominant, both in the study's design and in its implementation. To better understand the student experience of RJ, and to better engage students pedagogically, student perspectives should be included in the design of such a study and in the analysis of the results, not only in the implementation of what I had already designed. This project valued students as active partners and co-creators of knowledge; yet more could have been done to ensure that they were 'equal agents of change' in the study (Fletcher 2004).

Findings

My research explored the intersection between adult intentions for the use of RJ in schools and students' experiences. I gathered data on the experience of RJ in two schools, and on the contextual factors in which these experiences were occurring. To frame the research, I asked two related questions: For what purpose was RJ being implemented in the two different schools? And how did students in each school experience the educators' approach to RJ in their school lives and relationships?

For the first question, I drew from contextual documents, and the educator questionnaires and learning circles. This question is attended to in themes one and three.

For the second question, I turned to the student data. Students in both schools were almost completely unaware of the term RJ and this lack of awareness necessitated a reach beyond RJ to the pupils' general experience of schooling. Listening deeply to their portrayal of their broad schooling experience, I coded the data for repeating ideas and themes. As detailed next, in themes two and four, the majority of student comments and observations revolved around the primacy and quality of relationships in the school – student–student and adult–student.

Theme 1: Scottish Educator Perspective: 'So restorative isn't just about, I suppose, order and control.'

In the Scottish school, elements of social engagement were intermingled with elements of social control when using RJ. While educators used RJ to help build empathy and create connections, they also used RJ to bring order and control to their relationships.

Some educators utilized RJ to broaden pupils' perspectives. SE2[2] described her usual approach to classroom issues: 'So usually I speak to them outside the class and I discuss basically, you know, why there's a problem and then what their perception of it is and what my perception of it is and what effect it can have on the others in the class.' Similarly, SE6 used RJ to encourage pupils to empathize with others' feelings, 'And I kind

of put him in the position, "How would you like someone saying those things to you?" "Oh, I wouldn't like it." So when he came back in, I got no more of it, no more of the nastiness.' Although engaged in shaping pupil behaviour, the focus here was on an outcome of empathy and connection rather than order and control.

In the learning circles, most staff felt very positive about relationships they had formed with pupils. Adults recognized how vital those could be to pupils who may have few stable relationships. Many staff members spoke about daily conversations with pupils, from checking in about the weekend to life-changing issues such as pregnancies. They declared that pupils were very open with the staff about their lives and that this built empathy in staff. Many staff recognized mutual benefit in such relationships: 'When you have a good relationship with the pupils you look forward to your work, to coming into work every day' (SE1).

It was rare to hear an educator refer to him- or herself as desiring more authority in the classroom. That said, even when framed in pupil-centred language, many of the personal examples and opinions pointed to an inherent belief of the teacher as final authority, particularly when keeping order within the classroom. As SE1 stated, she uses RJ 'very much as a tool to make the pupils understand that if they've done something where I've had to put them out of class, how it makes me feel about them and their behavior.' The focus was not on discovering the roots of the behaviour or on recognition of mutual accountability, but on *making* the pupil understand the *teacher's* perspective. Similarly, SE4 rejected punitive measures unless she decided it was necessary for classroom management reasons.

Consistent with RJ used as a classroom management tool, there was little mention in the learning circles about amplifying pupil voice; the focus was on pupil behaviour and how to improve it. As SE3 explained, RJ was used 'with the pupils to let them see and understand the consequences of their behaviour.' Interestingly, SE5 offered this observation about the purposes of RJ in the classroom: 'So restorative isn't just about, I suppose, order and control; it's also about teaching them, isn't it?' Although in this discussion SE5 expanded her understanding of RJ to include a role for educating pupils, the comment revealed her primary understanding of RJ as being about the order and control of pupils. Her comment, more explicit than others, was evidence that affirmative RJ existed in the school.

SE1 called for punishment to be used alongside restorative measures, justifying her response by referring to general society: 'What stops people breaking the law? The fear of getting into trouble. There has to be some element in society to stop people disrupting and disregarding the laws and rules of society. If there is no consequence and no punishment, right, therefore society will run in chaos.' SE3 summed up the difficulty in changing views

about punishment, whether belonging to educators such as SE1, or the general public:

> I think the whole Scottish education system is one that's been based in the past on punishment. And people work because the consequence of not working is that you're punished. You know, and so people will do things because, or behave because of the consequence of not behaving.

