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Mary M. McConnaha

Michigan State University, mcconnah@msu.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

This article comes from a larger work written while I was a student in Loyola University Maryland's Curriculum and Instruction for Social Justice program. I am deeply appreciative of Stephanie Flores-Koulish who advised me and offered feedback on early drafts.

A Restorative Justice Book Club for Secondary Classrooms

MARY M. MCCONNAHA

Schools face several challenges in creating meaningful community relationships, and the breakdown of these relationships causes harm to students, teachers, and administrators. Many schools have turned to restorative justice practices as a way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, reduce discipline referrals, increase graduation rate, and strengthen the school community (Evans & Lester, 2013; Winn et al., 2019; Weaver and Swank, 2020). However, Winn (2013, 2018) and others have proposed that the principles of restorative justice can be embedded into the English Language Arts curriculum. In this paper, I describe a restorative justice book club unit for early adolescents that is both academically rigorous as well as restorative. Its goal is to demonstrate to ELA practitioners how restorative justice practices can fit into units they likely already teach. If more teachers used restorative practices in their classrooms, our schools would experience deeper community ties that would lessen incidents of harm and decrease feelings of isolation in our students.

Keywords: restorative justice, middle school, ELA, book club, young adult literature

Restorative Justice Book Clubs in the Secondary Classroom

Schools are desperate for deeper community building and connection. In 2020 and 2021, schools around the country operated remotely or with social distancing that caused students to feel more isolated from one another. School shootings, often perpetrated by adolescents who experienced bullying, continue to take the lives of our students. Even normal student misbehavior is being increasingly criminalized, and students who act out in class may face suspension or school-based policing, and research shows that repeated disciplinary referrals in schools are feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Fowler, 2011). These

strains on the school community are happening concurrently with teachers' time being increasingly strapped—they are asked to teach rigorous (though increasingly censored) content, prepare students for state-mandated exams, and address student social-emotional wellness. It is in hope to address our students' desperate need for community as well as the demands on teacher time that I have designed the following restorative justice book club unit entitled "What Is Justice?"

Restorative justice, according to Howard Zehr (2015), views crime and harm as a disruption of relationships between people. This is in contrast to retributive (or punitive) justice, which views crimes (or misbehavior) as a violation against "the state"—or in schools, a violation against the Honor Code, teacher, or school administration. When harm is viewed as a breaking of relationships between people, the goal of justice becomes not punishment, but addressing the needs and obligations that harm creates (Zehr, 2015). Schools use restorative justice programs to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, reduce discipline referrals, increase graduation rate, and strengthen the school community (Evans & Lester, 2013; Winn et al., 2019; Weaver and Swank, 2020). The glossary at the end of this article offers further restorative justice terms and definitions.

An important way classrooms become restorative is by including Circles, and they make up a major part of this unit plan. A restorative Circle is deeply rooted in Indigenous and Native traditions (Zehr, 2015). Educators and community leaders use its principles in classrooms and community justice. In it, participants sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other, with only a focal point in the middle (such as a candle) to give participants something to rest their eyes on. One essential principle of the Circle is only one person speaks at a time, and the speaking person is designated by holding a talking piece. The talking piece can be anything, but often has significance to the participants. A Circle

Keeper opens the Circle by asking a question or inviting a reflection. In this unit plan, the teacher is likely the Circle Keeper. After a community building question, the teacher will ask a question about the books the students are reading. In a Circle, it is important to emphasize that the talking piece may be passed without speaking, and participants do not raise hands or interrupt.

Curriculum theorists have suggested that restorative justice can be blended with academic curriculum (Winn 2013, 2018; Evans & Lester, 2013; Winn et al., 2019;). Within ELA classrooms specifically, Winn (2013) argues for a “restorative English education” where all stories are honored and students learn about the feelings and experiences of other people. Winn (2013) notes that in restorative justice, all voices, those of both adults and children, are treated equally (p. 128). In the classroom, that means the teacher is not the keeper of all the knowledge—instead knowledge and skills are created together in the community of learners. Winn and colleagues (2019) argue to use ELA classrooms as sites of justice and transformation because they are natural places for storytelling. The book club unit described in this paper is an example of how to blend restorative justice and young adult literature study in an early adolescent classroom.

