

The story of a model restorative school: creative response to conflict at MS 217 in Queens, NY

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Abstract

Purpose – Restorative practice programs in the USA and Western elementary and secondary schools have been the focus of intensive, large scale field research that reports positive impacts on school climate, pro-social student behavior and aggressive behavior. This paper aims to contribute to a gap in the research by reporting a case study of transformation of an urban middle school in a multi-year implementation of restorative practices.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reports how Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) supported the transformation of Middle School 217, in Queens, NY, from a school with one of the highest suspension rates in New York City to a model restorative school. CRC's model, which incorporates the themes of cooperation, communication, affirmation, conflict resolution, mediation, problem-solving, bias awareness, bullying prevention and intervention, social-emotional learning and restorative practices, helped shift the perspective and practice of the entire school community from punitive to restorative.

Findings – Implementation of a full school advisory program using restorative circles for all meetings and classes and development of a 100% respect program committing all school community members to dignified and respectful treatment aided the transformation. Key to MS 217's success was the collaboration of multiple non-profit organizations for provision of peer mediation training, after-school follow-up work, staff coaching and preventative cyberbullying training through the Social Media-tors! Program.

Research limitations/implications – Challenges to the restorative practices implementation are reviewed with attention to the implementation online during COVID-19.

Originality/value – Next steps in the program post-COVID are articulated as a best practice model for other schools interested in adopting MS 217's commitment, creativity and community-building to become a model restorative school.

Keywords Restorative justice, Conflict resolution, Violence prevention, Interrupting school to prison pipeline, Restorative practices, Restorative schools

Paper type Research paper

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Research on restorative practices in schools

Restorative practices programs for schools highlight accountability in a system of non-punitive reconciliation and community building. These programs help students think in terms of the rights of all and advocate on behalf of community members whose rights have been infringed (Jones, 2012). These programs can have profound influence on children at the time in their lives when identity formation is key and their notion of belonging to and being responsible to a community is forming (Lane, 2005/2006). As the National Education Policy Center stated in its recent policy paper (2020, January, p. 3):

We view RJE [Restorative Justice in Education] as a comprehensive, whole school approach to shifting school culture in ways that prioritize relational pedagogies, justice and equity, resilience-fostering, and well-being. Guided by a set of restorative values and principles (e.g., dignity,

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respect, accountability, and fairness), RJE practices are both proactive and responsive in nurturing healthy relationships, repairing harm, transforming conflict, and promoting justice and equity.

The strongest impetus for restorative practice programs in schools started after 2000 in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. In June 2003, Rigby and Thomas (2004), cited in [Wearmouth et al. \(2007a, 2007b\)](#) conducted a study of 50 primary and secondary schools throughout Australia to assess the impact of restorative practices programs. They reported a variety of implementation practices, noting the difficulty of full school implementation. A national evaluation of restorative justice practices in 32 schools in nine pilot areas across England and Wales has provided encouraging evidence ([Bitel, 2004](#)). The research involved surveys from more than 5,000 pupils and 1,150 staff, as well as more than 600 individual interviews with key stakeholders. Data on school performance indicators were gathered at the beginning of the evaluation in 2002 and at the end in 2004. Before the restorative justice programs, the schools had high levels of victimization and behavioral problems. Youth Offending Teams were then given the responsibility of implementing restorative practices. After the programs, 95% of all conflicts had been resolved through mediation and conferencing and there were significant reductions in the levels of bullying and victimization.

In Scotland, restorative practices were implemented in 2004 to provide support for students with behavior problems ([Kane et al., 2008](#)). As [McCluskey et al. \(2008\)](#) noted, there was criticism about theoretical models of restorative justice originating from the criminal justice system being applied to educational settings. Later, the Scottish educational model of restorative practices was elaborated as a whole school initiative and researched in a pilot study included 18 schools with comprehensive data collection, including surveys, interviews, observations and behavioral incident records. Results indicated that commitment to restorative practices was critical in delivering positive outcomes of reduction of playground incidents, discipline referrals, expulsion and use of external behavior support ([McCluskey, 2010](#)).

In the USA, the past decade has seen a heightened appreciation for restorative practices in K-12 schools. A key interest has been in the impact of the programs on suspension and expulsion rates. Comparing restorative practice interventions in 22 schools and 22 comparison schools, [Augustine et al. \(2018\)](#) found suspensions and days lost to suspension decreased more significantly in the program schools than in the control schools and in program schools students were less likely to be repeatedly suspended.

Racial disparity in use of suspensions and expulsions is a critical concern and restorative practices has been suggested as a way to address this problem. In Oakland and Los Angeles, where the districts are implementing broad school discipline reform and restorative initiatives, suspension gaps between Black and White students have narrowed ([Hashim et al., 2018](#)). However, there is concern about how well restorative practice programs address implicit bias and cultural insensitivity, and hence, how much can be expected from restorative practices in decreasing suspension disparity ([Schiff, 2018](#)). Lustick and her colleagues (2020) interviewed teachers and students to discover the successes and challenges of implementing community-building circles with attention to equity and inclusion. They found that both teachers and students experience these practices as transformative when enough trust is established to share openly; however, more training is necessary for this to be consistent across schools and classrooms.