The reasons for using RJ in this school were not uniform as discussed by the educators: desires for social engagement were intertwined with a strong undercurrent of social control.

Theme 2: Scottish Student Experiences: 'No people can make a change. Not unless you're the Queen'

Pupil–pupil relationships

For pupils in Scotland, their assessment of the quality of pupil–pupil relationships varied greatly. The school was 'like one big family' (Sheldon),[3] because 'sometimes people talk to each other, like, bad, but sometimes we're really nice to each other' (Jemima). Georgia agreed with this, suggesting the school had a community feel since 'you've got a load of people that you ken [know] and even if you're not pals with them, they're still there for you when you need them.'

Conversely when asked specifically about peer relationships on the questionnaire, only 32% felt that pupils respected one another. Jeanne, in her co-researcher interview, summed up the range of relationships pupils navigate:

> Um, well, most of the pupils get along really well. That'd be nice if, like, everyone could get along. And some people, you're scared of 'cause you know that they'll hurt you that bad if you were…… 'cause we got someone in our class that's quite noisy and that, and if you tell 'im to be quiet, he'll go mental and start picking on you. Start being nasty to you or something.

When issues between pupils did arise, most did not feel they were equipped to deal with them themselves. Awesome McAwesome could not imagine pupils resolving an issue without adult support: 'It's always usually the teachers that, like, sort it out. Because if you've just had an argument with someone you wouldn't really want to talk to them about fixing it. So, it's always usually the teachers.' The pupil questionnaires backed this observation. Seventy-five percent of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that adults would help them resolve conflicts; only 29% had confidence that pupils could do it themselves. In the learning circles, pupils who felt they could resolve issues themselves mostly indicated they would do so with force. Co-researcher John did not see himself as aggressive, but was willing to defend himself:

> Like, maybe four, like, three weeks ago. One of my pals was standing on a railing, and I was under him. And he jump off and land... grabbed onto me and smacked my head on the ground. But that was like... I was... so I just got up and whacked him. That stopped him. Ha.

The responses in the learning circles and the co-researcher activities revealed complex and varied pupil interrelationships.

Adult–pupil relationships

Adult–pupil relationships were also seen as complex by students. Eighty-seven per cent of pupil respondents felt respected by adults, all participants could name one adult that he/she trusted and 75% of pupil respondents relied on adults to help them resolve conflicts. This confidence was reiterated in the learning circles and co-researcher activities. Pupils named many adults within the school who treated them well, who were, in their words, 'nice' or 'friendly', spoke to them with respect, explained lessons carefully and gave them room to make decisions.

However, when pupils acted in ways that either broke a rule or was deemed disruptive, pupils were never quite sure how teachers would react. The pupils reported a lack of consistency in adult responses, suggesting that negative behaviour was: often ignored ('A guy was, like, abusing this other guy in class, and the one teacher didn't do anything about it.' – Eve); sometimes confronted with shouting or threats from the teacher ('And the person that wasn't doing anything got sent out. And then the teacher started shouting at them.' – Sheldon); and only occasionally discussed between adults and pupils ('The teachers just usually tell them to stop or, if they don't, they'll take them outside and talk to them' – Springer Spaniel).

The one universal pupil complaint concerned the amount of shouting. Most pupils did not understand why adults shouted, feeling that 'they shout too much. Way too much' (Awesome McAwesome). Although pupils were often baffled by the shouting, Jeanne offered this explanation: 'If one of the pupils are winding up the teachers, the only thing they can do, really, is shout, 'cause they don't have any way to take their anger out.' The prominence of shouting in students' experience contrasted sharply with educators' insistence that shouting was no longer prominent in the school because of RJ.

Yet, most negative pupil–adult interactions were the fault of pupils, according to the pupil participants. Daisy found that 'quite a lot of students talk back to the teacher when they're not meant to.' Pupil sympathy for adults, however, did have its limits. For example, several pupils were critical of adults seemingly giving up on chronically disruptive pupils. As Jemima explained:

> Sometimes the teacher's at fault, sometimes 'cause if someone's being quite nippy [sharp-tongued] someday and they get sent out, the teacher wouldnae give them

a second chance. Which they kinda should, 'cause they didn't mean it or anything. 'Cause some people actually have anger problems and that, so when they get sent out, they're like sent out for the rest of the class, so they don't really get a second chance. And maybe that makes them a bit more upset and angry.

