


Article

# Using Restorative Practices to Prepare Teachers to Meet the Needs of Young Adolescents

Jamie Silverman \* and Molly Mee \* 

Department of Secondary and Middle School Education, Towson University,  
8000 York Road, Baltimore, MD 21252, USA

\* Correspondence: jsilverman@towson.edu (J.S.); mmee@towson.edu (M.M.)

Received: 22 July 2018; Accepted: 17 August 2018; Published: 30 August 2018



**Abstract:** Recent news on school safety and efforts to improve school climate underscores the importance of building positive student relationships and resolving conflict in our nation’s classrooms. Restorative practices are currently gaining credibility and popularity as a means to build classroom and peer relationships. Through a descriptive study, we explored how to model the restorative practice of community circles with teacher candidates to prepare them to use the approach with their future middle school students. We describe how a teacher educator engaged middle-level teacher candidates with community circles in an internship seminar for this purpose. This article illustrates the powerful effects restorative practices had on the teacher candidates’ peer relationships and the connections they made about teaching young adolescent students. We also provide a step-by-step guide for implementing this practice in middle level teacher education programs.

**Keywords:** restorative practices; community circles; middle level teacher preparation

---

## 1. Introduction

Recent news and climate changes in our schools underscore the importance of building positive relationships in our classrooms and working to more constructively resolve conflict. Restorative Practices (RP) is one approach that is gaining credibility and popularity as a means to build classroom relationships. Smith, Frey, and Fisher state that “a climate of trust is essential for learning—but is quite fragile among the complex interactions of many humans each school day” [1] (p. 75). Further, Blood and Thorsborne maintain that RP helps create communities where “long term and deep relationships [are built] between all its members who need to co-exist in a healthy way for learning outcomes to be met” [2] (pp. 17–18). An important role of the university professor and teacher educator is to prepare future teachers to meet the needs of their future students. Often, the focus is on academic and cognitive needs, to the detriment of the student’s emotional and social needs. This is especially true regarding the middle school child who is at a sensitive social and emotional developmental stage. According to the Association for Middle Level Education’s *This We Believe* [3], an essential attribute of an effective middle school is that education for the young adolescent should be empowering, inviting, and supporting.

While we as middle-school educators know this to be true, we continually reflect on ways to prepare our future middle school teachers to create safe spaces for the young adolescent. During the 2017–2018 academic year, we—a university instructor and a department chairperson—joined efforts to infuse RP and community circles into our teacher education curriculum. The instructor learned about the practical application and power of RP and community circles while supervising middle level teacher interns at an urban middle school, with a history of significant behavioral challenges and high suspension rates that recently began the practice of community circles. During time spent in the school building she began hearing and seeing terms such as “building relationships,”

“virtue language,” “accountability,” and “positive classroom climate” in the hallways and on classroom walls. Middle school students sat in circles, negotiating problems with other students and respectfully listening to their peers to resolve conflict. Students engaged in community circles by offering responses to a central question about their lives outside of the school building.

We then imagined the impact this practice could have on the young adolescent and wondered why every middle level intern was not being prepared to use it in the classroom. We added the topic of RP into the middle level teacher education curriculum and infused community circles into the instructor’s classes. Our premise was that, if interns engage in community circles with their peers to build their own community, then they would be able to transfer that experience and integrate RP with their future middle school students. While this was not a data-based study, the instructor did learn what the interns began to value about restorative practices as a result of participating in community circles during the internship experience and began exploring with the interns the ways they foresee themselves using community circles to address the social emotional needs of middle schoolers in their future classrooms.

## 2. Defining Restorative Practice

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices founder and president, Ted Watchel, “The social science of restorative practices offers a common thread to tie together theory, research and practice in diverse fields such as education, counseling, criminal justice, social work and organizational management” [4] (p. 2). The overarching goals of RP are to build healthy relationships and to repair those relationships if harm arises in any given community (e.g., the classroom). Results of a study by Kehoe, Bourke-Taylor, and Broderick [5] show that RP affects student behavior by addressing social skills such as empathy, accountability, and respect for others. Students noted they felt safe in a restorative community because teachers were calm and understood their emotional needs. This also resulted in a stronger sense of empathy for all of the community members. Another benefit of implementing RP in teacher educator programs and schools is the associated skills that it builds in social-emotional intelligence. Zulkey [6] suggests teachers versed in RP are able to focus more on instruction and less on managing disruptions when their students bring strong social and emotional skills into the classroom. These skill sets may also translate to students’ future goals and connections with new communities.

