Building Community Trust and Breaking Free of Punitive Punishment Cycles: Introducing and Facilitating Restorative Justice Practices for Millard Fillmore Elementary's 5th-Grade Classes

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

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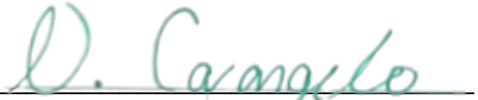

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Abstract:

This project examined the ways Restorative Justice Practices can be used as a method to build trust and healthy relationships amongst a cohort of 5th-grade students. Restorative Justice Practices, in conjunction with building trust, provide a way to handle conflict in a collaborative and dialogue-based way, rather than physical or verbal violence. Trust also arms students with the skills and community building necessary to prevent conflict before it occurs. Since Restorative Practices are typically offered in secondary schools, students of this age group often aren't frequently offered the opportunity to learn about these practices, and I wanted these lessons to be a way for young students to be taught healthy conflict resolution skills. To conduct the project, I ran eight weeks of restorative practice lessons with two 5th-grade classes at an urban elementary school in New England focusing on teaching students new methods for problem-solving and conflict resolution. Twice during the course of the eight weeks, I interviewed the two teachers in order to see what improvements the class displayed outside of my weekly class period. This project offers new ways that trust can lead to problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, and can be taught and enacted in an elementary school setting.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank everyone on my reading committee for their work in helping me to revise my thesis, further my understanding, and build my ideas; this project would not look like what it does without their guidance, wisdom, and support. I would also like to specially thank Eric for all the work he did as my advisor. I could always count on him to point me in the right direction and be a person off whom I could bounce ideas and discuss my thoughts. I also could not have done this project without the graciousness afforded to me by Mackenzie and Danielle; they opened their classrooms up to me, and trusted me enough to hand over the reins, and for that I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank the rest of my CYES cohort! I learned so much from all of you, and I really think we built a rich, thriving community in the cohort these past three semesters. I want to specially thank Lily and Xea from the cohort, my accountability group. They were with me every step of the way to grant me the space I needed to vent or affirm that I was not alone in this process. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for all their support; I could always count on a phone call to them to make me feel better or discuss ideas. My mother has worked in equitable, socially just public schooling for her whole career, and now specifically in restorative justice. I have been inspired by her work for my whole life, and her career and teachings are the inspiration for this project; I could not have done all of this without her guidance and resources.

In its totality, I want to dedicate this thesis to commemorate the late Ira Coleman-Palansky. I met Ira as the program and music director of Camp Kinderland, a socialist secular Jewish summer camp that I attended, and now work at as a counselor. I have always seen

Ira as a mentor of mine when it comes to youth work and social justice, and his teachings and philosophies are what first inspired me to really be interested in this career path. I wish I could've told him that. He spent his life preaching joy, kindness, and compassion, and it is our duty, as mentees of his, to try to live up to his teachings and his ideologies. I have no doubt in my mind that if everyone followed Ira's teachings, the world would be the *Ganeydn*[1] that he made Camp Kinderland for me and countless generations of campers and youth workers.

[1] Yiddish for Heaven, or more specifically, "Garden of Eden."

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Introduction:

My friend, Michael, was never allowed to play soccer with us in elementary school; the kid who owned the ball didn't think Michael was good enough – though, as I've grown older, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that Michael was Black in a school in which he was in the vast minority. I really liked Michael, and I was upset that he was barred from playing soccer during recess, even though I was allowed to play. At that time, I had just become a Peer Mediator at my school, and I thought I might lend a hand to the situation. I established a dialogue where I explained the harm that Owen – the owner of the ball – was doing to Michael, and how our school prides itself on being an environment where people don't feel excluded. I asked him why he believed that Michael playing would take away from the enjoyment of the other kids. Did a marginally worse player joining the fun diminish the skill level of those better than us? I used the term "us" because I was also a sub-par soccer player by Brooklyn recess standards. We talked it over for a matter of minutes, and Michael was allowed to play indefinitely after that. He was horrible at soccer, but that was okay. We had done exactly what the Peer Mediation was supposed to do: We solved our problems dialogically and came to the resolution that brought justice to the situation.

I didn't know it at the time, but that fourth-grade interaction was my first experience with Restorative Justice practices. One of the foundational principles of Restorative Justice is "collaborative problem solving," a way of addressing conflict with the help of a group through our words and open dialogue. We didn't necessarily have a group to help us talk through it, but the three of us used dialogue together to address our issue. At home, my parents taught my

siblings and me to address our problems with words, and I translated that lesson to mediate a peer conflict on the soccer field. Resolving conflict is one of the things restorative practices (RPs) are designed to do: The students who learn conflict mediation through RPs in the classroom can utilize these skills in every aspect of life and use the lessons to solve their conflicts through words and conversations. Too often, schools don't explicitly teach this skill, and it falls onto the shoulders of the parents or guardians to instill these values in their students; the failure to do so leads to a generation of kids who don't have problem-solving skills to use in the real world. Think about how often in daily life we encounter conflicts or a problem that needs solving on a day-to-day basis; even something as small as a coworker leaving their mugs in the office sink. Without learning healthy conflict resolution skills at a young age, it becomes harder to translate those skills into the adult world. If we were to hit our coworkers the next time they left their dishes in the sink, we would be fired, and would have to deal with ramifications throughout our lives. Students in elementary schools are in the perfect developmental stage to learn new skills, and apply them in their regular social interactions; teaching students healthy methods of conflict resolution in 5th grade will help them in every stage of their future lives. Looking back at the Michael story, all of the students involved in that resolution saw the power of dialogue, and we all witnessed a positive outcome from it; these are strategies we, hopefully, carried with us the rest of our lives.

Therefore, to bridge the gap in conflict mediation training for about forty 5th graders, I introduced and facilitated restorative practices at Millard Fillmore Elementary[2], an elementary school in a midsized Massachusetts city. The goal of this project was to build an atmosphere in

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

the classroom that is a caring, cohesive community, built around principles of community support and helping your fellow community members. My RPs taught students healthy ways to deal with conflict. We did this through learning about collaborative-problem solving, a way of dealing with conflict as a community through mediation and dialogue-based resolution skills.

