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A Missing Piece: Embedding Restorative Justice and Relational Pedagogy into the Teacher Education Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, restorative justice (RJ) has been increasingly embedded in school policies and practice, primarily as a method to correct individual behavior. RJ, however, has a deeper potential, to help students build relationships and make school safe, equitable and relevant for its members. RJ is a growing social movement – globally and in Canada – that practices peaceful, constructive approaches to violations of legal and human rights. Yet, there is little understanding for how to introduce RJ to teachers so that they are supported to tap into this deeper potential in a sustainable manner. This manuscript provides a discussion of RJ as it is currently understood, implemented, and institutionalized, and we present data collected via focus groups with former teacher candidates enrolled in an RJ-focused teacher education course facilitated through relational pedagogy. The data highlights participants' perceptions of RJ, the relational pedagogy approach of the course and the impact of the course on participants' learning experiences. We draw from this data to make a case for embedding the philosophies of RJ and relational pedagogy into teacher education classrooms in order for teacher candidates to develop relationship-building competencies and a capacity to implement RJ in effective, holistic and sustainable ways.

Restorative justice (RJ) is a multi-layered concept that does not easily lend itself to a universal definition (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Woolford, 2009). Although the terms restorative practice, restorative approaches or restorative measures are used in the international community, in this Canadian study the term RJ is used to refer to the philosophical approach that views harm as a violation of people and relationships rather than as a violation of rules or laws (Zehr, 2002). RJ is a growing social movement – globally and in Canada – that practices peaceful, constructive approaches to violations of legal and human rights and is "about learning to live in a better relationship with oneself and others" (Boyes-Watson, 2008, p. 8). The centrality of relationships makes RJ

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relevant not only to the justice system, but to most social organizations, including schools.

The processes that are currently referred to as restorative have long been evident in Indigenous communities, especially before European colonization (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). And with educators and philosophers historically arguing that schools need to educate the heart as well as the mind (Dewey, 1909; Pestalozzi, 1818), RJ's emphasis on learning to develop respectful, mutually supportive relationships offers powerful potential for teaching and learning. In recognition of this, schools are the fastest growing area for the practice of RJ (Morrison, 2015), yet there are discrepancies in how RJ is understood, implemented, and institutionalized. Most often RJ is utilized as a program focused on correcting individual student behavior (Morrison, 2015; Reimer, 2018). However, scholars have noted that RJ has a deeper potential to create the conditions for personal and social change, address injustices behind rule-breaking behavior in schools, and ensure that school is safe and relevant for all its members (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Riestenberg, 2012). The question remains, however: How do educators tap into the potential for RJ to foster school communities in which individuals feel connected and systemic issues are addressed? In this article, we provide a description of RJ as it is globally understood and practiced and then how it is particularly situated in a Canadian context. We describe the core principles of RJ and how this lens was used to design and implement a course in teacher education at an Ontario university. Finally, through data collected from course evaluations, student reflections, and focus groups with nine course participants one year after graduation, we examine teacher candidates' perceptions of RJ and the relational pedagogy approach of the course. Throughout the article, we make a case for embedding the philosophy of RJ into teacher education classrooms in order for teacher candidates to develop capacity in relational pedagogies and to implement RJ and relational pedagogies in effective and sustainable ways.

Restorative justice in schools

Framing problems in schools as violations of relationships rather than of institutional rules of order (Morrison, 2015) requires a significant divergence from schools' traditional approach to discipline in which punishment is meted out by an authority above when a rule is broken. Recognizing the need to explore alternatives to suspensions, expulsions and other punitive disciplinary measures, some schools in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand became early adopters of RJ in the 1990s and 2000s (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Morrison, 2015). RJ, in many of these schools, was used as a response to student behavior, bringing together those most affected to collectively find substantive solutions for student discipline issues (Bargen, 2010; McCluskey et al., 2008; Morrison, 2007).

When an incident would occur – for example, a fight between two students – rather than suspend the students, the students and others affected would engage in a process in which they would reflect on what had happened, who had been harmed, how they had been harmed, and they might decide upon an action plan for what they could do to make things right. With the focus resting on student behavior and responding to harm, RJ was predominantly used as an alternative behavior management tool rather than an approach to build and maintain relationships throughout the school.

More recently, however, there has been a further shift in thinking and practice. Although RJ still finds traction in many schools as a behavior management tool, some schools are implementing RJ as a more comprehensive approach to nurturing healthy school communities (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Morrison, 2015). Buckley and Maxwell (2007) advocate for this shift by pointing out that if used only as a behavior management tool RJ "not only runs the risk of being identified as another form of punishment, but also of having its greater impact and implications being ignored" (p. 18). That greater impact, advocates would say, is the creation of a restorative school culture in which people and relationships form the cornerstone of safety, belonging and learning (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Riestenberg, 2012). Evans and Vaandering (2016) offer a comprehensive view of RJ in education, defining it 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" (p. 8). They suggest that there are two core beliefs central to all RJ processes in schools: That all human beings are worthy and that we are all interconnected. These core beliefs play out in a continuum of restorative practices, ranging from classroom meetings to peer mediation to multi-party restorative conferences. Hendry (2009) views the continuum as having three connected stages: The building, maintaining, and repairing of relationships.