Pupils also were particularly frustrated with teachers who reacted to one pupil's misbehaviour by getting 'angry at the whole class and we end up in trouble for doing nothing' (Daisy).

The perceived unfair treatment of some students led to discussions of voice and trust. In the pupil questionnaire, 64% agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy for them to share their opinions with adults in the school. The number dropped to 51% when asked if pupils help to make decisions in the classroom; here, 21% of pupils either disagreed or strongly disagreed. These numbers were echoed in the learning circles. A few pupils felt confident they were listened to, with Nathalia lauding the senior management team: 'We do kind of have a say in decisions because [the headteacher] is that kind of guy where he, like, notices things and helps a wee bit.' Most other pupils were uncertain whether pupil voice made an actual difference. John cited a recent call for pupil opinions: 'But you know on the sheets, like, our opinion, they willnae get registered as anything, they willnae get used. They'll just be chucked in the bin or something.' Georgia echoed this analysis: 'No people can make a change. Not unless you're the Queen.' Most pupils did not feel their opinions affected decisions. When discussing these matters, one of the core themes that surfaced was trust. Pupils tended to trust in adults – to deal with issues appropriately and to listen to pupils – but often did not feel it reciprocated. The issue of trust embodied the general feeling of many pupils: they appreciated, for the most part, how adults in school related to them; but wanted more of it (trust, voice, second chances) and more consistently.

Relationships, also the cornerstone of RJ, played a central role in the pupil experience of school. Both pupil–pupil and adult–pupil relationships were seen as complex and contextual. Pupils expressed a need for assistance in navigating these relationships and found support from some adults in the school, though this support was inconsistent.

Theme 3: Canadian Educator Perspective: 'I want them to learn how to do it so that people will listen to them.'

Educators in the Canadian School used RJ to realize a variety of objectives. As they discussed these objectives, in questionnaire responses or in learning circles, educators revealed more clearly their own understandings of RJ. Most goals were focused on students, and, although a few tended toward social control, most were about social engagement.

In one section in the questionnaire, educators were asked to define RJ. Four main understandings of RJ emerged: taking responsibility for actions; solving

problems collaboratively; giving voice to all involved; and making things right. These themes were clarified and expanded on in the learning circles.

The most commonly cited goal of RJ mentioned in both the questionnaire and learning circles was to have students take responsibility for their actions. For many, taking responsibility simply made sense. CE5 explained: 'Yep, you made a mistake; we all do. Let's fix it. Let's take responsibility for it and let's take responsibility for fixing it.' In order for students to take responsibility, educators felt students first needed to develop an awareness of others. According to CE9, RJ helped students 'to develop their empathy towards what their actions have done towards others.' This awareness needed to be made explicit since, as CE12 suggested:

> Sometimes they don't know that what they're doing is wrong or how it affects other people because they're just thinking about themselves. 'Well, I was mad because you didn't want to play with me, so I did that.' But then having people explain, 'Oh, when you do that it makes me scared and I don't want to play with you or be around you.'

By understanding how their actions impacted those around them, educators hoped that students would take responsibility for those actions.

Having students engage in collaborative problem solving, was educators next priority for using RJ. Educators hoped RJ would teach students 'skills to be able to talk about problems, to be able to develop skills and vocabulary to talk about problems' (CE9). Those social and communication skills were thought to be beneficial for students in the long term. CE10 offered this assessment:

> It's just a really powerful skill for them to have to solve their own problems. And that's what it teaches, in the end, when they go off into the world on their own, they're going to approach conflict and problem solving in that way, if they've been here long enough to gain that skill.

This goal represented both current and future hopes; as one questionnaire respondent stated, RJ was a 'future-oriented, solution-based approach.'

