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"Here, It's Like You Don't Have to Leave the Classroom to Solve a Problem": How Restorative Justice in Schools Contributes to Students' Individual and Collective Sense of Coherence

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Abstract
Students face innumerable stressors, in and outside of schools. Some schools are better able to support students to thrive, individually and collectively, in the midst of these stressors. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a restorative justice approach in a Canadian primary school, this article explores the role of restorative justice in facilitating student well-being. To interpret this research, I mobilize Antonovsky's (Health, stress and coping. Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1979) "sense of coherence" concept: individuals are most likely to thrive when they perceive their lives as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. Based on the data, I argue that the Canadian school's restorative justice policies and practices helped students make sense of complexity within their school lives, building within them a strong sense of individual and collective coherence.

Keywords Coherence · Well-being · Restorative justice · Restorative approach · Salutogenesis

Introduction

How are students supported to thrive in the midst of innumerable stressors? This article responds to this question through the study of one Canadian primary school, mostly populated with students from refugee and new immigrant backgrounds, many of whom experienced significant disruption in their home countries, during their journey to Canada, and now in their new land.

While recognizing the profound systemic and personal violence experienced by many of the students, this is not an article about how these students struggled in

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school. By most measures, despite past and current oppressions, the students thrived. Students overwhelmingly described their school experience in positive terms and exuded confidence in their abilities to solve issues and make a difference in their immediate reality. Drawing on Antonovsky's (1979) concept of salutogenesis, the origins of health, I focus the article on why these students appeared to thrive in their particular school environment. The students were part of a larger qualitative study that explored student experience of restorative justice in schools.

To interpret this research, I mobilize Antonovsky's (1979) idea that a "sense of coherence" is crucial to coping with everyday stress. Antonovsky found that individuals are most likely to thrive when they perceive their lives as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. The study attends to the following research question: How do the students' school experiences of restorative justice support the development of a sense of coherence?

Data gathered using a qualitative approach suggest that the Canadian school's policies, practices and relationships, especially those pertaining to restorative justice, provided students with a series of experiences that developed their sense of coherence. I argue that, with the school's assistance, within a sociocultural, relational context, students were supported to make sense of complexity within their lives. Students in the study built confidence that most of their issues, with support, could be overcome. I argue that the use of restorative justice in this Canadian school contributed to a strong sense of coherence in students. Such findings allow for an expanded conceptualization of the potential of approaches such as restorative justice. The findings also provide a way to differentiate restorative justice approaches in schools: between those that are narrowly focused on improving student behaviour, and those that build an individual and collective sense of coherence and, ultimately, well-being at school.

Sense of Coherence

Aaron Antonovsky (1923–1994), an Israeli American sociologist, spent much of his life exploring the relationship between health and stress. His studies often involved people under prolonged stress—those living in poverty, Holocaust survivors—and Antonovsky wondered why, under these conditions, did some individuals maintain health and actually thrive. During the 1970s and 1980s, predominant medical efforts were concentrated on disease and illness—what caused them and how to cure people of them; Antonovsky offered a new way of thinking, quite dramatically moving the focus from disease and illness to health and well-being (Antonovsky & Sagy, 2017). Arguably, Antonovsky's work was a significant precursor to the current well-being movement, a movement gaining strength in policy and practice in the realms of education, health and politics (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Coombes, Appleton, Allen & Yerrell, 2013; Miller, Connolly & Maguire, 2013; Powell, Graham, Fitzgerald, Thomas, & White, 2018; White, 2017).

Given that everyone has a level of daily stress—albeit some more extreme than others—the question for Antonovsky's lifework became, how do any of us stay healthy? The answer he found was: by developing a sense of coherence (Antonovsky,

1979; Antonovsky & Sagy, 2017). Antonovsky (1979) defined a sense of coherence as "*a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected*" (p. 10, italics in original). Thus, it is not low levels of stress that move us towards health, but our ability to consistently, in the midst of our daily stress, make sense of our inner and outer environments. It is a generalized way of seeing the world and one's place in that world that is "shaped and tested, reinforced and modified not only in childhood but throughout one's life" (Antonovsky, 1979, p. 125). What develops in this shaping and testing, is a sense that although life is full of complexity, complications, frustrations and failure, I (or we) can usually overcome (Antonovsky, 1979). Antonovsky later (1987) wrote that there are three distinct yet interconnected aspects that build a sense of coherence: a view of life as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful.

Comprehensibility

For life to be seen as comprehensible, it needs to have some form and structure; to be somewhat predictable. Antonovsky (1979) described the opposite to illustrate his point: "If one never knows what is coming, one never knows how to organize one's behaviour" (p. 140). Comprehending life does not mean it is seen as simple, but that its complexity fits with our general way of seeing the world. Braun-Lewensohn, Idan, Lindstrom and Margalit (2017) describe it as a sense of predictability, safety and security felt by individual members of a community. Bowen, Richman, Brewster and Bowen (1998) looked specifically at schools and found that students viewed school life as comprehensible if they felt safe within school and understood by others at school. To build this sense of life as comprehensible, individuals need experiences over time of consistent supportive relationships (Krause, 2011; Nash, 2002). Thus, in schools, comprehensibility is built in students when they have repeated experiences of security and acceptance in social relations with both adults and peers.

