

Looking Within and Beyond: Restorative Justice in Schools

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Thank you to my partner, who was the first to show me that it isn't a bad thing to take accountability for a harm and that we all deserve a chance to show up better.

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ABSTRACT

Across the past three decades, restorative justice (RJ) has become increasingly popular in the U.S as an alternative to criminal legal approaches, particularly in schools suffering from the effects of school securitization and a rise in discipline. However, what RJ means is often variable in how it is practiced and dependent upon its local context: school, family, community, etc. This study reveals the tensions underlying RJ's implementation process in schools and investigates the role that political climate plays in those efforts. The results of this study are based on a series of eight semi-structured interviews with key national organizers and scholars who work with restorative justice practices in schools. Findings indicate that there are three key tensions in RJ's implementation in educational contexts: 1) the pervasiveness of carceral logics, 2) RJ's lack of structural support, and 3) the contingency of RJ's use based upon how different actors think about and use it in practice. Finally, the local political climate of RJ practice has both salutary and adverse effects on implementation efforts. Together, these findings provide a deeper analysis of the obstacles in RJ implementation in schools, thereby allowing individuals to work towards sustainability in schools.

Key words: academics, community organizers, criminal legal system, restorative justice, school discipline, zero tolerance

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, I joined a team of scholars, including faculty and undergraduate students from UT, community organizers from Community Defense of East Tennessee (CDET), and community members on a CURCI (Community University Research Collaborative Initiative) project. Our project for the 2022-23 school year was to research, develop, and share a conflict resolution and restorative justice alternatives curriculum for Knox County Schools. This ongoing project (now in its third phase) and these core commitments to non-punitive alternatives were some of the things that had drawn me to the University of Tennessee, where scholars study harm, restorative and transformative justice, and abolition. In doing the research for this project, our team met with numerous scholars doing restorative justice, transformative justice, and abolition work across the United States. These conversations, my research of the literature, and my growing relationship with grassroots organizer Imani Mfalme-Shula, who was recently profiled in Jocelyn Simonson's book *Radical Acts of Justice*, are the grounds for my thesis project. In my discussions, it became clear that more research was needed on the tensions in RJ implementation that organizers, scholars, and teachers routinely encountered.

Schools as an Emerging Place of Crime and Criminal Justice

With the use of zero-tolerance policies on the rise in schools across the United States, and the subsequent consequences of these policies on students and school climate, schools and communities are in search of alternative ways to address student "misbehavior." Zero-tolerance policies are ones that have "predetermined consequences for specific offenses" and are intended to treat all rule-breakers equally to ensure fairness in disciplinary actions (Stinchcomb et al. 2006; Henault, 2001). In schools, zero-tolerance policies look like the mandated use of suspensions and expulsions to deal with student

behavior that is deemed inappropriate (Anfara Jr et al. 2013; Evans and Lester, 2012; Stinchcomb et al. 2006). Additionally, zero-tolerance policies in schools operate under the assumption that “removing students who engage in disruptive behavior will deter others from disruption” (Ewing, 2000) and “create an improved climate for those students who remain” (Public Agenda, 2004; Skiba, 2008). In regards to education, zero tolerance is seen as “a response to violence in schools” (Kodelja, 2019). Punitive school environments are the result of zero tolerance policies, formed as an adaptation of the policies stemming from the tough on crime era of the 1980s (Morris and Perry, 2016).

Prior to the tough on crime era, zero-tolerance was first developed by the US Customs Agency in order to address the growing drug trade (Martinez, 2009; Heanult, 2001; Piphoo, 1998; Skiba and Peterson, 1999a, 1999b). The idea of zero-tolerance made its way to the education system with the passing of the Gun-Free Schools Act, or PL 103-832, under the Clinton administration in March 1994 (Martinez, 2009; GFSA, 2004). The Gun-Free Schools Act required schools to implement a zero-tolerance policy and impose at least a one year expulsion to students who bring a weapon onto the school’s campus (Martinez, 2009; Ashford, 2000; Casella, 2003; Essex, 2001; McAndrews, 2001; Skiba and Peterson, 1999a; 1999b; Stader, 2004; Wald, 2001). For schools that did not comply, the schools risked losing federal money from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (Martinez, 2009; Ashford, 2000; Casella, 2003; Essex, 2001; McAndrews, 2001; Skiba and Peterson, 1999a; 1999b; Stader, 2004; Wald, 2001).

In the subsequent years, the topic of school safety came to the forefront of the public’s attention following key school shootings such as the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 and the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012 (Addington, 2009; Tanner-Smith et al. 2017). In light of these tragedies, schools moved towards

securitization. Schools use surveillance cameras, security personnel, and metal detectors with the belief that these security measures will ensure school safety (Tanner-Smith et al. 2017; Brown, 2005; Johnson, 1999; Madfis, 2016). Around 89% of public high schools had security cameras operating on campus during the 2013 to 2014 school year; 43% had at least one security guard, school resource officer, security personnel, or law enforcement officer on campus once a week; and 9% of schools enforced random metal detector checks (Zhang et al. 2016; Tanner-Smith et al. 2017). As evidenced by the history of zero-tolerance policies, the manifestation of these policies in schools exists on the backdrop of a broader cultural shift in securitization that has occurred in the past four decades in the US.

At the inception of zero-tolerance policies, weapons and drugs were the main concern; however, over time zero-tolerance “moved beyond its original intent (Martinez, 2009) and became a “catch-all phrase” for offenses related to fights, school dress-codes, movement on and off campus, and violence (Dizon et al. 2022; Morris, 2015; Armour, 2016). By 1997, 79% of U.S. schools had some form of a zero-tolerance policy (Armour, 2016), and, in a massive shift, now most schools and legislatures have securitized and hardened school disciplinary codes. As a result of zero-tolerance policies, suspensions and expulsions of students, specifically students of color, in schools has significantly increased (Schumacher, 2014; Morris and Perry, 2016). For example, one such study’s findings showed that black students, particularly black boys, are more frequently and harshly disciplined than other children of color (Applied Research Center, 1999; Henault, 2001). Relatedly, the Harvard University Civil Rights Project on Zero Tolerance revealed that Black and Latinx students were “more likely to be disciplined for offenses like ‘defiance of authority’ and ‘disrespect of authority’” which are subjective behaviors possibly making racial bias a facilitator in disciplining students (Henault, 2001; Advancement Project,

2000). Scholars have even coined the term “youth control complex” to describe “the hyper-criminalization of racial and ethnic minority youth across the US, which leads to greater levels of over-policing, surveillance, and punishment in US schools with large populations of racial and ethnic minority students” (Iwama et al. 2024).

The research on the effects of zero-tolerance policies is alarmingly clear: they create less safe schools (Stinchcomb et al. 2006), disproportionately discipline students of color (Morris and Perry, 2016; Armour, 2016; The Civil Rights Project, Advancement Project 2000; Kodelja, 2019), widen the racial achievement gap (Morris and Perry, 2016), increase the odds of contact with the criminal legal system (Morris, 2015), increase disconnectedness between the student and their school (Morris and Perry, 2016), and further the academic decline of students (Morris and Perry, 2016). In other words, there is more evidence of zero-tolerance policies having a negative effect on schools than there is evidence of these policies having a positive effect (Martinez, 2009). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics’ study related to school violence found that after four years of zero-tolerance policies in schools, schools with zero-tolerance policies were still less safe than those without zero-tolerance policies (Henault, 2001). Along with the negative effects of the use of zero-tolerance policies in schools, scholars are questioning the criminalization of children and their behaviors (Henault, 2001). With schools enacting zero-tolerance policies, students are criminalized, rendering them as “undeserving citizens, a status that thereby circumscribes future incarceration” (Feldman et al. 2011; Cowen and Siciliano, 2011). For these reasons, schools and communities have a vested interest in alternative approaches. One such approach that is proving effective in schools is based on restorative justice (RJ).

RJ operates against the powerful tentacles of the criminal legal system and its creep into schools in the US. Within the criminal legal system, justice is seemingly standardized and efficient (McCold, 2004). The criminal legal system operates in a way that relies on a variety of efficiency mechanisms, such as people taking plea deals rather than going to trial, in order to manage the large influx of people into the system. There is also the manner in which society itself has taken on key features of the criminal legal, or carceral, systems. With the rise of mass incarceration and political commitments to governing through crime (Simon 2020; Garland 2001), schools inevitably began to change their disciplinary practices to be standardized, efficient, and focused on control to reflect the practices of the criminal legal system. In schools, this process of standardization and efficiency can look like designating fixed punitive repercussions for certain behavioral violations, also known as zero-tolerance policies (Stinchcomb et al. 2006). The efficacy of zero-tolerance policies is questionable considering that these policies do not prevent harm or repair harm that has already taken place. There is considerable research detailing their ineffectiveness and the need for alternatives (Anfara Jr et al. 2013; Advancement Project, 2010; American Psychological Association, 2008). Some scholars argue that zero-tolerance policies are about social control (Morrison and Vaandering, 2012). Significantly, disciplinary practices have been shown to disproportionately affect students of color (Morris and Perry, 2016; Armour, 2016). In particular, Black and Latinx students are mostly negatively affected by punitive school policies (Morris and Perry, 2016), raising foundational concerns about inequities, racial justice, and the racialization of carceral logics.

Schools in the U.S. exist in the shadow of the carceral state and reflect the ideological hold of punishment on institutions, making schools and education more broadly, a key site for analysis and change. Punishment and revenge are “elements of

carceral logic” (Kaba, xxiii). This relationship to punitive policies and their hold on the vision of education in the U.S. makes RJ implementation a key challenge. Most of the literature on RJ in schools shows that schools are primarily using RJ to counter zero-tolerance and punitive policies (Armour, 2016). This is important to note because RJ’s main goal is to reduce conflict through a deep engagement with relationships around harm. RJ is not simply an effort to replace punitive policies—this is merely a by-product of RJ’s intended goals. RJ is rather an entire philosophy and way of being in right relationship with others. It is in this contested and carceral context that teachers and community organizers seek to implement restorative justice practices.

