

Relational Theory and Critical Race Theory as Social Practice in School:

The Restorative Approach

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Dedication

I dedicate this project to my daughter Helen as she begins to navigate the social world of public schooling.

Helen: learn from difference, believe in the good, trust in community and work for peace.

Abstract

This thesis presents a restorative approach in education as a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being together in school communities. Through a theoretical lens of relational theory and critical race theory, case study research was conducted on the restorative approach at a diverse urban elementary school in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The questions this work addresses include: *How does a restorative approach affect the quality of relationships in school communities, particularly for people that have been marginalized? And, what are some recommendations on how to best implement restorative approaches effectively and sustainably?* Participants in the case study include students and staff at the school which serves a socioeconomically and culturally diverse population, including an African Nova Scotian community. In addition, the reflexive nature of the researcher is taken into account as she is a member of the school community as both a classroom teacher and resident. Qualitative data was collected through group talking circles with students and staff at the school and analyzed to reveal four themes that are integrated around a core category of nurturing social culture change including 1) strengthening social connection, 2) affirming identity, 3) fostering emotional engagement, and 4) resolving and preventing conflict. Through an in-depth look at the experience of “Halifax City School,” this study also provides recommendations on the effective and sustainable implementation of restorative approaches in education, including 1) understanding a restorative approach in theory and practice, 2) participating in sustainable social opportunities to collectively develop, support and strengthen the approach, 3) learning and collaborating in the broader community, and 4) ongoing evaluation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The emergence of restorative justice and restorative approaches in education in both local and international contexts in recent years speaks to the need to transform the climate and culture of our social institutions. A restorative approach represents a paradigm shift in the way we think about justice and education and embodies the idea that our institutions should be mechanisms for social engagement as opposed to social control (Morrison, 2013). A restorative approach seeks to construct positive, inclusive and safe school climates by developing and supporting strong, healthy social relationships amongst school community members based on qualities of mutual respect, care, concern and dignity. As Llewellyn and Llewellyn (forthcoming) explain, disciplinary issues are not the core of this approach; rather, “a restorative approach is attentive to the promotion and protection of positive relationships within a learning community” (p.1).

Nova Scotia is uniquely placed to implement restorative approaches in schools through this widened lens, given that it is home to one of the most developed and comprehensive restorative justice programs in the world. However, restorative approaches in schools are not simply an adaptation of restorative justice, and as Llewellyn (2012b) has explained, restorative approaches are important and useful “not just for easy cases, not just for students, and not just when things go wrong.” There is certainly a common set of guiding values, standards and principles inherent to both justice and education models, but a restorative approach in school requires more than a response to conflict, harm and wrongdoing; it speaks broadly to a relational way of being, learning and knowing with others in community. Together, restorative justice and

restorative approaches in schools represent two like-minded reform efforts that are supported and strengthened by a relational framework and a shared set of values, including interconnectedness, respect, inclusion, responsibility, humility, honesty, mutual care and non-domination (Zehr, 2002).

Contextually, a restorative approach is a new-old idea; it is new to our justice and education systems relative to the centuries-old civilizations and customs in which it is historically and culturally rooted, including First Nations peacemaking circles, African village moots and Maori meetings, among many others (Schweigert, 1999). Restorative justice has been articulated in Western societies only since the early 1970s and institutionalized in the Province of Nova Scotia since the late 1990s. It presents insight into the deficiencies of traditional processes of the justice system and offers an alternative approach to justice, just as a restorative approach in schools offers an alternative approach to social relations and school discipline models.

In defining restorative justice, Llewellyn and Howse (1998) say that

Restorative justice, contrary to restitution, [does not rectify] a wrong by restoring the *status quo ante*. Instead, restorative justice aims at restoration to an ideal. Restorative justice seeks to restore the relationships between the parties involved to an ideal state of social equality. It stands juxtaposed to the backward focus of restitution as it attempts to address a wrong by transforming the relationship between those involved such that the same situation could not arise again. (p. 26)

This relational view of justice is grounded in the idea that when wrongdoing takes place, it is not only the victim that is harmed, but the connections with others in the community as well. The restorative response to wrongdoing is thus very different than that of a zero-tolerance approach or the retributive justice system. Zehr (2002) summarizes this approach by stating that violence is not simply a violation of a law or rule, but a violation of people and of interpersonal relationships; therefore, violations

create the central obligation to right the wrongs. Similarly, Llewellyn (2009) proposes that the best way to respond to wrongdoing so that relationships are protected is to bring together those who are affected in inclusive processes, providing meaningful opportunities for participation. Thinking relationally about justice has very powerful implications for thinking relationally about education.

After more than a decade of institutionalized restorative justice in Nova Scotia, a restorative approach in education has emerged throughout educational institutions across the province. On October 24th, 2012, the Departments of Education and Justice collaboratively announced that restorative approaches were to expand throughout the province and that “Nova Scotia will be the first Canadian jurisdiction to initiate a province-wide restorative approach” (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Nova Scotia Department of Justice, 2012). Restorative approaches continue to emerge throughout social institutions in fields of justice and education in Nova Scotia (NS): including, but not limited to, the Restorative Approach in Schools Project (RAISP) as part of the provincial Crime Prevention Strategy at the NS Department of Justice, the NS Task-Force on Bullying and Cyber-Bullying, the NS Human Rights Commission and their Restorative Boards of Inquiry, and at Dalhousie University as a way to deal with conflict among students living in residence and community members. Simultaneously, there has also been a global proliferation of restorative organizations working in fields of justice and education. The experience of the elementary school at which this case study research was conducted is thus situated within a broad restorative movement to transform social relations both within and beyond public institutions.

Why a Restorative Approach?

In education, the systemic problem of power differentials in the public school system and how that plays out as lived experiences for students, families and staff is an issue of social control. A restorative approach seeks to “transform power imbalances that affect social relationships” (Morrison, 2006, p. 372). Using a relational and racial lens to look critically at the social experience of schooling reveals issues of alienation, violence, inequity, stigmatization and exclusion. Dr. George Dei at the University of Toronto speaks to a relational way of being in schools as a way to promote anti-racism education and foster connectedness of African Canadian students within school communities. Dei (1996) argues that schools must commit to social transformation that links individuals to a collective and change the way they do things as a result. Instead of extolling the virtues of meritocracy, individual achievement and responsibility, which deny “structural and systemic barriers to self- and group-actualization and development,” he suggests that we should consider the following:

There is an African proverb that says, “Rain does not fall on one roof and neither does the sun shine on one house alone.” It is also said that, “One tree does not make a forest.” There is another saying that, “One ant cannot build an anthill.” And lastly, there is the fable that, “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am.” One may ask: “What is the social/educational message contained in these proverbs?”

These proverbs point to the importance of understanding the human condition and our connections with one another. They suggest that, as a society, we are bound together by a cloth of mutuality and respect for one another. No one is an island unto herself or himself. It is only through the love of sharing and protecting each other that as a society we can sustain the longevity of this cloth.... We learn from the African fables that each of us, as a member of society, can never reach our full potential as long as others among us are not allowed to reach their goals and dreams. While the individual is extremely important, the notion of “individuality” only makes sense in relation to the larger community of which the individual is a part. (p. 16)

Dei (1996) calls for a “new theoretical discursive framework for understanding the sociology of race and schooling that emphasizes the role of power and social conflict as crucial variables in intergroup relations” (p. 22). Echoing relational scholar Jennifer Llewellyn (2009, 2012) in responding to this call, I believe that thinking relationally about education is an effective way to critique inequitable social structures within the public school system and offer alternatives to the way individuals function together: that is, how equal respect, care, concern and dignity can actively be supported through relationships on a regular basis, as well as in situations of harm and wrongdoing which affect the social fabric of the community. Dei (2006) supports this relational view by saying:

In order to achieve both academic and social success, students need a school system that instills a sense of discipline by developing the learner’s sense of self-worth, moral fibre and purpose within society. This new vision of education emphasizes the development of a culture of youth affirmation that fosters a sense of pride by helping to build strong personal, social and cultural identities. For example, such a culture can be achieved when teachers introduce alternative forms of school discipline to replace suspensions, expulsions or the summoning of law enforcement. (p. 28)

The structure of our social institutions thus needs to change in order to make the time and space necessary to build and rebuild strong and positive relationships based on mutual respect, care, concern and dignity as a fundamental way of being together in community. To that end, the experience of implementing a restorative approach at a diverse urban elementary school in Halifax, which I will refer to as “Halifax City School,” provides a window through which to gain perspective on the potential of a restorative approach to transform the social climate of schools and create positive, inclusive and safe learning communities.

Anti-racism is for holistic interconnection among all forms of life. It follows the Aboriginal proverb, 'All things are connected', and suggests that we must respect and cherish this principle. (Dei, 2005, p. 12)

Becoming Restorative

"I don't like being angry. I don't want to hurt anybody."

These words marked the first wave of change in my classroom. They were spoken by an eight-year old African Nova Scotian student who had been in conflict with peers on a daily basis and as a result, was being suspended from school at least once a week. For the first three months of school that year, she rarely expressed herself verbally and in this moment, she was addressing both her teacher and her classmates while sitting on the floor in a circle formation. The previous day, while she was suspended from school, the other students and I talked openly about how often she was being suspended and how it was affecting us as a group. We talked about how much we liked and cared about her, how we didn't want her being sent home and prepared what we wanted to say to her upon her return. In circle the next morning, students expressed themselves to her critically but lovingly. One student responded: *"I really want to be your friend but I'm scared you're going to hurt me again."* I said: *"I care about you. And I want you to be here with us but we need to take care of each other."* When everyone had expressed themselves, talking piece in hand, from places of care and concern within the circle, the student told us she didn't like being angry, she didn't know what she was doing sometimes when she was angry, and she didn't mean to hurt anyone. After some group deliberation, she also proposed a solution: she asked if she could stay inside for recess for a while.

She wanted to work on dealing with feelings of frustration and anger in healthy ways before going outside for fifteen minutes of unstructured play time, as it was during this time that she was most often in conflict. She understood from our dialogue within

circle how her actions had been affecting others and was suggesting a reasonable consequence. School administration supported the decision and arranged an alternative recess for her. In the meantime, I provided opportunities in the classroom to build strong, positive relationships, and she was paired up with a teacher who became her mentor. Her mother was pleased that she was no longer missing shifts at work because of her daughter's suspensions. By spring, she was able to gradually transition back to outdoor recess and unstructured play with peers.

This process signified to me that the way I was setting aside some time and space to connect with each other on a social and emotional level in the classroom was allowing students to share their stories, thoughts, experiences and feelings – and that the process achieved a supportive and inclusive community of learners. Relating to each other in this way revealed information about personal and social situations that students were experiencing in their lives, which fostered empathy and understanding among the group. The class was engaged in a trusted process within which we could address each other openly and listen to each other, both in times of cooperative learning as well as in times of conflict. It seemed to create a safe space, a space within which the students could take risks to express themselves and shape trusting relationships based on respect, care, concern, and dignity. This was the beginning of my restorative journey, and the most profound period of self-examination, higher education and reflection in my life.

I am passionate about the restorative approach because I understand from classroom experience that strong social relationships in a school community can be the foundation for a positive school climate and high academic achievement. In contrast, a lack of strong social relationships and school attachment can have disastrous results, especially

for marginalized youth. Smyth (2010) writes about the link between students' sense of connectedness and dropping out of school:

At a more personal level, power relations are played out on a daily basis in classrooms as young people contest authoritarian and autocratic relationships which they see as being out of kilter with contemporary life. This process of contestation and "speaking back" in the quest for a more democratic space leads to situations in which the burden of undemocratic school cultures is often borne by students. (p. 200)

In June of 2011, after seven years of teaching and managing classroom climate based on various methods of school-wide, class-wide and individual discipline programs, I attended the 14th Annual World Conference of the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) in collaboration with the Nova Scotia Restorative Justice Community University Research Alliance (NSRJ-CURA) in Halifax. I was curious about it because I had heard about its success at another Halifax elementary school: how the number of school suspensions had dropped significantly, and how the school climate had become more positive and peaceful through a restorative approach.

After attending the conference, and learning about the global restorative movement that was taking place, I approached the new principal at my school to see if we could adopt a restorative philosophy and participate in whatever workshops were necessary to create a common understanding around the restorative approach among school staff. She was keen to explore the restorative approach, and throughout the 2011/2012 school year, staff at our school was involved in three professional development sessions facilitated by a local consultant of the IIRP in Halifax. At the beginning of the following school year, in late September 2012, there was one last workshop on restorative practices that involved all students and focused on conflict resolution circles. In addition, the school

offered childcare that evening and hosted an information session for parents and guardians.

As a teacher, I am very motivated to analyze the restorative approach as it emerges at my school and to locate this research within the restorative movement as it emerges more broadly throughout the province, country and the world. In addition to my teaching experience at Halifax City School, I believe part of my motivation to conduct this research also connects to my academic and employment history; before becoming a teacher, I completed an undergraduate degree at Dalhousie University in International Development Studies, lived and studied in Cuba, and worked with a volunteer-sending, non-governmental organization in South America. These experiences, in addition to teaching in diverse school settings, have provided opportunities for me to reexamine my social position in terms of the power and privilege that I have in relation to others. Living overseas and being challenged culturally and linguistically was a transformative experience for me in terms of experiencing social exclusion and cultural illiteracy.

During 2012-2013, I have been involved in the development of the Restorative Approach in Schools Project in Nova Scotia as a learning team facilitator and presenter, helping to shape the implementation of the approach in the province as it expands to other schools. Such work on the restorative approach in practice, as well as this case study research project focusing on the potential of a restorative approach to bring about social transformation in schools, combine and reaffirm my passion for both community development and education.

Drawing on the work from leading relational theorists like Jennifer Llewellyn at Dalhousie University, Chair of the Nova Scotia Restorative Justice Community

University Research Alliance (NSRJ-CURA), I will explain how restorative justice and restorative approaches in schools are rooted in and further developed by relational theory. In addition, I will argue that there are strong connections between what the restorative approach can offer to schools serving African Nova Scotian communities and the educational reform that leading African Canadian and African American scholars such as Dr. George J. Sefa Dei (University of Toronto) and Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (University of Wisconsin) are calling for in terms of anti-racist and culturally relevant and responsive education. Together, to that end, relational theory and critical race theory constitute the interpretive lens through which my case study on restorative approaches has been crafted. The two research questions this work will address include: How does a restorative approach affect the quality of relationships in school communities, particularly for people that have been marginalized? And, what are some recommendations on how to best implement a restorative approach effectively and sustainably?

It is my argument that restorative approaches in schools that are informed by relational theory and critical race theory are about much more than reducing suspension rates, controlling student behaviour, conflict resolution and arranging chairs in a circle; they extend to culturally responsive decision making and animation of school policies and procedures, to inclusive and equitable ways of being together, to shifting power relations and perspectives in school communities, to socially-just pedagogy. As Blood and Thorsborne (2005) conclude:

We must approach the implementation of restorative practices with a broad and deep understanding of what makes a difference. It is not simply a case of overlaying a justice model of conferencing and expecting it to work in a school setting. Restorative practice in schools is much more than conferencing serious misconduct. We are working in a community that has long term and deep relationships between all its members who need to co-

exist in a healthy way for learning outcomes to be met. This requires a range of proactive and responsive processes which strengthen relationships and take a relational approach to problem solving. The implementation of restorative practice risks the fate of many other well intentioned programs unless we understand what it takes to change the hearts and minds of our school communities and are prepared to learn from our past. (p. 17)

Language Use

Before proceeding any further, I would like to offer clarification in terms of language use. I recognize the importance of language and want to be clear about the meaning and interpretation I intend to convey by using three terms of particular importance in this project. First, according to Cheboud and France (2004), “the term African Canadian does not only include ‘black’ loyalists, but more recent immigrants and their children from the Caribbean, Fiji, and the many countries of Africa” (p. 2).

Although the terms African Nova Scotian, African Canadian and Black, as well as African American and Black, seem to be used interchangeably throughout academic literature, they appear to be mainly used in these ways by African Canadian and African American scholars. Therefore, from my position as a White researcher and teacher, I can not presume to fully understand why Black may be used interchangeably with these terms or how deeply the meaning may be changed or affected by my own interchangeable use of these words. For that reason, following Cheboud and France (2004), I have chosen to use the terms African Nova Scotian, African Canadian and African American to refer to people of African, Caribbean and Fijian descent living in those respective regions of North America.

Second, my use of the word “critical” and the term “critical theory” in this thesis refers in a general way to theory that seeks to question dominating ideologies and act as a

catalyst to motivate action and transformation: particularly, a commitment to action for social justice. I align my use of “critical” with that of Dei (1996), who uses this word

to imply a critique aimed at understanding and transforming existing ways of thinking and knowing and doing things. In this sense then critical theory is a social practice.... Anti-racism education is more than a theoretical discourse or abstract set of propositions; it is an approach which includes a commitment to political and academic education for meaningful social change. (p. 10-11)

I pair together relational theory and critical race theory in such a way as to construct an anti-oppressive framework and interpretive lens for my case study on restorative approaches. When I use the term “critical theory,” I am referring to these two theories, not specifically the work of neo-Marxist theorists associated with the Frankfurt School (Bohman, 2013). Others’ use of the term “critical theory,” such as that of Vaandering’s (2010), may not necessarily align with my use of the term; at times, use of the term seems connected to Friere’s pedagogy of the oppressed or critical pedagogy.

Third, I am consciously using the term “restorative approaches” rather than “restorative practices” because I believe that the former term is more useful in that it also implies a conceptual understanding; it is an umbrella term that is inclusive of a wide variety of restorative processes and practices. In comparison, “restorative practices” is a popular, although limited term, that refers to specific reproducible acts, such as having circles, in order to improve school climate. I believe this comparison is important because it speaks to the need to locally customize restorative approaches based on community-based understandings of why and how we need to do things differently in our schools, as opposed to reproducing restorative practices as a one-size-fits-all educational program or kit. As explained by Ruck and Halpern (2012), the development of a

restorative approach is a process that takes time because it is a way of learning, thinking and interacting in a school as opposed to the simple implementation of a new activity.

Halifax City School

In a conscious and concerted effort to protect the identities of the participants, as well as community members, I have chosen not to name the elementary school at which the research was undertaken, despite receiving ethics clearance to do so. Instead, I will be using the pseudonym, “Halifax City School.” In addition to changing the name of the school, I have also changed some of the identifying features of research participants and community members who are referenced in the stories and narratives that I have shared.

This urban school serving children in grades primary to six is comprised of a socioeconomically and culturally diverse population, serving many African Nova Scotian as well as immigrant and refugee families, mainly from Africa and the Middle East but also from Latin America and Asia. A large number of our families are low-income and live in public and subsidized housing complexes nearby, including a high number of single-parent homes (almost always run by a single mother). In contrast, the neighbourhood has also seen upscale housing and condominium development over the past decade. The school offers both English and French Immersion programs. I have been a classroom teacher at this school in the English program for over five years, and I have also lived in the community since 2007.

At Halifax City School, we have a very dedicated staff with minimal turn-over, and over the years, we have tried various approaches and methods to developing a more peaceful, positive and high-achieving school climate, but it has been difficult. This

context has provided me with the impetus to examine what we can do differently as a school to better serve our community. I believe this research is significant for two main reasons: I introduce a theoretical framework that links relational theory and critical race theory to restorative approaches, and I offer recommendations on using a restorative approach to change the social culture of schooling. To that end, the next chapter will discuss the theoretical lens through which the case study of Halifax City School is designed and interpreted.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

One responsibility of educators is to ensure that all students develop a shared sense of belonging, a sense of connection and a sense of identification with the school. Every student must be able to claim ownership of her or his school and be able to say, 'This is my school, I see myself here, and I belong here.' (Dei, 1996, p. 17)

Dr. Dorothy Vaandering (2010), who conducted a three-year evaluation of the restorative approach in Ontario schools, argues that more work needs to be done around the link between critical theory and restorative approaches in schools as a way to make this approach – which seeks to transform social relations in schools – sustainable and effective (pp. 145–176). She contends that a restorative approach in schools is more than a practice or an act that seeks to control student behaviour and school climate. She argues that

Critical theory, a framework that has to my knowledge been employed minimally in the field of RJ [restorative justice] and education, exposes and then provides a means for addressing an important debate that has arisen, namely that of RJ being conceptualized solely in terms of student conduct as opposed to the development of relationship and community. By using critical theory it is my intention to map out the limits in the field thereby enhancing the current philosophical understanding of RJ practice in schools. I argue that further insights into the implementation and sustainability of RJ in education can be developed by drawing on conceptual analytic frameworks about power relations as put forth by Freire (2005) and hooks (2003). In so doing, I highlight that while RJ addresses issues of conflict and behaviour, it cannot be understood solely in these terms if it is going to play a role in transforming the culture of schooling. (p. 145-146)

My research and analysis of the restorative approach, both in theoretical and practical terms, answers this call to action – to link critical theory and restorative approaches – and furthermore, focuses on how an understanding of critical theory can inform a restorative approach in schools that seeks to create a climate in which all children and youth participate in a public education system that is equitable and inclusive.