Manageability

For life to be seen as manageable, a person needs to be confident that most things will work out well. Life will naturally involve failure and frustration but a person who sees life as manageable believes that most challenges can be overcome either individually or with assistance. Antonovsky (1979) suggested that this does not involve the belief that "I am in control" but the belief that things are generally "under control" and not "out of control". In schools, this means that students perceive themselves as mostly able to handle the demands and challenges they face, whether academically, personally or socially (Bowen et al., 1998; Krause, 2011). A sense of life as manageable is built, Antonovsky (1979, 1991) found, when there are experiences of a load balance or a fit between what is demanded and an individual's available resources, and also when a person successfully resolves challenges. By overcoming a challenge, Antonovsky (1979) wrote, "we learn that existence is neither shattering

nor meaningless" (p. 194). Schools or communities can help build this sense of life as manageable by providing individuals with experiences of self-efficacy (Krause, 2011), teaching strategies and skills for conflict resolution (Bowen et al., 1998) and having resources available in times of crisis and distress (Braun-Lewensohn & Sagy, 2011; Braun-Lewensohn et al., 2017).

Meaningfulness

For life to be seen as coherent, experiences need to not only be predictable and manageable but also rewarding and engaging. Braun-Lewensohn and Sagy (2011) found that adolescents viewed life as meaningful when they were able to express themselves, and feel satisfaction, challenge and interest. Antonovsky (1991) believed that a sense of life as meaningful was built through experiences of participation, when individuals have opportunities to contribute to and participate in valued ways in their social worlds. In schools, this means students having experiences of influencing and participating in social decision-making processes and finding solutions to problems that affect them and their community (Bowen et al., 1998; Krause, 2011).

Sense of Coherence Research in Schools

In a 2017 review of the sense of coherence literature focused on adolescents, Braun-Lewensohn et al. found that adolescents with a strong sense of coherence reported better perceived health and reduced stress. Not surprisingly, most studies looked at psychological and individual characteristics that built a sense of coherence in adolescents. This individualistic lens mirrors the predominant focus within well-being literature where the "individual remains the unit of analysis" (White, 2017, p 127). Of those that examined sociocultural, relational or systemic considerations, the focus was on family, school and community. Interestingly, studies that examined families mostly focused on how family contexts/characteristics contributed to or detracted from the development of an adolescent's sense of coherence; most studies that examined schools, rather than seeing school as a developmental factor, focused on what happened to students academically who entered school with a strong or weak sense of coherence. In that light, a strong sense of coherence predicated higher grades, enhanced academic motivation and individual success at school (Bowen et al., 1998; Levi, Einav, Ziv, Raskind, & Margalit, 2014). Schools were seen as a context within which students employed their sense of coherence; they were rarely seen as active contributors to developing within students a sense of coherence.

Yet, "the real issue" Antonovsky (1979), as a sociologist, writes, "is whether the societies in which our children grow up and in which we live our daily lives facilitate or impede the development and maintenance of a strong sense of coherence" (p. 226). Few studies explore how schools facilitate or impede this development. A German longitudinal study named primary schools as a site for the promotion of a child's self-worth and sense of belonging, developing personal and social resources that build a child's sense of coherence (Krause, 2011). An American study, looking at students deemed to be at risk of school failure, determined that students' sense

of coherence grew in situations in which they perceived their school as safe and their teachers as supportive (Bowen et al., 1998). My own study, exploring how a Canadian primary school has assisted students to thrive amidst stress, attends to Antonovsky's "real issue", entering into the conversation of how schools can better assist students develop a strong sense of coherence, with a particular focus on restorative justice.

Restorative Justice in Schools

Restorative justice (RJ) is a set of principles and practices that position harm as a violation of people and relationships rather than as a violation of rules or laws (Zehr, 2002). In schools, this relational approach diverges from traditional school discipline where authority is exercised when a rule is broken. Instead, all affected people are engaged in dialogue and work to find ways together to deal with the situation (Hendry, 2009; Hopkins, 2011; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). Beyond being simply a response to harm, Hendry (2009) describes RJ in schools as a philosophical approach that is fundamentally about building, maintaining and repairing relationships.

Evans and Vaandering (2016) agree, offering 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 informal restorative conversations to classroom meetings to peer mediation to formalized multi-party restorative conferences. Green, Willging, Zamarin, Dehaiman and Ruiloba (2019) identify these practices as occurring in two tiers. The first tier involves proactive practices "used daily in classrooms and other school settings to foster relationships and prevent conflicts" (Green et al., 2019, p. 169). The second tier involves more formalized practices to address harm with those directly involved.