Restorative Justice Philosophy

Restorative justice centers on relationships: everyone is understood as being connected to one another. One definition of RJ offered by Suvall (2009) states that it is a way to “hold offenders accountable, repair harm to the victims, and provide support and assistance to offenders to encourage their reintegration into community” (p. 558). In order to achieve justice, RJ focuses on the needs and obligations of everyone involved, including the person who was harmed, the person who did the harm, and their respective communities (Zehr, 20-22; Morrison and Vaandering, 2012). At the end of this process, every person and relationship, from the person harmed and the person who did the harm, as well as community relationships, should be “restored to well-being” (McCold, 2004).

In sum, there are three key elements of RJ defined by Howard Zehr who was foundational to the RJ program at Eastern Mennonite College where one of my interviewees, Kathy, currently teaches. In both of Howard Zehr’s most prominent books, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (1995) and *A New The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (2016), he offers a breakdown of RJ’s principles. The first element is

that harm is a violation of people and relationships. In essence, we are all connected to each other so when a harm occurs, it damages our connectedness and relationship to one another. The second element is that harm creates obligations. According to this element, the person who did the harm is tasked with taking responsibility for the act, listening to the person who was harmed, and brainstorming a way to make amends with the person harmed and the community. The last element defines justice as everyone affected (person harmed, person who did the harm, and their respective communities) being involved in making things right. In other words, when a harm is done, everyone affected is expected to contribute to the process of amending the harm (Zehr, 2016).

According to the literature, restorative justice is primarily conceptualized in two ways: as a menu of processes and procedures or as a set of values (Morrison and Ahmed, 2006). For those who conceptualize of RJ as the former, “what needs to be done to resolve conflict and heal relationships” is often highlighted whereas those who conceptualize of RJ as the latter highlight “the philosophical principles and ethos of being restorative and warn against the use of practices without a deep understanding of the philosophy that guides those practices” (Anfara et al. 2013). For the majority of RJ educators, they acknowledge that RJ is characterized by both philosophy and practice (Morrison, 2006; Anfara et al. 2013).

In contrast to the questions asked by the criminal legal system: “What laws were violated?”; “Who is guilty?” and “How shall they be punished,” RJ asks a different set of questions: “‘Who has been harmed?’ ‘What are their needs?’ and ‘How can these needs be met?’” (McCold, 2004). Whereas justice is standardized and efficient in the criminal legal system, RJ acknowledges that when a harm occurs, it creates different needs, and as such, tailored responses to each harm and relationship are essential (McCold, 2004). The process

of repairing harm with RJ centers on values such as “empathy, connectedness, empowerment, and compassion” which Stroup notes are qualities that are stigmatized in U.S. society, often seen as weaknesses (Stroup, 2019; Payne and Welch, 2018). Other qualities of RJ include mutual respect, dialogue to allow for fair processes, equilibrium between support and structure, and fostering relationships rather than dealing with misbehavior (Macready 2009). Restorative justice in its purest form is voluntary and not forced. RJ is about allowing people to come into a restorative process in their own time and not forcing people to take part in these processes. One by-product of restorative justice is the prevention of re-offending (McCold, 2004). In the literature scholars use two key terms: restorative justice and restorative practices. Restorative justice is more concrete and accurate whereas restorative practices encompass the practices themselves, such as circle practice, restorative conversations, deep listening, and other skills that are inherent to restorative justice.

Victims and Harm

Restorative justice is one way that those on the other end of a harm are able to get their needs met (McCold, 2004). Conflict is essential, necessary, and inevitable. Conflict can be harmful but it can also be helpful and functional because it forces us to change, to change the way we're doing things and allow new ideas to be shared. RJ allows for us to work through conflict and to move through it, rather than avoid it. The primary way to interact with conflict through RJ is by addressing the harm that was caused to the victim and subsequently, bringing all parties involved into a conversation (Stroup, 2019; Payne and Welch, 2018). According to McCold, addressing the harm done to the victim means acknowledging and working to repair any emotional and/or financial damage that the victim and their family experienced, along with managing the after-effects of the harm on

the relationships with the person who did the harm, and relationships between others involved (McCold, 2004). Through the person who has been harmed, the person who did the harm, and their respective communities playing active roles in the process of repair and ‘doing justice,’ they are able to directly deal with their conflict, rather than having this process be outsourced to the criminal legal system (McCold, 2004). Research studies reveal that “RJ practices give victims a greater sense of control (empowerment), as they can decide the degree of involvement they intend to have in the process” (Gustafson, 2005; Nascimento et al. 2023). In other words, people involved in the RJ process are able to exercise autonomy, healthy communication skills, and participate in a process that allows them to practice accountability and possibly get their needs met, all whilst promoting healing for all involved.

Research Questions

With various schools implementing restorative justice practices, and the implementation of these practices and their outcomes being well-documented, there are still gaps in the literature on the tensions that exist surrounding this process of implementation in schools. By tensions I mean the underlying mechanisms at play when implementing RJ. This is especially relevant given the changing political climate in the U.S. By political climate I am referring to the move away from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Critical Race Theory, and Gender/Queer studies in the US. This gap in the literature and evolving climate inform my first research question:

Question 1: What tensions are present, if any, when implementing restorative justice practices in schools in challenging or hostile political contexts?

My first research question frames my second research question in that it provides a backdrop on which to contextualize the relationship between educators, organizers, and the environment in which they do restorative justice work:

Question 2: How does political climate shape consensus of the use and implementation of RJ practices among educators and organizers in different political and institutional contexts?

The terms educator, academic, and organizer can and do often overlap. However, for this study, by educator and academic I mean people who are in the business of teaching and providing education to other people. By organizers I mean people who organize around issues in society but whose primary duties are to the community, not a higher education institution. Organizers are invested in popular education. Other terms I may use throughout my thesis include academics, teachers, and administrators. By academics I refer to people who are at higher education institutions. They are mostly engaged in research and teaching at these institutions and their primary role consists of duties for the higher education institution. Teachers and administrators are those at any level of education, ranging from elementary to universities. This question gets at the struggles among these groups to advance RJ programs in political climates that rely on and favor punishment and policing as the primary answers to school conflict and behavioral issues. I will be following threads in the interviews about how to build consensus with stakeholders, establish contacts and entry points into education at the local and state level, what to call the program, how to launch the campaign, how to build RJ trainings in the community, and many more.

Lastly, this research will contribute to the literature on harm, violence, restorative justice, punitive policies, and non-punitive policies in schools. My proposed study will add to the literature on restorative justice by 1) naming the tensions that underlie the challenges

faced when implementing RJ practices in schools, 2) assessing how implementation efforts are affected by political climate, 3) examining the consensus of RJ among academics and organizers, 4) investigating how political climate shapes consensus among academics and organizers, and 5) studying the RJ practices of a city (Knoxville) that has not been studied before.

Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 is the literature review in which I detail the history of restorative justice and how restorative justice exists in schools, the process of implementation of restorative justice in schools, and the political context of the United States. The remainder of the thesis includes Chapter 3, where I introduce the research method used for the study: thematic analysis. In Chapter 4, I present my findings of key tensions academics and community organizers experience when implementing RJ in schools and contextualize my findings within the broader context of the literature. Lastly, in chapter 5, I summarize the thesis and offer closing remarks.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW: AN OVERVIEW OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

Having addressed the foundational principles and contexts for RJ above, in this chapter, I briefly lay out the research literature on the concerns of restorative justice practices in schools. It is important to acknowledge the rich history of restorative justice practices, including those that derive from Indigenous traditions which focus on the importance of interpersonal relationships in an effort to support the wellness of everyone in the community (González et al. 2018; Zehr, 11, 20). As such, RJ can best be described as a “rediscovery” of practices that have long been practiced by Indigenous and First peoples, and have shown up in other human societies as well (McCold, 2004). However, in the contemporary context, origin points are complex, implementation is varied, and RJ practices themselves can include restitution, peer mediation, community service, and student conferences, conducted by a range of actors - trained restorative coordinators, tribal elders, mediators, lawyers, counselors, social workers, even police officers—under a broad umbrella of RJ settings.

Restorative Justice in Schools

In the US, the implementation of RJ in schools began in the late 1990s in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota; and several school districts in Wisconsin (Armour, 2016; Karp and Breslin, 2001; Sumner et al. 2010; Anfara et al. 2013). The development of RJ practices in these cities was grounded in efforts to change practices of racialization in schools, specifically bias towards lower socioeconomic students and students of color and increasingly punitive school environments (Armour, 2016). Schools assumed that the use of RJ practices instead of punitive practices such as suspensions and expulsions would interrupt the racialization of punishment. That is,

students of color were the majority of students at the other end of punitive school policies and if these policies were replaced with RJ practices, students (of color) would not be suspended, expelled, and ultimately forced out of school through the school-to-prison pipeline. Unfortunately, research shows that RJ does not benefit all students equally and that the disciplinary outcomes for Black students remained largely unchanged (Davison et al. 2022). In one research study, their findings showed a decrease in total discipline and suspension rates in the Meadowview Public Schools (MPS) school district, however, the positive outcomes of RJ were only experienced by White, Latinx, and Asian students with Black students maintaining the same level of disciplinary outcomes (Davison et al. 2022). For schools with RJ, there may be a reduction in disciplinary inequity in certain instances (Augustine et al. 2019), however, disciplinary inequity may be increased in other instances (Hashim et al. 2018).