As well as analyzing restorative approaches through a relational lens, the context in which I teach compels me to also look through a theoretical lens of race to examine restorative approaches against the backdrop of pre-existing social inequality. Restorative justice is best understood, supported and developed by relational theory, as are restorative approaches in schools; in addition, critical race theory provides a lens through which educators can understand the role of power relations in schools based on social differences.

Relational Theory and Restorative Justice

Identity cannot be defined in isolation because it is relational, and that identity acquires its meaning from both what it is and what it is not. (Dei & James, 1998, cited by Jamal, p. 227)

Rooted mainly in the work of feminist scholars working in fields of law and social policy, relational theorists such as Downie and Llewellyn (2012) reject the individualistic image of the self traditionally associated with social and political liberalism; alternatively, relational theory highlights relationships, community and connectedness (p. 6). A relational sense of self may seem radical or revolutionary to some individuals, especially in the Western world, but it clearly identifies with a variety of age-old social, cultural and political theories, concepts and perspectives that have defined ways of being together in the world for groups such as Indigenous African and Aboriginal communities (Schweigert, 1999).

Relational theory “uses as its starting point the fact that human beings exist in relationships and do not come into the world as the independent, fully autonomous, and self-sufficient agents assumed by many traditional liberal theorists” (Koggel, 2012, p. 70). As Baylis (2012) explains, “the concept of personhood that figures most

prominently in contemporary Western ethical and political theory is that of the independent, rational, self-aware, self-reliant, self-interested individual thoroughly (if not obsessively) engaged in the autonomous pursuit of his interests” (p. 112). One example of how this neo-liberal conception of the self is manifested in or affects education systems is reflected in the assumption that student underachievement on standardized testing is due to poorly run schools and incapable teachers, as opposed to inequitable social structures and underfunding (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, forthcoming).

In sharp contrast, the relational view of the self is perhaps best defined by Sherwin (1998) when she states that

No one is fully independent... the view of individuals as isolated social units is not only false but impoverished: much of who we are and what we value is rooted in our relationships and affinities with others... all persons are, to a significant degree, socially constructed... their identities, values, concepts, and perceptions are, in large measure, products of their social environment. (p. 34-35)

Furthermore, Nedelsky (2012) explains the relational conception of the self by stating

We come into being in a social context that is literally constitutive of us. Some of our most essential characteristics, such as our capacity for language and the conceptual framework through which we see the world, are not made by us, but given to us (or developed in us) through our interaction with others. (p. 5)

Llewellyn (2012) roots restorative justice in relational theory. She contends that the baseline qualities of equal respect, care, concern and dignity are central to healthy and successful relationships (p. 90). She states that “once we recognize that selves are relational, it becomes clear that to respect them requires some knowledge and concern for their needs and aims and for their position in relation with others” (p. 94). By rejecting the liberalized view of individuals as separate entities in society, relational theory thus

concludes that the social systems and structures within major institutions such as justice, health and education based upon this sense of self are flawed. Therefore, acknowledging the human self as fundamentally connected to others, relational theory offers radical implications for social institutions, the way in which they are structured and the way in which they implement programs and services.

Llewellyn (2009) says that relational theory recognizes the agency of individuals, but individuals are not separated; in contrast, people are socially connected and grow in and through relationships. Furthermore, she explains that this may not be a radical idea about the way we understand ourselves, but this concept of connectedness is certainly not reflected in the way our justice system and other institutions – like the public school system – are structured. However, there are reform efforts (such as restorative justice and restorative approaches in schools) that have emerged to try and make space within those institutions and social structures to articulate this concept – for people to connect, build positive relationships, and work and learn together. This implies that people are thus responsible for and accountable to each other.

In order to think relationally about each other in schools, educators need to shift their perspectives, question assumptions and recognize the centrality of relationships – rather than the making and breaking of rules – in thought and in action. Dei (1996) and his vision of anti-racist education reflects this idea because “many youths have spoken about a sense of alienation and of the pain they experience because of their lack of connectedness to, and identification with, certain societal institutions” (p. 15). I believe that a restorative approach has the potential to support such a necessary transformation of social relations in schools by providing equitable and sustainable ways to build

connectedness. There is much research that speaks to the benefits of strong school attachment for students, the need for a sense of belonging in and connectedness to their school. For example, Perez (2000) says:

Teacher caring is important because it encourages student commitment to school and their engagement in learning. It can be a source of motivation for all students, but especially for culturally diverse students who may be at risk of failing or who may be disengaged from schooling. A lack of connection is often a consequence of feeling “invisible” or anonymous in the school setting. (p.102)

A restorative approach (RA) provides the way in which this process of increasing connectedness could take place and students could come to new understandings about how classmates and peers live in the world in relation to him/her. Ruck and Halpern (2012) explain that “understanding our interconnectivity is at the core of RA and the corresponding practices. As opposed to viewing incidents that take place in a classroom setting or on the playground, as isolated infractions, RA attempts to get to the root of the issue and do so in a cohesive, relational manner” (p. 245). For example, a restorative approach emphasizes the importance of dialogue in a trusting environment to foster connectedness and enhance learning. The use of talking circles, rooted in Indigenous traditions and cultures is a restorative process that promotes dialogue which, as Taylor (2009) says:

becomes the medium for critical reflection to be put into action, where experience is reflected on, assumptions and beliefs are questioned, and habits of mind are ultimately transformed. The dialogue is not so much analytical, point-counterpoint dialogue, but dialogue emphasizing relational and trustful communication, often at times highly personal and self disclosing. (p.9)

Bintliff (2012) discusses her use of talking circles as a strategy to promote dialogue and build connectedness among the “high-risk” youth she teaches in an outdoor experiential education setting (p. 49). Based on her research, she argues that fostering

connectedness and feelings of belonging helps students to develop strong attachment to their school and improve academically. Circles are often used preventatively as well as for conflict resolution purposes: for example, in the form of class meetings, community problem-solving and reintegrating suspended students into the classroom (Reimer, 2011). More broadly, a restorative approach provides opportunities for a relational perspective to reframe the way in which students and staff view incidents of harm; instead of understanding harmful incidents as rule-breaking, they are viewed as undermining relationship and negatively affecting the community at large. For instance, Ruck and Halpern (2012) reference a local incident from a high school in Nova Scotia in which racial slurs were used in a group of boys:

A fight had been scheduled to take place at noon off school property, but as the time grew closer, tensions were growing inside the school. The school decided to use a circle and talk to all parties involved, as well as the guidance counsellor, student support worker, and the principal. The principal began by asking some questions in an effort to relax a very tense group of students. The student support worker talked about the history of this racial slur and the impact on his community. Eventually, one of the boys expressed the reasons why the use of the racial slur was offensive and hurtful. He spoke about the struggles he faces on a daily basis and the history of that word. One of the students who had used the slur indicated he had no idea that the word would have this kind of impact and that his intention had been to simply insult the other student. A young woman asked if that was how they saw her; because when she hears that word that is how it makes her feel. Through this dialogue, the students began to connect and understand how their actions were impacting others. Ultimately, the students reached a common understanding from which to move forward. Following this circle, they committed to work on these issues as a school and the guidance counsellor spoke with the students individually about how they would communicate the outcome of the session with their friends and peers. (p. 246)

Reimer (2011) states that “by attending to these restorative values [interconnectedness, respect, inclusion, responsibility, humility, honesty, mutual care and non-domination], restorative justice practitioners and proponents, regardless of

differences in definition, attempt to develop processes that make things as right as possible for all affected by harm” (p. 5). In classrooms, this often takes the form of circles and affective statements, and sometimes more formal conferences that may include administration, students, teachers, parents and community members, outside of the classroom. More broadly, a restorative approach offers a way for all people in schools to analyze their role in relationship with others, and it also offers schools a relational lens through which to make decisions around system-wide, school-wide and classroom-wide policies, practices, programs and pedagogy. In terms of school discipline and as a response to harm, the restorative approach, rooted in relational theory, is vastly different from a zero tolerance approach that focuses on an individual’s crime and punishment. Instead, those affected by an incident or situation look to the future and figure out what it will take to produce respect, care, concern and dignity.

Reflecting on the restorative approach in Australia schools, Blood and Thorsborne (2005) say that “restorative practices focus our attention on the quality of relationships between all members of the school community. Repairing the harm necessarily forces us to learn from the experience that has led to the conflict and examine our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours which have contributed to it” (p. 3). Furthermore, they go on to list cultural cues that members of a school community perceive as representative of the quality of relationship amongst its members. This list includes how management speak to staff, how staff speak about the management in their absence, how management and staff speak about students and parents, the patterns of communication in staff meetings and after meetings, how criticism and disagreement are handled, how the school invites,

promotes and supports initiatives and individual vision, and lastly, how the school responds to identified need amongst students or staff.

If we reject the liberal individualistic version of the self within schools and, alternatively, take the relational view that we are all connected through relationship with one another, a major implication is that a paradigm shift must take place in terms of the way we conceptualize the purpose of education. We must commit to being socially responsible with each other, and to the role of schooling in fostering that social responsibility, whether as a student, parent, teacher, administrator, educational program assistant, support personnel, caretaker, community member or volunteer. We must change school culture at every level by first and foremost asking the question, “Will this decision, comment, instruction, conversation or act serve to build, repair and restore relationship?” I suggest that it is by analyzing ourselves through this relational lens or filter that we become restorative in social practice.

Relational theorists believe that when wrongdoing or harm takes place, “through restorative processes, parties are able to consider the role that existing social inequalities have played in the situation and what steps might be taken to address them” (Llewellyn, 2012, p.98). This directly relates to critical race theory, which is used in the context of education to understand school inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). For my purposes, layering relational theory with critical race theory to construct an anti-oppressive theoretical framework enables this research to be more contextually meaningful and critical in nature; that is, to analyze how a restorative approach might support a school community that serves African Nova Scotian students in its efforts to embrace policies, programs and pedagogy that are inclusive and equitable. To that end,

the next section will discuss critical race theory and how it works to inform a restorative approach that would seek to transform inequitable and marginalizing social structures that undermine the climate and culture of school settings.

Critical Race Theory

The issue of race and the stigmatization of students arising from their differential treatment by race (e.g., labelling and stereotyping, sorting of students, low student expectations by teacher, lack of curricular sophistication, the absence of diversity in staff representation, and the disciplining of Black bodies with suspensions and expulsions) cannot be underestimated. (Dei, 2007, p.350)

Given the diverse context in which I teach, I am motivated to uncover systems within the traditional social structure of public education that marginalize minority students, specifically African Nova Scotian students. James (2010) says that “Racism is generally understood at the level of individual attitudes, and as acts of discrimination. But it is more than this. It must be understood in terms of historical and structural factors, and in terms of the rules, policies and practices that have been the prevailing norm in institutions that have operated for years in favour of those by whom and for whom they were constructed in the first place” (p. 255). Williams-Lorde (2012) at Dalhousie University in Halifax says:

Racism is a form of bullying. State-sanctioned racialized bullying has been practiced throughout Canadian history through laws that permitted enslavement, segregation, internment and other forms of racial discrimination. Severe racialized bullying and violence continues in the form of hate crimes. Indeed Statistics Canada has reported that over half of all police-reported hate crimes were motivated by race or ethnicity and that Blacks continue to be the most commonly targeted racial group. (p. 61)

Critical race theory (CRT) assumes that racism is not a series of isolated acts but rather, that racism is deeply ingrained “legally, culturally and even psychologically” in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). Looking through a theoretical lens of race at the

social structures that are deeply entrenched in institutions like schools reveals issues of exclusion, alienation and stigmatization of African Canadian youth.

Drawing on several critical race theorists including Bell (1992), Delgado (1995), and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Maddox-Smith and Solorzano (2002) define critical race theory, rooted in law, sociology and history, in the context of education in the following way: “CRT consists of basic insights, perspectives, methods and pedagogies that seek to identify, analyze and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 68). Furthermore, they list five tenets of critical race theory as it applies to education, including: “the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination; the challenges to dominant ideology; the commitment to social justice; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and, a transdisciplinary perspective” (p. 68).

A relational and racial lens allows school community members to critically examine, reflect on and change system and school-wide policies, programs, practices and pedagogies to ensure they promote equity and inclusion, and foster responsible and respectful relationships, especially for students who are detached and feeling socially excluded. Moreover, Dei (2006) lobbies for “a school in which controversial issues are not swept under the carpet, where there is an open, frank and critical engagement of the power questions of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression which characterize our communities... success for Black/African-Canadian students and our ability to root out all forms of violence (including those perpetrated by, and visited on, youths) will flow from this vision of education” (p. 28). I am very

interested in the potential of an inclusive restorative approach to challenge the status quo in school social culture and support an anti-racist framework.

According to critical race theorists Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), social reality is constructed by the formulation and exchange of stories about individual situations (p. 57). A restorative approach that embraces respectful dialogue and active listening, both in times of social cooperation and in times of conflict, would seem to support a way of being together in community that is culturally responsive and anti-racist at its core. To that end, considering the discrimination that students who do not come from the dominant social group encounter as a result of being “different,” Ghosh and Abdi (2004) argue:

It is important that teachers, along with the students, examine new ways to understand how power works in constructing race, class, and gender, and how power differentials are maintained through racism, sexism, and classism... Even if they want to, educators in today’s pluralistic societies cannot escape from their responsibility to discuss racism, sexism, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, all of which play an important role in constructing the we-and-they relations. (p.80)

As previously discussed, regular use of talking circles during the school day is one aspect of a restorative approach which allows for the re-structuring of social relations within the classroom and promotes perspective-taking. A restorative approach that seeks to challenge assumptions and support the cultural responsiveness of teachers and students would proactively invest time in dialoguing. “Dialogue, chat, informal talk, discussion is an incredibly powerful way to learn and teach... unfortunately, because of time constraints and misunderstandings about our mission, the culture of most schools runs contrary to authentic and fearless conversations. Speaking personal truths; asking tough questions; listening deeply to one another; and raising, rather than avoiding, conflicts are activities seldom accomplished during a normal school day” (Nicolet, 2006, p. 206).

One benefit to doing daily talking circles in classrooms is that it can provide the opportunity for all voices to emerge. Dei (1996) argues that “anti-racism calls for creating spaces for everyone, but particularly for marginal voices to be heard” (p. 30). A restorative approach strives to provide equitable and sustainable social opportunities in which the quiet, the alienated, the often excluded voices may be heard. And the listeners, open and attentive, can potentially learn both about their classmates and themselves as individuals in relation to each other within a common group. Delgado (in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) suggests that “the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the ‘dysconscious conviction’ of viewing the world in one way” (p. 57).

In research that examines “the cultivation of highly effective relational processes,” through which teachers develop strong relationships with African American students and foster academic achievement, Cholewa, Amatea, West-Olatunji & Wright (2012) report that “in the midst of the discrepancies in academic achievement, special education, and behavioural referrals between low-income, African American students and their more privileged White peers, there are culturally responsive teachers whose low-income, African American students are excelling” (p. 27). Furthermore, Cholewa et al (2012) say that teachers who developed strong relationships with their students did so by developing emotional connectedness, facilitating conditions of relationship building, and students’ affective responses – three core tenets of a restorative approach in education.

Adams, Bell and Griffin (1997) write that “our goal in social justice education is to enable students to become conscious of their operating world view and to be able to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations” (p.

xvii). In order to accept and acknowledge the other in relation to oneself, an investment of time is required specifically for sharing personal stories as well as highlighting the differences amongst us, celebrating them, and making connections between those social differences and social power. I suggest a restorative approach in schools would wedge out the time and space necessary to have these important conversations, which have the potential to transform the way in which members of school communities understand, see and treat each other on a routine basis.

In the United States, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings describes pedagogical excellence she has observed over the years that successfully serves African American students as “culturally relevant” and argues that this type of teaching practice is central – and must be central – for the academic and social success of all marginalized youth. Ladson-Billings (1995a) speaks to three main objectives of culturally relevant pedagogy; that is, to encourage and support high levels of academic achievement, cultural competence, and “to help students recognize, understand and critique current social inequities” (p. 476). I argue that a restorative approach which honours, respects and dignifies each member of the school community, and makes the time and space necessary for authentic and critical conversations to take place, would support the goals of culturally relevant pedagogy. It is no surprise to me that during a three-year study on culturally responsive teachers, Ladson-Billings (1995b) had the following to say about the commonalities amongst the eight teachers she observed:

The teachers kept the relations between themselves and their students fluid and equitable. They encouraged the students to act as teachers, and they, themselves, often functioned as learners in the classroom. These fluid relationships extended beyond the classroom and into the community. Thus, it was common for the teachers to be seen attending community functions (e.g. churches, students’ sports events) and using community services (e.g.

beauty parlors, stores). The teachers attempted to create a bond with all of the students, rather than an idiosyncratic, individualistic connection that might foster an unhealthy competitiveness. This bond was nurtured by the teachers' insistence on creating a community of learners as a priority. They encouraged the students to learn collaboratively, teach each other, and be responsible for each other's learning. (p. 163)

Disturbingly, Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) report that in the United States, academic achievement of African American students has historically been declining while rates of suspension and expulsion for the same students has steadily increased (p. 56). In 2011, Ladson-Billings spoke about the "school-to-prison pipeline" and reported that

Incarceration rates climbed in the 1990s and have reached historic highs in recent years. In 1995, 16% of Black men in their 20s who did not attend college were in jail; by 2004, 21% were incarcerated. By their mid-30s, six out of ten Black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. In the inner city, more than half of all Black men do not finish high school. A 2004 study by the Schott Foundation found that although Black males make up only 8.6% of public school enrolment, they represent 22% of expulsions and 23% of suspensions. Polite and Davis (1999) found that for the same offence, suspension days ranged from two to 22 days – intimating that school personnel use a fair amount of discretion in determining how to sanction students. Of Black boys who enter special education, only 10% return to regular classrooms permanently and only 27% ever graduate. In addition to the numbers, research has found that Black boys often do not feel cared for in their school communities (Rawls 2006). Yet, the single most important thing in turning lives around according to Noddings (1992) 'is the ongoing presence of a caring adult.' (p. 7)

Similarly, in a Canadian context, Dei (2007) argues that

As far as African Canadian families are concerned, the most contentious issue in education today is the suspension and expulsion of students following the zero-tolerance policy. The questions to be raised then become, 'What is the school's responsibility to youth and to education? Are schools to act as the police to enforce law and order or simply to educate young people?' If it is the latter, it requires a different mind set geared to teaching about discipline and not simply enforcing discipline. It is troubling when many of the students who are expelled or suspended are students of color (especially Black students) who are left to languish during their suspension... But the larger problem here is how these

suspensions and expulsions can lead to the eventual incarceration of the youth. We are very close to the prison complex mentality that Foucault (1980) talked about, especially when we bring the panoptic gaze to certain bodies and construct a school–prison feeder road. (p. 351)

Based on my experience and my observations over the past five years teaching at Halifax City School, most of the repeated office or discipline referrals for behavior concerns made by teachers – including myself – are for African Nova Scotian students, particularly male, in a student body of approximately 300 students where they represent a minority. I know that a restorative approach, informed by both relational and critical race theories, will not immediately reverse these disturbing trends. Nonetheless, I argue that a restorative approach is a significant and hopeful effort toward educational reform that promotes respectful and responsible relationships in the best interests of the students described in the social statistics above, and all members of our school community. After all, as Beck and Malley (1998) argue, “Most children fail in school not because they lack the necessary cognitive skills, but because they feel detached, alienated, and isolated from others and from the educational process” (p. 133).

What are schools doing to respond to the stigmatization of African Canadian students, in particular? Dei (2007) says that:

In responding to calls for action, we see the introduction of measures aimed at creating safe learning environments. These environments often reveal the effects of the policing of youth in schools. Zero tolerance measures, it can be argued, work with a racist and racialized ideology of safety, and the policies in particular help perpetuate racial hierarchies. These policies enforce rigid school discipline and codes of conduct in a one-size-fits-all approach. They contribute to the understanding of schools as top-down, authoritarian, and coercive institutions. (p. 350)

Milner (2006) echoes these concerns over one-size-fits-all and zero-tolerance approaches to discipline and control in schools. He says, “teachers must examine what

appropriate behavior actually is; that is, are not appropriate behavior and ways of seeing the world subjective and socially constructed?” (p. 84).