Another understanding of RJ was that of an approach that gave voice to all participants. Questionnaire respondents appreciated RJ's ability to empower students to express opinions that would otherwise be unheard and to allow students to feel fairly treated. Although the understanding of RJ as an empowerment tool did not surface often in the learning circles, the few educators who raised this as a goal were adamant. CE9 hoped that participating in circles would impact students positively: 'Making them feel like, No, I'm capable; I can solve my problems; I've got some skills. Empowerment.' CE7 more explicitly made this hope part of her practice:

> I'm thinking that they'll be able to stand up for themselves. Because there's a lot of kids that can't voice their concerns. I have a lot of quiet kids that are too scared to rock the boat, kind of thing. So hopefully I'm also teaching them how to stand up

respectfully for yourself, not just mouth off at somebody and go 'Shut up!' at everybody. I want them to learn how to do it so that people will listen to them.

Although not mentioned often, those who did mention the hope that RJ would give voice to students were firm in their belief.

Finally, a few respondents saw RJ as a way to 'make things right.' Incorporating aspects of the other three goals – taking responsibility, collaborative problem solving, and giving voice – making things right was seen as an all-encompassing goal. CE6 discussed kindergarten girls working to do this: 'And the language that they use and the caring that they show towards other people and, even at such a young age, their willingness to admit their mistakes and their efforts to make it better, and to make the school better, it's just, it's really great to see.' Making things right merged aspects of the other goals to a holistic hope that RJ could restore or create better school environments.

The hopes educators had for RJ – taking responsibility, learning to problem solve collaboratively, empowerment, and making things right – did not focus primarily on controlling or changing the behaviour of students. They expressed the desire of educators to help students develop empathy, communication and social skills, and find their voice – indicators of transformative RJ.

Theme 4: Canadian Student Experience: 'You don't have to leave the classroom, really, to solve a problem.'

Student–student relationships

Students in Canada, as in Scotland, portrayed school as a complex web of relationships. They described their school as having a respectful, supportive ethos epitomized by the treatment of newcomers to the school. Students repeatedly discussed their responsibility to ensure that new students felt welcomed in the school. Co-researcher Kiwi explained what happened with someone new: 'We would just catch them. Like, we would say hi already and we would have a big conversation with the new kid. And they would feel comfortable, like, they would feel like they were part of the big family already.' One of the co-researchers, Tay-Tay, shared the experience from a different perspective: 'I think that you should be able to feel included because I was a new kid this year – me and [student] – and we felt really included at the beginning.' As further evidence of this inclusive atmosphere, students shared examples of peer encouragement, standing up for others, and helping peers solve their own problems. RaRa shared this example in the co-researcher interview:

> I liked how people, if somebody was having trouble with something, maybe, like, say, if you were having trouble in math, like, if you had partners, they would come and help you even if they're not your partner. You're allowed to go around helping.

Support was not universal, and students also shared numerous instances of harmful behaviour – gossiping, fighting, bullying – between students. Most of the co-researcher reports focused on examples of students fighting. Students related the incidents with great detail and, often, significant emotion, even if they themselves were not involved. Their reports frequently indicated how the incident was or was not dealt with. Co-researcher Kitty Pie shared a representative example:

> Last week, it was a huge problem 'cause a boy in our class got punched by another boy in the other class and he had a black eye and a bloody nose. And a girl, too, she got, she was being, she felt like she didn't belong to the school because someone was being racist to her. She felt, she felt really, she felt bad for her own colour because she told [teacher] that she didn't want to be that colour anymore, she felt like being a different colour. And the other boy that was, like, yelling at her and stuff started laughing and calling her names in Arabic and swearing at her, making fun of her parents, making fun of her. But then we helped her with the problem. We walked her away, we calmed her down, we made her laugh, we played with her, we gave her cookies, and some of us gave her gum. We talked to her and we talked to the boy, too.

Although fights were a common aspect of student relationships, so was resolving them. Students had almost universal confidence in the ability of their peers – often with adult help – to sort out issues in a satisfactory manner. As Code7 said, 'People actually get along sometimes. And if anyone fights they would actually be solving it. So you wouldn't have to worry about after school, what would happen to you if you got in a fight.' Discussion revealed that teachers could usually be counted on to help solve issues, often through the arrangement of a restorative circle. Students, for the most part, did not feel these processes were imposed upon them; students felt they were equal partners in the solutions. As one learning circle participant expressed it: with circles 'you don't have to leave the classroom, really, to solve a problem. Like you can discuss it with your whole class. And your classmates might have solutions for the problem.' Students felt they were part of a community – for good or bad – and simply trusted that, in the end, issues would be solved.