In schools, RJ practices are mostly framed as substitutes for disciplinary and securitization measures. Schools began adopting restorative justice (RJ) practices as opposed to punitive exclusionary practices in order to not only address conflict, but to prevent it as well by “changing the conditions that lead to violence (Anfara et al. 2013). RJ recognizes the uniqueness of each harm and allows space for the unique challenges and learning opportunities that arise out of harm (Karp and Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb et al. 2006). In contrast to punitive disciplinary policies such as suspensions and expulsions, RJ practices “promote equitable and relational learning environments through policies and practices that support students through conflicts” (Davison et al. 2022). For schools, this meant restorative justice practices such as circles; peer justice councils or peer juries; restorative circles; victim-offender mediation or reconciliation, peacemaking circles, and restorative conferencing. Each of these practices is able to be applied either in individual

classrooms or as a whole-school approach (Morrison and Vaandering, 2012; Anfara et al. 2013).

For most schools that have implemented RJ practices, there has been an improved school climate, increased feeling of safety among students, better academic performance, decreased rates of suspensions and expulsions, the building of relationships, and the development of active listening, among many other positive outcomes (González et al., 2018; Schiff, 2013). This research also has important implications for school environments and student trajectories. RJ practices have been proven to reduce the disparities in discipline practices that primarily affect students of color (Morris and Perry, 2016; Payne and Welch, 2018). The literature demonstrates that the implementation of restorative justice practices in schools leads to various positive outcomes such as decreases in the number of behavior-related referrals and suspensions (Augustine et al. 2018; Payne and Welch, 2018; Riestenberg, 2013); the development of skills to manage conflict in an effective and healthy manner (Penny, 2015; Schumacher, 2014); better academic performance (Payne and Welch, 2018; Jain et al. 2014); an improved sense of safety (González et al. 2018; Schumacher, 2014); and the promotion of better relationships among students as well as teachers and staff (Augustine et al. 2018; Payne and Welch, 2018), to name a few. Fundamentally, RJ is a slow and time-consuming process which stands in direct opposition to the fast-paced society of the US (Stinchcomb et al. 2006). Given the values and characteristics of RJ, naturally, challenges arise for those who desire to implement these practices in US schools. There is a tendency for RJ to be used as a “quick fix” and applied reactively which is particularly concerning as this deviates from RJ’s main purpose of building up relationships to facilitate the repair harm, and thus reduces RJ to “a program of behavior intervention” (Armour, 2016). Furthermore, as far as actual implementation is

concerned, a study conducted in 2016 in the U.S. showed that over half of the states had schools that were at varying points in incorporating restorative practices (González et al. 2018; González, 2016), suggesting widespread use but also high variability in application.

Researchers see restorative justice practices in schools as a viable pathway toward addressing the punitive practices that are currently in place (Stinchcomb et al. 2006; Payne and Welch, 2018; Armour, 2016; Morrison and Vaandering, 2012). Some educators believe RJ is able to be implemented alongside punitive systems (Stinchcomb et al. 2006) but most RJ educators believe RJ cannot exist alongside punitive systems (Anfara et al. 2013). As such, proponents of RJ advocate for a “completely new disciplinary system” rooted in restorative principles (Davison et al. 2022). Usually, schools implement RJ as a mere alternative to normative discipline policies rather than a total replacement of disciplinary policies, and use RJ as another tool in their toolkit wherein lies wide discretion on discipline methods (González, 2012; Davison et al. 2022). Since RJ is being implemented alongside the traditional disciplinary system, there is space for those in power to exercise discretion in determining the appropriate discipline for a student’s case (Davison et al. 2022). Notably, this discretion is concerning given that “both discretion and subjectivity contribute to racial disproportionality in school discipline” (Skiba et al. 2002; Steinberg and Loeoe, 2018; Davison et al. 2022).

Similarly, restorative justice practices have the ability to impact the school-to-prison pipeline which primarily affects students of color (Payne and Welch, 2018; Wald and Losen, 2003; Jain et al., 2014; Schiff, 2018), zero tolerance policies (Stinchcomb et al. 2006; Jain et al., 2014; Sumner et al. 2010), and further lessen the probability of students’ futures being severely impacted by established punitive discipline policies (González et al. 2018; Fabelo et al. 2011; Wald and Losen, 2003). There is limited research however on the

impacts of RJ on those who have harms committed against them, who otherwise might be identified as “victims.”

Studies on restorative justice in schools span methodologies, having used qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches, although research using quantitative methods is sparse (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2020). Additionally, most research on RJ is in the form of evaluation reports or institutional reports (Anfara et al. 2013). This study does not seek to fill this gap for several reasons. To sum it up, using a quantitative approach in this study would have required more resources, financial and time-wise, and access to documents that have proven nearly impossible to obtain by schools and counties. These aspects were not available during the duration of this research but could be the next step in research on RJ in schools. A more participatory approach to restorative justice evaluation, building out the research questions and approaches with those who are directly impacted by harm and RJ practices, is also missing and would be of great use, given RJ’s fundamental principles.

In addition to these gaps, there is little research on the uses of RJ practices by both academics and community organizers of RJ, how their understanding and use of RJ relate to each other, and how the political climate of an environment shapes the way RJ is practiced by educators and organizers. This is significant given that educators and organizers often work towards similar goals and share the same space, and to explore how each conceptualizes RJ practices and therefore realizes their objectives would shed light on the ways that their two methods converge and/or diverge. Further, the political climate in which educators and organizers find themselves could influence the way they do RJ in schools, perhaps forcing them to get creative with strategizing implementation approaches in an environment that is in direct opposition to the work they do. Punitive environments, in

this case schools in the US, with a focus on punishment and revenge are opposite RJ's focus on fostering relationships, healing, and repair.

The Challenges of Implementation in Restorative Justice Practices

Despite evidence of the positive outcomes of using restorative justice practices in schools, implementation has not been without its challenges. In a school context, RJ can be seen in different school initiatives such as social emotional learning (SEL) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) (Darling Hammond et al. 2020), and is “best characterized as a non-punitive approach to handling a wide range of conflict” (Fronius et al. 2016). Others link RJ to DEI initiatives, as seen in this study's findings. In all of these cases, this programming may or may not be grounded in actual RJ principles and practices and can defer its practice by presuming institutional space where that core work might otherwise take shape. Research has been done on the different ways to implement RJ practices in schools, however, there is little research on the tensions of implementation itself. Anfara et al. (2013) highlights challenges of RJ in their article and strategies to overcome those challenges. Three challenges present themselves when implementing RJ: 1) requires time and resources; 2) lack of conceptual clarity; and 3) clashing philosophies. The implementation of RJ is a systemic change, one that requires three to five years to see significant changes in schools (Blood and Thorsborne, 2005; Anfara et al. 2013). Along with time, funding is needed to train school personnel in RJ practices (Fields, 2003; Suvall, 2009; Anfara et al. 2013). Since scholars suggest three to five years to allow for RJ to change school environments, funding would also need to last this long. Another challenge is the “ill-defined practice with little consensus on its applications” (Fields, 2003; Anfara et al. 2013). Lastly, the hold on existing punitive disciplinary policies leads to resistance of new ways of addressing student misbehavior (Sumner et al. 2010; Suvall, 2009; Anfara et

al. 2013). If schools are “entrenched in policies and practices that value control and compliance over relational ecologies that nurture growth and well-being (Morrison and Vaandering, 2012: 148), then “it is likely there will be resistance to restorative principles or that restorative practices will be implemented but co-opted by more punitive approaches” (Anfara et al. 2013). This thesis builds on this literature and further deepens our understanding of the challenges and tensions of RJ implementation in schools. In particular, we know little about how implementation is impacted by the political climate that a school is situated in. Exploring these tensions is especially important as this information could be used to better understand local and political environments around punishment, foreshadow any obstacles, and therefore, better strategize the implementation of RJ practices.

Although there is a near consensus in the literature on the effectiveness of RJ practices in schools, there have been challenges in having it successfully implemented. Most of the literature on RJ in schools shows that schools are primarily using RJ to counter zero-tolerance and punitive policies. This is important because RJ aims to reduce conflict through a deep engagement with the relationships around harm; it is not simply an effort to replace punitive policies which is merely a by-product of RJ’s intended goals. As the findings in this study show, the culture of punishment in the US both invites schools to take up RJ, in some form, and is, simultaneously, so deeply grounded as to prevent RJ’s core philosophies and practices from entering school systems. This relationship to punitive policies and their hold on the vision of education in the U.S. makes implementation a key challenge. Additionally, with the increased presence of school resource officers (SROs) and police on school campuses along with various types of surveillance technology (Armour, 2016; Morris, 2015; Dizon et al. 2022), some insist that RJ practices themselves are seen as

a threat to this established order and pose a political concern for the safety and security of school campuses, as the findings in this study confirm. Furthermore, support from key stakeholders in schools such as teachers and administrators is tough to gain, given an often unwavering commitment to punishment. This ideological hold around discipline and punishment is a key barrier to presenting a pathway that is in direct opposition to these deeply held beliefs. Similarly, this ideology around punishment is further reinforced by an insecurity of student agency among those in power where traditionally, educational processes often leave students voiceless and powerless as this study's findings concur.