## 3. The Community Circle

RP brings with it more specific, proactive community-building tools, such as community circles. Implementing community circles in the classroom begins building trust and healthy relationships. As a result, teachers establish trust in their classroom community and can more effectively navigate students’ emotions. “Facing one another, they [the students] have frank and open discussions about academic topics (e.g., their academic goals for the day or the semester), emotional topics (e.g., their experiences being the target of teasing), and classroom-specific topics (e.g., what norms of respect they would like to establish in the classroom). The types of topics and specific content are limitless, yet the goal is similar: to provide an opportunity for students and teachers to learn about one another (and thus respond more appropriately to one another)” [7] (p. 328). The community circle is a key component of RP that contributes directly to proactive, community building and addresses the emotional needs of the young adolescent. When teachers take time to sit in a circle with their students and present a question to the community, students then learn about each other and have time to express their feelings, resulting in a community of respect. Young adolescents bring an array of emotions to the classroom every day, and community circles can provide an outlet for students to feel safe, expressing their emotions.

In her piece on being a RP practitioner, Montani explains foundational aspects of community circles. “Ground rules are developed by the group to develop a commitment about how members will participate. Although one or two people may serve as facilitators, power and ownership is shared

among the group. This forum has allowed for generations of people across cultures and settings to peacefully and safely discuss the most sensitive and charged topics" [8] (p. 10). Watchel elaborates on the shared ownership of community circles, stating, "The format [of community circles] maximizes the opportunity for the quiet voices, those that are usually inhibited by louder and more assertive people, to speak without interruption. Individuals who want to respond to something that has been said must be patient and wait until it is their turn to speak. The sequential circle encourages people to listen more and talk less" [4] (p. 8). In a recent study Smith, Frey, and Fisher. (2018) maintain that "using circles allows every voice to emerge and gives each member opportunities to connect and appreciate others' contributions" [1] (p. 77).

#### 4. Integrating Community Circles into the Course Sequence

Students in our program take pedagogy courses over a four-semester sequence. It is within this sequence where we intentionally introduce RP and community circles to the interns. We first introduce RP in a course titled Adolescent Development and Diversity. Here we introduce readings and videos that define and demonstrate RP in schools. In the next course, Principles of Secondary Education, interns participate in a group research project on RP and present their findings to their peers. They also observe community circles practiced in the middle school. In their final two semesters, they complete their part- and full-time internships, during which they continue observing RP in action and participating in community circles. In the Internship Seminar course, interns share their experiences in the field, evaluate peer lesson plans, and receive support from their instructor and peers.

We believe the best way to teach interns how to effectively implement and lead a community circle practice in the middle school classroom is by first engaging them in that practice with their own peers. We did this in the Internship Seminar course during their final semester of student teaching. We had heard from the internship seminar instructors that the interns often needed at least 30 min just to talk about their struggles before the seminar began and that it often had become challenging to manage. By calling on interns to participate in community circles at the opening of each seminar seemed apt, in that it created a structured time to meet their emotional needs while also showing them the value of running a community circle in their own future classrooms.

#### 5. Preparing and Knowing Your Audience

We wanted to use community circles with our interns for two purposes—first, to allow time for them to express feelings about both their successes and struggles in the field, helping them realize that this profession often results in emotional highs and lows, and second, so they could experience community circles as a means for using them in their future classrooms.

The first step in creating a successful series of community circles at seminar was by creating a set of focused questions that would invite the interns to express their emotions in a structured manner. By our modeling this practice for them, they learned the value of such preparations. Scaffolding is another important aspect of leading community circles, and we wanted the interns to realize that building trust in a community is essential. For example, beginning with a "lighter" question invites all members of the community an opportunity to feel more comfortable about sharing their response with the group. More detailed information concerning the preparation of community circles can be found in Appendix A. To see the entire series of community circle questions as well as a parallel set of questions a teacher of middle school students might pose to an audience of young adolescents in a community circle, see Appendix B.

It was also important for the Internship Seminar instructor to participate in the circle. The instructor highlighted her contributions each week, thus modeling and inviting a discussion of the power of their own contributions when they would lead community circles with their future students.