Young adult literature can be a strong entry point for a restorative justice unit, as there are ample opportunities for students to find text-to-self connections. Relating to characters in a book or being able to understand their motivations may help students apply the lessons learned in a novel to their own lives. Restorative justice as a practice values personal stories and the relationships people have in a community (Winn, 2013). If novels can help develop community by changing student prejudices, ELA teachers with classroom libraries and/or the ability to choose their own class texts will need to consider which texts best support their goal. Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of windows and mirrors for classroom texts is useful here: teachers need to consider how books help students discover more of who they are (identity) and who the other people around them are (empathy and community strengthening). While reading a book as an isolated experience may not produce more empathetic or perspective-taking students (Darragh, 2015), what a teacher does with a novel in a classroom may impact prosocial student behavior (Malo-Juvera, 2014); schools and teachers have been using novel study units to prevent bullying in primary and secondary classrooms for years.

In the book club unit, students are asked to read and reflect on young adult novels that explicitly or implicitly showcase restorative justice practices or philosophies, such as victim-offender dialogue, paying attention to harms and needs, and the importance of community. Students will read a high-interest young adult novel with restorative justice themes. They will discuss the book in small groups, respond to writing prompts that require them to engage with questions related to restorative justice, and critically reflect on their own assumptions and relationships verbally and in writing. At the end of the unit, not only should students have continued to grow in their academic reading, writing, and discourse, they should also have learned to give others the benefit of the doubt, question their prejudices and biases, and build healthy relationships.

Unit Plan

Setting and Context

The unit entitled *What is Justice?* is designed for secondary students (specifically grades 8-10) in ELA classes, however it could be adapted for lower or higher grades by modifying the questions, adapting the texts, and giving more or less time for reading or writing. It will take approximately five weeks. The unit is also meant for any school setting. The unit could take place at any point during the school year, but as it both builds community and challenges preconceived notions, there are advantages and challenges for different times of the school year depending on the level of community already established. Before the unit begins, students should have experience discussing in small and large groups, or this skill should be taught and modeled.

Unit Overview

This unit overview follows the framework of *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins et al., 2005). The essential questions of *What is Justice?* are: What is justice? How do our judgments of others affect the community? How can we build a more just community?

By the end of the unit:

Students will understand that:

- No person neatly fits into a particular label: at different times each person causes harm, is harmed, and is a witness to harm.
- Each person has different needs.
- Justice means different things to different people.

- Restorative justice is one way to repair harm when it occurs and build community before it does.

Students will know:

- Restorative justice is a way of thinking about the harms and needs in communities. It seeks to heal relationships when harm occurs by understanding harms, needs, and obligations (Zehr, 2015).
- Issues of justice are not objective and are nuanced. People's internal biases and snap judgments of others play into their perception of justice.
- Establishing norms before a restorative Circle ensures each member feels included and safe in the space.

Students will be able to:

- Read and annotate grade-level literature to prepare for class discussions and written assignments.
- Respectfully discuss their texts with small and large groups.
- Write reflectively and analytically about questions related to the dominant themes in the text.
- Make claims and support those claims with evidence from the text, as well as their own experience.

By the end of the unit, the students will use the text and resources from class, as well as their own experience, to respond to their book club book. In this example curriculum, the prompt is:

Using the primary text, short stories, journals, and class discussions, answer **one** of the following questions in a well-organized essay:

1. To what extent is harm healed at the end of your book club book?
2. Discuss how labels, biases, and prejudices are at work in your book club book.
3. Discuss the different roles characters play in your book club book (such as the person who causes harm or the person who has been harmed).

However, teachers should amend this assessment for the needs and learning styles of their classrooms.

Formative evidence that the students are growing in their understanding, knowledge, and skills include: annotations in the primary text, written reflections, participation in small-group discussion, participation in Circles, final student reflection.