To implement this project, I taught lessons, once a week, for eight weeks, teaching the students the practices of Restorative Justice. The lessons linked these practices to structured conversations on community, healthy conflict, and problem solving. I wanted to address the following questions: How can RPs build a supportive, trusting, community in the classroom? How do RPs enable students to learn about productive and healthy dialogue between peers? How do RPs prepare students with new methods of dialogue-based conflict resolution?

Literature Review

Discipline Furthering the "School to Prison Pipeline"

In Education and Sociology, a concept exists called the "School to Prison Pipeline." The Center for Juvenile Justice argues that "the 'school-to-prison pipeline' is, in reality, two pipelines that combine to drive students out of the classroom, away from a pathway to success, and towards or into the juvenile or criminal justice system" (CfJJ, n.d, p. 1). The CfJJ goes on to mention how removing students from schools for disciplinary infractions makes them statistically more likely to find themselves in the criminal/juvenile justice system. However, this pipeline doesn't exist indiscriminately: Black students are four times more likely to receive out-of-school suspension than white students (Darling-Hammond, 2023, p. 3). This disparity in

discipline furthers the cycles of the pipeline, with out of school punishment directly correlating to “higher rates of dropouts and involvement in juvy systems” among Black students (Morris & Perry, 2016, p. 4). Not only does out of school punishment lead to higher levels of youth incarceration, but “Researchers have found that… suspensions alone explain 20% of the Black-White academic achievement gap and that students suspended just one time are twice as likely to drop out of school, 44% less likely to graduate, and 49% less likely to attend a post-secondary institution” (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2020, p. 296). Punishment structures in schools, as we have them now, reinforce cycles of youth falling into the criminal justice system. Punishment deters students from wanting to continue with school, and they start to think that there is no way to escape that oppressive cycle.

Restorative Justice Practices Disrupting School to Prison Pipeline

Restorative Justice Practices (RJPs) are punishment alternatives that are predicated on being the antithesis to out of school punishment; because of this, RJPs are designed to break the cycles of the “School to Prison Pipeline.” Supporters of RJPs understand that these practices will undo the cycles of disciplinary practices that will lead to harmful and destructive consequences for the students (Losen, 2015). In their *Fostering Belonging* piece, Roderick, et al. (2023) pose the question, “How can schools both reduce exclusionary discipline and ameliorate racial disparities in its use?” (p. V). The answer that the authors provide is by implementing restorative practices, aimed “to inculcate conflict resolution skills and strengthen community bonds” and “to resolve conflicts and repair relationships” (p. v). Restorative Justice is a way to disrupt the disciplinary punishment paradigms that exist in school today; they focus more on teaching

healthy behavior and decision making, rather than punishment. On top of this, Restorative Justice creates “human beings [that] are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior” (High, 2017, p. 529-530). As stated in the above section, punitive discipline doesn’t deter bad behavior, it just enforces the School to Prison Pipeline (D’Orio, 2023, paragraph 5). Restorative Justice, however, is a tool to break these cycles and stop the trajectory towards youth incarceration. Restorative Justice changes the way that punishment is viewed in schools, and prevents students from being pulled out of the classroom – thus, diminishing the chances students have of getting caught up in juvenile justice systems. It teaches conflict resolution skills, so violence doesn’t become the students’ solution, and there isn’t suspension for violent acts. It also arms students with ways to stop conflict before it ends up happening or escalating.

Success of Restorative Justice Practices

Restorative Practices have been documented to work in schools which have implemented them. A K-12 school district in Pittsburg, PA “estimated that RJ implementation caused a 16% reduction in days lost to suspensions, which was statistically significant ($p < .05$). The reported reduction in suspension days was statistically significant among certain student subgroups, including Black, low-income, female, and special needs students” (Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2020, p. 299). Restorative practices reduce rates of suspension among students, and thus, weakens the School to Prison Pipeline. Restorative justice works for reducing rates of bullying. Acosta et al. (2019) did a study on how implementing RPs in a school district in Maine would impact bullying, and discovered that, “students who reported that their teachers used more

restorative practices experienced statistically significantly less physical bullying ($p < .01$) and statistically significantly less cyber bullying ($p < .001$). More restorative practices also predicted less emotional bullying" (paragraph 1). The Morningside Center has their own restorative practice curriculum, called the 4Rs, that they've implemented in schools across New York City. They found that,

> Students in the 4Rs schools were less aggressive, less hyperactive, and saw their social world as less hostile than their peers in non-4Rs schools. They were happier and more likely to resolve interpersonal problems competently. Students judged to be at greatest behavioral risk by their teachers had better attendance than their counterparts in the control schools and made better academic progress as rated by teachers. They also did better on standardized tests. In addition, independent observers found significantly higher levels of overall classroom quality in 4Rs schools. (Jones, et. al., 2011, paragraph 4).

Restorative practices work. They work to diminish accomplishment gaps based on race and class. They work to diminish bullying; they work to boost community identity in the classroom and school, overall. Schools that implement RPs have statistically lower rates of suspension and expulsion. But it requires training to have these results. When schools purchase RP curriculum, it is often required that the institution also purchases the training that goes along with the lessons, so there is a greater chance of seeing these successes.

Conceptual Framework

Restorative Practices Build Trust and Relationships

Restorative Practices (RPs) are a multifaceted educational framework that can take many shapes and sizes; too often, educators and facilitators of the Practices only focus on its use as a way of mediating conflict. Granted, conflict mediation is a major part of what RPs can achieve, but any understanding of the Practices as solely Circles, Talking Pieces, and mediation is a reductive outlook, and doesn't honor the true power of Restorative Practices. According to the Morningside Center (MSC, 2019), RPs are "a set of processes and tools that help us create a caring school community and keep that community whole. The premise is that people and relationships are valued first and foremost." (p. 1). I have understood Restorative Practices to be about building trust and repairing bonds between members of the community. Trust is a force ingrained in Restorative Practices; the Circle Keeper, for example, needs to build trust with the members of the Circle in order for the members to share situations in which they experienced harm. RP Practitioners believe that unpacking and discussing harm in a space built on pillars of trust can be a healing space for the members.