By seeking to build and reaffirm strong and positive relationships through mutual respect, dignity, care and concern, as opposed to competitive power struggles based on the making and breaking of rules, a restorative approach that promotes community rather than conformity would seem to offer a healthy and proactive alternative to zero tolerance policies and one-size-fits-all approaches.

In diverse school settings, students and staff need explicit opportunities to interact, relate to each other and explore the challenges and barriers that exist to building a positive school experience – both individually and collectively – for example, pedagogical approaches that may not be culturally relevant, alienating forms of punishment, exclusive social events or racism in the form of low academic expectations. In “White Women’s Work,” Hancock (2006) says that most teachers who teach in “inner city schools” have a mentality that they are going to “save urban students, only to find out that they themselves were the ones who needed to change; to grow; to understand; to accept and remove the mask of superiority, self-righteousness and judgement” (p. 98).

While observing instructional methods and programming in schools serving African American students in the US in recent years, Ladson-Billings (2011) reports the following:

When I made my way to schools serving large numbers of Black students (and in one case the entire student population was Black) I could not help but notice the degree to which every aspect of the students’ activities were regulated – not just what they were taught, but also how their bodies were controlled. They were required to wear uniforms; they had to line up in particular ways, they were prohibited from talking in social spaces like hallways and the cafeteria. There is only one analogy to this kind of regulation – prison.

A few years ago I witnessed another other example of this tight regulation. An elementary principal proudly took me to see her ‘restitution room.’ In it were several rows of children, all Black and all male, sitting absolutely silent with their hands folded. The classroom was presided over by an instructional aid and there were no books or reading materials in the room. There were no displays on the bulletin boards, no cute and colourful pictures of school children or animals, and no admonitions about how to be a good student. It was just a bare room with four walls. The principal turned to me and asked what I thought. My response was probably impolite but I replied, ‘I think it’s fine if you’re training them for prison.’ (p. 13)

In response to the social stigmatization and marginalization of African American students, Milner (2006) says that “it is critical for teachers to recognize their own power and their responsibility in providing their students of colour with access to the culture of power” (p. 82). Anti-racist and socially-just pedagogy in schools challenges us to dialogue about our perspectives and our differences - differences based on race, class, gender, ability and sexuality - and how these differences affect educational opportunities and experiences. I believe that the vision of a school community or school system that seeks to embrace the restorative approach rooted in relational theory and informed by critical race theory is best described in the words of Dei (2007):

Education must cultivate a sense of community and social responsibility if we are to ever meet and wrestle with the challenge and possibilities for African youth education. Simply put, schooling must be community. There are calls for revisioning the educational system in public schools, to introduce a more effective method of teaching diverse youth, to create spaces where the needs of the most disadvantaged are seriously and concretely addressed (not glossed over), to promote schools with strong ties to the community, and to help learners build their self-, collective, and cultural identities. Such schools, it is hoped, will promote self-respect among learners, cultivate respect for elders, and promote discipline within academic and social excellence. (p. 5)

To that end, I have crafted a case study at Halifax City School to explore the ways in which a restorative approach affects the quality of relationships within a diverse urban community, and to make recommendations on implementing a restorative approach based

on this local experience. It is my argument that a restorative approach, rooted in relational theory and informed by critical race theory, empowers schools, and more importantly the human beings teaching and learning within them, to develop strong, positive relationships through practices and processes that are based on mutual respect, care, concern and dignity. In this way, critical theory becomes social practice; the remainder of my thesis is an exploration of that work.

Chapter 3

Research Design

Anti-racism research is not about becoming located or situated in another's lived experiences but is rather an opportunity for the researcher to critically engage his or her own experience as part of the knowledge search. (Dei, 2005, p.2)

Through a theoretical lens of relational theory and critical race theory, I conducted case study research on the restorative approach at Halifax City School by facilitating group interviews in the form of talking circles with students and staff. The questions this work addresses include: *How does a restorative approach affect the quality of relationships in school communities, particularly for people that have been marginalized? And, what are some recommendations on how to best implement restorative approaches effectively and sustainably?* The qualitative data I have collected speaks to the social narratives and lived experiences of participants and how a restorative approach has affected the quality of their relationships within the school community in which they live, work and play.

At the outset, I want to locate myself as researcher. Throughout the research process, I have paid careful attention to my position as a White classroom teacher, researcher and resident of the broader community. I have relationships based on those roles with students, colleagues and families that have developed over a period of more than five years; therefore, I am implicated reflexively in the research itself. In explaining the meaning of reflexivity in qualitative research, Finlay (2002) says

As qualitative researchers engaged in contemporary practice, we accept that the researcher is a central figure who influences, if not actively constructs, the collection, selection and interpretation of data. We recognize that research is co-constituted, a joint product of the participants, researcher and their relationship. We understand that meanings are negotiated within particular social contexts so that another researcher will unfold a different

story. We no longer seek to eradicate the researcher's presence – instead subjectivity in research is transformed from a problem to an opportunity. (p. 212)

Drawing on the words of Martinovic and Dlamini (2009), I see my position as aligned with that of a “reflective classroom ethnographer” (p. 131) through my work in facilitating talking circles and engaging in dialogue with teachers and students with whom I share knowledge and experiences within a learning community. My own experiences as a teacher at Halifax City School, and as a researcher and school volunteer this year while on sabbatical, inform my reflections on social practices in the school and my analysis of the talking circle discussions. It is precisely because of my position as researcher that I am able to co-construct the meaning of what it means to be restorative at Halifax City School with the participants of the research. As Fontana and Frey (2005) point out, “ethnographers have realized for quite some time that researchers are not invisible neutral entities; rather, they are part of the interaction they seek to study, and they influence that interaction” (p. 716). The way I am situated within the community as a teacher, and this year as a researcher and school volunteer, reflect what Martinovic and Dlamini (2009) describe as “current research practices in critical ethnography in which the position of the researcher as an embodied self is considered an important and valuable source” (p. 132).

To carry out the research within my school community, I chose to use a critical case study model in which qualitative data was collected through talking circles with students and staff. The next section will discuss case study and the research method in depth.

Case Study

Initially, I envisioned a case study approach to evaluating the effectiveness of a restorative approach at my school as a quantitative measure of discipline referrals and school suspensions. I came to that early conclusion because the majority of research on the positive outcomes of restorative practices is quantitative in nature. For example, the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) (2009) reports that:

Administrators at West Philadelphia High School learned about restorative practices in spring 2008 and began implementing the practices immediately, using circles in some classrooms. The school had its first formal restorative practices training in fall 2008. From April to December 2008, suspensions decreased by half and recidivism plummeted. The school's administrators credit restorative practices for these improvements. (p. 6)

Likewise, in the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board in Ontario, the IIRP (2009) reports that over a two year period, the total number of students that were suspended in elementary schools dropped from 1559 in 2005-2006 to 1281 in 2007-2008 (p. 23). Other schools and organizations implementing restorative practices across the globe send out exciting messages on Twitter that read, for example, "1 of my Kent secondary schools that piloted restorative approaches/justice have DECREASED REMOVALS FROM CLASS BY 39%" (@RJ4Schools Ltd, 2012). I believe this quantitative approach to measuring the effectiveness of restorative practices is useful, but limited, as it exclusively speaks to restorative practices as a way to resolve conflict, control student behavior and reduce suspensions. It does little to measure the effectiveness of a restorative approach in transforming the social culture in schools.

One example of a Canadian qualitative case study (Reimer, 2011) analyzed how a restorative approach "was being experienced and implemented by teachers and administrators in a specific Ontario Public School Board during the 2008/2009 school

year” (p. 2). Through qualitative methods that included questionnaires, document analysis and interviews, the author focused her research on teachers and administrators who implement restorative approaches. Despite an appreciation for restorative values, her work reveals systemic challenges to implementing restorative approaches in effective, sustainable ways, such as a lack of common understanding about the meaning of restorative approaches among school staff, as well as a lack of consistent support and promotion by those in leadership positions in school boards – both in terms of funding and in policy. She explains that the restorative approach is mainly understood by those who implement it (administrators and teachers) as a tool for resolving conflict after the fact, as opposed to school board officials who understand it as a preventative measure. Without citing any quantitative data in her case study, she explores the value of incorporating a restorative justice-based approach in schools as a way of thinking and acting for educators, and offers a comprehensive look at the pitfalls of implementing restorative practices as a training program from outside sources that costs too much money to sustain.

I suggest that reporting mainly quantitative research reflects the limited belief that a restorative approach is mostly about conflict resolution, control of student bodies and behaviour to maintain particular social relations and expectations, as opposed to positive and equitable relationships and learning environments. Therefore, I have chosen to conduct qualitative research in my case study, in an effort to broaden the scope of research about the restorative approach and its potential to sustainably transform the social culture of schooling. My hope is that this case study will be helpful to my learning

community and others in trying to understand and analyze the social experiences we share in an effort to promote mutual respect, dignity, care and concern with each other.

Situated within the critical research paradigm, this work attempts to “catch the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995, p. xi). In order to carry out in-depth qualitative research on restorative approaches in education in an attempt to understand the complex social world within schools, I have chosen to use the case study method which Berg (2009) claims “is an extremely useful technique for researching relationships, behaviors, attitudes, motivations, and stressors in organizational settings” (p. 331). There are several interpretations of case study; some argue it is a theoretically-informed research method while others would say that it is an information-gathering exercise used to develop theory. Yin (2009) offers a two-fold definition of case study that speaks to the context of my research. He says

A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context... [it] copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence... and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p.18)

Furthermore, this case study in particular is aligned with what Yin (2009) defines as a “critical case study” (p. 47). He distinguishes critical case studies from other types using three characteristics reflected in my case study design. He says that a critical case study is based on “well-formulated theory” and seeks to enhance understanding of the context (p. 47). In addition, he says that critical case studies using single-case design are appropriate when the case represents a unique situation. In this way, I see the context of the diverse urban elementary school where I am conducting research and our socio-cultural context as unique in terms

of current research on restorative approaches in schools. In fact, there is no published data at this time on the effectiveness of restorative approaches in Nova Scotia schools, let alone the unique urban and diverse context represented by Halifax City School.

Therefore, this critical case study captures a snapshot of the social culture at the school in a way that is valuable and also manageable given the tight timeframe as dictated by the terms of my one year study leave. Over a period of five months (January 2012 – May 2013) while on sabbatical, I conducted this case study in an effort to reveal the strengths and challenges of implementing an approach that seeks to transform social relations within the school community. In the fall of 2012, I received ethics clearance from both the Halifax Regional School Board and Mount Saint Vincent University in order to conduct research with staff and students at the school. By capturing stories, narratives, thoughts, feelings and experiences through the talking circle research method outlined below, the data will speak to the lived experiences of community members and what it means to be restorative at Halifax City School and beyond.

I chose to use talking circles as my research method in order to model a restorative approach to research in both process and outcome. In order to change school culture through a restorative approach, I believe that members of school communities must always ask the following question when relating to and interacting with others: “Will this decision, comment, instruction, conversation or act serve to build, repair and restore relationship?” Asking myself this same question as researcher facilitated the idea of using talking circles to carry out the case study. The circle method provided a process through which the participants strengthened their social connection with each other,

created shared understanding around the meaning of a restorative approach, and came to collective conclusions about how it affects the quality of our relationships with each other as well as how to best implement the approach moving forward.

Context for Talking Circles

Over the course of a full school year while on study-leave, I remained connected to the school community in a variety of ways. For example, every Wednesday morning from the second week of September, I volunteered for the breakfast program, and stayed during the day at times to participate in a supportive role in classrooms and talking circles at the request of teachers and administrators. In addition, I attended and participated in some regular staff meetings and school-wide events such as fundraisers and socials.

I also shared my project during informal gatherings with staff, students and families and by attending staff meetings, committee meetings, School Advisory Committee meetings, and Home and School Association meetings to share information and engage in conversations about the restorative direction we are taking as a school community.

During this process, I journaled my experiences and thoughts on an ongoing basis in a field notes journal, reflecting on discussions and interactions in which I participated and/or observed throughout the school community. In doing so, I have taken the advice of Lofland (as cited in Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2006) who says “take notes regularly and promptly; write down everything no matter how unimportant it may seem at the time; try to be as inconspicuous as possible in note taking; and, analyze notes frequently” (p. 47). I also completed some interviews outside of the school with restorative justice leaders and practitioners in Nova Scotia for one of my Independent Study courses at Mount Saint

Vincent University this year. These interviews also provided a context to draw upon when analyzing the restorative approach at Halifax City School, and more broadly as it emerges in both local and international contexts.

Talking Circles with Students and Staff

Administrators, teachers, students and families have been using and participating in talking circles as part of the restorative approach to teaching, learning, team-building and problem-solving at Halifax City School for two years. Therefore, I coordinated my group interviews in restorative talking circles because it provides a safe, familiar environment in which participants could communicate with each other and because it reflects the values and principles of being restorative in social practice. During the talking circles, I asked a minimal number of open-ended questions to staff and students. As Fontana and Frey (2005) point out, “each interview context is one of interaction and relation, and the result is as much a product of this social dynamic as it is the product of accurate accounts and replies” (p. 699). My hope was to gain insight from teachers and students that have been exploring a restorative approach at the school on how it can inform the schooling experience to better serve all community members, but particularly those who experience alienation. In addition, by conducting talking circles with students and staff, I attempted to provide the participants as well as myself the opportunity to create new understandings about past experiences and new awareness in terms of the restorative approach. My interviews have thus been similar to storytelling sessions in which students and teachers share their personal and social experiences. In this way, the circles have provided

valuable insights and information for my research, but have also been consciousness-raising and restorative experiences for everyone, including me.

After recruiting participants and receiving informed consent from each of them, as well as parental permission for student participants, I facilitated two rounds of circles with each of the two groups (staff and students) for a total of four circles. Participants spoke uninterrupted while holding a talking piece, and the circles lasted up to two hours each in length. There was a maximum of twelve participants in each circle. I used a question guide that contained three open-ended questions (Appendix A), but also followed the direction of the participants and their responses to shape follow-up questions or prompts. Fontana and Prokos (2007) define open-ended questioning as a process in which the interview “allows the respondent to provide a personal narrative as a response” (p. 118). I recorded the dialogue using a portable audio device and transcribed the conversations at home.

I openly invited participation of staff and students through face-to-face and email recruitment methods, and chose participants on a first-come-first-serve volunteer basis, being mindful of equity and diversity issues. The goal of the talking circles was to investigate the experience of implementing a school-wide restorative approach, through the eyes of students and staff at Halifax City School. As Smith-Maddox and Solorzano (2002) conclude about their research from a critical race theory perspective, “the case studies provide a vehicle for listening to individual and oral histories and observing community life. The process of creating stories is not only a method of constructing knowledge about race but also the basis for learning how to teach diverse students” (p. 80).

The following section discusses the narratives and lived experiences of students and staff at Halifax City School that emerged through the talking circles and important insights and implications that were revealed through thematic analysis. My hope is that this case study will enable my school community and others to take a critical look at social relations in schools and make informed conclusions about the role of a restorative approach in educational reform. By taking an in-depth look at the experience of Halifax City School as it implements a restorative approach, this work offers some insight into how a restorative approach works to build strong, positive relationships in diverse urban contexts and offers some recommendations on how to implement a restorative approach in other learning communities that are committed to promoting social responsibility in schools.

Chapter 4

Being Restorative: A Case Study of the Restorative Approach at Halifax City School



It took some time for me to comfortably make the adjustment from being a classroom teacher to a researcher during the 2012/2013 school year in the same school where I have taught since 2008. To help with this process of transition, I tried to stay closely connected to the school community not only through the research, but also as a weekly volunteer. I volunteered for breakfast club every Wednesday morning starting in September and stayed during the day to support classrooms and talking circles at the request of teachers and administrators. I also participated in various meetings, gatherings, events and ongoing projects as a community member throughout the year. This level of engagement not only kept me connected to the community, but it also enabled me to communicate with potential research participants when it was time to facilitate the talking circles.

To that end, early in January 2013, I started the recruitment process to engage students and staff as participants in my research. In terms of students, there were many more informed consent forms signed and submitted than my talking circles could accommodate. Parents and guardians supportively expressed their interest to me when they saw me in the school or in the community, and would regularly inquire about the date of the circle and if their child would be participating. For each round of student circles, I had to choose twelve participants from the many who had expressed interest and had parental permission. For this reason, there were two different groups of students in each circle. I also had a positive response from school staff, having had ten participants in the first staff circle and nine participants in the second, with mainly the same people in both circles. In a small community school, I was pleased with the response to my recruitment efforts. The first round of circles took place in late January, and the second round of circles took place in late March.

On a January afternoon, I arranged eleven chairs in a circle in an empty classroom space and placed a portable audio device in the middle of the circle on the floor. At the end of a busy school day, nine staff members arrived and took their places within the group. Over halfway through the allotted time, one last participant arrived, after having facilitated a restorative circle after school. Near the end of the staff circle, one participant who was there for the bulk of it had to leave to respond to an inquiry at the office, but came back as soon as possible. The ten participants in this staff circle – predominantly but not exclusively White and female – seemed very anxious to share experiences, thoughts and ideas as well as listen to their colleagues. Except for one, they were the same participants who returned for the second staff circle in late March.

The next morning, I arranged thirteen chairs in a circle in the same space where I had facilitated the staff circle the previous day and set up the audio recorder. I went from classroom to classroom to pick up the participating students and bring them to the circle. Once inside our private space, I closed the door and hung a sign that read “circle recording in session – please do not disturb” as this was taking place during the school day. There was an inclusive combination of students ranging from grade three to grade six from both the English and French programs, and male and female students from diverse backgrounds. I warmly welcomed the participants and discussed some familiar circle guidelines such as respectful dialogue and active listening. I also reviewed the purpose of the activity and reassured them that the information they provided would be confidential, and that they could withdraw from participating at any time or pass the talking piece in the event that they were not comfortable sharing. As it turned out, the students were excited to talk and listen to each other and openly reflect on experiences both at school and outside of school in response to my questions and prompts.

I repeated this process in late March, doing a staff circle one afternoon after classes had ended and a student circle the next morning. I facilitated all four circles and audio-recorded the conversations that took place in response to three open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Following this semi-structured guide, I frequently asked participants to “tell me more about that” or encouraged them to express their feelings about the stories and experiences they were sharing. On several occasions, we kept going around the circle until the participants felt that they had completed the conversation that emerged. With each subsequent round, there was an obvious evolution of collective learning and an increasing amount of interest in and connection among the stories, experiences and

perspectives that were shared. Overall, the participants were very thoughtful and open in their responses, and drew directly from their own experiences at Halifax City School, while, at times, also reflecting on their personal lives and relationships outside of school. Although I spoke minimally during the process of circle, I contributed to the conversation at times, made meaning with the others, and reflected on my own classroom experience when discussing the ongoing process of implementing a restorative approach at the school.

After facilitating the talking circles, my first step of research analysis involved transcribing the audio recordings of the circles. In addition to these transcripts, the data also included field notes, based on observations, interactions and conversations I had while immersed in the community, as well as from interviews from the independent study in the fall. It is important to note that during this time, I was simultaneously involved as a learning team facilitator with the Restorative Approach in Schools Project (RAISP), participating and attending professional learning opportunities on restorative approaches, and completing an independent study course entitled “The Implementation of Restorative Approaches in Nova Scotia Schools.” The combination of the rich qualitative data from the talking circles at Halifax City School and the knowledge gained from professional development opportunities outside of the school afforded me an in-depth look at the experience of students and staff at Halifax City School as situated within the unique provincial context of restorative approaches in Nova Scotia and a global restorative movement.

I will now discuss my approach to thematically analyzing the data and the four themes that emerged, including strengthening social connection, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement, and resolving and preventing conflict.

Analysis of Data

I used a thematic analysis that draws on the constant comparison method derived from grounded theory and a qualitative content analysis. The thematic analysis speaks to the experience of staff and students as they implement a restorative approach at Halifax City School. Content analysis of the talking circle transcriptions, and specifically participants' responses to my first question, on the other hand, provides a method of interpreting changes over time in how the staff and students conceptualize restorative approaches and what they believe it means to be restorative. Both methods reveal important insights about both what it means to be restorative, what affect a restorative approach has on relationships, and how to go about implementing a restorative approach in schools.