This comprehensive whole-school approach, however, is only one way to view RJ and it has not been embraced by all schools. Historically, most schools implementing RJ have used it primarily as a specific response to harm or student behaviour issues (the second tier in isolation) rather than to nurture a school culture or build capacity of people to engage with one another (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Morrison, 2015). Indeed, research of RJ in schools often focuses narrowly on the effectiveness of RJ to attend to individual student misbehaviour (McCluskey, 2013). Success of RJ initiatives is frequently measured by reduced student expulsion rates, fewer student visits to the principal's office, or increases in student attendance (Green et al., 2019; Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014; Lewis, 2009). For the most part, measuring such changes in individual student behaviour has shown RJ to be an effective approach (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg 2006; Youth Justice Board, 2004). Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley and Petrosino (2016) conducted a literature review on RJ in schools in the USA and found that all the empirical studies they

reviewed reported that implementing an RJ programme resulted in a decrease in the prevalence of harmful student behaviour.

Behavioural change is one indicator of RJ as an effective approach; yet, it does not speak to a comprehensive understanding of RJ as building school communities in which both the individual and the collective thrive. RJ writers in recent years have worked to more explicitly place RJ within a framework of relational theory in which the self is constituted in and through relationship with others (Llewellyn, 2011; Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015; O'Reilly, 2019; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). A relational view is fundamentally concerned with the character and conditions of relationships (Llewellyn, 2011). In this sense, success of RJ in schools is measured by the change in the quality of social relationships that result rather than in behaviour modification (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015). In such a comprehensive understanding, RJ is "linked to all kinds of interactions that occur during the school day; into its ceremonies, its curricula, its physical environment, therefore, in the very culture of the school itself" (O'Reilly, 2019, p. 2). Indeed, studies do show that RJ improves student–student relationships (Cavanagh, 2010; Kane et al., 2007) student–teacher relationships (Kane et al., 2007; Kaveney & Drewery, 2011) and school climate (Augustine et al., 2018; Reimer, 2019; Varnham, Evers, Booth, & Avgoustinos, 2014).

RJ is often described as a movement in which practice has led theory. Cunneen and Holye (2010) call for "praxis" in the movement—"a constantly reflexive, dialectical relationship between theory and practice" (p. 186). Otherwise, as McCold (2000) writes, a situation emerges in which restorative justice comes "to mean all things to all people" (p. 358). Framing RJ within relational theory (Llewellyn, 2011; Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012) helps hone the meaning and practice of RJ. Within such a frame, however, more conceptual and practical work needs to be done to knit together what it means to nurture school communities in which both the individual and the collective thrive. I propose that one way to explore RJ in a comprehensive way—taking into account the lived experience of RJ practices and policies within a school—is through Antonovsky's (1979) sense of coherence lens.

Restorative Justice and Sense of Coherence

Antonovsky's (1979) sense of coherence has never been mobilized to interpret RJ research. There has, however, been some research into RJ and well-being which speak to fragments of Antonovsky's (1979) theory. For example, Norris (2019) explored three different UK restorative schools and the impact of RJ on student happiness and student engagement. She found that the school with consistent proactive restorative practices raised the level of student happiness and engagement, while the other two schools—one with isolated reactive restorative practices and one with an inconsistent whole-school restorative approach—did not. Knight and Wadhwa (2014) provided portraits of how RJ practices fostered individual and collective resilience in schools in the USA. Varnham et al. (2014) identified RJ as a democratic school practice in Australian schools, ensuring young people, were active

participants in their education. These studies, while not utilizing the full sense of coherence lens, lend credence to the applicability of Antonovsky to RJ.

As research into RJ in schools increases, there is a welcome move beyond that which is quantifiable (behaviour modification measured through, for example, decreases in visits to the principals' office) to the more comprehensive, transformative aspects of RJ. Yet these transformative aspects are often nebulous and hard to track (O'Reilly, 2019). I believe that viewing RJ through a sense of coherence lens provides RJ researchers the opportunity to maintain a focus on a comprehensive view of RJ, situated within sociocultural contexts and relationships, while using specific criteria to gage the impact that RJ is having on individual students.

As a crucial link, both RJ and a sense of coherence are not the end goal. RJ advocates do not want RJ in schools for the sake of RJ: they want to implement RJ to help people "live collectively and as our 'best selves'" (Elliot, 2011, p. 5). Similarly, Antonovsky (1979) wrote that having a strong sense of coherence was not a good in and of itself: a strong sense of coherence is good because it is salutogenic, it moves us towards health. Thus, both are focused on the end goal of individual and collective well-being. I argue that if RJ assists students in viewing life as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, then RJ is helping students to thrive. Viewing RJ through the lens of a sense of coherence holds those of us who implement RJ accountable to ensure that RJ actually does what we claim it does: build learning communities where individuals and collectives thrive.

Methodology

Interestingly, although Antonovsky (1979), himself, insisted that there was no set method required to research a sense of coherence, there are only a few studies (see Kostenius & Öhrling, 2009) on students in schools that use purely qualitative methods. Studies tend to use either quantitative or mixed methods, almost always utilizing a diagnostic instrument such as the original sense of coherence questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1983), an adaptation of the original scale for children and/or adolescents (Antonovsky, & Sagy, 1986; Levi et al., 2014), the School Success Profile (Bowen et al., 1998) or the Well-Being Profile (Krause, 2011), among many others.