Just as is done in the schools, the instructor introduced a talking piece to facilitate the community circle. Each week, one object was passed around the circle, and whoever was holding the object had

the floor. As the weeks progressed, the group learned more and more about each another and about the power of running community circles in the classroom.

## 6. Intern Feedback on the Power of the Community Circle

Throughout the course of the full-time internship, the interns responded to our questions, posed at the opening of the seminar, about participating in community circles. The interns indicated that they enjoyed participating and felt safe voicing their thoughts with their peers. They looked forward to Wednesdays—seminar days—each week because they knew they'd have some time to express their emotions and to hear from others. They liked realizing they were not alone in their emotions as they heard from one another during community circles. Furthermore, they discovered common bonds that would have otherwise unnoticed not only by articulating thoughts but also, and perhaps more importantly, by listening to one another. When asked if they could see themselves initiating community circles in their own middle or high school classrooms, each intern responded with an emphatic "Yes"!

During week three of the semester, during full-time internship seminar, the instructor posed the community circle question, "What are you struggling with this week?" We chose to ask this question at this point in time because the students had discussed goals and proud moments during the first two weeks. We expected, by week three, the interns would have experienced struggles, either in planning, relationships with their mentors, managing students, or managing their time. One by one, the interns shared, each offering an academic and personal struggle they were encountering. Heads nodded in agreement with each response articulated. Several interns said they wished they had the power to create more time in a day. Others expressed their frustration in being given too much mentor feedback at once. Some didn't know how to navigate this amount of feedback from their mentors while others wished for more feedback. The last intern to speak began her response by saying, "I just want to say that it is so nice to hear I'm not alone in this. You guys totally get me, and I get you. I love our little seminar family." Clearly, that this group had formed a deep connection, and the word "family" was mentioned in its discussions more than once over the course of the semester.

Watchel [4] explains that community circles provide people with an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum, and equality. According to Pranis, the circle process allows people to tell their stories and offer their own perspectives. It also has a wide variety of purposes: conflict resolution, healing, support, decision-making, information exchange, and relationship development [4] (p. 7). Without realizing it, the interns supported the literature concerning the benefits of leading circles in the classroom.

## 7. Conclusions: Connecting the Practice to the Middle School Classroom

One of the final community circle questions presented to the interns was a request that they complete the following statement: "I am a teacher because\_\_\_\_\_." While some may predict that the answer would be, "I am a teacher because I want to pass my love of [insert content area here] along to my students," this was not the common response. Instead, the interns completed the statement with comments about emotional capital in the classroom. Responses included, "I am a teacher because I want to build relationships with my students like you have built with us," "I am a teacher because I want to be a role model for my students because some of them don't have an adult to look up to," and "I am a teacher because I like to see the smile on my students' faces when they realize they can do something new and they know I am proud of them."

Although the community circle led on the final day of seminar was powerful, we did not want it to be the interns' last one, as they were days away from completing their final internship and just a week away from graduating. Many were interviewing and receiving job offers for the coming fall. Given the pervasive theme of "Where am I headed next in my journey," the seminar turned into a casual discussion of how the group could see themselves accessing and implementing community circles in their future classrooms. The interns suggested that they use community circles to check in

with the students in their classes and as a means to gather feedback from them about what they're getting out of the class and what they like about it.

The interns understand that middle school students are required to take English or history class, but they want to learn more about what their students really enjoy from the class. They suggested that the community circle would help strengthen relationships by creating a "we're all in this together" perspective. The interns also saw value in using community circles to address concerns that might arise in their classrooms that disrupt the environment; they understood that using community circles could benefit their classroom climate.

Students' need change. While communities and societal issues change, the need to listen to others with respect remains constant. Expressing our feelings in safe environments and building emotional and social skills to create healthier classroom communities is critical. RP will remain an integral piece of the coursework we develop and present to the future generation of interns who will, one day, create healthy and safe middle school communities of their own.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J.S.; Investigation, J.S.; Methodology, M.M.; Writing—review & editing, M.M.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A

### Key Practices for Running Effective Community Circles

#### Predict, Prepare, Plan

- **Predict:** Predict the emotional high and low moments teaching candidates will experience over the course of their internship. Consider when these moments occur and during which weeks you want to access successes vs. struggles.
- **Prepare:** With the emotional timeline in mind, prepare questions that will invite interns to express their successes and their struggles in the community circle.
- **Plan:** It is important to highlight the structure of the community circle and the practices you are modeling with the interns. Plan to bring in literature about community circles for interns to read in their own time or even use a community circle to discuss the findings if you wish. Plan to be involved. It is just as important for the instructor to contribute as it is the interns.