The constant comparison method defined by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 as a central tool of grounded theory seeks to “constantly compare new data with existing data, concepts and categories. It also entails comparing categories with each other and categories with concepts” (Bryman, 2012, p. 710). In practice, this essentially means three levels of coding to constantly narrow down the data and allow core insights and implications to emerge. The first step is open coding which involves mining all of the data for themes.

LaRossa (2005) states that “early in coding, a single indicator may prompt the researcher to develop a concept; that is, the researcher might note the concept in the margins of a transcript and write a memo about the concept’s possibilities. Eventually, however, multiple indicators will be needed to theoretically saturate a concept” (p. 841). After the data is narrowed down into broad themes using open coding, axial coding is used to explicitly examine the relationship among them and find connections that have emerged to create an overarching category or categories. The third level of coding is selective coding, which is the process of selecting the “core category... or focus around which all other categories are integrated” (Bryman, p. 569).

The goal of constant comparison analysis is to dig through the data systematically while developing higher levels of abstraction, ultimately centering on a core variable that is “theoretically saturated and centrally relevant” (LaRossa, p. 852). By loosely drawing on the constant comparison method, I have thematically analyzed the data and identified one overarching core category and four themes. The core category around which the four themes are integrated is a commitment to nurturing social culture change and social responsibility in schools. The themes that emerged from the experience of applying a restorative approach at Halifax City School include: strengthening social connection, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement, and resolving and preventing conflict.

In addition to this thematic analysis, I used a qualitative content analysis procedure to assess any growth or change over time in how the staff and students conceptualize what it means to be restorative in the context of Halifax City School. Within qualitative content analysis, according to Bryman (2012), “there is an emphasis on allowing

categories to emerge out of data and on recognizing the significance for understanding meaning in the context in which an item is being analyzed (and the categories derived from it) appeared” (p. 291). The first of my three open-ended questions asks participants the following: *When I say the word “restorative,” what words would you use to describe what that means?* The responses to this question in both rounds of circles (for a total of four talking circles) speak to the participants’ associations with a restorative approach. In this case, a qualitative content analysis entails counting the frequency of words used by students and staff at the school to define the meaning of a restorative approach based on their knowledge and experience. Interestingly, this analysis revealed there was change over time, the most significant being a shift from describing a restorative approach as conflict resolution to, among other attributes, an inclusive, non-judgemental, and respectful way of being together.

Finally, in May of 2013, I conducted member-checking activities with the participants of the talking circles in order to include staff and students in verifying the accuracy of the transcripts and approving the data for use in this project. I provided staff participants with hard copies of the talking circle transcriptions and invited them to verify the accuracy of the transcripts as well as offer input into the analysis. To actively engage students in this process, we reenacted the talking circles as they read from the transcripts and then openly discussed the content of the transcripts and what we learned from them.

In this chapter, I will share the research story of the talking circles and make connections with some insights from my field notes and interviews. In addition, the discussion of the case study will be situated within the global restorative movement by making connections to documented experiences at schools in other parts of the world that

are also implementing a restorative approach. Ultimately, this chapter will serve to tell the story of Halifax City School, currently in the process of implementing a restorative approach, and what this means in the broader context for the future of education, while addressing the two overarching research questions: How does a restorative approach affect the quality of relationships in school communities, particularly for people that have been marginalized? And, what are some recommendations on how to best implement restorative approaches effectively and sustainably?

Insights and Implications

The analysis of this critical case study on the restorative approach at Halifax City School offers an in-depth look at the complex social experience of the community and draws on this experience to spark the imagination of others who also seek to transform the social experience of schooling. By simultaneously addressing the two overarching research questions of this case study, this section will discuss the four main themes that emerged in relation to the core category. It will also illustrate the results of the qualitative content analysis which speaks to change over time in participants' conceptualization of what it means to be restorative and how this informs the implementation of the approach both at Halifax City School and in other contexts.

To analyze the data, I mined for indicators that would enable me to claim and substantiate several main themes. I coded sections of the talking circle transcripts and field notes by using a range of highlighter colours and by making notes in the margins. When a theme emerged, I would name it and assign it a highlighter colour. Every time I came across the same theme or something related to it, I would code it in the same colour.

Eventually, four main themes emerged from the data that became saturated with several indicators including strengthening social connection, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement, and resolving and preventing conflict.

As the following discussion will demonstrate, the intersection of the four main themes works to support the creation of a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment through a restorative approach at Halifax City School. These themes are interdependent and, in fact, the ongoing process of social culture change that is happening within the school depends on their regular intersection. Using a restorative approach exclusively for conflict resolution purposes, for instance, would probably affect the participants involved in the process of resolution but would have little impact on the social culture of the school community or the prevention of further conflict. Therefore, these four themes that emerged from the data reflect a restorative approach as a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being together in community all the time, not only when conflict arises. Community members – including staff, students and parents – are investing a lot of time and energy in the restorative approach because of a fundamental commitment to nurturing social responsibility. They certainly would not be taking the time necessary to get to the root of conflicts that negatively affect relationships, or to engage socially and emotionally, if they did not care about the social culture of the school community to the extent that they do, as is evident in the data.

For instance, a powerful story that was shared in the first staff talking circle in January involves two families, one of which is African Nova Scotian and the other a newly immigrated family from Africa. The families were in conflict because one child was being perceived as a bully. A restorative talking circle facilitated by administrators

brought the two families and children together in respectful dialogue, where all participants shared their experiences, thoughts and feelings and listened closely to each other. In the end, not only was the situation resolved, but future conflict between the children and the families was prevented. Moreover, the adults in the circle gained perspective on each others' parenting styles and socio-cultural identities, by explaining how they raised their children; one to be "a strong Black woman" and the other "a passive child who should avoid conflict."

Ultimately, and with lasting impact, their relationships were strengthened, as evidenced by a moment a few weeks after the circle when one of the parents saw the child he had originally perceived as a bully sitting in the lobby outside of the office. She appeared sad, so he sat next to her, put his arm around her and chatted with her in a supportive tone. She was feeling sick and was waiting to be picked up. When her parent arrived to take her home, the two parents greeted each other respectfully and lovingly, as the two children continue to do today both within and outside of their classroom. As one participant stated in the staff circle, "If we didn't have a circle, that relationship wouldn't be there." The positive change in social relations between these two families exemplifies the culture shift that is taking place at the school because of a restorative approach, which strengthens social connections, affirms identity, fosters emotional engagement and resolves and prevents conflict.

These proactive outcomes of using a restorative approach at the school builds a positive social culture and effective learning environment, and ultimately stronger school attachment for all community members, as evidenced by the following quotes from the talking circle transcriptions:

When you look at... referral data by each classroom... and when you look at teachers who are using circles or have a greater comfort level with the approach, it seems like they are the ones that are lower [less office referrals] (Staff, January 28).

I think that circles, when we started doing them, I think it was last year, when we started doing them, it made the school better. It helped because there wasn't as much arguing and... kids are getting more work done (Student, January 29).

There was a time when there were a lot of problems going on, in the classrooms at least. And we tried a fishbowl circle, it's like a circle except there's a smaller one within it and then those people talk and tell their story and then people around offer advice so there were a lot of problems going on and arguments between people, so we used one of those and people gave a lot of helpful suggestions like talking to the person and working it out, or things like that, then it helped retain a good relationship between all the classmates (Student, March 26).

It's been really good for building relationships in my class. There are a lot more students helping each other who normally would be arguing with each other. There's a lot more positive talk, and I think a lot of that has come out of circle (Staff, January 28).

I noticed that when I walked by your class this afternoon, the children were sitting outside of your door, it was an unusual mix of students, and they were interacting. I don't even know exactly what they were doing but it was really positive. [Teacher interjects: They were working on a netbook doing some science research]. Yeah, and it was quite a mix of students and you could tell that they were speaking respectfully. [Teacher interjects: And they chose that group which is unusual, I didn't even put them in that group. They chose that group.] Really? That's very exciting. It's exciting for the people who are often left out. [Teacher interjects: Right. It's exciting in particular for those kids because it empowers them to feel like they belong]. Yeah... it's just so great instead of trying to, although it happens sometimes, students would say 'No, you said this and I said that' but really now, the taking the turns and expressing their feelings and coming up with solutions to things that are problems, it's been really powerful (Staff, January 28).

It all goes back to building those relationships. If you don't have that in this school, you don't have anything. And it's something you have to work at. But, it's worth it. I agree with your comment about feeling included and feeling as part of the group, because I have a student in my class in particular who has always, has never felt part of the group and has a lot of other issues. And when I talk to his mom, his mom says this has been his best year ever because he does feel like he's part of the group for the first

time. He got a new hair cut the other day, and two of my girls said, 'I like your hair cut!' and he's never had that. So I do think part of the circle has really helped that because it's a safe environment for him now (Staff, January 28).

I find the transitions for the kids are better when we have circles, at the start of the day, after recess, the times when they have most of their problems, and since I've done that, we're having less issues (Staff, January 28).

And, so, another thing in terms of modelling is on Wednesdays, with book buddies, I go with [another teacher's] class and we go to the gym. And we do a huge circle together. And the kids model it with each other. The last one was like twenty minutes because it was a big group of kids and you could hear a pin drop, they were being so respectful with each other. And just the fact that they know it's going to happen in grade one, grade two, grade three, you know, it's something that builds on the previous year (Staff, January 28).

We're teaching the kids something they are adopting as their lifestyle, and their modes of communication, and... what about when they get to be parents? You know what I mean? Maybe we're actually really teaching them something that will help them and their journey in life, and so when they get to [local junior high] and [local high school], then all of a sudden they're graduated and out in the world as grown-ups, and they're having kids, and guess how they're talking to their kids? That's pretty good! (Staff, January 28).

We've got good relationships, and you know it's great for practicing our language arts (Staff, January 28).

I think because of all the groundwork that's being done in the classrooms especially, people do feel safe and they're able to make themselves vulnerable... and so when you do get to talk and work things out, they're more supportive of each other than just jumping in and yelling out and you know, they react differently than before, I find that (Staff, March 25).

I had a situation today where a little girl hurt another little girl's feelings. And when she was trying to give her an I-message, she didn't want to hear it. She said, 'Do you remember last week when I hurt your feelings and I apologized? I need that from you right now' and then they went on the carpet, and they did it (Staff, March 25).

I have changed a lot. So, instead of me doing what I normally would have done, getting upset and you know, I was upset, but I handled it completely different. I used circle, get over here and sit down. You know, let's do it (Staff, March 25).

And they feel so proud. Like when they come to you and say they're upset about something, and you say, well did you try to solve it on your own? They are like, yeah, I have tools, right? I can try. And then they go, and you can just see how, after they've had that interaction, because you're just kind of watching, and you can see how they're prancing off, like they're, they feel good! (Staff, March 25).

When we first started, we just used simple questions and now you can go a bit deeper. And I found that kids were passing a lot, which is their option, right, like I don't say you can't pass, you gotta share. But now I find more people are sharing and increasing the risk they're taking (Staff, March 25).

It really is helping with the French language acquisition. I know the vocabulary, like when we're talking about a specific topic, just like in writing when I throw a few key words on the board, I put 'I feel this way when' or 'This weekend, I felt...' and I give them those options, and it just kind of helps them, you can tell they're really listening to each other because they'll pick up on the vocabulary changes from each other (Staff, March 25).

The kids, our students, get to know each other better and because they know each other better, they are less likely to... have conflict. I find that because I'm having circles everyday in class, there's less blow-ups, less problems, and if there are problems raised, we talk it out in the circle as a whole, you know, instead of sending somebody somewhere else, you know, to detention or something like that (Staff, March 25).

The above excerpts speak to the social culture change that is taking place at the school and connect back to my own classroom story shared at the beginning of this thesis about the African Nova Scotian student who was repeatedly suspended until I started taking the time to engage proactively with her and her family. The following discussion substantiates the four themes (strengthening social connection, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement, and resolving and preventing conflict) that speak to the effect a restorative approach is having on the quality of relationships at Halifax City School. Following this discussion of the four themes that emerged, I will examine an interesting phenomenon that occurred during the talking circles; as the talking piece went

around and participants shared thoughts and feelings, the research method itself proved to be both collectively consciousness-raising and restorative in nature.

Strengthening Social Connection

Llewellyn and Llewellyn (forthcoming) state that:

Relationship is not a ‘good,’ in and of itself, to be valued and promoted. Rather, relational theory contends that relationships *are* and thus attention must be paid to the nature and implications of our connections. Such attention reveals that our connectedness can be a source of pain and devastation as much as promise and hope. It reveals that for as much as we need each other to be well and flourish, we can equally be undone and profoundly harmed by one another. (p. 9)

In schools, feeling socially connected to the school community increases pro-social behaviour and decreases antisocial behaviour (Morrison, 2006). As the experience at Halifax City School shows, a restorative approach serves to strengthen social connections and promote equality of relationship by transforming power imbalances and differentials that negatively affect relationships. I was reminded of this on a smaller scale when I was recently walking home from spending a morning at the school. The African Nova Scotian parent of a student I had previously taught yelled “Hi, Mrs. Boudreau!” from her moving vehicle, to which I returned the greeting, but with her first name only. After reflecting on the informal interaction in the minutes that followed, I thought about how she considers it respectful to refer to me by my last name, and how I should extend that same level of respect to her by addressing her by her last name as well. In principle, the scenario represents the embeddedness and my emerging awareness of the need for respectful dialogue in all ways as we relate to and interact with each other in the school community, thereby enacting power-sharing relationships through which we strive for equity.

Another example of strengthening social connections and transforming power imbalances through a relational and racial lens that stood out for me emerged in a community meeting at the school. A discussion took place amongst parents, staff and volunteers while brainstorming about fundraising events. The conversation turned to the timeline of the year and when to hold certain events at the school. One of the community members who is aware of and sensitive to the issuing of monthly social assistance cheques to a large portion of our families made the point that any fundraisers or community events should occur shortly after the distribution of the cheques in order to make community events more accessible and inclusive. From my perspective, the conversation that took place after this suggestion, which centered around issues of class, showed that it was a learning experience for some of the more socio-economically privileged participants in the meeting, and an example of the types of conversations that need to be ongoing in order to dismantle the power and equity issues that alienate marginalized members of the community.

A relational and racial lens challenges educators to understand the impetus to work proactively to develop positive relationships and disrupt patterns of stigmatization. In this way, a restorative approach presents more than a set of social practices for the classroom; it is a way of being in the world, and working, playing and learning with others in ways that are respectful and responsible. As Macready (2009) suggests, “schools have an important role to play in providing a community culture where children and young people may learn the value of relationships and of social cooperation” (p.218). Below are some examples of students’ comments from the talking circles that speak to the importance of social connection.

The fact of like, all of us having such a tight-knit community. We all, like, most of us know each other really well and we talk a lot, in that way we get to know each other better.

Having respect for one another.

In circle, it helps us all get to know each other more, and when you share what you like, maybe somebody else likes it, and you didn't know that and you become her friend.

Doing circles, it makes us come together more as being a big family.

Treating people for who they are and the way you want to be treated.

Being positive with each other here.

Doing circles gives us better relationships. Because then you get to know people a little bit better, and see what they have to say and see how nice they are, and feel joyful and happy.

We do circles in our class too, and circles help you know more about, like, say you were friends with a person but you didn't know much. If they were in a circle explaining themselves, then you learn more about the person.

If you're new to this school and you don't have friends or you don't know your teacher that well right, and you go in the circle and you tell people about yourself, and people actually start to know you then you get more friends that way. And, your teacher knows you too. Then, it's pretty cool and better.

Morrison (2005) argues "if we understand that individuals are also motivated by the need for affirming social relationships (or to simply find meaning for themselves as group members), institutions should acknowledge and carry the responsibility of nurturing positive relationships" (p. 337). The student and staff participants in the talking circles spoke to the strong, positive social connections and relationships and sense of belonging they are developing through the opportunities and experiences provided by a restorative approach.

Affirming Identity

At Halifax City School, the restorative approach is building capacity amongst community members to affirm their own identities in relation to the identities of others.

In explaining the principles of anti-racist education, Dei (1996) says that

Identity cannot be defined in isolation... identity acquires its meaning from what it is not, that is, from the 'other.' Identity implies both uniqueness (selfhood) and sameness (relations with/to others)... the identity of the self involves more than the individual and it is important for educators to understand how issues of individual and group cultural identities intersect... One task of anti-racism teaching is to help students make connections between their own self and the group they comprise... and for schools to develop a more critical understanding of how the varied identities of students and teachers affect the processes of schooling and ways of knowing, teaching, learning, and understanding the world. (p. 31-32)

The restorative approach at the school is shaped by the identities and relationships that exist in the local community, building on the ways in which relations are made mutually respectful and equitable, and addressing the ways in which relations break down. One way that relations are based on mutual respect, dignity, care and concern is by respecting the unique identity of students, teachers, parents and community members in such a way that issues of race, class and gender are not ignored. For instance, the staff have initiated further conversations about class with the broader community, including members of the Home and School Association, about the nature of upcoming fundraisers at the school to ensure they are more equitable and inclusive than some held in the past that were not only expensive to attend, but also culturally irrelevant or inappropriate for a large portion of the school community.

In a story captured by the first staff circle in January, a participant talked about the disarming and healing nature of a circle that develops through learning about and respecting the identity and perspective of others; in this example, race was directly

addressed. The story was about an interaction that took place between an African Nova Scotian teacher and a bi-racial student. The teacher had used the term “mutt” in what the teacher felt was a positive way to refer to the student in the classroom and in response, the family felt disrespected and angry. A circle was organized to bring the family and the teacher together to talk about the issue. The participant telling the story said

And then it became real for me when they started talking about their experiences and the teacher opened it up and (s)he talked about how (s)he was treated growing up, and how s(he) treats kids and tries not to be judgemental. And a mutt can be taken as a bi-racial and they're bi-racial parents. He's a bi-racial child. So, [the parent] is burning fire, all this anger is coming from that one comment that was made back in November and now the teacher can do no right. And once that came out, the teacher... told his/her story. (S)he told her why (s)he used the word mutt, because his/her best friend of forty years has called him/her mutt his/her whole life, and that's an endearing term as far as (s)he knows.

In this example, staff and families are dialoguing about difference, and specifically about race. In the end, relations between the teacher and the family improved, as they started to see and understand each other. They agreed to keep the conversation going, and to meet every three weeks to build and maintain a more positive connection and talk about the student's academic progress. As this story shows, the work of a restorative approach can be very difficult and complex. Reviewing this situation through a relational and racial lens demands a response that seeks to promote equality of relationship, as opposed to sweeping it under the rug. During the process of the circle, the teacher gained appreciation for the perspective of the family and understood why they were hurt; likewise, the family came to understand why the teacher would use the term “mutt” and learned about her as a person. Both the teacher and the parents reaffirmed who they are as individuals, as well as their connection in relationship with each other as members of a collective. In this way, a restorative approach provided the opportunity to have a

meaningful conversation that addressed a racial issue which had negatively affected relationship. As this example shows, a restorative approach rooted in relational theory and informed by critical race theory supports a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being together in community, based on the qualities of positive relationships including mutual respect, care, concern and dignity.

As the following talking circle excerpts show, students and staff, at times, mention difference, such as gender and race, although the differences are not addressed explicitly:

I think it's changed the dynamics in the classroom too... even the little quiet girls talk in circle which is a huge accomplishment for them... I was always of the same mind, like 'no, they don't need to know anything' and then I thought, you know, maybe they do, and they see you a little bit differently when they know some things about you anyway... what colour car you drive, yeah, they know I went to [local] school, and I grew up not far from here, and all that kind of stuff (Staff, January 28).

I think they're really discovering themselves through this process, I know I am (Staff, January 28).

I think that no matter what colour you are, or whether your culture is different, we are all different, and we're all great people and that means that it's much better to be different than all exactly the same (Student, January 29).

I think we should stop some kids from bullying others just because of what they look like (Student, January 29).

Do not bully and be respectful to people who are different. Other cultures (Student, January 29).

In circles, you realize people are not as bad as you're thinking (Student, January 29).

They are more accepting of each other's unique personalities (Staff, March 25).

Circles let you learn more about people (Student, March 26).

Don't judge people by the way they look (Student, March 26).