Repairing relationships–the response to harm or conflict–has traditionally been the focus of schools with a restorative approach. With the shift to creating a restorative school culture, the focus moves to the other two components that Hendry (2009) mentions: the building and maintenance of relationships. In this view, to work restoratively places value on the quality and health of relationships between the people in the school community (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

RJ and relationships

This focus on building and maintaining relationships is crucial in schools since education is relational. As Fullan and Langworthy (2013) write:

> Learning is rooted in relationships, and supportive relationships can unleash the potential of every student. Yet few teacher preparation programs provide teachers

> with explicit guidance on how to build these relationships especially with students whose life experiences may be quite different from the teacher's own. (p.14)

Relationships are such a constant that they often remain unexamined in schools, and rarely are effective relational pedagogies explicitly taught and modeled in teacher education (Reimer, 2018).

At its core, RJ is about relationships and relationships are not neutral. A relational view is fundamentally concerned with understanding the character and conditions of relationships (Llewellyn, 2011). As Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) write, "Human relationality is not an ethical value. Domination is as relational as love" (p. 7). Bishop, Ladwig, and Berryman (2014), in a study focused on Maori students, learned that in classrooms where teachers reproduced society-wide power imbalances and demonstrated low expectations for students, students reciprocated with low educational achievements. In contrast, students thrived in classrooms characterized by caring relationships and high expectations (Bishop et al., 2014). Kecskemeti and Winslade (2016) propose a relationship-centered approach to teaching. Understanding that relationships can either support or hinder teaching and learning, however, they ask a crucial question, "What are the relational conditions that optimize opportunities for learning?" (vii). The question accepts that relationships are inherent in education and turns the attention to the *quality of those relationships.*

Relational and circling pedagogy

In restorative schools, the intentional nurturing of relationships is most commonly seen in the use of relational pedagogy and the social technology of circles, in which spaces are created for the sharing of individual and collective ideas and needs (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Riestenberg, 2012). It is in circle, Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015) write, that classes or groups are "practicing basic ways that are fundamental to being successful together" (p. 23). They are building and maintaining relationships.

Establishing and maintaining a climate of care, trust and autonomy in the classroom are at the heart of relational and circle pedagogy. In simple terms, according to Crownover and Jones (2018), relational pedagogy is "the systematic construction of appropriate relationships embedded within the schooling process" (p. 18). When teachers are aware of and explicitly focus on the quality of their interactions with students, relationships develop organically and through deliberate instructional methods to build classroom communities that promote academic, social, and emotional growth (Crownover & Jones, 2018; Rees & Le Mare, 2017). One such deliberate instructional method used to develop, maintain, and restore relationships is the social technology of circles. The circle (commonly referred to in schools as talking circles, community circles,

classroom meetings, conflict circles, or peacemaking circles) is a highly structured space where all participants physically sit facing each other. In a circle, the usual indicators of hierarchy are absent, which signals an intentional focus on mutual connection, understanding and dialogue (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Brown (2017) names circles as the most flexible of restorative processes, being used for intentionally building relationships, but also for teaching content.

As pedagogy, circles are spaces for students to engage in content and try new skills. Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015) suggest that circles develop student voice, used as a space for "articulating one's ideas, for critical thinking, and for sharing one's views" (p. 69). Circles, Bickmore (2014) writes, provide "dialogic learning opportunities" (p. 177). Brown (2017), in her study, found that circles helped to build a listening culture in schools in which students learned ways to engage with one another and the curriculum. Through circling processes, students practice emotional literacy, including the practical habits of: respect, problem solving, listening, curiosity, empathy, responsiveness, perspective-taking, responsibility, and shared leadership (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Hopkins, 2011). Circles are a way of coming together that encourages the practicing of relationships.

Encouraging the paradigm shift

The success of RJ in schools, therefore, is not measured in behavior modification, but by the change in the quality of social relationships that result (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). Yet there is a tension between the neoliberal individualistic conception in which North American schools operate and a focus on the primacy and quality of relationships. Educators experience this tension in schools, feeling the need to manage and bring order to student behavior while at the same time recognizing that they, as teachers, are "in the business of relationships" (Thorsborne, 2013, p. 48). In a study of the use of RJ in schools, Reimer (2018) found that RJ is used in schools in the service of the predominant relational objectives–whether to control or engage. A paradigm shift is required for those implementing RJ to not only focus on relationships, but to ensure those relationships are just, caring and about honoring rather than controlling students. Simply implementing RJ does not equate with a paradigm shift in educators and in school culture.