Choosing the Right Novels

Many young adult books indirectly touch on restorative justice themes and would be appropriate for this book club or novel study unit. As a starting place, teachers may specifically consider the following three young adult books: *It Wasn't Me* by Dana Alison Levy (2018), *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999), and *Dear Justyce* by Nic Stone (2020). Across these stories, the characters either engage with a restorative practice or learn a lesson about identity or community. *It Wasn't Me* directly deals with Circle justice—the restorative justice practice of gathering people in a circle after someone has been harmed to hear each other's perspectives in the hope of healing harm. *Speak* is an enduring novel that shows the trauma of unhealed harm, and it invites a deep discussion of how the needs of each character are met or unmet. *Dear Justyce* is the sequel to Nic Stone's *Dear Martin*. The novel centers a Black boy, Quan, who is wrongfully imprisoned, and it shines a light on the injustices of the criminal justice system (particularly for Black and Latinx youth) and focuses on the lack of support for juvenile offenders. The text underscores the different ways Youth of Color and white youth experience the criminal justice system, allowing for readers to interrogate issues of racial power and privilege. For teachers, this book presents a lot of interesting questions for discussion and writing.

Pre-Reading Activities

Before the unit begins, students should have the opportunity to give input on their text selection. Allowing students some choice in their reading helps to motivate students and to develop their identity as a reader (Louie & Louie, 1992; Stevens, 2016). Winn and colleagues (2019) assert that a “responsive classroom environment that includes student choice and is centered on learners” can improve student-teacher relationships and minimize the number of encounters that lead to suspension or expulsion. The teacher may set up a book tasting where the students are introduced to the novels. The teacher may have physical copies of the books present for students to leaf through, or they may show pictures of the cover, include excerpts and quotes, identify the number of pages, and highlight reviews. Students then rank their choices of books. While the teacher will have the ultimate say in placing students into groups, every effort

should be made to give students their highest-rated book. This may only become impossible if a student is the only one to rate a particular book as their first choice.

Once the books have been assigned and book club groups of ideally 4-6 students are created, the unit begins. A small group of 4-6 allows for conversations of multiple viewpoints where everyone can have an opportunity to speak and listen, but too small of groups (2-3) can lead to stilted conversations or one person dominating the discussion. On the first day of the unit, the teacher sets up station rotations that (1) introduce the novels, (2) have the students write reflectively, (3) brainstorm about the unit's essential questions, and (4) work on community building. It is important not to skip the community building—even though it may seem to take away instructional time. Winn and colleagues (2019) have found that projects done restoratively should spend half the time centered on community building. To introduce the novels, the students may watch prepared book talks about the text, flip through their books and annotate or discuss what they notice, and/or begin reading the first few pages. The written reflection station asks: Write about a time you experienced justice or injustice. For brainstorming about the essential questions, students work together to respond to different questions like: "What is justice?" "What are examples of biases people have?" and "What is a just community?" on a graffiti board (chart paper and markers).

Building community is one of the most important components of the pre-reading activities because restorative justice teaching hinges on trusting the community. If students do not know each other well, they will not be as willing to be vulnerable in small or large group discussions. Teachers should frequently return to community-building activities, such as starting the class with a restorative Circle, throughout the year, and hopefully, they have already established a classroom culture of respect, trust, and curiosity.

Over the next two lessons, the class creates norms for discussions and begins thinking about the major themes of the texts they will read (justice, community, and healing). For example, on the second day, the teacher may start a Circle with community building (Pranis, 2005), ask students what they think of when they hear the word "justice" and reintroduce the graffiti board or brainstorming sheet from the previous day, and ask them the difference between justice and revenge. Students should have some direct instruction on what restorative justice is, its goals, and how it is different from retributive justice. This lesson is especially important

if the teacher chooses to end the unit by discussing the different roles characters play in the text (harming person, harmed person, etc.).

As students begin to read their texts, teachers should emphasize expectations for any annotating they want the students to complete—keeping in mind the goals of being a productive discussion member and the expectations for writing they will be asked to complete. Teachers should consider allowing students to choose the pace at which they will read their books given the dates for discussions and assessment, whether or not they as a group will allow reading ahead, and how they will support each other to get work completed. Depending on the grade level of students, assigning small group discussion jobs can be helpful. As examples, a "Discussion Leader" facilitates the discussion and begins with questions, a "Notetaker" records the salient points and questions, and a "Cheerleader" encourages others to participate.

Reading Activities

The biggest section of this unit is the reading activities. The lessons follow a pattern of reading and annotating, small group discussions, and classroom Circles.