A restorative approach at Halifax City School is providing opportunities for community members to come together in meaningful ways that foster positive interactions and ways of relating with each other. It is important to note, however, that although there were some stories and narratives shared by participants that were about social differences, a critical race lens reveals that what was often invisible in the data - and initially to me as I interpreted the data - were explicit and intentional discussions about race, class, gender, ability and so on and how these differences support positions of domination and subordination in the community. As noted earlier, in promoting an anti-racist framework, Dei (2006) lobbies for “a school in which controversial issues are not swept under the carpet, where there is an open, frank and critical engagement of the power questions of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression which characterize our communities... success for Black/African-Canadian students and our ability to root out all forms of violence (including those perpetrated by, and visited on, youths) will flow from this vision of education” (p. 28)

Anti-racist education calls for naming social differences and discussing the power imbalances that exist in schools based on these differences. In addition, educators like myself in positions of power need to constantly re-examine their own privilege in relation to students and families, in explicit, intentional and ongoing ways to disrupt and question their own identities. Everyone in the school community must engage in honest discussions about the role of social difference in relationship and identity. This research process has been a very significant part of that ongoing journey for me; I knew it was important to use a critical race lens to examine the restorative approach at Halifax City School, but I didn't immediately recognize the relative lack of explicit dialogue around

social differences in the circles because of my own power and privilege. Although there are only a few examples of participants explicitly dialoguing about difference, I believe a restorative approach can - and must - wedge out the time and space necessary to have critical conversations around race, class, gender and the ways in which they intersect. The core category around which all of the themes are integrated is the school's commitment to nurturing social responsibility and social culture change. But how can we nurture social responsibility and meaningful social culture change without talking explicitly about issues of social difference and power that undermine respectful relationships?

Dei and James (2002) say that “the affirmation of identities allows students to work with embodied knowledge to resist marginality and exclusion in schools. By acknowledging and responding to difference, educators might not only challenge power and privilege, but they might also enable students to use their individual and collective agencies to work for change that furthers equality, thereby enriching and strengthening our social fabric” (p.18). In this way, a restorative approach to education that provides sustainable processes and practices through which identity comes to be acknowledged and affirmed can be defined as a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being together in a school community. In terms of ongoing implementation, it is important for educators like myself to understand that meaningful social change can only happen when power and privilege are challenged openly on an ongoing basis; circles can provide the opportunity to have these important discussions.

As Macready (2009) states, “Restorative practice gives primacy to social relationships. Rather than support monologues of knowing, the aim of restorative

practice is to create contexts for learning in which the voice of the other may be heard, and where dialogue and reflective enquiry prompt learning that is inclusive and socially informed” (p. 218). Educators who work within a relational framework with children work to develop healthy social relations that are not dominating or oppressive but rather supportive, responsible and respectful. To that end, a restorative approach “is a vantage point... that is critical to allow for students and teachers to see and understand the connectedness of people and thus the relations of power that define and mobilize knowledge” (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, forthcoming, p. 2.).

As educators, shifting to a relational lens urges us to consider how our judgements affect the social identities and experiences of others when making decisions that directly affect our students and their families when working, learning, playing and being together in a community. In this way, a restorative approach rooted in relational theory and informed by critical race theory supports inclusion and cultural responsiveness in social practice on the ground, and also supports governing policy around these efforts as well. For example, a restorative approach would enhance the ability of schools and their personnel to animate the policy statements of the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB) around race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights (RCH). For instance, HRSB (2007) says its

commitment to positive Race Relations, Cultural Understandings, and Human Rights and Equity in Learning is grounded in our belief that we have shared responsibility for improving student achievement, supporting the development of lifelong learners, and promoting the rights, dignity and self-worth of every person who is served by our school system; building inclusive learning environments that foster social, intellectual, physical, cultural, emotional, and moral development; developing learning environments that value diversity and foster respect among all members of our school community; creating a school system that is responsive to the diverse needs of the communities it serves; working as advocates for social

and educational change to improve equity, safety, and access to learning that supports the personal development and success of all students; learning about bias, prejudice, stereotyping, harassment and discrimination; actively working to identify and eliminate barriers that undermine the board's ability to reach its vision for student achievement and equity in learning; building strong and inclusive school, home and community relations that support improved student achievement and the board's ability to eliminate barriers to the equitable participation of parents and community members in our schools and school system. (p. 1-2)

In reviewing the implementation of restorative justice in Nova Scotia since the late 1990s, history shows that one of the major challenges has been addressing the needs of marginalized communities such as the African Nova Scotian community. Williams-Lorde (2012), who is currently researching and writing about restorative justice in Nova Scotia through a lens of critical race theory, reminds us that

in order for restorative justice to be fully effective and equitably practiced, a race conscious approach to restorative justice must be implemented. Restorative justice holds the promise of transforming social relationships such that they become more equal and mutually respectful of inherent dignity than before the particular 'wrongdoing' occurred. This transformation can only happen, however, when the racialized dimensions of the subject relationship are explored through a contextual restorative approach that includes examining the racial and other power dynamics inherent in the relationships... A race-conscious and culturally specific approach to restorative justice is necessary in order to ensure that pre-existing patterns of systemic, institutional and individual racism are not reinforced or perpetuated through a restorative approach, and that African Nova Scotian culture is respected. (p. 76, 77)

In 2009, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings published a book entitled *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. In its conclusion, she lists some ideas that act as guiding principles to help prepare teachers to teach in a more culturally relevant manner. This list includes, but is not limited to, providing teachers with educational experiences to understand the central role of culture and providing teacher candidates with opportunities to critique the system in ways that will help them choose

a role as either agent of change or defender of the status quo. In addition, she lists some of the hopes that African American parents have for schools. This list includes: providing educational self-determination, honouring and respecting the students' home culture, and helping African American students understand the world as it is and equip them to change it for the better. Based on this case study at Halifax City School, crafted through an interpretive lens of relational theory and critical race theory, I argue that the road to making the vision of Ladson-Billings a reality lies in a restorative approach that provides a variety of equitable and sustainable social opportunities to affirm and reaffirm personal and social identities, and fosters mutual respect, dignity, care and concern. As the examples in this section illustrate, a restorative approach challenges us to "get in touch with our own worldview" (Morrison, 2013) and to work actively with others to build, maintain and repair strong and positive relationships.

Fostering Emotional Engagement

"What has more recently emerged is the recognition that restorative practice also needs to be proactive, immersing the school community in a pedagogy that values relationships and a curriculum that values social and emotional learning" (Morrison, Blood & Thorsborne, 2005, p. 338). In addition to strengthening social connections and affirming identities, another forward-focused outcome of a restorative approach at Halifax City School as reflected in the data is the support for emotional engagement amongst students, staff, as well as family and community members. At the very end of the first student circle I facilitated in late January, one student broke out into song in honour of another student's upcoming birthday, leading to a whole-group chorus:

At my house, there's not a chance to have circles. Cause our weekends are so busy, we have birthday parties, like mine coming up on Saturday. And my sister has games every single Saturday. And practice on Wednesdays and Sundays. My mom has work. My dad has work.

You said your birthday was on Saturday? Um... well, [student breaks out into song] 'Happy birthday to you' [and all other students join in], 'happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear [previous speaker], happy birthday to you... and many more!'

This final comment in the first circle with students was a spontaneous expression of care. In fact, the student who initially led the singing of the happy birthday song is a grade four White male in the French Immersion program and the student celebrating a birthday on the upcoming Saturday was an African Nova Scotian female in grade six in the English program. They live in different parts of the city, one in a residential part of north end Halifax in a single family home and the other in public housing. They would ordinarily have little opportunity to connect with each other. It was a touching moment because the singing occurred at the end of the circle when the student obviously felt comfortable enough to act lovingly to a student with whom he was not well-acquainted. In addition, all of the other students felt comfortable to join in and sing along. In this way, the circle provided the space in which the students could connect with each other socially and engage with each other on an emotional level in the process.

Throughout all four circles, there are many examples of students and staff expressing themselves emotionally and empathetically. For example, in the first round of circles, students said:

Most of the kids who hurt others are really feeling bad or hurting themselves. So, a good thing to do is help them feel better so they don't hurt other people.

Circles make you learn more about people so you won't hurt their feelings, and they also make you feel like you are as good as anyone.

Circles help us because once we were in an assembly and we heard a student call another student a bad name. We had a circle about it and talked about how it made us all feel when we heard that.

In the second round of circles with students in March, they said:

Circles help fix your problems or if you're scared to say something, cause like you're like a big family.

Support each other. Basically stop eaves-dropping on something that you're not a part of, and give each other some room and space to let them kind of, like I said earlier, to speak what's on their mind with someone they can trust and tell.

In the staff circles, there were a lot of references to experiences where the participants and/or students in their care had expressed themselves emotionally, and to the emotional engagement that took place through careful and active listening, both in circle and in other dialogical social situations. There were many references to the use of affective statements and "I-messages," which are strategies we encourage students to use at the school in order to allow people to express how someone's words or actions affect them and make them feel; we also encourage people to state the preferred replacement behaviour. For example, in the staff circles, participants said:

And the other thing I notice is that the kids using their I-messages is really giving a voice to the kids, especially those girls who never say anything. They'll be really upset or frustrated and this gives them a venue and a way to do it. It gives them a model they can use, and people know how to respond. It's a nice thing for them to be able to express themselves.

I feel like this is almost like the beginning of giving them a method of communication that isn't just for now - it's forever. That they can actually, not just mend fences, but really empower themselves. It's a way of knowing that they can take control by asking the proper questions and... there's never blame. Like, we're not blaming anybody; everybody makes mistakes. Everybody does things they regret. But in a restorative atmosphere... you can always make it better. It can be made better. And that's the really nice thing. And they know when they're ready. It's funny because we don't force those conversations, so when you're ready, and I love it because it takes the pressure completely off.

I had a little girl who had a really tough time sharing her feelings at the beginning of the year, and just today, we stayed outside of music for a second so that she could say an I-message to somebody in grade two so she thought that was very cool, and she was very empowered, and it was really good. And it's a really nice lesson about being assertive and not aggressive. So, you know, finding that, like, your driving standard, you're finding that balance of asserting yourself but not, you know, being mad when you say how you feel.

The kids are using the language. Like today, [administrator] came to talk to the whole class and one of the kids said, 'oh, is that like when we should be giving an I-message to the other person?' and I was like, okay, they're getting it, you know, it's like, it's building from grade primary, grade one, all the way up to the grade sixes, so, that's a good thing.

In the second staff circle, there were two very poignant stories shared by participants that clearly show the level of emotional engagement that occurs as a result of using a restorative approach. In the first story, during a stressful moment with emotions running high at the end of a school day, one staff member describes a situation where a circle enabled the class to address the way that relations had broken down and ultimately, go home on a positive note. She said:

We had a little bit of a meltdown in our class last week, and I got upset. And *I* got upset because somebody was calling me unfair... and there was a lot going on, and I got upset and I said, 'I need a circle. Everybody, get in the circle.' And I was for real, I was mad. And the kid that got me mad slammed the door to the coat room and stayed in the coat room. And I was sitting in my chair, and all the kids were sitting there, and I said, 'This circle is for you! I need you to come out here and listen to me! I have something to say!' and I didn't know what he was going to do, and all the other kids are looking at me. He really made me angry. I made a teacher decision on another student's meltdown, and it was a screaming meltdown, and I thought, we gotta gather this, stop what we're doing, and I got mad because he said, 'he ruined it for us because you stopped it' and it was a teacher decision that I had to make, do something quickly, in order to gain control back of the class basically, and so anyway, he got really angry at me and said I was being unfair and so I was the one with the hurt feelings, and I was upset because I was trying to look after somebody else... and they were all sitting looking at me and within two seconds, the door opened and he came out like this [arms crossed] and he was out, and I thought, ok, he's not in circle but he's standing over by the table listening, leaning up against it so I

said fine. I said, ‘I need everybody to listen to what I’m saying. I’m trying to teach you’... I said, ‘you know, I care about every single one of you. One of you was having a really bad moment, and I needed to step in as the teacher and do what I felt was the right thing to do. I want your support in that, I need you to support me, all of you’... and then he came a little closer, and he said, ‘well, I thought you were being really unfair because’ and I said ‘wait.’ I gave him the talking piece, and he came a little closer, and he told me why he thought I was being unfair and everything, and I took it back and I said, ‘you know, I appreciate you saying that, and I like the way you’re calmly telling me this, and this is what we need to do, talk about it’... So then, he said, ‘well, I think I have a solution.’ Well, anyway, he had a solution... and we had six minutes before the bell. And in the end, everybody went home smiling, including me. But I started out by saying, that’s the first time I’ve ever really used it for me. And not only just that but I usually have really quiet circles, and we do more superficial big circles, but they’re still very very relationship-building, so yeah, that was for me, that was like, it really worked. You know, and it was a really powerful feeling to actually see them using the words back at me. You know, like, ‘well, I really think we should...’ and respectful, listening. People were upset, I’m about to cry, they know it, the Kleenex is there, yeah, so that was my really, really, really, really powerful experience last week.

Taking the time to dialogue about what happened in this scenario protected the relationships in the classroom, salvaged the positive learning environment and prevented the typical and alienating response of sending a student to the office for detention. After sharing this story, the teacher apologized to me saying “this probably doesn’t help your research but I just needed to share it.” I reassured her that her story was important and that, more generally, I hoped we could all use the circle opportunities provided by the research process to share our stories and experiences in order to help each other reflect on what it means to be restorative at Halifax City School.

Another story from the second circle with staff also shows how a restorative approach fosters emotional engagement. The student referenced in the following story has a lot of difficulty expressing emotions verbally, and would typically disrupt the learning environment by acting violently and/or leaving the classroom when upset. In

this case, he told his teacher that he was feeling hurt based on something that had been said to him before coming to school.

We ask how they feel everyday, and everybody says how they feel; they put their name on the chart but then they sort of explain it, right? So they put their name by angry or sad or whatever and one of my students said something today that was really upsetting... [a family member] had called him a name, you know a bad name, and I said 'oh, I'm sorry to hear that' and... I know that sometimes when people get angry they say things... he was telling me that he was upset... and this didn't happen in the early days but now they're saying something happened... and it wasn't pleasant... it was nasty, and it happens all the time. So, he's giving me a message. So... it really is a time that we share and that's a trust thing too, right? I mean this child is telling me something that upsets him... in that moment, you know... I wanted... to make him feel better.

As this case shows, a restorative approach helps to nurture a community of care in which there are daily opportunities to engage socially and emotionally with each other. Had this child not had the opportunity to express himself emotionally upon arriving in the classroom that morning and to receive support, it is very likely that the learning environment that day would not have been positive or peaceful. However, a proactive investment of time and space set aside each morning in this particular classroom enables the students to share their thoughts and feelings and helps to prevent conflict while promoting and protecting relationships.

As these stories show, a restorative approach fosters emotional engagement while at the same time, strengthening social connections, affirming identities and resolving and preventing conflict. This experience at Halifax City School aligns with trends that are emerging in restorative schools around the world. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) explain:

A key component of [restorative justice] is emotional engagement, such that there is reason for emotion. This contrasts with the suppression of emotion that typifies courts and schools. The aim is to build positive affect (empathy,

interest, and excitement) and discharge negative affect (anger, humiliation, fear and disgust). This is distinct from most institutional responses, which focus on establishing the facts, with little focus on the social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that make up the rich motivational ecologies within the lives of individuals and communities... In contrast, the deeper social and emotional foundation of relational ecologies moves the application of [restorative justice] away from a disciplinary measure of control to a pedagogy and praxis of engagement, development and integrity at both individual and institutional levels. (p. 140-141)

By paying careful attention to and being mindful of the way we feel, how those feelings influence our actions, and how we make others feel through our relations and interactions with them, we can change the way we think and act in community with others. Macready (2009) says that “socially irresponsible attitudes are fostered when individuals experience censure and punishment from people who do not matter to them” (p. 212). Fostering emotional engagement, and ultimately a positive attachment to school, thus plays an important role in promoting socially responsible and respectful ways of being together in the world.

Resolving and Preventing Conflict

Through strengthening of social connections, the affirmation of personal and collective identities, and the engagement of emotions, Halifax City School is experiencing a social culture shift. These three themes that emerged from the case study data show how a relational way of being is manifested in the school context on a day-to-day basis, not only as a response to racism, bullying and other forms of violence that weaken the social fabric of community, but first and foremost as a commitment to social responsibility. The themes also speak to what a restorative approach is not; in fact, that it is not only reactive nor used exclusively as a remedial conflict resolution

tool. Resolving and preventing conflict is certainly an important component of a restorative approach to education that is rooted in restorative justice, but its effectiveness in terms of whole-school culture change is interdependent with the other themes which are experienced on a routine basis as a restorative approach supports a positive, inclusive and safe teaching and learning environment. This relational approach has also proved to be successful in the UK, in schools where McCluskey, Kane, Lloyd, Stead, Riddell & Weedon (2011) report the emphasis has been on “whole school ethos building, encompassing preventative and educative aims at all levels, but also operating as a response to wrongdoing, conflict or when relationships have broken down” (p. 109).

Throughout the talking circle transcripts and my field notes, there are many stories and situations that speak to the important role that conflict resolution and prevention plays in transforming the social culture of schooling through a restorative approach. In a personal conversation I had with a colleague from another elementary school in Halifax, he said “it all comes down to relationships. It’s all about building, maintaining and repairing relationships under the premise that you usually don’t intentionally hurt somebody that you have a relationship with.” In this way, a restorative approach to conflict resolution is not only remedial; it is forward-focused and manifests itself as a day-to-day relational way of being together in school communities. When conflicts do occur, a restorative response perceives wrongdoing as a violation of relationship rather than a violation of institutional rules, and focuses on repairing the relationship and the dignity of all involved and affected by the situation. As Karp and Breslin (2001) state from their experience of restorative approaches in the United States, “at its best, the

restorative approach transforms a student violation into an opportunity for learning – learning about the harm of the offence, learning about the responsibilities of community membership, and learning about democratic decision making and participation” (p. 269).

The implication of viewing wrongdoing as a violation of relationships instead of a violation of rules is that instead of punishing an individual or individuals to try to change their behaviour, we focus on the obligations that the violation to relationship created and that need to be met. In this way, justice involves the harmed, those causing harm, and community members in an effort to put things right. The central focus are the needs of the harmed, those causing harm, and the community’s responsibility for repairing harm, as opposed to the centrality of punishment or the wrongdoer/offender getting what he or she deserves.

For instance, a teacher recently commented to me how she was sceptical of a restorative approach at first, but now that she “does circle” every day, the students have learned that it is a method they can use when they feel there is something preventing them from learning or working together peacefully and meaningfully. She said that her students recently asked to have a circle to talk about the way a few students were treating another student because they knew it wasn’t right. In addition, an administrator recently told me the story of a circle in which he involved parents in order to resolve an ongoing break-down in relationship between two families in the school community. In the presence of their children, these parents accepted responsibility for their actions which had served to destroy the relationship between the two families, and subsequently between the children, and committed to changing their approach to each other in thought

and in action, modeling more socially responsible behaviour for their children moving forward.

A common understanding among those of us who work with children and youth, especially in diverse, urban schools where there is a significant number of school suspensions issued each academic year is that school suspension does little to change student behaviour or solve conflict. Usually, when students return to school after being punished through suspension and isolation, he or she is more angry and resentful than before he or she were kicked out of the building, and nothing is sustainably resolved or changed. When we think about this relationally, we can understand that suspension doesn't work because it is, in essence, banishing a student away from the school community, as opposed to working actively with the student to restore equality of relationship and address the harm in a way that maintains the dignity of all involved and their roles as contributing members of the community. If school administrators decide that student conduct warrants suspension, a restorative approach would still make the time and space necessary to repair relationship by reintegrating the student back into the community through an inclusive, restorative process because the ultimate goal is healing and restoring as opposed to punishment. As Llewellyn & Howse (1998) suggest, "restorative justice then might include restitution as a step on the road to its ultimate goal of restoration but restitution can not be the end of the road" (p. 29).

When I asked students at Halifax City School about some of the ways we are restorative at our school, some of the responses from both circles that illustrate conflict resolution and prevention include:

Not bullying.

Helping people when they are upset. Helping friends to be joyful and happy again.

Circles help people... when I was in grade two, two boys got in a fight, and we had a circle, and we helped them.

After you share in a circle, they can understand you better. Like last year, we did a fishbowl. Like, everyone was in a circle and the people that had got in a fight were in the middle. And they talked until the problem was solved.

In staff circles, there were many stories and situations shared that reflected a restorative approach to solving and preventing conflict:

I find that taking the restorative approach helps take the venom out of the situation, I guess. If you approach it in that way instead of an accusatory way, you get a lot further with the kids. Especially with children that I don't know; sometimes I can not have the best relationships but this gives me an opportunity to make those relationships, especially with kids that are outside of my own classroom.