These challenges indicate the presence of underlying tensions, such as a lack of consensus or ability to build consensus among RJ stakeholders, that inform the research questions of this project. There can often be the sense of “best plans gone awry” in an overview of restorative justice practices in schools. In keeping with McCold, there is no consensus in RJ theory and practice (McCold, 2004). The main reason for this is the conflicting views of what constitutes one's “community” and therefore, the result has been varying RJ practices and goals (McCold, 2004). In a 1996 research study looking to assess the level of consensus of key components of RJ, researchers found that there was a varying degree of consensus on certain aspects of RJ (McCold, 2004; McCold 1998). The results of the study showed that the greatest level of consensus concerned three concepts of RJ: 1) “crime as a harm to people and relationships” 2) “offenders have an obligation to make things right to those affected,” and “victims and offenders are direct stakeholders, but others are affected as well”; there was little consensus on who the “others” are in this process, “what role they should play, or what reparation the offender owes them”; there was no consensus on the main objectives of RJ or what practices are considered to be “RJ” (McCold, 2004; McCold, 1998). Consensus is important because without it, RJ and what it

entails will be defined by “the most vocal advocates or by political expedience” (McCold, 2004) which is deeply problematic and concerning.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

In this study, my methodological approach was based upon my research questions and the need to access perspectives on restorative justice from key actors at the interface of schools and restorative justice policy nationally. My own work in community organizing spaces had introduced me to academics and organizers working on restorative justice in education. In particular, while working on the first phase of the CURCI project during 2022 and 2023 where our team sought to research and create a restorative justice curriculum, we met with various organizers, teachers, community members, and organizations in the US and Canada who offered insights into RJ implementation. From these meetings, I strategically selected eight people located in different parts of the US and Canada to allow for variability and facilitate comparison. These individuals were chosen based on the rapport I had built with them over the year and recommendations from other participants, considering the topic of my thesis. I did have one participant drop out of the study very early on in the project. They were a restorative interventionist for a school in Knox County and were invaluable to the first phase of the CURCI project as they offered a perspective of someone on the ground, doing “RJ” work, in a Knox County school. Unfortunately, since her interview was not “an approved interview through Know County” according to her supervisors, she had to rescind her participation in this study.

In total, I interviewed eight scholars and organizers. In alphabetical order and the order that participants appear in Appendix A, I will detail who each participant is and their connection to this project. I interviewed a participant, pseudonym Alice, who wished to remain anonymous. Currently, Alice oversees restorative practices in Chicago Public Schools in Illinois where she is responsible for 600 schools with over 30,000 individuals.

David Yusem is the Restorative Justice District Coordinator for Oakland Unified School District in California. As such, David supports schools in practicing restorative justice and trains young people and adults in these practices. David has been doing RJ work for over two decades.

Heather Pruss is a professor in the Sociology and Anthropology department at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky where she teaches various Criminology and Criminal Justice courses. Heather's research focuses on how oft-marginalized individuals experience the US court system. She also volunteers in family group conferencing for Volunteers of America Restorative Justice (VOA RJ).

Imani Mfalme-Shula is the Executive Director of Community Defense of East Tennessee (CDET) where she has led the grassroots, community-based organization for over seven years. CDET focuses on the education, liberation, support, and empowerment of people by challenging mass incarceration and disparities within the (in)justice system and its effects through the use of participatory defense. Imani M also led the CURCI project related to the creation of the restorative justice curriculum through phase one, two, and currently leads the third phase.

Judah Schept is a professor in the School of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU). Judah's work is rooted in Critical Prison Studies wherein he explores the history, political economy, and cultural logics of the carceral state. His book, *Coal, Cages, Crisis: The Rise of the Prison Economy in Central Appalachia* was recently published in 2022.

Kaitlyn Selman is an assistant professor in the department of Criminal Justice Sciences at Illinois State University. Kaitlyn's research unearths the ways in which the racial capitalist forces of differentiation and dispossession work to reproduce oppressive

conditions for young people, as well as the strategies of opposition and transformation that marginalized youth have developed in response.

Katherine (Kathy) Evans has been a professor in teacher education at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) since 2011. She teaches courses in educational psychology, special education, and restorative justice in education. EMU has one of the oldest restorative justice programs in the US, and is the home of a prominent figure in the field of restorative justice, Howard Zehr. The Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice is a program of: The Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at EMU.

Katie McLellan is an Indigenous Education Facilitator in Community in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

Majority of the participants are parents or guardians of young people in K-12 schools which gives them another lens with which to interact with RJ in schools. After interviewing my eight participants, I then conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts which allowed me to do deep coding and contextual work in developing my findings.

Thematic Analysis

In order to analyze the data, I used a thematic analysis (TA) approach developed by Gerald Horton (Joffe, 2011). Thematic analysis is a “method for analyzing qualitative data that involves searching for recurring ideas (referred to as *themes*) in a data set” (Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016; Clarke and Braun, 2017; Joffe, 2011). TA derives from content analysis (CA) which is a method that involves counting the number of times a particular aspect of the data, such as a word or image, appears in the data set (Joffe, 2011). Since CA is about the frequency with which a piece of data is present, it is a quantitative approach that is primarily used with projects analyzing mass media (Joffe, 2011). Although CA

allows for a systematic analysis of data, it has been critiqued as removing data from its context which is necessary for making meaning of the data (Joffe, 2011). In order to address these concerns, TA was created to build on the systematic method of CA whilst providing an approach that gets at the hidden meanings of the data (Joffe, 2011). Thematic analysis is not used as a means of summarizing data, rather as a method of identifying and making sense of “key...features of the data” (Clarke and Braun, 2017). In thematic analysis, themes represent the big “patterns of meaning” (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Joffe, 2011). As a way of arriving at themes, the researcher first creates codes, or the “smallest units of analysis” that represent a meaningful aspect of the data set and are related to the research question(s) (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

Moreover, thematic analysis involves a multi-step process and is renowned for its flexibility as a method given that it allows for varying sample sizes, research questions, data collection, and interpretation strategies (Clarke and Braun, 2017). When using TA and deciding on a sample size, it was important to consider that in order to evaluate similarities and differences between both groups, academics and community organizers, and draw valid conclusions, there would need to be enough participants in each group (Joffe, 2011). TA is used to recognize patterns in the data and this is only possible with a sufficient number of participants (Joffe, 2011).

Data/Collection and Analysis

Flexibility in the sample size proved essential in this study as I anticipated having at least double the number of participants I interviewed, but my study was not affected by this miscalculation. Although only one of the eight interviewees self-identified as a community organizer, some of the other interviewees could be considered as community organizers despite lack of self-identification. This will be discussed further in the analysis portion.

Verbal interviews that are semi-structured are at the “root” of TA (Joffe, 2011). Semi-structured interviews allowed for me, the researcher, to follow the flow of the conversation without being restricted to staying on a particular topic (Joffe, 2011). This proved useful in practice given that there were topics that came up during the interviews for which I had not thought to create questions.

One aspect that makes thematic analysis a valuable approach is its applicability to a critical framework wherein the researcher is able to evaluate personal and/or social meaning of an observation and probe the implications of said meanings (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This characteristic was particularly useful for this project because not only was I able to ask more questions in response to an idea the interviewee shared in order to gauge their perspective, but while analyzing the interview transcripts I was also able to evaluate the broader implications of the shared idea and whether the idea was shared by a wider segment of the population. People’s thoughts and experiences are reflective of the social context in which they find themselves, allowing for some analysis of the environments they inhabit (Joffe, 2011).

Two other crucial aspects of thematic analysis include (1) its applicability to both inductive and deductive research, and (2) its ability to be used as a means of identifying explicit, or manifest, and hidden, or latent, meanings in a data set (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Joffe, 2011). For the first aspect, this study can be classified as deductive research because I went from creating a set of research questions to collecting data through interviews to analyzing said data to drawing conclusions from the interviews. In contrast, inductive research involves collecting data and then creating theories based on said data. For the second aspect, thematic analysis allowed me to recognize keywords that were present in all the interview transcriptions by providing a means of identifying “something directly

observable” (Joffe, 2011). Similarly, thematic analysis gave me the ability to recognize hidden meanings in the interview transcripts such as phrasing that pointed to ideas more implicitly rather than explicitly (Joffe, 2011). Using a thematic analysis approach allowed me to discover patterns “within and *across* data in relation to participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices” (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

Since I am interested in tensions that may be present in varying environments and the experiences and perspectives of educators and organizers, thematic analysis allowed me to look for themes and common ideas that may have been brought up in the interviews as well as divergences. For my sample, I strategically chose eight people in different states and countries who are arguably leading the way on the use of RJ in schools. Although these eight people are not representative of the population, that was not the purpose of this more selective approach. Instead, I sought out experienced actors in restorative justice who could shed light on the various ways RJ is thought about in various kinds of educational spaces by people in various roles (Joffe, 2011). Thematic analysis is the method most appropriate for assessing “a given group’s conceptualization of the phenomenon under study” (Joffe, 2011). Based on the interviews, I was able to form a cohesive narrative of the tensions people experience when implementing RJ in schools and in communities, understand how academics and organizers converge and diverge in their conceptualization of restorative justice, and evaluate the role political climate plays in the manifestation/development of RJ practices.

I answered the study’s two research questions by using the qualitative approach of conducting interviews with educators and community organizers from K-12 schools and universities across the United States and Canada. I filed for an expedited Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in November 2023 because this study presented no more than

minimal risk to participants. Once the IRB approved my study in December 2023, I began to reach out to educators and organizers who I have been in RJ movement space with over the past year. From there, I used snowball sampling to increase my sample. In total, I conducted eight interviews with people across the U.S. and Canada who have worked to implement RJ in schools or communities, have familiarity with RJ practices due to the spaces they've occupied, or currently do RJ work in schools or communities.

Once I made contact with a participant by sending them an email, I then scheduled a Zoom call or in-person meeting at the day, time, and location that was most convenient and accessible for the participant. The average length of each interview was about an hour and did not exceed more than two hours. Interviews were semi-structured in order to have a level of consistency among the participants while also allowing for information to come up that I may not have planned to ask. As such, I had a list of questions (see Appendix B) that served as the foundation for each interview and asked each participant each question on the list.

