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Untangling While We Weave: Educators of Color Navigating Trust in Schoolwide Restorative Justice Reform

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Untangling While We Weave
Educators of Color Navigating Trust in Schoolwide Restorative Justice Reform

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the experiences of educators of color implementing restorative justice practices within the school-prison nexus. Drawing upon carceral progressivism and the school-prison nexus frameworks, it examines how these educators navigate building and repairing relational trust while transforming punitive disciplinary policies. Through interviews, pod-mapping, and community healing circles, the study elicits narratives from five Bay Area educators committed to restorative justice.

Four key themes emerge: 1) interweaving intentional restorative justice structures with authentic connection; 2) consistent care for fostering relational trust; 3) moving at the speed of trust to avoid moral injury; and 4) intergenerational wisdom and collaboration in sustaining restorative justice work. The study proposes a restorative trust model, extending Charles Feltman's framework by situating it within the context of restorative justice work in schools shaped by carceral logics.

The study provides insights and recommendations for educators, school leaders, teacher education programs, and policymakers advancing restorative justice and dismantling the school-prison nexus. By centering the voices of educators of color and proposing a contextualized restorative trust model, it contributes to the literature on restorative justice in education and offers a vision for building just, equitable, and liberatory environments for young people.

Keywords: restorative justice, school-prison nexus, relational trust, educators of color, restorative methodology, restorative trust, carceral progressivism

Dedication

For the children of San Francisco
we lost my first five years teaching,
for the children who persist still,
for anyone and everyone
dreaming of that otherwise elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

I honor the words of Thay Thich Nhat Hanh here and the truth of interbeing.

Thank you to the lands that have sustained me, and the indigenous peoples who have permitted me to be a guest on the lands they have stewarded for millennia. I grew up among the cottonwoods along the river known as the Rio Grande, aware of the smallness of my existence against the stark relief of the Sandia Mountains and the endless desert skies in what is now known as Albuquerque, New Mexico, the ancestral homelands of the Tiwa. I am grateful to be a guest now on Ohlone land, and I am grateful for those who go by many names: the Tamien Ohlone who host Santa Clara University; the Muwekma Ohlone who host Stanford, my first home when I first left the desert; the Ramaytush Ohlone with whom I share space as an educator, and the Yelamu Ohlone who have stewarded the land I have called home for nearly a decade now. These histories, these people, the dark waters of the Bay, the rolling hills and the rolling fog have all nourished me.

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Tyler, we're ADB forever. You know where you are in these pages.

To my sister, you are my heart.

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Introduction

It was a sunny December afternoon in San Francisco when I was preparing for my last class of the day with my 8th grade students, and I heard a loud commotion outside in the hallway: a lot of laughter, shouting, booing. From prior experience, I knew there was a student fight either brewing or happening. As I came to my classroom doorway, I saw students pulling out their phones and immediately barked at them to put those away and get to class. To my luck, they followed my instructions and scarpered.

When I fully stepped outside, a young, tiny Black boy was lunging at a taller Black girl who was ducking his shots. He screamed, "I'll kill you, I'm going to kill you b—h!" and launched his whole body at her. At that moment, a Black paraeducator and I put our bodies in the way and the young girl darted into the 7th grade classroom right next to me.

Given absolutely no other choice, I put my arms around him, and he tried to worm out of my grip. Despite his very small stature, he was immensely strong, and I knew at that moment it wasn't his first scrap. He kept screaming "I'm going to kill you, I'll kill you, fucking b—h!" and he couldn't seem to perceive my hold on him. He thrashed in my arms, elbowed me in the chest, causing me to lose my breath and eventually body-checked me into the wall. Meanwhile, the Black paraeducator and Latino science teacher were clearing the hallway and trying to lock the 7th grade classroom door to prevent him from accessing the girl he was trying to attack. I just held him in my arms and neutrally repeated, "You're okay. You're okay. I've got you."

At some point his attempts to get out of my grip slowed down, but he'd get another wind and try another time. It was at this moment that I noticed a white woman standing near me, just

watching the whole thing. I looked up at her and she meekly said, "I'm the social worker

substituting for today." We had previously lost our social worker a couple months ago and this

was my first time seeing this stranger, seated on the floor as an escalated child flailed around in

my arms.

"Where's the principal?" I asked. "We need her. Now."

"She's on the other campus. So is the assistant principal and the counselor."

"Well go get them!" I yelled.

At some point the student calmed down enough to just sit there by the door, but he

insisted he wouldn't move until the other student came out so he could kill her. But this was

enough for me to let him go. I waited until the Black paraeducator sat down quietly next to him,

speaking to him in a quiet voice, and I knew that we could figure it out from there. It is at this

point that I think it is important to name that the student had an Individualized Education Plan, or

an IEP. This particular paraeducator was the one tasked with working with this student on a

regular basis and had the best relationship with him. I knew at that moment I had done the best I

could to deescalate the situation, and knew that whatever remained could not be done in my

capacity as a classroom teacher nor in my identities as a non-Black woman of color in the space.

I stepped past them to return to my classroom.

I walked in to see my eighth graders' wide-eyed, lost expressions. I tried to open my

mouth and get class started, but instantly tears welled in my eyes and my voice cracked.

"I'm…not really okay right now, so I'm going to step outside for a bit. Can you all get started on

the free read?" They nodded. I had the fortune of having a classroom assistant show up at the

door at that moment, and they offered to cover my class. The student had been moved since then to the office, I presumed. In the hallway, I burst into large, ugly sobs.

I tell this story for a few reasons. One, it is just one moment among many that is normal in many under-resourced public schools across the country. A simple search engine inquiry or venture into the world of what used to be known as #EduTwitter-–the pocket on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, where educators share thoughts and experiences—will quickly generate news stories, TikTok videos, and other media capturing these moments of school violence with dysregulated adults and children alike. Two, this moment is just a snapshot of a much more complex story, one where every moment and character has a backstory and aftermath that contributes to the greater question: How did we get here? What structures in our school policies and practices were absent, and which ones led to this incident unfolding the way it did? And the third reason is why *I'm* here, writing a dissertation.

When I tell this story in-person to other people, their faces fall and their hearts break, and they say "I'm so sorry that happened to you," usually in shock at what that student said and did. But I push on, and let them know that for me, the physical pain wasn't the part that brought me to tears. It wasn't what pushed me out of the profession of classroom teaching and working in classroom teaching. What absolutely crushed me was the moment when the white woman social worker stared at the three adults of color, and told us that the institutional leaders we were supposed to rely on were completely absent. No one was coming to help us anytime soon, as far as I knew at that moment. This abandonment of schools by leadership at myriad levels rings true the further we move from the advent of COVID-19 into a new reality.

So this is a story of betrayal, and this is a dissertation about trust.

Statement of the Problem and Background

The National Education Association, one of the largest teachers unions in the country, recently conducted a survey asking its members how serious of a problem they considered certain challenges. Out of 3,600 respondents, ninety percent said stress and burnout were a serious problem and generally they did not feel trust or respect from the public, their schools, or students (GBAO, 2022):

Figure 1
Survey Responses to Serious Issues Facing Educators
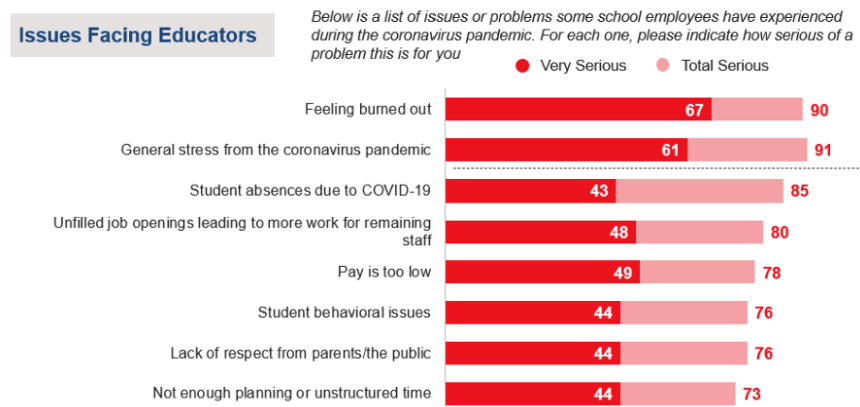
Note. This figure was reproduced from the National Education Association report.

The survey also found that 55% of members were considering retiring or leaving the profession earlier than they expected, and this number was even higher for Black and Latinx educators (pg. 2). This is concerning given that the teaching profession as a whole has historically struggled in the last fifty years to recruit and retain educators of color. California teachers are not immune from these national trends, as half of retired teachers said Covid-19 related struggles led to an earlier than expected retirement, and many teachers cited feeling overwhelmed between staffing shortages and an inability to meet student's socioemotional needs and dealing with increased

behavioral challenges (Lambert, 2022). All in all, trust in education in the United States seems to be at an all-time low.

According to an April 2022 survey of parents in the United States, K-12 education was listed as a top concern to survey respondents, right above crime and gun violence (Kamenetz & Jennings-Brown, 2022). The survey also said that most families seemed to be satisfied with the performance of their own school, this speaks to the culture wars raging around the country and the existential crisis around education. Even if families do have some satisfaction and trust with schools, there is no question that ideological wars around education rage on multiple fronts: people across the country are creating talking points about Critical Race Theory being taught in classrooms, calling teachers groomers and arbiters of indoctrination for teaching about gender identity and appropriate pronoun use, and that classroom educators are failing students because they opt for one reading approach over another (Love, 2023). Families are deeply anxious about their children's place in the world, especially after the onset and in the ongoing crisis of COVID-19. After the 'Red Wave' of the last few years, it is clear that teachers too have an eroding sense of trust in the school systems, as teachers all across the country have organized labor strikes to protest low wages, dangerous working conditions, and an absence of structural support, all while school board members across the country face death threats and political recall efforts. Schools in the United States are politicized sites, and increasingly teachers bear the brunt of the demonization that the right assail upon schools as institutions.

According to Edutopia (2021), educators of color are leaving the profession at a faster rate than their white counterparts, and the whole field is seeing an exodus of educators. Educators of all races cite discipline challenges as a major reason to leave, and the socioemotional challenges students have that lead to increased conflict with peers and teachers

have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Black teachers in particular experience an "invisible tax" in which they are asked more than white counterparts to be the "front line" of socioemotional challenges and discipline issues, and this can compromise the overall performance of educators of color (Terada, 2021). This makes them more susceptible and targeted for dismissal and remediation, rather than receiving the support and care they need as educators in a challenging profession. Educators of color perpetually face racist microaggressions when the institution relies on them for discipline: "'Black teachers are being inundated with fixing discipline,' said [Toya] Frank. 'The number of teachers in interviews who have talked about people marching Black and Brown boys to their classes to fix them and get them straight, that's a microaggression'" (Terada, 2021).

It is the area of school discipline and behavior management systems where I draw my attention in this project. Burdened by racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011) and the invisible tax of school discipline, educators of color are then often on the front lines of witnessing and in some cases feeling like they are completely complicit in the very harm they entered education to try and undo or dismantle. I was one of many naive young educators who thought that excellent teaching and deep relationship building with my students would be enough to enact institutional change, and while that was true in some cases, it wasn't enough to sustain me personally as a person in the profession or as a person in this world. While the Bay Area and California at large are known to be liberal or progressive places where restorative justice practices have been set into policy, what I found with my fellow educators were myriad hypocrisies. Where I thought would be a celebration of equity, multiculturalism, and restorative justice, I found performativity, antiblackness[1], and permissive exclusion. As more and more teachers leave the field and others

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[1] Antiblackness, as a reminder, explains the dehumanization of Black people

are reluctant to enter the profession, the field of education will need to foster many different kinds of trust—institutional, relational, and politicized (Vakil & De Royston, 2019)— in very deep-rooted ways in order to avert or recover from the inevitable compounding crises that will come with the teacher shortage, and make real gains in cultivating climates and culture of belonging for teachers and students of color.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The last piece of this puzzle lies in restorative justice in schools. While there are many things that contribute to teaching the whole child when it comes to children of color, it is approaches to student behavior and school discipline that has the most dire impact on student outcomes. Punitive approaches to Black and Brown children in schools enact the school-to-prison-pipeline or what Erica Meiners conceptualizes as the school-prison nexus (Meiners, 2011). As explained by Subini Annamma:

> Erica Meiners (2007) was one of the earliest to conceptualize the ways schools related to prisons; the "school-prison nexus" Meiners used to describe the "*web of punitive threads* [emphasis mine]…which capture the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration" (p. 32) better captures relationships between schools and criminalization.

Schools are not the last stop on the road for students of color before they are caught in the jaws of the prison system, but rather an institution that actively participates and contributes to the criminalization of children of color. When children are subjected to punitive policies and practices of surveillance, when parents and educators feel helpless in the face of these death-making institutions to stop their children from being criminalized and denied the learning

and joy every child is entitled to, this also fundamentally fractures the trust between school organizations and their stakeholders.

I felt such a profound sense of betrayal in the story I shared, but I did not give up on the notion of restorative justice itself. But no one in leadership came to follow up with me the next day, or even the week after. By the time my principal had asked about my wellbeing, I had already filed a worker's compensation form in the event that I needed greater care from being body-checked into the wall and elbowed in the chest, hitting my head in the process. I spoke to the paraeducator who deescalated the student and some teachers about the incident, but I never debriefed the incident with the principal, assistant principal, or counselor who was offsite, nor did I ever see that social worker again. From my understanding of the event, the students who were involved in the individual conflict were brought together after a two- or three-day suspension for a restorative re-entry meeting and conference. I remember receiving an email that they were able to come out of that interaction laughing in camaraderie, and I felt a sense of relief. While I would continue to help de-escalate the students in question in future incidents, and sometimes that included similar degrees of physicality, those students never clashed again to the same level. Over time, we were able to reach a point where the student who threatened murder even walked away from potential conflict and went to find a quiet place to be with his anger on his own. In many ways, I know that a web of relationships provided opportunities for those students to grow and find alternatives to conflict and harm.

However, I had a tenuous and fraught relationship with my school administrator, school counselor, and the absence of social workers for the rest of the year. I also know, looking back, that I missed some key opportunities as an educator to connect to these students in a different way and take responsibility for my own contributions to their sense of community, safety, and

belonging. While I believed in the work of restorative justice, I did not truly believe that we effectively implemented schoolwide practices, especially when I look at how the school struggled with disabled Black and Latine students in other ways throughout the year. Students frequently avoided class—known in public school terminology as 'elopement'—and they engaged in regular conflict whether in the classroom, hallways, or out on the blacktop during lunch and breaks. Despite the district's formal commitment to restorative practices, I have found that the Bay is much more similar to the pervasively violent dynamics outlined in *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, antiblackness and schooling* in San Francisco by Savannah Shange. Multiculturalism is often at odds with affirmation of Black life rather than in concert with it, and this leads to perpetuated antiblackness and continued criminalization despite the presence of racial diversity.

When I conceptualize my wonderings about this incident as a example of restorative justice in school gone awry (but not quite wrong), I try to root it in my understanding the Bay Area's progressive carceralism, restorative justice as a web of obligations to each other, the school-prison nexus as a web of punitive threads, and trust as the threads of these interconnected processes. If the state is the operating authority for the web of punitive threads, enacting violence on individuals based on transgressions against the law, restorative justice offers an opportunity to weave a different fabric of community, where harm and trust can be repaired between individuals to create a stronger whole.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework
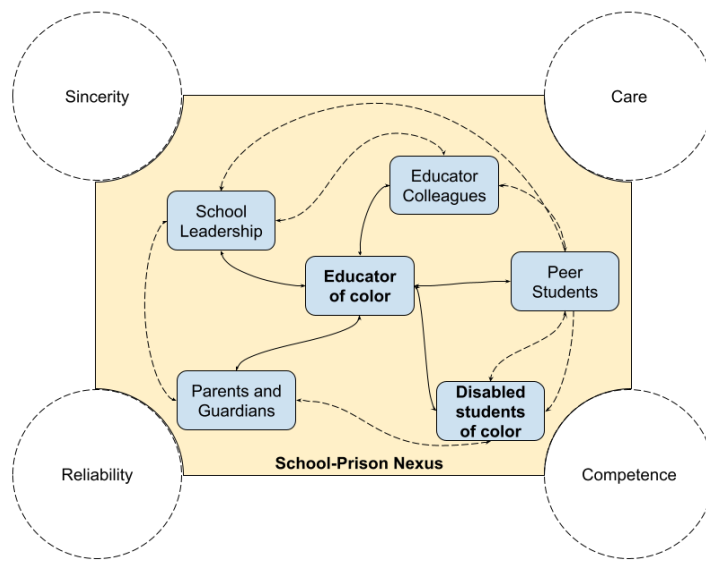
Research Questions

My research questions for the study are as follows:

- How do educators of color describe their school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms as they are entwined in the school prison nexus?
- How do educators of color describe their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust in stakeholders when implementing restorative justice processes in schools?
- How can we learn from these descriptions of trust to better restorative justice practices in schools?

Definition of relevant terms

- **People of color:** a social category originating in the 1970s to refer to people who are racially marginalized in the United States.

- **Multiply marginalized**: similar to terms like intersectionality or the experience of 'double jeopardy,' this refers to when individuals are marginalized not in just one social construct but many (e.g. being marginalized by one's race as an Indigenous person and also marginalized by one's disability)

- **School-prison nexus:** an alternative framework to the school-to-prison pipeline, the school-prison nexus refers to the 'web of punitive threads' designed to ensnare socially marginalized people and subject them to state-sanctioned violence

- **Restorative justice:** "Restorative justice (RJ) is a broad term that encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches for avoiding and addressing harm, responding to violations of legal and human rights, and collaboratively solving problems" (Fronius et al., 2019; Zehr, 2002)**.**

- **Restorative practices**: Restorative practices (RP) constitute a framework utilizing informal and formal processes that proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing. Restorative Practices is commonly used in school settings, to distinguish its differences from the legal system's framework for justice.

- **Prison-Industrial Complex (PIC) Abolition**: a movement and philosophy advocating for the complete dismantling of the prison industrial complex, which includes prisons, youth detention centers, and the systems and ideologies that sustain them (Meiners, 2011).

- **Trust**: making someone valuable to yourself vulnerable to another person's actions, with some confidence that they will honor your vulnerability (Feltman, 2021)

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to more intentionally develop the relationship between the literature of relational trust in schools and restorative justice implementation by educators of color in schools, who are disproportionately affected by school discipline policies. While the introductory story was one about how I felt betrayed by schools, I am more interested in what it will take to bring educators of color back to the field if they have fled these dangerous conditions, and what it will take to recruit new educators of color who can trust the schools they choose to work with. The aim of this study is to make connections between relational trust and restorative justice in schools, and to theorize the following:

    a) a framework for trust through an abolitionist lens, and

    b) opportunities to identify the "success" of restorative justice implementation beyond suspension and expulsion rates.

I have concerns that when we speak to the value of restorative justice practices only in relation to its potential to disrupt the school-prison nexus, we run the risk of pigeon-holing the value of these practices only in in a deficit-centered lens, that this is the "set of practices to implement" when children of color are a problem. I have questions about the limitations of assessing the success of restorative justice when we mainly focus on decreasing suspension and expulsion rates, namely the experience of the adults of color who are tasked with leading the charge on this implementation because they are assumed to be the "right" people and therefore have to take on more of the burden.

Limitations of the Study

This study did not examine disciplinary outcomes such as suspension and expulsion in-depth in a quantitative fashion, as I did not have the capacity or time to determine if the presence or absence of suspensions or expulsion means that restorative justice is "working." In fact this is an intentional decision to move away from this as a metric and instead examine trust as another measure of restorative justice and its implementation in schools. This study will also not look at the success of restorative justice as a school reform, as the success of school reform is often measured across multiple years at a single institution at the very least.

Organization of Study

This dissertation is organized as follows:

Chapter 1: Ensnared in the Web introduces the problem of study, the research question and research aims.

Chapter 2: Restorative Justice, the School-Prison Nexus, and the Vitality of Trust gives an overview of the existing literature on relational trust in schools and restorative justice practices in the school system, particularly as they pertain to educators of color and students of color in the school-prison nexus.

Chapter 3: Crafting a Restorative Methodology discusses the qualitative methodologies—namely pod-mapping and community healing circles—used to design the study, and how restorative justice principles informed the basis of the research method processes.

Chapter 4: The Groundwork of Restorative Justice and Trust covers the overview of findings and discussions, outlining the participant profiles in their school context. The chapter also shares the first emergent theme of the study, which answers the first research question and establishes the groundwork in which restorative practitioners of color navigate school contexts and trust.

Chapter 5: Gesturing towards Freedom gives a summary of the remaining three emergent themes and findings of the study regarding the interaction between relational trust and restorative justice implementation in schools.

Chapter 6: What is Trustworthy is Worthwhile offers up my personal conclusions and interpretations, with recommendations for future areas of research and policy change.

Positionality Statement

As a Vietnamese/American nonbinary femme who worked in public schools for six years from the time I was a student teacher and now works as Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in an independent school that serves students with dyslexia and related learning differences and disabilities, I have felt firsthand what it is like to confront conflict and violence in the school space, and seen how other teachers have approached similar challenges. I shared my personal narrative in the beginning to illustrate how I literally embodied these challenges around harm, safety, betrayal, and trust. I also think it's important to name that while others may have decided restorative justice in schools for lesser, equal, or greater incidents of violence than the story I began with, I remain committed to the project of restorative justice because of my political orientations as an Engaged Buddhist and a prison-industrial complex abolitionist.

I wanted to examine my own experiences as a restorative justice practitioner working in a school space alongside the experiences of others in different titles, school contexts, and identities. While titles, contexts, and identities may different, I wanted to know how the shared experience of being restorative justice educators and practitioners in Bay Area schools shape our understanding of the work to make communities of safety and belonging for disabled students of color in particular. My deep knowledge of schools, restorative justice, and culturally responsive pedagogy enabled me to build relationships and assess the reflections shared with me in a responsive and respectful way. I was interested in interrogating my own assumptions and biases about these processes, and learning how other practitioners navigate challenging situations around trust.

Chapter 2: Restorative Justice, the School-Prison Nexus, and the Vitality of Trust
Reviewing the Literature

Overview

Having established the need to research the nature of trust in schoolwide restorative justice, this section summarizes the major themes of the literature around restorative justice and relational trust in schools. I will review the most recent understandings of restorative justice as a philosophical orientation to harm and wrongdoing in society, and then outline the history of exclusionary discipline in schools and how that enacts the school prison nexus on multiply-marginalized students of color.

Restorative Justice (RJ) and relational trust are two concepts that have gained increasing attention in the last twenty years of research in education. Restorative justice or restorative practices emphasize repairing harm caused by wrongdoing and rebuilding relationships between the parties involved. Historically marginalized communities such as people of color and disabled people in particular have advocated for restorative justice as school reform as an alternative to traditionally zero tolerance approaches to school discipline. Relational trust is based on the idea that positive social relationships are essential for effective and sustainable collaboration for a co-constructivist approach to learning. Restorative justice in education is usually limited to discussions around school and classroom discipline, whereas relational trust spans the entire domain of topics in education, from teacher-student dynamics in the classroom and retention of educators of color to institutional trust in the process of school reform. However, despite their differences in the literature, both restorative justice practices and relational trust in school reform emphasize a need for voice, being heard, and co-constructing inclusive processes that center historically marginalized populations to ultimately prioritize learning in the process of achieving

outcomes. For restorative justice to be fully implemented as a school reform rather than in individual contexts, it is crucial to examine how relational trust impacts restorative justice as an overall school reform process.

This literature review explores the relationship between restorative justice and relational trust. Specifically, it investigates the following research question: Under what conditions are educators of color experiencing relational trust as it relates to restorative justice school reform? To answer this question, I conducted a comprehensive review of existing research on both restorative justice and relational trust, including studies from a range of disciplines. I utilized research databases such as ERIC and ProQuest, filtering for full-length articles that were peer-reviewed and published in the last twenty or so years. I also examined major systematic literature reviews by previous researchers, looking for landmark studies and a diverse range of articles that addressed school climate and relationships. Additionally, I employed the use of an artificial intelligence (AI) discovery app created by researchers called Research Rabbit to further identify the connections and relationships of these studies as they relate to my research question. Lastly, I pulled from readings and materials from and utilized by restorative justice practitioners themselves, whether within or outside the field of education even if these practices have yet to be fully studied by academics.

This review highlights the current state of research on the topic, including key findings and debates. Additionally, I identify gaps in the literature and discuss the significance of the review for advancing our understanding of restorative justice and relational trust in schools. Ultimately, rview will hopefully contribute to the development of more effective strategies for addressing experiences of betrayal in schools, fostering trust, and building positive, sustainable school climates where everyone has access to feelings of belonging.

Restorative Justice in Schools for Educators and Children of Color

Given that research around restorative justice is relatively nascent in both implementation and research in the field of education, one single conclusive definition of or approach for restorative justice has yet to be articulated. However, for the purposes of this literature review and subsequent research study, I operationalize the following definition summarized from Howard Zehr: Restorative justice is an "alternative framework for thinking about wrongdoing," in which justice is focused less on what wrongdoers "deserve" and more on the needs of the wrongdoer, the individuals harmed, and the community as a whole (Zehr, 2002). I will be using this definition because I think it most holistically captures the common understanding of restorative justice. In particular, I apply the abolitionist view on restorative justice as articulated by legal scholars such as Vincenzo Ruggiero and prison-industrial complex abolitionists such as Mariame Kaba.

It is generally agreed upon that restorative justice or restorative practices can trace their roots back to two major community movements: the clearest connection is to the Mennonite communities in North America in the 1970s, and the second is that of indigenous peacemaking traditions in North American and New Zealand's indigenous populations (Fronius et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Lustick, 2020; Morrison, 2005; O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020; Zehr, 2002). Restorative justice is a response to punitive or retributive approaches in the legal system, in which justice defines the roles of victim and offender. In punitive or retributive justice, justice is determining the "appropriate" punishment to the offender; the harm that the offender caused must be "paid back." However, the emphasis on the crime or harm done is interpreted as wrongdoing against the state more than it is about the victim or the offender. The state expects

the both parties to accept the state-determined results and there is little inclusion of individual experiences (Ruggiero, 2011). Where punitive justice focuses on the offender and the harm that should be inflicted in equal measure to the crime committed, restorative justice seeks to shift towards the needs of all parties, humanizing both the victim and the offender while meeting the needs of the community. In the legal system, this often means bringing together the victim and offender for formal conversations where all parties are heard such as Victim-Offender Dialogues, or VODs, typically guided by a restorative justice practitioner. The offender has an opportunity to hear how their actions harmed the victim and in doing so, gains a sense of empathy and feedback so that they understand their impact and hopefully do two things: feel genuine remorse for their actions and actively participate in repairing the harm. Repair is a major component of restorative justice. The victim may regain a sense of agency by sharing their experiences, and all parties can contribute to the restoration of a sense of community.

However, while restorative justice in spirit attempts to humanize both offender and victim, abolitionists would caution that without a critical view of the role of the state in a restorative justice approach, may humanize only the offender and continue to victimize the victim. In fact, abolitionists seek to eliminate the legal structures of the state in the first place, arguing that the roles of 'offender' and 'victim' as well as the defining of 'crime' continue to dehumanize all parties involved for the benefit of the state (Zehr, 2002). Victims may be trapped in the very definition of themselves as a victim as the legal system assigns helplessness to the role of the victim and acts on their behalf, often superseding their own decision to participate in restorative justice processes. Abolitionists practicing restorative justice still center the needs of the people involved but rather than trying to ascribe judgment of what constitutes a 'crime' or 'harm,' view crimes instead "become a starting point for a real dialogue, and not for an equally

clumsy answer in the form of a spoonful of pain" (Ruggiero, 2011, p.7). In education, the language that schools utilize can vary, as some use the term restorative justice (RJ) and others use restorative practices (RP). Restorative justice was originally coined and configured in the realm of the legal justice system, so some schools want to highlight the use of practices because these interventions can be utilized beyond the scope of rule-breaking (McCluskey et al., 2008). Restorative justice in the legal system is usually confined to the victim, offender, and mediating judicial bodies, but restorative practices in education can bring in many members of the community, including teachers, students, bystanders, and family members (Morrison, 2005). Grounded in these origins, there are some common themes across the literature regarding the principles that guide restorative justice and key features of implementation in schools.

Punitive Justice and the School-Prison Nexus

Punitive approaches to behavior in schools not only mimic the conventional justice system but collude with carceral structures in order to constitute what is known as the school-prison nexus, criminalizing multiply marginalized youth such as students of color and students with disabilities. It has been widely documented since school desegregation in the 1970s that students of color, and Black students in particular, have been referred, suspended, and expelled at higher rates than the white counterparts and for more subjective determinations such as defiance or loitering (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). Zero tolerance policies also emerged in US schools in the 1990s as "a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). The American Psychological Association found that despite

prevailing ideas about the effectiveness of zero tolerance and punitive policies in schools;

schools that employed zero tolerance policies had poorer school climates, did not reduce

violence rates, and revealed disproportionate impacts on Black students and students with

disabilities (p. 854-855). The American Psychological Association then suggested restorative

justice as one method through which schools and school districts could shift away from zero

tolerance policies. Punitive policies in education also have a disproportionately adverse effect on

the educators of color expected to enforce them (Center for Black Educator Development, 2022;

Skiba et al., 2002; Terada, 2021).

While some scholars theorize the phenomenon of increased suspension and expulsion of

students as the "school to prison pipeline," the conceptualization of the school-prison nexus,

more accurately describes the painful experiences of all people of color whether students or

adults in schools and additionally more clearly identifies the need for an abolitionist approach to

restorative justice in schools. Via Subini Annamma (2018), the school prison nexus is defined

thusly:

> Erica Meiners (2007) was one of the earliest to conceptualize the ways schools
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> related to prisons; the "school-prison nexus" Meiners used to describe the "web of
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> punitive threads...which capture the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of
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> the intersections of education and incarceration" (p. 32) better captures
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> relationships between schools and criminalization. (Annamma, 2018)

The school-prison nexus illuminates to us how multiply marginalized young people of color are

more vulnerable to both institutional neglect and state violence in both the school and prison

systems simultaneously. Meiners uses the term "web," a word regularly echoed in restorative

justice frameworks as well as a "web of relationships" or a "web of obligations" (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Zehr, 2002). Damien Sojoyner (2013) extends this explanation of the school-prison nexus and asserts that not only does the school-to-prison pipeline insufficiently explain the relationship between school and prisons, but the "structure of public education is just as and maybe even more so culpable in the enclosure of Black freedom, which in turn has informed the development of prisons" (p. 242). Educational enclosure, he argues, is the first aim of schooling in the United States, the first location where the joys and dignity of Black people and especially Black youth are crushed and entrapped. He cautions that the school to prison pipeline (STPP) not only inadequately describes the relationship between schools and prisons, it unfortunately also defangs the work of community organizers, assuming that education for Black children is an inherent good compared to prison rather than a necessary technology to dehumanize the racially marginalized and expand a prison nation.