The paradigm shift required to create a restorative culture–with a focus on the primacy and quality of relationships–is impossible to achieve with short-term thinking or through traditional teaching methods. Kathy Evans, the head of an RJ Education Graduate Program, wrote in a 2014 blog entry, "The type of educational changes we are hoping for cannot be accomplished in a few hours or 3-day-long sessions. … In our haste to make sure teachers are 'trained' in restorative justice, we must ensure that they aren't just learning a new set of skills, procedures, or practices" (Evans, 2014). Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007)

echo Evans's comments by arguing that teacher candidates *need to experience* that which they are learning to teach. Paradigm shifts cannot be trained or read in a textbook (Adamson & Bailie, 2012; Mezirow, 1978, 2000). The way to bring about the paradigm shift needed to create a restorative school culture is to create such a restorative culture amongst those eventually tasked with implementing RJ.

In this vein, Vaandering (2015) created a restorative professional learning program for teachers. Explicitly embodying the philosophical foundation of RJ, the program invited an individual and collective exploration of relationships–with self, other adults, students, amongst students, with pedagogy, curriculum, and institutional structures. The two-week program, she found, allowed teachers to understand, question, practice, and, importantly, experience RJ within a learning community.

Yet, Vaandering's (2015) program was still a short-term institute and offered to individuals in the midst of their teaching career. Such a dialectical experience was not part of their education and induction into becoming a teacher. It is rare to find RJ infused into Canadian teacher education programs. If discussed at all, RJ is usually mentioned at a surface level, as one among many topics that teacher candidates are invited to seek out beyond the program offerings (Reimer, 2018). So how do educators tap into the potential for RJ to foster a socially responsible school community in which individuals feel connected and systemic issues are addressed? What role does teacher education play in supporting such an endeavor? Can an RJ-infused experiential course offered during teacher education influence a paradigm shift for teacher candidates? These are the questions on which an elective teacher education course, introduced in a Canadian Faculty of Education in 2011, was founded. This qualitative study's findings report on teacher candidates' views of the RJ-focused course and its impact.

Course description

The second author developed the elective course, *Creating healthy, safe, and supportive learning environments*, to provide teacher candidates with a transformative learning experience–about RJ and through RJ–before they become immersed in school culture, attending to the dialectical relationship between theory and practice needed for paradigm shifts to take hold in schools. This was, however, only one course students chose within their Canadian teacher education program; The rest of the program was not explicitly grounded in a similar relational or restorative framework. Teacher candidates and instructors both identified tensions between the content and relational pedagogy engaged in this elective course compared with the teacher candidates' experience of the rest of their teacher education program. These tensions emerge in the findings to be discussed later.

In the first iteration of the course, the emphasis was on establishing a healthy learning community amongst the teacher candidates that was dynamic and rigorous. Students reflected on challenging educational issues and developed a critical perspective on current teaching practices, conducting an Inquiry into the Familiar (IITF) in which they researched the history, philosophy and effectiveness of educational practices that they deemed to be typical in Canadian schools (raising hands to answer questions; assigning homework; detentions for misbehavior). Within this learning community, students studied and practiced RJ experientially through the use of classroom circles. In the second iteration of the course, of which the first author was the instructor, the course design expanded to expose students to a variety of relational pedagogical structures (including circles) that support the philosophy of RJ. The first author drew inspiration for the course and her teaching from her own experiences as a Tribes Learning Community (TLC),[1] trainer with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), school administrator, and teacher leader.

In 2015, the elective course consisted of 10 three-hour-long classes. Teacher candidates engaged with relevant topics, such as school safety, mental health and wellness, and building healthy school relationships. Each class had a similar structure: An opening community circle, smaller literature circles, an energizer activity, a guest speaker or an example of a relational instructional strategy[2] and a closing community circle. For the opening and closing circles, the students from the class set the guidelines for the circling process collectively (see Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) and reviewed them each class. Discussions within the circles were based on the course themes but often moved to more personal, challenging topics, such as values, insecurities, pressures or constraints, hopes for the future, and areas of confusion or tension related to their professional roles and responsibilities. Each week, in the teacher-assigned literature circles, students would rotate between roles (chair, reporter, note-taker) to discuss the required texts and present their IITF assignment. A different group each week was responsible for leading the opening circle, energizer activity, and the closing circle, which were based on the class needs in relation to community building. For example, in earlier weeks, leading groups would organize circles focused on getting to know one another, whereas later circles opened up spaces to have more difficult conversations. Students were required after each class to reflect in writing on their successes and struggles in relation to their role in building, maintaining, and restoring relationships within their small groups and the larger class community. The professor would respond to each reflection with

[1]Tribes Learning Communities (Tribes TLC®) is a research-based elementary, middle and high school program that promotes academic, social and emotional development by creating a positive learning environment. The Tribes group development process focuses on resiliency and the stages of human development (www.tribes.com).