My study is a qualitative case study exploring the lived experiences of students in one Canadian school. While quantitative studies provide us with a sense of scale and the ability to compare and generalize, qualitative studies move us beyond the numbers to "build a depth of understanding" of an aspect of everyday life (Leavy, 2014, p. 2). This research aims at building a depth of understanding of how school experiences—relationships, policies and practices—might contribute to the development of students' sense of coherence. As a qualitative study, students are invited to explain the impact of school practices in a nuanced manner impossible to achieve through diagnostic instruments.

The current study was grounded in a larger multi-site case study, exploring the student experience of RJ in one school in Canada and one in Scotland (Reimer, 2018). This current paper focuses solely on the Canadian school. In the larger study, a key finding was that RJ in the Canadian school was experienced by students as a

comprehensive whole-school approach; RJ in the Scottish school was experienced by students more as a behaviour management approach. It was from the analysis of data in this larger study that I encountered the feeling of coherence, solely within the data from the Canadian school. The data pointing to a sense of coherence were "stumble data", as Brinkmann (2014) would call them, data which break a researcher's gaze from the original objective. The school experience that Canadian students were describing to me simply made sense to them. Unable to fully explain this feeling of coherence and the impact it seemed to have on students through the RJ literature, I turned to Antonovsky's (1979) work. Thus, this study is unique in that I did not intend to measure a sense of coherence, nor did I ask students to assess their sense of coherence on a diagnostic instrument; rather, I collected extensive data on students' school experience, and found within that data strong evidence of their school lives as manageable, comprehensible and meaningful. This study adds qualitative detail and depth to how those three sense of coherence aspects (manageability, comprehensibility and meaningfulness) look and feel in schools.

Participants

The Canadian school, Rocky Creek, a public school in the western province of Alberta, had 350 students, between the ages of 3 and 12. One-third of students were new Canadians, many participating in formal schooling for the first time; students identified 40 different home countries. A significant number of students grew up in refugee camps and were fleeing various forms of social upheaval. Students at times arrived traumatized and trust needed to be built with both them and their families before learning could occur. Poverty was also an issue experienced by many students at the school. The school was chosen as it had been implementing restorative justice for 5 years at the time of the study. I focused on the grade 5 and 6 students, aged 10–12 years old. The school recommended these grades since their age made them more appropriate for the research activities and many students would be familiar with RJ, having been exposed to RJ for multiple years at the school. The school had some composite classrooms (multi-grade) and so working with 2-year levels made sense. I was in the school for 1 month in the Spring of 2013.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis were conducted through a social constructionist lens where meaning is constructed within relationship (Crotty, 1998, p. 45). Consistent with this, research was undertaken to determine how understandings and experiences of RJ were constructed, interpreted and made meaningful (Glasersfeld, 1989).

Data collection was extensive. Data that spoke to the student experience were gathered through student questionnaires, learning circles and co-researcher activities. Data to understand the broad context in which the student experience was situated were gathered through document analysis, participant observation, interviews, educator questionnaires and learning circles. Taken as a whole, the research

attempted to illuminate the complex dynamics of students' experiences. Below, I briefly explain the data collection activities focused directly on student experience.

Questionnaires

The student questionnaire focused on direct and indirect indicators of RJ and student perceptions of school. The questionnaire covered adult–student relationships (Cavanagh, 2010; Hendry, 2009; Morrison, & Vaandering, 2012), peer relationships (Bargen, 2010; Cavanagh, 2010; Hopkins, 2011), how conflict is handled (Amstutz, & Mullet, 2005; Hendry, 2009; Hopkins, 2011) and how decisions are made (Bargen, 2010; Cronin-Lampe, & Cronin-Lampe, 2010; McCluskey, 2013). Out of 85 potential grades 5 and 6 students, 38 completed the questionnaire (45%). The questionnaires were meant to provide a broad overview of student experiences of RJ in the school, a starting point for the more in-depth qualitative research activities. Importantly, questionnaires were also used to identify pupils interested in participating in those activities: the learning circles and co-researchers.

Learning Circles

Learning circles are focus groups conducted in the style of restorative classroom circles, eliciting stories about thoughts and experiences (Wilkinson, 1998). Participants are deemed experts, teaching each other and the researcher about their reality. Circle conversations focused on their general schooling experience and each circle also focused on one of three themes drawn from RJ literature: communication, rules or community. Students were assigned randomly to a circle conversation (communication, rules or community). Twenty students (7 male and 13 female) participated. I ran five student learning circles, each with between two and five participants. The shortest was 18 min and the longest 42 min.

Co-researchers

At the end of each learning circle, I recruited co-researchers. This was described to students as similar to being detectives or reporters where they observed their daily school lives, then shared and helped make sense of their findings with me (Reimer & McLean, 2015). The concept of co-researchers built on Grant's (1993) idea of shadowing, where teachers followed a student in their school for a day to gain a better understanding of the student experience.

Of 20 learning circle participants, 19 (6 male and 13 female) became 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 life, taking note of everything they saw or heard that they felt was significant. Taking note entailed writing detailed observations, drawing pictures, repeating direct quotations, whatever they were most comfortable with. After the three-day observation period, I met students individually. During 5–30 min interviews, they explained what they had taken note of, what they thought it meant in terms of their general schooling experience, and talked about the experience of taking notes.