Additionally, research over the years has demonstrated that African American students experience school suspension and expulsion at higher rates than their peers irrespective of behavior (Mizel et al., 2016). Meanwhile, students having any special education category increases the likelihood of suspension, with some exceptions for Speech-Language Impairment and/or Low Incidence categories (Sullivan et al., 2014). Increased incidences of suspension also increase the likelihood of interacting with the juvenile justice system (Annamma, 2018). Thus, decreasing the application of exclusionary policies has been of increasing importance for educators and schools committed to serving multiply marginalized young people within schools. For these reasons, it is generally agreed that exclusionary policies in schools are rooted in antiblackness (Fronius et al., 2019).

The Shift to Restorative Justice in Education

Restorative justice has been recommended as a promising alternative to zero tolerance policies and overreliance on exclusionary discipline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Jain et al., 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014). Restorative justice principles have entered the discourse and been adopted for practices and policies as early as the 1990s according to the literature (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Zehr, 2002). It is important here to note that different programs utilize different language or terminology, alternating between restorative justice (RJ) or restorative practices (RP). Some do not even include the word justice in their programming (Karp and Breslin, 2001). Buxmont Academy (Karp & Breslin, 2001) was one of the first to use practices rather than justice because to those practitioners, the idea of justice is "elusive and virtually unattainable" (p. 267). For the purposes of this literature review and study, it is important to stay grounded in the term 'restorative justice' because while justice is certainly elusive, schools are sites where students and adults alike practice being in community and it is the process of coming to agreement and negotiation that over time crystallizes our shared sense of justice.

Restorative justice in schools can differ from restorative justice in juvenile and criminal justice institutions because the nature of relationships in each context is profoundly complex and dependent on the context (Morrison, 2005). Where juvenile and criminal justice in the United States is mostly standardized, schools in the 21st century vary greatly across public district, public charter, parochial, independent, and private contexts. The degree of utilization also varies from site to site. Some treat restorative justice as "low-level" conflict resolution, while others use it as a formal follow-up to an exclusionary mandate (Fronius et al., 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Jones, 2022; Karp & Breslin, 2001). Morrison notes that the most common and effective practices in

initial implementation, whether formal or informal, are inherently reactive (Morrison, 2005).

While some schools aim to eliminate punitive practices entirely, others embed restorative justice

principles into existing structures that have been historically punitive, such as the 'Restorative

Justice Center' at Hawthorne Elementary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, wherein the existing

after-school detention program was re-envisioned a place of prosocial learning and repair of

harm (Ashworth et al., 2008). For schoolwide integration of restorative practices, the

International Institute for Restorative Practices identified up to 11 "Essential Elements" along the

continuum (Acosta et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016):

Table 1

11 Essential Elements of the Restorative Practices Continuum

Essential practices	Sample indicators of proficiency in practice
1. Affective statements	Use "I" statements; make students aware of the positive or negative impact of their behavior; focus on behavior; encourage students to express their feelings
2. Restorative questions	Reflect standard restorative questions (What harm has been done? How has it impacted you? What needs to happen to make things right?); require a response, written or verbal
3. Small impromptu conferences	Use to resolve low-level incidents between 2 people; take place as soon as possible after the incident has occurred; use the standard set of restorative questions; use affective statements; ask students to conduct a specific activity to repair harm from the incident
4. Proactive circles (comprise at least 80% of circles conducted at a school)	Use to set behavioral expectations (e.g., for academic goal setting or planning, to establish ground rules for student projects, to monitor or build understanding of academic content); use standard set of restorative questions; use affective statements; run by students, after being facilitated 5 times
5. Responsive circles (comprise no more than 20% of circles conducted at a school)	Use in response to behavior or tensions affecting a group of students or entire class; Require all people involved to play a role; Use standard set of restorative questions; Use affective statements
6. Restorative conferences	Use in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of repeated less serious incidents; use scripted approach and trained facilitator; use standard set of restorative questions and affective statements
7. Fair process	Allow students to provide input into decisions affecting them; explain the reasoning behind decisions to the students affected; clarify expectations so students understand implications of the decision, specific expectations for carrying out the decision, and consequences for not meeting expectations
8. Reintegrative management of shame	Avoid labels that stigmatize wrong-doers; discourage dwelling on shame; acknowledge person's worth while rejecting unacceptable behavior (i.e., separate the deed from the doer)
9. Restorative staff community	Use restorative practices to resolve staff conflicts and proactive circles to build sense of community among staff
10. Restorative approach with families	Use restorative practices during interactions with family members, including proactive circles that focus on intentional communication of positive student behavior and academic achievement
11. Fundamental hypothesis	Maintain high expectations for behavior; do not ignore inappropriate behavior; use the appropriate mix of control/pressure and support; minimize the role of staff facilitators

Howard Zehr (2002), one of the leaders of the restorative justice movement, stresses in The

Little Book of Restorative Justice that restorative justice is "a compass, not a map" and stresses

that all models "are to an extent culture-bound" ("An Overview"). In restorative justice models, solutions should be built from the ground up, as a result of dialoguing about individual and community needs and the resources available (Morrison, 2005; Zehr, 2002).Restorative justice practices in schools can range from informal to formal (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Wachtel, 2016).

Restorative Justice in Schools

Generally, restorative justice practices require a great deal of time and resources for training, seeing a meaningful change in outcomes whether behavioral or academic, and the actual repair of harms and conflict (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Implementation of restorative justice can lead to promising results for schools with regard to school climate and culture as well as preliminary decreases in referrals and exclusionary policies, although it is important to note that one cannot always guarantee that these decreases or increases are not always directly correlated with restorative justice implementation in schools (Davison et al., 2022; McCluskey et al., 2008). It can lead to material changes for the experiences of students, as Scottish pupils reported that "RP had led to teachers 'not shouting' ,'listening to both sides' and '[making] everyone feel equal'" (McCluskey et al., 2008, p.14). Karp and Breslin (2001) first studied a critical mass of schools implementing restorative justice programs in the mid-1990s in Minnesota public schools, Denver Metropolitan public schools, and alternative schools in southeastern Pennsylvania. The Karp and Breslin study found that many of the K-12 schools in the Minnesota study saw a drastic reduction in infractions and referrals. The first randomized controlled trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention found that while the Restorative Practices Intervention may not have conclusive evidence to be an effective multi-level comprehensive program, the environment established did demonstrate "more positive outcomes (higher school connectedness, better

school climate, more positive peer relationships and developmental outcomes) and less victimization from physical and cyber bullying." (Acosta et al., 2019, p. 14). Many studies for schools and school districts across the United States have seen meaningful drops in referrals, suspensions, and expulsions following implementation of restorative justice practices and policies and even the use of one restorative practice can lead to a significant shift in exclusionary outcomes for Black and brown students (Fronius et al., 2019; González, 2015; Jain et al., 2014). Research has also shown that schoolwide implementation of restorative justice practices has positive effects: "reaching far beyond any particular disciplinary event: improved relationships, increased student leadership, enhanced empathy, greater feelings of physical and emotional safety, and so on" (Sandwick et al., 2019, p. 26). Other research has confirmed that multiple positive outcomes of restorative justice on school climate and other factors such as relationships and safety (Acosta et al., 2019; González et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014; Sandwick et al., 2019).

Restorative Justice in the Bay Area

Home to leftist organizations and movements such as the Black Panther Party and the Third World Liberation Front, the Bay Area has long been framed as a progressive haven both historically and in contemporary discourse. Bay Area schools have incorporated restorative justice practices in various schools since the beginning of the 21st century. In Oakland Unified, Fremont High School most notably spearheaded the work, and the improvements seen at Fremont and various schools that followed suit led to a $2.5 million investment in restorative justice in 2017 (Jones, 2022). The Oakland Unified School District Board of Education passed a Restorative Justice Resolution in 2010 and since then has seen a number of positive changes in schools: staff and students reporting a greater sense of belonging and empathy, decreased

referrals and suspensions, an increase in peer capacity for conflict resolution, and increased academic achievement (Jain et al., 2014). In San Francisco Unified, the Board of Education passed a similar resolution to explore the use of restorative practices in schools, which included a systematic plan to implement and study the outcomes along with a clear funding plan that would not endanger the annual budget (Kim-Shree Maufas et al., 2009). The district had dedicated restorative practice coordinators and developed a comprehensive handbook spanning over a hundred pages to support the four phase transition for schoolwide restorative justice practices (Berkowitz, 2017).

Outside of these two large urban public school districts in the Bay Area, there is enough evidence on school websites across charter and public school districts to indicate that restorative justice has taken hold in many Bay Area schools irrespective of funding structure. San Mateo Union High School District and Five Keys Schools and Programs, which serves incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth both list Restorative Justice as part of their programmatic approach on their websites (Five Keys Schools and Programs, 2022; San Mateo Union High School District, 2023). An American Federation of Teachers union chapter in Daly City voted in 2015 to implement restorative justice practices in their high schools. KIPP Bay Area began exploring restorative justice approaches in 2009 and committed to training every teacher in restorative justice as of 2015 (Zappa, 2015). KIPP officials report that by implementing restorative justice school reforms systematically across four years, the region decreased their school suspension rates by 4% in four years and sparked commitments to restorative justice practices across the charter network nationwide (Vara-Orta, 2018).

Limits of Restorative Justice School Reform

There are limitations to the 'success' of restorative justice practices when it comes to fostering cultural changes and desired outcomes in school reform. First off, it's important to recognize that restorative justice in schools is not a panacea to all of the social ills that negatively impact academic achievement and experiences of belonging for marginalized students in schools. It cannot be understated that restorative justice is a compass, not a map (Zehr, 2002). Determining expectations and outcomes that feel achievable must ultimately be rooted in the community and context attempting to implement these reforms in their school. The following questions must be answered: Where are we trying to go? What is realistic within the time frame, human resources, and funding that we have available to us?

However, while a leader in adopting restorative justice practices in schools nationwide, the Bay Area's unique context as a historically progressive landscape leaves it vulnerable to a specific phenomenon of hypocrisy. Savannah Shange's seminal work, Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, and Schooling in San Francisco built upon the concepts of the school-prison nexus and educational enclosure to identify carceral progressivism, in which efforts at social reform policies and practices, especially when they are intended to address inequities for communities of color, end up retrenching the status quo. To illustrate, it is not uncommon for Bay Area progressives to espouse statements of acceptance and inclusion while also calling for unhoused community members of color struggling with mental illness to be pushed off the streets and locked up, denied of their agency and self-determination. Current research suggests that restorative justice reform could be vulnerable to the perils of carceral progressivism, especially in the Bay Area. Additionally, "some research shows how schools can adopt the language of RJ without incorporating its values, ethics, and aims" (O'Brien &

Nygreen, 2020, p. 525). This can occur when restorative practices are taken on by a school because they wish to address racial inequities, but succeeding instructional and training materials or discussions of implementing fail to include explicit conversations and learning about racial equity alongside and included in restorative justice trainings (Davison et al., 2022).

These differences between expressed commitment and actual implementation suggest that carceral progressivism may be at work, as school districts fail to adequately sustain the work of restorative justice. For example, schoolwide restorative justice implementation faces a number of challenges in Oakland Unified, including: "limited time, limited trainings and coaching, buy-in, information sharing and communication, unclear discipline policies and protocols for serious offenses, student attitudes or misuse of RJ and inconsistency in application" (Jain et al., 2014, p. 58). In San Francisco Unified, while the program initially helped to reduce suspensions by thirty percent in the first three years of the program, which included professional development and training, eventually San Francisco Unified stopped funding restorative practices in the district and teachers cited in a Mission Local article cited this cessation of support as a direct factor in the violence and emotional dysregulation demonstrated by students following the return to schools after the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aleksey, 2023). Despite the seeming prevalence of restorative justice as schoolwide reform in Bay Area schools, few peer-reviewed studies outside of those studying Oakland Unified School District exist to corroborate the purported success of these programs in these various settings. On existing websites, blog posts, and newspaper articles, educators typically cite a decrease in suspensions or anecdotes describing improvement in school climate as evidence of success in restorative justice. However, these do not always reflect the voices of the most marginalized in the school-prison nexus.

Additionally, researchers such as Dorothy Vaandering (Vaandering, 2010) have cautioned that an approach grounded in critical theory is necessary to avoid the misuse of restorative justice frameworks to reinforce adultist attitudes towards children. This is supported by the uneven outcomes of restorative justice implementation in practice, as different studies indicate differing levels of success when it comes to closing the racial disproportionality gap for school discipline. Davison (2022) found that schoolwide restorative justice implementation in one school district had uneven results across racial groups and did not necessarily improve outcomes for Black students in particular, where other studies found significant drops for all racial groups including Black studies in a multiyear study of the Denver Public Schools district (González, 2015). Additionally, because restorative justice approaches are often an alternative and not a replacement to traditional retributive approaches to student discipline, these two systems often exist side-by-side within a school community as the school makes shifts away from an old model and towards a new one. This means that "racialized decision-making and discretion remain pertinent – and perhaps increase in importance – in these contexts" (González, 2015, p. 5).

Formal restorative justice processes also hit a roadblock when schools do not commit to the entire continuum of restorative practices as a part of the school ethos. As I learned from restorative justice practitioners in schools and other settings, "you cannot restore something that was never there". While schools are highly complex and tight-knit webs of relational dynamics, most of the literature mentions things like "building" or "improving" relationships. They do not necessarily cover the range of relationships that individuals may have with each other, which could include not having a relationship at all. Two students who see each other every day in class have a different range of relational trust required than students who simply pass each other in the

hallways. Thus, the web of obligations and outcomes based on the obligations in these scenarios will vary.

In addition to time, personnel, training, and funding, both the literature and policymakers have failed to address one more vital resource: relational trust. As Renjitham Alfred and Rekia Jibrin outline in their chapter on the 'Struggles and Opportunities' of implementing restorative justice in *Discipline Over Punishment*:

> Mistrust of the restorative process can result in silencing dissent from community voices that challenge the process, and this requires skilled negotiations between community-based workers and school members who can both incorporate community values within the restorative justice practice and aligning those values to school ones. (Gardner, 2016, "Struggles and Opportunities")

However, there is little in research or training materials on restorative justice that tangibly and concretely outline what trust building looks like beyond implementing restorative practices. For example, despite developing over a hundred pages of information, agendas, and resources for schoolwide implementation of restorative practices, San Francisco Unified School District's handbook does not address trust or distrust. There are no sections in the handbook that speak directly to potential concerns or frustrations educators may have in implementing restorative justice or restorative practices in their schools. By not addressing these issues of distrust directly, restorative justice efforts are undermined at the onset because those who are supposed to implement these reforms do not feel seen or heard when they have legitimate concerns such as lack of time, resources, or staffing. Trust is necessary to implement any school reform, and restorative justice literally is built on the foundation of trust between individuals and community.

The following sections of the literature review will consider trust in light of existing literature and how it pertains to schoolwide restorative justice.

Relational Trust in Schools

Restorative justice is inherently rooted in the need to build trust between individuals and within the community, but oftentimes, restorative justice literature assumes a shared understanding of trust and what it entails, rather than explicitly exploring its function or development. However, before we delve further into the role of trust in restorative justice and school reform, due to the highly dynamic and complex nature of human relationships and perception thereof, it is critical to define the following more explicitly: what entails relational trust, why it's important to schools, and how it is specifically problematized and politicized with regards to educators and youth of color within school structures. I will be pulling from a variety of frameworks to outline my conceptual understanding of trust in schools implementing restorative justice.

Two texts form the foundation of the definition of trust for this study: The Thin Book of Trust by Charles Feltman, and Trust in Schools: A Resource for Core Improvement by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider. Organizational leadership coach Charles Feltman defines trust as "choosing to make something important to you vulnerable to the actions of someone else" (Feltman, 2021, "Introduction"). This definition of trust is useful for two reasons: it assumes that safety—whether physical, social, emotional, or psychological—is at the core of establishing trust, and highlights the individual agency one has in providing or withholding trust. Feltman's emphasis on safety clarifies the stakes involved when trust is broken. Trust is a continual process of "risk assessment" (p. 10). Furthermore, the notion of vulnerability as integral to trust will

prove necessary to illuminate the particular challenges of power and positionality that race and disability introduce to the notion of trust.

In their landmark study on trust in schools, educational researchers Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider pointed to political scientist Robert Putnam and political economist Francis Fukuyama for the basis of their definition of trust and its importance in schools. According to Putnam and Fukuyama, trust is necessary for the fostering of democratic societies, and the presence of high social trust "links the effectiveness of workplace organizations to the quality of social ties that exist within and between institutions" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Both of these theorists root their work in James Coleman's notion of social capital, which is maintained through high quality social interactions.

Bryk and Schneider pointed out that schools are sites of long-term relationships that demand a high degree of intimacy and interconnectedness, and describes relational trust as a "particular system of social exchanges" and at length:

> Relational trust views the social exchanges of schooling as organized around a distinct set of role relationships: teachers with students, teachers with other teachers, teachers with parents and with their school principal. Each party in a role relationship maintains an understanding of his or her role obligations and holds some expectations about the role obligations of the other. Maintenance (and growth) of relational trust in any given role set requires synchrony in these mutual expectations and obligations (Bryk and Schneider, 2002).

Bryk and Schneider went on to conduct a multilevel longitudinal study of Chicago Public Schools and found that higher trust schools saw greater increases in school achievement than

low-trust schools. In other words, school leaders that worked to foster trustworthiness in their schools saw greater gains than schools that failed to do so. Contrary to conventional assumption, their study also found that schools that were already considered "high-achieving" did not necessarily have high levels of trustworthiness, and therefore did not see large gains in school achievement over time. This definition of relational trust is consistent with the "web of obligations" mentioned in restorative justice literature. It can be hypothesized that schoolwide restorative justice then, when embraced as a schoolwide philosophy, should foster greater trustworthiness in the school institution and overall improved effectiveness.

To further understand the dimensions of trust, both Feltman and Bryk and Schneider divide relational trust into four components which share similarities in the literature even if the terms for them slightly vary. Bryk and Schneider use the terms "respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity" while Charles Feltman calls them "sincerity, competence, care, and reliability." While each of these terms could garner their own literature review, for the purposes of this study, I leaned more on Feltman's terms—for communicating to educators in different settings, the single-word terms for each distinction offers a useful simplicity and I will overlap understandings of those four terms with features identified by Bryk and Schneider where necessary.

The successful implementation of restorative justice practices in schools is deeply intertwined with the presence of relational trust among school community members. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue, relational trust is the bedrock for effective school reform and organizational change. In the context of restorative justice, relational trust is particularly crucial because these practices require a fundamental shift in how schools approach conflict, discipline, and relationships. Moving away from traditional, punitive models demands that educators,

students, and families trust each other enough to engage in more open, honest dialogue and collectively problem-solve (Morrison, 2005). Moreover, restorative justice's emphasis on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships (Zehr, 2002) can only be realized in a high-trust environment where people feel safe to be vulnerable (Feltman, 2021). Distrust, on the other hand, breeds defensiveness and disengagement, undermining the core principles of restorative justice. Therefore, the degree of relational trust present in a school community will likely have a significant impact on the depth and sustainability of restorative justice implementation. Schools with strong relational trust are better positioned to embrace the philosophy and practices of restorative justice, while those lacking trust may struggle to move beyond surface-level changes.

Trust also plays a crucial role not only at the systemic level but at the interpersonal level when it comes to restorative justice practices in schools. Educators provide key insights on the success of restorative justice implementation at the ground level, as they contribute key insights to the nuances and affective experiences of the process. Listening to educators fosters trust and leads to improved applications of restorative justice practices in schools (Brown, 2017). Additionally, adolescents in classrooms are less likely to be referred to exclusionary disciplinary practices and go along with disciplinary decisions within the classroom when educators have a relational approach and students perceive their teacher's actions as trustworthy (Gregory & Ripski, 2008). Buy-in from all educators in a school building is also a major challenge to successful schoolwide restorative justice implementation, as evidenced in a study of Oakland Unified's restorative justice approaches (Jain et al., 2014, p. 27). When educators are skeptical and do not have trust for the new initiative in place, this seriously compromises the capacity for restorative justice to be truly transformative and thus it is essential to build positive and trusting relationships among educators around restorative justice (Morrison, 2005, p. 352).

Trust also impacts where teachers' experiences of burnout are mitigated or exacerbated (Van Maele et al., 2015). Teachers feel the most burnt out when they feel like unruly student behavior exceeds their capacity and they cannot trust students to behave as expected, while trust in their leadership prevents emotional exhaustion and trust in colleagues helps them stay connected in the humanizing aspects of the work. The absence or betrayal of trust, on the other hand, at the individual level may lead to moral injury, or the lasting psychological harm that occurs when an individual transgresses their core values and beliefs. Levinson (2015) argues that moral sensibility will not lead to just and appropriate solutions to educational dilemmas because the nature of the political, economic, and social constraints that shape (and are shaped by) the U.S. education system places educators in situations in which they are obligated to enact moral justice but in which no just action is possible. Given the gaps between Sugrue (2020) has found that K-12 educators experience similar dynamics of moral injury to military veterans and child protection professionals. This leads to responses such as health issues and desires to leave the teaching profession. Sugrue also found that moral injury was more prominent in settings where there were more students of color, suggesting that educators may experience or observe moral injury more acutely the closer they are to witnessing the dynamics of the school-prison nexus.

Trust and Restorative Justice for Educators of Color

Bryk and Schneider (2002) extend economic and political understandings of social trust to factor in asymmetries of power, but these asymmetries extend more to the role each individual inhabits within the school (student, administrator, parent, etc.) than it does factor in the asymmetries of power as they related to identities such as race. However, educators of color who work in schools committed to restorative justice reform could provide an enormous wealth of insights and wisdom. As Van Maele (2015) recommended, "future research on the burnout

phenomenon in teaching should therefore account for the quality of the relationships that teachers have with other school members" (p. 109). This is particularly important for educators of color, who face disproportionate challenges in the workplace.

Research has consistently shown that educators of color experience higher rates of burnout and attrition compared to their white colleagues (Ingersoll et al., 2019). They are more likely to work in hard-to-staff environments that have high populations of students of color, making educators highly likely to enter scenarios where moral injury is also more likely (Sugrue, 2020). They are also more likely to face microaggressions, stereotyping, and other forms of bias that can undermine their sense of belonging and trust in their school communities (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). These challenges are often compounded by the "invisible tax" that educators of color face, which includes the extra labor of supporting students from marginalized backgrounds and advocating for more equitable policies and practices . In the context of restorative justice implementation, this "invisible tax" may manifest as a "discipline tax," where educators of color are disproportionately called upon to handle disciplinary issues and lead restorative practices (Center for Black Educator Development, 2022; Terada, 2021). While many educators of color may be drawn to restorative justice work as a way to promote social justice and challenge the school-prison nexus, the emotional and time-intensive nature of this work can also exacerbate burnout and feelings of isolation if proper supports are not in place.

Given these realities, it is crucial that we listen to the voices of educators of color when seeking to understand the challenges and opportunities of restorative justice implementation in schools. By centering their perspectives and experiences, we can gain valuable insights into how relational trust is built (or eroded) in the context of restorative practices, and identify strategies for creating more inclusive and equitable school communities. In my own study, I aim to

contribute to this important work by applying a restorative methodology that more closely attends to the quality of relationships and trust that educators of color need while navigating restorative justice reforms in their school communities. Ultimately, by attending to the unique burdens and challenges faced by educators of color, we can develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of what it takes to build relational trust and implement restorative justice practices in schools. This understanding is essential for creating school environments where all educators and students can thrive, and where the transformative potential of restorative justice can be realized to a greater extent.

Challenges and Future Directions

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the relationship between restorative justice and relational trust in schools, there are still significant gaps in our understanding. Many of the studies cited in this review have been limited by small sample sizes, lack of longitudinal data, and a focus on a narrow range of school contexts (Fronius et al., 2019). Additionally, few studies make explicit the measurement of relational trust as a potential metric for the effectiveness or successful implementation of restorative justice practices in schools. These limitations make it difficult to generalize findings and understand the long-term impacts of restorative justice practices on relational trust and student outcomes.

Furthermore, schools attempting to implement restorative justice practices may face numerous challenges. Resistance to change, lack of resources and training, and competing priorities can all hinder the successful adoption of restorative approaches (Jain et al., 2014; Morrison, 2005). These obstacles may be particularly pronounced in schools where relational trust is already low, as staff may be less willing to engage in the vulnerable work of shifting

school culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). More research is needed to understand how schools can navigate these challenges and build the necessary foundation of trust for restorative justice to take hold. Future studies should also seek to center the voices and experiences of educators, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. While some research has highlighted the importance of teacher buy-in for restorative justice implementation (González et al., 2019), there is still much to learn about how educators' identities and experiences shape their perceptions of restorative practices and relational trust. Understanding these dynamics will be crucial for developing strategies to support educators and build collective commitment to restorative justice.

Ultimately, the promise of restorative justice lies in its potential to create more equitable and inclusive school communities. By prioritizing relationships, repairing harm, and giving voice to all stakeholders, restorative practices have the power to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and address the disproportionate impact of punitive discipline on students of color (Davison et al., 2022; González, 2015). However, realizing this potential will require a deep commitment to building relational trust and a willingness to confront the systemic inequities that have long plagued our education system. As such, future research and practice must not only focus on the mechanics of restorative justice implementation, but also grapple with the larger questions of power, privilege, and oppression that shape our schools and society.

Chapter 3: Crafting a Restorative Methodology

Methods and Procedures

This chapter identifies the methods used to answer the research questions. In the first chapter, "Ensnared in the Web," I outlined the need to examine trust and its relationship to restorative justice as an approach to school discipline, and how there is a particular need to attend to how educators of color navigate relational trust in service of disabled students of color in school settings. In Chapter 2, "Restorative Justice, the School-Prison Nexus, and the Vitality of Trust," I reviewed the existing literature on the domains of restorative justice and relational trust in education, especially as they pertain to educators and students of color entwined in the school-prison nexus . In this chapter I provide an overview of my qualitative methodological approach, procedures, and the participant recruitment and profiles for this study.

To review, the research questions guiding this research study are as follows:

- How do educators of color describe their school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms as they are entwined in the school prison nexus?

- How do educators of color describe their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust in stakeholders when implementing restorative justice processes in schools?

- How can we learn from these descriptions of context and experiences to better understand dynamics of relational trust when practicing restorative justice in school?

The remainder of this chapter details more substantially the research methods and processes designed and implemented to answer the research questions: their purpose, rationale, and mechanics to achieve as rigorous and valid a methodology as possible.

Methodological Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research design, focusing on relational trust and restorative justice as its area of study. It was crucial to design the study in line with restorative justice principles, focused on meeting the needs of all involved, especially the participants who are made vulnerable by the school-prison nexus situated in a context of the Bay Area's carceral progressivism. I sought to develop a restorative methodology that would both accurately capture the wisdom and insights of participant experiences as well as complete my own obligations to them as the researcher positioning educators of color in an even more vulnerable position.

Through a baseline survey, semi-structured interviews, limited field observations, and a community healing circle, I elicited insights from a talented group of Bay Area educators of color currently enacting schoolwide restorative justice practices at various secondary schools. According to Bhattacharya (2017), qualitative methodologies that prioritize understanding rather than generalization bring forth "stories that participants have to tell, which have not been heard or documented in academic spaces, or perhaps require further documentation" (p. 19). This multidimensional approach over the course of six months allowed me to deeply study and understand the stories of educators of color historically marginalized in school spaces. A qualitative study was well-suited to better understand the nuances and contradictions of working as educators of color striving for schoolwide restorative justice reforms in the school-prison nexus. Because trust-building and school transformation are ongoing, dynamic processes and not static outcomes, my research aimed to capture the complex, temporal nature of these processes and how they unfold over time, especially within the tensions and contradictions of the school-prison nexus. Savannah Shange's conceptualization of carceral progressivism works to "illuminate the paradoxical dynamic in which social reform practices, particularly those that

target inequities in communities of color, can perpetuate antiblack racism even as they seek to eliminate it" (p. 14). Even though restorative justice practices have been taken on by many schools that serve communities of color, qualitative inquiry better surfaces the paradoxical dynamics of the complex interplay between race, discipline, and restorative justice in the Bay Area.

Additionally, this research is informed by Eve Tuck's "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." Tuck writes about the harm that comes from the traditionally extractive nature of Western researchers entering indigenous communities to do research without redressing the legacy of historical and ongoing settler colonialism. Under the guise of 'objectivity', researchers setting out to 'simply' document or portray have engaged in both damaging research and damage-centered research: "Stories of teeth counting, rib counting, head measuring, blood drawn, bones dug up, medical treatment withheld, erroneous or fabricated ethnography, unsanctioned camera lenses, out-and-out lies, empty promises, cover ups, betrayals, these are the stories of our kitchen tables. (Tuck & Fine, 2007, p. 159). From the vantage point of the so-called 'research participants' (the 'our' of the above quote cited), it is the "out-and-out lies, empty promises, cover ups, and betrayals" that constitute the lived experience of Indigenous peoples rather than whatever ends up in the Findings and Discussion sections of researchers' dissertations. Considering that this study revolves around trust and addressing harm, it was essential to critically question basic assumptions about qualitative research and design the methodology in a way that prevents harm and repairs harm to ethically and authentically elicit those kitchen-table stories and maintain trust.

Each part of the methodological approach was designed with restorative practices and values in mind. Drawing from Zehr (2002), the restorative justice principles are summarized as follows:

1. Restorative justice focuses on harms and needs.

2. Wrongs or harms result in obligations.

3. Restorative justice promotes engagement and participation.

Therefore, this study served as an opportunity to document those stories that have been overlooked in educational and academic spaces and ensure that participants' and communities' harms and needs are acknowledged. This, in turn, raised awareness among educational practitioners, in hopes of prompting action to fulfill resulting obligations. The study continually returned to the participant's needs, created opportunities to reflect on resulting obligations as a consequence of harm, and promoted engagement and participation in both the study and their own contexts as school-based restorative justice practitioners.