Adult–student relationships

Although peer relationships dominated student conversations, their relationships with adults also featured prominently. Students felt almost unanimously supported by adults. Overall, students had more faith in the adults in the school than in each other. Only 52% of student questionnaire respondents felt that students respected each other as compared to 87% feeling respected by adults. Soccer thought that relationships with adults were as important as those with other students: 'Everyone in the school has a friend and, like, there is no one in the school that doesn't have anyone to

talk to. There's teachers, there's staff, there's lots of people to talk to.' One of the responsibilities that students attributed to adults was that of enforcing school rules. Rules were understood by pupils as being predominantly about safety and 'getting along.' RaRa believed, like most of the participants, that 'the only reason that there are rules are so we're safe in school.' Soccer explained them this way: 'We have rules and the rules are just the rights of the child. And we respect each other. And we don't make fun of other people and their cultures, language…' Seventy-four per cent of student questionnaire respondents found it easy to talk to adults in the school. Notably, in 3 days of observations by 19 students, there were only two recorded instances of adult behaviour that students found unsupportive – one of a teacher 'by accident' (Shadow007) getting the wrong student in trouble and one of adults ignoring bullying on the playground. Overall, students had confidence on the adults in their school.

Seventy-nine per cent agreed adults in the school would help them resolve conflicts. As Corcork said, 'When we try to solve a problem all the teachers help the students solve the problem so that we can minimize it so it's not as big a problem so we can all get together again.' Although, in the questionnaire, students felt that they would be listened to more readily if they were the one hurt (84%) than the person misbehaving (73%), learning circle and co-researcher participants provided examples in which stories from either 'side' of the conflict were heard equally. RaRa provided a typical scenario in her co-researcher report:

> Like, when [teachers] see kids fighting they come in, like, a little place. And they talk to them about their feelings and they get one story at a time from each person. And the stories are both heard and eventually it gets resolved and they become friends again.

Beyond bringing students together to talk, adults assisted students through other measures to solve issues. At times, students looked to adults to be arbitrators of disputes ['Teacher called them back in and told him not to talk about people's weight 'cause it's rude. And they both said sorry to each other and they started working again' (Code7)]; other times students would seek help directly from teachers ['Sometimes it's just too bad, they need to talk to a teacher about it' (Sophia)]; and some students took advice from teachers to heart ['But the teacher tells us, like, if you rage or if you get angry, take 10 breaths, take 10 steps away and just, like, be calm. Try to be calm' (Monkey)]. The action most often cited as being taken by teachers, however, was arranging a circle discussion in which 'all the kids can be really honest and they can actually share their true feelings' (Sunflower).

Relationships, seen as complex, as in Scotland, played a central role in the Canadian student experience of school. Notably different from the Scottish experience, students in the Canadian school thought that what adults did –

whether in creating rules, enforcing rules or supporting their needs – made sense. The overwhelming majority discussed consistent support from adults in navigating these complex school relationships.

Discussion

Like many RJ practitioners, I embarked on this study with a transformative understanding of RJ. According to this view, RJ is called to 'address injustice and to improve the lives of the many' (Woolford 2009, 17) and transform schools to places 'characterized by possibility, relationship, hope and justice' (Vaandering 2009, 39). This study, which focused on the intersection between educator beliefs about RJ and how students experience RJ, challenged my expectations. While implementing RJ can achieve these objectives – can be transformative and foster social engagement – the evidence also suggests the opposite – that it can and is used as a tool, not unlike more overtly disciplinary approaches, to engender obedience and student compliance. The understandings that educators draw on when enacting RJ have significant impact on how students experience RJ.

Scottish summary: the reality of both/and

The Scottish pupil experience of my participants was layered and complex. It was a reality of 'both/and', as pupils encountered discourses of both transformation and affirmation.

Within the school, pupils experienced a transformed environment in which violence had been radically diminished since the implementation of RJ. Most pupils trusted at least one adult in the school. They had faith that adults would help them sort issues in their lives. Staff often dealt with students' interpersonal issues through restorative conversations; such impromptu conversations were visible throughout the school. Overall, pupils equated the relationships of trust there to those of a family; most pupils embraced the school in all its complexity. The Scottish school appeared, from the broader policy context of systemic cohesion together with elements of its everyday implementation, to be set to be a model of transformative RJ.