Another critical goal of restorative practice programs has been improving school climate – especially in terms of creating supportive safe space for students targeted with bullying. In Oakland, data from staff surveys revealed almost 70% of respondents felt restorative practices helped to improve school climate ([Jain et al., 2014](#)). [Acosta et al. \(2019, p. 880\)](#) reported on their research arguing:

This study fills a gap in research on multi-level school-based approaches to promoting positive youth development and reducing bullying, in particular cyberbullying, among middle school youth. The study evaluates the Restorative Practices Intervention, a novel whole-school intervention designed to build a supportive environment through the use of 11 restorative practices (e.g. communication approaches that aim to build stronger bonds among leadership, staff, and students such as using “I” statements, encouraging students to express their feelings) that had only quasi-experimental evidence prior to this study. Studying multilevel (e.g. individual, peer group, school) approaches like the Restorative Practices Intervention is important because they are hypothesized to address a more complex interaction of risk factors than single level efforts, which are more common. Baseline and two-year post survey data was collected from 2,771 students at 13 middle schools evenly split between Grades 6 (48%) and 7 (52%), and primarily ages 11 (38%) or 12 (41%). Gender was evenly split (51% male) and 92% of students were White. The intervention did not yield significant changes in the treatment schools. However, student self-reported experience with restorative practices significantly predicted improved school climate and connectedness, peer attachment and social skills, and reduced cyberbullying victimization.

The research demonstrates that restorative practices programs in schools have merit in reducing negative behavior, reducing suspensions and improving school climate and perceptions of schools as safe spaces (Acosta *et al.*, 2016). However, we have much to learn – especially in terms of best practices in how to implement long-term restorative practices programs. The remainder of this article describes an exemplar of those practices in a multi-year intervention in a high-risk urban middle school in Queens, NY.

Creative Response to Conflict’s history is the history of an evolving field

Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) has educated teachers, young people, and communities to constructively address conflict and prevent and repair harm for nearly 50 years. Our trainings have aimed to help break the cycle of violence and punitive discipline, encourage student growth and strengthen and transform schools in large, racially and economically diverse, and urban school districts in NY, NJ, CT and beyond. We have partnered with universities and researchers to measure the effectiveness of and refine our work.

Founded in New York City in 1972, funded by the Quaker Project on Community Conflict, and a program of the Peace and Social Action Program of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), our initial focus was providing nonviolent conflict resolution skills to children at the youngest possible age. Starting in Manhattan elementary schools, we went on to work with over 50 schools of all grades in NYC. For many years, we were known as Children’s Creative Response to Conflict, until we expanded our work to include people of all ages and changed our name to CRC.

In the early days, we worked closely with Philadelphia Quaker groups including Movement for a New Society and Nonviolence and Children, with which we shared an emphasis on the theme of affirmation in conflict resolution work. Our first book, *The Friendly Classroom for a Small Planet*, was released in 1978. Our other original themes were cooperation and communication. Within a few years, we became involved in the development of the Alternatives to Violence Project and expanded to work with people in prison. *The Friendly Classroom* included an AVP training outline showing our methods could be applied not just to schools but also to prisons and community groups.

In the early 1980s, with the goal to professionalize the field, the Hewlett Foundation funded conflict resolution and mediation projects like ours, hoping to make these skills widespread and turn new vocabulary into household words. Early on, mediation was frequently misread and mistyped as meditation! A great deal of *The Friendly Classroom* material was used by San Francisco Community Boards to create the first elementary peer mediation materials

and workshops. Mid to late 1980s was the heyday for peer mediation, with programs in hundreds of schools, and CRC provided peer mediation training all over the country.

The standards movement, with a focus on test scores, brought support for mediation to a screeching halt. Like the arts, mediation was no longer deemed important enough to teach and fund. So, we pivoted and developed problem-solving resources and curriculum, and focused on integrating problem-solving into content areas such as language arts, social studies, math and science. From 1978 to 1992, we were a program of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In 1992, we established CRC as an independent organization.

A project born of the civil rights and peace movements, racial justice has always been integral to all of CRC's work. We were one of the earliest groups to provide anti-bias education, having begun to train teachers, young people, parents and community organizations about preventing and interrupting bias starting in the early 1990s. Under Mayor Dinkins' administration, we trained 1,000 NYC volunteers in our model, which has always included perspective-taking, cultural sharing, and discussions on the institutionalized nature of racism and other forms of oppression. Power, privilege and the internalization of oppression are at the core of our training.

Increasingly, we saw the interrelationship of bias and bullying behavior and, building on conflict resolution and communication skills, we created trainings to prevent and intervene in bullying. As internet use grew, we created workshops and materials to address cyberbullying.

From the beginning, our format for workshops was a model quite close to a restorative one. Rooted in indigenous traditions, restorative practices (RP), of which restorative justice is one part, allow people to develop connections and empathy and address and repair harm. As an alternative to punishment, restorative practices encourage collaborative problem-solving, accountability, amends and healing. Restorative circles include participants sitting in a circle around a centerpiece, a circle-keeper prompting rounds of storytelling or sharing, a talking piece passed around as each participant speaks, and the creation of shared agreements. They often include an opening ceremony or activity and a closing ceremony. Our workshops always took place in a circle, included sharing reflections in go-arounds, and using consensus, though we were not yet using a talking piece or centerpiece and had not yet shifted from facilitation to circle-keeping.