In the framework of restorative justice, embedded within Tuck's letter naming the harm that research has done to marginalized peoples, is the obligation then of the academy to engage in research that promotes healing for all involved. Given that restorative justice in schools is rooted in building, strengthening, and restoring relationships, the methodology of this study was designed to empower restorative justice practitioners to reflect on their work and increase their capacity for building, strengthening, and restoring relationships. By framing the methodology in the principles of restorative justice, this ensured that the study provided opportunities for reflection, community building, and sustainable wellbeing for the participants.

Research Context

It is important to understand the interplay of the school and prison system in California to make sense of how educators of color and restorative justice approaches are situated in schools. Carceral progressivism is useful for trying to understand trust and restorative justice in schools because "[a]s a framework, carceral progressivism brings our attention to the continuities between racism and antiracism, allowing us to disentangle intention from impact, and disrupt right/left dichotomies that can obscure emergent political worlds in places like southeast San Francisco" (p. 15). Shange's work speaks to these conflicting realities, that California and the Bay specifically can be both a 'golden gulag' and a place of progressive politics. Thus, seemingly progressive educational reforms, such as restorative justice, can paradoxically perpetuate antiblack racism and other forms of oppression. The Bay Area, with its reputation for progressive politics and social justice movements, serves as a rich site for examining these contradictions and their impact on educators of color.

California has traditionally been a Democratic or liberal stronghold in national elections, and is generally regarded as being more politically left than other parts of the United States. However, as pointed out by abolitionist scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore in *Golden Gulag*, California also incarcerates a disproportionate number of racially marginalized people, specifically Black individuals (Gilmore 2007). This relates to what some call the school-to-prison pipeline or what many Black abolitionist scholars call the *school-prison nexus*, in which enactments of state violence manifest not only in the legal and incarceration systems, but also in schools (Annamma, 2018; Meiners, 2011; O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020; Shange, 2019; Sojoyner, 2013). In addition, while California is broadly considered as liberal, the Bay Area in particular is situated as a 'progressive left' stronghold, especially when it comes to restorative

justice, education reform, and how schools approach discipline policies. Frisco (the historically

Black endearment for San Francisco) and The Town (aka Oakland) are the historical home of

leftist collectives and movements such as the Black Panther Party or the Third World Liberation

Front. The Bay has long been considered a haven for queer people and a site of LGBTQ+

community (e.g. San Francisco's Castro neighborhood) or resistance, found in the legacy of

Harvey Milk or the Compton's Cafeteria Riot. Today, the Bay Area is still home to a number of

organizations dedicated to resisting state authority and identifying community-based solutions to

violence, such as the Anti-Police Terror Project or the Bay Area Transformative Justice

Collective.

　　With regard to restorative justice in schools specifically, the Bay Area has continued to

lead on this issue in the state and country—in both its strengths and its contradictions. From a

broader policy perspective in California, East Bay Senator Nancy Skinner has introduction

California Assembly Bill 274, which builds on a decade of existing legislation that had banned

wilful defiance suspensions for younger students: "SB 274 would apply to all grades TK through

12 in both traditional public schools and charters. The bill would also prohibit schools from

suspending or expelling students for being tardy or truant, according to the news release." Large

urban Bay Area districts have long been the leader in moving away from zero tolerance policies

in educational contexts. Both Oakland Unified School District and San Francisco Unified School

District not only banned willful defiance suspensions, but they funded and introduced

Restorative Justice practices in schools as far back as 2007 for OUSD and 2009 for SFUSD with

School Board Resolution 96-23A1. Other school districts like San Mateo County, alternative

schools, other types schools such as charter schools and independent schools also have adopted

restorative justice practices, often in alignment with their politically progressive values.

The study involved participants from public-district, public-charter, and independent schools in the Bay Area in California. There currently is insufficient data to suggest that there are differences in how restorative justice practices may be implemented between the three, although existing literature and the school-prison nexus as a guiding framework suggested that there are similarities in restrictions. The study examined K-12 schools and specifically the experience of how educators of color navigate school reform and relational trust with regards to attempting restorative justice school reform because I'm curious about the school side of the school-prison nexus. While some schools are 'closer' in proximity to the prison aspect of the school-prison nexus, given how it is theorized, students of color are really never very far from the possibility of state violence and incarceration no matter the type of school they attend. Thus, the need for restorative justice and the dismantling of zero tolerance, punitive policies should be omnipresent to actually cultivate safe spaces for belonging for all multiply marginalized young people.

Four out of five pod-mapping interviews were conducted in-person at the school site, while one was conducted over Zoom. While the in-person interviews were preferable for me as the researcher, allowing for limited direct observations of the participant in their school site and office space, it was also crucial that I was responsive to the needs of each participant and allowed them to determine what made them feel comfortable to candidly share their experiences and adapt to their busy schedules. I facilitated the community healing circle over Zoom to eliminate the geographical barriers, provided that participants lived very far from each other in the context of the Bay Area and allowed us to meet easily at a mutually convenient time.

Participants and Recruitment

To elicit the best insights for my research questions, I sought to recruit and identify participants who are all-stars, or the Restorative Justice League of Bay Area schools. For these

reasons, I employed purposive or purposeful sampling to identify my participants, gathering a team of specialists to look at a unique and challenging problem that demands a high degree of expertise (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I leveraged my own personal network working and teaching in the Bay for the last decade with progressive educators, as well as my insights as a researcher to develop a thoughtful recruitment strategy for the study. I used a combination of purposeful sampling types, including maximum variance, convenience, and snowball sampling to capture a sample of participants that would give the most information-rich insights regarding the research questions (pg. 98).

I conducted this study with a total of five participants. This number reflected sufficient data saturation, and selected intentionally to provide adequate time to review multiple points of data for each participant in a thoughtful manner. Three participants went on to join the community healing circle, in which I also shared my own reflections as a researcher-participant. In order to make sure all participants felt seen and heard in the healing circle, a central tenet of restorative practices, having a small but intentional number of participants was essential. All of these considerations led to data abundant with wisdom, vivid insights, and rich descriptions that illuminated key themes related to the research questions.

I used a flier and matching email to recruit participants. The flier and email (Appendix A and B) outlined the purpose of the study, an introduction of myself as the researcher, and invited them to participate in the study by filling out a survey. I established the credibility of the study by sharing my affiliation with the doctoral program at Santa Clara University as well as my current employment as the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging at a school for students with learning differences. By sharing these roles along with my identity as a person of color in education, I communicated to potential participants that I had a degree of expertise in

both research and working with marginalized populations. The flier and email also explained the purpose of my research, the study processes, and its intention to improve restorative justice practices in schools. All of these components increased transparency in an effort to build trust and rapport with potential participants even before the study fully began. From there, they were invited to fill out a recruitment survey on Google Forms. I shared these materials on social media platforms as well as contacts who I knew to be restorative justice practitioners in Bay Area school districts. The end of the survey also provided an opportunity for participants to recommend other restorative justice practitioners of color whom they believed to be a good fit for the study, and I reached out to all recommendations.

Once the survey was completed, I employed two-tier sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pg. 100) to filter out participants who would not qualify for the next stages of the study. Two-tier sampling ensured that I would not compromise either the data available for the study nor the trust of other participants during the community healing circle if I did not hold a rigorous standard for qualification. If participants did demonstrate thoughtful, insightful responses to the open-ended questions of the survey and proved eligible for the criteria of the study, then I scheduled meetings with the participants to conduct a 65-75 minute pod-mapping interview. All participants were invited to the community healing circle, and all but two declined, due to life circumstances barring their availability to continue in the study. I compensated all participants for their time and participation in the study with gift cards in value of $75 to $150, recognizing that their wisdom, insights, and time took them away from their full-time work as restorative justice educators of color, or from their loved ones and life outside of work.

All five participants identified as people of color and were currently working in a school site or multiple school sites during the time of study. They all worked in education for at least

three years in certificated staff roles, and part of their roles and responsibilities in their current job involved school discipline. They worked in public district, public charter, and independent schools, serving 6th through 12th grade students. Additionally, participants demonstrated competence within the following domains: relationship building with students of marginalized identities, critical analysis of how race and marginality shape the experiences of children in school, and foundational knowledge of restorative justice principles and practices. The identities, experiences, and insights of the participants will be elaborated upon in the Findings and Discussions chapters.

Methods and Procedures

The design of data collection procedures consisted of three components. These included a recruitment survey, a semi-structured interview with a pod-mapping protocol, and a community healing circle. The use of multiple touchpoints (e.g., semi-structured interviews, pod-mapping, and community healing circles) allowed for a multidimensional, longitudinal understanding of trust-building and school transformation. These methods of data collection aligned with the needs of the research questions as well as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. This process also emulates how Restorative Justice is often facilitated in schools; in my own role as a Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging, I regularly do pre-conferences with students after harm has occurred and then bring students together once I have done some fact- and pattern-finding for a restorative circle.

Recruitment Survey

The recruitment survey functioned to ensure that participants met the criteria for study eligibility, ensured a high degree of expertise related to restorative justice practices in schools, and established baseline assessments for trust and applications of restorative justice practices in

their respective school sites. To determine eligibility, the survey included closed-ended questions that pertained to their identities as people of color, educators currently working in 6-12 schools, and their school's formal commitment to restorative justice practices. Following that, the survey included Likert-scale questions to learn more about participants' existing self-assessments of trust with other school stakeholders, wherein they were asked to determine if they had No Trust, Fragile Trust, Developing Trust, and Stable Trust with stakeholders such as students, families, teachers, and administrators. The next part of the survey asked participants more about their understanding of restorative justice practices at their school site, how restorative practices showed up in the participant's roles and responsibilities, and perceived barriers to implementing restorative justice practices in their school site.

After I reviewed their responses, participants with strong responses were invited to the next part of the study. I determined strength responses based on the thoughtfulness of the answers due to length and clear descriptions in the open-ended sections. Out of eight survey responses, I invited five to the next part of the study. These survey responses were saved on a password protected Google Drive, in which only I had access to the results.

Pod-Mapping Interview

In the next part of the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, in which they answered questions to illustrate their current understanding of Restorative Justice principles and the dynamics of relational trust within their school context, employing a transformative justice tool known as pod-mapping. I developed these semi-structured interviews with my theoretical and conceptual frameworks in mind, taking into account the importance of trust, restorative justice, and carceral progressivism. These semi-structured interviews align with

an approach of narrative inquiry, in which stories are viewed as data of "how we share our daily lives" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pg. 34).

Four out of five pod-mapping interviews were conducted in-person at the school site over the course of five months, while one was conducted over Zoom. While the in-person interviews were preferable for me as the researcher—allowing for limited direct observations of the participant in natural settings such as their school site and office space—it was also crucial that I was responsive to the needs of each participant and allowed them to determine what made them feel comfortable to candidly share their experiences and adapt to their busy schedules. I facilitated the community healing circle over Zoom to eliminate the geographical barriers, provided that participants lived very far from each other in the context of the Bay Area and allowed us to meet easily at a mutually convenient time.

Semi-structured interviews and qualitative methods in general are still the most common approach to researching both relational justice and restorative justice in schools because the area of study is still relatively new (Brown, 2017; Bruhn, 2020; Daneshzadeh, 2021; Lustick, 2020). Interviews allow researchers to deepen their understanding of a participant's lived experience in relation to the research questions, providing opportunities for rich description and connection. This study's approach, where semi-structured interview precede a community healing circle is modeled off of Ezinne Ofoegbu's adaptation of Johnson's sista circle methodology, wherein the research method is designed as simultaneously a "community building and data collection tool" (Ofoegbu, 2022, pg. 5). As mentioned earlier, this is similar to how I typically conduct pre-conference meetings with individual members before holding a repair circle when harm occurs as a restorative justice practitioner. In a repair process, this is to establish a strong common foundation of shared values, facts, and meaningful patterns before moving on to

address conflict and differences of perspective. This is consistent with foundational approaches to circles in restorative practices, wherein participants are engaged "at the beginning of the process in a conscious process about the values they wish to hold in the collective space" (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, pg. 27).

The questions for the semi-structured interview accomplished two functions: 1) having structured questions ensured a common framing around values, trust within the school community, practitioner positionality, and any clarifying needed from the recruitment survey (Appendix E); and 2) the interview's flexible approach made room within the research method for participant self-determination to share their needs and insights as they felt comfortable. Additionally, pod-mapping was a crucial component of these semi-structured interviews. The concept comes from the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective (BATJC), who are abolitionist practitioners committed to restorative justice or transformative justice. Their work on pods and pod-mapping is also included in Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement. Practitioners found that the word "community" was not concrete enough to describe the support systems that people needed after experiencing harm. BATJC defines "pod" as the following:

> Your pod is made up of the people that you would call on if violence, harm or abuse happened to you; or the people that you would call on if you wanted support in taking accountability for violence, harm or abuse that you've done; or if you witnessed violence or if someone you care about was being violent or being abused. (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019)

Pod-mapping is an activity in which individuals identify the people in their "pod" and the degree to which those people are trustworthy for a specific purpose–namely, being reliable and present

in times of violence, harm, or abuse. Pod-mapping offered a unique lens to explore the research questions guiding this study. By visually representing their webs of relationships and support within the school context, participants shed light on the relational ecosystem in which they are working to implement restorative justice practices. The activity surfaced perceptions of power dynamics, institutional barriers, or key relationships where trust is strong or in need of repair (Research Question 1). Participants' reflections on their pod maps provided insight into their specific efforts to cultivate relational trust with different stakeholders (Research Question 2). Comparing pod maps across participants or over time may reveal broader patterns or insights about the dynamics of relational trust in the context of restorative justice implementation (Research Question 3). However, as a novel method in educational research, pod-mapping may present some challenges. Participants may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the activity, potentially leading to variations in response quality or depth. The visual nature of the data may also pose challenges for cross-case analysis. Despite these potential limitations, pod-mapping offers a promising tool for illuminating the relational contexts of restorative justice work in schools.

I recorded each interview on a digital voice recorder as well as my laptop, using a microphone to maintain clarity of voice. After each pod-mapping interview, I wrote a short memo within 24 hours of the interview to capture my own observations, biases, and notes. I sent the audio recordings to a transcription service called Rev for transcription and time-stamping before adding both the written transcript and audio recordings to a qualitative coding software, which supported preliminary and continued data analysis.

Community Healing Circle

The most commonly recognized features of restorative justice practices in schools are talking circles. There are a number of circles that have been utilized in many Indigenous communities for millenia now, including "community-building circles, decision-making circles, democratic governance circles, celebration circles, and grief circles to name a few" (O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020). To recognize the value of the work these restorative justice practitioners of color were doing in schools and to lean on my own expertise as a restorative facilitator myself, inviting the participants to a community healing circle following the pod-mapping interviews made the most sense.

There were multiple advantages to a community healing circle. Firstly, it would act as a focus group interview rooted in restorative justice practices. Sue and Russ Romas (2023) have recently found that using restorative circle approaches addresses power dynamics in traditional focus group structures, increases trust and vulnerability, promotes networking and collaboration within participants, and in-depth, longer responses. Furthermore, various kinds of talking circles have been upheld by Indigenous researchers, working across a number of fields including health and to a lesser extent, education (Nabigon et al., 1999).

I emailed all participants a month prior to the community healing circle and used the platform when2meet to schedule a mutually convenient time for the meeting. Due to the geographical distances of participants, the healing circle was held on Zoom. Three out of the five invited participants were able to attend, and the others were not due to family obligations. The healing session lasted approximately two hours and fifteen minutes, with all members attending the entirety of the circle.

At the beginning of the healing circle, I invited all participants to introduce themselves with their name, pronouns, role, and a value that they hold important when in circle with others, especially new people. Then I presented the four preliminary themes as I understood them thus far from the pod-mapping interviews. Member checking proved to be a valuable validity strategy, as it increased the accuracy of the findings and allowed further opportunities for participants to co-construct meaning around the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). All participants elected to share thoughtfully on all four themes, and for the most part shared the conversational space equitably, as demonstrated in the document portrait below, generated by MaxQDA.

Figure 3

Community Healing Circle Speaker Distribution
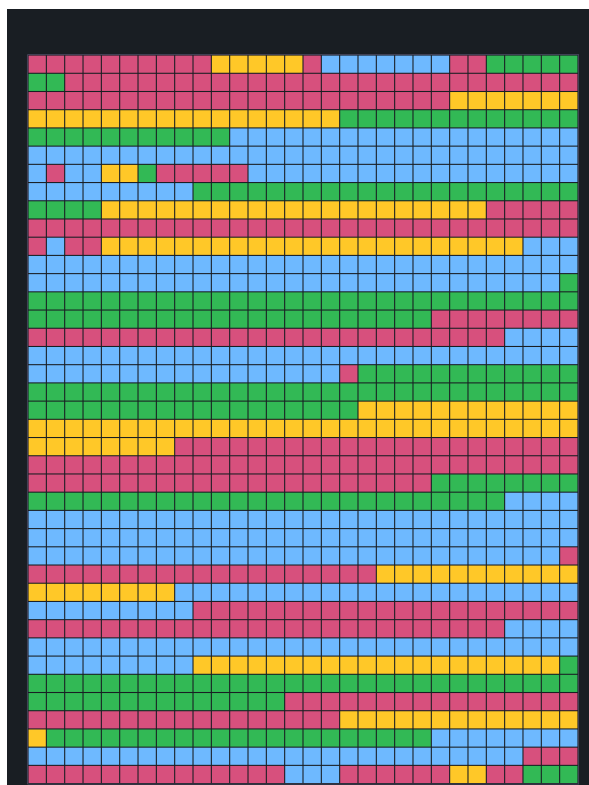
Note. The table shows the four participants speaking shares and sequences of the community healing circle, including the researcher-facilitator, who is indicated by pink squares. When I spoke, for the most part I was introducing the next emergent theme and posing a question, or affirming what others said, occasionally sharing my own examples.

Participants reviewed the preliminary themes and provided greater context for their own school sites and experiences, deepening the data available to understand the themes as they related to the participants as well as the research questions. I prioritized the importance of member-checking as a reflective experience and planned out deliberating the sequencing of themes to participants, as I wanted them to come out of the circle with a sense of community healing, rather than defeat (Candela, 2019, pg. 625).

Following the community healing circle, I sent the audio transcription to Rev, the transcription service, for documentation and analyzed the data in concert with previous survey and pod-mapping data.

Positionality

Prior to my positioning as a researcher, I had worked in two different secondary school sites as a restorative justice practitioner for six years in San Francisco. In college, I had both studied and practiced restorative justice practices as a part of my major and as a facilitator of healing circles and repair circles during campus protests and organizing efforts. I was no stranger to intrapersonal, interpersonal, or structural violence, and regularly integrated restorative practices into my own approaches to each within the school system.

I asked these research questions from a deeply personal place; from my experience, including myself, many educators of color leave the field of education not only because they are burnt out but they experience demoralization or moral injury. I studied relational trust and restorative justice to better understand how fostering trust may keep people in the work. This demoralization, in my own experience, was a direct result of the Bay Area's carceral progressivism, but I wanted to be sure that I did not generalize this feeling to my participants, continuously reflecting on my own personal experiences and values versus the values and lived

experiences of the participants. Like my participants, I identify and am identified as a person of color who is deeply committed to restorative justice and schoolwide reform with a bias against zero tolerance discipline policies. I am in the work of continually assessing trust and vulnerability, hoping to find my own place to belong while I foster belonging for others. These shared identities and commitments bolstered my capacity to build trust with participants, generating deeper and more meaningful insights.

Despite being a restorative justice practitioner of color in my current employment, it was crucial to recognize that I had left the urban public school context and now worked in an independent school setting that is much more resourced and less subject to state violence. Thus, I was careful in comparing my current experiences navigating schoolwide restorative justice to what participants may be experiencing. I also was no longer a classroom teacher, and could not rely on citing experiences that grew more distant from my lived reality with each passing day. I also recognized that while I identify as a person of color, I am not Indigenous, Black, or Latinx and I should take care to not make assumptions about how school discipline and restorative justice impact these populations. I did not have any direct reports in my workplace and did not anticipate that educators from my workplace would meet the criteria to qualify for my study, so I did not have to navigate that particular dynamic.

Timeline

Project Timeline	
Dates	Activities
October 2023	• IRB Approval • Participant Recruitment • Semi-structured interviews + Pod-mapping
November 2023 to	• Semi-structured interviews + Pod-mapping

January 2024	● Semi-structured interview analysis
February 2024	● Semi-structured interviews + Pod-mapping ● Semi-structured interview analysis ● Findings writing ● Check-in with participants
March 2024	● Semi-structured interviews + Pod-mapping ● Semi-structured interview analysis ● Healing circle data collection ● Healing circle data analysis ● Conclude collection
April 2024	● Summary of Findings ● Comments and revisions from participants
May 2024	● Writing and Revisions

Data Analysis

Broadly, the study's theoretical framework grounded in an abolitionist restorative justice approach informed my data analysis, as I sought to better understand dynamics of relational trust through the lens of carceral progressivism, the school-prison nexus, and restorative justice. I gathered the data from my primary methodological instruments and wrote short memos following the pod-mapping interviews and community healing circle to guide the direction of my thinking. Using a systematic coding approach and MaxQDA as the coding platform, I filtered the data and continuously referred back to my research questions until themes and subthemes emerged from the coding.

True to the reflexive nature of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), I utilized a combination of inductive and deductive coding. Some deductive codes were directly related to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, such as "school-prison nexus" or "sincerity" (one of the four domains of trust based on the Feltman model." Other deductive codes were functional, such as "What are your personal core values?" which allowed me to more easily identify themes

across questions from the semi-structured interview or community healing circle. Still other codes were inductive, in-vivo codes that developed from the rich language and expertise participants shared in their answers and insights; I also gathered initial codes based on my own post-interview memos, as I followed hunches and language that resonated with me during the interviews themselves.

Over time, I clustered these codes into broader themes or subthemes, drawing connections over time as I reviewed the coding and participant responses. By the time I facilitated the community healing circle, four themes had emerged from this initial process. Due to the positive response of the member checking process, those themes remained intact as I coded their responses deductively based on previous codes and the solidified themes. At this stage, subthemes became more apparent as participant responses across pod-mapping, interviews, survey answers, and the community healing circle. Below is an example of this process:

Codes	Subthemes	Theme
- Identity - School Stakeholders - Modeling Values - Fair Process - Youth Voice	- Navigating Place, Positionality, and Power with Cultural Humility - Intergenerational Feedback Loops - Centering Youth Voice (Yes, Every Time)	Rooted in Intergenerational Self-Determination

At the heart of my analysis were my participants and the marginalized communities they served. The word 'analysis' in its Greek etymology means to break apart, to unloosen. It was important that I maintain a desire-based framework for the research rather than damage-centered research, and that this work truly emphasizes "understanding complexity, contradiction, and the

self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009, pg. 416). While I wanted to break apart a complex problem—navigating relational trust in the school-prison nexus—it was important that I note break apart or oversimplify the complexity of these human experiences. Thus, discrepant or contradictory cases raised the expectations of me as a researcher, demanding that I thoughtfully present those complexities in conversation with sociopolitical contexts, as self-determined gestures toward freedom. Reflexive journaling and repeated peer debriefing ensured the trustworthiness of analysis, and I regularly held the work accountable to the conceptual and theoretical framework to curb my own limitations as a researcher.

Ethical Considerations

None of the participants nor their schools were named in this study, but their wellbeing and safety were paramount in the research process. This study adhered to guidelines set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and I ensured continual consent throughout the research steps and procedures. Consent was explicitly asked in the recruitment survey and again gathered through a consent form prior to the pod-mapping interview. Verbally, prior to the pod-mapping interview and community healing circle, I reminded participants that their consent was revocable at any time and they also could elect to keep certain topics off the record in order to protect their sense of confidentiality and privacy.

I maintained and collected data on a password-protected laptop in encrypted folders. All transcriptions were saved locally. Pseudonyms further protected participant information. After completion of the study, I will save the data for three years before destroying it to continue protecting the data and confidentiality of the participants.

Limitations

While I do share identities and experiences to the participants, this is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it fostered a sense of camaraderie and affinity as racially marginalized educators navigating the school-prison nexus. On the other hand, my biases needed to be accounted for through the deliberate structuring of the methodology, to elicit the authentic insights of the research participants. Out of all of the educators of color in the Bay Area who may be talented in restorative justice practices in schools, five is a small sample size. The wisdom and knowledge of the participants, while deeply meaningful, can only capture a subset of the greater experience of restorative justice practitioners in the Bay.

The recruitment survey, while thoughtfully designed to filter out inexperienced restorative justice practitioners from the more experienced ones, may have been over-calibrated to filter out too many potential participants. It took a while to recruit participants, and it is unclear if any one factor made it difficult for potential participants to feel like they could join. Some were perhaps too busy with their full-time job, or they simply forgot to complete the survey.

Furthermore, the methodology may be difficult for a researcher with less experience in restorative justice practices to accurately replicate. When I was not working on my dissertation study formally, I was at my full-time job conducting circles on a near daily basis. A lack of adequate training on restorative processes may lead to the possibility of causing undue harm to participants, and the researcher must be sufficiently equipped with tools and time for repair in that event.

Chapter 4: The Groundwork of Restorative Justice and Trust

Findings and Discussion Pt. I

This chapter presents the key findings that emerged from interviews with five Bay Area educators of color as they navigated cultivating and repairing relational trust when implementing restorative justice practices in their schools. The sample comprised one high school teacher, three high school administrators, and one middle school RJ coordinator. To reiterate, the research questions were as follows:

- How do educators of color describe their school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms as they are entwined in the school prison nexus?

- How do educators of color describe their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust in stakeholders when implementing restorative justice processes in schools?

- How can we learn from these descriptions of trust to better restorative justice practices in schools?

Through hour-long semi-structured interviews and participatory "pod mapping" diagrams, rich descriptions were elicited regarding participants' experiences with RJ, school climate, and trust-building across various school stakeholders. Four salient themes emerged through iterative analysis of observational notes, surveys, interview transcripts, pod-mapping documents, and researcher memos. Data analysis was grounded in both: 1) the conceptual framework of relational trust in the school-prison nexus supported by Feltman's domains of trust (sincerity, care, reliability, and competence); and 2) the theoretical framework of Savannah Shange's carceral progressivism and abolitionist restorative justice.

The major themes that emerged centered on:

1) interweaving intentional frameworks with authentic connection,

2) consistency as care,

3) transforming schools at the speed of trust, and

4) deepening restorative roots through intergenerational wisdom.

Woven across these themes was the need for deep listening, culturally affirming approaches, and purposeful crafting of beautiful, joyful spaces and moments. Collectively, these elements foster an ecosystem conducive to the principles and practices of restorative justice - nurturing trusting relationships, a profound sense of belonging, and the conditions for meaningful individual and collective growth and healing. This chapter provides summaries of the five participants and school contexts, and covers the first theme: Interweaving Intentional Frameworks with Authentic Connection, which answers the first research question of how these practitioners described their school contexts.

Participants' Backgrounds and School Contexts

Participants in this study included five Bay Area educators of color in diverse public school positions spanning teaching, administration, and instructional support. They represented a wide range of schools, from high-need charter schools and public school districts serving predominantly low-income students of color to well-resourced independent schools where low-income students of color represent a minority of the student population. Their schools and districts evidenced racial/ethnic disparities in academic outcomes and disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black and Latinx students. These systemic inequities and complex challenges contextualize participants' work with restorative justice and trust-building across stakeholders. Despite their differences in resources and demographics, all schools had a

formalized commitment to restorative justice practices in their school. Their school websites or

handbooks make mention of restorative practices, and the public or charter schools have districts

which reinforce this commitment at the policy statement level.

All participants have been anonymized through pseudonyms, chosen in agreement with

the participants during their one-on-one pod-mapping interview and confirmed after the

community healing circle. The following descriptions are an attempt to contextualize the rich,

complex lives of these educators as they assert values and commitment to social justice in Bay

Area schools. While I do my best to capture relevant elements of their identities, roles,

responsibilities, and experiences for the purpose of understanding the research questions and

findings more deeply, I also want to assert the critical importance of recognizing the full

humanity of these educators. What cannot be fully captured on the pages of this study or even in

the recordings of the interviews are innumerable. There were the place-based jokes of living and

working in Bay Area schools, like when I asked Ernesto to say something to test the microphone

and he quipped, "No PDs," a callback to tedious professional development sessions led by

out-of-touch district administrators. There were the knowing sidelong glances between

participant and researcher as we connected over shared struggles.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Name	Role	Grades	Years (Education/Role /School)	Location	Student Demographics
Roxanne	RJ Coordinator	6-8	15/4/4	Resilience City	500-1000 students, 98% BIPOC

Ernesto	Teacher	6-8	5/5/5	Authentic Metropolis	<500 students, 65% BIPOC
Kiyoshi	Dean and Teacher	6-12	12/9/3	Industrious Town	500-1000 students, 98% BIPOC
Jose	Assistant Principal	9-12	9/5/1	Innovation Capital	>1000 students, 97% BIPOC
Calvin	Dean	9-12	5/1/1	Authentic Metropolis	500-1000 students, 43% BIPOC

Note. The table above shares the following information: name; current role; grade levels the school serves; years of service in education, their current role, and years at the school site; the Bay Area location of their school; and the student population range and percentage of students who identify as BIPOC. The locations have been given pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

Kiyoshi: The Contemplative OG

Figure 4

Kiyoshi's Pod Mapping
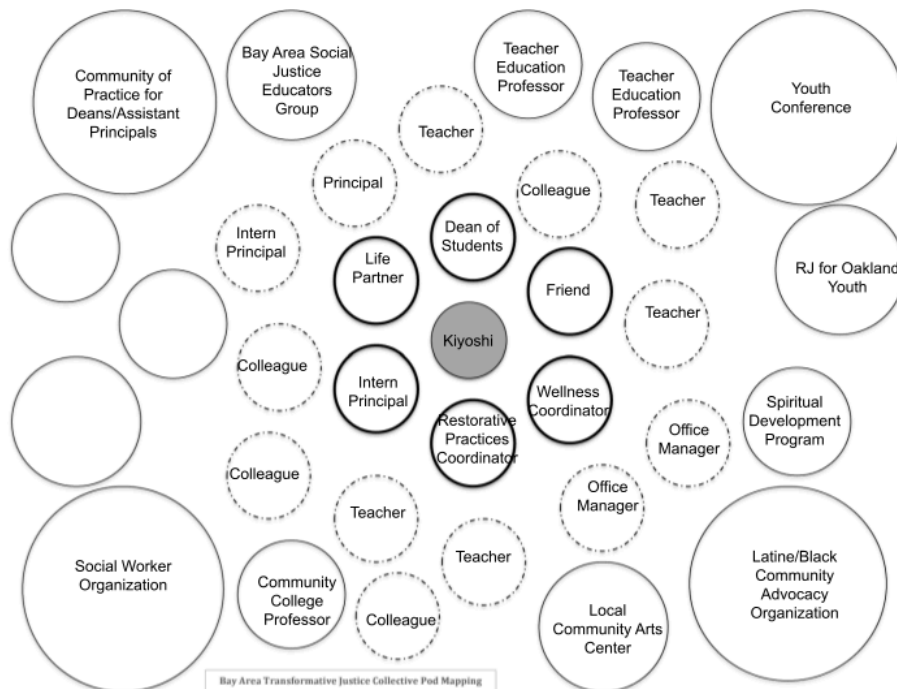
A soft-spoken and contemplative individual with deep convictions, Kiyoshi is a cisgender man who identifies as multiracial. He has been teaching at the same school site for nearly ten years in both English and Ethnic Studies. Three years ago, he became the Dean of Students for the high school. The charter school is located in the Bay Area and has been around for about the same amount of time as Kiyoshi has been there, as he was essentially a founding teacher of the community. His school site serves a little less than six hundred students, most of whom are Latine. Kiyoshi brings his experience studying urban education and ethnic studies in university as well as his lived experiences growing up in the East Bay to his role in promoting restorative justice practices within the school community.