[2]The weekly activities and instructional strategies were described with their rationale and extension options for students to reference on the first author's blog.

comments and questions in an effort to model the construction and maintenance of positive teacher-student relationships.

The course has been offered now for eight consecutive years. From the first iteration of the course in 2011, student evaluations have consistently ranked the elective course as "excellent" with students reporting in the qualitative comments that it should be mandatory for its impact on their teaching and learning experience. As professors interested in how to support educators in embedding RJ and relational pedagogies into classroom practice, these results were exciting and worth examining further. In particular we were interested in the impact of the course on teacher candidates' learning experiences and their perspectives on the applicability to their future classroom practice.

The current study

Grounded in a social constructivist position, we sought to develop a provisional understanding of RJ as developed through our participants' experiences and their interactions with the socio-cultural environment (Proulx, 2006). A social constructivist frame can help to generate an understanding of the meaning of RJ constructed from participants' points of view and can provide insight into how these meanings were shaped and then influenced participants' experiences and interactions (Glasersfeld, 1989). Throughout the project, we prioritized our participants' voices but were also reflexive of our own interpretations of the phenomenon of RJ–interpretations that shaped the development of the research and the data collection processes. We made further interpretations while transcribing the interviews, analyzing the data, and then in writing up the final results. As such, we acknowledge that, as researchers, we have an intimate and necessarily influential role in the construction of the research data.

Participants

Our study focused on the experience of teacher candidates enrolled in the course in 2015. As an elective course, participants represented a variety of disciplines (i.e., language arts, physical education, science, mathematics, and social sciences, etc) and levels (i.e., primary/junior, junior/intermediate, and intermediate/senior). The study used data collected from the course evaluations completed by 32 out of 39 participants, as well as students' final course reflections. Additionally, all 39 members of the class were invited by email to participate in a focus group, nine months following the completion of the course; nine teacher candidates (three females and six males) agreed to participate. Prior to the course, all participants had little to no previous experience with RJ and none had experienced explicit relational pedagogy in a university setting as students. At the time of the focus groups, all the participants had graduated from the

teacher education program and were licensed to teach in Ontario. It is uncommon in Ontario for newly licensed teachers to have full contracts in traditional K-12 schools upon graduating from their teacher education programs. As such, none of our participants were fulltime tenure-track classroom teachers; yet each participant was involved in education in some capacity (e.g., as occasional teachers, teacher in an international school, and a graduate student of education).

Focus groups

Focus group data were collected at three points: (1) in-person with one female and three males; (2) online with one female and two males; and, (3) online with one female and one male. All focus groups were 1.5 to 2 hours in length; each participant contributed to only one focus group discussion. The online focus groups took place through synchronous chat software. As many of the participants had moved to new locations to seek out teaching opportunities, it was crucial that we offered online focus groups as one option.

Focus groups were particularly suited for this study as they mimicked the features of circling and allowed for interactive and intensive discussions whereby participants co-constructed their understandings in a shared environment (Kitzinger, 1994). Furthermore, focus groups position participants as experts of their social worlds and can help to reduce unequal power relations amongst the researcher and participants that can manifest in individual interviews. The third author used a semi-structured interview guide (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006) to conduct the focus groups, allowing for flexibility. We were especially sensitive to ambient power dynamics as their former instructor (the first author) was present at each of the focus groups (in a note-taking role). The decision to have the instructor present was made to tap into the strong teacher-student relationships that had been developed through the course to enhance openness in the focus group. Difficult conversations and the space to challenge RJ and its use in schools were an important part of the course design and it was felt that the instructor would provide a familiarity for participants. The focus groups were conducted after participants had successfully graduated from the program and all expressed comfort to discuss the course in this format and were pleased to reconnect as a community. However, as researchers, we recognize the added complexity and potential limitations of this decision.

Course evaluations and student reflections

In this study, data were also collected from the University's official "Evaluation of Teaching by means of Student Questionnaire" that had both quantitative and qualitative elements and the students' non-evaluative final reflections that were

completed as part of the RJ course. Three sentence starters guided the students' final reflection: I used to think … Now I think … and I will … .

