

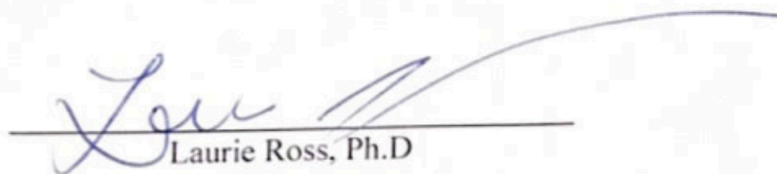
**Exploring Restorative Practices in Urban Community Centers  
and School-Aged Children: A Guide in Harm and Healing for Parental Growth**

Praxis Project Proposal: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,  
and Education Studies at Clark University

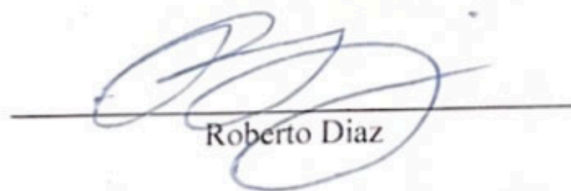
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### **Abstract**

After-school programs exert an unparalleled influence on students, transcending socio-economic barriers and personal circumstances. However, the impact is not unilaterally positive; rather, it hinges on the structure and focus of these programs. While well-designed programs can yield significant benefits, the lack of structure and disruption in afterschool settings can affect student learning outcomes.

In exploring the efficacy of afterschool programs as educational environments, it is important to dissect the negative effects of a disruptive structure. Afterschool settings that do not have clear objectives and supervision may foster an environment full of distractions and disruptions. The absence of structured activities can contribute to a sense of chaos, inhibiting students' ability to focus and engagement. In such environments, students may be more prone to distractions, peer influence, and behavior issues, all of which take away from the intended educational experience. Without proper support systems in place, these students may struggle to access the resources and opportunities available in afterschool programs, perpetuating cycles of inequality.

By acknowledging and addressing the challenges posed by disruptive and non-structured afterschool settings, stakeholders can work towards maximizing the potential of these programs as educational tools. Through thoughtful design and implementation, afterschool programs can become transformative spaces where students from all backgrounds can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

## **Introduction**

### **Juan Rosa**

One summer morning in 2015, Juan Rosa walked into Friendly House's food pantry. After receiving items from the pantry, Ingrid, who is a staff member at the pantry, noticed Juan had taken just a few food items rather than bags of food. Ingrid explained to me she believed Juan may have only taken a few items because he may be homeless, further explaining this was an observation she has seen frequently by the homeless—she asked Juan if he needed any other additional support and Juan expressed that he had not slept well for a few days and needed a place to rest for a few hours. Through further assessment while leaning on her experience, Ingrid determined Juan's eligibility for the Comprehensive Anti-Gang Strategies (CAGS) program at Friendly House; CAGS was an intervention program for at-risk youth. The program's assessment process began with short answer questions. After the assessment, Ingrid shared with me that Juan was very difficult to hear and understand, she explained that he avoided eye contact and spoke with his head down, and seemed defeated. The assessment uncovered that he was chronically homeless, he had fled Puerto Rico to escape gang violence and so he moved in with family here in Worcester. Juan's most recent gang conflict in Puerto Rico was life-threatening and ended in his brother's death. Unfortunately, upon his arrival, the family member that he was going to live with was also a victim of a gang conflict which led to his family member's death. This unexpected change was the ultimate cause of his homelessness.

After the assessment was completed, I began calling homeless shelters and other housing support organizations. The hope and goal was to find a safe place and shelter for Juan. Stabilization was the main goal of the support staff. Finally, after hours of outreach, the

emergency shelter in Worcester was willing to help Juan immediately. Juan was subsequently dropped off at the emergency shelter where he was able to stay the night. After finally getting some much needed rest Juan was just full of life the next day. His eyes were wide open and he spoke with more confidence from the previous day.

The emergency shelter was willing to help him with a bed for a few days. Now that there was some minimal stability, I began the employment seeking process by helping Juan with his resume. After several days of searching, Juan landed a job at a linen factory named Angelica; I felt overjoyed for Juan. Now that he had a source of income it was time to engage in some financial literacy. The next goal I planned for Juan to start a savings account in order to raise the necessary resources that would maintain more permanent housing. However, after several weeks Juan began to show signs of substance use. He would show up to check in with dilated pupils, bloodshot and watery eyes. He was also being more secretive about his whereabouts, a lot more easily irritable, and often disoriented.

After much observation, I uncovered that Juan was using K2, a synthetic form of marijuana. Juan also shared that the substance use began at work with some of his colleagues. I held space and advised Juan on the potential outcomes of not addressing a substance use issue. His substance use began to affect his work performance and he was subsequently fired. After determining that Juan needed more of a support network, I began to search for and subsequently found some of Juan's family in Connecticut. In hopes of getting Juan to a safer space quickly, I purchased a bus ticket for Juan out of my own pocket, so that he could reunite with his family. With Juan now having more stability came a real sense of short-lived relief by staff. Just eight weeks later on a routine follow up call, I was informed that Juan had been a victim of gang violence and had passed away.

Throughout my time with Friendly House I had other similar stories. At the heart of the issue my youth face is a lack of stability and subsequently never being or feeling safe. Through this process I began to ask myself a series of questions. I asked myself, what did the gang life provide for someone like Juan and his older brother? If you were to ask some of my youth why they joined a gang, they may say things like because we grew up together, it's how we make money, get girls, etc. However, when we peel back some of the layers we find that the "gang life" in Worcester is generational. Those who get involved can get a false sense of why they joined. Once you get to know these young people, you begin to understand that they are just looking for an inner circle, a family, stability, but most of all safety.

### **My Journey in Worcester - 2006**

Growing up in Worcester, I faced hardships like Juan, such as homelessness, substance use, gang conflicts and violence. I overcame these hardships, giving me the experiential knowledge to support other youth experiencing these same hardships.

In 2006, I was a freshman at North High School. One of the high school gangs targeted me and I was beaten badly, twice. One of my attackers aimed a gun at me in the school hallway, I was able to get away by running through the hallways and out the building. I ran from North High School to Plumley Village East Apartments, a housing complex about 3 miles away from the school, where I sought refuge in one of my classmates', George's, home. Wanda, George's mother, was a Pastor and I felt safe there. My mother eventually picked me up, but the threatening calls and texts to my phone from my attackers began that day and lasted a week. After that week, I discovered I had been wrongfully targeted due to mistaken rumors, though I never returned to school.

Though it may be perceived I was drowning in despair, there lived a spark of hope inside me that it would all go away. As hardships continued even after leaving high school, the spark of hope transformed into realization that my story wasn't just about what I went through, but about how I faced adversity with all the strength I had. My own journey armed me with a newfound resilience and a deeper understanding of the struggles plaguing the youth in my community; I set out on a journey of self-discovery and advocacy. Each step I took was driven by this burning desire to turn my own hardships into opportunities, to lift up others who were going through similar tough times, and to stand up against the injustices that keep pushing people down in our society.

### **The Years 2006 - 2010**

Amidst the chaos in high school and the uncertainty that came with it, the streets of Worcester became both my battleground and my classroom. Every night spent without a roof over my head taught me something new about resilience and survival. I found a lifeline in organizations like the Worcester Youth Center. Through their support and guidance, I discovered a community of people who were dedicated to helping young individuals like myself navigate through tough times. They provided me with resources and connections to housing assistance programs that eventually led me to secure stable housing. As I settled into my new home, free from the constant worry of where I would sleep each night, I found my mind finally able to focus. With a roof over my head and a newfound sense of stability, I could channel my energy into positive endeavors, such as education, personal growth, and community involvement. The support I received from organizations like the Worcester Youth Center not only provided me with

a place to call home but also paved the way for me to pursue my goals and dreams with renewed determination and purpose.