It is important to state here that while students were co-researchers in the sense that their voice was prioritized and they were active co-creators of knowledge, students were not involved in the initial planning of the study and research activities and thus their participation as equal agents of change was limited (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fletcher, 2004).

Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis (TA) approach, I initially coded the data from the larger Canadian and Scottish study based on six phases of TA: become familiar with the data; generate initial codes; search for themes; review themes; define and name themes; and produce the report. Data collected were analysed inductively, meaning that the identified themes are strongly linked to data, sometimes bearing little relation to the questions asked of participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002). The data were coded based on repeating ideas that emerged, regardless of whether they fit within my conceptual framework.

It was within this initial inductive coding that I identified the repeated idea of "school making sense" within the student data; though, notably, only within the Canadian student data. In order to understand this repeated idea within the Canadian student data, I reviewed sense of coherence literature and created working definitions for Antonovsky's (1987) three aspects that build a sense of coherence: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness.

Using these working definitions, I then returned to the Canadian student data—in particular, the learning circle transcripts, the co-researcher notebooks and the individual co-researcher interview transcripts—and coded them manually. Analysing the data deductively, I identified repeating ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that fit within the three organizing themes of: comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. In the following section, I outline the findings from the deductive analysis.

Findings

Context

Education in Canada is a provincial responsibility. Although RJ has been applied in Canadian schools since the 1990s (Drewery & Winslade, 2003; Morrison, 2007), in the province of Alberta, it is difficult to find information on how and when RJ was first introduced to schools. There was no concerted effort to introduce RJ to schools across the province; most likely the introduction happened on an individual staff member or school basis, with much regional differentiation. Thus, it was the school's, Rocky Creek, own initiative to implement RJ.

Prior to implementing RJ, Rocky Creek relied on a standard discipline model, focused on a punitive approach. The new principal, knowing she wanted the school to move in a different direction, sent staff members to a variety of professional development sessions, to see which approach they favoured. In the end, the principal

stated, "the staff latched on to the notion of restorative practices as something that was small enough that we could take a piece of it and use it. Which was specifically the restorative justice circles".

RJ in Rocky Creek was framed as a way to build, maintain and restore relationships; it was not seen as a technique as much as simply "how we manage what we do in this building" (Rocky Creek principal). Educators utilized common restorative questions (What happened? What were you thinking about? Who has been affected? What needs to happen to make it right?) to guide restorative hallway chats, classroom meetings and more formal restorative conferences. Underpinning their proactive and responsive restorative processes was a focus on relational interconnectivity.

The key way RJ in Rocky Creek was actualized was through the use of restorative circles. The circles utilized at Rocky Creek, underpinned by restorative philosophy, were used to proactively build a sense of community on a daily basis as well as used responsively when incidents arose to discuss and deal with issues of conflict and harm. Restorative circles (commonly referred to in schools as talking circles, community circles, conflict circles or peacemaking circles) are more than a physical re-arranging of chairs. Restorative circles are spaces where each person is invited to participate fully, spaces "designed to promote connection, understanding and dialogue in a group" (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014, p. 23). Circles at Rocky Creek were used to teach and practise social, communication and relational skills—with the expectation that students were developing skills to eventually handle issues on their own. I observed a variety of restorative circles at Rocky Creek used with different ages and for different purposes. Although Rocky Creek engaged other restorative processes (such as conferences and conversations) in their approach, circles were the most frequent and visible embodiment of their restorative work and thus this paper focuses mainly on Rocky Creek's restorative circles.

When my study was conducted, RJ had been part of the school's policies and practices for 5 years. Data within the following themes are drawn primarily from the student learning circles, co-researcher interviews and participant observation. Occasionally, when noted in the themes, questionnaire data are integrated into the description. Importantly, in the learning circles and co-researcher interviews, the students did not break their experiences into categories such as restorative activities and non-restorative activities; they simply spoke about and observed their daily lives, as experienced within the restorative culture of Rocky Creek. Within these broad discussions, I categorized their experiences into the three aspects of sense of coherence: *comprehensibility*, *manageability* and *meaningfulness*. Definitions, drawn from the sense of coherence literature, introduce each category.

Comprehensibility

Definition Students have a sense that school is predictable and safe. Although there are complexities and conflicts, students are not overwhelmed by them. School relationships are consistent and constant. Students feel understood by others and have a sense that they belong at school.

Students referred to Rocky Creek in positive terms, focusing on the relationships that made the school feel like a family. This familial feeling was evidenced for students particularly in the ethos of welcoming new students. Co-researcher Kiwi[1] explained what happened when someone new arrived: "We would just catch them. Like, they would feel like they were part of the big family already". As evidence of this inclusive atmosphere, students shared examples of peer encouragement, standing up for others and helping peers solve their own problems.

All learning circle participants had something positive to say about the Rocky Creek teachers, who they described as: "caring", "nice" and "funny". Eighty-seven per cent of respondents to the student questionnaire felt respected by adults.