Well, I use circles everyday. Its just usually after recess, sometimes it's after lunch, sometimes it's the beginning of the morning because I find the transitions and what they're bringing in to the school, can trigger their whole day so my question, and I just keep it simple, how are you feeling and why? And from that you can find out what's happening in their lives, what happened at recess, you can find out, you know, just if they're happy so, like I said, because of that I find there are less conflict resolution, and we talk about I-statements. When I'm on duty and someone is saying 'Teacher!' I say, 'did you use an I-statement?' So they can get, so they're using it so I'm not always facilitating a circle, they're solving their own problems, right? I find everyday, it just makes it, they get used to it. And I find they take it home... and now they're infusing it into their own lives.

It's interesting, after the circle, I had called [student's] mom just to talk about something else that had happened, and she said how much she appreciated [the circle] and that this is something she'd be open to doing again so she went from 'I don't think so, don't be calling me every time [student] has a problem' to 'wow, that's great.' Like you know, I think this is something that will be great.

Something happened in the yard, and I had to call both of the parents, and one of the parents who I had been involved with in the past in terms of problem solving, um, was very upset on the phone. She said things like, 'I'm going to come in here and beat up that little boy and this and blah blah blah,' and then she stopped herself and said 'well, I just need one of those

circle things! Just call me when you got it set up.’ And that was it, so, I set up the circle... when I sat down, I started with respectful language, that type of conversation, before we started and the parent, the irate parent, who four days earlier said, ‘yeah, just listen because this really works.’ She interrupted me, and we turned into co-facilitators [laughing] and actually, it went really, really well. So, we had this parent who was seeing red, you know on the Thursday or the Friday, and the following Tuesday, you know she had time to cool down, and she even said, you know, I overreacted the other day, so it is good to take that initial emotion that can sometimes come out as anger and give yourself time to cool down. It went really well.

As these examples show, the restorative approach to resolving and preventing conflict at the school can take many forms, depending on the situation and the severity of the issues affecting relationships. Students are using affective statements and I-messages with each other in the building and on the playground, making amends and moving forward. Teachers are facilitating circles in classrooms and with each other that are relationship-building and restorative. Serious conflict resolution at the school resembles a formal conference, usually in the office facilitated by an administrator, in which family and community members, staff and students may come together to talk about what happened and what needs to happen to make things right.

Implementing a restorative approach is not a quick fix; it is challenging and at times, complex and messy work. Given the fact that social differences such as race, class and gender were discussed minimally as issues affecting relationships among community members, it is clear a restorative approach is not simply about being nice to each other; it is difficult work that requires a collective will to challenge the status quo and to take the time to cultivate meaningful social change. At the time this case study research was conducted, the staff participants at Halifax City School were speaking to the challenges they were experiencing such as the availability of time and resolving conflict in a way that maintained a sense of consequences for students. They were starting to plan how

they could work together to come up with practice standards and guidelines to address these challenges, such as setting aside time in the daily schedule for every class to have talking circles, creating a restorative approach committee, and reaching out for support on how to best address the challenges of conflict resolution and prevention in a way that still addressed harm. For instance, in the second circle, one administrator said:

So, there was a situation in [a] class last week that... they were trying to work out a problem, and I wasn't sure what the problem was, but they were trying to work it out in the hallway, and I had asked if they needed my support with it, and they said yes. And then once we got into it, it was this huge, big issue that I didn't know that that's what I was getting into so then I had to back it up, and talk with them each individually to get all my facts to move forward that way... and it was hard because it started off as a circle with this many people, and then as everyone is getting their two cents in, it becomes, you know, these three people are on this side of the argument, when really, its only two people that I needed to have this conversation with. So, to back up, I needed to get rid of some of the audience that feeds into it and talk to both students who were very upset, and they were getting very emotional. I had to bring it back to that level where I spoke to them individually... so you have to be really careful, and I went into another circle this afternoon which then I had to, it was like a top-down circle because I had to be like, okay, you all need to stop talking and listen to me again. So, I completely believe in the approach, but we do need, I know I do, I need to be more careful with it because I was believing in it so much that I was going to it like too quickly at times, and I have to make sure that, you know, I still go through what I need to do to get all of my information and all of that before I go to, okay, we're just going to have a circle.... in the situation last week, a circle made things worse because I didn't have all the information and things just started to build up for those two students.

And:

I think the other thing that we're finding out in the office is that, and [teacher] and I just found this out a couple of weeks ago in a situation in her class is that the circle is just one part of an approach, and lots of times people don't realize that there are consequences still attached to actions and I think that's part of our growth process. It's realizing that if I've hurt [so and so], well maybe we can work it out and restore it together, but I might still need to have a consequence because of that.

The school community has developed a strong foundation of what it means to be restorative in its own context, and has experienced the ways in which a restorative approach transforms the social culture of schooling as discussed above. As the data shows, the school is often successful at creating a positive, inclusive and safe teaching and learning environment in relation to the four themes that emerge from using a restorative approach: strengthening social connection, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement and resolving and preventing conflict. All four of these themes flow from a vision of and commitment to nurturing social responsibility and social culture change through a relational lens. In addition, a racial lens reveals that more explicit work needs to be done as the process continues at Halifax City School to transform the social culture of schooling for those who are marginalized based on differences of race, class and so on, in relation to those who are more privileged. As stated by Morrison and Vaandering (2012), “restorative justice in its development in schools over the past two decades seeks a significantly different purpose for education and practice of schooling, one that moves away from education as training to one that is much closer to the Latin root of education – *educere* (to lead out)... by cultivating connections, reconnecting broken lines of communication, and providing a space for individuals to discover who they are within a nurturing relational community” (p. 151).

It is thus my overarching argument and fundamental belief that schools strive to be communities of care that are responsible for fostering a relational, culturally responsive and anti-racist way of being together in community based on restorative values of interconnectedness, respect, inclusion, responsibility, humility, honesty, mutual care and non-domination (Reimer, 2011). This vision for schools as communities of care that

foster social responsibility makes the time and space necessary on a daily basis to have practices and processes that embody and reflect these values – and in the process, creates a social culture shift. It demands a relational lens through which members of school communities can be mindful of their own perspective in relation to that of others, and their actions which are rooted in these perspectives. It also requires a critical race lens which reveals issues of power and privilege, inequity and marginalization and supports an anti-racist framework in education. The experience of Halifax City School, as captured by this case study, is reflected by Macready (2009) who writes: “when children and young people are living in a socially responsible culture in which all individuals are valued equally, where respect for others is expected in all day-to-day activities, and where social justice is a priority for everyone in the school, conditions will be favourable for a decline in the levels of hurt and harm within and beyond the school community” (p. 219).

Furthermore, educators, parents, community members, policy-makers and government must recognize that nurturing a community of care and socially responsible human beings does not happen exclusively through academic activities or standardized curriculum; as the experience of Halifax City School clearly shows, there must be opportunities in place to develop, support and strengthen the capacity and skills for creating a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment through a restorative approach, which enable the human beings in schools to strengthen social connection, affirm (and disrupt) identity, engage emotionally and resolve and prevent conflict. In closing, as a restorative response to those who make a “back to basics” systems-based argument in which “reading, writing and arithmetic” are held as central to school reform,

I agree with Morrison (2013) when she argues that the transformation of schools takes dedication to these 3Rs: “respect, relationships and restoration.” A relational and racial lens shines the spotlight on systematic patterns of alienation and abuses of power that serve to construct long-standing negative relationships in diverse, urban communities. As the case of Halifax City School shows, a restorative approach is rooted in a commitment to social culture change that can work to disrupt and transform these patterns, and promote and protect positive relationships that are rooted in mutual respect, care, concern and dignity.

Before moving into a discussion of recommendations for implementing a restorative approach in schools, I want to highlight the unique consciousness-raising and restorative experience that took place during the research process because the experience itself embodies valuable insights and implications for best ways to implement and sustain an effective restorative approach in schools. The following section demonstrates the results of the qualitative content analysis.

Creating a Collective Consciousness

While carrying out the research, an interesting phenomenon emerged through the process of meaning-making during the group talking circles. What was most striking both during and after the circles was the profound impact that the circle method itself was having on the thoughts and feelings of the participants, and on the implementation of the approach at the school-wide level. As Morrison and Vaandering (2012) describe, “circles have emerged as an effective process to lever the rich social and emotional ecologies of individuals and communities” (p. 143). In the turn-taking process of circle that emphasizes respectful dialogue and active listening, the participants and I created shared

understandings through a level of interaction that is virtually impossible to build in a busy school environment in which most staff are isolated from each other. In fact, the talking circle method proved to be a restorative activity both in process and in outcome; it allowed participants to share their stories and perspectives with each other, strengthening their relationships and shared sense of purpose, while at the same time modelling what it means to implement a restorative approach in the broader school community. In this section, I will share several examples that illustrate how the experience of circles was both consciousness-raising and restorative, followed by a discussion of the implications this experience presents for the implementation of restorative approaches in schools.

First, I will share the results of the qualitative content analysis I used to look for the meaning of a restorative approach at Halifax City School and any change in this meaning over time. From the outset, I was curious to know how the participants would define a restorative approach, and if that definition would change based on their lived experiences as time went on. The responses to my first question from both students and staff revealed the fundamental values they associate with a restorative approach. As the data shows, the participants learned from each other in the process of circle, and there is evidence of conceptual shifts made both in the process of circle, as well as over time between circles as they became more familiar with a restorative approach. Changes over time in what a restorative approach means is more significant with the results of the staff circle as the two staff circles had almost all of the same participants in both January and March, whereas the student circles had almost all different students participating in each.

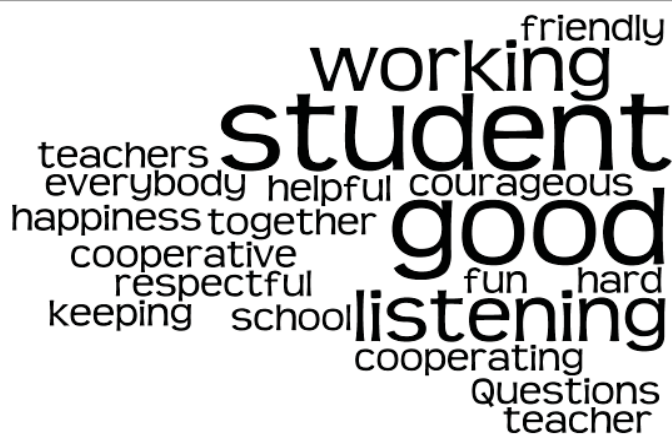
In responding to the first question, some participants referred to conflict resolution (“fixing,” “repairing,” “healing”) whereas others understood it more as a way of being in

the world with others (“non-judgemental,” “dialogue,” “inclusive”). In the second circle with staff, a clear shift had taken place, as evidenced in the fact that out of twenty of the words used to describe the meaning of being restorative, only three referred to conflict resolution. And, the three words that did refer to conflict resolution were near the beginning of the dialogue; as the talking piece went around, staff responded with words that were reflective of a relational way of being in the world with others and offered an in-depth look at what it means to be restorative on a day-to-day basis. They said:

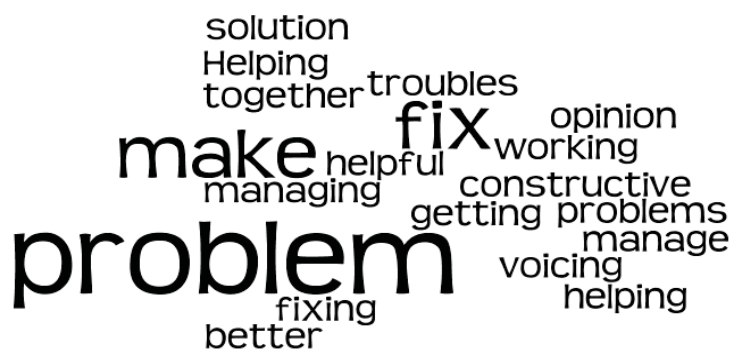
“Building,” “repairing,” “fixing,” “healing,” “relationship,” “ownership,” “responsibility,” “dialogue,” “affirming,” “reflecting,” “perspective,” “sharing,” “opening up,” “vulnerability,” “courage,” “community,” “supportive,” “inclusive,” “different way of understanding,” “non-judgemental”.

The complete results of the qualitative content analysis are represented below visually in word clouds. Generated by an online, web-based program, the word clouds are a creative way to illustrate the frequency or recurrence of words used to respond to my first question. The words that are bigger and bolder in each diagram are those that were said most frequently. As the words below illustrate, the majority of the students identify the restorative approach as an effective way to get along with each other, be a “good” student, and solve conflict when problems arise.

Student Circle #1:



Student Circle #2:



I found it difficult to assess any significant shifts in students' understanding of restorative approaches. I assume that this was because there were different students in each circle but there could have been other reasons; for instance, their classroom experiences may differ. I had expected there may have been some change based on the fact that students would have had more experiences with a restorative approach. In terms of the staff, the word clouds below represent the content analysis of their responses to the first question in

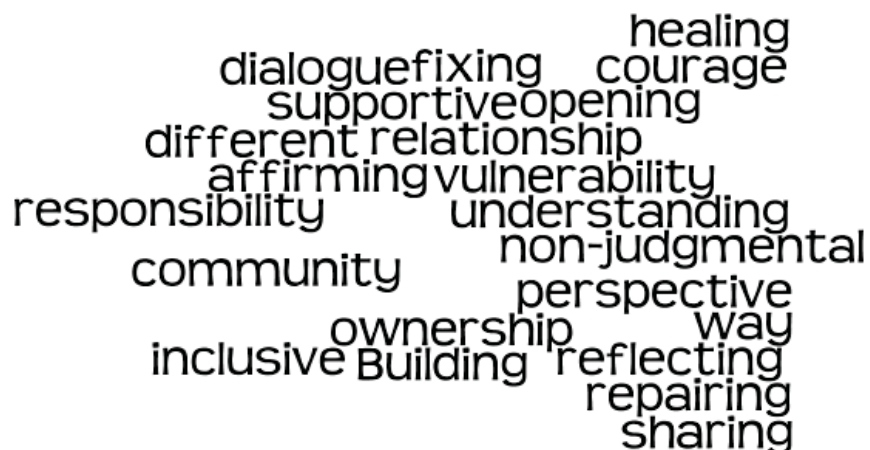
terms of the meaning of a restorative approach. Some change over time is clearly evident, seeing as the participants in both circles were the same except for one individual participant that was present for the first staff circle but not for the second.

Teacher circle #1:



A word cloud for Teacher circle #1. The words are arranged in a roughly triangular shape, pointing upwards. The largest word is 'up'. Other prominent words include 'opening', 'goodness', 'getting', 'relationships', 'practice of', 'repairing', 'patching', 'positive', 'dialogue', 'building', 'crunchy', 'and Healing', and 'feelings fixing'.

Teacher circle #2:



A word cloud for Teacher circle #2. The words are arranged in a roughly triangular shape, pointing upwards. The largest word is 'healing'. Other prominent words include 'dialogue', 'fixing', 'courage', 'supportive', 'opening', 'different', 'relationship', 'affirming', 'vulnerability', 'responsibility', 'understanding', 'non-judgmental', 'community', 'perspective', 'ownership', 'way', 'inclusive', 'Building', 'reflecting', 'repairing', and 'sharing'.

As these word clouds illustrate, staff members that participated in the talking circles shifted their collective thinking around the meaning of a restorative approach from a method of conflict resolution to an inclusive way of being together with students, colleagues and families on a day-to-day basis in schools.

It is important to note that in addition to these responses to the first question, there was evidence of conceptual shifts made during the talking circles themselves in terms of what it fundamentally means to be restorative as the circle progressed. From the time the first question was answered to the end of the conversation, there was obvious collective growth in terms of recognizing the values and principles inherent to a restorative approach, as the following excerpt illustrates. In response to a question that asked about the ways we are restorative at Halifax City School, one staff member stated:

The tattle-taleing has been really reduced, and if ever it does happen, I always say ‘well why don’t you go and try to solve it?’ and then you just see them right away like, ‘oh yeah, I can do that’ and its great; its really great... we’ve been solving a lot of our own problems, also they all feel like they belong in the circle which is really great. I started to do a circle after lunch as well, I do one after recess but I started doing one after lunch as well which really helps them.

Near the end of the circle, this same teacher was clearly emotional, evidenced both visually and verbally when she spoke in circle, and when I listened to the recording again at home. A clear shift had taken place in the way in which she understood the effect a restorative approach was having on the quality of relationships at the school, less as a tool to use for helping students and repairing conflict, and more as a humanistic way of being with others. After listening closely to her colleagues’ stories, thoughts and feelings, she said:

To go back to that first question that you asked about words that describe being restorative, it’s like having your stories brought out. You know, some

people don't lean towards the circle, and it's intimidating. It takes a lot of courage. And the thing is, when you're sitting with these feelings, you think: I'm trusting humanity right now. That's it, that at the bottom of all of that anger, or jealousy, or whatever muck, that at the bottom of all of that is the wanting to have a relationship. And, you're being vulnerable taking that chance.... and that's what restorative practice is. It's trusting.

One example that illustrates the consciousness-raising and restorative nature of the circle method shows how students in the January talking circle collectively built an understanding around the transferability of a restorative approach to contexts outside of school or, in other words, how they came to understand a restorative approach as a helpful way of relating to and interacting with others in any social context. In the excerpt below, one student plants a seed of thought around the transferability of the knowledge and skills they are learning at Halifax City School, and the subsequent speakers in the circle cultivate the idea and make it meaningful in their own lives.

I think circles help everyone to understand what's happening... like what a person did, kind of, to help us understand what they did that we didn't see.

I don't think we should just have circles at school; I think that people at workplaces should have them too like if they get in an argument about something then that would be helpful so, um, people don't get really mad at each other even at workplaces. You [looks to me as a teacher in the school] should have circles too if you get in fights.

I also think that this is the kids' workplace too.

I was thinking that at people's homes they should have, like, they fight a lot, well maybe not a lot but sometimes they fight, um, so I think they should have circles... at their houses because then they can all explain to each other what's going on, what happened and like, they could explain to their family why they said stuff.

I think that parents that get into fights a lot should have a circle before they make it all big.

I think siblings should have circles too. Everybody should have circles.

When the talking piece was passed to me, I told the students that the staff was also engaging in circles with each other: in the staff room, during meetings and also with families. They were both surprised and happy to hear this information, which I think speaks to their support of circle but also to the fact that they need to be involved in implementing the process moving forward. A restorative approach is not something staff does to students, but with students and other community members; this should be modelled in social practice, implementation and evaluation.

The sentiment that a restorative approach is not something that is exclusively school-based was also expressed to me on a few occasions by parents and guardians as well. For instance, at a school community meeting, a parent shared how she felt the restorative approach was enabling her children to talk about their feelings more and solve their own problems at home. Throughout the school year, administrators also reported to me that parents who saw the value of restorative circles were requesting them “before issues get out of hand.” As noted previously, in reference to a situation that involved two students who were having difficulty getting along, one parent told the administrators that she wanted “one of those circle things!”

The following example from the second talking circle with students in March shows how ideas evolve as participants share their thoughts, feelings and experiences as the talking piece goes around and around. In response to my second question, which asked students to reflect on the ways in which we are restorative at the school, they said:

Like, how we work together so that they won't shut down the school. Like last year it happened, and this year it happened again.

Like, how we helped to get the playground here. Because it was supposed to come in May but, so like, we all worked together and wrote letters. We all wrote letters and talked about how we want the playground here and tried

to convince [representative of the municipal government] to try and get the playground here, and it worked!

Well, um, I was just thinking about two years ago like somebody else said and I remember that me and two other people were doing a speech... and actually saved the school last time.

In these examples, the students are referring to coming together as a community to either oppose something that threatened the school (a potential school review for closure process) or to enhance something that would benefit the school (the construction of a new playground). In addition to building a collective consciousness in circle, this excerpt speaks to the potential of a restorative approach in schools to support active citizenship opportunities and social justice curriculum that provides meaningful and inclusive ways of working and learning together. This echoes the experience of schools in the UK where McCluskey, Lloyd, Stead, Kane, Riddell & Weedon (2008) suggest that a restorative approach offers a way to promote social justice in education in addition to thinking differently about conflict in schools.

In a conversation this year, one of the teachers at the school told me that her students had requested a circle to discuss an issue related to the new playground. Upon its completion, the school was faced with safety challenges as all of the students wanted to use the new equipment at once during recess and lunch. In response, the students in her particular class requested a circle to discuss this issue and problem-solve. In the end, they proposed a playground rotation schedule to the administration who adopted the idea as school-wide policy. In this example, a restorative culture that fosters shared power, shared responsibility and shared accountability ensured that the students, directly affected by decisions made about playground use, had the power to come up with their own solution. Echoing the sentiments from the excerpt above, the students from this example

knew their voices would be heard and that their input would be valued by those in positions of power in the school.