Data analysis

We relied on Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis to code and categorize all data (i.e., focus group transcriptions, course evaluations, and student reflections). Thematic analysis is a useful method for summarizing core features of phenomena found within the data set and can help researchers to generate unanticipated insights. Thematic analysis does not seek to theoretically describe complex processes, such as in grounded theory, but rather aims to elucidate descriptive patterns found in the data. In this study, a thematic analysis was conducted in the following steps: (1) exporting the textual data from the discussion forum, course evaluations and student reflections into a word document, and transcribing the in-person focus group; (2) becoming familiar with the data; (3) generating preliminary codes through line-by-line coding (community-building, experiential, circles, reflection, positive relationships, connections, vulnerability, trust, disconnect, empathy, facilitates learning, connections, way of being); (4) grouping codes to represent familiar phenomena (course experience, community and relationship building, personal impact and transformation, instructional technologies, in-school experience, tensions); (5) defining/refining themes through subsequent review of data and preliminary codes (RJ as a way of being; anchored in relationships; and requiring a restorative school culture); and, (6) producing the final report. Although Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of analysis are presented in a linear fashion, we agree with Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) that our analysis was a reflexive process where we often moved iteratively, oscillating between many phases. To begin the formal data analysis process, the first and third authors read and discussed their general perceptions of the data. Preliminary codes and themes were constructed and revisited. Through discussing these themes with the second author, the first and third author drew further analytical conclusions of the data. All authors were involved in drafting the manuscript.

The aim of this study was to glean the influence of this Canadian university course taught through the lens of RJ and relational pedagogy on teacher candidates one year after graduation. Three themes emerged from the data analysis process: RJ as *a way of being*, RJ as *anchored in relationships*, and RJ as *requiring a restorative school culture*. It is important to note that these three themes are interconnected and may overlap at times during the discussion, especially in some direct quotations from focus group participants.[3] Support from the research literature and study data are also interwoven into the combined results and discussion section.

Results and discussion

Students' course evaluations and reflections

Respondents to the 2015 student evaluation questionnaires ranked the course as "excellent" (4.9/5.0) and agreed that they "learned a lot in this course" (4.81/5.0) and would "recommend the course" (4.9/5.0). When asked what they liked about the course and the teaching in the anonymous qualitative comments section, students highlighted the "opportunities to experience and practice different community building activities," the "hands-on aspect of the course," "the great atmosphere of trust and understanding," "building relationships," and "a new way to teach, share, and be taught with many ideas I would bring to my future classroom." When asked how the course and/or the teaching could be improved, students noted that they would have liked "If we are able to observe restorative practices in classrooms," "more exposure to themes in context (e.g., more field trips!)," "a smaller class size," a more authentic way to evaluate the literature circles beyond peer assessment, and more focus on issues such as "mental health, racism, homophobia, sexism, and cyberbullying" as well as other systemic power relations and structures in schools. Many students also noted that "the course should be compulsory" and that "restorative practice and related material should be essential learning for all Bachelor of Education students." Although feedback from official course evaluations is valuable, instructors only have access to this data months after the course ends. As such, in-class student final reflections not only offer more immediate feedback but can yield useful information directly related to instructors' interests, such as the ways (if any) the course changed students' perspective of RJ and relational pedagogies. Interestingly, all 39 student responses showed both a significant change in understanding as well as a written commitment to embed key tenets into their future classrooms. For example, whereas one student noted that "I plan to create classroom community through circles, restorative practices, and building relationships," another wrote:

> I used to think that restorative practices were somehow separate from traditional discipline and only used surrounding conflict. Now I think that restorative practices are used to build community not just 'restore' it. I will bring restorative practices into my practice! (I already have on Thursdays [during practicum placement]) and always be cognizant of community and what I can do/facilitate to build it and collaboratively co-create it.

From the course evaluations and student reflections, it was clear that teacher candidates enjoyed the course and that it had had an impact on them. However,

[3]Focus group participants are referred to by pseudonyms that were self-selected during the data collection phase of this study.

an examination of this view and impact nine months later frames this study's thematic analysis of the three focus group discussions.

RJ as a way of being

As emerged in this study, the opportunity to practice RJ and relational pedagogies was rarely experienced in our participants' Canadian Bachelor of Education context. This is supported in the research literature that has shown teacher education has traditionally tended to focus more on mental and technical expertise rather than emotional literacy, relationship building, and personal sharing (Jackson & Boutte, 2018; Reimer, 2018). As noted by one participant, Caesar, "There was very little emphasis on that in our program here. It was just one technical thing after another. It was this quantity thing." For Marcia, "that was one of the neatest things, that we were actually practicing that idea and not just talking about it." Also, as Ben highlighted, providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to engage with the ideas of RJ as praxis opened up the possibility that they could use this approach in their future classrooms:

> Had I not experienced it first hand, I would have likely felt uncomfortable with the idea that I could pull it off on my own. Having the experience with me makes it easier to envision myself implementing it in my future classes.

Hence, implementing RJ into the teacher education classroom goes deeper than teaching students a set of practices, such as circling. Instead, it must be embedded into all areas of the classroom climate, which includes the design and delivery of course syllabi, learning activities, assignments, and assessments. Best summed up by Caesar, "It can't be done once in a while, but requires commitment to relationships and the process inside and out of the classroom." Hence, RJ is more than just a set of things we do; it is a framework for how we view teaching and learning and calls for a paradigm shift, or as Nancy Riestenberg notes, "a change in both the head and the heart" (as cited in Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p.xvi).