Reading and Annotating. On reading and annotating days, students begin by responding to a journal prompt that connects to all the texts the students are reading, such as:

1. Think about one of your "labels." How do you think of yourself, or how do others think of you? To what extent is the label accurate?
2. What connections to yourself, to another text, or to the world can you make?
3. Who has been a positive influence in your life? How?
4. When have you been a part of a community? What did it mean to you?

These journal entries should change at various points in the unit depending on the conversations that have occurred. For example, after a Circle on ripple effects, students journal may respond to:

1. Reflect on a time when you had to make amends for harm you caused.
2. What have you been thinking about ripple effects since yesterday's conversation?

The purpose of these reflection questions is to connect the student to their text as well as consider the restorative themes

of the unit overall. They should not be graded, and teachers should consider making it optional for students to share what they write.

After journaling, the students read their books in class and annotate. Annotations can be guided with a prompt to help students prepare for the small-group discussion (such as, “Notice how the character’s backstory helps you understand their choices now,” “How do power and privilege play a role in this text?”), or they can be open-ended (such as, “take note of anything that has meaning for you”).

Small Group Discussion. In a small group discussion, students begin by practicing their questioning skills. Based on what they read the day before (on a Reading and Annotating Day), they should write an open-ended question they would like to ask their group. After writing their questions, students review the community norms and values they have created for discussions. Teachers may pose the same question from the previous lesson that guided the annotations to get discussions started, or they may have students start their own conversations—or give the students the choice!

While discussing, students should ground their responses in the group’s text, other texts they have read or viewed, or their own lived experiences. Students are encouraged to take notes so when they complete final written pieces, they will be able to draw from the wisdom of the discussions. Discussions times could range from fifteen minutes to as long as the students will speak, depending on the grade level of students and their background experience with book club discussions.

Teachers should resist chiming into these discussions unless they see harm is occurring or the group has misunderstood something factual in the book (such as a character’s name or the order of book events). Students should learn to trust themselves as valued members of the literary community and not see the teacher as the source of their academic validation. Teachers who foster a dialogic classroom where students respond to one another and expand on their own ideas are working to create restorative classrooms (Winn et al., 2019). Student-centered learning is doing the work of building a restorative community.

Classroom Circles. After some small-group discussion days, the class should gather together for a community Circle and/or large group instruction. In these Circles, students will connect the aspects of restorative justice they see in

their texts with restorative justice practices in the classroom. There may be three or more Circles in the unit, depending on the time allotted for the unit and the level of trust and community in the classroom. It is important to remember to foreground community building in these Circles and to reiterate the community values before each Circle gets underway. After the Circle concludes, the teacher will give a writing assignment and work time. Each suggested circle is described below.

The first Circle should come after the first small group discussion (Lesson 5 or 6 overall). When thinking about guiding students through restorative justice and deepening the relationships of the learning community, it can be helpful to start with a Circle on identity and perceived identities of others. In *Dear Justyce*, the characters Doc and Quan have a discussion early on about labels, and in *It Wasn’t Me*, the narrator Theo introduces the reader to his perception of the other students in Circle Justice with him. A teacher may choose to ask students to reflect on their own labels or identities (“baseball player,” “sister,” “Latino,” etc). This Circle may then move into discussions of stereotypes, questions about identity, or power and privilege, and the teacher should be prepared to listen and facilitate a discussion about any of those topics. The writing assignment for this class period asks students to: Write about how labels for other people are helpful or harmful in your life.

The second Circle comes when students are about halfway through their books and have been well-introduced to all the major characters. They should notice the challenges of the characters and be able to articulate the relationships the major characters have with one another. They may be starting to take notice of issues of race, gender, class, power, and privilege in their writing and small group discussions. Whether or not the first Circle centered power and privilege in its identity discussion, the second Circle should examine them. The teacher may show examples of how a character’s backstory led them to make certain choices. Then, the teacher may prompt students to consider how their own backstory has led them to make a choice. The teacher should consider the trust in the community before asking the Circle to recount times they have caused harm or been harmed. When it is the teacher’s turn to speak, they may choose to remind students that just because we can understand what led a person to do harm, that does not mean the harm is excused. The writing assignment for this day may ask the students to: Describe a situation, real or imagined, where

learning about someone's backstory in your own life could change the way you saw them.