One of the responsibilities that students attributed to adults was that of enforcing school rules. Most students equated rules with a staff-created programme called ROCKY[2]: Remember to listen; Own your actions; Care for others; Keep your hands to yourself; You can be a leader. Posters explaining ROCKY were plastered on the walls of the school; the acronym—and its focus on collective responsibility—were referred to frequently by students.

Students felt that the rules were logical and necessary. RaRa believed, like most students, that "the only reason that there are rules are so we're safe in school". Code7 explained them this way: "We have rules and the rules are just the rights of the child: we respect each other". Students felt that adult enforcement of the rules also made sense. This belief that rules and their enforcement made sense is significant: so often studies find the opposite, that students are left confused and frustrated by the actual rules as well as their handling (McCluskey, 2014; Raby, 2012). Donat, Peter, Dalbert and Kamble (2016) name teachers acting justly as crucial for the cultivation of students' well-being in schools. There were a variety of measures that Rocky Creek adults were known to take to deal with students who broke rules or in other ways were seen to make the school unsafe. Although there was some mention of exclusionary practices, most teachers employed restorative conversations or a circle approach. For many participants, the rules and the way that teachers enforced those rules simply made sense and felt right; students knew what was expected of them, felt those expectations were there to keep them and others safe, and knew what might happen if they did not live up to those expectations.

Despite the sense that Rocky Creek was a safe school, students had no allusions that it was free of conflict and strife. Students shared numerous instances of harmful behaviour—gossiping, excluding, fighting, bullying, racism and more—between students. Fighting—both physical fights and "talking fights" (Sophia)—were prevalent. Students related the incidents with great detail and often, significant emotion, even if they themselves were not involved. Their reports frequently included how the incident was dealt with. Co-researcher Kitty Pie shared this example of students spontaneously dealing with an issue between a boy and a girl:

[1] All names are pseudonyms students gave themselves.

[2] Not the actual acronym, but similar.

> 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 the solving of them. Students felt conflict was an inevitable and normal part of daily experience. Notably, students saw their peer relationships as works in progress. As Cor-Cork explained, her class was engaged in discussions about "telling the truth and not excluding people. We've been working on that and we've improved over time".

Many students expressed appreciation that "When we have a problem we can tell the teachers what's going on and we can be open with them" (Sam). Seventy-four per cent of student questionnaire respondents found it easy to talk to adults in the school. Remarkably (and in stark contrast to the Scottish school involved in the larger study), over 3 days, there were only two instances recorded by the co-researchers 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 in the Rocky Creek adults. Although conflicts were part of their reality, students felt connected to one another and to the adults in the school, creating a sense that school relationships were ones they could rely on.

Manageability

Definition Students have a sense of confidence that, despite frustration and failure, most things will work out well. Students see themselves as being able to handle school demands and overcome challenges. School relationships and resources assist students in times of distress and build students' abilities to resolve issues. Students feel that things are under control at school.

Students at Rocky Creek were realistic about the presence of frustration and pain in their daily lives. Yet most students had confidence that either on their own, or with support, the issues they encountered could be resolved. Several mentioned appreciation for the snack programme where "kids that don't get to eat breakfast at home, they can eat breakfast at school" (Code7). Students found it natural for Rocky Creek to meet a wide variety of student needs. Lily discussed her needs being met through the clubs offered by the school; Kitty Pie talked about individual staff members being supportive of her needs. In her co-researcher interview, Kitty Pie had this to say in praise of one staff member:

> He brings us together so that we can feel, so we feel we belong together, that the school is a Rights Respecting School and that we feel like we have friends and that we don't feel like trash. He brings us together, he makes us communicate, he puts us on teams, he also gets new students, and he plays with us, talks to us.

In terms of conflicts, although participants shared a few examples of students working out their own issues, this was quite rare. Joe Bob felt that she had "seen it

once. Once or twice". The questionnaire responses affirmed that it was difficult for students to solve their own conflicts: only 34 per cent had confidence that students could do it themselves.

Students were much more confident in the ability of adults to help them work through problems. Seventy-nine per cent of questionnaire respondents agreed that the school would help them sort out conflicts. CorCork shared this experience: "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". Code7 also voiced confidence in his analysis of Rocky Creek: "I'd say it's actually a pretty nice school. 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". Fights, frustration, pain and drama will occur; but students had confidence that there will be constructive ways, within the school, to address them.

In order to address issues, students identified that teachers arranged restorative circle discussions. Most students expressed appreciation for circles, viewing them as necessary components of the classroom community. Circles were seen as a safe place to share emotions and thoughts because, as RaRa articulated it, "whatever goes on in the circle, stays in the circle". Circles were viewed as a place where the truth emerged, where everyone was able to share his/her side of the story and as a way to minimize problems. Co-researcher Liby believed that if some students "don't have a circle it gets bigger and bigger and bigger and they just go to the point where they want to, like, beat each other up". Circles were also practical, seen as a process in which actual solutions were decided upon. In circle, those solutions might be provided by adults or by other students. Sophia praised the process, stating that "it's like 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". Although circles were overwhelmingly relied upon to solve problems, students did share a few examples in which circles did not work. In these cases, individual students were seen to prevent the circle from working, either refusing to listen to the other person or not being honest in circle.