At the beginning of each interview, I shared the informed consent document while reiterating that their participation was voluntary, they had a choice as to whether or not they wanted to answer a question, and that the interview could be stopped at any time. I started recording the interview on Zoom and asked the consent question again to get the participant's consent on record. Afterwards, I went over the options for identification wherein participants decided whether they would like to be anonymous or not in this study.

To collect data in the interviews which occurred via Zoom, I used Zoom's cloud recording program on my laptop. All of the data collected in this study was stored on UTK's Google Drive with the use of OIT-sanctioned technology. I ensured that all of my procedures were consistent with IRB requirements. Data was recorded digitally and digital

records and notes were kept in UTK's Google Drive. Given that I used UTK's Google Drive, I was required to have password protection on my account using Duo Mobile. My research supervisor, Michelle Brown, and I were the only people who had access to the data that were recorded using the above methods.

Once I conducted all the interviews, I then transferred the audio files from the interviews into NVivo, a qualitative software program. Using NVivo's transcription add-on, I transcribed each interview. Once all interviews were transcribed, I began coding in keeping with the design of thematic analysis. Through the use of thematic analysis, I coded recurring ideas, or themes, across the interviews. While coding, I developed 253 codes. With so many codes present, I then collapsed these into four sub-areas. The first sub-area was titled: "carceral logics" which I later titled "the pervasiveness of carceral logics." Within this theme were codes such as the culture of punishment, resistance to blame, and no value in taking accountability. The second sub-area was titled "structure" which I later titled "RJ's lack of structural support." Codes under this theme included lack of ongoing support, one-off trainings, and tension: top-down. The third sub-area was titled "critique of RJ" which I later titled "the contingency of RJ's use based upon how different actors think about and use it in practice." Within this theme were codes including go beyond RJ, RP v RJ, and restore v transform. The fourth sub-area was titled "politics" which I later titled "political climate." Within this theme were codes such as DEI, school board responses, and unable to change. Analyzing the patterns using thematic analysis was key to identifying common tensions experienced by both academics and community organizers alongside exploring the impact of the political environment on implementation efforts. Each sub-area represents a core space for my findings, which I work through in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

What tensions are present, if any, when implementing restorative justice practices in schools in challenging or hostile political contexts, and how does political climate shape consensus of the use and implementation of RJ practices among educators and organizers in different political and institutional contexts? In this chapter, I expand on the findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews. The themes most evident included 1) the pervasiveness of carceral logics, 2) RJ's lack of structural support, and 3) the contingency of RJ's use based upon how different actors think about and use it in practice. All of these themes have the tension of power dynamics underlying them.

The Pervasiveness of Carceral Logics

Carceral logics play a profound role in the introduction of restorative justice into school systems. In the editor's introduction of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice*, Tamara Kopper describes how "Mariame (Kaba) also shares that she is grappling more with punishment and revenge as elements of carceral logic, even when enacted outside of the criminal legal system" (Kaba, xxiii) Punishment and revenge are aspects of carceral logic and these are key factors for how we deal with people who cause harm in the US. The culture of punishment, which Brown defines as how "communities take as their most basic good a potentially limitless drive toward an impossible sense of security, founded upon governance through crime and fear," means that there is a widespread belief of the value of punishment as a way of addressing various issues (2009: 7). Issues such as a person not following the rules, spoken or unspoken, set by law and/or society, harming another person or animal, and displaying reckless behavior, to name a few. Over half of participants mentioned the way that society clings to punishment. Imani M emphasized that the way the current criminal legal system operates is solely based

on punishment, leaving no room for people to have the opportunity to get the help they need, do better, or even make amends for the harm they caused. She said that some people view punishment as the sole way to react to a harm. Judah spoke to the fact that there are times where we are in conflict with our kids or a partner and we don't call the cops on them. Instead, we work through the conflict and move on. We do not have the same response when it is someone we don't know or aren't in close relationship with. When we're forced to reckon with "what do we do with this extreme harm?" the response is almost always, "oh, we'll just call the cops" he says.

In some situations, there are no ways for those harmed to get help without being punished whether that's through verbal threats, physical violence, and/or abandonment by those who are expected to respond and address harm, in this case the police. Restorative justice has the potential to stop the cycle of harm and violence which occurs when we don't properly heal from that trauma explained Kathy. Imani M gave us an example of what this looks like in practice. For example, a mother loses her son to gun violence. She advocates for the death penalty because she's in excruciating pain and society says this is the way to get justice within our current system. That mother is working to make the harm doer's mother experience the pain of losing her child as well. This reaction is understandable. Victims and those affected by harm are valid in their reactions. There's also another dimension to this scenario where we're just causing more harm because we're in pain. RJ offers a way to make amends, heal from harm, and stop the cycle of violence.

In some instances when victims experience "justice" through the criminal legal system and the person who did them harm gets their sentence and gets locked away, victims recount that they didn't feel any relief, such as thinking "I'm healed". What victims were speaking to is an incomplete feeling. Victims noted that they were still hurting and the

outcome of the case did not resolve anything for them. That's a major lack of the current criminal legal system—not providing processes where victims can feel healed and whole again. The criminal legal system was created to do exactly what it is doing: “create a cycle of enslavement and profit and punishment” explained Imani M.

In regards to societal beliefs around the relationship between the criminal legal systems and those who have been harmed, from Judah’s perspective, he sees the undergraduate criminal justice students and the general public holding the belief that “...a punitive criminal justice system is somehow the same thing as a system that, like, takes care of victims of violence or harm...” Judah explained that in reality, the opposite occurs where the “system is so callous towards people who are victimized.” This is where restorative justice has the potential to do what our criminal legal system cannot, which is provide a way for victims to access healing and get reparation for the harm that was caused.

This view of punishment as the only solution to harm makes the introduction and implementation of RJ challenging because there is no room left for the discussion of alternatives, especially when one such alternative, RJ, is seen as a “get out of jail free card” said Imani M. In other words, some people view RJ as an easy way out and a way to let “people off the hook” agreed Heather. When it comes to the use of restorative practices in Chicago schools, Alice has observed teachers’ reactions after sending students to participate in RP. Teachers implied, “They [the student] went down and had a *little* conversation, a nice little conversation and came right back up. Nothing changed. Nothing happened” (emphasis mine). It’s important to note that in this example, restorative practices are viewed as trivial and ineffective, as conveyed by the use of the word “little.” Katie has heard similar statements to the effect that RJ is a “lesser process” where people simply talk through the harm and move on. More concerning views have been shared about RJ in that

students will be able to get away with the harm they cause, and this could potentially harm teachers in the process, shared Kathy. One thing to note is that if a school relies on suspending students for misbehavior, even if a student is not the one being suspended and is only witnessing the process as a bystander, it will affect how they feel about that school and portray the punitive environment of the campus, warned David. Prior to enacting any punitive response to student misbehavior, Kaitlyn urged us to “problematize why we are criminalizing...certain [student] behaviors in the first place.”

Participants described the unrelenting hold some people have to making sure people who do harm still experience consequences and experience the same punishment that they endured. For example, comments of “I got spanked as a kid and I turned out okay” or said punishment “worked for me” or seeking affirmation by saying “but there’s still consequences, right?” In other words, said Alice, some people “want to stick with the way it’s always been because that’s how they were treated.” Kathy described our relation to punishment as an addiction and asserts that our need for punishment comes from our “long” history. David reminded us that, “...the biggest challenge is the systems that are in place are based on a societal understanding of how we do things, which is respect, authority, be quiet or you get punished.” Alice summed up the pervasiveness of carceral logics perfectly when she says “we are socialized in a punitive society who believe that punishment works.” Punishment must be serving us in some way. We have a deep desire to see what society has told us is the only response to harm-doing, that is punishment, be done to others, and some would argue we derive pleasure from punishment.

Another aspect that props up carceral logics is our culture of blame. The culture of blame negatively impacts society to the point where people “don’t want to do the wrong thing” as Katie put it when talking about people in the criminal legal system. Kaitlyn

agreed that we've been conditioned to not admit or be hesitant to admit fault; we immediately resist taking blame. This avoidance of taking blame is arguably the single factor propping up cancel culture. Being "canceled" refers to people withdrawing their support for someone for doing something deemed unforgivable. As organizer and author adrienne maree brown defines it,

Canceling is punishment, and punishment doesn't stop the cycle of harm, not long term. Cancellation may even be counter-abolitionist...instead of prison bars we place each other in an overflowing box of untouchables – often with no trial – and strip us of past and future, of the complexity of being gifted and troubled, brilliant and broken. We will set down this punitive measure and pick each other up, leaving no traumatized person behind. We will not cancel us (brown 2018).

Following brown's analysis, the prospect of being canceled creates fear in people to misstep or make a mistake. To admit that someone has done harm requires a level of vulnerability which is not valued in society, said Kaitlyn. On top of this, "We don't protect people when they're vulnerable," she said. People may be weary to act on what they think or know because they don't want to do anything wrong. People may also be more adverse to taking responsibility for their actions given that a consequence could be getting canceled. There's this looming fear that impedes progress and growth. To admit that someone has done harm requires a level of vulnerability which is not valued in society, said Kaitlyn. On top of this, "we don't protect people when they're vulnerable," she said. There's also "no incentive in this country for anybody to...take real accountability for anything"...especially when the only form of accountability that we understand in society

is punitive” Kaitlyn pointed out. Importantly, there needs to be a separation of accountability from punishment, emphasized Heather.