In the early 2000s restorative practices became popular. Always pursuing professional development, we further expanded our knowledge of and refined our use of RP. We adopted additional circle elements, began implementing more restorative content into trainings, and were among the first trainers to implement RP in NYC public schools. As more schools incorporated RP for community building, dealing with conflict, repairing harm and reducing suspensions, there was also a resurgence of interest in peer mediation programs as an empowering tool for students to manage smaller conflicts.

In addition to staying current and evolving with innovations in the alternative dispute resolution field, we have also stayed abreast of and incorporated innovations and best practices in education theory and child development. To best support students, we integrated trauma-informed methods and social-emotional learning (SEL) techniques into our RP, peer mediation and conflict resolution curricula.

As a national dialogue about ending mass incarceration developed, schools became interested in alternatives and ways of preventing the criminalization of youth. We understood the stakes and the rewards of implementing restorative justice (RJ) in schools. Our approach to RP, which incorporates the skills and concepts of SEL, conflict resolution, anti-bias/anti-racism and mediation, supports schools in interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. To be effective, we believe schools need to be holistically using all of these methods and ideas.

To encourage engagement, foster community and provide information and skills, we use multiple modalities and formats including small and large experiential workshops, one-on-one and coaching sessions, circles, conferences, presentations and town hall-style meetings. Our model addresses the whole child, the whole school and the community context to cultivate a lasting, positive school culture. We use circle processes to help the school community develop a shared vocabulary, common conceptual framework, and skills to productively negotiate conflict and crisis, prevent, identify and intervene in harmful incidents, learn from challenging occurrences and deepen relationships.

We have stayed true to our Quaker roots by remaining open to new perspectives and ideas, proactively discussing challenges and reaching consensus on solutions. By 2015, when we began our work at Middle School 217 in Queens, NY, we had already refined an effective, evidence-based model and provided thousands of hours of professional development and student and family workshops in NYC's multicultural and multiracial schools.

Setting a foundation for restorative practices at MS 217

Since 2015, CRC has participated in a collaborative process that helped MS 217 transform into a model school. MS 217 is a large NYC school (1,700 students) with a great deal of economic, language and racial diversity. Many students are recent immigrants. In 2012, having been identified as a school with one of the highest suspension rates in NYC, resources were made available to turn MS 217 around. Principal Patrick Burns showed his critical support for restorative work.

It's helpful to note that restorative circles are effective in building community, stimulating engagement and enabling participants to empower themselves because they use open ended questions to elicit each person's perspective and make space for all voices to be heard in go-arounds. In cases of harm repair, those impacted are centered in discussions about accountability, amends and support. Someone committing harm would then be directly accountable to those impacted, rather than to the institution for breaking a rule. Understanding impact encourages growth, whereas a focus on compliance does not. These practices enable problem solving, instruction and harm repair to unfold in an environment of shared power, where everyone has an equal voice and feels valued, respected and heard. The atmosphere engendered in restorative circles contributes to the development of inclusive, welcoming, participatory and consensus-oriented classrooms and school culture in which empathy, connection and learning can flourish.

Principal Burns initially sent four of his deans to an RJ training which, in 2014, resulted in him bringing in coach Matthew Guldin, of Cross-Cultural Consulting Services, to begin incorporating RJ into their discipline procedures. Guldin's focus is on alternative methods of discipline and the practice of *100% respect*, a model that balances the power dynamic within the hierarchical structure of schools. Burns then added Morningside Center for Social Responsibility for staff development and coaching in community-building circles.

CRC was brought in during the second year of restorative work to collaborate with Morningside on training and teacher coaching. Typically, CRC starts out with teachers, and then expands to administrators, parents and others. In this case, however, because of the high rate of suspensions, the school chose to start by training and coaching administrators and deans in de-escalation techniques and restorative alternatives to suspension. The rate of suspensions quickly dropped, as they immediately saw the effectiveness of RP in creating accountability and reducing recidivism.

CRC began coaching MS 217 teachers in restorative circles and added parent training soon after. Our framework, curriculum and experience enabled us to help unite and harmonize efforts of families, administrators, teachers and children to disrupt the driving forces of punishment and exclusion that reproduce a cycle of failing and suspensions. As part of our whole school approach, we aimed for all members of the school community to

experience circles and trained teaching assistants, cafeteria workers, maintenance staff, school secretaries and school safety officers. Additionally, we helped strengthen relationships between parents and the school. Understanding and supporting the whole child has been crucial to the reduction of disruptions, conflict, bullying, and, ultimately, disciplinary referrals and suspensions.