Meaningfulness

Definition Students feel their time at school is rewarding, engaging and challenging. Students have the opportunity to express themselves and participate in ways that are valued by school members. The school engages students in decision-making processes about issues that affect them.

Students at Rocky Creek tended to speak about school with a sense of joy; they talked about the pleasure they had just by attending. Kitty Pie took great delight in telling a story of the previous afternoon, in which her teacher and class had a playful interaction. She beamed as she concluded: "Today, like, our class came together as a whole, as a big group. And we talked, we laughed, we joked around, and we played together".

School for the students was more than what happened in the classroom. When naming aspects of the school that they appreciated, students often discussed outside-of-class activities: the snack programme, soccer games, multi-cultural festivals and clubs.

One programme implemented across classrooms and activities was UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools (RRS), based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. According to UNICEF's own training materials, a RRS gives children meaningful opportunities to voice opinions, participate fully in all aspects of schooling, genuinely participate in decision-making that affects them, and resolve obstacles to well-being. In Rocky Creek, their RRS approach was tied to their RJ approach, with the principal describing the alignment this way: "They are both about healing, about ensuring that everyone is included in the larger society". RRS seeks to uphold the right of children to have a voice in decisions that affect them; RJ also seeks to include the voices of all affected.

The practical way that students experienced this was again through restorative circles. Sunflower, Bob and Sam, during one of the learning circles for this project, engaged in a discussion about what they appreciated about classroom circles:

> Sunflower: In circles, I like how all the kids can be really honest and they can actually share their true feelings.
> Bob: I agree with Sunflower 'cause when we have a circle, people, they don't have to be scared to tell the truth or be honest.
> Sam: I agree with Bob because in a circle, you express what's going on in your life. And it's not just all the bad stuff that happened, you can explain the good stuff that's going on and, like, how you feel.

Interestingly, in this very discussion, these students were demonstrating their capacity to listen to one another and voice their own opinions, building upon what the student before them had said. A few minutes later in the circle discussion, the same students—plus a few additional ones—revealed their capacity to also express dissenting opinions. Two students—Sunflower and RaRa—spoke about their frustration with a reading activity. The other students—Bob, Corcork and Sam—disagreed with their assessment. In the middle of the learning circle the five students facilitated their own discussion about the topic, expressing their thoughts without dismissing the opinions of their peers. The spontaneous conversation was a clear indication that students were receiving practice in how to participate in community and to express ideas.

Students having voice, however, only has real meaning if that voice has some sway in decision-making processes. Timmermann (2018), writing about meaningful work through the lens of "contributive justice", explained the original contributive justice conception as twofold: people have an obligation to contribute to their social worlds; and there needs to be structures in place to allow that contribution to matter.

The majority of Rocky Creek students felt as though they could contribute to life at the school, influencing decisions adults made about Rocky Creek: 66% of respondents agreed that students help make classroom decisions. Liby was unequivocal in her belief that student voice was considered by adults:

> The principal's fair because she goes around to the students to see what the students think of it. And if they don't like it, she wouldn't do it. If they did like it, she would do it.

Although students felt they had a say in many school choices, they were still eager for more opportunities to be heard. Some students, such as Faith, also acknowledged that although students wanted more choice, "sometimes they don't make good decisions". A lesson articulated by students was that with choice comes responsibility.

About half of questionnaire respondents felt they could make changes in the school if something was unfair. In the learning circles and co-researcher interviews, none of the students expressed any fear or doubt that they would be listened to if a change was necessary. Liby believed that "if there was something that was bugging all the kids and they didn't like it and they thought it was unfair, the kids could go and talk with somebody about it and then it would change. And then the kids would've made the difference". Students saw themselves as participatory members of the school community with voices that mattered.

Discussion

In Rocky Creek, many of the policies and practices collectively provided students with experiences that left them feeling that their school lives were comprehensible, manageable and meaningful. For Antonovsky, it was important that those three components, however, were not examined as isolated entities. Life for someone might be comprehensible but not at all manageable. Or it might be manageable, but not meaningful. The three needed to be considered as a collective in order for there to be a sense of coherence—a *"pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence*" (Antonovksy 1979, p. 10, italics in original) that things make sense and will work out.

For the students of Rocky Creek, there was much overlap between the aspects of their school experience that were comprehensible, those that were manageable and those that were meaningful. Rocky Creek's practice of circles, the key way in which they enacted RJ, embodied all three.

Circles Helped to Make School Life Comprehensible, Manageable and Meaningful

The use of circles, grounded in restorative philosophy, made school life comprehensible. By using circles regularly, it was acknowledged that there were complexities and conflicts in life and that students faced those issues as a rule; it was predictable that issues would be dealt with rather than ignored. Weekly use of circles built relationships and a sense of trust in one another; students were given space to express their thoughts and feelings and thus be understood by others. Issues were dealt with in the classroom, rather than through exclusion. Students and staff were collectively building what Brown (2017) names as a listening culture.