The culture of blame permeates schools as well. Kaitlyn pointed out that when students are harmed at school or school shootings occur, the teachers or parents are to blame. No other explanations as to why a harm occurred are valid or even considered, and teachers or parents are immediately at fault. The culture of blame in schools and surrounding communities is very reflective of society as a whole. This is evident in students not being able to handle conflict on their own, requiring a teacher or police to come in to defuse the situation. This dynamic is reflective of the state taking the agency from victims and people who have done harm. In the criminal legal system, the state takes the place of the victim and the victim essentially has no say at all, even though they should be centered. The way our legal system currently operates is that it centers the offender and restorative justice offers a way for victims to be centered as well.

RJ's Lack of Structural Support

The implementation of restorative justice in schools more often than not lacks the structural support necessary to make any real change proving to be a key tension in implementation. Alice, who oversees restorative practices in Chicago public schools, is the only person doing this work and is responsible for overseeing 600 schools with over 30,000 people. Understandably, she is urging for more support, particularly in the number of overseers of restorative practices. At other schools where teachers were enthusiastic and looking forward to the use of RJ, teachers were disappointed and frustrated with the lack of support to actually carry out RJ, shared Kaitlyn whose father is a teacher. Another form of support crucial to the implementation of RJ is funding. David gave a glimpse into what it is like to receive funding stating the need to reach out to funders every one to five years in

order to have a continuous supply of money for RJ work. David shared that money for technical support is necessary, and that money is “always a challenge.” In Chicago four years ago, the union went on strike and one of their demands was that sixteen positions for restorative practitioners in schools would be added for each year of the contract. Since the contract is nearing an end, the union has once again asked for more funding for these positions.

Heather volunteers in family group conferencing for Volunteers of America Restorative Justice (VOA RJ) and one thing she notices is the lack of infrastructure and resources to support the person who did harm. There is no support in place to make sure the person who did harm follows through on the amends or actually becomes a person who does not do the harm again. There is also a lack of infrastructure for schools that want and need to implement RJ but don’t know how. Since the school system in Heather’s area lacks the infrastructure necessary to use RJ, VOA RJ, a community organization, has started to facilitate that work by taking on cases for those schools. Judah, who has a child who is a freshman in high school in Lexington, Kentucky, said that where he lives, there is a restorative justice in schools program however, he has not heard of RJ being used at the high school. Judah attributed this to one of two things: 1) the underutilization of RJ, or 2) lack of communication about the use of RJ.

In regard to trainings for RJ, three of eight participants mentioned the “one-off” trainings common in this work. Kathy described these “one-off” trainings as “quick and dirty.” In other words, people attend one training and then are “set loose” to go do the work in schools. In Alice’s experience, trainings are typically two to three days and then people are expected to go out and do the work. Kaitlyn echoed Alice’s experience except trainings are four hours total followed by administrators then telling teachers to “go off and do it”.

For some training, teachers use their professional development days to “go do one more training” shared Kaitlyn. Essentially, “it’s just, like, another tool in your toolkit” she says, emphasizing that RJ is not seen as particularly important or unique, rather it’s simply another set of practices at teachers' disposal. In Kaitlyn’s experience, school districts will make a commitment to do RJ without giving teachers the necessary resources to carry out that commitment. There’s a lack of ongoing support for teachers to actually do RJ properly and as such, RJ “gets implemented piecemeal” with teachers left to struggle on their own. Even without a commitment from the district, teachers do RJ solo. That is, they do RJ in their classroom because the practices have yet to spread to the entire school or they have yet to receive support from administration.

Another tension is the high level of turnover of teachers, principals, and staff in schools. There are constantly new teachers and principals coming into Oakland schools with teachers and principals going out, and as such, there are constant “introduction to RJ” trainings. Instead of being able to build on the introduction to RJ trainings after the first year and increase their skill set, Oakland schools are in a perpetual cycle of introducing RJ to staff. The sustainability of school-based practices is called into question when you have a high level of teacher turnover, explained Kathy. For David, the key piece of the puzzle in the implementation of RJ in schools is the principal and this can be a good or bad thing. This can be a good thing, if the principal understands what RJ is and what needs to happen in schools because then they are able to bring in other people and advocate for its implementation. The principal being a key factor can be a bad thing because when you have a new principal, often they bring in new staff and new systems which makes it hard to make progress.

A top-down approach to implementing RJ in schools is an important tension.

Whether RJ is implemented in schools using a top-down or bottom-up approach impacts the success of RJ while highlighting power dynamics and co-optation of RJ. For Oakland, the implementation of RJ was “organic” David described, in which the community led the effort. The community organizing for RJ to be in schools, a bottom-up approach, was the way it should have been, rather than the top-down approach of a superintendent going to a conference, hearing about the idea, and bringing it back to the school to implement, which David talked about in a negative light. Kaitlyn called the use of the top-down approach in this way as the “bureaucratization of education.” Rather than administrators and others in power reaching out to teachers to see whether they know what RJ is or are using it, what their experience is with RJ, or seeing if they have any suggestions that the district could get behind, teachers are left out of the conversation. Instead, Kaitlyn asserted that a tension presents itself when

you’ve got all these, like, professionals coming in and trying to dictate what the people below them are doing when the people ‘below’ them are the ones that are actually doing the work and would probably...actually be the best source of information so that it can ripple upwards instead of it being a top-down thing. So, I think we have this, like, awful top-down approach. It’s the business model, right?

A top-down approach can be seen as a good thing when those in high positions support and advocate for the use of RJ, and/or have strong ties to the community at the “bottom.”

Jennifer states that restorative practices were futile in Chicago public schools when they were not adopted by those at the “highest level of the school” such as the principal and

other leadership. Chicago public schools also realized that they had to start with the adults rather than the students, so the adults were the focus of trainings and circle work. It was important for leadership, principals, and teachers to use restorative practices and resolve any conflict amongst themselves. After the adults, the attention was able to be shifted to the students. Kathy also favors the approach of starting with the adults. She said that once internal capacity is built and knowledge of RJ is gained, then the next step would be to work on shifting policy. For Kathy, it makes sense for the policy work to come after exposure and experience with using RJ. For Katie who saw things from the top-down, it was a non-negotiable for an indigenous-run organization to uphold the values of indigenous people.

***The Contingency of RJ's Use based upon How Different Actors Think About and Use it
In Practice***

There is no consensus on the definition or use of restorative justice in practice. The findings below support McCold (2004) who argues a needs-based theory of RJ is the key to reaching consensus. Some of the participants routinely insisted there isn't one definition of RJ. As Judah said, "it can look so different in different places and when administered by different kinds of parties" it can be a challenge to talk about a standard definition of RJ. In doing research for her co-authored, "Restorative Justice in Education: what we know so far" Kathy realized that the differences in RJ implementation in schools made comparing schools to one another similar to "comparing apples and oranges" (Anfara, Evans, and Lester 2013). In one example she shared, one school focused on school culture while another focused on disciplinary practices; the researchers sought to compare the schools after a year but the study had no validity due to the stark differences.

Another key difference in implementation is the terminology of restorative justice versus restorative practices. Some participants leaned towards using restorative practices for two reasons: 1) the recognition that the criminal “justice” system does not actually achieve justice, and 2) justice is not necessarily important, rather there should be a focus on the skills that can be used to strengthen and repair our relationships. One participant preferred using the term restorative justice because to them, simply using ‘restorative practices’ fails to pay the necessary attention to why we are all here: to do restorative justice. With that being said, the aforementioned participant does use the phrase ‘restorative justice practices’ occasionally because they recognize the value of the skills that RJ offers such as listening deeply to others, asking though-provoking questions, and being mindful of our language before we speak.

What is certain and supported by the literature is the use of RJ as an alternative to the use of the criminal legal system which participants in this study noted as well (McCold 2004). Participants noted that restorative justice is mostly used reactively when a harm occurs, but that RJ offers us more than being merely a response to harm—it can be used as a model for how to be in right relationship with one another. Alice said RJ is 80% preventative with a focus on building relationships and 20% being the repair of harm. With this breakdown, Alice said that doing the 20% of repairing harm is easier because work has already been done to strengthen the relationship and build the skills necessary to address harm. When the focus is solely on repairing harm due to conflict, it will be viewed negatively rather than being a way for “how we are together as a community,” said David. Kaitlyn expressed similar sentiments in that the preventative work, the “front end” work needs to occur to facilitate the prevention of particular student behaviors in schools. The front end work includes building trust, mutual accountability, and community. Increasingly,

she says schools mostly use it to respond to certain student behaviors. A crucial aspect of RJ for Katie is the recognition of the background of the person who did harm, or the social location. She said without acknowledging and addressing what led a person to the point of doing the harm, the likelihood of RJ being a successful process is unlikely.

Kathy noticed a lot of misimplementation when it comes to what RJ looks like in schools. She characterized misimplementation as the integration of RJ into existing behaviorist schema such as PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). Using her psychology background, she explained this process in simple terms: “we know that cognitively, it’s easier to assimilate new information into existing schema than to create a new schema.” For Kathy, RJ is a different lens that deserves a new schema, because when RJ is tied to other approaches, she emphasizes that it doesn’t work. Additionally, in Kathy’s view, people using RJ need to also focus on justice, equity, and power. Alice offered another perspective on the implementation of RJ into existing behavioral schema. Alice worked in the Office of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) for over four years, and restorative practices are based in this office. Her reasoning for restorative practices in the office of SEL is that “preventing harm from happening is about building relationships and knowing how to interact with people and dealing with your...emotions. That’s all social emotional learning.” Since Chicago public schools are supposed to have an SEL program, restorative practices were integrated into this program. SEL is supposed to be a part of the teacher’s curriculum and one way this looks is by doing a weekly circle which promotes relationship building. Alice pointed out that an important aspect is a person being trained to do this work and have restorative conversations.