In the spirit of 'both/and', however, consistent with contradictory impulses reflected in Scottish national, regional and school RJ documents, most educators saw RJ as a way to help improve pupil behaviour and bring order to the classroom. The educators, while caring about pupils, used RJ primarily as a classroom management tool where staff remained the ultimate authority and classroom norms remained unquestioned.

Pupils, although feeling listened to, were sometimes uncertain how much their opinions mattered. They, in contrast to what adults said, felt that staff were quick to shout and blame pupils unfairly. While pupils empathized with

adults in stressful situations, many did not believe their empathy was always reciprocated. For example, some pupils felt teachers did not often give chronically disruptive pupils second chances. Many pupils in the learning circles desired more empathetic and trusting relationships with adults.

I witnessed a system pursuing a broadly transformative agenda, with a range of initiatives including RJ, coherently supported by people in leadership positions nationally, regionally and within the school. At the staff level, this coherence eroded. I encountered a continuum of beliefs as staff members questioned how restorative and inclusive practical schooling could actually be. By the time RJ reached the classroom, pupils experienced an incoherent mixture of transformative, mutually respectful relationships alongside authoritarian, punitive ones that depended on the particular individuals involved and the particular context.

Canadian summary: individual commitment

The Canadian student experience was as layered and complex as in Scotland. The layers and complexity, however, took on a uniquely Canadian dimension. As in Scotland, the experience was not monolithic.

Within the school, there were many social and pedagogic challenges. Students were at different developmental stages, there was poor staff communication, and many students came from cultures seen by teachers as non-supportive of restorative values. Students provided examples of exclusion, bullying, racism and sexism. Some educators wondered how much control they should relinquish during circle time and where punishment fit within the approach. With such challenges and little coherent systemic support, this school seemed a likely candidate for an affirmative approach of discipline and obedience to flourish.

Instead, signs of transformative RJ were everywhere. Circles were used proactively to build community. Many educators hoped that RJ would empower students and give them voice in both the short- and long-term. Behavioural change, in this school, was not the primary focus. The majority of students expressed a high degree of trust that adults would work with them, listen to them and support them. Importantly, most students felt decisions adults made – including the rules and their enforcement – were not arbitrary, but made sense.

The personal commitment that staff members had to RJ and their views on RJ as developing students not controlling them, resulted in relatively consistent school-wide restorative practices where the experience of students became predominantly transformative. The commitment to transformative RJ originated with teachers, the individuals most directly interacting with students, and was not significantly diluted by the time it reached students.

Holding the studies side by side

As profiled in the aforementioned summaries, each school is complex. When held side by side, the complexity is multiplied. There are no simple explanations as to why and how discourses of affirmation emerged as dominant over transformation or vice versa.

In Scotland, the school in this study would appear, with its systemic cohesion, poised to embrace transformative RJ; the Canadian school, within a context of individualism and systemic fragmentation, would appear to be disposed toward affirmative RJ. Despite contexts suggesting opposite outcomes, the school-level experience in Scotland leaned toward the affirmative and in Canada toward the transformative. The understandings of RJ held by individual educators appeared to most significantly determine whether RJ was experienced by students as affirmative or transformative. Although impossible to predict which school is better poised for long-term sustained reform, current student experience differed according to whether RJ was seen and used by educators predominantly as a tool of social control or social engagement.

The primacy of relationships

Educator use of RJ, however, cannot be partitioned off and examined in isolation from the rest of schooling practices and agendas. Helpfully, the student co-researchers' evidence provided insight into the broader milieu in which RJ is situated. The evidence demonstrated that students' schooling experience – which includes RJ and all other approaches – is mediated and defined almost entirely through and within relationships.

The character of relationships: social control or social engagement

In *No Education without Relation*, Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) state, 'Human relationality is not an ethical value. Domination is as relational as love' (7). Once the centrality of relationships is established, the question shifts to examining what sorts of relationships exist and what the effects of being in different kinds of relationships are.