### **Jay & Rose**

In 2010, my first daughter, Jaylin, was born. She was like a guiding light for me during my times of homelessness. I felt like I wasn't good enough to be a dad because I couldn't provide for her in the way I wanted to, which was with constant love and protection. Not living with their mother, I felt removed from my ability to love and protect her. The constant conflict with her mom made it hard for me to connect with her. I had to watch from afar as she grew up, wishing I could be more involved but not knowing how because of the conflict between her mom and me. Years went by, and in 2014, we had another daughter, Rosalyn; but the conflict didn't stop. Even though I really wanted to fix my relationship with their mother, it seemed impossible due to the constant conflict. My daughters witnessed the arguments causing them early emotional harm. Looking back, I know I didn't have the necessary tools I needed to confront these conflicts.

### **Worcester Youth Center and the VOICES Curriculum**

In 2019, I began working at the Worcester Youth Center (WYC). At WYC, I adapted to working with at-risk and proven-risk youth experiencing homelessness and gang violence. During my work, the organization adopted a curriculum by the Department of Public Health named Valuing Our Insight for Civic Engagement (VOICES). VOICES is a curriculum that incorporates elements of leadership and civic engagement with a series of 6 workshops that complements the ability for participants to discuss their identities, their communities and their



agency to make change as leaders. The six workshops were identities, perceptions & stereotypes, individual power, conflict styles, community power, and advocacy.

Being trained in the curriculum, WYC staff members and myself ran a curriculum at the Nativity School in Worcester. The Nativity School is an all-boys middle school ranging in ages 11-14. Our engagement with the students at Nativity was characterized by enthusiasm, receptiveness, and a shared dedication to learning. Sessions at the Nativity were very well structured and WYC staff had support from the school faculty.

The feedback we received from the students further affirmed the efficacy of our curriculum. Their expressions of enjoyment and the knowledge gained served as a validation of our efforts. Central to the success of our curriculum delivery was its structuring. Each session was thoughtfully organized to maximize engagement and optimize learning outcomes. Through a blend of interactive activities, multimedia presentations, and hands-on exercises, we catered to diverse learning styles and fostered an inclusive learning environment.

### **The Work: 508 Guns-Down Gloves-Up**

During COVID-19, the Worcester Youth Center began to host virtual programs in hopes to keep youth engaged during the pandemic. During my outreach efforts to engage youth, I connected with a young man named Leo Martinez. I spoke with Leo about his goals and ambitions. Through those conversations I learned that Leo was involved in gang activities. Program staff identified Leo as a candidate for the virtual VOICES program. Before Leo could begin engaging in the VOICES programming, Leo was shot in the leg by a rival gang member. Due to the shooting, Leo's leg was struck badly and he remained bedbound for several weeks. In order to stay connected with Leo, I often called him and checked in on him. During our

conversations, Leo would share his desire to avenge the individuals that shot him. This was a vital point in Leo's life where WYC focused on intervening by teaching him how to approach this specific conflict

Leo began to engage in the virtual VOICES programming. During the programming, staff and youth, including Leo, spoke about the five conflict styles mentioned in the VOICES curriculum. After the programming ended, Leo launched a campaign online named 508 Guns-Down Gloves-Up. The purpose of Leo's campaign was to address gang violence through the art of boxing, where rival gang members are able to confront each other in a boxing ring. The effects of the VOICES curriculum in Leo's life were clear.

After much success in my work at WYC, I was searching for new ways, opportunities and ideas to help the youth in Worcester address conflict and overcome violence. I began to have conversations with many community leaders including Laurie Ross, professor at Clark University, to guide me into new practices I can adapt to my work; Laurie advised me to apply to Clark University. I was stunned. I didn't think I would ever be good enough to go to college. Regardless of my doubt, I decided to apply and was accepted. I thought to myself "if I earned a degree, I could be in the high spaces where important decisions are made in my community and potentially have the power to unlock new doors for future Eddy's, Juan Rosa's and Leo's.

### **The Realization**

In my work with Juan Rosa and Leo Martinez, I became aware of the role conflict played in their lives. Reflecting on how Leo managed to overcome challenges, including an incident where he faced gunfire at home, I couldn't help but think: "VOICES works!" The curriculum provided him with the necessary tools to tackle such obstacles. I began to ponder if I could adapt

the skills in the VOICES curriculum, specifically in conflict resolutions, to my personal life, particularly in my relationship with my daughter's mother, if this may indeed be the step in a direction where she and I can begin to get along and become capable of effectively addressing future conflicts.

### **Clark University Praxis**

As I walked down the hallways of Clark University, a wave of sadness washed over me, and I couldn't understand why. After all the battles I had overcome, wasn't I supposed to feel great? Wasn't I supposed to feel like I had "made it" in life? But those thoughts were far from the truth. Observing the different personalities in the hallways, I saw the innocence and ignorance in the young student lives. Was I judging them? Was I jealous of their happiness? Or did I really belong here? These questions haunted me until my second year at Clark when I began to feel accepted and safe within the community. This shift in my feelings during the second semester was a result of my determination to persevere. I received tremendous support from professors Eric DeMeulenaere and Sarah Michaels. They listened to my challenges, validated my feelings, empathized with me, and posed thought-provoking questions both in and out of class. This support encouraged self-reflection and helped me take greater accountability for my growth.

I enrolled in a course called the "Praxis Design." Initially, I had no idea what "praxis" meant, but after some research online, I learned it referred to the practical application of a theory that can measure change. Given the success in past work, specifically with the VOICES curriculum and my personal journey to overcome conflict with my daughters' mom, my goal was to create a praxis project focused on resolving conflict between custodial and noncustodial parents to lessen the emotional harm children experience, when witnessing their parents argue.

After deep thought on how to create such a praxis project, I began to realize the goals of my intended praxis project were too expansive for my time at the university—the efficacy of that praxis project would take years. Instead, I found a different project.

During the Praxis Design class, I built a connection with a classmate, Toby Holt. Toby and I shared a similar interest in conflict resolution. While my focus was on adults, Toby was focused on resolving conflict for children aged 8-13. Having worked with youth aged 14-17 using the VOICES curriculum, I felt this would be a natural extension of my work. Toby and I joined together on a project to bring the VOICES curriculum to the younger children at the YMCA.

Toby works part-time at the YMCA Afterschool Program, supporting children aged 8-13, and he shared that he has identified a need for conflict resolution among the youth. Toby shared that the YMCA children often argued with each other and sometimes had physical altercations; there was harm being done to one another and in the YMCA space. Toby and I connected with the program director, Esmeralda, whom I knew from my previous community work. When we met with Esmeralda, Toby and I explained our intention to bring a praxis project to the afterschool program, focusing on healing relationships among the children Toby had identified as being in conflict. Given Toby's existing employment at YMCA and my already established connection with Esmeralda, she believed the afterschool program would benefit from our project, and we were quickly approved.

### **Project Goals and Inquiries**

For the project, Toby and I developed an activity-based program at the YMCA that engaged youth in conflict resolution. We adopted the VOICES curriculum into the program and

named the program “Code Orange.” We chose the color orange as it is the national color of safety and adding the word ‘code’ felt it may sound appealing to our target youth population.

To create Code Orange, my Toby and I condensed the VOICES curriculum into a six-week youth development program focused on conflict resolution. Our purpose for the program was to improve participants' understanding of different conflict styles and equip them with effective conflict resolution strategies. This included helping youth recognize and manage conflicts constructively. The project goal was to provide knowledge around conflict to youth at the YMCA. I also integrated restorative justice practices into our program. My introduction to this approach came through restorative justice training (later explained in the conceptual framework section) at the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) during my tenure at the Worcester Youth Center in 2019.