Kiyoshi is a man who truly walks the walk as a leader in service to his community. He is one of the few administrators in the building who still has teaching responsibilities and this—on top of his prior classroom teaching at the school—cements his credibility with students and teachers alike as he still can empathize with the experiences of those in the classroom. In his work, Kiyoshi is driven by his core values of integrity, community and justice. He strives to uphold these values in an educational system and society that often works against them. Kiyoshi aims to create spaces for open and honest dialogue, whether engaging students in critical conversations about identity, bias and discrimination or advocating with administrators for fair and restorative disciplinary processes. Citing the leadership and wisdom of women of color, he is very aware of how he has been socialized masculine and does his best to model integrity and direct communication, leading to meaningful connections with students, particularly young men of color. He leads with both compassion and high expectations, balancing understanding for each person's context with accountability.

Over his decade at the school, Kiyoshi has built a stable sense of trust with many students, families and colleagues who have seen his genuine care, reliability and commitment to the community over time. However, he acknowledges that trust with administrators can sometimes feel unstable due to challenges with communication and top-down decision making. Kiyoshi aims to navigate this by humanizing everyone involved while still prioritizing what is most student-centered. Kiyoshi's pod-mapping reveals a strong support network of friends, family, and his partner who affirm his values and approach. Notably, Kiyoshi is someone whose pod explicitly includes individuals who were outside of the educational system and more impacted by the carceral and legal systems, and he felt like these deep friendships both support him and keep him accountable to disrupting the school-prison nexus. He also finds Community of Practice gatherings with fellow Dean of Students to be a valuable resource. At the same time, Kiyoshi recognizes the need to continue developing his Spanish language skills to foster trust with more of his school's Latine[2] families.

Roxanne: Champion for Beauty

Figure 5

Roxanne's Pod Mapping

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[2] I use the term Latine as I feel it's a term that best encompasses the gender diversity of those who claim Latinidad and better straddles linguistic borders between English and Spanish across the Americas. Other endings such as Latino, Latina, Latinx will be mentioned in direct connection to participant identities or their own uses of the terms.

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective Pod Mapping
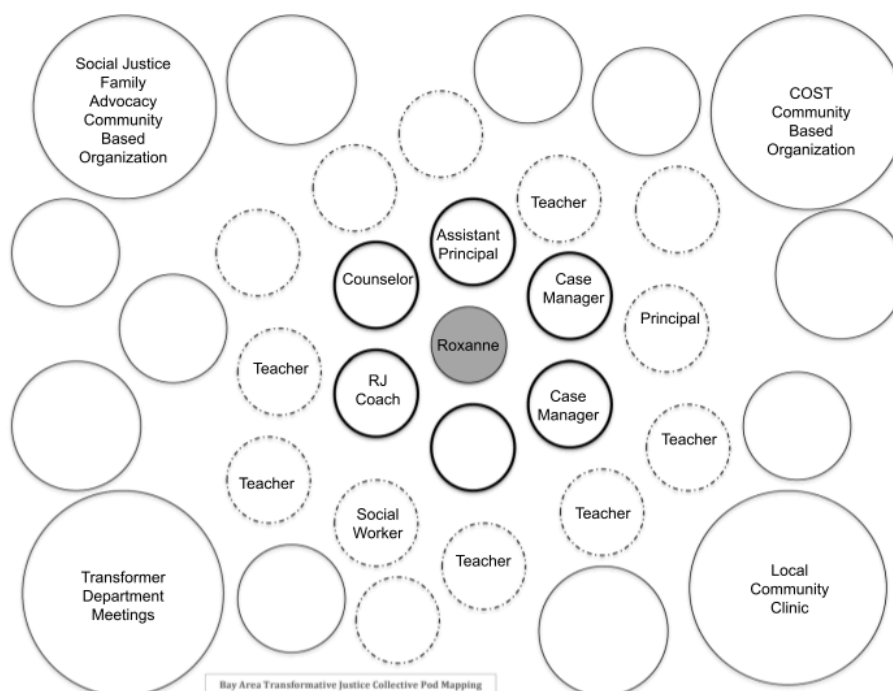
      Roxanne is a warm and reflective Restorative Justice Facilitator at a public middle school in Resilience City, California. As a mixed-race Black woman, Roxane centers her core values of courageous love, self-discovery, collective intergenerational impact, and beauty in her work at the school site. These values guide her approach to building trust and fostering healing in her school community. Roxanne began working at her school site in 2020, so she has navigated significant change processes in the advent and aftermath of COVID-19 and came in with both instructional and administrative experience from previous school sites. In her current role as Restorative Justice Coordinator, she facilitates mediations, guides re-entry processes, and contributes a restorative lens to leadership and planning. Her commitment to authentic relationships, vulnerability, and heart-to-heart conversations allows her to connect deeply with students and colleagues. Roxanne's approach to trust-building is rooted in her personal values and the school's CARE framework (Community, Academic Mindset, Relationship Skills, Effective Communication).

Despite feeling an affinity toward Black students, Roxanne acknowledges the complexities of her identity as a mixed-race educator from a more suburban area of northern California. She engages in constant self-reflection to check her own biases and antiblackness, given the disproportionate disciplinary referrals and suspensions of Black students at her school. Roxanne strives to create spaces where students feel seen, heard, and valued, even in the face of challenging behaviors. Over the course of four years and now in her fifth year at the school, she has developed stable trust with students, families, and support staff through her consistent presence, care, and sincerity. However, Roxanne recognizes the ongoing need to foster trust with teachers and administrators, particularly around issues of competence and reliability in supporting students of color. As an advocate for fair process and high expectations without punishment, Roxanne pushes back against disciplinary practices that shame or silence students. She emphasizes the importance of openhearted conversations where students feel emotionally safe and respected. Roxanne's pod mapping reveals a network of colleagues who provide support, honesty, playfulness, and opportunities for reflective dialogue about restorative justice theory and practice. Roxanne's pod also revealed strong connections to local community-based organizations and professional development that allowed her and her school community to access necessary resources to sustain restorative practices.

Moving forward, Roxanne hopes to see more investment in the well-being and healing of educators of color, particularly Black educators. She envisions affinity spaces, professional coaching, and access to therapy as crucial resources for restorative justice practitioners. Roxanne also emphasizes the need to redefine the role of restorative justice facilitators beyond disciplinarians, focusing on proactive community-building and supporting teachers in implementing restorative practices. Through her courageous love, self-reflection, and

commitment to collective intergenerational impact, Roxanne emerges as a transformative force in her school community. Her insights illuminate the challenges and possibilities of cultivating trust and healing in educational spaces, particularly for students and educators of color.

Ernesto: Teacher, Community Builder, Karaoke King

Figure 6

Ernesto's Pod Mapping
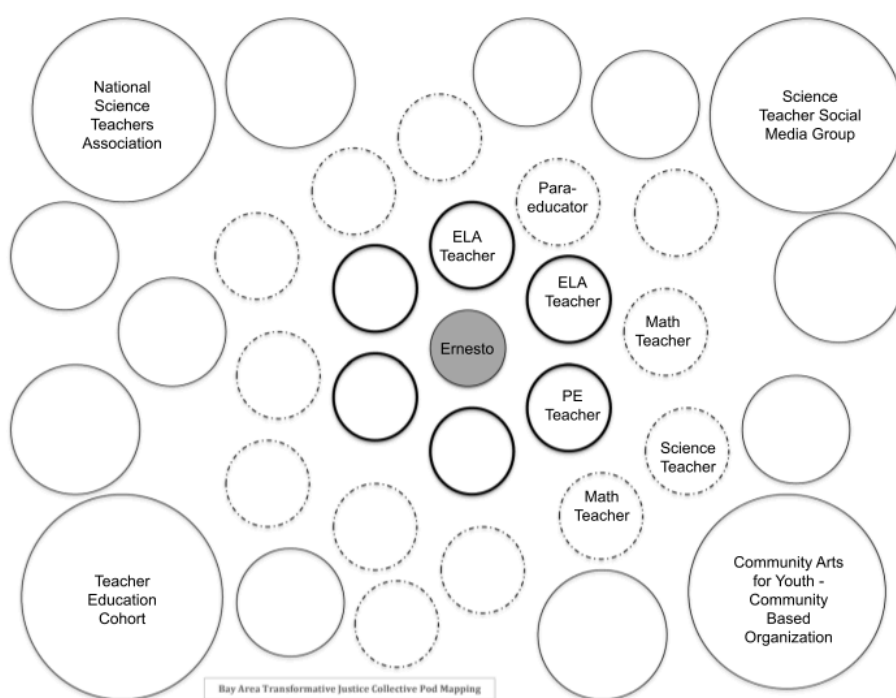
Ernesto is a dedicated, thoughtful 7th and 8th grade science teacher at a racially and socioeconomically diverse middle school in Authentic Metropolis, California. As a Latino man who grew up in the Central Valley of California, Ernesto centers his core values of building relationships, trust, and community in his work, which he feels align well with the school's values of inclusivity and creativity. In his fifth year as an educator, Ernesto has developed stable trust with his students through consistent modeling of restorative practices, creating a classroom

environment where they feel safe to be vulnerable and express themselves authentically. For example, his students eagerly participate in karaoke, continuing to sing even when other students or adults enter the room, demonstrating their trust and comfort in the science classroom space. Ernesto connects with students through involvement in the school's athletic program, sharing his cultural background, speaking Spanglish, and engaging them in conversations about their own cultures and traditions. He leads proactive community circles during advisory, as well as reactive ones when harm occurs in the classroom or the broader school community so that students have an opportunity to process their feelings and generate strategies for moving forward.

However, Ernesto has observed a concerning shift in school culture in recent years. With a recent administrative change, Ernesto felt like both administrators and classroom educators started on the same page with a shared sense of optimism, and a goal of "listening and considering and valuing everyone's input and opinions, and also keeping a lens on how we're interacting with kids; not being punitive, not being disciplinarians." Students soon reported a different story, however, experiencing negative interactions with peers and adults particularly in the hallway, describing the school as "toxic." Despite beginning with a stance of requesting support and presenting evidence for his concerns in collaboration with other teachers, Ernesto has been met with defensiveness and denial from administrators. This has led to eroded trust to the point that he has fragile trust with administrators, perceiving low levels of care, sincerity, reliability, and competence in their support of restorative practices.

Ernesto also recognizes the ongoing work needed to foster trust with teachers, particularly around issues of competence and reliability in implementing restorative practices effectively and consistently. Ernesto's pod mapping reveals a network of colleagues in the middle school who provide support, collaboration, and opportunities for reflective dialogue about

restorative practices. A fellow teacher aligns with Ernesto's vision of a safe, inclusive community and is skilled at conflict resolution. Another colleague consistently centers student needs and well-being. The PE teacher, while newer to the school, engages in thoughtful introspection and seeks Ernesto's guidance in supporting students. Ernesto also relies on the support of educators outside his school, such as his former graduate school professors and teacher education cohort, who provide guidance and resources on implementing restorative practices through a social justice lens.

Looking ahead, Ernesto emphasizes the need for consistent training, support, and resources for all staff to effectively implement restorative practices. He highlights the importance of open communication, active listening, and valuing the perspectives of students and educators of color. By centering his values, Ernesto strives to create a more equitable and restorative school environment for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. He provides critical perspective into cultivating trust and healing in educational spaces, especially as an educator of color committed to dismantling systemic inequities.

Calvin: Authentic Navigator of the Interstitial

Figure 7

Calvin's Pod-Mapping

Colleague

Colleague

Romantic
Partner

Community
Center
Coordinator

Supervisor

Calvin

Professional
Development
Opportunities

Youtube

Books about
Restorative
Justice and
Love

Colleague

Students
(generally)

Christian Values
and Ethics
around grace
and forgiveness

Director of
Instruction

Dean
of Students

RJ for Oakland
Youth

Community
Center
Coordinator

Student
Council
Chairs

Therapist

DEI
Student
Group

Friend

Community
Center for Civic
Engagement

Friend

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective Pod Mapping

Calvin is an exuberant, inquisitive Dean of Student Experience at an independent high school in Authentic Metropolis. As a mixed-race individual in his late twenties, Calvin brings his unique perspective and lived experiences to his role in promoting restorative justice practices within the school community. Calvin's own educational background as someone who attended public schools before studying at an elite private university informs his approach, and he is someone whose experience insightfully identifies that the school-prison nexus operates across both public and private school settings. He recognizes the immense privilege of the independent school world he now works in and aims to make his own winding path legible to students. As someone socialized as masculine but working to model vulnerability, weirdness and a "heart-centered" ethic, Calvin moves fluidly between both racialized and gendered spaces, connecting with students in unique ways. In his current position, which he started this school year, Calvin takes the lead in implementing restorative justice practices with students, while collaborating with his supervisor to address matters involving adults. Calvin views his work

through the lens of his core personal values: beauty, community, and curiosity. He strives to craft beautiful and joyous spaces, foster intentional community, and approach his work with an open and inquisitive mindset.

In his first year at the independent high school, Calvin has achieved a stable sense of trust with several key colleagues who share his student-centered orientation and DEI focus - including his supervisor, fellow deans, and staff from the Center for Community Engagement. However, Calvin acknowledges he is still developing trust with certain constituents like families, teachers, administrators, student inclusion chairs, and the broader student body. He aims to build trust through "crafting time" for informal relationship-building, increasing his visibility and approachability, and demonstrating consistency and reliability over time. Calvin's pod-mapping also reveals a desire for more organizational resources to support his growth as a young DEI practitioner– whether that's professional development in restorative practices, nonviolent communication training, or thought partnership to help him align his intuition for relational dynamics with more codified best practices. As someone who advanced quickly into leadership, Calvin strives to match his skills with the conceptual frameworks and practical tools to do the work as "beautifully" as possible.

Inspired by the Christian values of grace and forgiveness from his upbringing, Calvin leads with empathy, nuance and a resistance to stereotyping that stems from his own experiences moving between racial, cultural and gendered spaces. He firmly believes that restorative work requires both proactive community-building and responsive repair and healing. While Calvin observes ongoing biases and challenges for students of color, he also sees potential in policies like the student-led initiatives and anti-hate speech guidelines that create space for youth to be

their full selves. With humility, care and conviction, Calvin emerges as an educator committed to fostering inclusion and belonging for every student.

Jose: Stalwart Advocate for Justice

Figure 8
Jose's Pod Mapping
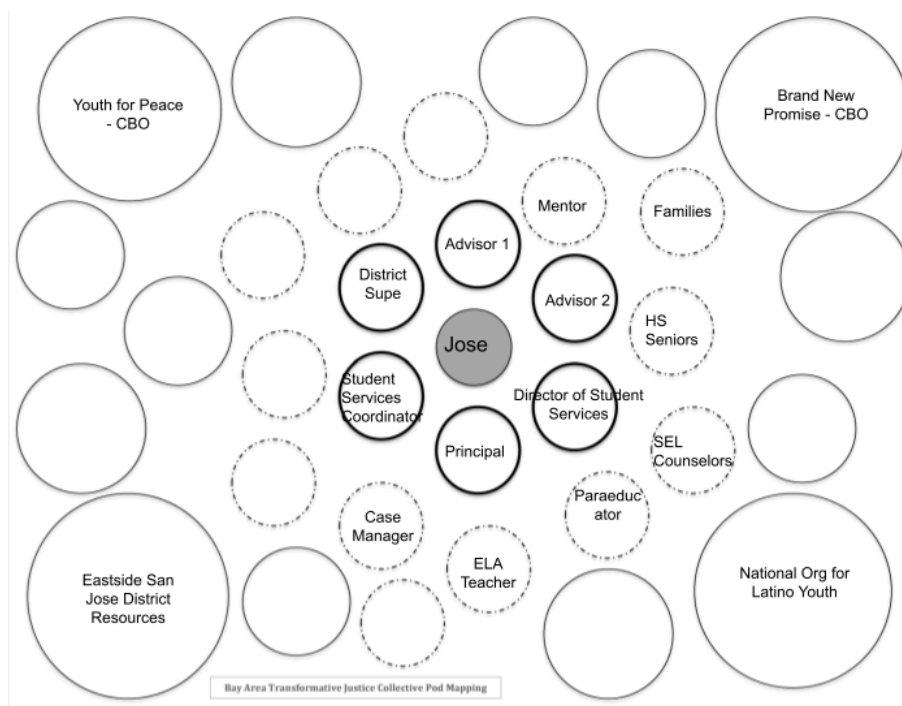
Jose is an experienced and dedicated Assistant Principal at a diverse secondary school serving over a thousand students in grades 9-12 in Innovation Capital, California. As a Latino administrator, Jose centers restorative justice practices in his daily work, with 90% of his role focused on facilitating mediation, restorative conversations, and community healing in response to student conflicts. In the week prior to our pod-mapping interview, he facilitated restorative interventions for seven physical altercations between students. Jose's core values of social justice, perseverance, and resiliency drive his commitment to restorative justice as a means to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and create more equitable outcomes for marginalized

students. His own experiences navigating education as a person of color shape how he shows up for students.

Jose has developed stable trust with the students he serves, perceiving high levels of care, sincerity, reliability and competence in his interactions with them. He creates spaces for students to be vulnerable, express themselves authentically, and work through challenges. Jose's ability to speak Spanish and share his cultural background helps bridge gaps and build trust with the predominantly Latino student body and their families. While Jose's values align with the district's mission of educational equity, he sometimes faces judgment from colleagues about his appearance and demeanor that make it difficult to build trust. However, he has encountered barriers in building trust with some teachers, especially white teachers who express skepticism about the effectiveness of restorative practices when they don't see immediate changes in student behavior. Jose recognizes that shifting mindsets and building buy-in is an ongoing process that requires patience, consistency, and open communication.

Jose has cultivated a strong network of support among key staff and administrators committed to restorative justice both within his school site and at the district level, evidenced in his pod-mapping process. This includes two student advisors who are his "go-tos" for facilitating restorative conversations, his principal who has been at the school for 8-9 years and consistently puts students first, and a fellow associate principal who shares Jose's educational philosophy. He also relies on the director of student services and a student services coordinator at the district for guidance navigating challenging situations. Community partner organizations such as Brand New Hope and Youth for Peace provide critical support in implementing proactive restorative circles.

Jose emphasizes the need for initiatives that engage students and families as partners in restorative solutions, as well as ongoing training and support to get more teachers bought into the restorative approach. By patiently persevering through the challenges and centering his values, Jose strives to cultivate a more inclusive, healing-centered school community. His insights underscore both the transformative potential and the real barriers to implementing restorative justice as an administrator of color.

Figure 9

Participants' Core Values

Note. A word map of the participants' core values

Interweaving Intentional Frameworks with Authentic Connection

One of the key findings that emerged from this study is the importance of interweaving intentional restorative justice frameworks with authentic connection. This theme speaks directly to my first and second research question about how educators of color describe their school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms as they are entwined in the school prison nexus, and how they cultivate and repair relational trust with students and colleagues when implementing restorative practices in schools. When we discuss 'frameworks' in this section, I

am referring to the establishing of structures that have a high level of control or limit setting as well as processes for support and encouragement, to make clear the behavior and social expectations of the space. Participants emphasized the need for structured frameworks and consistent practices to guide their restorative work, in alignment with what Brenda Morrison (2005) says schools need to do when implementing restorative practices, which is to "invest in a regulatory framework that empowers all member of the school community to engage in productive pedagogy" (pg. 342). These frameworks and practices ranged from the informal to the formal, aligned with the Restorative Practices Continuum outlined by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (Acosta et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016). In this way, schools contribute to "facilitating the institutionalization of RJ via key infrastructure (staffing, scheduling, space) and the integration of RJ into daily school life" (Sandwick et al., 2019, p. 21). They also highlighted the equally important role of authentic, human connection in building trust. They described a delicate balance of established protocols and allowing for organic, spontaneous moments of connection and vulnerability. These protocols and authentic connections tend to and strengthen a school's "web of relationships" or a "web of obligations," (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Zehr, 2002).

Figure 10

The Restorative Practices Continuum

Note. This figure is reproduced from the International Institute for Restorative Practices and the article, "Defining Restorative." (Wachtel, 2016, p.)

This theme illuminates the complex dynamics of trust-building in restorative justice work, particularly for educators of color who are often navigating multiple layers of power and identity in their relationships with students and colleagues. By carefully interweaving intentional frameworks with authentic connection, these educators are able to create safe, supportive spaces where healing and growth can occur though positive communal participation. As supported by the work of Thalia González and colleagues (2019), by tending to the multiple levels and structures within a school and striving for authentic connection throughout, these practitioners of color enable " the school to better respond to challenges, incidents, and needs as they arise since a supporting and caring culture is already in existence" (pg. 217). In the following sections, we will explore three key subthemes that emerged within this larger theme: 1) crafting spaces for beauty and joy, 2) balancing structure and spontaneity, and 3) disrupting enclosure, or the challenge of prioritizing connection and joy. Through the experiences and insights of our participants, we will better understand the interlocking dimensions of a thriving culture that forms from the principles of restorative justice.

Crafting Spaces for Beauty and Joy

This first subtheme speaks directly to my second research question: how do educators of color cultivate relational trust in their school stakeholders when implementing restorative justice processes in schools? All participants worked to create what participant Roxanne emphasized as "restorative groundwork, restorative groundwork, restorative groundwork" as the foundation of a school climate conducive to restorative practices. By carefully interweaving intentional frameworks with authentic connection, these educators are able to create safe, supportive spaces where healing and growth can occur. One key way they do this is by crafting spaces that foster beauty and joy. The five restorative justice practitioners of color are all artisans as much as they

are educators, recognizing that facilitating a sense of belonging and community is as much about craft as it is connection. They were all committed to structures, literally and figuratively, that mimic the concept of the social discipline window in restorative practices work, where high structure exists alongside high support. As modeled by Ted Wachtel and the International Institute for Restorative Practices in the figure below, the social discipline window conceptualizes approaches to behavior boundaries and and social norms:

Figure 11

The Social Discipline Window
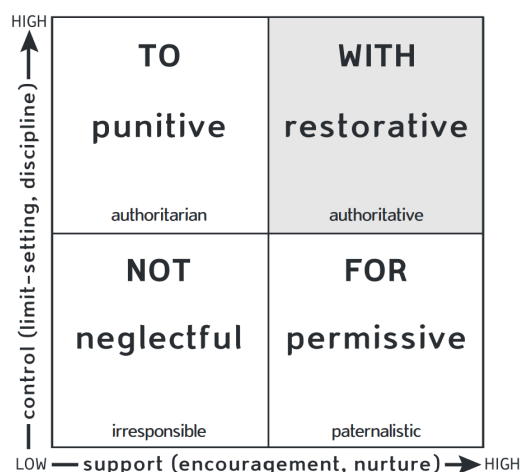
Note. This graphic is reproduced from Defining Restorative by Ted Wachtel.

By intentionally creating beautiful and joyful spaces, these educators lay the groundwork for the authentic connections and relationships that are central to restorative justice work. Every community member knows where the limits of the community are to uphold shared values, and they are also encouraged within the culture to be their best selves. To achieve this, participants recognized the necessity to invest deeply in social capital by creating opportunities for it to develop. As Ted Wachtel, the founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices says:

Where social capital—a network of relationships—is already well established, it

is easier to respond effectively to wrongdoing and restore social order—as well as

to create a healthy and positive organizational environment. Social capital is

defined as the connections among individuals (Putnam, 2001), and the trust,

mutual understanding, shared values and behaviors that bind us together and make

cooperative action possible (Cohen & Prusak, 2001).

This commitment to crafting spaces of beauty and joy with intention for a healthy and positive

organizational environment emerged multiple times. By exploring these examples of participants

crafting beauty and joy, we can better understand how such a commitment establishes a

foundation for positive regard that will facilitate trust-building in schoolwide restorative justice

practices.

In the pod-mapping interviews, each participant shared their three personal core values

and how those aligned with their work as restorative justice practitioners and the values of the

school. Upon conclusion of all the interviews, I was struck by how a particular value was

bookended, despite the fact that these individuals worked in very different Bay Area school

contexts. In my first interview with Roxanne, she had mentioned that Beauty was a core value

for her: "[For] Beauty, I get to make my doors and make posters, I get to create a lot of visual

displays for kids and that feels really good, to just share beauty with them." Roxanne's core

value of Beauty manifested in a collective dedication to creating beautiful things in service of

community, sharing her core values and inviting others to do the same. When I walked with her

from the main entrance of the middle school at which she worked to her office in a large

building, that commitment to visual beauty in the school enlivened the experience of walking

through the space. Rather than a drab neutral, vivid colors splashed across the walls of the

hallways, classrooms, and lockers. Posters and art installations of folks of color important to Resilience City's history were ever-present. These examples demonstrate her and the school's commitment to establishing the social capital necessary for a restorative community, demonstrating the "mutual understanding, shared values, and behaviors that[…] make cooperative action possible" (Wachtel, 2016, pg. 1). This beautiful space that Roxanne pours into reminds students and other community members that their humanity is recognized, and she models what she expects of others in the community, which is that she has a responsibility to create a "compelling space that kids want to be in." She emphasized the importance of a holistic approach to beauty, not just aesthetics, and hoped that new teachers would think about lesson flow and topics as well.

Roxanne's commitment to beauty and its role in fostering a restorative community was echoed by another participant, Calvin, despite their seemingly different school contexts. In my last pod-mapping interview with Calvin at his school site, Calvin echoed Roxanne's core personal value of Beauty. He said,

> I think things should be beautiful. I think I'm very interested in crafting spaces, events, moments where things can be beautiful and folks can show what is really interesting to them within that field. So yeah, anything that I'm doing, I try to make gorgeous.

Calvin's emphasis on beauty was not just a personal preference, but a deliberate strategy for creating a welcoming and affirming environment for students. His office space reflected this commitment, with a thoughtfully displayed student collage that highlighted both their experiences of injustice and their resilience. The inclusion of small plants and Calvin's guitar

suggested an attention to detail and a desire to create a warm, humanizing space. Moreover, the sense of joy and beauty extends beyond his own office into the entirety of the administrative wing or "admin wing," as it is referred to. His colleagues play ukulele and sing, sometimes while sitting in their offices, creating a symphony of beautiful music in the "admin wing," where Calvin admits he never would have imagined he could feel comfortable when he was a high school student himself. Calvin recognizes that the work of facilitation or crafting something lovely can be tangible as much as it is temporal, that even small moments can be considered with intention. Much of Calvin's role as the Dean of Student Inclusion also involved supporting student clubs, affinity groups, and programming. During the community healing circle, he delighted in a recent multicultural show led by the school's Filipinx affinity group, even performing in the show himself with a colleague. His perspective highlights the multifaceted nature of restorative justice work in schools. It is not just about responding to harm or conflict, but about proactively creating conditions where students feel seen, valued, and connected. By attending to the physical environment and creating moments of beauty, even in small ways, educators can communicate a deep care for students' well-being and a respect for their full humanity. Even before there is harm to repair, these school contexts establish a strong sense of community such "higher school connectedness, better school climate, more positive peer relationships and developmental outcomes" which repair processes in Restorative Justice practices in schools seek to maintain (Acosta et al., 2019, p. 14).

In multiple ways, restorative justice practitioners of color in these Bay Area schools attended to physical space, formal structures, and informal structures to infuse the values and principles of restorative justice throughout their community. Kiyoshi, the Dean of Students and an Ethnic Studies teacher who had worked at the school for a decade, similarly demonstrated a

clear command of this crafting throughout his work. Physical beauty also was present at

Kiyoshi's school in Industrious City, California, where I was immediately greeted with a wave of

paper monarch butterflies upon entry into the school, a celebration of the community's racially

diverse population and in particular, the metaphor of the monarch butterfly for Latine students

and their families who have navigated stories of migration. In his shared office, student artwork

and powerful works that highlighted social justice organizers framed his side of the room,

mindful of the messages and representation he wanted to reflect back to his community. As he

showed me around the school, Kiyoshi did not let anyone in the school pass by without a friendly

wave or a short check-in, gently tapping a student on the shoulder who was independently

working on his laptop to see if he needed anything, considerate of the fact that this student had

gotten "in trouble" recently. Through these intentional interactions, he consistently embodied

what De Royston and Vakil call politicized care, which consists of political clarity, communal

bonds, potential affirming, and developmental appropriate[ness] (De Royston et al., 2017, pg. 8).

When I visited him at the end of the day at his school, Kiyoshi continually tended to the web of

connections and invested continuously in the school's social capital at every level, resulting in a

feeling of ease and peace in the spaces as he moved throughout the school.