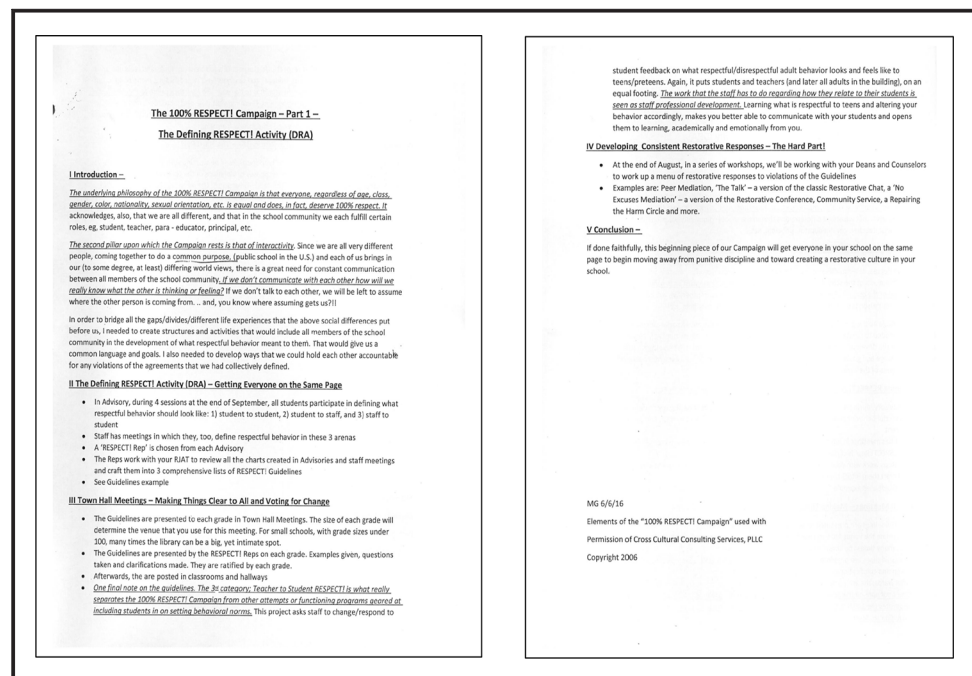
100% respect

In collaboration with Guldin, we implemented the *100% Respect* model (Figure 1) throughout the school. Students were asked to brainstorm what 100% respect between students looks like, describing specific behavior they would see. The next week, students were asked to write what student respect for staff looks like, then staff and students discussed and wrote up what staff respect for students looks like. A group of student leaders compiled and summarized the information. The school held assemblies where each grade had leaders ratify the documents. Finally, they held a culminating program at which the whole school agreed to this declaration of 100% Respect – a school-wide set of agreements posted prominently throughout the building – and applauded their collaborative process. It was inspiring! We helped facilitate drafting a code of conduct and a restorative process to implement and adhere to the community agreements. The entire school community had collectively contributed to building a school culture based on a foundation of respect, active listening, empathy, problem-solving, mediation and harm-repair, where constructive conflict resolution is normative.

School climate

Our whole-school approach improved the climate throughout MS 217. Before the pandemic, when a person walked into the school, they were frequently greeted warmly,

Figure 1 100% Respect process used by MS 217 to create a school-wide declaration of respect document



getting the sense this is a special, welcoming place. Unlike many NYC schools, there's no metal detector. The school safety officers often greet visitors with "How are you doing today?", "Can I help you?" and "Nice to see you". Posters announce, "This a diverse school" and "Everyone is welcome here".

The 100% respect ethos is a hallmark of the change in school climate. There has been a tremendous increase in students' realization of their academic and emotional potential resulting from being in an environment where they feel respected. Several teachers and administrators attended the *growth mindset* training and now the school displays uplifting posters with messages like, "It's not 'I don't know', It's 'I'll give it a try'" and "My brain is like a muscle; when I exercise it, it gets stronger." No one tags these posters with graffiti or tears them down.

Along with other deans, Dean Paulin walks the halls and if he sees a scrap of paper on the floor he picks it up. Students see him do this and it communicates, "Our school is important. It's a safe, neat place. You are safe in these hallways." All of his actions convey, "This is a respectable place." Dean Paulin will challenge students if they break a school agreement, but does so respectfully, as he is invested in RP.

Trainings and sessions

Circles with teachers

CRC supported teachers to create an environment in which cooperation enhances relationships between and among students and teachers. We helped students see they have many choices regarding bias and conflict and taught them skills for making positive choices.

Many NYC schools, including MS 217, use *advisory*, a regularly scheduled period when teachers provide support to students in small groups on academic and social issues or help them plan beyond the current school year. A main goal of the advisory is to build community and give students more opportunities for SEL and to discuss things pertaining to their age and grade level in small supportive settings.

At MS 217 half of the school, every other week, has advisory in smaller restorative circles. (Depending on the size of a class, it could have 5–15 students, the average being 10–12.) For example, guidance counselors might go around to eighth grade advisories and, in circle, give a lesson on the different high school options and discuss the high school application process.

While advisory is taking place, the other half of the school attends an assembly where there might be an experiential activity or film and discussion. We started staff training in advisory circles and then coached teachers to be circle-keepers. With half of their class in assembly, teachers did community-building circles in their (Figure 2) advisories. We began with Grade 6 and, after year one, moved to Grade 7 and then Grade 8. Advisory works well with RP and this school made use of the structure for implementation.

The first phase with teachers was coaching them in their advisory sessions, by joining circles with students and either observing what they were doing, modeling, or co-circle-keeping, depending on the teacher's needs and comfort level. Classes in each grade had some circles with common content and structure, in addition to having unique teacher-designed circles.