One of the ways trust in RPs gets built is by sharing stories within the Circle – I use Circle to mean a space engaging in RPs. The members connect with each other through either shared experiences, or hearing and absorbing the personal stories shared with the class, and trust grows and harm begins to heal. bell hooks (2009) tells us how sharing stories can start the sharer down a path of healing: "For in writing various stories about the me of me and telling those

stories in books and in therapy sessions, my wounded spirit began to heal" (p. 51). She continues on to more specifically reveal how sharing can create a process of healing, by writing, "The soul murder I felt as a child was no longer the mark of my being; by telling stories I had entered a redemptive space. I had entered a world of soul retrieval." (p. 51). hooks isn't directly referencing RPs or Circles, but the notion can be translated into those spaces. Through sharing our stories, and in turn, building trust, RPs creates a healing space. However, that healing may not come if there isn't trust built into the Circles. If someone shares a story, and another student laughs, for example, that will further harm and not allow for healing. But that laughter or poking fun wouldn't happen in a space that is built on pillars of trust. That healing connects to the aspect of repairing bonds, and creates restorative spaces. As I will discuss in depth later on, repairing bonds became a salient focus of my students.

On top of repairing bonds, trust in RPs works to achieve other outcomes. One example of this is building engagement in classrooms. What I mean by engagement is participating in class discussions, sharing ideas, and students not having their heads on their desks. When students trust the members of their class, and the teacher, and "This trusting relationship with teachers [leads] to students striving and working extra hard to not betray the established trust" (DeMeulenaere, 2012, p. 31). Trust gets ingrained into the actual classroom, and communities built on pillars of trust emerge in the classroom. In that regard, students feel safe to share the personal, potentially traumatic events that get shared in Circles. While it is still important to build trust in any regular classroom, more trust is required for students to feel comfortable sharing stories about conflict and harm than discussing the water cycle or the hypotenuse of a triangle. Circles become a place where trust thrives, and it establishes a "collective identity for

the class based on trust" (DeMeulenaere, 2012, p. 33). Trustworthy bonds in the community can also lead, as I discovered, to creating networks of support. When students trust those around them, and have built solid relationships with them, they begin to rely on those bonds for the support that they need. It is why, for example, when we would facilitate Restorative Justice Circles at the middle-school enrichment academy where I taught this past summer, we would allow the students to choose a teacher to participate in the Circle with them; when students are supported by adults they trust, they feel supported and are willing to share their experiences. By strengthening bonds and relationships in the classroom community, my 5th grade students discovered that community could be an outlet on which they could rely for help and support – whether that be emotional or material.

As the interpersonal bonds and relationships between the students strengthen and develop, the students, in turn, will see advancements in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL skills as students working "to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." (CASEL, 2020, p. 1). Deepening immersion in trust and community will bring higher levels of SEL to students, and SEL developments equip students to handle conflict healthfully, and even stop conflict at the root before it emerges. In a 2022 report on the importance of SEL, the Wallace Foundation listed "Social Domain" as an area of SEL; Social Domain refers to students' social skills and interpersonal and relationship skills. The Wallace Foundation's report lists three benefits of higher levels of Social Domain skills, one of which being "conflict resolution" (Wallace

Foundation, 2022). Tying SEL skills to restorative practices, higher understanding of and development with SEL intrinsically leads to higher abilities of conflict resolution; the two go hand-in-hand. Students trust each other to handle conflict and discuss it when it arises, and not let it fester until the conflict builds up and eventually becomes too much for the individual to handle; built-up conflict can, for example, lead to violent outbursts – whether it be physical violence or emotionally violence like insults or name-calling. RPs allow students to have supportive bonds that won't shatter due to mendable conflict, and repair harm that was done to the bonds before the RPs became introduced.

In my literature review, I unpacked how RPs are a way to change the paradigm of punishment structures and not further the replication of education discipline leading to judicial discipline. As crucial as a facet of Restorative Practices as this is, building relationships of trust can work to deter conflict between peers before it happens. When trust is built into bonds between community members, there is a higher level of respect, which leads to lower levels of conflict; As Jeffrey Dickie states, "Conflicts themselves often arise from, 'a lack of understanding about different needs' but the resolutions usually require feelings of security and respect." (Dickie, 2015, p. 1-2). However, if conflict does arise, bonds already ingrained in trust are easier to repair. RPs are about fixing harmed bonds between members, and my students were excited to learn new strategies for that.

The last aspect of trust and building relationships that permeated my research was through role models, both positive and negative role models. Role models are people in whom we can place our trust, for better or for worse; they are people off of whom we model our behavior. In schools, teachers have the ability to be role models for students. In this paper, I will

discuss how teachers and how they speak about their students have an impact on how their students view themselves. As people in social power dynamics, teachers have a unique ability to shape their students' perceptions of themselves; it becomes crucial that all teachers understand this power, and do not further the cycles of students perceiving themselves as "bad kids."

Methods:

Methodology:

I did the bulk of my research as Practitioner Action Research, defined as, "study[ing] the setting by acting in it and studying the effects of their actions. It is an intrinsically disturbing research" (Anderson and Herr, 2009, p. 158). For this project, I am not studying the teacher, and because of this, my intervention puts me in the focus of the research; I am directly studying the *result* of my actions in the classroom, rather than observing what the teacher may be doing well or not. I wanted to do it this way because I could adapt my lessons if things were not working out the way exactly I had imagined, and because I was able to directly build relationships with the students and see how they responded to the teaching I did. I sought to understand the impact of my RPs so I can better understand what was or was not effective within the curriculum and practices.

Methodology Continued– Project Rationale:

I already understand that, in terms of "punishment," the American public education system is broken; Eleven-year old Black students are being sent home from school because they

wore their hair in braids (NYT, 2018). Why are schools treating non-violent situations punitively, when they aren't an issue at all; why are students missing days of school for dress-code violations? Capitalist education values a punitive punishment viewpoint rather than a community-based healing one. I want to work to bring change to that system, and reshape how discipline is handled in schools. I am intervening because, as someone engaging in research, and engaging in the framework of understanding that Clark's CYES program prepares its future teachers and community leaders with, I want the autonomy of being my own catalyst of social change. Moreover, my decision to bring that change through restorative practices isn't a randomly selected intervention. Many studies have shown that RPs lower the risk of in-school suspension and other disciplinary measures for the students who partake in them (Youth Restoration Project, 2020; Lyubansky, 2016; García-García & Ortega Campos, 2021).