The use of circles also made school life manageable. Circles provided a process that students could use to be able to manage individual and social demands placed

upon them; rather than attempt to solve everything by themselves, they knew there were adults and peers willing to help them solve problems. Students built a sense over time that issues were manageable as they had experiences of solving them collectively. They also built skills that they used on a daily basis to manage stresses. Students trusted adults around them to ensure that things were dealt with; all was seen to be under control. It is in circle, Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2014) write, that classes or groups are "practicing basic ways that are fundamental to being successful together" (p. 23). Pretsch et al. (2016) found that even subtle experiences of injustice impact on students' well-being and emotions and suggest that teachers need practical ways to make them explicit and address them. Circles, in Rocky Creek, were one such way.

Beyond making school life comprehensible and manageable, the use of restorative circles also made life meaningful. Circles provided students space to connect with one another and express their positive and negative feelings and experiences; circles were a way for students to be fully at school. They built a sense of community within circle and were expected to act as members of that community. Students were invited to be active decision-making members of the school community—making choices and being held responsible for those choices within circle. Circles provide "dialogic learning opportunities" (Bickmore, 2014, p. 177), a space for "articulating one's ideas, for critical thinking, and for sharing one's views" (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2014, p. 69). Circles, built on restorative philosophy, created an overall sense of coherence—a "*pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence*" (Antonovksy, 1979, p. 10, italics in original) and a feeling of well-being.

Well-being: Individual and Collective Thriving

Antonovsky (1979) emphasized having a strong sense of coherence due to its ability to move us towards health and well-being. Well-being, however, is a contested concept; although still often framed as an individual, medicalized pursuit (Barrow, 2019; Powell et al., 2018; White, 2017), definitions are expanding to include relational wellness (Powell et al., 2018; White, 2017) and "being well in the world" (Barrow, 2019, p. 31). Powell et al. (2018) involved young people in a study to conceptualize well-being, finding that quality relationships and a sense of agency were woven throughout young people's conceptualizations of well-being. These expanded definitions of well-being are what were evident in the experiences of the students in my study.

My study did not capture increases in individual or school levels of health or well-being, as might be possible through diagnostic pre- and post-testing. Rather, by attending to student perspectives, students relayed experiences of: strong, positive, trusting relationships; conflict as a normal and natural part of existence; working together constructively and honestly to air issues and resolve them; and having their voices listened to and responded to. Many of the students in the study had backgrounds of trauma; such students are often found to struggle with well-being in school (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2018; McElroy & Hevey, 2014). Instead, in this study, individual students thrived, sharing experiences of joy and belonging in

the schools. As a whole, as observed in the relational spaces of classrooms, the playground and learning circles, collectives also thrived, working together rather than against one another. Well-being for the students was experienced at Rocky Creek in socio-emotional and relational terms (Powell et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This study suggests that restorative philosophy and practices lend themselves to building a strong sense of coherence. RJ, with its focus on constant, quality relationships, helps people comprehend their daily existence; RJ provides support and processes for people to manage—often with assistance—what seems unmanageable; RJ gives people voice and a meaningful role to play in decisions that affect them. In schools, RJ seeks to build people's relational capacity "in a manner that supports and respects the inherent dignity and worth of all" (Evans & Vaandering, 2016, p. 8). Both RJ and a sense of coherence are focused on the end goal of individual and collective well-being.

The connection between RJ and a sense of coherence was particularly evident in Rocky Creek because Rocky Creek educators understood RJ to be about relationships, social engagement and transformation—a comprehensive understanding of RJ as building school communities in which all are respected and both the individual and the collective thrive. If Rocky Creek had implemented behaviour management RJ, where RJ is used reactively, as a specific response to harm or student behaviour issues, rather than to nurture a school culture or build capacity of people to engage with one another (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Morrison, 2015), it is unclear if a sense of coherence would have been as evident. The Scottish school in the larger study, for example, utilizing behaviour management RJ, did not build such a sense of coherence in students (Reimer, 2018). While some research in schools with a behaviour management approach has revealed experiences of incoherence on the part of students (Norris, 2019), this is an area that calls for further study. I found that in Scotland, with behaviour management RJ, although the approach to discipline was improved, kinder and gentler than mainstream discipline, RJ in that school sat side by side with punitive measures; the focus was more on controlling behaviour than on engaging individuals, building connections and providing consistent, meaningful ways to participate as community members. Students may have positive experiences in such schools, but without the school facilitating an overall enduring and dynamic feeling of trust and confidence, their sense of coherence.

Thus, I argue that RJ and a sense of coherence are not a natural fit: comprehensive RJ focused on social engagement aligns with a strong sense of coherence; behaviour management RJ focused on social control may not.

Limitations and Strengths

While adding qualitative depth to how sense of coherence is experienced by students in one school, this study cannot offer conclusive evidence that comprehensive RJ

always assists in building a strong sense of coherence in students. This study is a starting place for a research and practice conversation, uniquely joining two bodies of literature—RJ and sense of coherence—that have been previously detached.

Viewing RJ through the lens of a sense of coherence could assist in differentiating between various approaches to RJ. It could also assist in holding those of us who implement RJ to account—to prompt us to ensure that when RJ is implemented it is helping students to make sense of their school lives. By helping students to see their lives as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful, we can build learning communities where individuals and collectives thrive.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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