Code Orange takes a prevention strategy to conflict resolution, rather than intervention. Our program sought to mitigate potential future conflicts rather than focus on the specific conflicts at hand. Through our project, we sought to give youth the tools to mitigate conflict between themselves, hence preventing future conflicts from escalating.

I hoped to influence youth to support one another throughout the program and continue to work on strengthening my knowledge on best approaches to conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution. Therefore, I focused on the following research question: In what ways was the implementation of conflict resolution skills training for youth ages 9-13 effective in promoting restorative practices, specifically in terms of addressing harm and facilitating healing? I wanted to understand what factors supported and hindered the success of the program that Toby and I developed and ran together.

## **Review of the Literature**

Restorative approaches emphasize repairing harm, restoring relationships, and collectively problem-solving through open dialogue and accountability - in contrast to more punitive disciplinary models (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015).

Studies have shown that this relational, collaborative framework can be highly effective in fostering a sense of community, empowering student voice, and equipping young people with conflict resolution skills (Anyon et al., 2016; Kline, 2016). When implemented thoughtfully, restorative practices create space for honest, vulnerable conversations about harm and its impact, allowing participants to take ownership, make amends, and rebuild trust (Fronius et al., 2019).

By adopting restorative frameworks, after school initiatives can not only address behavioral challenges more effectively, but also empower youth, strengthen interpersonal bonds, and foster the social-emotional skills essential for long-term success (Fronius et al., 2019). As such, this body of research points to the immense potential of restorative practices to transform the culture and impact of youth development programs.

When examining other projects similar to Code Orange, I drew on some outside resources. The approaches in our project are restorative approaches and conflict resolution. These concepts allowed us to make sense of the different areas in our project. Outside perspectives are also necessary in defining these terms for our research project.

Lodi, et al. (2022) conducted a global review of restorative justice practices to analyze the implementation and outcomes of restorative justice and restorative practices in academic settings. The researchers aimed to understand how these practices are applied at different

educational levels and to evaluate their effectiveness in managing conflicts and fostering positive relationships among students and between students and teachers. The outcomes showed that restorative justice and restorative practices, such as restorative circles and peer mediation, did indeed reduce conflicts. The table below illustrates some data from the research which show the effectiveness of restorative practices in educational settings.

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#### Appendix A

**Table A1.** Academic scientific literature excluded from the systematic review ( $n = 15$ ).

First Author, Year	Study Design	Population	Intervention	Comparison	Outcomes
[60]	Quantitative research review (regression analyses, nonparametric models, tests, and analyses of variance) and literature review	US K–12 schools	Restorative justice and restorative practices as an alternative school disciplinary model	traditional school system	Reduction in misconduct (e.g., bullying); less use of exclusionary disciplinary responses (e.g., suspensions, expulsions); less unequal disciplinary treatment; higher school attendance; improvement of the school climate and safety; better academic results
[65]	Theoretical article	School	Restorative justice practices as an instrument of social development	restorative justice practices as an instrument of behavior management practice	Reflections on social development through restorative justice in New Zealand schools
[37]	Theoretical article	School	Restorative justice as a school reform strategy	punitive, exclusionary, and zero-tolerance approaches (e.g., suspensions, expulsions)	Reflections on exclusionary school discipline (ESD) as a question of health justice and on the importance of implementing school restorative justice practices to address ESD
[67]	Systematic literature review of peer-reviewed studies	Elementary, middle and high school students and teachers	Restorative conversations, circles, conferences, and peer mediation	exclusionary and punitive disciplinary policies (i.e., zero-tolerance policies)	Improved social skills (e.g., empathy, awareness, and accountability); prosocial behavior; positive school climate and social relationships between teachers and students and peers; problem-solving strategies; conflict management; reduction in bullying
[68]	Literature review	Elementary, middle, and high schools	Use of picture books to support social and emotional learning via RJ conversations and practices	traditional school system and practices	Improved social skills (e.g., empathy, awareness, and accountability); improved emotional skills, attitudes, academic performance; prosocial and positive behavior and building of safe and engaging classroom communities; positive school climate and social relationships; conflict and behavior management; boosted gender equality and understanding of different individuals and cultures

*Table 1. Summary of academic literature on restorative justice practices in schools reviewed in the study (adapted from <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010096>)*

By focusing on the "Outcomes" column in this table, we can see that the reviewed studies reported significant benefits from implementing restorative justice and restorative practices in schools. These approaches were found to reduce misconduct like bullying, and lead to less use of exclusionary disciplinary responses. Additionally, the studies indicate that restorative practices improved social skills, empathy, and accountability among students. These positive outcomes

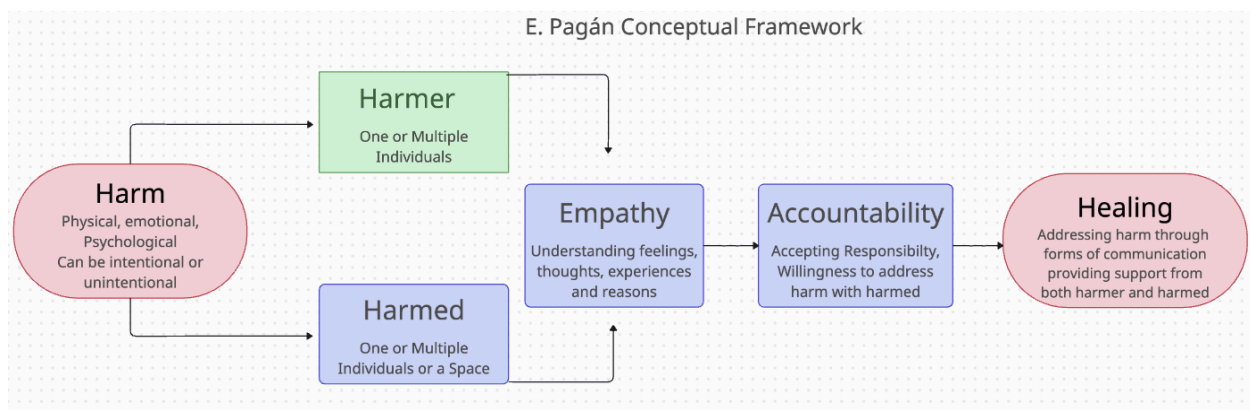
appear to be directly linked to the restorative justice interventions described, which centered on approaches like restorative conversations.

### Conceptual Framework

Working at the Worcester Youth Center was an enlightening journey for me. Under the leadership of the Executive Director, Samuel Martin and the Director of Creative Leadership and Organizational Innovation, Nydia Colon, I underwent deep and insightful training around restorative justice training- where I delved deep into the principles of restorative approaches. These experiences have solidified my belief in the transformative power of restorative practices, which have become the cornerstone of my approach to conflict resolution when working with youth.

Restorative practices offer a holistic strategy for addressing conflicts among individuals. Unlike traditional methods that often focus solely on punishment, restorative practices aim to heal wounds and foster an environment of peace and collaboration. At the core of these practices are the concepts of harm, empathy, accountability, and healing. Each of these elements plays a crucial role in the restorative process, which I have visually constructed in the framework below:

*Restorative Justice Conceptual Framework:*





The first step in the restorative approach is recognizing and understanding the harm caused. This goes beyond physical damage and includes emotional and psychological impacts on all parties involved. Recognizing harm involves actively listening to those affected and validating their experiences. It's about acknowledging that an offense has disrupted not just the individuals involved, but also the broader community. Having harm and harmer as distinct components enables the framework to specifically focus on developing empathy for the harmed individual and fostering accountability in the person responsible for the harm. This helps facilitate the restorative process.

Once harm is acknowledged, the next step is fostering empathy. This involves encouraging the harmer to understand and feel the impact of their actions on others through empathy. Empathy is crucial because it helps to humanize both the victim and the offender, moving beyond the label of "wrongdoer" and towards understanding them as individuals who are capable of growth and change.