Jose demonstrated his consideration of the impact of informal check-ins by deliberately

balancing them with more structured connections. He emphasized the importance of connecting

with students in settings beyond the common formal restorative conferences or circles he often

facilitated in his role as an Assistant Principal. In doing so, Jose exemplified the fundamental

hypothesis of restorative practices, which states that "the healthiest environment for human

beings is one in which there is free expression of affect, minimizing the negative and maximizing

the positive" (Wachtel, 2016). Jose's informal check-ins allowed students to experience a fuller

range of affect, as he engaged them in "five, 10 minutes of non-academic conversation, just getting to know who they are as a person, as a human." By focusing on topics other than academics or behavior, Jose minimized the negative and provided students with the autonomy to share freely about other aspects of their lives. Furthermore, Jose formalized opportunities for positive expression of affect through a "positive reinforcement initiative" that celebrated students' small wins, such as getting to school on time, while acknowledging the hurdles and challenges they faced in their lives.

Jose also shared that partnering with community-based organizations supported the culture building of the school and made a crucial difference in providing high structure and high support. At Jose's high school, a local organization called Youth for Peace and in particular a local community member named Pastor Miguel worked in tandem to bring joy to children's experiences, passing out "bags of chips or fruit snacks" during brunch and Pastor Miguel would ask "students to throw up the peace sign. So that's his thing. It's the City Peace Project and he'll snap pictures of them and I see the joy in moments like those, which is building connections." Even though midday snacks and posing for photos with peace symbols may seem like small gestures, Jose celebrates the joy present in those connections and recognizes the care that goes into these acts. Just like at Kiyoshi's school, these moments demonstrate politicized care in which these students are cared for in developmentally appropriate, communal, and politically deliberate ways. As Jose notes, "sometimes for some of our students, our schools are that safe place or that moment of joy that just makes a difference." By intentionally partnering with community organizations to create these moments, schools can help mitigate the effects of trauma and stress that many students experience. By partnering with community organizations and infusing even small moments with joy and care, educators can create the conditions for

authentic relationships and a strong sense of belonging - the very foundations of a restorative justice approach.

Even if an educator's reach does not extend as far as being able to foster relationships with outside organizations, their commitment to crafting spaces of beauty and joy can have an enormous impact on building positive relationships in a school. As a middle school science teacher, Ernesto first began hosting karaoke sessions during the end-of-semester activity day and found that it was very successful. He decided to continue hosting it whenever the middle school held an Activity Day. He observed that students demonstrated a tremendous sense of ease in the classroom, sharing with me, "even when other kids walk into the room in the middle of it, or other adults, and they just keep on singing." Ernesto elaborates on the significance of these karaoke moments and what they do for the student community, saying that "shows that they've built that trust, and I really try my best to create that space where they feel safe and they feel comfortable just having fun. Maybe they really love singing, but they just don't find the space where they can do it with friends, or have fun with it" (Ernesto Interview, Pos. 76). Here, Ernesto uses the phrase "create the space" explicitly, recognizing the active responsibility he has to students and the school to hold that space. Ernesto's karaoke sessions are a powerful example of how educators can craft spaces of beauty and joy even within the confines of a classroom. By intentionally creating a space where students feel safe to express themselves and have fun, Ernesto is fostering the kind of authentic connections that are central to restorative justice work. The fact that students continue singing even when other students or adults enter the room is a testament to the trust and comfort they feel in the space Ernesto has created. Moreover, Ernesto's recognition of his active role in creating this space ("I really try my best to create that space") highlights the intentionality that underlies this work. Crafting spaces of beauty and joy doesn't

happen by accident; it requires educators to make deliberate choices about how they structure their classrooms and interactions with students.

The examples from these expert restorative justice practitioners of color illustrate how artfully they craft spaces of beauty and joy across multiple levels at their school, from the informal to the formal, in both spatial and temporal contexts. Whether it was vibrant visual displays, office designs with social justice in mind, or lively community partnerships, these educators recognized that welcoming schools promoted an abundance of social capital, the *vita activa* necessary to animate the foundation of a positive environment that is not only conducive but regulatory to the work of restorative justice practices (Morrison, 2005). By attending to the physical and temporal dimensions of their school contexts with students of color in mind, they communicate continuously to students that each individual *matters*, that their unique experience is valued and important to the complex web of the school community. These efforts to craft beauty and joy are not separate from the more formal structures of restorative justice, but are in fact intrinsic to them. When we invest in a community's social capital and recognize each person's humanity on a daily basis, it provides necessary lubrication to the difficult work of repairing harm and relationships when conflict does occur. In this way, restorative practitioners of color continuously tend to the proactive opportunities as much as they (and in order to) prepare for the reactive moments. While crafting spaces of beauty and joy is one key strategy these educators use to cultivate relational trust, it is closely intertwined with another: balancing structure and spontaneity in their restorative justice practices. In the next section, we will explore how these educators navigate the tension between the need for clear, consistent frameworks and the desire for authentic, organic connections with students and colleagues.

Disrupting Enclosure: Balancing Structure and Spontaneity

As stated earlier, these restorative justice practitioners of color are artisans who recognize that facilitating a sense of belonging is as much about craft as it is about connection. In the previous subtheme, I sought to make evident how these practitioners proactively cultivated prosocial relationships across the Restorative Practices Continuum, striving to be mindful of the craft of informal moments as much as the formal structures. These efforts, I argue, are not merely aesthetic or superficial, but are deeply political acts that challenge what Damien Sojoyner calls the "enclosure of Black education," which is operationalized by hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment or what Subini Annamma frames as a pedagogy of pathologization (Annamma, 2018; Sojoyner, 2013). Sojoyner asserts that current school disciplinary practices, such as policing and expulsions, have developed to suppress expressions of Black culture, autonomy, and liberation movements within schools. In this context, the work of restorative justice practitioners takes on a new urgency and significance. In a traditional school setting, adults are the ones with the power to dictate policies, frameworks, and structures. In this hierarchy, schools expect compliance from children, in which they do not have their own opinions, perspectives, or needs. As Annamma notes of the school-prison nexus, the "pedagogy of pathologization (hyper-surveillance, hyper-labeling, and hyper-punishment) [...] created criminals of students who did not fit unspoken and yet desired normative standards (e.g., white, male, able-bodied)" (Annamma, 2018, pg. 13). Central to disrupting this enclosure and criminalization then is the delicate balance between structure and spontaneity that the study's participants carefully navigate in their school contexts. They recognize that to truly center the needs of their communities—a fundamental tenet of Restorative Justice—and build authentic trust, they must create spaces that are both firmly bounded and radically open to organic expression and connection (Wachtel, 2016; Zehr, 2002).

This balance, I argue, is key to fostering the kinds of transformative relationships and experiences that can challenge the dehumanizing effects of the school-prison nexus. When we examine this balance through the lens of Charles Feltman's four distinctions of trust[3], it's clear that spontaneity is essential for building sincere relationships (Feltman, 2009). The participants shared stories where they both held firm, deliberate lines around a specific place or moment, and also kept an open, curious stance that allowed others to organically enter and shape the moment based on their own honest, affective responses. At the same time, they recognized the need for clear structures and expectations to create a sense of safety and predictability. It is this dance between structure and spontaneity that creates space for authentic connection and, in turn, fosters relational trust among participants in restorative justice practices. In the following examples, we will see how restorative justice practitioners artfully navigate this tension in their daily work, and how this navigation serves to disrupt the enclosure of Black education and create spaces of possibility and joy within schools.

Both Calvin and Ernesto leveraged creative arts practice, particularly music, in their respective school sites to foster authentic connection and disrupt traditional notions of school discipline. Ernesto's karaoke sessions, which arose spontaneously from student interest, illustrate how crafting spaces of joy requires flexibility and responsiveness to students' needs. Similarly, Calvin used his guitar not merely as a display item but as a tool to infuse the admin wing with music and laughter, creating a welcoming environment for students who might otherwise feel intimidated by school leadership. As Calvin explained, "legitimately in that hallway there is music and laughter and us hanging out and enjoying ourselves," with his use of the term "legitimately" underscoring the transformative power of music, laughter, connection, and joy in a

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[3] Feltman's four distinctions of trust are sincerity, care, reliability, and competence.

space traditionally associated with discipline and control. By interweaving intentional frameworks with organic, student-led expressions, both educators demonstrate how balancing structure and spontaneity is key to fostering trusting relationships. Ernesto notes that students "feel safe and they feel comfortable just having fun" in these spaces, while Calvin emphasizes the importance of creating structures that "allow you to be more of yourself." In doing so, they challenge the implicit, normative standards that seek to conform students to normative standards within the school-prison nexus and constrain the self-expression of students of color. Instead, they create spaces where students can bring their whole selves and embrace the unexpected possibilities that arise when authentic connections are nurtured. By striking this balance, Calvin and Ernesto are able to cultivate the relational trust that is essential for restorative justice work to succeed.

Roxanne and Jose, as restorative justice practitioners in their schools, intentionally sought out informal, spontaneous connections with students to counter traditional disciplinarian roles and build trust-based relationships. Jose, an assistant principal with the power to impose consequences like suspensions, found relationship-building challenging with students frequently sent to him. He was aware of the "pedagogy of pathologization" (Annamma, 2017) that subjected students of color to hyper-labeling, with white teachers referring to their behavior as "prisoner-like" or "dangerous" for simply accessing the only cold water fountain in the staff lounge. To resist both the culture of criminalization at the school as well as to counter the potential of his own role to enact punitive consequences on these students, Jose emphasized bringing his "authentic self" to interactions beyond formal restorative conferences. He invited students, saying, "'Come by, let's check in,' five, ten minutes of non-academic conversation, just getting to know who they are as a person, as a human." These check-ins aligned with Ted

Wachtel's fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices: "that the healthiest environment for human beings is one in which there is free expression of affect, minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive" (Wachtel, 2016). By dedicating time to know students as individuals, Jose recognized their full humanity and resisted the hyper-labeling and criminalization racially marginalized children face in school contexts. At the end of the day, these check-ins are not with inmates, prisoners, or dangerous entities, but with children of color who are learning and growing. Jose's intentional balance of structured and spontaneous interactions creates a space where students can express their authentic selves and be seen as whole persons, disrupting the dehumanizing tendencies of the school-prison nexus.

Roxanne, a Restorative Justice Coordinator, encountered a tension between her title and the disciplinarian role she was expected to assume. Unlike Jose's school structure in Innovation, Roxanne had experienced schools where the roles of RJ facilitator and disciplinarian were separate. Although Roxanne acknowledged being "somewhat of a disciplinarian" and feeling "implicated in the data" regarding racially disproportionate referrals, she believed her core role was building authentic relationships with students. Among the 11 practices on the Restorative Practices Continuum, Roxanne prioritized informal conferences and impromptu interactions. "So much of my day is just literally wandering the hallways and coming upon situations and providing support," she shared. "I think being that impromptu advocate, impromptu thought partner, I think that is helpful and I do think it's what I end up actually really doing." By being an impromptu advocate and thought partner to students in the hallways, Roxanne resisted the limited stereotype of a disciplinarian and met students' needs through spontaneous mentorship opportunities. Like Jose, Roxanne exemplifies how restorative justice leaders "go beyond the

procedural aspect of engagement to the emotional aspect of engagement" (Morrison, 2005), recognizing the importance of tending to students' emotional needs in everyday interactions.

When this balance of structure and spontaneity is achieved across these school settings, a sense of joy and connection is deeply palpable while the structures that enabled them are hardly perceived. Calvin shared his concern that "if joy is given too much of a structure, it loses some of its luster." He strove to create a safe container through restorative justice practices "where joy can just happen spontaneously," allowing students to simply "laugh, sing, or play at the ping-pong table outdoors in beautiful weather." These moments of "natural upspringing," as Calvin called them, confirm the success of restorative practices in creating an environment where students can express themselves authentically and challenge the constraints of the school-prison nexus (Sojoyner, 2013). Similarly, Ernesto described this natural unfolding of connection and joy at the beginning of his Monday morning classes, when students need more time to transition back into school routine from their weekend activities. Students would share things like how "their fish died and they were bummed about it" and students would organically develop an implicit structure for conversation, "in a class-wide discussion, not thirty kids talking over each other." Ernesto described these interactions as "genuine, respectful questions and it seemed so structured without the official structure…for me those are the wins and the moments of joy." In Ernesto's classroom rooted in restorative justice principles, the "official structure" that upholds normative, narrow ideas of how students are expected to behave fall away in favor of the norms and values of the classroom community, where structures for conversation are in service of a sincerity that fosters trust and authentic connection.

It is this deliberate increasing of capacity, where children can express more challenging affects like frustration or being "bummed," that give more space for racially marginalized

children's full humanity and their "varied modes of buy-in and disruption" (Shange, 2019, p. 49)." In both settings, in these moments, the community is allowed–even if briefly–to transcend the limits imposed by the school-prison nexus. As Calvin put it, these moments of joy and connection are a "confirmation that we have built something that is a safe container" that allows for "a natural upspringing." However, achieving and maintaining this balance is not without its challenges.

The Challenge of Prioritizing Joy and Connection

Implicit in Ernesto's naming of authentic connections and respectful dialogue as "wins" is the struggle of achieving these moments within the school-prison nexus. Prioritizing connection and joy within the school-prison nexus is a constant challenge for restorative justice practitioners. In a system that often misinterprets spontaneous expressions of youth agency as "willful defiance," creating spaces for authentic relationship-building and joyful interactions requires careful calibration. As Savannah Shange (2019) argues, "willful defiance" is better understood as "the agentic flows that creatively adapt to and subvert the terms of carceral progressivism, exposing its incoherencies and fissures" (p. 15, 2019). In other words, what is often punished as defiance may actually be students' attempts to assert their humanity and resist the dehumanizing logics of the school-prison nexus.The restorative justice practitioners in this study navigate this tension on a daily basis. They craft spaces of beauty, safety, and joy as deliberate acts of political care, inviting creative energy and democratic participation from all stakeholders. In doing so, they are acutely aware of the need to balance structure and spontaneity, the formal and the informal, to create environments where students can express themselves authentically without fear of punishment.

This is no easy feat. As racially marginalized individuals themselves, these practitioners are often susceptible to the violence of the school-prison nexus. They experience tension between making connections and holding lines, especially when they are expected to be disciplinarians, as in the examples of Jose and Roxanne. They must constantly evaluate levels of social capital and trust within the school, recognizing how harm in one relationship can ripple out to affect the entire community, as Kiyoshi's experiences demonstrate. Moreover, the urgent pace of school life, driven by white norms of productivity and efficiency, leaves little time for the slow, patient work of building relationships and repairing harm. In this context, moments of "natural upspringing," as Calvin calls them, are rare and precious. These spontaneous expressions of joy and connection are a testament to the restorative justice practitioners' skill in creating safe containers where students can be their authentic selves.

By nurturing these moments of authentic connection and joy, restorative justice practitioners like Ernesto, Calvin, and the others are engaging in a profound act of resistance. They are challenging the logics of the school-prison nexus, which would label these expressions as "willful defiance" and respond with punishment, exclusion, and ultimately enclosure. Instead, they are creating spaces where students can experience the full range of their humanity, building the trust and relationships that are essential for true healing and transformation. As the next theme will explore, this work requires a deep commitment to consistency and care. Restorative justice is not a one-time event but an ongoing practice of showing up for students, day after day, and creating the conditions for authentic connection and growth. By prioritizing connection and joy, even in the face of significant challenges, these practitioners are modeling a powerful form of care that has the potential to transform not only individual relationships but the very structures of schooling itself.

Chapter 5: Gesturing toward Freedom

Findings and Discussion Pt. II

"Liberation is a velocity rather than a state of being." – Savannah Shange

"We are not autonomous, self-sufficient beings as European mythology teaches…We are rooted just like the trees. But our roots come out of our nose and mouth, like an umbilical cord, forever connected to the rest of the world…Nothing that we do, do we do by ourselves. We do not see by ourselves. We do not hear by ourselves…That which the tree exhales, I inhale. That which I exhale, the trees inhale. Together we form a circle." – Jack Forbes (via la paperson, 2017)

While the previous chapter established the groundwork for restorative in schools, this chapter discusses the three themes restorative justice educators of color navigate regarding how they cultivate and repair trust in schools while entwined in the school-prison nexus (Research Question 2). This chapter contextualizes participants' lives and work within their school environments, synthesizes the remaining key thematic findings with supporting evidence, and summarizes the collective wisdom of these participants on trust-building and restorative justice.

Consistency as Care

The second finding of this study is that consistency is, in itself, a form of care for students and the school community, especially for marginalized students subjected to disproportionality, inconsistency, and inequity within the school-prison nexus. While the Maxwell axiom is widely accepted in progressive education circles and supported by Lisa Delpit's work on the importance of building relationships with students of color, Savannah Shange's framework of carceral progressivism suggests that expressing positive intent and care towards children of color has limitations. Shange (2019) points out that while staff and schools leaders can be "genuinely and unequivocally committed to a vision of racial equity," their vision is shortsighted for as long as "they continue to see themselves and their school as working outside the bounds of systemic racism, rather than always already ensconced within them" (p.

82). Thus, even well-meaning, progressive, antiracist educators can still uphold carceral logics while espousing an orientation of care towards racially marginalized students.

Participants in this study frequently expressed frustration with their inability to show up consistently for students or with perceived inconsistency from colleagues who lacked sufficient skill to consistently implement restorative practices or failed to question their own implicit biases. Incongruity between the philosophy of restorative justice practices within the school and local community values also contributed to concerns about the lack of alignment, ultimately decreasing levels of relational trust within the school's social webbing. These restorative justice practitioners demonstrated care through consistent commitment. Prioritizing joy and connection requires ongoing practice, consistency, and commitment. By consistently showing up for students, restorative justice practitioners demonstrated a deep ethic of care essential to the success of restorative practices in schools. This theme, "Consistency as Care," explores how restorative justice practitioners navigate the challenges of the school-prison nexus and carceral progressivism by embodying reliability, accountability, and competence while working towards alignment between school values, policies, and community partnerships.

Care is Not Enough

The examples shared by participants in this study demonstrate that while care is a crucial component of building trust within restorative justice practices, it is not sufficient on its own. As Bryk and Schneider (2002) emphasize, relational trust requires that expectations be regularly validated by actions. When educators express care and concern for students but fail to consistently embody the principles of restorative justice in their practices, they undermine the very trust they seek to build. This subtheme explores the limitations of good intentions and highlights the need for consistent, competent, and accountable actions in cultivating a truly

restorative school environment. Before delving into these examples, I want to make clear that I am not saying care isn't important. It is, in fact, a necessity. Charles Feltman, in his book The Thin Book of Trust, defines care as "the assessment that you have the other person's interests in mind as well as your own when you make decisions and take actions, and that your intentions toward them are positive" (Feltman, 2021). He argues that care is one of the most important elements in building lasting trust. Most participants in this study felt that their colleagues were sincere in their intentions to treat students with care and even aspired for politicized care. However, having positive intentions and keeping others' interests in mind can only go so far in fostering the social capital of a school, where relational trust is measured on a day-to-day basis (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The following examples identify the gaps in trust within schoolwide restorative practices as they relate to the four domains of trust outlined by Feltman: care, sincerity, competence, and reliability. These examples demonstrate how inconsistency and lack of true adherence to restorative practices principles can diminish trust and social capital within the school community, ultimately undermining the goal of creating a restorative and equitable school environment.

Participants in the study expressed a varying range of trust in their colleagues' ability to care for students of color or employ a restorative practices lens to their work, revealing the limitations of good intentions alone in building relational trust. Roxanne, for example, said she "generally trust[ed] that our teachers are caring about kids across the board." However, she also acknowledged her wariness towards some educators' approaches, particularly those of early-career, white educators, noting that she did not "necessarily vibe with their approach to young people." Roxanne's use of the term "vibe" suggests an intuitive skepticism towards these educators' competence in effectively caring for students of color. She recognized that these

educators needed to develop a set of competencies—instructional, cultural, relational, and socioemotional—to be truly effective at the school site. Without these competencies, less experienced educators were more likely to unknowingly perpetuate normative, carceral logics, thus contributing to the school-prison nexus. Roxanne thoughtfully applied a restorative lens here, recognizing that while the intent of these early career, non-Black educators did not mean to harm students, their impact still fell short in meeting the needs of Resilience City's students. To avoid reinforcing the status quo, these educators she worked with need to fill a critical skill gap and increase their competencies.

These gaps in competence from their colleagues over time led to greater frustrations in multiple participants, whose actions contradict their stated commitments to restorative practices and social justice, undermining trust within the school community. Ernesto felt like he watched well-meaning white people and even well-meaning people of color "sort of transform" over the years due to lack of support and lack of resources to adopt "harmful practices and harmful tendencies with the kids," and particularly Black students and students with disabilities. He would hit a roadblock, however, in discussing the impact of colleague's behaviors because their identity and emotional reasoning would be centered in their intellectual self-fashioning as a progressive, restoratively-minded educator. Ernesto expressed challenges with a non-Black school counselor of color in particular, saying:

> [They will insist] 'I'm a social justice practitioner. I'm a restorative justice centered adult.' Having that label makes it really hard to put these practices into use at our school because this person, while they're intending to hold healing spaces and practice restorative justice, they're not really implementing anything

that is restorative about it…it almost becomes, I don't want to say meaningless,

that might be a little too strong of a word, but just checking boxes.

Firstly, Ernesto here demonstrates a strong understanding of restorative practices needing to be centered in needs before imposing obligations, that students need to both express hurt and on their own terms find healing, and that there is a denial of the lived experiences of marginalized children and their emotions. He identifies core competency gaps in his colleague's approach to restorative justice practices and sees profound implications for the school's perceived commitment to restorative justice—that is, "when students experience teachers or administrators saying one thing but doing another, it negatively impacts school culture" (Gardner, 2016, web-cited). Ernesto hesitates to call it meaningless–which would elevate these interactions to the level of performative–but he does at minimum establish these interactions as perfunctory, leaving the student unhelped and left alone with their needs unmet. These challenges with the counselor substantiate Shange's (2019) assertion that "cerebral commitments to racial justice are undermined by nonblack people's visceral commitment to order" (p. 79). While purporting to be a "social justice educator," the counselor's actions as reported by Ernesto demonstrated a stronger adherence to fulfilling the procedural requirements of restorative justice in a perfunctory manner, rather than truly embracing the foundational tenet of restorative practices, which demands an inclusive dialogue that welcomes and validates all perspectives and needs without prejudice. This inconsistency from a school counselor who claims to be a restorative justice practitioner, positioned in a role to support students, undermines trust not only for the students but for Ernesto as a colleague within the school, ultimately diminishing the overall trustworthiness and social capital available and even damages the reputation and buy-in for restorative processes.

Similarly, Calvin shared an example of a colleague who positioned themselves as a social justice advocate but deflected responsibility for causing harm to a BIPOC student, citing their familiarity with the student as a defense, telling him "I've sat with her and we've talked. I really know her story." This response, which prioritized the educator's self-image over the student's lived experience, demonstrated a seeming lack of sincerity and competence in applying restorative practices principles. Additionally, by shoring up their own self-image by using the student's "story" as justification for their own behavior, this educator reinforces the dehumanizing nature of the school-prison nexus. The BIPOC student's vulnerability with that adult in the past is now used as an argument against the student's current lived experience of harm from that educator, seriously compromising the claims of care or sincerity Calvin's colleague may be trying to assert. In the examples shared by Ernesto and Calvin, these colleagues fail to "go beyond the procedural aspect of engagement to the emotional aspect of engagement," thus compromising the quality of relationships in their schools (Morrison, 2005).

Kiyoshi summarized these concerns, stating,

> If I perceive that someone has a pattern of lacking integrity or stepping outside of their integrity, it's really hard for me to trust them. And especially in this work where their little lives are on the line, I think that's where [I lose trust].

For Kiyoshi, due to their positionality of adults within a school structure and multiple marginalizations students face within a school hierarchy and beyond (with their "little lives on the line"), he takes particular issue with individuals who demonstrate a "pattern" of lacking integrity. This has concerning implications for the greater health of the school community, as "relational trust atrophies when individuals perceive that others are not acting in ways that are

consistent with their understanding of the other's role obligations" (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, "Unmet Obligations and Pervasive Distrust"). These examples illustrate how care alone is not enough to build relational trust; educators must also demonstrate sincerity, competence, and reliability in their actions. When colleagues' practices are inconsistent with their stated values and commitments, it erodes trust across all four domains outlined by Feltman and communicates cultural cues that the school is still more committed to the school-prison nexus than restorative practices (Morrison, 2005). This lack of trust ultimately undermines the effectiveness of restorative practices and perpetuates the harmful dynamics of the school-prison nexus, even when educators express good intentions. To truly cultivate a restorative school environment, care must be accompanied by consistent, competent, and reliable actions that align with the principles of restorative justice.

Being Trustworthy: Embodying the Distinctions of Trust

The study participants, though facing challenges similar to other adults in their school community regarding roles and responsibilities, distinguished themselves through an unwavering commitment to working with integrity, rooted in values and striving for trustworthiness. They recognized and reflected on their limitations, carefully considering identity, position, capacity, and context, and were attentive to mannerisms and behaviors, recognizing their impact on building or eroding trust. When harm occurred or trust was fragile, they examined situations through a restorative justice lens, mindful of power dynamics. By embodying the four trust domains—care, sincerity, reliability, and competence (Feltman, 2021)—and aligning with restorative principles, they demonstrated trustworthiness. Their positionality led to relative privileges or subjected them to dehumanization, surveillance, or punitive responses compared to white peers. However, through consistent efforts exhibiting these traits over time, these

practitioners fostered trust, becoming pillars within the school ecosystem. This level of consistency provides the deep care that marginalized students need within the school-prison nexus, cultivates a positive school culture, and enables the path for school transformation towards restorative justice principles.

Educators of color in this study consistently prioritized the needs of students of color when implementing restorative justice practices in their schools. Jose led with his passion for serving marginalized communities, saying, "that's why I tend to give it my all when I'm on campus." During a community healing circle, all participants agreed with Ernesto's assertion that "my top priority is always students, student first." This student-centered approach was exemplified by Kiyoshi, who continually examined his own positionality and centered student needs as his moral compass when making decisions, asking himself, "Are we being student-centered in this decision?" Calvin also asserted that he knew his North Star would always be students: "If it's a student thing—issue, crisis, need, project, initiative—versus something else—parents, families, faculty, staff—I usually want to make sure the students know that I got them." However, participants recognized that being truly student-centered within a restorative framework required more than just a progressive mindset. They actively worked to understand and navigate the power dynamics inherent in their positions as educators of color in Bay Area schools and demonstrated that understanding through their actions.

To build trust with students, they consistently communicated their positive intentions through their actions and words. Roxanne, a seasoned restorative practitioner, emphasized the importance of clarity when interacting with students: "I need to make sure my job makes sense and for the things that I'm saying to kids to make sense. I'm not trying to bamboozle kids. I don't want to be trying to trick kids and I'm not trying to get kids. I am not trying to catch kids doing

the wrong thing and punish them." Roxanne's statement highlights her awareness of the socialization students experience within the school-prison nexus, which often fosters distrust towards adults in schools. By actively working to reduce the cognitive load students face when discerning her intentions, Roxanne facilitated trust and relationship-building. Jose noted how important it was to stay in his core values of perseverance with students in restorative practices because for many students, "it's not their first rodeo." These students had been subjected to restorative practice questions in a perfunctory manner across four, five, or six years already and "they get to me and they already know what to say." Jose felt like it was important to show up in a consistent manner so that students understood he was leading with care towards them rather than a commitment to order and procedure like others students had encountered in the past, who believed they could simply convey care once in a restorative process and have that be enough. Participants also underscored the importance of clear boundaries and expectations. Kiyoshi shared his frustration with unclear expectations, stating, "I've always felt it's gone against my core values when folks are chastising me for not meeting expectations that were never made clear... Young people hate that [too]." He recounted instances where students were disciplined without a clear understanding of the expectations, leading to confusion and eroded trust. These examples demonstrate how educators of color in this study navigated the complexities of building trust with students within the context of the school-prison nexus. By prioritizing student needs, communicating clear intentions, and setting transparent expectations, they worked to create a foundation for restorative practices to take hold in their schools.

Beyond clarity of expectations and intentions, these educators of color also led with values of curiosity and respect for the students and their emotional experiences. Participants were mindful of their own self-regulation and recognized the deep impact their behavior could have on

students' experiences. Kiyoshi said he could only remember one instance in which he raised his voice and lost his patience across his ten years of working with young people at his school site, a skill he learned from working in food and customer service prior to his work as a classroom teacher. Roxanne emphasized having "openhearted conversation where I can talk to you and you know that I'm not mad at you." She had learned from her own personal experiences with a previous administrator, where she had a principal who "used to be just reckless with his anger." She stressed the importance of not yelling at students, considering her tone of voice and making sure that students knew "even when I'm being very serious, I am not mad, because that really shuts kids down." Both of these participants had been educators and restorative justice practitioners within schools fo the longest time among the sample, and they had achieved a practiced level of composure towards students, able to have difficult conversations with students without being dysregulated prioritizing their own needs over the needs of students, thus staying in their student-centered values. Their increased levels of competence regarding complex, emotional scenarios in schools also increased their capacity to communicate care and sincerity to students.

However, it is impossible to always demonstrate composure and educators earlier on in their career naturally will be less practiced in their ability to navigate these interactions. Being humanized within the school-prison nexus means recognizing that these educators, subject to multiple marginalities and contexts always teeming with punitive potential, will have moments where they show up messy. These participants recognized that reality, but they still held themselves to high standards of accountability and continued to enact restorative justice practices in those times when they "stepped out of their integrity," as Kiyoshi put it, and came back to their integrity by working to repair harm with others. At multiple points, Ernesto emphasized he

reflected regularly on his interactions with students and took responsibility for any harm he did or may have caused students, "seeing where I know I was in a bad mood yesterday, and I went home thinking about this interaction…how maybe it didn't come off in the best way, or maybe I was projecting some of my own personal struggles, and approaching that student the next day to apologize or to follow up or circle back." Calvin also modeled this as a value of radical transparency, feeling like apologizing sincerely was an important part of repairing trust. He gave an example of how he might talk to a colleague about a shared responsibility to a student in a restorative process: "I just let people know, hey, I apologize. I won't say I dropped the ball, but this isn't moving on the timeline I hoped for, and here's maybe some of the reasons why. I really care about this connection or this thing we're building or this project, but is there a way we could have more spaciousness?" All of the participants recognized the importance of tending to their obligations to their community once harm had occurred in any way (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Zehr, 2002). Through all of these reflections and behaviors, they thoughtful modeled Feltman's four domains of trust. They strove to be sincerely honest, demonstrate care, deepen their socioemotional and restorative competencies, and over time become reliable to others.