Participants conveyed how valuable RJ is while also acknowledging that other solutions are needed since our relationships to each other and harm-doing are directly and

indirectly impacted by the systems in which we find ourselves. Participants talked about how RJ is often used as a “quick fix” in schools, when it is really a process that is hard and requires time. Kaitlyn attributed the use of RJ as a quick fix due to adults not being able to intervene in the structural factors at play. According to the literature, RJ is actually a process that is slow and time-consuming (Stinchcomb et al. 2006). When it comes to the teachers who are a part of the implementation process in schools, Kaitlyn said some teachers are wanting RJ to fail so that they’re able to say they attempted RJ, it didn’t work, and they can go back to doing things the way they’ve always done them— using armed police on school campus to deal with student “misbehavior.”

When Kaitlyn said, “the key being restore rather than transform,” she was speaking to the overarching goal of RJ, while recognizing that work beyond RJ is also needed. Judah described RJ as an important tool and practice within a broader movement, one being the abolition of police and prisons, that is fighting against and ultimately working within the confines of capitalism and the state. Heather viewed RJ in the same way, where RJ “...moves us in the right direction, but it’s not the fix. It’s not the end. It’s almost the beginning of a larger conversation of...what next?” Kathy thought similarly in that homophobia, sexism, racism, theocracy, among other things which are embedded in our conditioning need to also be addressed. For her, the focus needs to be on addressing inequities, systems and structures, along with our interpersonal relationships. RJ is able to have the most impact in schools when there is broader structural change.

Participants also pointed to how a lot of us practice elements of restorative justice in our daily life. We practice key restorative justice values in our interpersonal relationships with our partners, our kids, and our family members. However, when it comes to people we don't know, people that are completely removed from us, we cannot conceptualize using

elements of restorative justice. We can't practice communication skills or give them the opportunity to show up better than next time. So, one question that haunts RJ practice is its relationship to the person with whom we have no connection.

Political Climate

How does political climate shape consensus of the use and implementation of RJ practices among educators and organizers in different political and institutional contexts? This question was designed to open up a rich discussion around RJ implementation practices in the polarized political climate of the US. Whether participants were in cities or states that are more progressive or in progressive institutions or cities within conservative States, they all had relative ease with using and implementing RJ.

Interestingly, one way participants expressed the connection between the political climate of a city and/or state and the effect on RJ implementation was related to the debates around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices. DEI practices have been the focus of legislators and school boards across the US. Heather, who teaches at Bellarmine University in Louisville, a blue city within the red state of Kentucky, felt that RJ's association with DEI was likely to have negative effects. She said, "So, the legislation they proposed there, I think it's the Kentucky House Bill Five, basically is kind of like Florida's stuff...you're going to need to change the name of things. We don't want critical race theory incorporated in coursework. That kind of movement." Since the legislation only affected public universities and Heather teaches at a private university, Bellarmine, the legislation did not affect her school. Nonetheless, she worries about this legislation for two key reasons: 1) Although she is not directly affected, she wonders about the consequences of that rhetoric; and 2) with the majority of people in the state going to public universities, this legislation would negatively impact curricula and university initiatives for most of

those in higher education. For Oakland school district, RJ was met with some resistance and suspicion with people referring to it as “flavor of the month or initiative of the month.” That is, RJ was seen as fleeting and something that would help the image of the school but not create real change. In contrast, for Kaitlyn, the likening of RJ to DEI was relatively favorable in terms of allowing RJ to be implemented in schools. She said that RJ was not so favorable in terms of the school district asserting, “hey, look at this new DEI thing we’re doing” and “we have this new thing for you to try.” In other words, the district was able to co-opt the RJ that was already being done by teachers, and pass it off as their idea to make themselves look better and dismiss the work that was already taking place.

Similarly, Heather pointed out similar support being shown to her class focused on RJ at her university. She shared that “generally the class gets help up as this example of like...this is community engagement at its finest.” Despite Heather contending with legislation that opposes what she teaches in this very class, ultimately she said, “I don’t think anybody at the institute cares or would push back” about the class. She continued, “I don’t think anybody here knows what it (restorative justice) is. So, they’re like, ‘you do what you want. We trust ya.’ Nobody’s really watching.” Heather has experienced no pushback for her class but says that if Kentucky legislators were to drop into her class one day where the reading was *Colorizing Restorative Justice* and the class was discussing how colonizers are causing harm or the material caused “white kids [to feel] guilty,” then there might be questions about what exactly is being taught.

In Virginia, where Kathy teaches at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU), her university is well-aware of the restorative justice work being done. At her university, she had no trouble getting support for the creation of a master’s degree in restorative justice education and a graduate certificate under EMU’s Center for Justice and Peacebuilding

(CJP). She recounted that she feels supported and encouraged in the work she does at EMU, sharing that there are conversations to expand on the work she's already done by offering a PhD in community and restorative justice. She noted: "There's lots of support. I never worry about getting fired for being too focused on justice and equity...I always feel like I have support from my university for...doing restorative justice work." EMU being well-aware of the RJ work being done on campus and fully supporting it comes as no surprise as EMU is the site of the birthplace of Howard Zehr's most prominent works, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* and *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*.

Alice observed that her work in Chicago, one of the US's core blue cities, has a widespread abolitionist movement as the backdrop for system-wide restorative practices in Chicago public schools. In 2014, The city's school systems wrote into their code of conduct that schools are required to use restorative practices as opposed to the ten day suspensions that were customary and this update in the code of conduct made it more challenging to expel a student. The change in the code is reflective of the move away from punitive policies and toward restorative practices that began as early as 1996 in Chicago, where the effort to bring in more restorative approaches to school is longstanding. A couple years later in 2016, Senate Bill 100 was passed by the state of Illinois which detailed that public school districts, not including Chicago, were required to use restorative practices. For schools that were out of compliance for at least three years, rather than punish those schools with threats to revoke funding or issue fines, the Illinois State Board began offering support to schools that need help meeting that new standard. In regard to codes of conduct, it seems that Bellarmine University is approaching academic misconduct and other issues in a

restorative way according to Heather's students who are familiar with how issues related to housing and student groups are handled.

Similarly, Oakland school district has made strides to reduce the role of police on campuses. Kaitlyn shared about Oakland's efforts to redirect the budget for police in schools to RJ instead, such as getting rid of willful defiance, and the pivotal role students have played in these efforts. While Oakland is similar to Chicago, as a historic and contemporary site for some of the nation's most liberal and progressive movements, including abolition and the Black Panther Party, there are still significant challenges. David Yusem spoke to these broader challenges of making an impact with restorative justice in the Oakland school district, saying, "It's just hard to move the dial...and even in Oakland, everything we've done. Whether it's RJ or having a whole office of equity or targeted strategies...nothing has moved the dial." Oakland's efforts to implement RJ in schools rests on the community-based work that has always been done, and occurs in the wake of the legacy of the Black Panther's and their ties to the school district.

Imani M, who works to implement RJ into schools in Knoxville, Tennessee, an increasingly blue city in a conservative red state, emphasized how she has encountered firsthand the political power dynamics at play in decisions about RJ's place in schools. In one scenario, Imani M. talked to Democrats about her ideas around RJ in school systems state-wide and noted that a lot of Republicans were behind her ideas. In response, the Democrats suggested she not talk to the Republicans, giving her excuses for why she should not be talking to them. She recalled, "...what I got from what was not being said was 'it's an election year and we don't want to have the Republicans to be behind something good.'" To Imani M she witnessed the "political clock" and the need to not give

Republicans a way to win over more voters be more important than the safety and well-being of kids in schools.

The curricula being taught in schools was a concern for a couple participants. Although Kathy receives overwhelming support from her university and is able to create RJ programs and certificates, she still has to contend with the conservative politics that are occurring across the country asking, “how do you teach an accurate history when you know the history books are scrutinized?” and “How do you live [your morals and ethics] in a district that’s shutting that down?” Kaitlyn held a similar view referring to the curriculum currently in schools as “white washed” and “sanitized” with little hope that it will get any better. Kathy’s solution involves getting creative and figuring out ways to teach educators to still do the work of RJ without calling it what it is while at the same time working in a school that is not restorative. One group that is complicating the effort to teach an accurate history is Mom’s for Liberty. For schools near EMU in Rockingham County, Kathy shares that Mom’s for Liberty makes up the majority of the school board and this group is increasing in presence in Kaitlyn’s community as well in order to encourage parents to have more decision making power in what their children learn. Recently, one of the school board members for the Rockingham County schools likened restorative justice to Marxism. Kathy was left speechless and explained to me, “if we compare restorative justice to Marxism, it immediately shuts down support for restorative justice in certain spaces.” Along with likening RJ to Marxism, there has also been the removal of four restorative practices positions, increasing use of punitive disciplinary policies, the banning of books, attacks on queer and/or trans youth and their pronouns, all of which Kathy affirmed “we see that all over the country.” Kathy was pointing out the way harmful policies and decisions are becoming more widespread across the U.S. with devastating consequences for students.

Others are also realizing they must get creative and strategically engage with people who oppose RJ. Heather has witnessed the director of VOA RJ “politically play” the game of knowing your audience and adjusting your stance as such. The director of VOA RJ has implemented the RJ program in Louisville, a blue city in the “deep red” state of Kentucky, and has expanded the program to other parts of Kentucky, including rural, in this case more conservative, sectors. In order to do this, Heather said the director has had to “sell this [RJ] in a certain way”. She further explained:

And even though it may not necessarily align with the reasons that she thinks restorative practices are important, knowing your audience in the sense of ‘what’s politically palatable in this space’ and ‘how do I stick to my...the essential pillars of my morals and ideals, right? But also, get this in practice. How do I make this happen? How do I facilitate this? So, having to sort of play to those political predispositions and ideologies and get the practices operating, at least in some capacity in those spaces means you might have some conversations where you’re biting your tongue, right? And you’re like, ‘God, I don’t love how this person is coming at me or how they’re characterizing the need, but if this is how I need to navigate it... which is always tough because you’re like, ‘at what level?’ Like, ‘how much can the means justify the ends and where am I going to draw those lines?’ So, I’ve seen her try to... have to navigate this.