Positionality:

I am the product of public schools, and I couldn't be prouder. I've always thought that, in a perfect world – were I to design it myself – public schools could be the most foundational actors and agents in bringing tangible social change and shaping future generations to carry social justice and community with them in life. I am planning to send my kids to public school, and hopefully they will send their kids to public school. Because of my devotion to and experience with public schools, I consider myself to be an insider for some aspects of my project. I understand, first-hand, what it is like to attend public elementary school and the challenges with which it comes; I understand inequitable resource distribution, and I understand the dialectic relationship between outside-the-classroom difficulties and inside-the-classroom challenges.

Jonathan Kozol professes that public schools are not a universal experience, and one experience in a public school does not mandate that all other experiences within public schools will be the same, but I believe that attending *any* public school makes you more of a public school insider, than growing up in private schools.

But in more ways than not, I am an outsider to this project and Millard Fillmore Elementary by proxy. The first thing that people notice when they look at me is that I'm a white male. I have gone through public school where that means different things: In my elementary and high school, that put me in the social majority, but in my middle school, there were roughly only a quarter of people who shared my racial identity. Millard Fillmore Elementary is the latter. The majority of my students are students of color – four of the forty students I worked with were white, to be more specific. A good portion of the students do not speak English in their home. Thus, I am an outsider in many respects. Race reigns more paramount than my identity as a public-school product, because you can tell my race by looking at me, and I am not afforded that immediate association by sight into being a public school-graduate; and so, my outsider identity supersedes whatever may make me an insider. But it isn't just race: I am not from Worcester, have never spent time within Millard Fillmore Elementary, and come from a socio-economic status much higher than most of the student body. Despite having some pieces of my positionality that could make me an insider, it is crucial that I continue to recognize myself as an outsider – hopefully, through my work, both my students and I will see me more and more as an insider. It is not inherently bad to be an outsider, but it is another element of trust that I have needed to build with my students.

In reflection on my identity and the analysis of it, it is important that I understand that I am privileged, in terms of identity, and how that shapes how I interact with the world around me. As a white, straight, middle-class, cis-male, nothing about how I look or where I come from puts me at risk, like it does for other groups. I don't have to walk around everywhere I go with the fear of death or violence in my mind. I am privileged to be safe. In understanding my privilege, I have to also understand that this means that I won't be able to connect with and truly comprehend the unique struggles of living in America as a person of color or as a woman. I know that going into teaching, hopefully, in a school district filled with low-income students of color, I will always be separated from the violence and oppression that many of my students will face. I can be as supportive of that struggle as I practice to be, but I will never have that lived experience that fully prepares me to connect with those aspects of their identity. I interact with the world differently than people of color do; I don't have to worry about myself or one of my family members being attacked or killed in a racist incident. I don't have to worry about how I'm perceived at job interviews or car dealerships; I mostly have the freedom to walk anywhere in public without feeling like I'm being surveilled; anytime where this isn't the case is chiefly due to my whiteness, and how it sets me apart from the residents of color in whatever that space may be. But my identity as a *surveillée* in that instance stems from my position as a white outsider in a non-white-dominated location, rather than the surveillance being because of prejudiced supposition some people hold on the danger to public safety that people of color possess, a burden I am waived of shouldering.

In tandem with that comes my Jewish identity. Part of learning about and connecting with my Jewish heritage was understanding the plight and suffering that Jews have gone through

across history. Some Jews think that this means that all of our suffering is equal, and Jews have a congruent understanding of current-day suffering as people of color do. My Jewish identity has armed me with empathy, a skill that is often lacking in the minds of the public. I came to this feeling of empathy through learning about Jewish values, and what it means to be Jewish; the main idea is "I am my brother's keeper," the antithetical statement to what Cain said to God after he murdered his brother Abel. "I am my brother's keeper" is the idea that we are responsible for helping out our communities and supporting those around us, who maybe are not in our communities as well. I learned about this at the Kinderland Kindershule, a secular Jewish after school program where we learn the Jewish history of social justice, and we learn Yiddish, the working-class Jewish language that echoed through the Jewish progressive circles. This is not a unique value to Jews, but it becomes unique for me because it isn't universal among the Jews; we owe it to our Jewish heritage to understand how Jewish values can teach us empathy for those who are oppressed. This notion has followed Jews around and permeated our values and consciousness; "I am my brother's keeper" is what build the rich, supportive community nature of the Eastern European *Shetles;* it is what motivated the poor, despondent Jewish immigrants in the Lower East Side to open their tenement doors and offer their neighbors what little food they could spare. It is the value that sparked the Partisan resistance camps in the German wilderness to fight against Nazi persecution of the Jews and all the other groups attempted to be exterminated; it is why I feel an intrinsic compelling to carry on the fight against the genocide in Gaza. Because of what I know about the deep suffering of the Jews, I feel a stronger drive and desire to use my privilege to stand up against the injustice that we see today. An injustice to one is an injustice to all, and someone from a community of past suffering, cannot stand by and not

advocate for making a change. Despite this happening consistently and frequently, I am choosing to not sit idly by, and watch the cycles continue. Kindershule taught me to not solely focus on oppression done to groups with whom I share an identity. We recite the poem, “First they Came for the Communists,” a poem depicting how it is imperative to lend a hand to struggles that aren’t centered around you, because one day your people will be oppressed and no one will be around anymore to help; we sing “It Could’ve Been Me,” a song where the main throughline is “you were the one oppressed and silenced, so I will do the work for both of us ‘as If I were two,’ so you are not alone in your struggle.” These are values that shape my teaching and social justice philosophy.

Site and Participants:

My Restorative Justice Practices was held in Millard Fillmore Elementary located in a mid-sized city in New England. Millard Fillmore Elementary is a PK-6 elementary school that is composed mostly of low-income students of color. 65.3% of the students’ first language is not English, and 28% of the students are current emerging multilingual English Language Learners (Mass DOE). In the 22-23 school year, Millard Fillmore Elementary had 372 PK-6 students, with an average student-teacher ratio of 14:1. The school has produced higher average Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores than the average scores of the district, and surpassed the average scores of all of Massachusetts schools in Science.