A poignant example that shows how participating in the process of the talking circle was a consciousness-raising and restorative activity for staff participants was when the conversation in the first circle in January turned to the daily use of classroom circles. As the following excerpt shows, participants were speaking about the use of circles during the school day and extended collective thinking from using it exclusively as a conflict resolution tool to an interactive way of being together on a day-to-day basis that fosters connectedness:

But I mean... it doesn't always have to be conflict resolution, you can use it to check-in, to see how are they feeling, it just allows everyone to get to know each other, to see if they had a good day or a bad day and this is why they had a bad day, they're tired because they went to bed late, you know, you can get a window into this child's life and how things play out. It's about the relationships.

That's exactly what I was going to say, and I do have a lot of conflict in my class and there is a lot of dialogue around that conflict, but less conflict now and more, just, helping each other out. And recognizing feelings, if somebody gets angry, they don't throw a desk, they don't throw something, they don't, they go over to the feelings chart and they put their name on angry or worried or sad or they make their own, as you see, now they're naming their own. They're 'really, really, really, really, really smokin' mad' or 'I'm really sick.' And I think it's way more than conflict resolution. It's just about communicating on the day-to-day basis instead of just, you know, [stomps feet angrily], it's 'this is how I'm feeling,' and we're getting there. We're not perfect yet, but we're busy! We're getting there.

I have a couple kids that don't hold back when we're doing the circle in the morning: they're sad because this happened last night, and that happened, and this child didn't get to say goodbye... So they're really discovering themselves, and the earlier, the better so they have the language-based skills.

So, to build on what you were saying, I had a professor at university that used to say, because he also taught during the day that, you know, what he would focus on was when the kids coming in and what they said, like 'oh, my cat had a litter last night,' and I find myself as a teacher, I'm quite structured, and I'm

working on my flexibility. But having that circle allows for all of those great things to be told, without me being like [says really fast] ‘oh that’s really great’ and not really feeling like I’m being authentic, you know like ‘oh, it’s your grandmother’s birthday.’ Anyways, it gives me time to do that.

I think my kids really like that they’re getting to know me as a person. They did a quiz the other day about me, they could name my kids and all kinds of things that they think is really cool... like these are all questions that they’ve asked me in circle so I think it allows both me to get to know them and them to get to know me which is really important.

I think that’s really interesting that you are allowing them to ask questions because the way I’ve always been taught, ‘it’s not about you,’ it’s you know, ‘you are Madame, you do not have a personality outside of this class, you live here, eat here, sleep here’ and you know, the teacher who goes on about themselves is taking away from the children’s education time, but... that’s not what it is, and you’re not going on about yourself, you’re giving them an opportunity to recognize you as a human being.

There are two people in a relationship. It’s reciprocal.

In this example, the staff participants layer their experiences together in a way that acknowledges the value of classroom circles and other sustainable social opportunities during the school day to build and strengthen relationships, as well as a sense of belonging. The quotes speak to the need and the desire to transcend institutional barriers (such as policy on academic instructional minutes per day or isolating, individual-centered teaching and learning activities) in order to make explicit time during the school day to express emotion, listen to others and connect on a personal level with each other.

A theme that began in the first staff circle in January that was continued in more depth in the second staff circle in March also speaks to the impact of the circle method on both the meaning-making and relationship-building that took place for participants. In the first circle, the majority of the comments made by staff were focused on how the approach was helping to change the social culture of the school by changing student behaviour. What was not discussed at length in this first staff circle was how a

restorative approach might be changing the way the adults in the building were interacting with and relating to students, colleagues, families and other people in their lives. However, near the end of the first circle, this thought began to emerge as administrators and teachers started working through the logistics of how they were going to start having regular staff circles to strengthen their relationships with each other:

[Teacher looks to administrator:] We're starting staff circles, aren't we?

Yes, this week!

I won't be able to make that, that's my duty day.

We're switching days every week.

Will there be different questions?

Yeah, whatever you want it to be. And I don't know about the time, I just put 8:40 because that's when people have to be at school.

Just make it 8:30" [shouts from group:] "yeah, 8:30!

I thought we had to be here at quarter after? I was wondering why you just didn't say 8:30.

Ok, next week, 8:30!

Ok, because I was thinking, it kind of excludes the four people on duty but if you're switching days each week, that's good.

And if you're at breakfast program, it's also hard to get there.

Shortly after this logistical discussion, at the very end of the first staff circle, one participant spoke about the need to connect as adults in the building and model a restorative approach in how we learn, act and reflect together:

This is what we need to be doing [other participant interjects: 'we do!'], not with just our children, we need to be doing it as a staff. We need to do it. It is about you know, developing that understanding and having that perspective of each other, listening to each other. ...everyone has different things they come in the building with every day, and everyone has different

strengths, everyone has different things they need to work on, and how can we accept each other and support each other and regardless of ‘who said what one day’ and ‘oh my god I can’t believe a person did that,’ whatever it is, we work together, and we need to accept each other for who we are and until that happens, I really honestly truly believe that we’re not going to move to the depths that we can as a school until we do that.

It’s true! You know that moment for me last week was when [student] got his hair cut. I mean, he’s been the ostracized kid in the room most of the time, and two of the girls said ‘I really like your hair cut’ and that, he was done, it made his life kinda thing. And I do think the staff part is missing. I was in a conversation about that the other day, like we need to get to know each other as people too because its such a busy place. Its stressful, everyone’s stressed and running in fifty directions, and we all have things going on outside of school, but take ten minutes and sit down and say, whatever, have a circle about your weekend or your made up name or whatever else [laughs], right? It’s just about all the little pieces put together, and people can say ‘oh yeah, didn’t you do that on the weekend?’

After doing weekly staff circles for about two months, which usually centered around one thematic question to which participants would respond in the staff room one morning per week, staff reflected on the changes in their own interactions and relations:

I don’t feel the staff circles has had a huge impact; it could be the type of questions, it just seems, like, for me, just one more thing, you know, getting’ our butts down there and if you look at the attendance there are a lot of people who just aren’t going and aren’t showing up, so. I don’t know if it’s the way we’re approaching it. I mean it sounds all like a good thing and I think it’s really good for us to get to know each other as people as well, but I don’t see it [staff circles] as being that positive in my opinion.

I have an opposite experience than you. I mean, I tend to just stay in my classroom and so, to go up and talk to other people, it’s nice [laughs]. And then to also have like a starting point to talk, like something positive to talk about because sometimes we can just, you know, the challenges that we’re having that day so to talk about what energizes us or to talk about a positive influence on our lives is a great starting point so then the next time I sit next to you at lunch, and I’m like, so tell me more about, like, I think that it’s great. And it does sometimes feel like it’s one more thing, especially if it’s in the morning, but I always end up leaving thinking that it was worthwhile. I’m nosy [laughs], so I like to hear people. You know, ‘I can see that in them’ so I like sort of finding, peeling away, like ‘oh my goodness, no wonder’ you know. [Colleague] shared a story with us at one of our circles that really changed my whole view; you know I love him anyway, but I

mean I really got a feeling for who he was, and *why* he was. And I liked that.

But, '*why* he was,' that's a very important thing to say, because that's what we're doing. We're finding out why the kids are the way they are.

And that's, yeah, for me, the penny dropped.

I think the questions are also good too because I'm always thinking about the students, the students, the students, and I can reflect on myself, like it makes me remember people that influenced me or like, it's grounding. You know, we never got to that question, but I have been thinking, what does energize me? I don't really know and then I just started thinking about it, right?

Well, I think I suggested it at the beginning, for staff meetings, but I think it's good, even though, you know, I don't go in the staff room usually so when you go in there and hear the questions, you get different perspective about where people are coming from, right, and if we're going to build relationships with our students, we also have to build relationships amongst others. So, I think it's good, I think it's, you know, I know it's time, and we don't always get everybody but we gotta start somewhere, right?

I mean, I know they're light questions right now, but except I missed that week, 'what got you into teaching?'

I loved that question though because it made me go through 'what is it that I love about teaching?' It was kind of a grounding question and... reminded me of all the reasons why and all the important people and yeah, and I had 'who inspires you.' I think that was one question and that made me think so much.

And it reminds you that you're part of a teaching community. I do end up being in my little dungeon, right, like I'm down there, and I'm just festering [laughs]. I'm running around doing one thing and then the other [laughs] but it reminds me, like, that you're part of a larger community.

But I think [colleague] has a valid point, I think that there are some people who do think that it's another demand on their time but I think the idea that it's optional and when you are able to come, like there shouldn't be a pressure, if you can make it, awesome, if you can't, that's okay. And, again, that's part of the respect thing, right?

And, to me, you know, you gotta let down your guard if you want to share information.

I don't think it's that though.

Well, I'm just saying, me. You know, you have to be willing to let down your guard and share information about your outside life and how you're inspired and all that stuff... I know sometimes it feels like an extra thing, but we gotta start somewhere if we're going to grow as a teaching community.

And, if we're going to ask our students to do it.

Right.

Yeah, for them to buy into it.

It can be scary to put yourself out there so it is a trust thing too.

I still think in terms of using the restorative circles and the restorative approach to help the adult relationships, I think it's still a work in progress. We're still at very surface level-type circles, but, I mean, it's a comfort thing and the more comfortable people get, the more it will happen.

In this excerpt above, a thoughtful and reflective group discussion emerged amongst staff which resulted in a collective view of a restorative approach as fundamentally about paying careful attention to relationships in the school – all relationships – and caring for each other in the way we interact with and relate to each other. Through this discussion, the participants identify regular staff circles as an opportunity that is intended to build and strengthen relationships amongst the adults in the building as part of the creation of a school social culture that holds respect, dignity, care, and concern as central to its philosophy. Despite system challenges of time and scheduling, the participants who have attended the staff circles collectively agree by the end of this discussion that a regular staff circle provides an opportunity to think about ourselves in relation to others and work actively to develop positive relationships with colleagues.

Circles and other opportunities to connect socially such as those being explored by staff and students at Halifax City School make it clear that experiences like these

reduce the stress that can exist around relationships in school communities, whether those relationships involve students, staff or family and community members. In terms of sustainable and effective implementation of the approach, it also reveals the importance and the impact of using the circle method and other sustainable social opportunities on an ongoing basis to learn, act and reflect as a group on what it means to be restorative in our own contexts. To that end, the next chapter will address the second research question and discuss some recommendations on how to best implement a restorative approach that seeks to create social culture change in schools based on the experience of Halifax City School.

Chapter 5

Recommendations on Implementing a Restorative Approach in Schools

The following discussion offers some direction for implementing an effective and sustainable restorative approach in schools based on the lived experiences of students and staff at Halifax City School as described by those who participated in the research, and as situated within a broad provincial and global context of a restorative movement in education. At the outset of this discussion, I want to highlight the importance of thoughtful leadership in implementing a restorative approach in schools. When I approached the principal of my school back in 2011 about the possibility adopting a restorative approach, the idea could have died in that moment. Instead, we became two early champions of the approach that soon became two players on a much larger team. For instance, in response to one of the stories shared by an administrator in the January staff circle, one of the teachers said:

I wanted to say that on a personal note... I think that you're giving the authenticity to this by sitting in your office and meeting with families and making it work. You have a special quality that brings that out in these families, whether you have a connection with them already or more than that, it's more than that, that may be the grain that starts it, but I just wanted to say that I appreciate that from you. I appreciate that.

And another teacher echoed that sentiment:

Yeah, you ground it, and you make it, um, you don't make it come across like it's flighty in the sense that it might turn people off. Like, it's an actual tool that's effective.

These staff responses speak to two key aspects of effective and sustainable implementation of a restorative approach in schools: 1) all staff members and students can play a role in promoting social responsibility and whole-school culture change, and 2) a restorative approach is contextual, responsive to the situation – it may include but is

not limited to, a classroom conversation about getting to know each other, peer mediation, high levels of support for peaceful playgrounds and transition times, or a formal conference focused on conflict resolution with administrators, community partners, students and their family members in the main office or elsewhere. This reflects the experience of Scottish schools who have implemented a restorative approach, both as a way to improve school social climate and as a way to deal with disciplinary issues (Kane, Lloyd, McCluskey, Maguire, Riddell, Stead & Weedon, 2009, p. 248).

As Morrison, Blood & Thorsborne (2005) state, “Leadership, like restorative justice, is about empowerment of the school community” (p. 341). Through school leadership that is committed to school reform and engages community members socially and emotionally in the process, Morrison et al (2005) list five key stages to implementing a restorative approach including gaining commitment (capturing hearts and minds), developing a shared vision (knowing where we are going and why), developing responsive and effective practice, developing a whole school approach, and developing professional relationships (pp. 341 – 352).

The experience of Halifax City School as reflected by the case study data reiterates most of those themes. Specifically, there are four key recommendations that emerged from the research, and are supported by international trends, including: 1) understanding a restorative approach in theory and practice, 2) participating in sustainable social opportunities to collectively develop, support and strengthen the approach, 3) learning and collaborating in the broader community, and 4) ongoing evaluation. The following discussion will substantiate these four claims based on the experience of Halifax City School as it has worked to implement a restorative approach since 2011.

1. Understanding a Restorative Approach in Theory and Practice

As the experience of Halifax City School shows, a restorative approach is more than a remedial response to conflict and widens the lens of restorative justice in school social practice. For this reason, it is vital that the first step to implementing a restorative approach is a foundational introduction to the values and principles associated with a restorative approach which sparks an ongoing conversation about the meaning of a restorative approach in local school contexts, as modelled by my talking circle research method. Like the enthusiastic talking circle participants in the case study, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) report the importance of “early RJ advocates” for implementing effective and sustainable restorative approaches in schools (p. 148). Furthermore, they support ongoing community conversations with such advocates, including students, parents, educators, academics, support personnel, practitioners and researchers, throughout implementation in schools “regarding the deep foundational principles of RJ that provide conceptual clarity and a recognition of the inherent worth of all people” (p. 149).

Restorative approaches are emerging in schools throughout Nova Scotia and the world. However, there is a risk that the practice is developing faster than the theory or conceptual understanding of what it means to be a restorative school and why this approach is necessary, a trend Vaandering (2011) refers to as “a compass without a needle.” Similarly, Llewellyn (2012) has said that “restorative justice developed in practice on the ground well ahead of the theory explaining and supporting it” because of the urgency of concerns and needs for an alternative to a criminal justice system that was failing offenders, victims and communities (p. 89). This experience, with mixed results,

is important for educators to note when adopting or reflecting on “restorative practices” in schools. Borne out of the instinct that we can do things differently to serve students and families in better ways, teachers have looked to restorative practices.

However, Llewellyn & Llewellyn (forthcoming) warn against seeing practices and methods that may reflect principles of a restorative approach as the be-and-end-all in terms of efforts to transform social relations in schools. They urge educators to consider that if we want to do things differently, we must also *think differently* about what we are doing. Specifically, they say that practices such as critical questioning, narrative inquiry, conferencing, circles, and living curriculum are important, but that these fit under an umbrella or overarching goal of promoting and protecting relationship, and this needs to be understood by those adopting a restorative approach in schools. In this way, “methods become tools or mechanisms for promoting, nurturing, fostering, and sustaining the equality of relationship required for healthy and productive learning communities” (p. 17). Thus, a restorative approach entails gaining knowledge, capacities and skills in order to work, learn, teach, play and be together restoratively, not simply the delivery of a program, initiative or a service.

Based on the experience of Halifax City School, which participated in restorative practices training in 2011/2012 through the International Institute of Restorative Practices, familiarization with “restorative practices” and related training is only a starting point or one part of the overall approach. In November 2012, when I interviewed Danny Graham, a key figure in institutionalizing restorative justice (RJ) within the justice system in Nova Scotia, and told him I was looking to learn from the experience of restorative justice in Nova Scotia, he said, “go deep to go broad, go slow to go long.” He

was stressing the importance of not oversimplifying or expediting the development of an approach that is about something as profound as shifting social relations. He told me that for the two years during which he was helping to coordinate the development of the NSRJ program, people would ask, “is it ready yet?” to which he would reply, “we’re still cooking... not yet.” It takes time to change our understanding of ourselves and how we connect with and relate to others – in equitable and inequitable ways – on individual and institutional levels. His insistence that a restorative approach is a living, evolving concept that needs to be phased in gradually over time, as we learn from experience, speaks to the fact that implementing restorative approaches in schools is an ongoing process that it requires a long-term commitment to social culture change.

These experiences highlighting the importance of a strong theoretical framework in which to develop, support and strengthen a restorative approach as a relational way of being together in school communities is reflected in other parts of the world. In New Zealand, the Restorative Practices Development Team at the University of Waikato suggest that

Schools that wish to consider establishing Restorative Conferencing need to analyze carefully whether the process fits within the culture of the school. The restorative ideals, as opposed to a punishment focus, have to be deeply embedded in the school’s culture for the project to be successful.
(Wearmouth et al, 2007, p. 45-46)

In Scotland, McCluskey, Lloyd, Stead, Kane, Riddell & Weedon (2008) explain that the implementation “draws... on a more humanistic, person-centered perspective accompanied by a strong sociological understanding of the complexities of schooling... Schools are developing work on playground relationships, mediation/peer mediation, a range of circles for universal and particular purposes and restorative conversations, meetings and conferences, as well as restorative management of exclusions and

reintegration following exclusion” (p. 209). In addition, they say that the “principles are firmly established within national policy and practice. It is clear that many Scottish schools can be seen to be promoting a humanistic, socially democratic ethos” (p. 210).

It is clear from both local and international experience and perspective that lasting, effective and broad-based implementation of a restorative approach in schools requires a strong conceptual foundation upon which practices can be developed, supported and strengthened over time. A relational approach to implementing restorative approaches in schools presents more than a set of social practices for the classroom; it is an inclusive way of being in the world, and working, playing and learning with others in ways that are respectful and responsible. A critical race lens also challenges us to look beyond inclusion to equity, and how issues of social difference relate to social power; a restorative approach provides opportunities to reveal power imbalances that negatively affect relationships and find meaningful ways to address them. As my research shows, participants did dialogue, at times, about difference but only minimally; there is a risk that talking circles such as those I facilitated for the case study can potentially mask social differences and make issues of race, class, gender, ability, ethnicity and sexual orientation invisible. This finding highlights the importance of educators’ openness to examining their own positions of power and privilege, and also their willingness to lead difficult discussions around social differences and the social power associated with them. In this way, the restorative approach is both a way of being that is relational and culturally responsive but also a tool that can (*and must*) be used to support an anti-racist framework. In the course of this study, it took me, a classroom teacher at the school, and someone immersed in anti-racist literature as a researcher, some time to even recognize

that these issues were not often openly addressed in the school circles – a statement that speaks volumes to my own position of power and privilege as a member of the dominant White group and how my lens shaped the initial interpretation of the data.

In order for a restorative approach to support anti-racist education, and not homogenization, these social differences must be explicitly named and discussed amongst students, staff and families in the community. For example, these kinds of discussions and conversations might be sparked by questions such as “how are we different?” and “how are we the same?” When these conversations take place, and community is constructed wherein differences enrich the social fabric as opposed to being hidden underneath, a restorative approach will truly support an anti-racist framework of education. Through a relational and racial lens, meaningful social change will only take place when this is achieved in regular social practice.

As Halpern says, “What we’re really trying to achieve is a culture shift, which takes a lot of thought and a lot of time... This is far more than a checklist of ‘Are you using circles? Have you had a restorative conversation today?’ What it takes is to have everybody in that school thinking differently about how they relate with each other and the community at large” (Shafer & Mirsky, 2011, p.1). The challenge is to provide students, staff, families and community members with ongoing educational and dialogical experiences and opportunities to gain the knowledge, capacity, and skills necessary for implementing and sustaining a restorative approach.

2) Participating in Sustainable Social Opportunities to Collectively Develop, Support and Strengthen the Approach

As the experience of Halifax City School shows, it is important to make time and space for sustainable social opportunities in school communities to collectively engage in ongoing conversations to develop, support and strengthen a restorative approach that is meaningful to those it directly involves. In the second talking circle with staff in March, one participant said

It comes down to our comfort level as the adults in the building and taking this time to share our stories... we learn from each other... having these conversations and you know, making the time for it... there's going to be ups and downs with it but I think... as long as we're believing in it and working towards it together, I think, you know, that's it.

As schools implement a restorative approach, it is vital to mobilize staff, students and community in participatory and dialogical ways on a regular basis to develop a restorative approach that is customizable and contextual as it grows, as opposed to a top-down approach or one-size-fits-all initiative. Having circles like those modelled by the research method in this case study in order to discuss the successes and challenges of implementation is important for continued development. For instance, as challenges arise that negatively affect relationships in the school community, staff talking circles and other sustainable processes provide a way for the community to problem-solve collectively.