Kiyoshi, who had been at his school site in Industrious Town for the longest time out of all the participants in the study, exemplifies how consistency and reliability can foster trust in a community affected by gentrification and displacement. In this predominantly Latine community, high teacher turnover often led students and families to treat newcomer teachers with suspicion. As Kiyoshi noted, they would ask, "Are you going to really stay around?" This need for reliability and consistency over time applied to all newcomers to the community, even if educators would typically be considered veteran teachers elsewhere due to their years of experience. However, after two or three years, "Folks begin to shift like, okay, maybe I can trust

you're down and you're going to be around and you're not just going to take off if and when things get hard." Kiyoshi's stable presence and commitment to the community allowed him to teach multiple siblings from the same family, which increased trust among parents and teachers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This trust enabled Kiyoshi to better identify and anticipate students' needs, such as quickly bringing a ninth-grade student into a young men's group he facilitated because of his familiarity with the student's older siblings. Kiyoshi's long-term dedication to his school and community demonstrates how embodying trustworthiness through consistency and reliability can foster strong relationships and support student success. His ability to consistently show up over time demonstrated his political commitment to students' lived realities, truly "down" and thus politicizing his care for his Industrious community (De Royston et al., 2017).

The examples provided by Roxanne, Kiyoshi, and other participants demonstrate how educators of color in this study actively worked to embody trustworthiness in their interactions with students and families. By consistently prioritizing student needs, communicating clear intentions, and setting transparent expectations, they cultivated trust and fostered strong relationships within their school communities. These practices align with the broader theme of Consistency as Care, as they showcase an ongoing commitment to building trust and creating a foundation for restorative practices to take hold. The participants' experiences highlight how educators navigated the challenges of implementing restorative justice reforms within the context of the school-prison nexus by focusing on the relational aspects of their work. Their stories shed light on the ways in which educators of color describe their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust with stakeholders, offering valuable insights into how we can learn from these descriptions to improve restorative justice practices in schools. Ultimately, the subtheme of embodying trustworthiness underscores the critical role that consistency of politicized care plays

in building trust and transforming school environments to better serve the needs of marginalized students.

Consistency as Care emerged as a powerful theme discussion with participants across multiple interviews and the community healing circle, illuminating the dedication of educators of color who recognize the messy, deep work of caring for children of color within a restorative framework. Practitioners of color committed to restorative practices in school recognized that care was not a superficial declaration of values, but instead needed to be reflected in their day-to-day interactions with students, families, and colleagues. However, these participants are people at the end of the day and due to the deeply interconnected nature of schools, their individual efforts to cultivate trust were ultimately hindered by disconnect and inconsistencies that occurred at other points among the school's stakeholders. One person cannot carry an entire school institution, and this is what contributes to overwhelm and burnout for educators of color. Therefore, to achieve a new internal consistency where an ethic of care is truly embodied by the practitioner and supported by the school, a transformation of the school is necessary, leading into the third theme, "Transforming Schools at the Speed of Trust."

Transforming Schools at the Speed of Trust

The third theme emphasizes the importance of building trust simultaneously across school systems and stakeholders to avoid overburdening individual educators, directly addressing the research question about school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms within the school-prison nexus. Restorative justice practices require a transformational shift in attitudes, belief systems, practices, policies, and even scheduling or programming to align with a dramatically different vision of schools and approaches to youth behavior (Sandwick et al., 2019). Participants acutely felt the challenges of this cultural change, often impacted by

structural and cultural misalignment and overwhelmed by multiple roles and responsibilities. The culture of urgency and achievement diminished opportunities to connect with colleagues or students, and losing time to respond to harm led to broken trust that was difficult or impossible to recover from. Despite the pressure to achieve rather than simply *be* in community, these educators shared key practices to transform their schools in the vision of restorative practices, emphasizing slowing down, pausing for clarity, learning in community, and practicing critical discernment in choosing relationships for deep trust investment, reflecting adrienne maree brown's insight: "Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships."

Human Beings, not Human Doings

Study participants strove to humanize every context they inhabited through structuring for authentic connection and staying grounded in their values to consistently demonstrate care. However, as Kiyoshi reminded me in our interview, while "it's about being student-centered first, educators have needs too." In the community healing circle, Calvin shared that his supervisor Emme was a lively, humorous mentor who had helpful phrases for him when he needed them, such as "We're human beings, not human doings." This phrase is the title of this subtheme because it concisely summarizes the multilayered challenge that these educators of color face when attempting schoolwide restorative reforms in their school context. As Erica Meiners cautions, we must avoid exceptionalizing children of color as the only people impacted by the school-prison nexus. If we over-emphasize the innocence of children, then we risk perpetuating that some—namely, adults of color and here specifically adults of color working in schools—are deserving of punishment and enclosure while others are not (Meiners, 2011). This subtheme explores how the school-prison nexus and the challenges of implementing restorative justice

practices can lead to the dehumanization of educators of color. Participants of the study shared their needs as restorative justice practitioners in schools were often unmet due to structural gaps or cultural pressures. As a result, participants shared stories of dehumanization, where they felt more like a cog in the machine— meant to serve a procedural purpose for the school-prison nexus rather than full human beings part of a community. It is crucial to examine the quality of these lived experiences and how it inhibits trust-building because "tending to adult relationship *is* in direct service to high expectations and rigor because if teachers cannot work together and support one another, students suffer" (Gardner, 2016). These examples serve to illuminate the emotional toll educators of color experience when actively working to transform the school-prison nexus, where they are more susceptible to experience moral injury[4] or feelings of institutional betrayal.

For all of the participants, despite the formalized commitment by the school to restorative practices, a lack of institutional capacity for school reform and structural gaps meant that these educators were spread thin and vulnerable to burnout. Burnout for educators occurs when demands outweigh resources, and these demands "can include an excessive workload, high levels of responsibility, lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, or conflict at work" (Cormier et al., 2021). All of these demands were present in participant narratives. Roxanne named that there was an emphasis on productivity at her school and she explicitly connected that to characteristics of white supremacy culture[5]. While the school did its best to hear educators' concerns, she felt like "we are still asking teachers constantly to do more and more, asking

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[4] Moral injury: refers to the lasting emotional, psychological, and existential harm that occurs when an individual "perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Sugrue, 2020)

[5] Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture is a framework that has been popularized in progressive education circles in the last decade, from Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001

everybody to do more and more." This left no time for educators to reflect on their feelings, as she noted, "People are expected to process emotions on a bell schedule timeline, and it isn't realistic." Before he was an assistant principal, Jose felt like he never had time to cover important content as a science teacher or connect with all the students. Now that he was an administrator, he said "I see the same thing. There's never enough time to finish everything that I want to or need to get done." It then became easy to feel caught in a day-to-day grind, because most of his role as assistant principal meant responding to metaphorical fires and calls for support.

Calvin also shared a striking example of how his day easily exceeded his expectations and capacity for meeting his obligations and responsibilities. While he initially may have had ten to fifteen tasks on his list, his whole day could be waylaid by a community repair process the moment a student came into his office crying for an hour. Between holding space, looping in support, and talking to the adult who precipitated the incident, Calvin found that the day disappeared in a flash:

> Suddenly…it's 4:00pm and I'm tired and also emotionally drained and feeling for myself, because I see myself in that kid. Because also I'm an educator, because I wanted to support that type of kid. And then I'm home and I'm like taking a breath for the first time. I'm like, oh, shoot. I haven't taken a breath all day.

This story exemplifies both Calvin's commitment to his students and their needs by tending to that student and following all the threads in the web of obligations to ensure harm is addressed and the student's sense of belonging restored in the school. However, doing so both displaced Calvin's plans for the day and left him exhausted emotionally due to his personal resonance with

the student's experience of harm in school. Roxanne, Calvin, and Jose named the central tension in the work of educators of color in schoolwide restorative justice reform. Namely that they felt like they had an excess of responsibilities and a deficit of time, and this often hindered their ability to feel successful at work. Every participant, no matter how long they had been an educator or how long they had worked at their school site, struggled with these feelings of responsibilities exceeding their capacity.

The pressure to take on additional responsibilities and the difficulty in setting boundaries can further contribute to the burnout experienced by educators of color. Ernesto, whose core values are relationship building and community, found himself having a hard time saying no when it came to caring for others and forwarding the work of restorative practices in the school. "Taking on different tasks, supporting colleagues or coaching every single sport at my school, all these little things for me eventually get to a point where if there isn't consistency, I can't do my job. I can't do everything all at once." Similarly, Calvin felt that being a competent person of color was a double-edged sword, leading to increased demands on his time and energy. "I just find it hard to say no, but then suddenly it's like that aspect plus the competency piece, plus being BIPOC, it's like it's Black History Month and I'm busier than ever." These experiences highlight the emotional toll that the lack of institutional capacity and structural gaps can have on educators of color as they work to implement restorative practices in their schools. Both Calvin and Ernesto were early career educators, and named that they struggled with setting boundaries because they felt such a high level of responsibility towards the culture they hoped to uphold for students. As caring individuals who were deeply competent in the work of restorative justice practices and culturally responsive pedagogy, they quickly found that these components combined with their identities as racially marginalized men in Bay Area schools led to being

expected to do more than they were able. With decreased capacity, educators of color have less availability to cultivate or repair trust with others. The constant pressure to meet increasing demands and the difficulty in setting boundaries can lead to feelings of dehumanization and burnout, undermining their ability to show up as full human beings in their roles as restorative justice practitioners.

Conflict or miscommunication with colleagues and supervisors also contributed to lessened trust and emotional exhaustion for restorative justice practitioners. These issues deeply frustrated participants' efforts to advance restorative justice in their schools, despite their strong commitment to these values. Roxanne, having been a school administrator herself, identified the root of her struggles with administrators as structural. She described the role of school admin in her district as a "garbage can," with overwhelming expectations that impeded their ability to effectively support her as a Restorative Justice facilitator. "I know that they're highly competent and it's not even that they're not reliable, it's just too much stuff to do. It's like it's literally too much to do and what I want or need them to be doing is not necessarily on their priority list," she explained, leading her to limit expectations of their reliability or consideration of her needs. Her experience confirms what Trevor Gardner (2016) points out is a common belief across many Bay Area schools when attempting school transformation in service of restorative justice practices: "there is just not enough time during the school day to work on adult relationships." After switching to a new grade level team, Roxanne also grappled with developing trust among colleagues. Despite similar roles as her previous team, there was a profound lack of clarity in coordinating restorative outcomes for students. Roxanne found herself in a hybrid disciplinarian/restorative facilitator role that felt "super muddled a lot of the time," with "yuckier" outcomes. This indicated an unclear commitment to restorative over punitive

approaches, leading to ambivalence about her work and effectiveness. Such ambivalence hindered Roxanne's ability to be sincere and risked eroding student trust when enforcing rules or policies that even she found unclear.

Implicit bias towards these educators of color in a way that maintain dominant power structures also played a part in their capacity to work towards whole-school reform. Kiyoshi perceived a bias against him from his supervisor, which hindered his efforts to introduce greater amounts of fair process and youth participation in restorative processes at the school. "There was some piece where, because *I* was the one bringing this to the table, I perceived that my principal didn't want to look at it, not because it wasn't necessarily something that would help, but because it was *me* that was bringing it." He described his relationship to his supervisor as "a rollercoaster" due to perceived levels of varying trust to distrust, and felt that it was difficult to maintain trust with other his principal when it seemed communication broke down at multiple levels: that the tone was brusque and uncaring, that follow-up actions did not align with words, and that communication was rarely timely.

Like Roxanne, expectation clarity was a particular point of contention between him and his administration, feeling like "it's gone against my core values when folks are chastising me for not meeting expectations that were never made clear." Kiyoshi went on to directly connect unclear expectations to the social discipline window (Morrison, 2005; Wachtel, 2016), stressing that as educators of color implement restorative practices , "You're doing things *with* folks instead of *to* them or *for* them" [emphasis mine]. He described that violation of core values as a universal experience, and that even young people do not want to be patronized or spoken to as if they are less than. Due to his own identity as a racially marginalized man of color, Kiyoshi was acutely sensitive to how lack of clarity and being punished for it dehumanized both him and the

students he served. For Kiyoshi and Roxanne, their principals did not operate in a way that was conducive to trust, compromising the levels of support they could get as educators within the school site. The experiences of Roxanne, Kiyoshi, and other participants highlight how the pressures, conflicts, and biases that educators of color face in their school contexts can lead to dehumanization, emotional exhaustion, and erosion of trust. These challenges, rooted in the power dynamics and structural issues of the school-prison nexus, make it difficult for these educators to fully embody their values and effectively implement restorative practices.

The Threat of Moral Injury

In the worst-case scenarios, these educators of color found themselves vulnerable to moral injury or feelings of both institutional- and self-betrayal, a deeply dehumanizing experience. Through the pod-mapping interviews and the community healing circle, participants demonstrated radical transparency and vulnerability, sharing emotionally fraught experiences of how they wrestled with these moral dilemmas, sometimes failing to come out on top and compromising their sense of trust in themselves or the school. These examples directly speak to the second research question, illustrating what happens when efforts to cultivate or repair trust are simply not available.

Participants in the study paid particular attention to school-based injustices, as those injustices they felt more personally responsible for, such as when Roxanne felt "implicated in the data" regarding racially disproportionate referrals at her school, a common thread across not only Bay Area schools but schools across the United States (Skiba et al., 2002). These restorative practitioners of color mentioned feeling disheartened or demoralized, especially when they witnessed harm perpetuated towards students of color and were helpless to change the outcome or challenge those who had done harm to be accountable. This helplessness was a result of a

number of factors: feeling responsible to maintain the school's purported values or the reputation of adults in the school community; fears of risking their job security at the school; or feeling tokenized by the institution, left to individually support racially marginalized students on their own, or utterly fail to support marginalized students. In all of these cases, participants were deeply morally troubled and felt isolated or alone in their work.

For example, participants experienced moral injury when they felt unable to be authentic or sincere with others due to a lack of transparency from leadership. Kiyoshi, an administrator, described communication breakdowns as a near-daily struggle that hindered his ability to maintain trust with fellow teachers. When asked why certain decisions were made, Kiyoshi felt caught between two difficult choices: "I always have to do this cost-benefit analysis…to what degree do I say that I'm on board with it? Because I also don't want (even if it is true at times) our admin team to be perceived as fractured or dysfunctional, because that ultimately lessens trust." The lack of information sharing and inclusive decision-making from his school leader placed Kiyoshi in moral dilemmas where he knew he would contribute to eroding trust regardless of his actions. If he feigned support for a decision made without his input, he would be insincere; however, if he acknowledged his lack of involvement, he risked being perceived as part of an incompetent and unreliable administration.

Moral injury typically manifested when restorative practitioners of color witnessed students giving up on trusting the school when they experienced harm. Ernesto shared an incident where a Black student experienced a racist microaggression, but the school failed to adequately address it. The student's resignation to the lack of restorative action left Ernesto feeling demoralized and unable to uphold his commitment to restorative practices, highlighting the school's overall failure to support both the student and the restorative justice practitioner.

Ernesto later reflected that this was a clear example of how students may not have a conceptual understanding of restorative justice practices, but they still internalized the deficiencies of adults unable to competently practice restorative justice. He shared concerns that this apathy permeated the school culture, lamenting, "Now there's this culture of, what's the point? Or this culture of, I'm just going to keep my mouth shut and push through it, and take all of this harm that's happening to me." Ernesto's reflection highlights the moral injury that occurs when educators are unable to effectively respond to the harm that students experience. In this case, the failure of the adult in the hallway to adequately address the racist microaggression not only created a situation, but also contributed to a culture where the student felt that speaking up was a futile effort– a clear erosion of trust that is deeply demoralizing for educators committed to restorative practices. This dynamic is a direct manifestation of the school-prison nexus, which creates a context where the harm experienced by students of color is normalized and minimized.

Educators of color felt most morally compromised when they couldn't interrupt the harm other adults inflicted on students. The following incidents reflect a cooptation of the restorative justice processes as cautioned by Vincenzo Ruggiero (2011), that "the discovery of the victims, in reality, is alleged to have provided a good pretext for reformers to espouse increasingly lenient treatment for victimisers." The school-prison nexus exploits the vulnerability of students and their self-disclosure in restorative cultures and processes to humanize harmful adults rather than staying grounded in restoring the dignity of the most marginalized i.e. youth of color. During the community healing circle, participants shared harrowing examples of colleagues engaging in racist acts, such as calling students of color dangerous, comparing them to prisoners, and demeaning their needs. Calvin encapsulated the systemic inequity that protected problematic teachers at the students' expense. He often asks others to think of "that one teacher at your school

who probably shouldn't be there," finding that everyone has multiple examples, yet little is done beyond ineffective talks. Calvin expresses frustration with the institution's inertia towards accountability and tolerance for white people's emotional comfort, sarcastically quipping, "I guess we'll just let a few hundred Black and brown students get harmed in the meantime while this white person just has to read a book because it hurts." This inaction leaves educators of color feeling complicit in the harm done to students, forced to compromise their values. The disconnect between personal and institutional values erodes trust and exemplifies how the school-prison nexus prioritizes white staff's comfort over students of color's well-being. Calvin is left questioning, "At what point do we recognize harm is too harmful?"

Despite his efforts, Calvin's actions within his school committed to progressivism and restorative practices sometimes felt hollow. His work became tokenized as the institution relies on his personal qualities rather than formal processes. Eventually, students pointed out the inadequacies of token adults of color shouldering what should be schoolwide transformation. In one painful experience, a student shared the limitations of Calvin's impact: "Well, you're now in this. You were with them and nothing happened, and it's been weeks. Calvin, yeah, you hold my emotions, but my experience at the school hasn't changed in a month. What do I do with that?" Calvin felt he failed the student because the system had failed them. Just actions seem unavailable, as being "too subversive" risks being pushed out, which would further impact students of color, leading to a sense of moral injury for Calvin himself as a practitioner of restorative justice.

Jose shared an incident where a powerful white teacher sent an email claiming students were dangerous after one wore a ski mask to school. This problematic framing extended beyond the school, permeating political narratives in the South Bay. Union members echoed this

sentiment, weaponizing it to advocate for their own needs at the expense of labeling children of color as criminals. Jose observed his colleagues going against the interests of his Latine students, reproducing the carceral logics of the school-prison nexus by perpetuating myths of "violent teenaged super-predators" (Meiners, 2011, p. 559). He worried about the "white wave" of educators in the majority Latine community and their potential to deploy gendered and racialized fear to augment the prison system. This led to an experience of moral injury that Jose described as exhausting and disheartening because it was systemic, coming from teachers, the institution, and outside the school.

The moral injury extended beyond feeling helpless to support marginalized students. Jose experienced self-doubt as the school-prison nexus inhibited his access to just actions and made him vulnerable to the punitive redirection of educational enclosure that trapped his students (Levinson, 2015; Sojoyner, 2013). When his supervisor asked about his boundaries and threshold, Jose responded, "I called it. *That* was my threshold, calling our students dangerous." Although his solidarity remained with his students and his commitment to social justice, he feared being "too much" and pushed out, which would reproduce the logics of enclosure (Sojoyner, 2013) by displacing him and depriving the school of a Latino administrator and pillar of trust. Speaking up risked betraying his commitment to his students, while tolerating the toxic narrative would betray his values. In both cases, Jose experiences profound moral injury as educational enclosure dismantles the potential for joy and dignity in this community of color.

The experiences of Kiyoshi, Ernesto, Calvin, and Jose highlight the profound moral injury that educators of color can face when working to implement restorative justice practices within the context of the school-prison nexus. These educators found themselves in situations where they were unable to fully live out their values or protect the students they served, leading

to feelings of self-betrayal, helplessness, and demoralization. The institutional inertia, lack of transparency, and prioritization of white comfort over the well-being of students of color created a context in which these educators were forced to compromise their integrity and witness ongoing harm to marginalized students. This moral injury is a heavy burden that compounds the dehumanization and burnout already experienced by these educators due to the structural and cultural barriers they face in their schools.

However, despite these immense challenges, the educators in this study also demonstrated resilience and a deep commitment to their values and their students. In the face of the dehumanizing pressures of the school-prison nexus, they found ways to resist and redefine success on their own terms. The next section, "Measuring the Speed of Trust," will explore how these practitioners pushed back against the dominant metrics of efficiency and productivity and instead measured their work by the depth of relationships, the authenticity of their interactions, and the slow but steady cultivation of trust and community. By reclaiming their humanity and the humanity of their students, these educators offer a powerful vision of what restorative justice can look like when it is grounded in the lived experiences and values of communities of color.

Measuring the Speed of Trust

The last two subthemes delved into how restorative justice practitioners of color in schools experience the precarious sea change that is attempting to transform from a school that enacts mechanism of the school-prison nexus to a school that centers restorative justice principles. In the first subtheme, "Human Beings, not Human Doings," participants shared how white norms of productivity and urgency dehumanized them. Pushed to the edge, these participants were occasionally or often pushed to the point of demoralization, as seen in the

theme, "The Threat of Moral Injury." These subthemes illustrated the tokenization that occurred to these educators of color in the school when attempts to enact restorative justice was not systematic nor multitiered. However, there is still more to learn from the experiences of these restorative justice practitioners of color. I found in interviewing them that they moved with a deep sense of integrity, as seen in the theme "Consistency as Care." Even when faced with the looming threat of the school-prison nexus, participants strove to let go of status quo expectations and redefine progress on not only their terms, but the terms of their students and the community as a whole. This next subtheme addresses all three research questions and in particular highlights the second and third research questions, shedding light on how highly effective restorative justice practitioners of color successfully build trust and improve restorative practices in schools.

I would like to take a moment to revisit adrienne maree brown's quote, "Move at the speed of trust. Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships" (brown, 2017). brown's use of the word speed here is meaningful. In physics, speed is defined as the amount of distance that is covered over a period of time and expressed as the following mathematically:

Figure 12

Speed Formula (2024)

$$Speed = \frac{Distance}{Time}$$

What then, is the distance over time when measuring the speed of trust? What is the speed of trust in alternative to? When we conceptualize schools as part of a school-prison nexus, an interlocking set of systems organized and operating for the purpose of enclosure—entrapping

Black dignity, joy, and humanity—and that the participants named white supremacy culture as the underlying impetus for a culture of urgency and productivity at their school sites, then it follows that typically, schools look to measure "critical mass." The school-prison nexus is moving at the speed at which communities of color are labeled, surveilled, and punished. In the Bay Area, these schools are part of a *progressive dystopia*, which Savannah Shange (2019) defines as "a perpetually colonial place that reveals both the possibilities and limits of the late liberal imaginary," where "blackness is perpetually *out* of place, and constantly running *out* of time" (p. 14). Shange uses the term progressive dystopia to "spatialize the encounter between cruel optimism[6] (Berlant, 2011) and antiblack state violence." Creating schools that truly value and love children and adults of color may be a failed project, and those within the system may be holding onto a cruel, self-defeating optimism. But there are moments shared by study participants where they do seem to close the distance between themselves and the young people they are committed to serving, thus actually moving at the speed of trust (even if it is not the speed of school reform or a sufficient answer to Calvin's exasperated ask, "Can we at least move at the speed of professional development?"). It is these small moments, out of place and out of time, that perhaps may provide the possibility of transformation. In the following examples, participants share how they focus less on critical mass and more on critical connections. They prioritize slowing down as a strategy to resist hegemonic norms of productivity and urgency. They measure trust by clarity of expectations and obligations, mutual recognition of humanity, and depth of reciprocity and interdependence.

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[6] According to Lauren Berlant, cruel optimism is to desire something that is an obstacle to your flourishing. In this case, wanting schools to work for children and adults of color and especially Black children, may be wanting something that is designed to trap your existence to work for you.

To close the distance of critical connections, clarity of understanding between all parties so that expectations are clear and all needs are met. As Kiyoshi named previously, expectation clarity is critical and everyone, young folks and students like, hate the feeling of being chastised for not meeting expectations that were never explicit or clear. In many different ways, these restorative justice practitioners of color worked to make clear the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved. In some cases, like for Roxanne, they took the lead on professional development. Roxanne was on her school's Professional Learning (PL) team, and together the team worked to create compelling onboarding processes, documents, and learning materials that were based on the school's values and mission, "rooted in being antiracist and explicitly calling out liberation." The PL materials demonstrated a commitment to community, self-knowledge, relationship building, and effective communication and those felt authentic to Roxanne as an RJ practitioner in the school. By investing her time not only in the students but also the professional development of adults at the school, Roxanne recognized the needs of multiple stakeholders and engaged them in understanding how their work contributed to the overall vision and success of the school, which is "pivotal to cultivating the necessary community commitment in moving forward" and build trustworthiness across the entire organization towards meaningful collectiveness action (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; González et al., 2019).

Taking the time to develop clarity of intention and language was of major emphasis across participants. In the community healing circle, Ernesto identified as a very emotionally sensitive person, and pushed himself to slow down when harmful incidents occurred if he was emotionally escalated. He said this slowing down to reflect was a meaningful unlearning process for him that was challenging but ultimately worth the investment of time and energy. "If we need to circle back or follow up a day later or two days later because we both just need space and time

to reground ourselves and be intentional with what we're going to say, I think that holds a lot more value than trying to fix everything on the spot." Ernesto felt like time he took to reflect on the situation was time well-spent, so that he could make sure he wasn't making the situation all about his needs. He underlined the importance of communicating to the student that "it doesn't matter what happened to me or what happened between myself and a student on this given day, it's not going to change how I see you, and it's not going to change how I interact with you. I make it clear." His dedication to communicating care in a sincere way ensured that he was logically consistent to the student and maintained trust, rather than threatening the student's sense of emotional wellbeing or belonging in the school. Calvin agreed with Ernesto, and mentioned that something "ultra important" to him was getting really specific on language and the words people were using to describe things. He encouraged his community to ask questions: "What are we actually trying to say?" or "Whoa, can we actually recognize that for a second because that's deeply harmful or stereotypical, or pathologizing, whatever it might be?" Like Ernesto, Calvin recognized that problematic language coming from an emotional space opened the door to implicit bias and greater consequences if left unchecked. For all practitioners, alignment of words and action to demonstrate integrity was crucial to trust-building.

Participants also measured trust not by the amount of time it took to complete an objective, but by the amount of time it took for every individual's humanity to be recognized and fully witnessed. They recommitted themselves to the principles of restorative justice, that those most marginalized in the community felt heard and listened to (Brown, 2017; Vaandering, 2010; Zehr, 2002). Additionally, when slowing down to witness students' full emotional spectrum, participants honored the importance of staying in the "With" quadrant of the social discipline window (Wachtel, 2016). Some participants already mentioned how humanizing their students

could already be a part of existing structures, like Ernesto letting students share about their weekend plans and vulnerable feelings at the beginning of science class, or Jose taking time out of his day to schedule short check-ins with students who typically interacted with administrators for misbehavior. However, it is not always possible for educators to plan accordingly, and thus must develop the discipline to resist falling into the habits of urgency culture themselves. For example, Calvin resisted the pressure to finish tasks on his checklist and instead prioritized students when they were looking to be heard and seen. "I do get that itch in the back of my own brain, like 'Oh, I need to finish that thing,' and then I'm like 'Wait, actually part of my job is sitting here and talking with this student and doing nothing else." For Roxanne, being with students meant "literally stopping to listen. So many kids would just stop to update me about their boyfriend or their situation. So it's just stopping for listening." By taking the time to stop in the hustle and bustle of the middle school hallways and connect with students, giving them her full listening ear and attention, she was better able to help young people "do tough things, like standing next to kids while they're having a difficult conversation, connecting with a teacher that they don't really want to connect with." Her presence and willingness to bear witness to the full range of their experiences mattered, so that she could be someone to name and notice the emotions young people at her school site moved through.

Trust was also measured by the quality of interdependence and reciprocity across relationships. As a reminder, Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) notes that relational trust is "an organizational property in that its constitutive elements are socially defined in the reciprocal exchanges among participants in a school community, and its presence (or absence) has important consequences for the functioning of the school and its capacity to engage fundamental change." Study participants, as informal and formal leaders for restorative justice

practices in their schools, recognized the importance of fostering a "reciprocal relationship between leadership and empowerment" that "permeate[s] all levels and domains of the school community" (Morrison, 2005).

Ernesto, for example, relied heavily on his fellow teachers, reflected in the community healing circle as well as in his pod-mapping. In particular, he collaborated with another colleague who helped to support LGBTQ+ students who felt deeply out of place in schools and were entangled in their own complex romantic relationships as much as they felt trapped by the lack of structures or support for their needs at school. Together, they met with these students during their prep periods, acted as thought partners to each other for one-on-one conversations with those students, and maintained a commitment to restorative questions (Acosta et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016), asking questions like "How can we help? What are we not helping with?" Similarly, Jose emphasized the importance of leaning on his administrative team to provide consistent care for students when his own plans were derailed by emergencies like fire alarms or fights. "I have to tap in another administrator to help me fill in that gap," he explained. "It's really leaning on the team to try to fill in some of those gaps where I can't be consistent." Even if he could not be there directly, Jose recognized and prioritized student needs and was willing to work in collaborative, interdependent ways with his team.

Roxanne also utilized the support of her team when she recognized the limitations of her own capacity and existing trust with students. If a student did communicate mistrust, she would seek out colleagues who the student did have trust with to facilitate a repair process for her and the student. This trust in other adults released a degree of control as she made herself vulnerable as a full participant in a restorative process, prioritizing the needs of the student and modeling her commitment to restorative justice values and practices. With fellow adults, Calvin, too,

emphasized the importance of reciprocity in his relationships with fellow adults. "I reciprocate thoughtfulness and care back, even if it takes a long time," he shared. "I will find the task. I'll keep the task. I don't ever delete a task just because it didn't happen in the timeline I wanted. I try to make it happen." Across all these examples, participants demonstrated a deep commitment to interdependence and reciprocity as essential components of trust-building in their school communities. By leaning on each other, sharing responsibility for student care, and modeling vulnerability and commitment to restorative processes, they worked to create a culture of empowerment and mutual support that could sustain transformative change.