We experienced some challenges in circles with students. Early in our work with students, one difficulty was not having everyone take the mindfulness activity seriously. Sometimes students were not focused on what was happening in the circle. There were times when some students consistently chose not to speak and passed the talking piece. This was not a significant problem because it affirmed their right to pass and emphasized that participation is consensual and not obligatory. Sometimes, a person or a few people would talk much more than others. As circle-keepers, we find it very helpful to ask, "Does anyone who hasn't

Figure 2 Sample of student community-building circle agenda

Group-Building Circle

Goal: Get to know each other, find commonality, deepen connections

Welcome

Mindfulness *Gong*

Check-In *How are you doing?*

Community Agreements Review

Values Discussion *Go-arounds:*

- *What values do we have in common? [Chart responses] Additional thoughts?*
- *How do we respond in a world with different values? Other ideas?*

Cooperation Web

Cooperation Discussion *Go-arounds*

When did you experience cooperation?

When do you wish there were more cooperation?

What do you/can you do that is cooperative?

Evaluation *Name something you enjoyed about today's circle and something you hope we might do in a future circle.*

spoken want to add anything?" Another challenge for these circles is structural. Class periods are relatively short so we would often run out of time as discussion deepened or moved in interesting new directions.

We did many circles directly with students, with teachers observing us. Sometimes, if they only had a little training, they felt less confident and would ask us to do a circle. One teacher didn't have the confidence to come up with a center-piece so CRC's Executive Director, Priscilla Prutzman brought her one. After three circles with that class, Priscilla returned later in the year to observe. The teacher circle-kept perfectly and was still using the center-piece.

As teachers became more confident, they would run their own circles, and when more experienced, they began content circles (Figure 3), infusing SEL into lessons from units they were working on. By 8th grade, there might be a circle on test preparation. Test anxiety

Figure 3 Sample of content circle agenda

Content Circle

Goal: Teach I-statements

Welcome

Mindfulness *Autumn visualization*

Check-In *How are you? If you feel comfortable, share anything that came up for you or something you enjoyed about the mindfulness activity.*

Community Agreements Review

Values Review

Activity *Make a gesture that expresses your name*

I-statements *Display and explain handout*

Practice *Small groups, take turns with the scenarios and making I-statements*

Closing *What's one important thing you learned today?*

was a popular subject for circles. We did several circles on how to keep yourself calm before a test and how to prepare.

We observe teachers one to three times a year, give them feedback and share suggestions. In some cases, teachers struggled with taking more space than students in the circle. That is when we would offer to model circle-keeping.

We supported teachers of students with special needs and did some circles with their small classes, (four or five students). We had written curriculum years ago with the NYC Department of Education (DOE) on using CRC themes with students with special needs and concluded that cooperation and affirmation work really well with trauma-informed practices. Because it was often difficult for some of these students to step outside of their own feelings and visualize another's point of view, conflict resolution was harder. Trauma-informed circles try to avoid triggers and are as positive as possible. The more we did cooperative and affirming work with them, the easier it was to do conflict resolution and the students responded well.

Student run circles

By year three, eighth graders were doing circles – ones they designed and circle-kept for their class. Some were incredibly good at it. Many of these students also trained as peer mediators.

Parent circles

We see family-school communication and engagement as essential to the success of RP in schools and strongly promote it. When we arrived in year two, we began parent circles. To attract parents, Principal Burns put signs all over the sidewalk, inviting them in for coffee and donuts. We had everything prepared upstairs and, with their breakfast in hand, he ushered everyone to the circle! We held these sessions every Monday morning. At first, we had Spanish and Arabic translation. The majority of the Spanish-speaking parents continued to attend, while the Arabic-speaking parents' attendance dropped off.

The principal started doing circles in parent meetings. These tended to be long, with parents delving into personal issues and exploring incorporating circles at home, noting they might help with family conflicts. They shared about needs and feelings. The more we met, the deeper the discussions got. We discussed the impact of being judgmental and where judgmentalism comes from, including culture. We did a parent circle on handling students' testing anxiety. We did a lot mindfulness, which they loved, appreciating time to relax. They indicated they wanted more, so we started doing mindfulness at the beginning *and* end. As circles in other parts of the school increased, we had fewer parent circles and then the pandemic hit. When we are fully back in the school, we hope to restart parent circles.

Training and involvement of all members of the school community

For the processes to be effective, everyone has to speak the same language and contribute to building this new school culture. We call it a whole school approach because, in addition to educators, students and parents, we involved staff from every part of the school in training on RJ, circles and the 100% respect process.

The school safety officers, which in other schools are called security or cops, are one of the most important groups to work with in moving a school from a punitive to a restorative model. When there are conflicts in schools, they typically view students as suspicious or even criminals. Since receiving our training, the MS 217 safety officers are more like helpers with authority. They maintain order *and* they're kind. They care deeply for and are friendly with students and interrupt bullying. Often, people view school safety officers as human

metal detectors. But in a restorative model school, they can really show up for kids in positive ways.

