

Restorative Justice Practices: A Tool for Equity

Context

Restorative justice practices, when implemented with fidelity and an identity-conscious lens, can be a powerful tool for equity in classrooms and schools.

We know that both nationally and here in Colorado, our students of color, students experiencing poverty, students with disabilities and other marginalized groups are more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement, for the exact same behaviors as their peers. These punitive practices then further damage the student's relationships with their educators and their school, contributing to opportunity gaps in academics, extra-curriculars, and engagement.

In order for restorative justice practices to be an effective tool for equity, educators must be intentional in how the practices are implemented. See below for examples of how each of our most common practices can contribute to equity and inclusion, as well as additional considerations to ensure you are implementing with an identity-conscious lens.

Community-Building Circles

A proactive restorative practice in which participants sit or stand in a circle and are each given the opportunity to respond to a common prompt or series of prompts.

How Community-Building Circles Promote Equity & Inclusion:

- Circles create a space for **sharing perspective across identities**. Storytelling, especially from voices that are traditionally marginalized, gives the individual the power to create their own narratives.
- By honoring oral tradition and by valuing both the individual voice and the collective experience, circles are a **culturally responsive** practice.
- When we feel connected to someone, we are less likely to act on our pre-conditioned biases and **more likely to make more generous assumptions** about them as an individual.
- When we feel a sense of belonging, we are more likely to vocalize when our needs are not being met. This **culture of feedback** is essential to equitable spaces.

Additional Considerations when Implementing Community-Building Circles:

- Are our circle prompts culturally responsive and trauma-informed?
 - Are you considering how circles might place additional burden on our marginalized community members?
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Restorative Conversations

A responsive restorative practice in which an educator and a student engage in a reflective dialogue about a behavior or conflict

How Restorative Conversations Promote Equity & Inclusion:

- Adults pause before reacting to a behavior to hear the student's perspective and provide **a more individualized and supportive response**.
- Slowing down, when coupled with training and reflection, can help adults **recognize when we are acting on biases** and when we are intentionally making decisions.
- Rather than being escalated through a classroom management ladder, students are able to share their perspective and give feedback to the adult, which ultimately **strengthens relationships and trust** between adults and students.
- When we engage in a reflective conversation with the student, **the student has voice and choice** in determining the consequences for their behavior.

Additional Considerations when Implementing Restorative Conversations:

- Are our school or classroom rules and policies culturally responsive?
- Did students have a voice in designing classroom and school-wide expectations?

Formal Conferencing & Harm Circles

A responsive restorative practice in which a facilitator, after extensive preparation, brings together two or more parties in conflict with one another to engage in a reflective dialogue

How Formal Conferencing & Harm Circles Promote Equity & Inclusion:

- While this process can still honor the intentions of our behavior, it emphasizes the impact the behavior has on our community and those individuals who are a part of it. By **prioritizing impact over intention**, we can engage in conversations about how we contribute to inequity and inclusivity even when we don't intend it to.
- **Perspective-sharing** increases understanding of identities different from our own.
- Students may **not be suspended or referred to law enforcement**, which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and disproportionately impacts marginalized identities.

Additional Considerations when Implementing Formal Conferencing & Harm Circles:

- Do facilitators recognize and explore the underlying influence of race, gender, ability, language and other facets of identity on a given conflict? Have we asked what healing looks like for a community-member instead of inserting our own thoughts?