The practices and strategies employed by the restorative justice practitioners in this study offer a powerful counternarrative to the dominant logics of the school-prison nexus. By prioritizing clarity of expectations, mutual recognition of humanity, and depth of reciprocity and interdependence, these educators are actively working to build trust and create the conditions for authentic relationships and transformative justice in their schools. Their commitment to slowing down, being intentional with language, and witnessing the full humanity of their students and colleagues stands in stark contrast to the dehumanizing pressures of urgency and productivity that often characterize educational spaces. In doing so, they are not only resisting the school-prison nexus but also modeling a different way of being and relating in schools, one that is grounded in the values of restorative justice and the lived experiences of communities of color. As evidenced by previous research and modeled by these educators of color, "restorative justice is slow work, demanding time and driven by listening, forgiveness, and love" (Bruhn, 2020). By taking the time to cultivate these humanizing practices and relationships, the educators in this study are laying the groundwork for a more just and caring educational future. Their efforts remind us that the speed of trust cannot be measured in efficiency metrics or disciplinary

outcomes, but rather in the quality of our connections and the depth of our commitment to one another's growth and well-being.

Rooted in Intergenerational Self-Determination

The final theme of the findings and discussion section addresses the third research question, or how we can learn from the experiences of educators of color to better the work of restorative justice practices in schools. The work of these restorative justice practitioners is not done in isolation. Rather, it is deeply rooted in a commitment to intergenerational self-determination, or the idea that the struggle for liberation is an ongoing, collective process that requires the agency and empowerment of people of color across generations. As Vaandering (2010) reminds us, "through telling and listening people are brought to a consciousness of the situation that had not been possible alone." By taking the time to cultivate humanizing practices and relationships, moving at the speed of trust, these educators build capacity for truly listening to and learning from the wisdom of ancestors, the insights of mentors, and the empowered voices of youth. In doing so, they create intergenerational feedback loops that allow for the continuous sharing of knowledge and strategies, ensuring that the work of liberation is always informed by the evolving needs and perspectives of the community. Moreover, by grounding their restorative justice work in cultural humility, authentic relationships, and community empowerment, these practitioners are developing what la paperson (also known as K. Wayne Yang) calls "technologies of liberation"—practices that subvert dominant paradigms and create new possibilities for resistance and transformation.

However, as Savannah Shange (2019) points out, self-determination is "a foundational tenet of liberation" that is constantly threatened by the carceral logics of the school-prison nexus. Freedom is literally taken away in the carceral system, perpetually threatened in the traditional

schooling model, and co-opted for misdirection in the schools of the Bay's progressive dystopia. In this context, racially marginalized children and adults often "occupy a liminal space between liberation and captivity, the peripatetic space of fugitivity" (p. 90). Freedom is not a given but something that must be continually fought for and cultivated through tactics that "take time and space" and "gesture toward, but do not instantiate, freedom." While restorative justice practices offer a promising path forward in recognizing the humanity of people of color, they are also vulnerable to cooptation when we remain embedded in the myth that injustice begins with the "offender," rather than the structural failures that create the conditions for harm in the first place (Ruggiero, 2011; Vaandering, 2010).

We must remember then that restorative justice practices are coordinated tactics that gesture towards but do not instantiate freedom. The efforts of these restorative justice practitioners, then, are about building the capacity to trust each other and move together in the direction of freedom, even within the constraints of the school-prison nexus. In the following section, we will explore how these educators are rooted in this commitment to intergenerational self-determination, drawing on the wisdom of cultural humility, the guidance of mentors, and the transformative potential of youth leadership. By centering these voices and experiences, we can begin to better understand the paradigm shifts, tools, and tactics we will need to sustain ourselves on the rugged frontier of abolition and liberation.

Navigating Place, Positionality, and Power with Cultural Humility

As restorative justice practitioners in schools, educators of color must navigate a complex landscape of identities, power dynamics, and cultural differences. Thus, as Dorothy Vaandering (2010) asserts, "in order for [restorative justice] to be effective and sustainable it must be understood first and foremost through a critical lens that recognizes the systemic, institutional

and structural dimensions of power relations in school communities." To build trust and effectively implement restorative practices, these educators must be deeply rooted in their own self-determination while also respecting and empowering the agency of the communities they serve. This subtheme, "Navigating Positionality and Power with Cultural Humility," explores how practitioners' self-reflection, cultural responsiveness, and commitment to social justice contribute to building authentic relationships and build capacity for healing in schools. By examining the experiences and insights of the educators in this study, we can gain valuable insights into how to cultivate trust and improve restorative justice practices in schools (directly answering research question 3). As the participants share their stories of grappling with their own positionality and cultural identities, we see how these processes of self-reflection and growth are essential for creating spaces where community members feel valued, respected, and empowered.

Moreover, the educators' commitment to cultural humility and learning from the lived experiences of their students and communities highlights the importance of developing restorative justice practices that are culturally responsive and relevant. By embodying a stance of openness and respect for the knowledge and agency of those they serve, these practitioners model the kind of transformative relationships that are at the heart of restorative justice. Ultimately, by navigating positionality and power with cultural humility, these educators of color are not only working to build trust and heal harm in their schools but also contributing to the larger project of dismantling oppressive systems and empowering communities to chart their own journeys toward liberation. In the following sections, we will explore the key insights that emerge from their stories and consider how they can inform our understanding of building trust and improving restorative justice practices in schools.

The educators in this study navigated a complex web of identities and experiences that shaped their perspectives and approaches to restorative justice work. Subini Anamma (2018) writes that "we grow authentic relationships through listening, as the stories of multiply-marginalized teach us how oppressions intersect and how to disrupt those oppressions most effectively." The participants of the study deftly considered the realities of interlocking oppressions, and recognized the need to listen to others for complicating and complexifying their understanding of restorative justice work. Kiyoshi described the challenge of embodying multiple identities, stating, "There's these communities and experiences that I'm connected to, but I've also never gone through the world as just one of those things, and so there's also this... secret third thing." This "secret third thing" represents the unique intersection of Kiyoshi's various racial and cultural identities which cannot be fully captured by any single category, the "braid" of lineages he inherited from legacies of internment, displacement, and migration in his multiracial heritage. This inheritance led him on a path to eventually find a passion for ethnic studies and eventually, urban education, where he now invites the current generation of young people to wrestle with legacies of colonialism and white supremacy alongside him. By grappling with the complexity of his own identity and the ways in which it is shaped by the experiences of previous generations, Kiyoshi is engaging in a process of self-determination that is deeply connected to the struggles and resilience of his ancestors.

Similarly, Calvin, another multiracial practitioner, shared his experience of "always [being] interstitial, in between things" and emphasized the importance of recognizing that "culture is fluid." He added, "having a kind of centralized notion around anything will often put you in a space where you're not allowing yourself to see the changes of people or to hear them for their experiences that might not fit your understanding." By remaining open to learning from

the communities he serves and not imposing a fixed understanding of their experiences, Calvin is

creating space for the agency and self-determination of those communities to shape the direction

of restorative justice work. Moreover, Calvin and Kiyoshi's ability to "move between spaces"

and build empathy in restorative justice work is rooted in their experiences navigating various

communities and perspectives. Acknowledging and grappling with this complexity is essential

for restorative justice practitioners, as it allows them to better understand and empathize with the

diverse experiences of their students and colleagues, and to create more inclusive and equitable

spaces for healing and justice.

Roxanne reflected on the importance of cultural humility in her work, even if she

appeared to have shared identities with her community on the surface. While she felt affinity

towards the students, sometimes they experienced her as "more of an outsider" due to her more

racially ambiguous appearance and suburban upbringing. Recognizing that her positionality

could make her prone to an antiblackness hostile to the youth she worked with, she took care to

carefully examine how she interacted with students and positioned herself in relation to them,

asking critical questions like "why am I talking to this kid? Why am I not talking to that kid over

there? [...] I am often trying to–in individual interactions–wonder, is this the move? Is there a

way to do this differently to have different outcomes?" Ernesto exemplified a similar degree of

cultural humility when interacting with families of color, acknowledging the limits of his ability

to understand parent perspectives without being one himself. He stated, "being an adult male

who has no children, it's always been difficult to put myself in the perspective of a caregiver,

who has concerns about their child and who just wants what's best." He always began IEP

meetings from a place of curiosity, sharing strengths and positive connections with the student,

and was pleasantly surprised with praise from the families for the relationships he built with their

students. Roxanne and Ernesto demonstrated cultural humility and responsiveness through their willingness to be with students and families. Together, the community "struggle[s] with and learn[s] from each other's cultural differences while simultaneously striving to incorporate new learning into the constructive activity of the classroom" (Archibold, 2016). Their reflection on the importance of cultural humility and constant self-reflection also speaks to the intergenerational dimensions of self-determination. By acknowledging their own biases and limitations, they actively work to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of oppression and create more liberatory spaces for the youth they work with. As Roxanne expressed, the joy was in "connecting with kids and getting to that vulnerable place." Restorative justice practitioners can learn from these study participants and their flexibility as they navigate the specificities of their school contexts by prioritizing vulnerability and cultural humility.

Participants recognized the importance of navigating place, positionality, and power with cultural humility in their restorative justice work, and how this required a deep understanding of the historical and demographic context of the communities they served. All participants recognized the historical significance of the place and land on which they worked, and how that shaped the current context of students' experiences within the school-prison nexus. Despite all the participants being people of color and hailing from California, they all acknowledged the limitations of shared identities and the sovereignty of local knowledge. Kiyoshi grew up working class in Industrious Town, but the Industrious he knew as a young person had a more significant Black population. Now that Industrious Town's demographics had shifted more Latine in recent years, he observed that sometimes his non-Black, non-Latine identity and limited Spanish skills could bring him "further away from different students at different times." He strove to stay rooted in his core values and be mindful of "real perceived advantages, disadvantages around all

of [those identities]." Despite having grown up as a mixed-race Black woman in northern California, Roxanne respected the indigenous knowledge of Resilience City's youth and families and their right to self-determine the pace at which they extended trust to her, while also leaning on shared experiences, such as her childhood acculturation attending Resilience churches with her family and making friends with Resilience youth then. Calvin, who grew up in public schools four hours away from Authentic Metropolis with less resources than many of his students, understood the limitations of a shared Black identity when these students experienced a painfully acute sense of being a token Black student at a school where some grade levels had no Black children. He recognized how "weird" it was to work in independent schools, and refrained from imposing theoretical frameworks from his African American Studies knowledge when students simply needed to share their own insights and be heard.

Working at one of the most racially diverse public schools in Authetic Metropolis, Ernesto initially struggled to find his footing in the school community: "It took me a while to find comfort in this space, not realizing how many students also identified as Latino, Latina, Latinx, even students that were Spanish speakers or that come from a similar cultural background as myself." However, he quickly found that students were eager to ask and answer questions about cultural backgrounds. Whether they quickly built rapport through Spanglish or students bluntly asking him, "You're Mexican, right?" Ernesto found that cultural identity was a top priority for his students and a tool to build relationships. Jose also found that as a Latino man working in a majority Latine community facilitated ease of trust building in some circumstances, noting that "just the color of my skin, just the social identities that I bring forth (Latino, male), I think that that also helps in bridging some of those relationship components." However, he also recognized sometimes that his positionality required calling in others for different access points

to trust building in restorative justice work, where the work with families got challenging, and families responded better to the school principal, a Latina who had been rooted in the Innovation community for decades. Study participants leaned into cultural identity when appropriate, but also knew when to pull back and respect localized, cultural boundaries. These examples demonstrate the complex and ongoing work of navigating place, positionality, and power with cultural humility in restorative justice work, and how this requires a deep respect for local knowledge and a willingness to constantly reflect on one's own positionality.

Navigating place, positionality, and power with cultural humility also meant continual learning and professional development. Because funding and resources were variable across Bay Area school contexts, participants did not identify common approaches to training in cultural humility and restorative justice. Furthermore, participants recognized that the language around restorative justice could be co opted by neoliberal hegemonic interests (O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020). To resist the operating logic of the school-prison nexus, then, they took the initiative to learn more on their own in different ways and find resources aligned with their values. This commitment to learning was reflected in the participant's pod-mapping. Jose participated in circle keeper training to run different types of circles and honor the multiplicity of indigenous circle processes. Roxanne increased her cultural competency and overall trustworthiness to teach in trauma-informed ways, and recognized that "teaching Black students in a school building [in Resilience] is its own competency...to hold the context of history and interactions." She attended transformer department meetings, joined educator support groups, and attended district restorative justice spaces to learn in community. Calvin watched videos on YouTube of people in different positionalities modeling RJ practices, read materials like The Little Book of Racial Healing or Pleasure Activism, and accessed resources provided by the organization Restorative

Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY). Kiyoshi, Calvin, and Ernesto attributed much of their culturally responsive approaches to their education in ethnic studies, Black Studies, and social justice teacher education respectively. While of course more universal professional development in the areas of cultural humility and restorative justice would be beneficial, there were clearly benefits to participants determining for themselves what nourished and sustained their work given the uniqueness of each participant's racial identity and school context. By maintaining this open, curious stance of cultural humility while staying cognizant of power structures, educators of color can better effectively operate with a critical restorative justice lens and avoid falling into the pitfalls of progressive race-evasiveness (Annamma, 2018; Vaandering, 2010).

Intergenerational Feedback Loops

The pod-mapping interviews and the community healing circle illuminated the importance of creating intergenerational feedback loops to create a more responsive, interconnected and interdependent approach to restorative justice at their schools. Eve Tuck posits that desire enjoys "some/a lot of self-determination" and she "insists that desire accrues wisdom in assemblage, and does so…not just across a lifetime, but across generations, so that my desire is linked, rhizomatically, to my past and my future." Her use of rhizome as a metaphor here speaks to the internodal, rooted dimensions of wisdom. Study participants expressed desire towards connection and liberation and accrued wisdom in community. They resisted neoliberal impulses towards punitive individualism, where human beings are rendered in isolation, "ripped of their social contexts, and continuously competing with other autonomous individuals on a playing field assumed to be level" (O'Brien & Nygreen, 2020).

As restorative justice practitioners within the school-prison nexus, participants instead rendered themselves *scyborg*, la paperson's articulation of "a technological condition of being

embedded in an assemblage of machines" whose "agential capacity extends beyond your being, into the system's capacity" (la paperson, 2017, pg. 64). By relying on their critical connections with others across generations, these educators of color oriented their own agential capacity beyond their being, their self-determination in service of collective liberation. They constructed interdependent relationships with mentors while also becoming mentors themselves, gesturing towards freedom in the process. This subtheme explores narrative examples in which participants mapped out pods with individuals who recognized their mutual humanity, modeled restorative justice values with greater depth of experience, and held them accountable to their own vision of what it means to be a restorative justice practitioner of color in the school-prison nexus. This dynamic, rhizomatic cultivation of trustworthiness beyond single individuals provides us a potential visualization of what restorative justice situated in ongoing community could look like.

Figure 13

"Mycelium Rhizome"
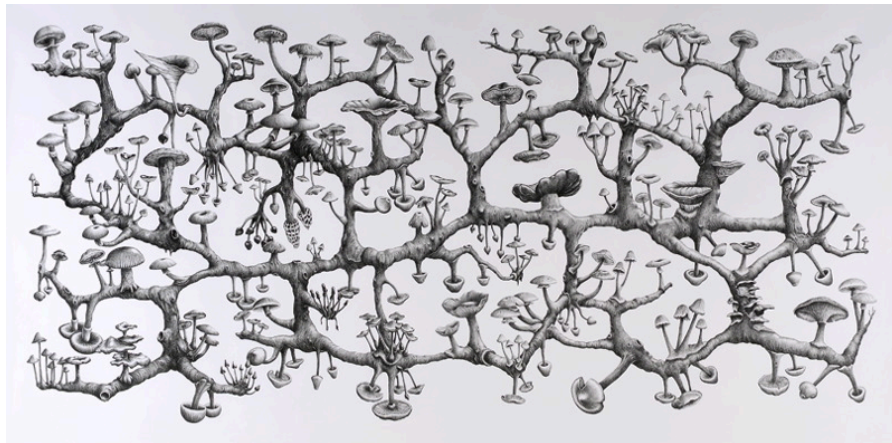
Note. This is artwork reproduced from the artist's website,
titled Mycelium Rhizome" by Richard Giblett (Giblettt, 2011)

Participants looked to the mentorship of the more and most marginalized and experienced for insights and support in restorative justice work. The wisdom of the marginalized came oftentimes from beyond the very margins of the school itself. For example, Jose paid homage to

his parents as role models for his work as a restorative justice practitioner committed to justice. Both his parents worked in the fields, with his mother later becoming a pre-kindergarten teacher and his father is still working in the fields. He expressed pride and admiration for them both, saying, "That's what fuels my fire. So where I'm coming from, the struggles that my family has endured and then where they are now. That drive, that perseverance that they've really modeled themselves, I tend to embody." Even if his parents did not work directly alongside him, Jose created an intergenerational feedback loop to sustain him within the school-prison nexus.

Similarly, Kiyoshi was raised by queer folks and "incredibly strong, brilliant, resilient, wise women." For him, the loss of his two godfathers to the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis left a deep imprint on him as a ten year old. Remembering the suffering they experienced and the social stigma queer folks endured at the time shaped his political understanding and continues to inform how he examines societal and local challenges today. Kiyoshi also shared that his childhood best friend was a wellspring of wisdom for him, as someone who was incarcerated at different intervals throughout their upbringing. This friend was also a restorative justice practitioner, albeit outside the school system, but provided crucial critiques for Kiyoshi from another dimension of the school-prison nexus, thus diversifying his feedback loops and improving his effectiveness as a school-based restorative justice practitioner. He expressed deep gratitude for his partner, who held him accountable when he was "showing his ass."

Like Kiyoshi, Calvin was surrounded by people of multiply-marginalized identities who supported him and his work. He said, "I feel very blessed to have a lot of, particularly women of color, but queer women of color, queer communities who have been big mentors, and help ground me." These educators of color grounded themselves in a rhizomatic network beyond the school that reminded them of their positionality and modeled how to leverage their core values in

challenging situations. These intergenerational relationships extend the participants' agency beyond their individual being and contribute to a larger system of resistance and transformation, rooted in the experiences of the most multiply-marginalized in society, animating the scyborg possibilities of these participants within the school-prison nexus.

Within the walls of the school, participants also looked to those more experienced than them for modeling and mentorship to increase their capacity to hold restorative justice values and processes. Roxanne was fortunate to work in a school that had been working on restorative justice reform for a few years, and in a school district with a depth of wisdom for restorative justice. "When I first started, the director of restorative justice was on campus and he is a wealth of knowledge. That was really exciting to be able to watch him model, and he has a lot of those shared values. So it was really cool to see him practicing those values in real life and be able to observe that in real time." While she noted that the building felt the director's absence as he left to support other schools in the district, with restorative justice practices, Roxanne was still well-resourced in her school site with folks who shared expertise (one had a master's degree in school-based restorative justice), laughs, playfulness, and honesty with her. These people in her pod "keep it all the way real" with her, an open two-way communication channel she could draw from.

Participants who were earlier in their career also turned to a wealth of mentors who had been at the school longer or also had a depth of expertise in restorative justice work. In the admin wing, Calvin and his colleagues kept their doors open, easily moving in and out of spaces to ask each other questions or make music together, with guitar and ukelele strumming harmonizing with the gorgeous voice of his supervisor, Emme. He held an immense amount of respect for her, a polyglot who seemed to have "lived many lives." Colleagues who worked with him directly on

restorative justice work as well as those who worked in the community engagement center collaborated to "make justice work interesting and engaging in the community." Ernesto had fostered a deep friendship and partnership with the 7th grade humanities teacher, as the two overlapped significantly in terms of serving the same students in the classroom and in managing the school athletics program. Their values and perspectives aligned closely with Ernesto's for a just, safe school community. "Whenever something happens in the school community, whether it's between the adults or the students, or whether I need accountability when it comes to Restorative Justice practices, I know that I can always go to him." He also turned to mentors in his teacher education program, even years out from his graduation, to deepen his understanding of restorative justice in the context of social justice. The experiences of Roxanne, Calvin, and Ernesto highlight how intergenerational feedback loops within the school can provide restorative justice practitioners with valuable opportunities for learning, growth, and support. By observing and collaborating with more experienced colleagues who share their values, participants deepened their understanding of restorative justice practices and navigated the challenges of implementation with greater confidence and skill. This type of mentorship and open communication is crucial for building the capacity of restorative justice practitioners and promoting a more responsive, interconnected approach to the work.

As they navigated challenging moments in restorative justice work in schools, participants not only drew wisdom and support from mentors across generations but also actively sought to become the mentors and advocates they wished they had in their own schooling experiences. By anchoring their perspectives to their own memories of schooling and modeling what they would have wanted for their younger selves, the participants created intergenerational feedback loops that extended both backwards and forwards in time. This process of reflection

and embodiment allowed them to disrupt cycles of individualism and punitive discipline and move towards interdependence and collective care.

Jose articulated this commitment to intergenerational advocacy, stating, "I see myself really advocating for the student that I was in high school or my K-12 public education. I think of who I want to be a voice for, who I want to advocate for, and I think that that's what grounds me on really tough days." By positioning himself as an advocate for his younger self and other students who share similar experiences, Jose generates a feedback loop that channels the wisdom and desires of past generations into the present moment of restorative justice work. Similarly, Kiyoshi named the necessity of unlearning individualistic habits and modeling interdependence to create more sustainable pathways forward. He reflected, "In this work where we're perpetually exhausted, it's hard to do that. And I feel bad when I have to lean on people, but I'm also trying to model with people, it's okay to lean on each other." By actively working to disrupt patterns of individualism and model interdependence, Kiyoshi created opportunities for intergenerational learning and support that can sustain restorative justice work over time. Calvin also emphasized the importance of leaning on mentors and "release valves" while at work, so that he could set better internal boundaries and show up as the kind of adult he didn't have in his own schooling experiences. He shared, "I want to be the kind of adult that I didn't get to see modeled in my space, the type of admin who isn't scary to come to and who genuinely listens and cares and all those types of things." By embodying the qualities of care, accessibility, and support that he yearned for as a student, Calvin creates a feedback loop that transmits the wisdom and desires of his younger self into the present moment of his restorative justice work.

Roxanne summed up the importance of these intergenerational feedback loops for cultivating trust and sustaining restorative justice work over time. She reflected, "Trust really

greases the wheel and keeps it moving. And so, I'm thinking about where do my own wheels need more of that grease, actually? I'm going to spend more time thinking about that in the different groups that I work with. We don't currently have feedback for my role; so I've been thinking, how do I create feedback?" By actively seeking out opportunities for feedback and reflection, Roxanne recognizes the vital role of intergenerational learning and support in building trust and improving restorative justice practices. Taken together, these examples illustrate how the cultivation of intergenerational feedback loops allows restorative justice practitioners to draw on the wisdom of past generations, disrupt cycles of harm and individualism, and create more sustainable and trusting relationships in their work. By embodying the qualities and practices they wish they had experienced in their own schooling, the participants create opportunities for transformative learning and support that extend beyond their individual experiences and contribute to a larger system of collective care and liberation.

The experiences and insights shared by the participants in this subtheme underscore the vital role of intergenerational feedback loops in cultivating trust and improving restorative justice practices in schools. By creating responsive, interconnected, and interdependent relationships with mentors and colleagues across generations, educators of color are able to navigate the challenges of the school-prison nexus with greater resilience, wisdom, and care. These feedback loops not only support the personal and professional growth of individual practitioners but also contribute to a larger system of resistance and transformation, rooted in the experiences and desires of multiply-marginalized communities. As such, the cultivation of intergenerational feedback loops emerges as a key strategy for promoting collective liberation and creating more just and caring educational spaces. Restorative justice practitioners and school leaders seeking to build trust and improve their practices should prioritize the development of these types of

relationships and create opportunities for ongoing learning, collaboration, and support across generations.

Centering Youth Voice (Yes, Every Time)

Children of color are the most vulnerable group within the school-prison nexus, and thus tending to their self-determination is of utmost importance. Educators of color in this study were acutely aware of these risks and worked intentionally to center youth voice and autonomy in their restorative justice practices, ultimately emphasizing the importance of young people's imagined futures at the heart of restorative justice work. This section examines how these educators of color truly centered the voices of young people in their work, avoiding the trap of further victimizing students with their restorative justice policies and programs (Ruggiero, 2011). Study participants were in alignment with Eve Tuck (2010) when she says, "I believe that our desire has expertise. In fact, I believe desire constitutes our expertise" (pg. 646). They recognized that "desire is smart – that it is purposeful, intentional, agentic; that it can teach itself, craft itself, inform itself; that it can make decisions, that it can strategize." Young people were viewed as contributors and change agents in their schools, and the desires and needs of students in restorative processes were not only included but necessary to "co-create their school culture" (Brown, 2017). By centering youth voice and autonomy in their restorative justice work, the educators of color in this study not only challenge the carceral logics of the school-prison nexus but also model a powerful vision of educational transformation—one in which young people are recognized as experts in their own experiences, trusted to shape their own futures, and empowered to create more just and liberatory schools and communities.

Participants recognized the vulnerability of students' positionality in the school prison nexus and pushed for greater opportunities to empower young people's decision making.

However, they were often constrained by the existing resources or mindsets of the adults in the building. Recognizing the adultist limits of their schools, many participants still advocated for fair process and more inclusion of student voice in restorative justice processes. As a reminder, there are three elements to fair process: expectation clarity, engaging those affected in decision-making, and explanation of reasoning behind decisions (Acosta et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016). For example, Jose expressed a desire to establish a "peer court" system that would engage students more directly in resolving conflicts and determining consequences. As he noted, "engaging students in the solution would be a very important restorative tool for the learning community." Jose saw the potential of student-led restorative practices to transform school culture and empower young people as active participants in their own learning and growth. However, the school was currently limited by insufficient staffing. Jose knew he would need more time and/or training to effectively bring in student voices, so in the meantime he regularly consulted student leaders on broad policy decisions in the absence of student-driven mediation processes.

On the other hand, while there may have been enough individuals to facilitate different levels of restorative practices, buy-in was a challenge at Roxanne's school in Resilience City. She explained, "I am really trying to have kids have input on their consequences and getting pushback on that." Roxanne noticed a friction between educators' commitment to restorative justice and their personal desires for "kids to feel ashamed and feel the pain of a consequence." Other adults in the building were concerned that by including student voices in the disciplinary process, students would not feel an adequate amount of shame or pain—even if it was unclear how much pain or shame would be sufficient. Similarly, Kiyoshi advocated for the implementation of fair process throughout the school, drawing from research: "Multiple times I

have asked my principal, just for our team, to read about fair process. "Many of the challenges that we're getting, what I would argue is a rift… exists because of struggles around communication or making decisions unilaterally." These examples illustrate the critical role that adult educators play in either reinforcing or transforming the adultist, hierarchical structures of schooling, as Vaandering (2010, pg.32) argues. By advocating for fair process and greater student voice in restorative justice practices, the participants in this study actively challenged the power imbalances and exclusionary norms of the school-prison nexus, working to create more equitable and empowering spaces for youth leadership and agency.

Roxanne, Calvin, and Ernesto, three participants in the study, recognized the wisdom inherent in the oppositional or unexpected stances youth took to the existing power structure. At Roxanne's school, students would often tell her or other adults, "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Rather than focusing on the perceived disrespect, Roxanne considered it a way to assess the students' trust levels in the adults and the institution. She respected the boundaries students were attempting to set, acknowledging that their desires constituted expertise and should be recognized as such before engaging them in restorative processes. As Savannah Shange offers, opacity is a site of knowledge production–what happens when young people do not concede to the terms by which we seek to know them?

Similarly, Calvin did not always try to solve his students' problems, especially when they expressed frustration and distrust of the school system that resonated with his own experiences. Despite the school's efforts to empower students, some students of color still felt neglected by the institution. Calvin respected the wisdom of their refusal and resignation, agreeing that the school's best efforts at restorative practices were still failing to hold them as promised. He recognized that the promise of college for these students held a greater degree of

self-determination and agency, and chose to collude with this promise rather than pledging allegiance to the high school's current state.

Ernesto also respected student voice and behaviors, understanding that if students were acting in egregious ways, it was an indictment of the institution's failures to live up to the promise of restorative justice. During a community healing circle, he shared a story of a student who broke down crying, saying that adults only yelled and made hollow threats instead of talking to them. Ernesto pointed out that the student had made reasonable points and incisively analyzed the gaps between the school's supposed commitment to restorative justice practices and the actual reality. Like theorist Eve Tuck, he did not treat desire as an unconscious, neutral vector leading young people astray but recognized their desires as agentic and strategic. The insights of this young queer kid of color are invaluable to the transformation of schools pursuing the values of restorative justice: be honest with us, be honest with yourselves, do better, be better. All three participants allowed students to decide for themselves where they chose to direct their energy and the boundaries they set as a result, even when it meant hearing challenging or defiant perspectives.

Ultimately, educators of color respect and honor the voices of young people because youth—as the most likely demographic to be victimized by the school-prison nexus and the attempts of progressive educators to implement restorative justice practices—often exemplify the values of kindness, respect, and self-determination these practitioners hope to model. In the community healing circle, we all resonated with Ernesto when he expressed profound gratitude for the kindness of his students. Sometimes he had rough days at work, and he appreciated the nonchalant "It's cool, we're cool," he got from students when he circled back with an apology for his own subpar behaviors. "Seeing them model that grace and that flexibility for me has

really been grounding and refreshing for me too, where every day is a clean slate, and they deserve the same amount of grace as I get." In these moments, it is the students who recognize that we can only move forward with each other, connected together to form a circle. Ernesto's reflection on the profound grace and kindness modeled by his students, even in moments of conflict or struggle, serves as a poignant reminder of the transformative potential of youth leadership and the importance of reciprocal accountability in building authentic, equitable relationships between educators and students.

Ultimately, by centering youth voice and autonomy in their restorative justice work, these educators of color not only gesture towards a more liberatory and humanizing vision of education but also embody the very values of respect and interconnectedness that lie at the heart of restorative justice itself. In the face of the ongoing violence and oppression of the school-prison nexus, their stories offer hope and inspiration for the possibility of a different future—one in which young people are truly seen, heard, and empowered to shape their own destinies and to co-create more just and caring communities. The experiences and insights of the educators of color in this study underscore the vital importance of centering youth voice and autonomy in restorative justice practices, not only as a means of disrupting the carceral logics of the school-prison nexus but also as a fundamental principle of educational transformation. By recognizing young people as experts in their own experiences, validating their desires and boundaries, and learning from their wisdom and resilience, these practitioners model a powerful vision of restorative justice that truly honors the self-determination and agency of those most vulnerable to the violence of punitive school discipline. In doing so, they challenge the adultist assumptions and hierarchical structures that perpetuate the victimization and marginalization of children, particularly children of color, within the school system.