Both Alice and Heather experienced having elected officials and other powerful actors be supportive of and advocate for RJ. More recently, Mayor Brandon Johnson stated that by the Fall of 2024, police would be removed from all Chicago schools. That result is due to

the ongoing organizing by the community. A year prior in 2023, schools were given the power to decide whether or not they would keep their two police officers on campus. Schools individually decided to keep both officers, remove one and use the funding for a restorative person with the stipulation that a plan would be in place, or remove both officers. Every Chicago school has what is known as a local school council consisting of a small board of people. The local school councils voted and created a plan for how to move toward incorporating more restorative practices. The Lieutenant Governor, Juliana Stratton, has progressive views and has been a major advocate for RJ in her position. In an effort to move away from punitive practices, it seems that Bellarmine University is approaching academic misconduct and other issues in a restorative way according to Heather's students who are familiar with how issues related to housing and student groups are handled. One possible explanation is that the Dean of Students, Dr. Leslie Maxie, wrote her dissertation on restorative justice titled *Job Satisfaction of Student Conduct Administrators and Their Use of Restorative Justice Practices*. I was surprised to find how the political contexts for RJ's implements were conceived of as fragmented, and not entirely driven by state or national policy as much as city-level politics.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Going forward, one question is what we can learn from these tensions? In this conclusion, I offer some preliminary thoughts. The title of this thesis, “Looking Within and Beyond” speaks to the idea that the individual is important but that we also should give more attention and put more emphasis on the structures that define individual relationships—the core of RJ practice. As Kathy said, “I think our own healing needs to happen because all of us were impacted by that punitive system in some way or another.” The title of this thesis also speaks to modeling the future that we want to live in and modeling the society and the relationships that we want to have. It gives us hope for what the future can look like and gets us in the mode of practicing these things so that when the time comes all of us are ready. As Mariame Kaba said, “we’ll figure it out by working to get there.” (Kaba, xx). The title speaks to another form of justice—transformative justice—which nearly all of the participants brought up in their interviews, a form of justice committed to social responses that do not create additional harm and advocate for structural needs. Although we have an idea of what we want our world to look like, these findings demonstrate that, in practice, it is often not cookie cutter clear, but rather a contested space. Everyone has their own vision of what RJ looks like and hardly is there consensus because we are living in different cities, working in different institutional spaces and community organizing contexts, with varying political climates. The findings demonstrate that academics and community organizers are able to implement RJ in schools even while working against the punitive culture they are caught within, without the necessary structural and sometimes institutional support, and amid weak and often diluted forms of RJ practice in the larger school system landscape. In order to successfully implement RJ in schools, individuals should focus on countering carceral logics by fostering a culture of accountability; work towards transformative justice;

build relational capacity within the school and community, and prioritize sustainability. The findings show that doing RJ is about acting out the world that we want to see even if we are not supported by factors outside of ourselves or living in that world in this moment.

Potential Directions for Future Research and Organizing

Future research should investigate the outcome of creating a standard definition of RJ that is faithful to its origins and core purposes. That means thinking about things such as how to avoid co-optation, how to make RJ more than simply a disciplinary or punishment alternative, and more. The tensions discussed in this project also could assist in helping academics, community organizers, and others develop strategies to bring about desired change in schools. These findings are useful in thinking about scale and at what levels changes around RJ can occur and through what institutional and organizing forms of connection.

Limitations

The main limitations were time. As I was simultaneously in organizing space, it was challenging to devote time to writing about what I was experiencing and writing about others' experiences. Going forward, it would be useful for more work to be done that highlights the relationship between the two (organizing and academic responsibilities). Another limitation of this study was that there were not enough respondents who fell under the category of community organizer. Although only one of the eight interviewees self-identified as a community organizer, most of the other interviewees could be considered as organizers/activists despite lack of self-identification. Some interviewees mentioned the work that they do in the community, such as helping stop the building of a federal prison or advocating for youth justice in school board settings, and based on these experiences, I would consider one of their roles as that of a community organizer. This study proved that

the binary between academic and community organizer is blurred and points to the importance of complicating these labels. Important to note is the increasing number of academics who are labeling themselves as “activist” or “public” scholars, which combines both academic and community organizing roles.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

- Anonymous Participant, Pseudonym Alice, Chicago Public Schools
- David Yusem, Oakland Unified School District
 - <https://www.ousd.org/restorativejustice>
- Heather Pruss, Bellarmine University
- Imani Mfalme-Shula, Community Defense of East Tennessee
 - <https://mbrow121.wixsite.com/knox-county-restorat>
- Judah Schept, Eastern Kentucky University
- Kaitlyn Selman, Illinois State University
- Katherine (Kathy) Evans, Zehr Institute, Eastern Mennonite University
- Katie McLellan, Indigenous Education Facilitator in Community

Appendix B: Copy of Interview Questions

What is your role in education? Teacher, graduate, scholar, parent, community member?

1. How would you define restorative justice?
 1. What do you view as key components of restorative justice? What makes it important or significant?
 2. What do you see as its goals/objectives?
2. How have you seen restorative justice be used in schools?
3. Is restorative justice a key part of school curriculum or practice in schools you are associated with?
 1. If yes, what was the process of implementing restorative justice into your school? What challenges did you face in bringing in stakeholders? What worked? What did not? What surprised you?
 2. If no, why do you think restorative justice has not been tried?
 3. Were/are there challenges or tensions in its implementation and practice? What factors contributed to these challenges?
4. How has the larger community responded to the use of restorative justice in schools?
5. What are other strategies you have used or heard of in regard to the successful implementation of restorative justice practices in schools?

Appendix C: Copy of Consent Form
Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Restorative Justice in Tennessee Schools: Challenges and Possibilities

Researcher(s): *Michelle S. Brown*, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Imani A. Shell, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a community member that teaches or works in a school, are a parent or a recent graduate, or are scholars of restorative justice or community leaders around issues of youth justice.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to explore how the community understands restorative justice practices and uses these practices in Tennessee schools through a series of interviews.

How long will I be in the research study?

If you agree to be in the study, your participation will last for 1 to 2 hours.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview at an agreed upon time and place that is most convenient for you or we will interview you by phone or videoconference for 1-2 hours. We will come prepared with a list of questions to promote discussion. You will be supplied a copy of this informed consent form which goes over your elements of consent for your participation.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, you can email Michelle Brown (mbrow121@utk.edu) or Imani Shell (ishell1@vols.utk.edu). All information already collected for the research will be destroyed.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Possible risks include

- *We will ask you questions about sensitive issues related to school safety, discipline, and political contexts but no more sensitive than ordinary conversation.*
- *You can refuse to answer any question.*
- *You can end the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.*

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

We do not expect you to benefit from being in this study. Your participation may indirectly benefit the community as our research hopes to generate support for school policies and curricula that improve school culture and disciplinary practices.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

- Permitted researchers will be the only people with access to the information collected in this study. All interview audio or video recordings will be kept for future research in agreement with IRB safety procedures such as locked offices, password protected storage on computers, hard drives, or secured file host sites. For recording purposes, mobile/wireless phones or digital recorders may be used as well as Zoom cloud recordings. These devices will be password protected and files will be deleted upon secure transmission to a secured file host site (UT OneDrive).
- Identifiers will not be retained or published unless participants wish to be identified. Data will be restricted to authorized research personnel through authentication and secure network servers. All security software for these encrypted machines is updated regularly through OIT support. We will use the secured file hosting site, UT's OneDrive, for storage purposes of transcripts and analysis. All recorders and computers with your data will be stored in locked offices of the researchers at the Law School and McClung Tower at UTK.
- We will use a secure network and UT Vault and VPNs when sharing data.
- All research information we collect or obtain will be restricted to only authorized researchers on the project; locked in a cabinet or file storage; locked in an office or lab; and all rights will end once a researcher leaves the study.
- You will have the option to choose whether to be identified directly or to have your identifiers stripped prior to analysis.

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by de-identifying all identifiable information upon transcription of recordings.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is unlikely, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.

- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

All recordings will be kept for future research in agreement with IRB safety procedures such as locked offices, password protected storage on computers, hard drives, or secured file host sites.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

What else do I need to know?

About 100 people will take part in this study. Due to the small number of participants in this study, it is possible that someone could identify you based on the information we collected from you. We will make every effort to prevent others from knowing you participated in the study and what information you provided.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, *Michelle Brown*, mbrow121@utk.edu, or *Imani Shell*, ishell1@vols.utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. My consent will be recorded audibly at the beginning of the recorded version of our interview. As part of the recorded consent process, I will state whether I choose to be identified as a participant in this study or not.

VITA

Imani A. Shell is a second year master's student with a concentration in criminology from Southern California. They are interested in restorative justice, transformative justice, and the abolition of police and prisons. Imani is currently working on a CURCI project with community organizers at Community Defense of East Tennessee and University of Tennessee, Knoxville professors and students in order to bring restorative justice practices to high schools in Knox County. Imani received their B.A. in sociology from Howard University and has taught two undergraduate courses at UTK: Social Problems and Social Justice, and Criminology, both in person and online asynchronous. Imani currently resides in Los Angeles, California with their partner and four cats.