Turnkey training for onboarding new staff

Already a large school, MS 217 continues to grow. Its improved reputation has increased enrollment and it is favored for its wonderful diversity. Therefore, new staff are always being added. MS 217 maintains the positive dynamics by training new teachers in the school's restorative methods and culture. Priscilla and Joyce Griffen (Morningside) trained new teachers at lunch for several weeks. They gave a condensed version of a five-day training, followed by classroom coaching. Some teachers already had training in previous schools, as restorative has become widespread in NYC.

We have also trained staff to turn-key their knowledge. They learn how to plan and conduct their own circle-keeping workshops, include experiential activities, design small group work, manage time and elicit evaluations. When CRC trains on facilitation and circle-keeping, participants learn listening and questioning skills, how to balance content and process and how to determine if workshop goals were accomplished.

Harm circles

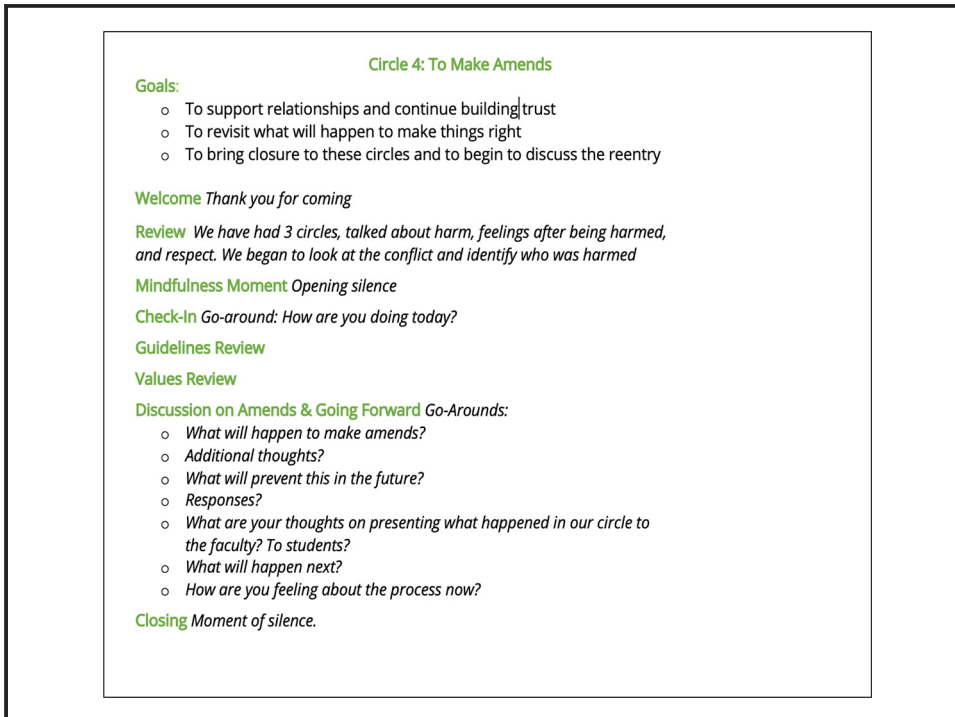
During our second year of peer mediation training, school safety officers had the opportunity to experience the benefit of harm circles. A situation arose in which two students not chosen as mediators kept sneaking into the mediation training, dishonestly claiming, "Our teacher said we could come." They were looking to get out of class and saw what we were doing as a safe space. They thought they wouldn't get into trouble, but school safety officers caught them running in the hallway. We had a circle (Figure 4) with them, which was a turning point. When the safety officers saw the impact of a circle, our relationship with them changed dramatically. The circle allowed them to fully understand what we were doing and saw that our work supported theirs and they fully came on board with RJ. When there's a good relationship with safety officers who have a commitment to shifting from punishment to restoring relationships, ongoing harm circles can have a huge, positive impact on the school.

We planned to do harm circles with students in the in-school suspension room, however, the dean started doing circles on his own. These circles helped students be accountable for their actions and feel welcomed back into their classes, while reducing recidivism. Burns said the biggest issue, during COVID-19, was students breaking into online classes and sessions and posting inappropriate content, including cursing and lewd videos. One high-performing student was caught repeatedly engaging in this behavior and was one of M.S. 217's only known suspensions during this time. Despite the suspension, the school used RJ. The deans held a restorative circle with the student who then apologized to the whole school and was welcomed back. It turned out this was a very bright student who was bored.

Peer mediation

Peer mediation is a critical component of RP that enables people to take ownership and constructively deal with conflict and harm. In year two, we added a peer mediation program. We helped guide MS 217 to create the structure for a successful program, trained students, and supported them in helping classmates more productively navigate conflict. Students learned and practiced listening skills, how to ask open questions and how to help peers brainstorm appropriate solutions for their conflicts. MS 217 selects leaders from each class to form their Dean's Council, many of whom become peer mediators, then Social Media-tors!. (See next section). In addition, several students, not already school leaders, became mediators, which comports with a tenet of peer mediation – mediators represent everyone.

Figure 4 Sample of an agenda for a harm circle



Social Media-tors!

Because there had already been a lot of successful innovation, MS 217 was a perfect place to begin a new collaboration. In 2019–2020, recognizing the significant problem of cyber-bullying, we developed the *Social Media-tors!* program in partnership with *Bridg-It*, thanks to a grant from JAMS and the Association for Conflict Resolution. *Social Media-tors!* is a program in which students are trained to intervene in online conflicts and promote pro-social behavior through the *Bridg-It* app's *shout-out* system.