In order for RJ to become a way of being, teacher candidates' existing philosophies about teaching, learning and schooling must be illuminated, discussed and questioned. The student final reflections offer interesting insight into the type of views that might exist. For example, one student wrote that they used to think "using restorative practices would give up 'power' or 'authority'" but now thinks RJ can "remove the authoritarian feeling that some students sense in school." Another wrote, "I used to think that desks and rows were necessary components in the secondary school classroom" and "I now think that circles are an extremely powerful way to engage students and create safe and healthy learning environments." In the course feedback, students noted an appreciation for the variety of instructional strategies used each

class to help illuminate and challenge existing beliefs and practices, especially the weekly literature circles with accompanying IITF assignment, and the "put yourself on the line" and "inside/outside circles" tactics (see Gibbs, 1994).

A critical element in a transformational shift in thinking (Mezirow, 2000) is the challenge to the status quo. Although some teacher candidates reported that this was "exciting", others found the initial experience "anxiety-inducing," "daunting" and "unsettling". As stated by Caesar:

> I just remember the first time I walked in. I think a lot of us had that impression- it was like that everything was pushed to the outside wall and you walked in and it was a big circle and you were like "oh no! It's a bloody circle! I can't hide behind my desk, right? I'm going to have to like talk to people I don't know.

Respecting how challenging a personal paradigm shift can be, students needed to feel safe and supported in the learning environment, as well as challenged to take risks. As Madame shared, "we need to work hard to deconstruct the way we've been taught. If it's modelled it's easier to figure that out." Although replacing desks with a "big circle" at the start of the course signals an obvious challenge to the status quo in terms of physical layout, as Ellen noted:

> The way of being is shown in the structure of the class, the syllabus and the tasks … it pushes against a comfort zone from the very beginning- acknowledging how we feel in this structure and reflecting critically on why this is.

Specifically, participants noted that unlike experiences in more traditional university classrooms where students "were used to desks"(Jake) listening to the instructor review the course syllabus, this first class was "unconventional" (Tom) because it required students to engage in a series of "warm up activities to break the ice"(Em), learn each other's names, and share how they were feeling about the course structure in a community circle.

As Boyes-Watson (2008) notes, relational pedagogies such as the circle process are often met "with skepticism, sarcasm, distrust, and animosity" (p. 9). This study's participants acknowledged feeling similar sentiments. For Marcia:

> I HATED IT! Hahaha! I was actually considering how to switch courses. Honestly, I found it juvenile, as it reminded me of a kindergarten class. Now, I can't wait to have my own class so that I can introduce this approach myself. Why kindergarten? Departure from regular classroom format – last time in circles was in kindergarten.

Although the circle format has a long history as a form of communication for spiritual, political and communal life throughout world traditions (Restorative Practices International [RPI], 2018), for many adults the last time they may have experienced a circle was during their primary schooling years. For Marcia, like many teacher candidates, although she was "skeptical at first," she "learned to love the circle process and appreciated what it had to offer." As noted by Isaac, it became "a safe place to get away from the chaos

outside the classroom- the assignments, the stress, the insomnia." And as Ellen summed up, "The course really felt like such a nice escape from the more traditional courses we had to take at teacher's college."

RJ as anchored in relationships

Relationships are at the heart of teaching and learning. With many studies linking positive student-teacher relationships to academic achievement and learning (Hattie, 2012; Smith, Frey, Pumpian, & Fisher, 2017), teacher candidates have long been encouraged in teacher education to build and foster positive relationships with and among students. This is, as Smith et al. (2017) highlight, "easier said than done" due to time constraints, cultural differences and lack of experience (p. 37). In this study participants also reported little guidance or support on how to do this in their future classrooms and rarely experienced it in their university classes as students. They also noted that relational pedagogies, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Ministry of Ontario, 2013), and RJ were often isolated to side-discussions or taught as content topics rather than experientially, which other studies have shown can lead to a devaluation of their importance as an approach to teaching and learning (see DiBara, 2007; Gist, 2017). However, by focusing on and experiencing what it takes to build, maintain, and repair relationships, a sense of community developed in this course. For Ellen, "It was so great to have a place to actually reflect on how we were feeling and see how others had similar (or different) experiences to us and to see the value in that." Thus, students not only became aware of their own emotions and learning, but also their influence on others. As Marcia remarks:

> While I was skeptical at first, I learned to love the circle process and appreciated what it had to offer. First, it allowed me to trust complete strangers; I shared personal information with people I barely knew. Second, the setup of the class (sitting in circles with nothing around us- no distractions) allowed me to be fully attentive to my surroundings and the conversations around me. Lastly, it made me conscious about my choice of words and how they might be interpreted or the impact they have on the people in the room.