The third Circle introduces the class to "ripple effects" and is the Circle with the most teacher-talk. It comes when students are between halfway and three quarter's finished with their books. The teacher may show a video clip demonstrating the ripple effects of kindness or "paying it forward" at the beginning of class and ask students to notice those ripples. Then, the teacher may ask students to think of a way that either harm or kindness could ripple out. For younger students, the teacher may frame the conversation within the classroom, with older students the teacher could include the wider community. Then, the students should consider the ripple effects within their books. How do the actions of one of the characters affect those around them? How are they helped or harmed by those ripples? In the written reflection that follows this Circle, teachers should consider the level of trust within their community: either by asking students to reflect on how an action they took harmed others (high level of classroom trust) or asking them to reflect on the ripple effects of an imagined scenario (low or building level of classroom trust).

The final Circle occurs after students have completed their books and turned in their final writing assignments, and its purpose is to reflect on the unit as a whole. How does the text read in book club connect to the students' and teacher's lives? How has their understanding of justice shifted or not shifted over the unit? Depending on the level of engagement over the ends of the books and students' connectedness to their final writing assignments, this Circle could last two class periods.

Post-Reading Activities and Assessment

After students have completed their books and their last small group discussions, they will demonstrate their learning with a unit assessment. Teachers may choose to have students work in groups or independently, on written or multimodal projects (such as a video PSA, speech, or presentation on restorative justice) as fits the learning needs of the classroom. Described here is a traditional written essay for teachers working to assess formal student writing.

Directions: Respond to both of the following prompts.

(1) Using the primary text, short stories, journals, and class discussions, answer **one** of the following questions in a well-organized essay:

1. To what extent is harm healed at the end of your book club book?
2. Discuss how labels, biases, and prejudices are at work in your book club book.
3. Discuss how the roles of victim, offender, and community are or are not at work in your book club book.

(2) Using everything you've learned in this unit, how has your book club book and your new learning affected how you see others in this classroom? In this school? In the wider world? What lessons are you taking with you?

Of course, teachers should provide rubrics with clear expectations for both writing prompts. Teachers may choose to spend one day with the students peer-editing their responses, depending on the classroom procedures for feedback and reflection already in place.

Conclusion

This example unit plan built on the principles of restorative justice English education should provide a roadmap for teachers who want to make their classrooms more restorative while providing academically rigorous content. Teachers have a lot on their plate attempting to balance teaching social and emotional skills as well as content, but this unit has students practicing literacy skills like making a claim and supporting with concrete evidence, participating in and leading small and large group discussions, and annotating literature while still building community and fostering empathy. All students should have the opportunity to learn in environments that cultivate trust, uphold justice, and question their stereotypes and internal biases so that misunderstandings and assumptions in these areas do not prompt conflict.

A restorative ELA curriculum should be available to those who have faced injustice and are considered at-risk as well as those with more privilege because all students deserve to learn in a community that values each student's perspective and works for justice (Winn, 2013). Every person can be a liberator or an oppressor, an ally or an adversary. Whether they come from homogenous schools or diverse, low or high income, everyone can gain from a curriculum that broadens perspectives, asks students to be vulnerable and courageous, and encourages the development of a trusting community. Our society could look very different—more tolerant and peaceable—if youth grow up with curricula that broaden

their understanding of and empathy for other people and ask them to take responsibility for harm they have created. A curriculum like the one described here is a stepping stone toward that more peaceful future.

Glossary of Restorative Justice Terms

Circle: A physical circle of participants and place for sharing and listening. There should be nothing within the circle except a focal point that has meaning for the participants (no desks, chairs, or backpacks, ideally).

Circle Keeper: A facilitator or participant who opens and closes the circle, emphasizes the community values, and models listening and participating.

Talking Piece: A token or item of significance that identifies who is speaking in the Circle. Without the talking piece, the participants should be listening (including the Circle Keeper).

Note: At times the terms “victim,” “offender,” and “community member” or “bystander” appear in restorative justice literature. However, I resist those terms in this curriculum to emphasize the dynamic nature of these roles. Additionally, speaking specifically of sexual assault, many activists are moving away from the term “victim” in favor of “survivor.”

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Mary M. McConnaha is a doctoral student in the Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education program at Michigan State University. She received her M.A. in Curriculum and Instruction for Social Justice from Loyola University Maryland, and she previously taught English Language Arts in the middle school classroom.

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