For my lessons, I was in the two 5th-grade classrooms that Millard Fillmore Elementary has. One class had nineteen students, the other class had twenty one students. The typical structure of elementary schools is that each class has one teacher who teaches them all their

lessons on the core educational components: Math, Science, ELA, and Social Studies. On top of that, the grade has speciality teachers for the elective classes: gym, art, and music. However, Millard Fillmore Elementary structures their 5th grade differently. The two teachers split their content material, meaning that one teacher teaches both classes ELA and Social Studies, and the other teacher teaches both classes Math and Science – both classes also have the same separate speciality teachers for those elective classes.

My research subjects were the students in two 5th-grade classes at Millard Fillmore Elementary. As a group, they are aged 10 and 11, and are 95% students of color – Millard Fillmore Elementary is a largely non-White population, making up roughly 86% of the general student body. All the students in the class participated in all the class instructional practices including the RJCs. But only the students for whom I obtained consent were participants in the data collection aspect of my research on the impacts of RJCs. My research subjects also included the two 5th grade teachers with whom I collaborated.

Data Collection:

Written Notes and Audio Transcriptions: I compiled a collection of written field notes and audio recordings for my data. During each week's restorative practices lesson, I set up and placed an audio recording device in the room so it picked up what people said during the class time. After the lesson time ended, I wrote down notes from what I observed in the classroom, including body language and how students were acting during the circle time, particularly noting changes in behavior over time. For example, I paid attention to whether students were ceasing to call out answers in class or speak without being in possession of the talking piece. I also kept

track of which students were participating more or less frequently from the first couple of sessions. I tracked which students are still engaging in physical violence or unsatisfactory classroom behavior. The field notes allowed me to observe changes in SEL skills within the boundaries of the class periods.

Interviews: Twice during the course of the sessions, once about halfway through in mid-to-late February, and once at the end of the sessions, around late April, probably, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the teachers to ask them about their experience of the introduction of RPs in the classroom and get their take on how they think it impacted the students. My research questions centered around the notion that RPs will boost many aspects of the students' SEL skills and performance in the classroom, and the students' involvement in the school community. The protocol for the interview followed as such: I asked the teacher my questions aimed at understanding the advancements in SEL skills, community building, and conflict resolution skills the students developed based on student behavior demonstrated in their day-to-day classes outside of the RPs.

Photographs of student work: Some of the assessments for the lessons revolved around art projects. I photographed students' completed art pieces.

Data Analysis:

I assessed the success of the intervention through seeing if there were changes in students' SEL Skills, new developments in conflict resolution, and seeing if conflicts are less likely to arise in the future. I also analyzed how trust was built in the classroom. I did so by juxtaposing students' initial response to me in the first week of lessons, with how they reacted

and responded to me on the last day of lessons. The interviews with the teachers were crucial to my understanding of the former because they offered insight to how the class behaved and developed during the seven periods a day in which I wasn't in the class.

Findings

My Project's Goals

When I first decided I wanted to be a teacher, I did so with the hope that I could make public education the utopia that I knew in my head it could be. I wanted to be the one to resolve all the issues with education in the country. However, this is obviously unrealistic, and set me up for failure before I even began to teach. I have to go into teaching with the understanding that I cannot solve all the holistic big picture issues of education solely by myself. But what I can do is stay true to my own teaching philosophy and truly believe that that philosophy will make a difference in my students' lives and the environment which I'm trying to cultivate. But I don't think this *doesn't* lead to holistic social change. Grace Lee Boggs' credo – as stated by adrienne marie brown (2017) – was, "Transform yourself to transform the world" (dedication page). We can stay true to transforming what we can control, and trust that, in accordance to brown's (2019) fractal theory, that will continue to shape the world. If we transform the future generations into socially conscious students, they will transform the world into a macro-utopia. To me there is great power in teaching: Teachers have the ability to shape the future according to their own values, and for me, that future looks like open-minded people positively engaging with themselves, their peers, and their communities for the greater good of the planet. That is learned

behavior, undoubtedly. Students require adults in their lives to teach them those values, whether it be their guardians or teachers. With students as young as elementary students are, it becomes even more paramount that they learn healthy and healing-based social behavior and understanding. That is where Restorative Justice comes into play. Restorative Justice is a catalyst teachers and school-support staff can use to bring change to the punitive and punishing nature of public schools and establish trust within the school community. If Restorative Justice practices are utilized correctly, through training and trust building, schools would be sites of rich community, a welcoming, multicultural environment, and a place where students feel safe. None of those, as it stands now, are universally true of nearly *any* public schools in the country.

What Are Restorative Practices?

To readdress what I briefly discussed earlier in my conceptual framework, Restorative Practices (RPs) are educational tools that work to build trust, belonging, and community into a classroom space; RPs also teach students ways to deal with conflict in a manner that isn't channeling violence. Many different actions can be classified as a Restorative Practice. If a student were to push a kid down the stairs and the school required the perpetrator to write the pushee a letter of apology for the hurt he caused the student through the push, that is an example of a Restorative Practice – it works to repair the bond between the two parties and does so with addressing the harm caused and not replicating punitive punishment structures. A mediation session between the two parties aimed at discussing harm done and, once again, working to repair bonds and trust would count as an RP.

Restorative practices are structures that change the paradigm of punishment. Harm is a concept that we tend to punish in schools – for example, we punish students for pushing or punching students, but schools also punish bullying and other interactions that cause mental and emotional harm. Punishment doesn't need to be the solution for dealing with those incidents, and restorative practices allow educators more flexible ways of handling those situations – for example, holding a restorative justice circle, where both parties of the conflict are invited to share – with a third-party, unbiased mediator – how they were hurt, and arrive at a compromise solution and a healthy way to proceed.

I used numerous methods of RPs within my lessons: I used collaborative problem solving, a set of teachings that gives students the skills to handle problems and conflict through group discussion and dialogue, along with teaching mediation skills and conflict role playing. All of those are lumped under the RPs umbrella. But the practice that I used everyday, and around which I structured my lessons was the concept of Circles.