For many study participants, the prioritization of relationships and social-emotional learning in the classroom is undervalued in classrooms and seen as too "touchy feely." However, as Ellen noted, teachers are the "ones who have the opportunity to build relationships with these students and have the potential to impact how students view and interact with others." The value of attending to relationships was also echoed by Em:

> It is such an important thing- social relationships. That's the hardest thing that we have to do, so the more practice we get at it, the more we can try [to improve] … if there is anything that you can get out of [teacher education], maybe that's it.

As noted in the research, whereas these behaviours are natural for some candidates, for others they need to be practiced and cultivated (Smith et al., 2017). For Madame, there was a general assumption that in order to gain entry into the Bachelor of Education programs, candidates already had the required social-emotional expertise:

> We all grew up as healthy adults who know how to relate to other people. So having it taught makes it seem redundant. But learning about it helps you see the depths of what you already know or feel, or to learn and become aware of patterns in your actions. So I think that it is so important and that it should be taught. But how it should be taught is the question.

By experiencing RJ and relational pedagogies in this course, candidates built competency in how to forge more positive relationships and nurture academic skills alongside social skills. As noted in their final reflections, for some candidates this led to a change in their thinking: "I used to think that this 'community building' stuff was mushy stuff and that a successful classroom can proceed without it. Now I think that community building activities are essential for a learner's success."

As noted in the literature review, relationships are not neutral. Conflict is an important part of a healthy community; this RJ course was not immune to challenging situations and relational conflict. Instead, what was emphasized in times of conflict were the RJ principles that every member be treated with dignity, equality and respect and that conflict is an opportunity for learning. As Ellen highlighted:

> I was in a literature circle group with some pretty strong personalities and sometimes I found myself getting slightly frustrated with them … but we were in this environment where we were constantly discussing and reflecting on empathy and understanding and considering others' experiences so it made it easier to handle and learn from what would have otherwise been a challenging experience.

The opportunity for teacher candidates to explore the ways they and others respond to challenging relationships, as well as consider the ways to restore community through RJ was valuable learning beyond the classroom setting. According to Ben:

> It definitely made me think about my relationships with students. Relationships with colleagues … it made me more aware of the challenges that colleagues are facing and how everyone deals with them.

Focus group participants also shared that this class prompted them to be more aware of the disconnect they saw amongst students in their practicum classrooms. For Marcia:

> When I look at many classrooms today, students are seated individually, like little dots on a sheet of paper, but when you introduce a circle, the students are all connected infinitely and become accountable for each other.

All participants noted that from this course, a focus on building, maintaining, and restoring relationships had influenced their understanding of teaching and learning and they were hopeful that they could implement it in meaningful, structured, and sustained ways. The problem in sustaining a relational focus, they noted, was not rooted in their commitment to restorative philosophy and practice, but was found in the surrounding dominant school and societal culture.

RJ requires a restorative school culture

Although passionate about using RJ and relational pedagogies in their own classrooms, all study participants stressed that it needs to be implemented consistently throughout the school. For Caesar, as noted earlier, RJ is a "way of being" and hence must extend beyond one classroom's walls:

> It should be an experiential thing. So even if you have one class, the moment that you unplug from the class and go to the next one, it's hypocrisy in the kids' minds, because they don't believe it, because other people don't support it … if there is no community buy-in then it is meaningless. So it's totally, for me, it's absolutely worthwhile and essential, it goes beyond just students. My question is how do we integrate this into people's lives that has meaning, a deep meaning, a lasting impression? And we gotta live it, it has to be actually lived.

"Living" it in schools means that RJ becomes a part of the quality and character of the school life. It is not separated from the rest of the school but is congruent with and emanates from the relationships that exist between and among staff, students, family and community (Smith et al., 2017). In order to change the behavior in the classrooms and playgrounds, school staff must also "walk our talk with each other" (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013, p. 217). For Caesar this was a major concern with RJ:

> You have an uphill battle … It's a community thing. And I would say that this is my biggest critique of this class. I don't want to knock anything explicitly in this class. For me, it's everything around it, my question is what is this class plugged into? If it's not connected to our lives then it's not going to be very meaningful. So how do we integrate that into high school, primary school, and into the parents of those children, and into the communities, their neighbors?

For many teacher candidates like Ben, this course "did not fit the mold and unlike with a lot of classes at the university level there was an element of unpredictability." Because of this disconnect with other classes, he noted:

> I was kind of nervous … if it's not done properly the circle concept can have you feeling quite vulnerable just due to the physical set up of the room. People feel comfortable behind desks.

For teacher candidates an acknowledgement of this tension and vulnerability was important to help them understand what their students may also experience if their class was the only one in a school operating restoratively.