School, for students, is constituted of relationships and is equated with relationships. They live by and learn through Bingham and Sidorkin's (2004) assertion that education is primarily about humans who are in relation with one another, that 'meeting and learning are inseparable' (5). Relationships are the essence of education. They mediate and animate any and all other curricular objectives (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004; Cavanagh 2011). By using RJ as a window to make school relationships explicit, we are able to examine the quality and character of relationships and, with this, ask questions of how relationships are used to control and/or engage.

The crucial questions, thus, become not about RJ, but about relationships. Are relationships in schools employed to foster social control? Or are they used to facilitate social engagement? Encouragingly, this study demonstrates that RJ, as a research approach, can be used to bring school relationships to the forefront when examining and trying to understand what actually occurs in everyday classrooms. As a research approach, RJ gives us space to ask rigorous questions about the nature and quality of classroom relationships and the concomitant agendas and objectives of educators.

Admittedly, some educators might argue, when the primacy of relationships in students' classroom experience is made evident, that relationships should still be managed to foster discipline and behaviour control in the classroom. Such a limited view, while unfortunate, would at least reframe that type of pedagogic discussion around how to achieve behaviour management within relationship. More constructively, a focus on classroom relationships for their own sake takes us to what is, in my view, the essence of education and could open the door for much more serious scholarship on understanding the nature, nuances and character of classroom relationships and the impact that educator understandings of relationships have on students.

Understanding relationships is central to understanding classroom experience. Attending to classroom relationships in all their complexity opens the possibility of creating classroom environments that are hubs of proactive cooperation, dissent, mutual support, trust, empowerment, communication and the many other hallmarks of transformative, socially engaged, critical peace education. As the student co-researchers testify, students already know that relationships are central to their experience and want the best of what relationships with each other and their teachers can provide.

Conclusion

RJ as a window

Schools are constituted by relationships. Yet relationships are, to borrow from Marshall McLuhan's idea about culture, 'as imperceptible to us as water is to fish' (McLuhan and Parker 1969, 5). We simply exist in relationship.

This study looked at the intersection between educator belief and student experience, asking two questions: For what purpose was RJ being implemented in the two different schools? And how did students in each school experience the educators' approach to RJ in their school lives and relationships?

It was revealed that both transformative and affirmative versions of RJ existed to differing extents in the two schools studied in Scotland and Canada. RJ was used by educators to both control and engage students. In the Scottish school, educators tended to see RJ as a behaviour management

tool and this was experienced by many pupils as fragmented and incoherent support. In the Canadian school, educators tended to see RJ as facilitating social engagement and this was experienced by many students as the provision of comprehensible and consistent support in the navigation of relationships. My study suggests that individual educators are not necessarily swayed by leadership or policy when forming their approach to RJ. That which specifically influences educators' approaches could be an area ripe for further research.

This study demonstrates that RJ is used in the service of whatever the predominant relational objectives are in each unique school. In a school where relational objectives are of social control – focused on compliance, rules, behaviour, and punishment – RJ is utilized to strengthen that control. In a school where the objective is of social engagement – focused on relationships of equality and mutuality, with a focus on empowerment and growth – RJ is utilized to strengthen that engagement.

RJ's power is as a window for making relationships visible. It makes perceptible the water – the school relationships – in which students swim. RJ can be used to ask critical questions about the quality of those relationships. Using what we learn from that, RJ can also foster – if individuals and institutions have the resolve – more constructive relational dynamics in classrooms and schools. Relational dynamics – between all members of a school community – that invite engagement, transform the status quo, challenge punitive systems of discipline, facilitate learning, and embody peaceful, equitable and just societies.

Notes

1. A note about language: *pupils* in Scotland are referred to as *students* in Canada; *principals* in Canada are referred to as *head teachers* in Scotland. I have chosen to use the term most common to the country to which I am referring. When writing about both cases or more generally, however, I default to the term most common to Canada.
2. Adult participants are identified with numbers; for example, Scottish Educator 1 (SE1), or Canadian Educator 1 (CE1).
3. All names are student-selected pseudonyms.

Acknowledgments

opening their schools and their lives for this study. Deep appreciation to Dr. Lorna McLean, University of Ottawa, my thesis supervisor, and to Dr. Gillean McCluskey, University of Edinburgh, for hosting the Scottish portion of this study. Sincere thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript who provided constructive and substantive advice.

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