Circles

Circles are the salient practice to Restorative Justice interventions. Circles are spaces that teach empathy, listening, trust, relationship building, and empower the voices of its members (van Woerkom, 2013). The Circle is also "a dialog process that works intentionally to create a safe space to discuss very difficult or painful issues in order to improve relationships and resolve differences" (Pranis, 2015, p. 3). It is designed "to find resolutions that serve every member of the circle" (Pranis, 2015, p. 3). Circles stem from Indigenous practices, and the chosen shape of a

circle is not coincidental either. The Lakota tribe has shared wisdom on what the spiritual power of a circle holds:

> Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is with everything where power moves. (Riestenberg, 2012, p. 75).

The circle is a shape predicated on togetherness and community; when members are seated in a circle, every person is able to see any member of the circle. Eye contact is paramount to the circle, and everyone is able to have eye contact. The shape of the circle also promotes equality between the members. There is no front of the circle, and everyone has joint ownership of the process (Riestenberg, 2012).

Circles are based on non-hierarchical power. Circles do not have a leader or a teacher, what they have instead is someone called the Circle Keeper. The role of the Circle Keeper is to "[assist] the group in creating and maintaining a collective space in which each participant feels safe to speak honestly and openly without disrespecting anyone else." The Keeper does not dominate and control the conversation, rather they, "[monitor] the quality of the collective space and [stimulate] the reflections of the group through questions or topic suggestions" (Pranis, 2015, p. 9). I was the Circle Keeper of the two Circles, rather than being a teacher. Each lesson I brought in discussion prompts and questions, but the freedom of discussion fell onto the

students; each student was able to discuss what they wanted, without being told it was off topic or “incorrect.”

Because the Circle is a body without a leader or a hierarchy, the Circle empowers its members to *trust their own voice.* The Circle teaches students that every thought or sharing is important and worthwhile, and it fosters the belief in the students that their own voice has power and autonomy; the students aren’t only sharing to answer a question, but getting comfortable in putting forth their own ideas without fear of pushback or being told their thought was wrong. What this creates is a group of students who are comfortable toying with ideas, building off of the thoughts of one another, and trusting themselves to speak in front of a group of people. These are skills that will be carried with the students for the rest of their lives, not just within the Circle, and it is why it is imperative that we start teaching these skills as young as in elementary school.

Another crucial element of the Circle is the talking piece. The talking piece is an object that allows its holder to speak; no one without the talking piece can speak, and everyone else has to listen intently to the person holding the talking piece. The talking piece is designed to foster the equality of the Circle because, “Everyone in the circle has an opportunity to share without interruption what is on their mind, and those not speaking can listen more fully without the distraction of preparing a response or rebuttal” (van Woerkom, 2013, paragraph 6). The talking piece is another element that builds trust in one's own voice because the student has the benefit of knowing that everyone in the Circle is listening to them when they are speaking, and the student doesn’t have to worry about judgment from their peers about their ideas and feelings.

On top of that, the Circle Keeper should help facilitate Community Guidelines (CG) for the Circle. This is essentially a social contract that each member of the Circle agrees to, and sets

the precedent for members' behavior in the Circle. Because the Circle is non-hierarchical, the Circle Keeper should not be the only one who dictates each clause of the guidelines; the students should feel empowered to pitch ideas for how their peers in the Circle should act, and also how the *Circle Keeper too* should act. The Circle Keeper is not above the CG, and is also held accountable through its formation. The CG is a tangible product to which the Circle Keeper can direct members' attention if any guidelines are broken. Trusting the CG helps to build trust between the members of the Circle because all members are agreeing to not judge, make fun of, or laugh at anyone's feelings or ideas; the members have the security of sharing stories or accounts of harm without fear. Having the students themselves help with creating the CG also builds trust in the students' own voices by having each student understand that they are helping dictate the behavior of the group.

In my Conceptual Framework, I mentioned that sharing stories is a way to foster healing and build trust. A Circle is the vehicle through which that healing process can begin. When the Circle is built on trust and all the members trust each other and the Keeper – mixed with adherence to the CG – the sharing of harm becomes healing. The sharer knows that everyone is intently listening to their stories, and they trust their peers to give insight about the stories, but more importantly, are there just to listen. Deep listening is a skill that students learn through Circles, and that deep listening is comforting to the student sharing their stories and builds trust within the Circle.

What Happened?

My plan was to introduce sets of Restorative Practices within two 5th-grade classrooms; the examples of Restorative Practices I used are collaborative problem solving, and dialogic-based conflict mediation, also known as using talking and verbal mediation tactics to solve conflict before it gets violent. This way, I was able to directly bring Restorative Justice practices to a public school. I facilitated a thirty minute session, once a week, for eight weeks, where in each class we explored what community and care means to us, as well as learned about and practiced collaborative problem solving by discussing real-life challenges the students face inside and out of the classroom. My hope was that these skills would translate outside of the Circle, and the students would become capable of channeling these practices into every facet of their lives.

The curriculum was split into two chapters: the first chapter focused on building community and trust within each of the two classes. I designed the curriculum to build that community because research shows that building a strong community will increase student participation and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) development (Kumpulainen and Minna, 2007). The community-building lessons were focused on student introductions, understanding what community is as a concept and what are the examples of communities in which the students find themselves; this chapter culminated in a lesson on self-care and community care, where the students discussed the importance of helping out their community and what it means to be supported by their respective communities. The second chapter of the curriculum takes us into the conflict/conflict resolution section of my lessons. This chapter started with an introduction to conflict in which students worked to define conflict and talk about where they think conflict

comes from and how conflict makes us feel. They also learned how restorative practices such as dialogic problem solving can *repair* and strengthen relationships between people who were engaged in a conflict. Next, I introduced the idea of collaborative problem solving and I discussed with the students how we can work together to resolve conflicts between our peers and friends. At the end of this chapter, the students used their mediation and collaborative problem solving skills to roleplay examples of school conflicts and how to address them. The final mini-chapter – it only spanned one lesson – was on punishment and how people telling us we're bad kids can, in turn, make us truly feel like bad kids. I chose to end with this lesson to honor the healing nature of Restorative Practices. I wanted this discussion to illustrate to my students that any harm that teachers' perceptions of them caused wasn't inherently their fault. I wanted this section to heal educational wounds and teach the students about why punishment cycles and negative perceptions persist. From what I had seen the past seven weeks, any negative perceptions of these classes that former teachers had couldn't be further from the truth, and I wanted my students to hopefully see that as well.