In spite of the extensive and positive experience with RJ in the university setting, and in light of the philosophical tensions between restorative classrooms and more hierarchical ones, participants raised a concern that as new teachers it can be challenging to embed RJ fully into their current and future classrooms. What became clear in the focus groups was that the type of teaching contract influenced their use of RJ and relational pedagogies. Whereas study participants with long-term contracts like Ellen reported focusing on building and maintaining relationships in their classrooms, those with occasional contracts found it more challenging. As Marcia stated, "A key challenge for me would be how and where to start!" Even those engaged in implementation noted concern around how to navigate the significant tension that exists between RJ's focus on the primacy and quality of relationships while working in schools with established academic and behavior policies and procedures. Having school leaders and colleagues who were also RJ champions and engaged in relational pedagogies would likely help them to, as Ellen stated, "dare to fully commit to the process." This view is echoed by Em, an occasional teacher who, thinking of her future classroom, noted:

> If there were colleagues that were doing it, that might be a different story. If there were people I could talk to about it and they were already onboard about the idea I think that is something … the idea could spread. It would only take a couple teachers doing it. If they were people who I felt a connection to, who were vouching for it. I might be more willing to try it.

Research literature shows that teachers' professional learning, especially for new teachers, is shaped by the school context in which they operate, a context that itself is strongly influenced by its surrounding community and society (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2007). Thus, although the recent graduates in this study made written commitments to embed RJ and relational pedagogies into their future classrooms, a restorative school culture would likely sustain their enthusiasm, help them fully commit to the process, and lead to transformational change in teaching and learning practices in schools.

Conclusion

Teacher education classrooms are communities that ought to offer the right conditions for powerful professional and personal learning experiences, specifically through providing emotionally safe and intellectually engaging spaces to explore new ideas and practices. Considering the contested ways in which RJ is understood and implemented across school communities, there is real value in

having teacher candidates actively engage in the RJ process as students before using it in their own classroom and school communities. The students in this study, who experienced RJ in an elective Canadian teacher education course, appreciated what they had learned within the course: They identified that RJ was not a program, but a way of being; they recognized RJ as anchored in relationships; and they stressed that RJ requires a whole school restorative culture to be widely successful. By experiencing and reflecting on the primacy and quality of relationships, study participants had a better understanding of the role RJ and relational pedagogies can play in improving teaching and learning in schools.

Thus, what can be learned from our study is the importance of having teacher candidates experience the building, maintaining and repairing of relationships in their own teacher education classrooms. RJ cannot be taught as content to teacher candidates; RJ must be experienced. It was only in the experiencing that the participants in our study recognized the importance of RJ and relational pedagogies for their own learning as students, and thus could see the power of bringing such an approach to their students. As shown in this study, courses that help answer the "how" for relationship building in the classroom are valued and sought out by teacher candidates. There is a burgeoning evidence base documenting the significance of using circles in schools (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014; Brown, 2017); future research should further consider the role of practical approaches for building community in higher education.

There are complexities in implementing RJ and relational pedagogies into teacher education programs. First, there needs to be an RJ practitioner in the faculty who is well-positioned to champion, design, and teach an experiential course. Second, considering the numerous competing priorities of teacher education, moving the course from an elective status to compulsory as recommended by all study participants will likely remain a challenge. As such, these types of singular courses remain disconnected from the surrounding teacher education program. On the positive side, isolated courses do impact directly on the course participants, and reveal the power of having even one restorative, relational, and experiential classroom amongst many–whether in a university, high school or primary setting. On the negative side, restorative classrooms that run counter to the broader school or societal culture will continue to keep RJ in the margins and make it harder for RJ to reach its potential to foster school communities in which individuals feel connected and systemic issues are addressed. What becomes evident from this study is the importance of a restorative school culture to support new teachers during the implementation process. While our study showed that teacher candidates were committed to RJ, only a handful of participants had long-term contracts when they were interviewed. Future research could examine the long-term influence of this type of course and of the school environments in which they find themselves teaching.

Lastly, it is important to note that this study reports on a small number of teacher candidates' perceptions and experiences in one Canadian teacher education course. As such, readers should be cautious to generalize the findings across multiple contexts. Although efforts were taken to establish an open dialogue in the focus groups, it is possible that the presence of the course instructor in a note-taking role may have produced a social desirability bias. Despite these potential limitations, the results do, however, point to many influential concepts that should be taken up by future examinations on the role of RJ in teacher-education classrooms. Longer-term studies need to be conducted to see what influence such relational, experiential courses have on teacher practice at various stages in a teacher's career. From our results, we know that the impact is immediate and still reverberates nine months later. The question is, for how long does the impact reverberate? Ultimately, embedding RJ into the teacher education classroom may be a missing piece in the complicated puzzle of how to create the conditions for personal and social change that will make all schools, including universities, safe and relevant for its members.

Disclosure statement

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