#### Reflect, React, Reach Out

- **Reflect:** After leading the first community circles and at several other check-points throughout the semester, invite interns to reflect on the community circle practice. What do they like about circles? How do circles help them? What have they learned about circles as a result? How might they see themselves incorporate circles in their own future classrooms?
- **React:** Join the discussion. As you listen to the interns feedback, contribute your own perspective. Discuss the power of the circle for you as an instructor. They need to know the benefits that exist for their future role as a teacher in their own classrooms. As of now, they are experiencing circles as a student.
- **Reach Out:** It is important to follow up with our interns once they have graduated and have their own classrooms. Reach out to the interns and ask if they've implemented circles. Remain a teacher to them. Help them plan circles for their classrooms if they ask. Remain a guide and a reminder that this practice exists. Once again, our interns (now new teachers) will be experiencing a different emotional rollercoaster and may become overwhelmed with first year struggles. Remind them about this practice and the power of it. Or perhaps, you will reach out to a recent graduate and they will remind you of the impact the circle had on them and share their successes in the classroom with community circles.

## Appendix B

Table A1. Community Circle questions.

Community Circle Questions: Suggestions for the Teacher Education Seminars	Community Circle Questions: Suggestions for the Middle School Classroom
What is one goal you have set for yourself as you enter your full-time internship this spring? How will you accomplish it?	What is one goal you have set for yourself in this class for this school year? How will you accomplish it and whose help might you need to do so?
What are you most proud of as it relates to your teaching this past week?	What are you most proud of about the (state major project or assignment) you just completed?
What are you struggling with this week?	What are you struggling with this week with friends?
Discuss one area in which you've improved as it relates to management.	Discuss one way you can be a better friend to someone in this class.
Describe a moment from the past week that made you smile and reinforced, yes, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.	Describe a moment from this past week that made you smile and reinforced, yes I am a good (student, friend, sibling, son, daughter, athlete, writer-offer several options)
What are you feeling most overwhelmed about this week? How can you help yourself?	What are you most overwhelmed about this week? How can you help yourself? How can I help you?
Name your greatest accomplishment at the high school.	Name your greatest accomplishment this quarter in class.
How has the transition been from high to middle school? Struggles? Enthusiasms?	How has the transition been from elementary school to middle school?
How have you demonstrated improvement and growth in your formal observation lessons thus far?	How have you started to meet the goal you set for yourself at the beginning of the year?
What was the most valuable moment of completing the Validated Practices Project?	What was the most valuable part of participating in community circles?
I am a teacher because . . .	I am a success story because . . .

## References

- Smith, D.; Frey, N.; Fisher, D. A Restorative Climate for Learning. *Educ. Leadersh.* **2018**, *75*, 74–78.
- Blood, P.; Thorsborne, M. The Challenges of Culture Change: Embedding Restorative Practice in Schools. In Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Conferencing, Sydney, Australia, 3–5 March 2005.
- National Middle School Association. *This we believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*; National Middle School Association: Westerville, OH, USA, 2010.
- Wachtel, T. Defining Restorative. Available online: <http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/Defining-Restorative.pdf> (accessed on 1 June 2018).
- Kehoe, M.; Bourke-Taylor, H.; Broderick, D. Developing student social skills using restorative practices: A new framework called H.E.A.R.T. *Soc. Psychol. Educ.* **2018**, *21*, 189–207. [CrossRef]
- Zulkey, C. Inside out: Can social emotional learning prevent bullying in Catholic middle schools? (cover story). *U.S. Cathol.* **2017**, *82*, 26–30.
- Gregory, A.; Clawson, K.; Davis, A.; Gerewitz, J. The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline. *J. Educ. Psychol. Consult.* **2016**, *26*, 325–353. [CrossRef]
- Montani, A. Being a Restorative Practitioner. *Communique (0164775X)* **2018**, *46*, 10–11.



© 2018 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).