In terms of the perceived impact of these chapters, I hoped that chapter 1, the building community content, would lead to greater levels of trust in me and class engagement, as well as diminishing the reluctance that students have in sharing their own personal experiences. It was all about building trust with me; I was a stranger to the class, I had to earn the right for those stories to be shared. I assessed the success of this through tracking changes in my field notes and recordings of class conversations, as well as analyzing if the teachers noticed changes in behavior and participation frequency during the two teacher interviews I conducted after each chapter of the curriculum. For the second chapter, I believed that the impact would be predicated

on two salient things: the understanding that violence is counterproductive in addressing conflict and dialogic mediation is more helpful, and that the students will learn practical and actionable strategies for collaborative problem solving. To analyze the success of this chapter, the students ended each lesson through either independent or group work, through which I was able to discover how much of the information they absorbed, and what takeaways they had; for example, all of the students wrote index cards answering the question, "how does talk help to resolve conflict in a healthy way?"

While doing my lessons, Ms. Max and Ms. Jackson were in the room with me; they gave me the freedom to do whatever I needed for my lesson and use whatever materials I needed. But their being in the room added stability to my lessons and didn't force me into a role in which I wasn't comfortable. That role was the disciplinarian and chief power in the room. Any time a student wasn't doing what they were supposed to – running around the classroom, throwing balls, not participating in assignments – Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max were the ones to try to remedy the behavior. I could focus on my lesson and focus on the rest of the eighteen students, while they focused on the one or two who were distracting. It also meant that I didn't have to be the one to tell any student they couldn't do what they were doing; I didn't have to be the enforcer, an omittance from my duties I believed helped to build trust. And as a newcomer to the classroom, and working to earn trust with the students, I was grateful to not have to wear the disciplinarian hat. Ms. Jackson one time had to call the office about a student and speak with the school staff official in the hallway. I, first of all, did not have the unfavorable job of being the adult who called the office about a student's behavior, and secondly, was able to not waste any of the remaining time we had on the two students taking away from the lesson. The two-teacher

structure of a classroom is perfect for sharing the teaching and classroom management duties of a teacher. Because I was the Circle Keeper, rather than the disciplinarian, all I would do was remind the students of our Community Guidelines. Ms. Jackson also was very helpful in this aspect. When students would be rowdy and out of control, she would tell students to "remember the Community Guidelines that you guys and Ezra made!" This reinforced the importance of the Community Guidelines from someone with more disciplinary authority.

On top of that, Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max being in the room also helped the structure of my lessons. For one, the students' day-to-day teacher essentially cosigned my lessons by introducing me to the class and presiding over the lessons, helping to legitimize my curriculum. A teacher would not let a stranger into the school and hijack a period of the learning day for a message with which they didn't agree, or an activity about which they didn't know. The fact that both teachers stayed in the room and helped kids stay on task proved to the students that my classes were worth teaching; while I was first trying to build trust and credibility, a teacher for whom the students already had trust was helping the students to find that trust in me.

While I would teach, Ms. Max and Ms. Jackson would be listening to the material and *modeling good behavior* for their students– the teachers would display what active listening looked like. They didn't correct me when they thought about some question differently; they didn't co-opt my teaching. When it came time for games, both would participate: Ms. Max became a rooster during the animal noise game, and Ms. Jackson joined the "joy" emotion machine. Upon a group or individual project being worked on, the two classroom teachers were always circling the room, making sure the students were on task and answering any questions

about directions that would arise. They were both respectful, engaged participants of the lessons, and they did not undermine me.

There is also intrinsic stability that comes from me conducting these lessons in a regular classroom during a regular instruction block of a regular school day. I won the students' attention because I was running unopposed for it. I wasn't conducting these lessons during their lunch period, their recess, nor during specials. They would be doing lessons during that time regardless of me teaching. That helped to solidify the students' participation and attention, and I don't think I would have the same success if I were to conduct these lessons during a non-school period of the day, like an afterschool or a camp, for example. I was grateful for the time slot I was given, and the teachers in my partnership.

Impact of the Intervention

Since my time with the two classes, the students have developed and displayed SEL improvements and improvements in conflict resolution. Ms. Max told me, during our post-curriculum interview that, "at recess today, there was usage of profanity directed at Nathan. Nathan, instead of reacting back like he normally would, actually came up to me and told me, which is a big improvement for him." This is not something that Nathan would have typically done, and it is a new development in his conflict resolution and SEL skills. Also, she talked about how the way that they handled MCAS this year – the end-of-the-year standardized tests that all Massachuessets students are required to take – saying that they "put more effort into them" and didn't "rush through the exams." She thought that this was a direct correlation to SEL improvements, and revealed improvements in "processing their emotions and being able to calm

themselves down." She said that she thinks "it takes maturity to be able to think, 'ok I'm really gonna try my best on this test,'" maturity, she explained, was the antithesis to how they behaved during MCAS last year. Lastly, the students have displayed higher levels of taking accountability. Right before Spring Break, there was a bullying incident that occurred within a group text chat that the 5th graders have. The students responsible told Ms. Max and Ms. Jackson what they had been doing, and took full accountability for their actions. Ms. Max told me that that would not have been the case before my lessons took place. On top of this, the principal of Millard Fillmore asked the student which method he would like to handle the situation, and the student chose a restorative justice circle! He understood the benefits that came from them, and trusted the process enough to have faith in its success; Ms. Jackson shared additional evidence of the success of our circles stating that directly after the circle, there was no displayed "animosity between the students involved in the bullying." Mitch, the student who had been getting bullied, felt safe enough in his community to handle the situation through dialogue, and face-to-face with his bullies.

The relationships that had been built in the classroom through our work with community and with RPs created bonds that could withstand this conflict emerging; RPs were able to restore the fraying of the bonds, and repair them. Not only did Mitch trust the community he is in to handle the conflict in this manner, he also trusted the practices. He believed that Restorative Practices would help to heal the bonds and the harm that had been done to him; he trusted that RPs would address the problem and find solutions in ways that typical punitive punishment would not. He trusted RPs to not further the cycle of bullying, and that this work with repairing bonds and harm would be the method through which the bullying would stop.