With empathy established, accountability becomes meaningful. Accountability in restorative practices means that offenders take responsibility for their actions and their consequences. This isn't about assigning blame, but rather about understanding the effects of one's actions, not just on individuals, but also on the collective, and taking steps to make amends. This can involve direct apologies, restitution, or other forms of reparation that acknowledge the harm done to both harm, harmed, and the space which aims to rebuild trust.

The final and most crucial step is healing. Healing is a collaborative process that involves all parties working together to mend the relationships and restore a sense of community. It's about creating a supportive environment where everyone feels heard, valued, and understood. Healing can only occur when there is a mutual commitment to moving forward and preventing

future harm. This often involves ongoing support, open communication, and community involvement.

At the Worcester Youth Center, I applied these principles by creating spaces where youth could openly discuss conflicts and their impacts, like Leo Martinez's story, for example. Through facilitated discussions and activities with the VOICES curriculum, we worked on building empathy and understanding, holding individuals accountable in a constructive way, and fostering collective healing. The framework I've captured visually above represents this process, emphasizing the interconnectedness of harm, empathy, accountability, and healing. Restorative practices are not just about resolving disputes, they are about transforming lives and communities by addressing the root causes of conflict and promoting a culture of understanding and mutual respect. This approach has proven to be incredibly effective in my work at the Worcester Youth Center, highlighting the potential for positive change when we focus on restoration rather than punishment.

## **Methods**

### **Methodology (co-authored with Toby Holt)**

The methodology we used in our project was practitioner inquiry. Mary Higgins' (2018) piece *Engaging in Practitioner Inquiry in a Professional Development School Internship*, and Marilyn Cochran-Smith & Susan Lytle's (2019) book, *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* give an in-depth explanation of practitioner inquiry and research that we used when considering our methodology. Higgins (2018) describes practitioner inquiry "as the systematic, intentional study by educators of their own practice" (p. 3). Although Higgins' piece is used in a school setting, her definition is still beneficial to our project. In our case, practitioner inquiry is studying the impact that Code Orange had on the members participating in the

program. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2019) assert that practitioner research is “a promising way to conceptualize the critical role of teachers' knowledge and actions in student learning, school change, and educational reform” (p. 5). Cochran-Smith and Lytle also focused on school-based spaces for practitioner research, but the methodology applies the same to out of school programs as well.

In our case, while we are not teachers, we are still the facilitators of our after-school Code Orange program and we are critically examining our role as practitioners. Practitioner inquiry works best for our project because we are implementing something new and my co-facilitator and I are trying to understand what worked well and what could be improved in our project. Since we are actively trying to engage the youth at YMCA in a new program that we are modifying for a younger age group, we must research how the new program affects the members.

### **Site (co-authored with Toby Holt)**

Our praxis site is the YMCA. The clubhouse has both indoor and outdoor features for the youth to use. The outdoor facilities include a basketball court, garden, small playground, track, baseball field and large open field for things like soccer. The indoor facilities include a swimming pool, a basketball gym, a boxing/lifting gym, a cafeteria, a game room, a library, classrooms, a dance studio, and a computer lab.

The participants of the club are primarily youth from the Main South neighborhood in Worcester, which is a low-income community, where many residents live in poverty and the neighborhood historically carries some of the highest crime rates in the city. The members in our project are nine to thirteen years old.

## **Positionality**

As a victim of gang violence I am all too familiar with conflict. Through gang violence, I've experienced trauma, fear, and a sense of powerlessness. These experiences shaped my worldview and my relationship to power. I recognize that I have developed a deep understanding of the consequences of conflict and how it affects individuals and communities.

I've acknowledged and worked through the ways in which my positionality as a victim of gang violence has shaped my perspective and understanding of the world while also recognizing that I have agency and power to effect change in my community. Like those at the YMCA, we share the same community.

While many demographics play a vital role in this project, age is at the forefront. Already having success in addressing conflict with youth aged 14-24, this project allowed me to address a younger population, aged 9-13. This new age allowed me to focus on prevention rather than intervention with the older population. As a former victim of violence and homelessness, my theoretical framework for understanding the world is multifaceted. The social-ecological model recognizes that individual experiences are shaped by multiple levels of influence, including individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors. This model suggests that gang violence is not just an individual issue, but rather a complex social problem that arises from a combination of individual, community, and societal factors.

My experience as a victim of gang violence is not unique and that there are likely others in my community who have had similar experiences; Sharing identities with the youth I work with who are Latino and male, the trauma theory experience may be all too familiar. Connecting with others who have shared experiences can be an empowering way to work towards creating change by addressing ways to approach conflict.

**Participants (co-authored with Toby Holt)**

The participants involved in our action plan are youth aged 9-13 who are members of the YMCA. The children come from a variety of different public schools in Worcester including Abby Kelley Foster Charter School, Woodland Academy, Claremont Academy, The Goddard School of Science, Jacob Hiatt, and others located around the Main South community. When choosing an age group to employ in our project, there were several factors to consider. Firstly, the youth in this age range have a flexible schedule when it comes to picking a structured activity for the day. Secondly, we wanted our participants to start this process at an age where they could both understand the content and be reflective in the activities. This was also the age group that Toby was working with in the capacity of his job.

**Data collection (co-authored with Toby Holt)**

Collecting data for our group involved the follow two sources:

1. Surveys: Surveys were used to gather data on participants' knowledge related to conflict resolution. Surveys were given before and after each session, and another before and after the program. The survey measured the contents effective by asking questions about knowledge and behavior changes.
2. Observations/Field Notes: Observing participants during program activities provided insights into their behavior and interactions with each other. After each session, Toby and I would develop our personal field notes on the events that had occurred during our session. Keeping records of these observations, along with records such as program attendance, and participation, provided useful data on the program's effectiveness. These records also help us tracked changes over time.

## **Data analysis**

We identified the following indicators of success:

1. Increased attendance and participation: If youth are engaged and interested in the program, they are more likely to attend regularly and participate in activities. Tracking attendance and participation rates can be a useful indicator of the program's success.
2. A decrease in the number of conflicts that escalate into physical altercations at the YMCA, an increase in the number of conflicts that are resolved peacefully, and an increase in the number of youth who report feeling confident in their ability to handle conflicts in a positive way.
3. Positive feedback from youth, staff, and other stakeholders: Regular feedback from youth, staff, and other stakeholders can provide valuable insights into the program's effectiveness.

Increased support from parents, volunteers, and community organizations, as well as an increase in the number of youth who report feeling connected to their community.

## **Findings**

### **Code Orange Program Overview**

After the first session of the program, it was evident to us as facilitators that the participants lacked effective conflict resolution skills. Several participants displayed disruptive behaviors and a lack of attention in group sessions. Tapping into our collective knowledge, we concluded that the group did not possess effective conflict resolution skills or abilities. We

believed if we could equip the participants with the conflict resolution strategies, we could address disruptive behavior in our group sessions and perhaps long term at the YMCA

Our approach to addressing conflict involved many methods aimed at equipping the participants to navigate styles effectively. Utilizing the VOICES curriculum, we designed each session to be interactive, engaging and later adjusted the lessons to meet specific needs of the participants. Throughout the 8 weeks, we facilitated a wide array of different activities and lessons focused on conflict styles, communication, and emotional control.

A key pedagogical practice used in multiple sessions was the use of role-playing scenarios during sessions dedicated to exploring the five conflict styles; fight, flight, assertive, dissociate & appease. Participating in such role plays allowed them to gain a comprehensive understanding and practical experience in demonstrating effective responses to conflict. After all participants had a chance to role-play, we facilitated discussions and debriefs which gave all participants a chance to reflect and share insight on their emotions and experience with the activity.

On 2/16/24 and 2/27/24, we focused on activities to promote active listening and effective communication. During these workshops, the participants were able to engage in constructive conversations with peers after engaging in activities designed to promote active listening.