Those already trained as peer mediators were given three days of training on responding to cyber-bullying. Students learned to recognize and intervene in disputes and bullying on social media, report harmful situations, and foster a positive school environment using *Bridg-It shout-outs*. Staff were trained in how to manage reports, support students and use the resource center to implement RP. *Shout-outs* are meant to be used school-wide to create a positive school climate.

In March, 2020, when we heard one of the 1,700+ students tested positive for COVID we elbow-bumped and said goodbye, and didn't return in person until December 2021. Along with our partners, we lost NYC and Board of Education funding due to pandemic related cutbacks. Fortunately, we still had this JAMS grant which allowed us to continue virtually.

During the pandemic, we shifted our approach and supported student leaders in training their peers online in both peer mediation and social mediation. Before the pandemic, CRC had already developed our *virtual circle template* (Figure 5). In online circles and trainings, we use and train others to use this tool, which simulates sitting in a circle to help teachers hold online classes and circles with a greater sense of community and connection. Initially used for our international restorative circles, we have now taught over 1,000 educators using it. A *virtual talking piece* is moved as each person speaks. In recurring groups, we add participants' pictures to their "seat". We used this template for *Social Media-tors!*.

Figure 5 Sample of CRC's virtual circle template



Remote learning presented us with a few challenges for which we needed to creatively problem-solve. The first was getting students to sign on. Out of 19 social mediators, our first remote skill-building session had a few students, with adults outnumbering them. The next session we had twice as many students, and it doubled again the next time. We had an ongoing problem with students who did not turn on their cameras and sometimes their mics. They may have been embarrassed by their home. Some did not have strong enough internet or a working camera or mic, and some were shy.

We found the chat function was extremely important, and students, who frequently text, readily adopted it. The more we met, the more they used mics and cameras. Some students stayed on after sessions and then turned their mics and cameras on. One student said Zoom froze if he used the camera and others had the same problem. We adjusted our activities to ensure our training remained interactive and involved different modalities, including kinesthetic, visual, auditory and integrating apps students suggested.

While we might have done a 4–6 hour in-person training, it was hard to have the students focus longer than 1.5 hours online. We used various formats— working in pairs and small groups and using movement. We were already doing experiential learning in person, so we had ideas for retaining students' attention online. We found adults also need this variation! Teaching online was more efficient as there was no travel time and no handouts to duplicate, as they were emailed and stored. Despite not being in-person, MS 217 peer mediators have been learning to recognize and safely intervene in online conflicts.

Student presentations at conferences

Prior to COVID-19, a unifying activity was having MS 217 educators and students present two years in a row at Lehman College's RJ conference on our whole school approach. Two students presented along with two guidance counselors, Dean Gega, Dean Paulin, a teacher and CRC and Morningside facilitators. The students, who were also mediators, talked about the program, highlighting mediation. Some parents commented on changes they saw in their children particularly after the peer mediation training, and one parent said they started doing circles at home. The session closed with a Q & A session. The students also presented part

of the keynote address. It was exciting for parents and students to demonstrate their knowledge on the subject of restorative at big conferences. There was also a student-run restorative conference at a high school, at which an MS 217 parent and student led a presentation on circle-keeping.

Why MS 217's transformation was successful

Collaboration as a key to success

Collaboration has been a significant part of the process of turning this school around, though, Principal Burns initially felt collaboration would be difficult. When we first came to present, Joyce, the Morningside trainer/facilitator was skeptical too. We said we would do coaching. However, Morningside was already coaching, as some of the teachers had Morningside's five-day restorative training and Joyce was contracted to follow-up with those teachers, so we needed to clarify our role.

Joyce was initially using Morningside's year-long circle curriculum for 6th grade. Once they got comfortable leading circles, the teachers decided they wanted to create their own circles. By then, CRC was fully involved and we had to learn how to compliment and support each other's work instead of duplicating and leaving gaps. We had different working styles. Morningside teaches with a very specific plan while CRC has a more open-ended approach, asking about goals and offering possibilities. By using our collaborative process, we gradually merged, working together beautifully.

CRC was ahead of many in incorporating peer mediation into RP and had a lot of experience with peer mediation, whereas Morningside was not doing peer mediation at MS 217. Joyce hadn't done peer mediation training for years and used a different model. So, Priscilla took more of the lead on that training. After Joyce learned our process they co-facilitated peer mediation training. Priscilla always prefers to work with someone and Joyce was used to working alone, though she came to really enjoy working in tandem. Priscilla and Joyce would jointly plan most of the parent circles together and co-circle-keep. They also divided the work for teachers who needed classroom coaching. Dean Gega was very helpful in setting up the trainings and is still the mediation coordinator at the school.

Dare to Revitalize Education through Arts and Mediation (DREAM), a Bronx-based group also contracted to work with MS 217, was in its early stages as an organization. CRC had trained them in peer mediation years earlier. They did not want to do mediation training and asked us to continue doing it, which we have now done for several years. DREAM hired a facilitator to come in as a mediator coach to run an afterschool mediation club, in addition to some lunch-time skill-building sessions, which gave students lots of opportunities to conduct and debrief mediations.