Within schools, these conversations can take place in regular staff meetings, school planning meetings, school climate meetings and/or restorative committee meetings, as well as community gatherings. Currently, Halifax City School is planning community conversations to discuss the restorative approach with students, parents and community

members at locations outside of the building, something they hope to continue on a regular basis.

In the week following the first talking circle I facilitated with staff, they began a routine of weekly staff talking circles that alternated days and provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships amongst the adults in the building. One morning each week, teachers, support personnel, administrators and specialists have the opportunity to gather in the staff room and have an open discussion that usually centers on a question aimed at strengthening the adult relationships in the building. At times, the staff circle is also used to problem-solve, plan and evaluate school-wide events and so on.

In addition, near the end of the school year, there were several staff members who spoke to the need for a “restorative committee” in order to reflect on experiences, successes, and challenges with each other and discuss the ongoing implementation of the approach at the school. This committee will form and start meeting regularly in the next school year starting in September 2013. This ongoing reflective piece is similar to the approach taken by schools in Scotland where an action research approach to implementation started in 2004. Kane, Lloyd, McCluskey, Maguire, Riddell, Stead & Weedon (2009) report that ongoing evaluation and analysis based on staff observations and experiences directly affected and contributed to the implementation. As the second talking circle from March 2013 with staff illustrates, teachers are anxious for social opportunities to connect, share experiences and learn together:

Something I've loved from the very beginning when it was introduced to us is that it wasn't a formula; it was something that we make our own. And I think we're learning a lot, like, we had just been talking about that before we came here, talking about this as we go along.

In response to this statement, I asked “so, how do we do that? When can we have those discussions as we move forward? Is the staff circle a place for that?” Staff responded:

We need conversation and sharing experiences to start. I think the staff circle is a great spot for it.

We could also, you know, put up some chart paper in the staffroom, questions about restorative practices or ideas, like something that worked well for me today, like post-its.

It could be a standing item on our staff meeting agenda too.

That’s a good idea.

As Kane et al (2009) report from the Scottish experience, “schools that fostered learning for all in the school community were more likely to bring about improvements” (p. 246). Furthermore, they say that schools where the approach was most successful “had the overall aim of improving school ethos by creating and sustaining positive relationships throughout the school community” and where there were “the means to explore the values, attitudes and expectations of all those involved in implementation” (p. 245).

A student-centered social opportunity that staff repeatedly mentioned as beneficial in the talking circles was time during the instructional minutes of the school day. At Halifax City School, the staff found it helpful to have the support of administration in taking fifteen minutes after recess each day to have a classroom circle with students by making it part of the daily schedule. At times, these classroom circles serve as meetings, or team-building activities or conflict resolution circles. They recognize that circles are only the “tip of the iceberg” in terms of a restorative approach, and they certainly happened outside of this fifteen minute period as well, but having the time available in

the schedule each day encouraged staff to provide the opportunity in classrooms for active dialogue and listening among students. In a busy learning environment where there are many competing pressures and responsibilities, carving out a time on a school-wide basis within the daily routine gave teachers the freedom to invest in building strong, positive relationships in classrooms as an integral part of the daily school experience.

3) Learning and Collaborating in the Broader Community

Implementing an effective and sustainable restorative approach in schools that seeks to transform social relations requires more than a few professional development workshops. Borne out of a commitment to social responsibility in schools, a restorative approach is a major paradigm shift in the way communities conceptualize issues of power and accountability, and move from an individual to a relationship focus. In addition to shared commitment and a critical mass, it takes time, ongoing collaboration and support – at least three major challenges in an education system that can be isolating and overwhelming for educators, families, and students alike. In terms of building capacity with educators in Nova Scotia, an insight from the implementation of the restorative justice program as indicated by Llewellyn and Howse (1998) is that

Restorative processes cannot simply be foisted upon people and expected to work. Parties need to gain an understanding of the aims and demands of restoration and have some say in what is required to achieve it in their context... individuals must be equipped for participation. Existing and learning in a society so centrally focused on retribution and adversarial methods of conflict resolution, there is little opportunity for individuals to gain a different perspective on conflict or its resolution. The success of restorative justice programs and processes depends on the participants' commitment to restoration, and their willingness to work toward that goal. This commitment can only develop as a result of education and dialogue. (p. 108)

In addition to school community members participating in social opportunities during the school day to advance the approach, it is helpful for schools to reach out for support to other schools, restorative justice agencies, academics, researchers and community members. For instance, in Nova Scotia, schools implementing a restorative approach can seek guidance and support from community restorative justice agencies that deliver the Nova Scotia Restorative Justice Program located throughout the province (please see www.gov.ns.ca/just/rj/ for more information on the program). This would be particularly helpful in situations of harm and conflict resolution. For example, if staff at Halifax City School wanted support, they could reach out to the Community Justice Society in Halifax or the Mi'kmaq Legal Support Network. A community partnership would be extremely helpful in ensuring the community does not view the school as having ownership of the approach, especially when a formal conference is required to address conflict in which staff are implicated. As an experience from New Zealand teaches us:

there is a danger that the school will try to exert control over the location and timing of the process, the protocol to be followed and over what restorative actions need to be taken, and by whom. Where the behaviour or decisions of powerful members of school staff may be part of the problem to be addressed (as in decisions to stand down, suspend or exclude students), students, parents and community members of those students may have little power to suggest and initiate solutions. A more balanced and equitable protocol for restorative justice procedures may involve locating the process outside the school, but within a community context, by following protocols and procedures that are understandable by members of those cultural communities. (Wearmouth, 2007, p. 45)

The Restorative Approach in Schools Project (RAISP) at the Nova Scotia Department of Justice is helping to facilitate these community partnerships and thereby creating a broad-based collaborative network across the province that promotes

consistency in terms of guiding principles and practice standards, as well as deprivatization and decentralization of implementation (for more information on RAISP, please see www.gov.ns.ca/just/prevention/restorative_approaches_in_schools.asp). Two ways in which RAISP is facilitating this model is by supporting schools in their own unique community-based “living learning plans” and facilitating province-wide experiential learning teams. This approach is about empowering communities to implement a restorative approach that is customized to the people living, working and playing with each other in school contexts, supportive of their unique objectives and responsive to their specific needs.

Through a critical race lens, this model of partnership between government and schools in Nova Scotia is potentially problematic and presents another layer of the complex work of implementing a restorative approach. The social culture of schooling has been historically controlled by one-size-fits-all, zero-tolerance policy that is virtually blind to issues of race, class, gender and other forms of subordination. Instead of engaging African Nova Scotian communities, for example, institutional policies have traditionally served to dominate, alienate and control them. As stated in the BLAC report (1994), “the history of Black education in Nova Scotia is largely one of exclusion and neglect legalized through discriminatory legislation and enforced by the racial attitudes of White society. For more than two hundred years, the Black population of this province has been systematically denied an education on an equal footing with the White population” (p.9). Therefore, a tension exists between government and communities in the process of institutionalizing a restorative approach through which a community-based movement encompassing local vision and commitment for social culture change is

facilitated by government. From this perspective, it is crucial that the experiential knowledge of communities be respected and central to the development of restorative approaches in schools like Halifax City School. Furthermore, I suggest that the facilitation of restorative approaches in schools across the province needs to be constantly filtered through a relational and critical race lens that begs questions like “who is being imagined or not imagined as the authors and participants of this approach in schools?” and, as previously noted on self-reflective level, “will this decision, comment, instruction, conversation or act serve to build, repair and restore relationship?” Through these racial and relational lenses, I believe a restorative approach that is implemented province-wide in Nova Scotia in an equitable and inclusive way will work to disrupt patterns and positions of domination and marginalization, and change the social culture of schooling. There must be safeguards in place to ensure that a restorative approach, as an institutionalized program of the provincial government, does not serve to subordinate marginalized groups within school communities.

To that end, at a professional development conference in October 2012 and additional learning opportunities in which I participated this year, Richard Derible, Project Lead for RAISP, described a collaborative and community development-based model of a provincial restorative approach: that is, a relational approach to learning, to and from which educators could share insight, experience and knowledge. This effort represents an action research approach to professional development, or in other words, a provincial learning network facilitated by government in which teachers could learn, act and reflect together to define what it means to be restorative and share both strengths and challenges of its implementation in their various school sites. For instance, teachers

might organize classroom exchanges, share stories and experiences, offer helpful guidelines on circles, affective statements, restorative questions and other practices, and post information to an online forum which speak to their experiences as they implement a restorative approach experientially within their communities.

This approach is rooted in a cyclical model that promotes repeated series of learning, acting and reflecting; in this sense, implementation is never completed but ongoing and ever-evolving. A broad-based, collaborative learning network provides the ongoing support necessary to sustain consistent kinds of operational practices amongst the gatekeepers of the program, to prevent the success of restorative approaches in schools hinging upon some administrators or individual teachers working in isolation to champion the approach, to promote contextuality, and to prevent inconsistency in terms of guiding principles and practice standards. This learning network is currently growing across groups of educators, restorative justice practitioners, academics, researchers and school communities in Nova Scotia, and Halifax City School is one unique part of that provincial web. A learning network that functions in this way reiterates the idea that a restorative approach is not a transferable or reproducible program to each and every school around the world but, in fact, a way to promote and protect the relationships in particular communities.

4) Ongoing Evaluation

Morrison (2005) notes that monitoring must be in place for “quality standards” (p. 344) and evaluation of the implementation, which contribute to the overall effectiveness, momentum and support for a restorative approach as it takes place over time. For example, early in the implementation stages of restorative justice within the justice

system in Nova Scotia, Clairmont (2005) conducted a mixed-methods evaluation of the program, which discussed ongoing successes and challenges. He said that

The NSRJ programme has been thoroughly institutionalized within the Nova Scotia Department of Justice and is no longer marginal to justice planning and strategising.... It has made significant progress on all objectives delineated in its originating proposal. The path of change has been in the desired and anticipated direction on all relevant issues – recidivism, participant involvement and satisfaction, the utilization of the RJ session format, agency capacity, provincial coordination and the presumption of restorative justice among police and corrections – capturing, respectively, perhaps, the diversion and healing dimensions of restorative justice. Still, the ‘value-added,’ comparison to its alternative measures predecessor has been modest, and unless there is much greater collaboration and use of the RJ agencies by crown prosecutors, judges and correctional staff, it will likely remain so. Difficult challenges for the NSRJ programme will come if it has to deal more with serious offenders and offences, with adults and with family violence of all sorts... There remains widespread scepticism among field-level criminal justice personnel and community leaders that the NSRJ and the non-profit RJ agencies could meet these challenges, but, at the same time, there is much support for the programme as it is presently implemented. (p. 251)

In his assessment of NSRJ in terms of the satisfaction felt by program participants, Clairmont (2005) says that when asked to identify “the best thing” about the experience, “offenders and their supporters emphasized avoiding court and the fairness and friendliness of the sessions, while victims and their supporters highlighted having their say and the direct communication between the offender and the victim. The participants overwhelmingly believed that, for offences such as the ones featured in their incidents, restorative justice was the desirable option” (p. 256). Referring to Clairmont’s mixed-methods evaluation, as well as an intergovernmental evaluation on the NSRJ program, Llewellyn (2009a) reported that “the results of both were very positive, both in terms of the satisfaction of participants and the effect of the program on re-contact rates with the criminal justice system” (p. 137). This province-wide evaluative piece that takes place

alongside implementation, above and beyond school-based monitoring and evaluation, helps to shape and strengthen the approach moving forward.

For instance, because of its successes, including the reduction of recidivism rates with youth, restorative justice is now featured prominently in provincial strategies aimed at conflict resolution as well as prevention; it also crosses departmental lines to include justice, education and community services. Pat Gorham, Director of Crime Prevention for the Nova Scotia Department of Justice says “There is now a significant interest across Nova Scotia to bring the restorative approach to schools... our provincial government is trying to find out what the capacity might be for RJ in Nova Scotia, identifying frameworks that might be put into place for schools that want to participate” (Shafer & Mirsky, 2011, p. 1). Not only is there significant interest at this point, there has been broad-based conceptualization and implementation of the approach across the province, including at Halifax City School. Through the development of the provincial learning network with educators as facilitated by the Restorative Approach in Schools Project (RAISP), a strong foundation has been laid, and the project is growing substantially throughout school communities in Nova Scotia.

At this point, more work needs to be done in terms of ongoing, embedded evaluation as an integral part of the development of RAISP in Nova Scotia. At the school level, staff and student restorative committees can create and monitor a school improvement plan that reflects the restorative approach in their context. Another idea is for educators to include a restorative approach as part of their annual professional growth plan which also requires documented and reported learning, action and reflection. At the province-wide level, I believe a mixed-methods approach to evaluation that encompasses

both qualitative and quantitative methods would be most useful. These combined methods would capture the fact that, as the experience of Halifax City School illustrates, a restorative approach is both proactively about relationship-building and reactively about conflict resolution; stories, narratives and the lived experiences of research participants could speak to the social culture shift taking place in their learning communities through a focus on relationships while quantitative data could speak to reductions in conflict, school suspensions, disciplinary office referrals, teacher and student turn-over and absenteeism, and so on.

In diverse urban schools such as Halifax City School, I believe an ongoing evaluation that is modeled after my talking circle method and draws on critical anti-racist research methodology would be valuable as a way to conduct a relational approach to research. Dei (2005) says that “anti-racist research requires a new paradigm shift away from colonial research to a genuine relational approach with local subjects to uncover power relationships in knowledge production, interrogation, validation and dissemination” (p. 11). This approach to research not only reinforces the values and principles of being socially restorative, but allows research and evaluation to be conducted within school communities in a restorative way. Through a relational and critical race lens, anti-racist research methodology enables both ongoing implementation and evaluation to be rooted in a collaborative, community-based approach. Dei (2005) suggests that anti-racist research involves “allowing students some control over the research process, sharing information on the research with students and students sharing in research interpretations and findings” and, that “in anti-racist research in schools, there could be some periodic meetings and briefings that would give some degree of ownership

of research information to schools and local communities” (p. 18). Going forward, I believe that this participatory and inclusive style of embedded and ongoing evaluation is crucial to effective and sustainable implementation of a restorative approach in schools. Potts and Brown (2005) list three guiding principles of anti-oppressive research that speak to the ways in which ongoing evaluation would embody anti-racist research methodology:

- Anti-oppressive research is social justice and resistance in process and in outcome;
- Anti-oppressive research recognizes that all knowledge is socially constructed and political;
- Anti-oppressive research process is all about power and relationships (p. 259-262).

As discussed previously, in order to change school culture through a restorative approach, I believe that members of school communities must always ask the following question when relating to and interacting with others: “Will this decision, comment, instruction, conversation or act serve to build, repair and restore relationship?” By using a restorative and anti-racist approach to the research process to carry out future evaluation – as well as to implementation – I suggest that very same question must be asked to examine research methods. In the spirit of walking the talk and practicing what we preach, an interpretive lens of relational theory and critical race theory demonstrates that at the individual, school and provincial level, a restorative approach is a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being in the world with others, and should be represented as such in effective models of social practice, implementation and evaluation.

Concluding Thoughts

Two years ago, in June of 2011, I attended the 14th Annual World Conference of the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) in collaboration with the Nova Scotia Restorative Justice Community University Research Alliance (NSRJ-CURA) in Halifax. I remember feeling hopeful and thinking how a restorative approach reconciled my passion for education and community development. I explored various ways of learning more about a restorative approach in education, and one year after the conference, I was packing up my classroom to go on sabbatical to study on a full-time basis and conduct research in the school community that has felt like home to me for years now.

The experience of Halifax City School, interpreted through a lens of relational theory and critical race theory, shows how a restorative approach can be a relational, anti-racist and culturally responsive way of being together in community that manifests from a commitment to nurturing social responsibility and social culture change. Students and staff that participated in the case study at the school spoke about the value of equitable and sustainable social opportunities that a restorative approach provides in order to create a community of care and a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment. Their stories and narratives illustrate how a restorative approach in school communities builds and rebuilds strong and healthy relationships based on mutual respect, care, concern and dignity by strengthening social connections, affirming identity, fostering emotional engagement and resolving and preventing conflict. In terms of implementation, the story of Halifax City School also illustrates what is required to spark and sustain positive social culture change, including understanding a restorative approach in theory and practice,

participating in sustainable social opportunities to collectively develop, support and strengthen the approach, learning and collaborating in the broader community, and ongoing evaluation.

At some points while crafting this work, it was difficult for me to articulate the experience of social culture change that is taking place through a restorative approach because I am so deeply immersed in the process, at the individual, school and provincial level, with a past, present and future in the school community. In this way, I have reflected upon and learned about myself in depth, as well as taking a comprehensive look at the restorative approach at Halifax City School. Throughout the year, there were several opportunities that enabled me to get in touch with my own worldview, and identify both convergences and divergences with the worldviews of others in the community with whom I share professional and personal relationships. Ultimately, writing this thesis and articulating my own beliefs and ideas about the social purpose of education has been the most profound of those opportunities.

In two months, I will return to the classroom renewed and hopeful, ready to help create positive change through a restorative approach in my classroom, my school community and the teaching and learning community at large. However, this does not imply that I have, by any means, completed my learning or will be without ongoing challenges. As the circle symbolizes, my restorative journey continues as I learn, act and reflect together with others at Halifax City School, across Nova Scotia and beyond.

In May, I dropped by the school one Friday to play a student-staff basketball game over the lunch hour. When we were warming up, someone asked me to find the administrators and tell them we were starting. When I got to the office, I couldn't help

but smile when one of the students in the lobby said, “Oh, they’re in a circle right now. They’ll be right out!” Moments later, professional clothes were changed into shorts and t-shirts, and for an hour, we all worked and played hard, together - bodies, hearts and minds - for the love of the game, and of each other.

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Appendix A

Talking Circle Question Guide

Amy Boudreau, Primary Researcher
Mount Saint Vincent University

Semi-structured questions for talking circle with staff:

1. When I say the word “restorative”, what words would you use to describe what that means?
2. In your experience, how does a restorative approach affect the quality of relationships in our school?
3. What are your thoughts on the best ways to implement a restorative approach?

Semi-structured questions for talking circle with students:

1. When I say the word “restorative”, what words would you use to tell me what it means?
2. Please share your thoughts about the ways we work to be restorative here at “Halifax City School”.
3. Do you have ideas about how we can do an even better job at being more restorative at “Halifax City School”?

Appendix B



Excellence • Innovation • Discovery

University Research Ethics Board

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance

File #: 2012-054
 Title of project: *Relational Theory and Critical Race Theory as Social Practice: The Restorative Approach*
 Researcher(s): Amy Boudreau
 Supervisor (if applicable): Susan Walsh
 Co-Investigators: n/a
 Version : 1

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has reviewed the above named proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* as outlined in the *MSVU Policies and Procedures: Ethics Review of Research Involving Humans* regarding the ethics of research involving human participants.

This certificate of approval is valid one year from the date of issue. Renewals are available for up to four years in addition to the initial year and are contingent upon an annual submission to the UREB of a written request for renewal accompanied by a satisfactory annual ethics report thirty days prior to the expiry date as listed below. A final report is due on or before the expiry date. Researchers are reminded that any changes to approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the UREB prior to their implementation.

<p>Dr. Daniel Séguin, Chair University Research Ethics Board (UREB)</p>	<p>December 3, 2012 Effective Date <i>[Expires: December 2, 2013]</i></p>
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Appendix C



University Research Ethics Board

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD

Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance

File #: 2012-031
 Title of project: *History of Restorative Approaches in Nova Scotia*
 Researcher(s): Amy Boudreau
 Supervisor (if applicable): Jennifer Llewellyn
 Co-Investigators: n/a
 Version : 1

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has reviewed the above named proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* as outlined in the *MSVU Policies and Procedures: Ethics Review of Research Involving Humans* regarding the ethics of research involving human participants.

This certificate of approval is valid one year from the date of issue. Renewals are available for up to four years in addition to the initial year and are contingent upon an annual submission to the UREB of a written request for renewal accompanied by a satisfactory annual ethics report thirty days prior to the expiry date as listed below. A final report is due on or before the expiry date. Researchers are reminded that any changes to approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the UREB prior to their implementation.

<p>Dr. Daniel Séguin, Chair University Research Ethics Board (UREB)</p>	<p><u>October 15, 2012</u> Effective Date <i>[Expires: <u>October 14, 2013</u>]</i></p>
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