The educational elements of our practical activities were also incorporated to help participants understand how to resolve conflict. On 2/2/24 and 2/24/24, we reviewed the ways people handle conflict. We focused on group conversations where all participants could engage. We engaged in understanding how to handle conflict with the goal of giving participants the skills to make better decisions when dealing with conflict with peers.

We encouraged participants to apply conflict resolution skills outside of the group in real-life situations. Participants were advised to reflect on possible conflict in their daily lives and apply skills learned during sessions next time they encounter similar conflict. With this, we aimed at allowing participants to apply practice and discover a theory of change.

**What Happened:**

Despite thorough planning, the project underwent multiple challenges and alterations due to unforeseen realities which we failed to anticipate. A challenge that became a theme throughout the project was disruptive behavior from several participants. The disruptive behavior deviated planned activities and took away from allowing others to fully engage and become fully affected by the sessions. In addition to the behavioral concerns, other anticipated challenges included conflicting schedules, late arrivals of participants, and constant staff interruptions. These disruptions hindered the implementation of the Code Orange project by derailing sessions and limiting our time for planned activities, affecting the quality of the program.

There were many challenges that did not allow for the project to go as anticipated. Considering the younger age group than I had previously worked with, I had anticipated some engagement challenges amongst the participants. However, the degree of disruptive behavior exceeded my assumptions.

Scheduling conflicts and participant absences added to the complication and the quality of the intended intervention of the program. Though we provided redirections and other forms of efforts to address these challenges, the persistence created roadblocks into achieving our intended outcomes.



## Day One

At the commencement of the program, Toby and I formed a circle with the classroom chairs. As the participants began entering the room, most of them greeted me, as they recognized me from the program's recruitment. As they sat in their chairs, the participants needed a lot of redirection. Bobby and Harrison decided to sit behind the circle of chairs, though after Toby mentioned that participation is required and delays will only delay their ability to eat food provided, they joined the circle. Reflecting on the ultimatum given to Bobby and Harrison, it seemed Toby may have been more directive in his approach than restorative; a restorative approach would start by empathizing with Bobby and Harrison's perspective. It might involve asking questions to understand why they chose to sit behind the circle or why they were initially reluctant to participate. Although Bobby and Harrison joined the circle. A restorative practice could have been applied for Toby and I to be understanding and engage Bobby and Harrison in dialogue to better understand their reluctance. Perhaps the current seating arrangements made him feel uncomfortable with others in the class and inviting them into dialogue would have made them feel included and more engaged.

We waited for about five minutes in the circle for everyone to join from their classrooms, Diana was the last one to join. Toby and I began by introducing ourselves formally as the facilitators of the program and asked all participants to go around and introduce themselves. During the introductions, there was a dispute between Elizabeth and Bobby. After Elizabeth had introduced herself, Bobby said, "Who would name their kid Elizabeth?" in a mocking fashion. This got Elizabeth upset and affected her involvement for the duration of the session. Toby and I did not immediately address this concern, we decided to keep the session going and ignore Bobby's remarks.

Reflecting, Toby and I should have immediately intervened to stop further harm to Elizabeth. Toby and I should have stopped the session to acknowledge the hurtful comment. We should have encouraged Bobby to consider how his words affected Elizabeth and allowed her to express her feelings. This would have fostered empathy and helped Bobby understand the impact of his words, emphasizing the importance of respect in our circle. After addressing the initial harm, promoting healing was crucial. Beginning with an apology from Bobby and giving Elizabeth space to respond would have helped resolve the conflict and restore safety in the group. Reinforcing positive behavior and checking in with Elizabeth afterward would ensure she felt supported. Reflecting on this experience with Toby to identify improvements for future sessions would strengthen our approach to maintaining a respectful and empathetic environment.

Facilitating a dialogue between Bobby and Elizabeth would allow Elizabeth's feelings to become validated, and ensure Bobby identified steps to prevent similar encounters in the future thus repairing the harm done to Elizabeth and begin healing. This incident could have been a powerful teachable moment for our project. By immediately intervening and addressing the hurtful remark, we could have explained the importance of creating a safe, respectful environment. Encouraging Bobby to reflect on how his words affected Elizabeth and allowing her to express her feelings would foster empathy. Guiding Bobby to take responsibility and apologize, followed by a group discussion on respect and accountability, would demonstrate restorative justice principles. This approach would turn the negative incident into a practical lesson on addressing harm and promoting healing, reinforcing the values of empathy, accountability, and community support.

After introductions, Toby and I began reviewing the program objectives. While explaining the overview, the word conflict was mentioned many times, all participants expressed

they did not understand the definition of conflict. A participant asked, “what does that mean?” I responded “What does what mean?” The participant responded “Conflict?” I shared with the participant and the class that we will shortly get into the definition and just remember the word for now. Gerardo in particular consistently expressed he wanted the food and was becoming upset, the remainder of group was beginning to lose focus as one after another asked about food during our overview. As we continued to lose the focus of the group, we noticed the group of boys, Anthony, Bobby, Harrison, Jeremiah, specifically Bobby and Harrison that were resistant to being there and starting to stir up others expressing their desire to go to the gym rather than being in the session. This would have been a great opportunity for either Toby or I to bring the students outside of the room and engage in dialogue to address the resistance and their disruptive behaviors. Not only addressing their behaviors but by empowering them to take ownership of their actions and their role in creating a positive and respectful environment during the session.

Instead of engaging in dialogue, Toby and I decided to ignore Anthony, Bobby, Harrison, Jeremiah's claims and attempted to regain their attention by having all participants stand on their feet to begin an activity called “Switch.” In ignoring their claims I was focused on delivering the content, which was important for Toby and I to better understand the group's knowledge. I instructed the participants to make two straight lines looking at each other. Each participant had another participant facing them. We instructed one line to persuade the opposite participant to switch places without physically touching them. Anthony and Harrison immediately switched. Isadora and Mackenzie mutually agreed to switch. As participants eventually switched, Christina and Franchesca were not switching. Christina asked Franchesca countless times to switch and Franchesca consistently said no verbally and nodded. Christina began to show signs of anger. Christina began to pull on Franchesca though both Toby and I instructed her to stop and

reminded her there was no physical contact. Christina and Franchesca did not switch sides and the activity concluded. I shared with the group why they feel we did this activity and no one had a response. I communicated with the group that this activity was focused on communication. I also told them the easiest thing to do was to switch positions like Anthony and Harrison. Toby and I asked Christina and Franchesca why they chose to not switch, no answer was provided. They looked at us and did not say anything, emotionless and voiceless.

It was evident to me that Franchesca and Christina may not be friends outside of the classroom or maybe they have issues with each other that Toby and I were not aware of. We decided to conclude the session. In reflecting, Toby and I did not follow up with Christina and Franchesca privately to discuss why they did not speak. Maybe they did not have much to say at all, but given the opportunity to provide restorative practice in repairing potential harm between the two, we did not take the opportunity at hand. Toby and I decided to finish the session with the Community Agreements (fig.1). Toby began to lead the session on examples of community agreements. All participants engaged in providing agreements.

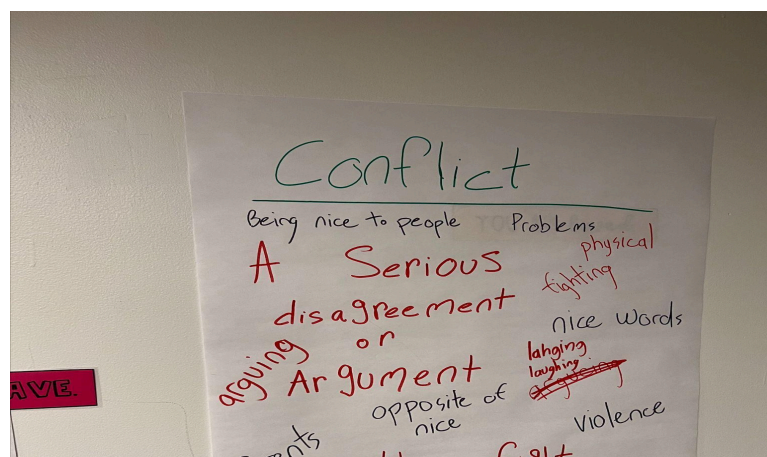
### **Introduction to Conflict**

Toby and I started the session on 2/9/2024 focused on visualizing conflict and our roles in it. Mackenzie was absent from the group. At the start of the session, Anthony, Christina, Harrison, and Jeremiah, were all on their phones. Toby and I asked students to put their phones away and they did.