We also collaborated with part-time staff of Margaret's Room, a space at MS 217 funded by the Safe at Home Foundation. This "is a dedicated safe room in schools where students can go to talk or 'hang out' in a comfortable environment that feels safe to them – a place where respect and confidentiality are the rule". They provide "healing services to youth who have been traumatized by exposure to violence including domestic violence, child abuse, teen dating abuse, and sexual assault." We worked with them to run circles focused on abuse.

It is rare to have this much ongoing collaborative work in schools. Often training organizations work independently, competing for resources. Schools commonly receive unconnected trainings, with no over-arching plan. Having multiple practitioners and stakeholders focus so much attention on strategic, shared objectives and model problem-solving and cooperation was very valuable for MS 217's transformational journey.

Because our collective efforts and model enabled this school to turn around so dramatically, reducing incidents of discrimination, conflict, and suspension and increasing connections between and among educators and students, it began to be known as a model school.

People from all over the New York Metropolitan Area, including politicians, other organizations and educators, came to observe circles, learn about *100% Respect*, and see how deans incorporate RP into their discipline approach.

Buy-in

Clearly, the early support and enthusiasm of the principal was instrumental in MS 217 becoming a model restorative school. Dean Paulin has also been a great advocate for *100% Respect* and RP. He is like a restorative justice superhero, walking around the school and immediately using RJ with students in a conflict in the hall or in the cafeteria. And the students love him. The same goes for Dean Gega, who has become the "mediation dean"!

Guidance counselors have also really been onboard. Once they were trained and aware of more effective methods to deal with conflict and harm, each segment of the school community saw the value in shifting away from the traditional, retributive method. When a significant percentage of a school is invested in the vision, restorative practices can become a reality.

Diversity

Because MS 217 is in Queens NY, one of the most diverse places in the USA, the school community is incredibly diverse and the staff reflect back to students and families what a strength this is. Educators emphasize that everyone is welcome and appreciated. In addition to being a multiracial school, there is religious diversity and they have always actively welcomed LGBTQ+ people. There are rainbow flags everywhere, and several teachers carry rainbow flag key chains. It is easier for RP to take hold in an environment where difference is celebrated and inclusion is cultivated.

Conclusion

While our collaboration enabled us to help MS 217 achieve its goal of transformation within about five years, we recognize ample funding made this possible. A few of the schools we have worked in had funding to hire a full-time RJ coordinator, though we recognize for many schools, particularly in the USA, where education is severely underfunded, a lack of resources presents a significant barrier. Schools with fewer resources may require a great deal more time to move away from traditional methods of discipline. So, in addition to a whole school approach and buy-in from the school's leadership, funding is key to the success of restorative in schools.

Principal Burns did his own research, polling the student body. One year, by grade, he polled students on the circles we held, asking which part students liked best. We learned they liked check-ins most, which spoke volumes about their need to be heard as whole people, and not just as students showing up for class, having to produce test scores. After getting that feedback, we never skipped check-ins. Another lesson is related to the mindfulness activities we do to help circle participants become calm, present and ready for the work ahead. When we began incorporating mindfulness into circles, most found it a bit strange and some would giggle. However, it quickly proved indispensable as students were more relaxed and focus. We got affirming feedback and never skip mindfulness either. No one giggles anymore!

Soon after we moved online, George Floyd was murdered. MS 217 students in our peer mediation and Social Media-tors! sessions were clearly affected by this and we needed to create space for them to process their feelings and thoughts. We were able to connect bullying and violence seen across the country, but were careful not to be didactic to attend to the trauma and fear being stirred up. This clarified the necessity of remaining flexible with

students and being capable of putting aside a day's plan when something important like this emerges. Changing school climate, building community, and RJ to support academic achievement and mitigate incidents of violence and bullying can only work when we address children's emotional and material needs, experiences and societal factors impacting them.

We certainly learned collaboration is vitally needed to transform a school in this way and requires extra effort in communication, a willingness to negotiate and accept differences in models, styles, and curriculum and patience with the process of trust-building. More than anything else, to serve a school effectively, training groups and organizations need to operate with a genuinely cooperative approach, recognize each partner contributes their own strengths, let go of unnecessary self-interest and truly build something new together.

It is too early to know all the ways COVID will impact schools in general and MS 217 in particular. We will have current peer mediators train a new group of students this year and hope to resume parent workshops and classroom coaching, including circles on how COVID has affected the school community. We will continue training new teachers on RP and expect some training will remain virtual. Flexibility remains important. Now that schools have returned to in-person learning, we will support educators with this transition by problem-solving, offering a positive, optimistic approach and using mindfulness and activities emphasizing gratitude, self-care and kindness. Our efforts to contribute to an environment of safety where everyone feels welcome are needed now more than ever.

We are committed to system-wide change by shifting schools to a restorative model to reduce police in schools and disproportionate interactions of Black and Brown children with the juvenile justice system. Because districts are, at last, prioritizing safe, pro-social and inclusive learning environments, they are seeing that restorative practices can reduce disciplinary referrals, effectively slowing the school-to-prison pipeline and improving outcomes. We continue to expand our restorative work to schools across the country and take pride in watching schools' transformations.

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