Summary

The study examined the experiences of educators of color implementing schoolwide restorative justice reform and how they described their school context as entwined in the school-prison nexus, as well as their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust. Through surveys, semi-structured interviews that utilized a restorative pod-mapping protocol, and a community healing circle, participants shared narratives that illuminated the complex, multifaceted and multilayered dimensions of their work as racially marginalized individuals in pursuit of paradigm shifts and cultural transformation at their schools.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the experiences of educators of color implementing restorative justice practices in schools, highlighting the complex interplay of intentional frameworks and authentic connection, embodying consistency, trust-building, and intergenerational wisdom in their work. Through the narratives of these dedicated practitioners, we gain insights into the challenges and possibilities of cultivating healing, equity, and liberation in educational spaces. The findings underscore the importance of grounding restorative justice work in the lived experiences and cultural knowledge of communities of color, while also recognizing the ongoing struggle against the dehumanizing logics of the school-prison nexus. Ultimately, by centering the voices and agency of youth, building authentic relationships across generations, and embodying a commitment to consistency and care, these educators offer a powerful vision of what transformative, restorative education can look like - one that honors the humanity, resilience, and self-determination of all members of the school community.

Chapter 6: What is Trustworthy is Worthwhile

Conclusion

"Such a worldview sees the universe as characterized by wholeness, unity, and connectedness. ...we treat each other in respectful and ultimately sacred ways, because we see each person as part of the whole and indispensable to it. We also see ourselves as connected to all other beings, and so what happens to them affects us too. Our connectedness gives us the responsibility to care for each other and to help mend the webs that hold us" (68). (Wonshé via Vaandering, 2010)

"Abolition is the unreasonable, irreverent wilderness that exceeds and undermines any infrastructural attempt to "develop" its lands, even in the service of revolution. Abolition is not a pathway—it is the end of paths and the end of worlds, a roadblock barring passage to the destination-cum-mirage of late liberal democracy" (Shange, 2019).

Circling Back

In the community healing circle, Calvin said, "I love circling back. I think it's really important to try to disrupt moments rather than react to them." Like Calvin, I too love circling back. So let's circle back.

When I was 28 years old, the school district I worked in caused an immense amount of harm by understaffing and failing to support the middle school at which I was employed. A Black student nearly attempted murder, or at the very least, attempted serious physical injury toward a Black femme student. A number of middle school students witnessed this incident of physical violence and the subsequent deescalation attempts, were forced into a shelter-in-place protocol. Teachers and paraeducators without sufficient training for physical deescalation did their best, only to find out that no administrators or counselors were onsite to manage what was clearly a crisis moment. The administrators and counselors were absent because they were tending to another crisis at the school's elementary school campus, which was understaffed and without sufficient support at the administrative level.

On a personal level, I experienced a headache and some body fatigue for a few days due to being body-checked into the wall and elbowed in the chest in the scuffle. But the physical pain

paled in comparison to the years of moral injury I had experienced at the hands of the school district, which I initially joined because I was enticed by the promise of a restorative justice school district in a supposedly progressive stronghold. I joined the work of teaching in that particular context because I truly believed I could learn from and with incredible educators of color alongside the incredible young people of San Francisco. What I didn't expect was that we would all be crushed by the very structures that were supposed to lift us up. I mistakenly believed in the school-to-prison-pipeline, and uncovered the ensnaring realities of the school-prison nexus. I was not exempt from the harm enacted by educational enclosure; no one was.

I embarked on this research study because, ultimately, I was curious about the profound betrayal I felt when I left that school district. I wanted to know what went wrong. I wanted to know what it would take to make things right. So I leaned into my lived experiences of betrayal and oriented myself and the research towards trust, what I consider to be betrayal's antonym–if not its antidote. I asked the following questions for this research study:

- How do educators of color describe their school contexts when implementing restorative justice reforms as they are entwined in the school-prison nexus?

- How do educators of color describe their efforts to cultivate and repair relational trust in stakeholders when implementing restorative justice processes in schools?

- How can we learn from these descriptions of trust to better restorative justice practices in schools?

For some, to exit the classroom and exit the school district I worked in signified a betrayal, or at least a lack of trustworthiness. It was a common refrain I heard from fellow educators committed to social justice and freedom in the six years I worked in the school district. Too many people

leave the classroom and marginalized communities of color, leaving children and adults who choose to stay with a sense of abandonment and isolation.

And yet, deep down, I knew I could not stay. I could not continue. Not like this.

Underlying my research questions are my own selfish, existential ones: what would it take for me to return to the Bay Area school district, educators, and children I adored and want to serve? How can we all persist within the school-prison nexus? How do we, the multiply-marginalized who seek liberation and love learning alongside children, look directly at the inevitability of betrayal?

I truly feel like these are questions worth asking, even if others may view me with skepticism.

Motivated both by a desire to avoid hypocrisy and a deep commitment to the values of restorative justice (transformative justice, prison industrial complex abolition, a Buddhist impulse towards bodhicitta, and liberation from samsara), I attempted to weave together the necessary strands of the literature review and craft a methodology for this research study that would, as some of my former students would say, stand on business. I hoped to address a critical gap in existing research on schoolwide restorative justice practices as a potential intervention in the punitive mechanics of the school-prison nexus by more closely examining the qualities of relational trust in schools for educators of color. My hope is that this study is one that my students would be proud of, that they would look at this and say "Yeah, Ms. Phan. This makes sense. I see you."

Towards a Model of Restorative Trust: Review of Findings

Truthfully, I was not entirely convinced I would really find trust at the end of this project. However, in shooting for the moon, I found some restorative justice all-stars, educators of color

who shared critical insights on building capacity for relational trust in schools for and through restorative justice practices. Their insights shed light on the theoretical and structural gaps that hinder the work of cultivating trust and schoolwide restorative justice reform in the Bay Area, allowing the violent aims of the school-prison nexus to co-opt RJ language and maintain the status quo. I engineered a methodology where participants reflected on 1) the alignment of their values with their school and those of restorative justice in a survey and semi-structured interview, 2) the interconnected reality of their supportive, trusting relationships in a pod-mapping exercise, and 3) the challenges and joys of their day-to-day work with other study participants in a community healing circle.

Drawing from the experiences and insights of the restorative justice practitioners in this study, I propose a model of *restorative trust* that is grounded in the following key elements: 1) the interweaving of intentional structures and authentic connection; 2) the consistent demonstration of care and compassion; 3) the willingness to move at the speed of trust, even in the face of institutional pressures; and 4) the cultivation of intergenerational wisdom and interdependence. Restorative trust, then, can be understood as a dynamic, relational process that requires ongoing effort, reflection, and adaptation. It is not a static state or a finite resource, but rather a way of being and relating that centers the humanity and agency of all. Restorative trust is built through the daily, often difficult work of showing up with integrity, vulnerability, and a commitment to repairing harm and nurturing growth. It requires a willingness to challenge the dehumanizing logics of the school-prison nexus and to imagine new possibilities for justice, healing, and liberation. Ultimately, restorative trust is about creating the conditions for all members of the school community—particularly those most marginalized—to thrive and experience a deep sense of belonging, dignity, and self-determination.

Table 3.

From Relational Trust to Restorative Trust

Feltman Model of Trust	→	Restorative Trust
Care	→	Consistent Care and Compassion
Sincerity	→	Interweaving Intentional Frameworks with Authentic Connection
Reliability	→	Willingness to Move at the Speed of Trust
Competence	→	Cultivation of Intergenerational Wisdom and Interdependence

The proposed model of restorative trust both aligns with and extends Charles Feltman's influential framework, which identifies four key dimensions of trust: care, sincerity, reliability, and competence (Feltman, 2021). Feltman's distinction of care is reflected in the restorative trust model's emphasis on consistent compassion and concern for others' wellbeing. However, the restorative trust model situates this care within the specific context of schools shaped by carceral progressivism (Shange, 2019), recognizing the need to create a school-wide culture of care that actively resists the dehumanizing logics of the school-prison nexus. Similarly, Feltman's dimension of sincerity, which involves honesty and authenticity, is echoed in the restorative trust model's focus on genuine connection and vulnerability. Yet the model acknowledges the structural barriers to sincerity in schools, such as power imbalances and institutional pressures, calling for a willingness to challenge these barriers in pursuing equitable, restorative relationships. Feltman's notion of reliability, or the consistency between words and actions, is reflected in the restorative trust model's emphasis on interweaving intentional structures and authentic connection. However, the model also recognizes that reliability in restorative justice work may require moving at the speed of trust, even when this conflicts with institutional timelines or expectations. Finally, while Feltman defines competence as an individual's perceived

ability to follow through on commitments, the restorative trust model frames competence as a collective capacity developed through intergenerational wisdom-sharing, collaboration, and support. By situating Feltman's distinctions within the specific context of restorative justice work in schools and attending to the systemic dimensions of trust, the proposed model offers a more comprehensive, contextualized, and transformative vision of trust that is specifically tailored to the needs and goals of educational spaces shaped by carceral progressivism. It provides a framework for understanding and nurturing the relational conditions necessary for restorative practices to take root and flourish in schools.

What Follows: Implications for Research and Practice

I write the following implications like short letters to other parts of the assemblage, as a scyborg similarly "entangled in in the machinery of assemblages" (la paperson, 2017). This research study has been an effort to circle back, to disrupt moments rather than react to them. By analyzing and deconstructing the pathways by which the school-prison nexus shapes itself, I offer these practical and theoretical implications, this disassembly and repatterning, to you all who are also embedded.

For Youth

Of course, there are practical implications for young people embedded in the school-prison nexus and how your educators of color navigate relational trust. Firstly, I want to repeat what Eve Tuck (2010) establishes: "I believe that our desire has expertise. In fact, I believe desire constitutes our expertise" (pg. 646). Your wants and needs matter. Your dreams constitute expertise. They inform the rest of us in the machinery. Perhaps we are perpetuating the same patterns meant to enclose your joy and dignity. Perhaps we are repatterning towards something else, more unknowable and more pregnant with possibility.

Your voice matters. Of course, you should always be asked for input on decisions that affect you. Raise your hand in class, send that email to your teacher to schedule a meeting, start that petition, and repost your friend's feelings about what is going on in school or the world on social media. Fill out those surveys and file those complaints, even when you don't think it will go anywhere. These are the things that provide leverage for restorative justice practitioners of color who want to co-conspire with you and sustain intergenerational feedback loops.

You may feel scared, and you may make mistakes as you exercise your voice in speaking truth to power. That is all part of the learning process. Remember the study's findings on the need for intergenerational feedback loops. Don't go at it alone because in truth, you are the most susceptible to the harm of the school-prison nexus. Rely on your own pod of trusted adults, whether those are your abuelas at home, your adult half-brothers who will challenge anyone on your behalf, or the weird but authentic teacher at school who always listens to you, no matter how busy they are. We're here for you. We've got you. You've got this.

Of course, you also get to decide for yourself where to direct your energy and attention. You also get to keep your mouth shut. You also get to scream when you are angry, hurt, and betrayed. You also get to walk away. Your refusal matters, too. A discerning co-conspirator will learn from everything you do.

All I ask of you is that you do not settle, because the school-prison nexus aims to entrap you or make you docile to its confinement. Always keep your heart, your values, and your dreams at the center of your decision-making.

For Educators

In the community healing circle, a memory of the past surprised me when Calvin shared the words of his supervisor: "We are human beings, not human doings." This phrase took me by

surprise in the middle of my facilitation work, because it wasn't the first time I had heard the phrase myself. When I was a junior in high school, Dr. Gary Gruber served as the interim Head of School. He was a towering white man in his seventies at the time, always equipped with a witty pun or a kind word for students. A decade later, I invited him to my US History class the school year I taught online during the Covid-19 pandemic. He offered the same wisdom to my students, also juniors in high school. I reiterate this wisdom to you now:

We are human beings, not human doings.

Like the participants of this study, set boundaries. Sometimes it really is just a job and leave your work at work. Close the laptop and leave the grading at school sometimes. Invest in the relationships that sustain you, especially those outside the classroom. The ones you love and who love you will be there for you no matter your job title and workplace. Those intergenerational connections and rigorous boundaries that honor your core values will make you a better educator. These factors mitigate burnout and build your capacity for transformation as the school community also transforms.

When you are in the classroom and the hallways, focus on developing systemic approaches to connection and be consistent with your care. Look to elders and mentors in the community to see how others model it, and constantly reflect on your own positionality as you experiment with behaviors to build trust in your school community. Practice cultural humility by recognizing the limitations of your own identity and experience. Listen to the young people when they tell you what you're doing ain't it, and adjust accordingly. Extend the same honesty and accountability to yourself that your students will offer you time and time again. Bring youth voices to everything you touch and do: the texts you read in class, the decisions made to the schedule for the next school year, and especially the consequences of bad decisions or

miscommunication. Even if you cannot change the outcome, make sure youth voices are heard on the way out.

Some of you may have already experienced moral injury in these restorative justice processes, forced into actions that seem to betray your very values and reasons for being in education. Some of you will experience moral injury. This is the school-prison nexus at work. In the aftermath of those moments, I hope you tend to your own grief. Don't be surprised if you feel fractured; like me, like the scyborg, perhaps those fractures can be recommissioned for alternative purposes. When you feel lost, know that what is trustworthy is worthwhile.

For School Leaders

At the site level, school leaders set the tone for culture and trust-building (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Thus, it is of utmost importance that administrators do not have two different sets of values and expectations, which foment distrust and feelings of hypocrisy. Participants named that it was important for schools to provide ongoing professional development, support, and resources for educators of color implementing restorative justice practices, including self-reflection, mentorship, and community-building opportunities. This must be reflected in the schedule and programming of the year. At the leadership level, the structures you apply can easily extend the controlling nature of the school-prison nexus. It is your responsibility to empower the multiply-marginalized and create opportunities for authenticity, spontaneity, and connection. You are the one who sets the conditions for whether your educators and students feel like human doings, or human beings.

School leaders can underscore the importance of grounding restorative justice work in the cultural knowledge, values, and lived experiences of communities of color, and the role of cultural humility in building authentic, equitable relationships. This can look like taking the time

as a community to learn the lived histories within and outside the school buildings. Who are the indigenous people who have stewarded the land on which your school resides? What are the histories of im/migration, settlement, and displacement in your local community, and how does that shape the experiences of the students enrolled? Exploring these questions is just as vital professional development as any curriculum. School leaders can model the same cultural humility the participants of this study did by reflecting on their own positionality as it relates to their educators, students, and families. When you suspect or receive feedback that you have hurt someone, let go of your power and try to engage in a restorative process. Lean on others to facilitate these opportunities to rebuild from broken trust.

Emphasize the transformative potential of restorative justice practices that center the humanity, agency, and self-determination of all members of the school community, particularly those most marginalized by punitive discipline policies. School leaders oftentimes are the arbiters of school disciplinary policy and should attend to the data with a careful eye for the multiply-marginalized in the school community. Significant disproportionality should be discussed, questioned, and challenged. After all, this study has demonstrated that consistency is care. Tend to the long-term work of cultural change and systems change. Track year over year the data that tells you more about your school's health. Additionally, the study participants also expressed a need for accountability and fair process at all levels of restorative justice implementation in schools. Like Roxanne said, you too, are implicated in the data that reflects racial injustice back to us. Model integrity and transparency, focusing on critical connections more than critical mass. You will lose the trust of your educators and students when you force people into unilateral decisions, so do your best to communicate clearly and involve those affected at all parts of the process.

You act as a leader in transforming school cultures. Do not relinquish your own agential capacities as scyborg to the status quo. Know that I see your humanity, too. You've got this.

For Teacher Education Programs

To the educators in teacher education programs, we need you right now as we face teacher shortages and significant teacher attrition, especially for educators of color. We need you to prepare the next generation of teachers who can challenge the school-prison nexus, equipped with the technologies of liberation available in restorative justice practices.

Explicitly teach not only relationship building and restorative justice practices in theory, but also have teacher candidates develop a critical orientation to power dynamics and positionality in schools. Have them examine these systems, show them how to critique them, but most importantly, give them opportunities to create new systems that consistently provide care to their students. The more power educators have due to position and positionality, the more they must practice cultural humility in sustainable ways. Hold them accountable to truly centering youth voices and engage in restorative processes when harm occurs.

For the educators of color you bring into your programs, help them set internal and external boundaries to mitigate burnout. Explicitly teach about moral injury so they can name those experiences when they happen. Consider that perhaps teacher education programs are the first site of potential disruption, and that you have opportunities to create a program that humanizes your teacher candidates and deprograms them from cultures of productivity and urgency.

Dismantle your own oppressive hierarchies and adultist assumptions. Examine where you are centering the youth voice in authentic ways. For example, how often do you bring in students and young people to speak as experts of their own experience?

For Policy Makers and School Districts

Policy makers must divest from the notion that schools are an inherent good, or even that they are a stop on the school-to-prison pipeline. Policymakers at the state and school district levels must critically examine their biases and assumptions to better see how the school-prison nexus shapes educational policies and practices–even in school districts and schools already committed to restorative justice and progressive philosophies. In order to dismantle oppressive structures, we need systemic change.

School districts can invest in comprehensive, culturally responsive restorative justice frameworks that prioritize authentic relationships, trust-building, and youth voice. To avoid feelings of betrayal, they should ensure that the mission, vision, and subsequent allocation of human and financial resources align. In order to be responsive to the needs of the most marginalized, policy makers can create intergenerational feedback loops by continually surveying different demographics and populations within the district about the success of their respective schools. Especially given that participants expressed a tendency to moral injury in restorative justice processes, deliberately seeking out this information through focus groups or empathy interviews may illuminate more insights about RJ implementation throughout a system.

From there, it is important to get specific on expectation clarity–what is the strategic vision for the school system, and how specific does the roadmap get about each entity's role in advancing the work? Furthermore, be mindful of the timeline–are you moving at the speed of productivity, or the speed of trust? Additionally, like the participants of this study, reimagine the metrics to measure trust in the first place. Otherwise, we risk falling into the same old traps under new camouflaged disguises. Without examining these metrics of change, Savannah Shange warns, "wanting to be free becomes wanting to win" (pg. 159). For example, suspension data

alone cannot measure the success of schoolwide restorative justice reform. Policymakers should consider other pieces of data, such as school climate, teacher attrition, and student experiences of socioemotional learning and belonging.

Additionally, it is important to remain consistent in the care provided to each school; Roxanne expressed concern that due to the seeming "success" of her school in mitigating incidents of physical violence and decreasing their referrals, the district would cut funding for the very positions and programs that reduced harm and increased trust in the first place. Allocate resources and support to *sustain* restorative justice work in schools over time, recognizing the ongoing nature of systems change and the need for long-term investment.

For Future Research

This study furthers the work of scholars examining the connection between critical theory and restorative justice, the limitations of restorative justice efforts in the school-prison nexus, and sheds more light on the dimensions of relational and politicized trust for educators of color.

A number of new directions for research emerged from this study: More attention can be paid to future research on the informal qualities of restorative justice practices and processes in schools. Additionally, schoolwide restorative justice research would benefit from longitudinal studies, as "evaluation must account for the timeline of such culture change" (Sandwick et al., 2019). Women of color notably emerged as sources of wisdom for participants, whether they were colleagues, supervisors, partners, or family members. Understanding the experiences of women of color in schoolwide restorative justice processes may lead to meaningful research in the future. I submit too, that further research centering the voices of young people in schoolwide restorative justice efforts will bridge existing research gaps. Additionally, while this study did not set out to examine moral injury for educators of color specifically, there are significant research

and practice implications in better understanding this psychological phenomenon and how it impacts the wellbeing and burnout rates of teachers of color.

I also want to invite researchers at this point to the power of refusing damage-centered research and aspiring instead for desire-based research frameworks, which are "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009). Multiple times throughout the study, research participants expressed joy and gratitude for their participation in the research. A few said near verbatim, "Thanks, this was fun," following their pod-mapping interviews. I received thank you notes at various points throughout the study, as participants felt like the opportunity to reflect on their practice humanized their experiences and moved them from human doing to human beings. As Jose expressed near the end of the community healing circle:

> Even though we are from around The Bay and a couple miles away, I think that we're doing some dope work, and it was super hopeful on our direction in our youth and just their education system in general. But I want to thank you all for being vulnerable, for just putting yourself out there…I really enjoyed the conversation, and if y'all want to do it again, I'm down.

As the researcher in this process, I too really enjoyed the space and every conversation I had the privilege to have with such talented, thoughtful people of deep integrity.

If y'all want to do it again, I'm down.

Strengths and Limitations

The multimodal nature of the study led to rich, multidimensional data illuminating the complex dynamics of what it means to be an educator of color living out restorative justice

values within the confines of the school-prison nexus. Through interviews, pod-mapping, and the community healing circle, this study honored the participant's right to self-determination by affirming their closely-held values in restorative justice work, visually representing their trusted networks through the pod-mapping, and restoring their own sense of dignity in the face of moral injury during the healing circle. The community healing circle also further validated the data through member-checking by sharing preliminary findings with participants, both eliciting further insights while affirming the lived realities of these participants. By focusing on Bay Area restorative justice practitioners of color, this study deepened the work of previous researchers in better understanding the limitations imposed by the Bay's carceral progressivism on restorative justice work.

Of course, as with any research study, there are limitations to the insights generated. For example, while all participants cited the wisdom of women of color when it came to restorative justice work in school, only one woman of color was interviewed. Given that women have been found to express higher levels of moral injury in K-12 education (Sugrue, 2020), more research on the experiences of women of color, moral injury, and trust will illuminate how their insights can inform schoolwide restorative justice reform. This study also did not focus on direct observation of the participants enacting restorative processes in their school; instead, it chose to focus on the reflective aspects of restorative justice work. There are inevitable research limitations due to my positionality, so I hope future researchers will bring in their unique perspectives and fill in the gaps I did my best to keep narrow. However, I would caution researchers with limited experience with being restorative justice practitioners with this labor-intensive methodology. Trust building is messy work; I believe I was lucky and experienced enough in my RJ facilitation to finish this study without issue. Had I or should I

commit any harm to participants or others implicated in this research study, the timeline of this

project would suddenly take on new life. I commit to tending to the emergent needs that arise

from this study should that be the case.

Conclusion

An interviewer once asked Toni Morrison in 2001, "How do you survive whole in a

world where we're all victims of something?" As we reach the end of this project, I find her

answer in its entirety resonant:

> It's a nice big fat philosophical question, about: how do you get through?
>
> Sometimes you don't survive whole, you just survive in part. But the grandeur of
>
> life is that attempt. It's not about that solution. It is about being as fearless as one
>
> can, and behaving as beautifully as one can, under completely impossible
>
> circumstances. It's that, that makes it elegant.

On a personal level, I know very well that we don't always survive whole. Very often, for those

of us who have multiply-marginalized identities, we can only survive in parts. As a survivor of

childhood sexual abuse as well as emotional abuse throughout my adolescence and early

adulthood, sometimes the only way to survive was to disassemble myself, entirely fragmented. In

the aftermath of that fragmentation, I know deep in my own circuitry that Morrison is correct–the

grandeur of life is in the attempt to behave as beautifully as one can under completely impossible

circumstances.

Morrison's words resonate deeply with the experiences and insights shared by the

educators of color in this study. In the face of the impossible circumstances constructed by the

school-prison nexus, these restorative justice practitioners embody the pursuit of beauty,

survival, and endurance. They navigate complex dynamics of trust and betrayal, working

tirelessly to cultivate authentic relationships, center youth voice, and transform their schools into spaces of healing and liberation. Their stories remind us that the work of restorative justice is not about finding perfect solutions but about engaging in the daily, difficult, and necessary labor of building trust, repairing harm, and nurturing the inherent dignity of all members of the school community.

Throughout the study, I found the rich narratives shared by the participants to be deeply compelling. These Bay Area educators of color are surviving, blossoming, and enduring. What is more compelling than that? As we move forward, let us draw inspiration from their example and commit ourselves to the ongoing, collective work of dismantling the school-prison nexus. Let us honor the humanity, agency, and self-determination of our youth. Let us strive, in the words of Morrison, to "do something interesting that [we] respect" in the time we have been given.

I see your shadows on the wall. I hear the echoes of your fragmenting. No one knows the shapes tomorrow holds your gestures toward freedom.

Whatever you try to do, make it gorgeous.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Pod-Mapping Interview Questions

SCHOOL CONTEXT AND VALUES
1. What are 3 of your core values?
2. How do these values show up in your work implementing restorative justice practices?
3. What do you need in schoolwide restorative justice practices for your values to be respected?
4. How do your personal values align or come into conflict with your school values?

BASELINE TRUST ASSESSMENT
1. Do you have any thoughts, comments, or questions regarding the online demographics survey you completed?
2. I'd like to take some time to understand more about your answers to the baseline trust assessment. For [Students/Families/Teachers and Counselors/Administrators/Support Staff], you answered that at the time, you had [No / Fragile / Developing / Stable Trust] with that group. Could you tell me more about why you responded that way?
3. Would you change any of your answers since filling out the survey?
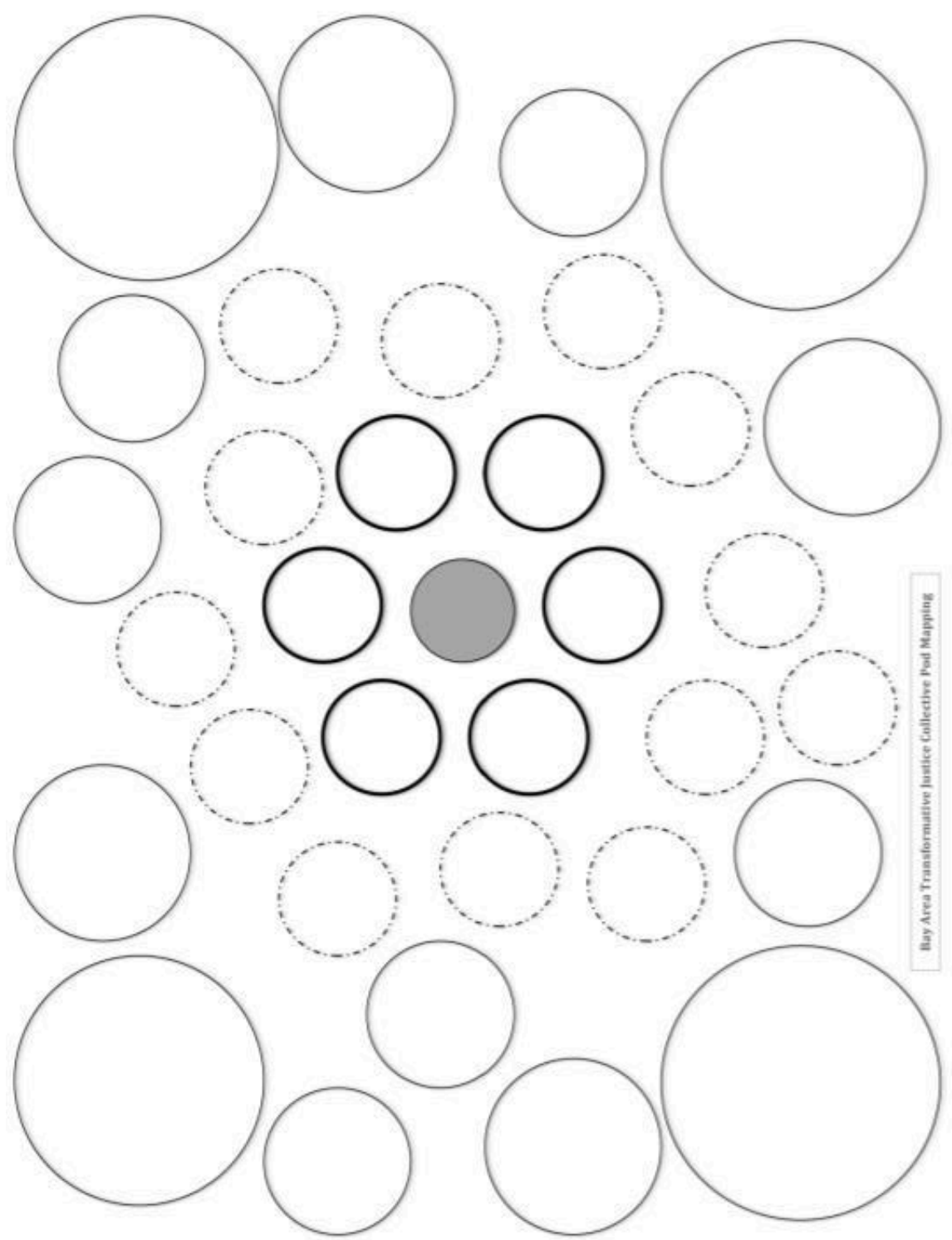
POD-MAPPING
- For the next part of the interview, I would like to get more into the specifics of how you develop and maintain trusting relationships in your school site when implementing restorative justice practices.
- Show them the Pod-Mapping Protocol Instructions and my own completed version of the Pod-Mapping Template.
- Ask them if they'd like time to fill out the pod mapping independently or if they want to talk through it and complete the template together. The guiding questions are as follows:
  - Who holds you accountable in RJ processes? Who will you turn to if you experience conflict or harm? Write those in the circles closest to the middle.
  - Who did you name in the movable circles? Why?
  - What steps would you take next to foster more trust with those in the movable circles?
  - What resources are available to you for RJ processes?

CONCLUSION
1. Provide a brief summary of key points discussed in the interview.
2. Give the interviewee the opportunity to share additional information and any final thoughts on the experience of Bay Area educators of color who implement restorative justice practices in their middle and/or high school.
3. Express gratitude to the interviewee for their valuable insight and significant contributions to research study.
4. Ask if the interviewee is willing to be contacted for further clarification or follow up in the community healing circle. If so, confirm their contact information or ask for their preferred contact details.

Appendix B: Pod-Mapping Template

Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective Pod Mapping

eProtocol » Investigator » Home » Approved Protocols » Details

Protocol ID: 23-09-2019

Principal Investigator: An Phan

Details

Form Type	Submitted Date	Meeting Date	Status	Approval Date	Expiration Date	Comments	View Attachments
NEW	10/24/2023	11/01/2023	APPROVED	11/03/2023	11/02/2026	Comments	View Attachments