We put all the seats into a circle again to begin the session. As students came in, Harrison immediately said “I ain’t sitting in a circle, I rather go to the gym.” Toby and I did not engage with Harrison and he eventually came to sit in the circle. As we sat, we began to explain the

program, Elizabeth asked “when do we get to eat?” Gerardo followed with the same question saying “Yeah, I want to eat.” We let the participants know that we will eat once we finish. An unknown peer peeked into the classroom and said “it smells like food, can I have some?” The participants ran to their peers and again we lost focus and engagement as Harrison and Lilliana did not listen to Toby's attempts at redirection. Toby and I spoke with the group and informed them that our group is special and to not let others interrupt. We informed them that allowing others to interrupt will impact our group's focus (which is the harm indicated). We asked the group to revisit our community guidelines and indicated that disruptions were part of our agreements. In reviewing the community guidelines, we began to address the problem and begin repairing the harm done. By identifying the harm, which was the disruption, we went directly into healing by addressing the community guidelines which brought us all back together. Recognizing that empathy was overseen, we did not recognize that misstep until analyzing that data. Toby and I handed out a pre-survey where questions about conflict were listed. Mackenzie and Elizabeth said “I don't know any of these questions,” so I went over to help them. More participants followed with the same statement. Toby said to the group “If you don't know the answer, just take your best guess.” Toby and I continued to support individuals one on one and in small groups explaining the questions and validating their feelings that some questions may be challenging. Wrapping up the surveys, Toby put an expo sheet with the word conflict and asked participants to read the definition that was already stated on the paper and to think about other words alike to add. We encouraged participants to add to the definition so they can begin brainstorming conflict.

The definition already on the paper was, “a serious disagreement or argument.”



While the participants were eating, Toby and I asked “What other words come to mind when you hear the word conflict?” “Fighting”, said Lillianna, “Arguing” continued Lillianna. Christina was the next to share “bullying, nice to people and problems”. Jeremiah and Diana responded with, “being nice to people” and “Violence.”

Toby and I explained to the group the warm-up was about self-control. We introduced the activity by having the members stand in two lines facing each other. Each participant was partnered with another one. Toby stated, “for this activity, we want you to practice keeping your composure, each of you has a partner, when we say 3, 2, 1, turn, you and your partner will turn towards each other and try your hardest not to smile or laugh. The first one to smile or laugh will be out, the game will end when one of you is the final one to not smile or laugh.” Franchesca advanced through every round and won.

An unknown YMCA staff walked in to cut through our room, the kids ran to them to greet them. Again, Toby and I noticed the harm that was done by the disruption as the participants lost focus. Running behind schedule, Toby and I went on from the warm-up activity and did not offer any repair to the disruption. For this activity, we asked each group to share a time where they experienced conflict. My group consisted of Anthony, Diana, Elizabeth, Gerardo, Isadora, Jeremiah, and Katherine; while Toby had the other participants. Harrison expressed discomfort saying he was the only boy in Toby’s group. Bobby joined Toby’s group shortly after so Harrison didn’t mention feeling excluded. I asked my group, “Can you think of a time you have had conflict with someone else in your life? It could be another YMCA member, it could be someone at school or someone different entirely. I’d like you to try and think for a

minute about that conflict. What happened? Who was a part of the conflict? How did you feel? And how did the other person feel?" The members thought for a minute by themselves.

I brought the group back together and asked, "who wants to share the conflict they were thinking of?" Anthony was the first to share, Anthony told a story of time where he saw a fight in school. Anthony says "everyone was running towards them to see who would win." I then asked Anthony, "what did that feel like for you?" Anthony shared that he was nervous and anxious that they would hurt each other "too badly." Anthony didn't want to talk about conflict anymore.

Jeremiah says, "There's always conflict here at the YMCA, kids are always beefing with each other." I asked Jeremiah to share more and he refrained saying "I don't want to share too much and be a snitch." This reluctance to share may be due to existing problems here in the circle, or possibly Jeremiah's fear of judgment from his peers. I reminded Jeremiah that we are a safe space and that anything shared here should remain here as agreed by our community agreements.

An unknown peer came into the room to grab their belongings, I immediately lost Harrison's engagement due to the unknown peer; this harm to the group was becoming a theme all too common.

Refocusing the group, Anthony shared that there is a lot of conflict at home with family. "Me and my sister always argue, she's so annoying," Katherine said, jumping in. I asked Katherine, "What do you usually do when she becomes annoying?" Katherine replied "Sometimes we argue, sometimes I ignore her."

There was no more participation from others in the group and Toby and I agreed to bring the two groups together as one to share how the experience of sharing their recent conflict was. Toby asked, "How was sharing your conflicts?" Diana said it was good. I asked others to share if

they were comfortable. They were reluctant to share. Toby asked, “Were the conflicts in your group mostly about experiences with your friends or people your age?” The participants shared that their experiences weren’t exclusively with people their age. Some participants shared that their conflicts were with YMCA staff and with parents. The group was rambunctious at this point because there were only five minutes left. Three participants were continuously laughing for the duration. Toby expressed that most conflicts have two sides to them; both the participant and the person they had a conflict with had different perspectives when it came to the conflict.

### **Five Conflict Styles**

I arrived a few minutes early to the session on 2/16/2024 to put up expo posters in the room. Each poster listed the five conflict styles listed in the VOICES curriculum, individually. As the students entered the classroom, I noticed the census was low. Participants Anthony, Bobby, Christina, Isadora, Jeremiah, Lillianna, and Katherine were in attendance. Franchesca asked me “Why is there a poster on the TV”? I told them the poster as part of an exercise we will be doing later in the session. We began the session with food; Toby and I discovered that providing the food at the beginning of the session resulted in less disruptive behavior. We began to review our community agreements and the definition of conflict; Jeremiah read the definition aloud. Most of the participants began to give examples of conflict as they were becoming familiar with the definition. Toby and I shifted to the activity for the day named “famous” names. We explained that the purpose of this activity was to promote communication. Each participant was given an index card and was instructed to write down a famous name. The index cards were then shuffled and distributed to all participants and they were told to not look at their given index cards and place it on their forehead. An unknown participant and YMCA staff came in due to being dismissed and grabbed their belongings, some of the participants lost engagement though



we were able to quickly refocus. This harm became inevitable as we were in a space where other program members kept their belongings during our sessions.

During the disruption, we noticed Anthony and Jeremiah looked at their cards prematurely and were disqualified from sharing their index cards. Anthony stated “I can’t help it, I am too curious. I took a step back and realized that Anthony was excited and engaged. To help repair the harm of being disqualified which could have potentially caused Anthony embarrassment, I validated Anthony’s feelings and told him that the game is very exciting and I understand why he would look and made sure he felt included by starting a second round with a smaller group.

Isadora couldn't guess their index card which read “Lebron James,” while Katherine was able to guess theirs, which read “Bad Bunny.” Although Jeremiah was disqualified from sharing their index card, Jeremiah was engaged in the activity and asked many questions. The activity concluded and we shared with the students that we will be moving into our focused subject, conflict styles.

Toby and I explained that all the posters in the room gave an example on how individuals react to conflict. We asked each participant to walk around the room and read each conflict style and its associated definition. We asked each participant to become familiar with each term as much as possible and stand near the poster that they most identified with, familiarize themselves with each style, and then engaged in a group discussion.. Participants were asked to choose the style they most identified with, Anthony, Christina, and Jeremiah chose "Fight,"(Figure 3) while Isadora, Katherine, and Lillianna chose "Dissociate." (Figure 4) Toby and I identified with "Assertive." Toby and I went around and asked each group to explain why they chose the conflict style. "We chose to fight because it's important to stand up for yourself," explained Christina.

"Dissociate seemed like the best option for us because we prefer to avoid conflict altogether," said Lillianna. Everyone allowed others to share without interruptions which was a sign for me that they are beginning to respect the community agreements.

### **Conflict Styles: Part Two**

On Feb 20th Anthony, Christina, Diana, Elizabeth, Gerardo, Harrison, Katherine and Lillianna; Bobby, Franchesca, Isadora and Lillianna were absent. There were delays due to participants wanting to stay in their previous activity, which included basketball and swimming. Due to this, the session began about 15 minutes later than scheduled. We proceeded to commence the session with the same routine with dinner being first. During dinner, Harrison repeatedly said, "I want to go to the gym, please." Harrison repeated this about 10 times during dinner. Toby and I consistently let Harrison know it is not time for the gym and that his participation is encouraged. As we wrapped up dinner we began to review our community agreements with Christina and Diana volunteering to read off the definition of the poster; this was a moment where I recognized Christina and Diana felt a sense of belonging. Jeremiah then quickly volunteered to read the list of examples on the conflict poster. Jeremiah's participation also gave a sense of belonging and trust within the group.

Unknown participants came into the room after smelling food and asked if they could have some, I informed them this is a closed group and closed the room door. Christina, Diana, and Elizabeth asked, “can we do the conflict styles thing, again?” Toby informed the class that we will be reviewing conflict styles again just like the previous session. Katherine, Gerardo, and Lillianna said they don’t want to do that again and prefer something else. Harrison then asked again, “Can I just go to the gym please,” in a very loud voice. We reminded Harrison that this time is dedicated to the group and he can have gym time during his next scheduled time.

“Now guys, please go back to the conflict style you chose during our last session,” I stated. In the Flight group, which included Gerardo, Katherine, and Lillianna, participants collectively shared that avoiding arguments was their favorite way to handle disagreements. Lillianna mentioned “I like to avoid arguments altogether because it's better.” Harrison continued to repeat, “I want to go to the gym, please.” I decided to pull Harrison aside and explained to him that his constant disruptions affect the group. In order to instill a sense of belonging, I asked Harrison if there is any other alternative that will keep him in the room mildly engaged, Harrison let me know there's nothing else he would rather do than go to the gym. I realized Harrison was not going to give into participating so I advised him to go speak with the center director if he strongly feels dissatisfied with our session today. Harrison proceeded to the center director and did not return for the rest of the session.

Going back into the classroom, I went over to the fight group. I asked participants two key questions: "Would you use this conflict style with a police officer?, "Would you use this conflict style with your mom?" Diana responded “I don’t want to get into an argument because I see my mother as a kind person.” An unknown YMCA staff came into the room to cut through to

another YMCA room, the group lost focus and were speaking to the staff. We were reaching the end of the session so we decided to wrap up.

### **Managing Conflict**

With the commencement of this session, Toby reviewed the community agreements and conflict definition sheet. The participants engaged with Jeremiah and Lillianna showing profound understanding. Toby shifted to the warm-up activity. Toby instructed every participant to stand by a crayon laid out on the floor; the crayons acted as spots for the activity. Toby started in the middle with the participants around him and said, “Never have I ever attended the YMCA.” Toby then said “If you have done the thing I said, you need to find a new spot in the circle.” Toby told the group, “the last one who doesn’t get a spot is stuck in the middle and needs to say another prompt.” Toby did this activity for about six minutes and then the pizza arrived at the front desk. Toby stopped the warm-up and had the kids line up for dinner. While the participants were eating, Toby put the conflict-style definition sheets up in a line where they could see. Toby asked the group to look over the definitions for a minute. After a minute, Toby refreshed the group on the definitions as fast as he could to keep their attention. During the middle of their eating time, Toby informed the group that there were only two sessions left of the program. Toby thanked them for all they had shared and done as a group so far. As eating time came to an end, Toby explained the next activity they were going to do.

For the main conflict resolution activity, Toby conducted roleplay scenarios using the conflict styles. The scenario we focused on was someone taking a crayon from someone else which he demonstrated with Gerardo. The participants watched while standing and sitting across

the room. Toby had Gerardo demonstrate the fight conflict style while Toby demonstrated a flight response.

In the demonstration Gerardo took the crayon from Toby and Toby asked quietly and conservatively, “could you please give me the crayon back?” Gerardo yelled, “No!” Toby shifted his body language backward moving away from Gerardo and said softly “Okay, could I please have it back?” Gerardo said, “No, it’s my crayon!” Toby moved backward again and started to move away from Gerardo. The other participants were laughing during the scenario. Shifting into a debrief, Toby asked the group about what they noticed from the roleplay. Lillianna said, “you looked scared.” I asked them to partner up or make a group of three and use the same scenario with one person using fight conflict style, and one person using the appease conflict style.

As the participants moved into their groups the focus became limited. Diana and Elizabeth were partnered, Elizabeth was the appease style and Diana was fighting. Diana took the crayon from Elizabeth and Elizabeth quickly and laughingly asked for the crayon back. Diana yelled “no,” loudly. Elizabeth didn’t know what to do next.

Bobby, Harrison, Jeremiah and Dariel were all in a group; their group struggled with getting started with the roleplay. Toby brought the group back and picked Harrison to do the next roleplay, this time with Toby. Toby explained they were going to do a fight-fight roleplay using the same crayon scenario. Harrison took the crayon from Toby and Toby yelled, “Why did you do that?! Give me my crayon back!” Harrison yelled back, “No! I want it.” Toby said, “But that’s my crayon! I want it! Give it to me!” Harrison again yelled, “No, I’m not giving it to you.” Toby went back and forth a few more times saying similar things and then ended the roleplay. Most of the group that wasn’t involved in the roleplay were laughing. Toby moved on to another scenario. Toby asked the group if anyone else wanted to do the scenario of the fight-conflict style

and the assertive conflict style. Elizabeth chose to use the fight-conflict style for the scenario. I asked if anyone would use the assertive style and no one wanted to so Toby did the scenario again. Elizabeth was smiling and took the crayon from Toby. Toby said calmly, “Can I please have the crayon back?” Elizabeth said, “No, it’s mine,” while slightly chuckling. Toby responded with, “Elizabeth, I understand that you want the crayon, but I was using it and you took it from me, could you please give it back?” Elizabeth again replied, “No, I want it! I’m not going to give it to you.” Toby responded back, “How are we going to make both of us happy with this outcome? We both want the crayon so how are we going to get what we want?” I told Elizabeth we should find a way to meet in the middle and that next session will look at what compromise looks like.

The activity showed the participants actual examples of how these conflict styles could be used in everyday life. Thus far, we haven’t shown or used real-life examples of these conflict styles. This activity also puts the participants in a somewhat unfamiliar place. They may have used one or two of the conflict styles, but it had them practice using the other conflict styles.

During this session, there were many disruptions from unknown YMCA staff and other outside peers that constantly interrupted, standing by the door asking for food, using the room as a passage through another room which regularly caused a loss of focus and engagement at different points of the session.

### **The Last Day**

On February 27, 2024, before the commencement of the session, Toby informed me of the absence of Bobby and Harrison. Both participants decided to opt-out of the session to join outdoor activities; Gerardo also opted out and chose a gym activity. After reviewing the community agreements and the definition of conflict, Toby informed the participants that this

session will delve into the activities and discussions that transpired during the previous session of managing conflict with demonstrations and reflections.

Participants engaged in conflict resolution demonstrations, primarily focusing on the "fight" conflict style. Through role-playing exercises, pairs like Elizabeth and Franchesca, as well as Lillianna and Christina, showcased their understanding of this style. Debriefing sessions allowed for dialogue and reflections. Toby and I participated in a conflict resolution demonstration, exemplifying various conflict styles such as fight, dissociation, and assertiveness.

Despite the serious topic of conflict resolution, the session maintained a lighthearted atmosphere, with participants often in a laughing mood. This positive environment encouraged active engagement and facilitated open dialogue throughout the session

On our final session, we stocked up on extra food, including mini-donuts, to mark the occasion with a celebratory vibe. The agenda for the day involved indulging in snacks, filling out post-surveys, and conducting a project review. Attending were participants Anthony, Bobby, Christina, Diana, Elizabeth, Franchesca, Harrison, and Jeremiah. Initially, everyone grabbed their food and settled around the room to begin eating. Once we finished eating, I gathered everyone into a circle to commence our planned activities. However, the group, particularly the boys, were still in high spirits, laughing and chatting animatedly from their mealtime banter. Sensing the energy might be too lively for a focused discussion, my colleague Toby and I made the decision to expedite the post-survey process and conclude the session earlier than planned. The unusually warm winter weather enticed the participants to spend their remaining time outdoors. Wrapping up, we treated ourselves to donuts and took the opportunity to touch base with each participant individually before parting ways.

In analyzing, the survey results revealed that many participants did seem to absorb key lessons, as evidenced by improved understanding of conflict styles, listening skills, and strategies for resolving disputes constructively in the post-survey comparisons. While the sample size was small, making broad generalizations difficult, the surveys provided a useful quantitative complement to our qualitative observations. The surveys suggested that despite engagement challenges, many participants were absorbing the intended messages about managing conflicts positively. The surveys also offer reassurance that consistent disruptions amongst the participants and from external factors such as unwarranted visits from outside program staff and peers, the disruptions did not completely affect the program lessons.

I believe highlighting the knowledge gained through the pre and post surveys lends hope that with more structure, after school programs show promise as platforms for imparting social-emotional skills when designed and supported properly.

In Figure 7 depicted below, a notable transformation is observed in a particular participant. Initially, during the pre-survey, the participant opted not to respond to any inquiries. However, upon completion of the program, the post-survey indicates a comprehensive engagement, with the participant providing responses across all sections, demonstrating marked progress. Noteworthy advancements include the participant's enhanced comprehension of conflict, adeptness in maintaining composure when talking, proficient in identifying all five conflict styles, application of skills outside of the group setting, and a self rating of 4 out of 5 in confidence pertaining to conflict management.

In Figure 8 four participants mentioned they're using the skills they learned outside of the group. These same participants answered 'No' when asked if they knew the definition of conflict in the pre survey. This highlights how they've gained valuable knowledge.



The data clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the conceptual framework of a restorative approach centered around harm, empathy, accountability, and healing. Initially, none of the participants knew the definition of conflict, indicating a lack of fundamental understanding and awareness. However, by the end of the program, all four participants reported using the skills they learned outside of the group setting. This significant transformation highlights how the restorative approach fostered a deeper comprehension of conflict, cultivated empathy, and encouraged accountability for their actions. Moreover, the participants' ability to apply these skills in real-world scenarios further showcases the healing and personal growth facilitated by this framework.

### **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the interconnected stories of Juan Rosa, Leo Martinez, and my own struggles with violence and homelessness, it becomes clear that the root of many hardships lies in a lack of stability and safety. Juan Rosa's journey, from fleeing gang violence in Puerto Rico to facing homelessness and substance use in Worcester, tragically ended in his untimely death due to gang violence. His story mirrors the reality of many youth in our community who are caught in cycles of instability and danger.

Similarly, Leo Martinez's involvement in gang activities and subsequent injury highlight the critical need for continuous support and intervention. Despite his initial resistance, persistent engagement and the introduction of structured programs like VOICES can provide a pathway to resilience and positive change.

My own experiences of being targeted by gangs in high school, struggling with homelessness, and ultimately finding support through community organizations such as the Worcester Youth Center, have equipped me with a deep understanding and empathy. These experiences have driven me to transform personal hardship into advocacy and support for others facing similar challenges.

The findings from the program, particularly the significant transformation observed in participants' understanding and handling of conflict, validate the effectiveness of a restorative approach. Initially, participants lacked a fundamental understanding of conflict and its implications. By the end of the program, they not only grasped these concepts but also applied them in real-world scenarios, showcasing the profound impact of restorative practices on their personal growth and ability to heal from past harms.

By integrating personal experiences with structured, supportive frameworks, we can create environments where youth like Juan and Leo—and even those with experiences similar to mine—can find empathy, accountability and healing.

## **Closing**

When we focus on non-traditional educational spaces like after-school programs, we begin to see the transformative potential they hold in addressing the gaps left by traditional schools. These programs are not just about extending the school day; they are about creating environments where young people can develop critical life skills that help them navigate the complexities of their lives.

Reflecting on the stories of Juan Rosa and Leo Martinez, alongside my own struggles with violence, homelessness, and the challenges faced by my daughter's mother, it is evident that we need more than just academic knowledge. We need spaces where we can feel safe, supported, and empowered to overcome personal and social challenges. Juan's tragic end and Leo's ongoing success highlight the urgent need for continuous and compassionate support. My own journey from instability to advocacy shows the transformative power of such support.

After-school programs, when designed with intention and care, offer a unique opportunity to teach conflict resolution skills often overlooked in traditional settings. These programs can act as sanctuaries where youth learn to process their emotions, develop resilience, and envision a positive future.

However, the effectiveness of these programs depends on our collective commitment. Teachers, leaders, parents, and community members must collaborate to create and sustain after-school spaces that are rich in learning and growth opportunities. By integrating restorative practices, we can address conflicts constructively, promoting healing and personal development. Unfortunately, while the director supported the Code Orange Program, the YMCA's the larger afterschool's infrastructure was not recalibrated to accommodate such a distinctive program. This meant that we encountered numerous disruptions from adults and youth who entered the space to see what was happening, collect items stored in our classroom, or use our classroom space as a cut through. If the overall structures of the afterschool program were more conducive the serious nature of our program we would have likely been more effective.

Reflecting on Toby's and my facilitation of the program In retrospect, there are several things we could have done differently to better support and retain students like Harrison who ended up disengaging from the program. First and foremost, we needed to place a greater

emphasis on building genuine, personalized relationships with each participant. Rather than solely focusing on the structured activities, we should have dedicated more one-on-one time to understand Harrison's unique needs, interests, and challenges. By taking a more holistic, participant-centered approach, we may have been able to tailor the program content and support systems to better meet his individual requirements.

We also see now that our program design was perhaps too rigidly structured, leaving little room for flexibility and student-driven activities. By incorporating more unstructured, youth-led components - where the participants had the freedom to explore their own interests and ideas - we may have been better able to cater to Harrison's needs and learning style. Creating that balance between guided instruction and autonomous exploration could have made the program more appealing and meaningful for students who were at risk of disengaging.

Ultimately, the loss of participants like Harrison is a humbling lesson that we must apply moving forward. Fostering true, lasting engagement requires a holistic, participant-centered approach - one that prioritizes relationship-building, inclusive community dynamics, and responsive program design. While we are proud of the positive impact the program did have, these are the areas we will focus on strengthening to ensure we are effectively reaching and supporting all the young people who need us most.

In conclusion, let's work together to ensure these programs not only exist but thrive, fostering creativity, curiosity, and resilience in our youth. By doing so, we demonstrate our dedication to raising a generation of leaders and thinkers capable of making our world a better place.

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