In my post-lesson observations of the class, I saw stark improvements in SEL skills, and I think similar results would occur if these lessons and restorative practices are implemented in another classroom. Ms. Jackson, in our post-curriculum interview told me that she "sees them being more mature in the classroom. Just like talking things out, instead of putting hands on each other, which – I don't know if you remember – was an issue at the beginning of the school year." That was a struggle with which the two teachers had to grapple. However Ms. Jackson continued on, "and I do see them not doing that as much… I see an improvement in that aspect of their SEL improvements." The students have changed the paradigm when it comes to handling conflict. Since I first started teaching my restorative practice lessons, the conflict management styles have shifted from violence to a dialogic approach. Ms. Jackson believes that the students got a lot out of it; she ended our wrap-up interview by telling me, "The class really really enjoyed your presence. I think you really did make a difference, and, especially for like the fifth grade class, when they were in fourth grade were in crisis, and just like the efforts of not just Ms. Max and I, but I think you as well, have helped them become more aware of their SEL learning and experience, and just create a community that's amazing!" I was confident that, without directly even mentioning SEL in my classroom, the trusting community that we built, mixed with the conflict resolution and bond-repairing skills that the students learned would be tools that would help develop and improve their SEL skills, and it seems like this was the case.

Building Trust with my Students, and Classroom Engagement Rose Because of it

The most apparent discovery – or rather, product – of the lessons was the community that we had built throughout the course of the lessons, and the trust that I had worked to gain from

my students. The two classes at Millard Filmore went from shyish, timid classes a bit unsure of who I was, to energetic, excitable classes who all made me cards and bombarded me with hugs on the last day of my lessons.

In order to build trust with my students, I started my lessons, on the first day of class, by telling them that I understand that they are in a unique and in a very scary time in their lives, as fifth graders; I told them that I *remember* what it was like when I was in fifth grade, and I implored them to believe that what we were going to talk about in the coming eight weeks would be skills and lessons that they could use to ease the struggles of being an elementary student. I explained to them that I made this project as a way for them to get support that they will need in coming into their own individuality.

I also structured the icebreakers on the first day in order to build trust: I personally am sick of the traditional icebreaker structure; on the first day of class, for over a decade, my teachers and professors have asked me to share a fun fact about myself, or answer the question, "if you were a bagel, what bagel would you be?" However, I think icebreakers have power in fostering community early during introductions, and can be taken a step deeper. Granted, it is always nice to agree with the student to your right that both of you would be personified pumpernickel bagels, but I believe that icebreakers are a way to build trust. The icebreaker that I assigned to my students was the question "Why are you amazing or special?" I wanted the students to have to think about what makes them special, and I implored them to believe that *everyone* had something that made them spectacular. It was my belief going into this project that capitalist schooling, as it exists today, places too high of an emphasis on getting a job, and only seeing school as a vehicle to get students thinking about the workforce (Kozol, 2005). This

reliance on entering the workforce in education has the power to strip students of their understanding of themselves as an individual and as a creative being, and only views them as an employee or a statistic. I tried to get my students to break free of this thought cycle and understand why they are special as just individual humans. But I also wanted my students to know that I believed in them – I believed in them before I even met them; my students had to understand that I thought they were special and amazing students, before we started any teaching. How can students believe in what I will be teaching them, if it is not clear that I believe in them?

I did this icebreaker first with Ms. Jackson's class, and a couple of times I had students ask if they could pass. I pushed back a little bit by saying that every single person in the room has something that makes them special, but, ultimately, I allowed the couple of students to pass if they didn't want to share; I did not want to force anyone to speak and make them uncomfortable – another little way I worked to build trust. However, when I did this icebreaker the next day with Ms. Max's class, upon allowing a student to pass like I did the day prior, Ms. Max came up with the idea to allow *other* students in the class to list something that made the initial student special. I thought this was a wonderful idea for two reasons: It allowed for the original student to believe that there was something about them that made them special, and it worked to build trust among the members of the class. Bonds between peers are strengthened and trust grows when students hear that their classmates believe that they are special. I was grateful to have Ms. Max's teacher wisdom in this moment, because, as a new educator, I would not have thought to introduce that aspect to the icebreaker.

The last thing I did to really solidify trust in the first two sessions was make sure that I knew all the students' names. It might sound basic and not impactful, but I believe that referring to a student by their name, rather than calling on them by pointing at them and saying "yeah," creates a personal connection between the student and the teacher; the teacher sees the student as a real individual and wants to hear their comments, rather than the student being a random being in the ether of hands raised. When the students were introducing themselves, I made a diagram of both classes' seating assignments, and studied who sat where so I could have the names down pat after the first two sessions.

Building this connection with them, and demonstrating that I had empathy for them and thought they all had qualities that made them special, was a first step in building their trust. I wanted them to understand that every aspect of this project was built with actual fifth graders in mind, not just as some arbitrary idea I had for research – for me, I wanted this project to have an aspect of giving back to the school community, not just an academic exercise for me.

I believed that building trust with the class would inspire participation and engagement. And it did. As we will see, lesson by lesson, the students began to trust me, and engagement rose. On my first day, with Ms. Jackson's class, during the course of the 37 minutes of discussion, only five students participated by sharing their thoughts or comments; and only four of Ms. Max's students participated on the first day. However, nine weeks later in the final lesson, every single one of Ms. Jackson's students spoke in class, and all but one of Ms. Max's students engaged in class discussion – Maria was the one student who stayed silent, in terms of full class discussion, however, she was eagerly participating in the small-group activity. The final day of content was focused on allowing the students to express their creativity through individual or

group projects on their takeaways from the seven weeks leading up to the final class. This idea came from my mid-point interview with Ms. Jackson, where she said,

> This is something that we're even learning too, but we notice when they have more creative freedom the engagement comes more naturally! Like maybe choices? Like maybe make a Google Slide, or make a Canva. Just like incorporating things that I think would be helpful. Like for example, I've given essays on photosynthesis, it's boring and pulling teeth for them, even though it's necessary. And then I gave them this composting project and they did it on Canva, and it's amazing; and you can see what they're learning!

Projects that allow the students their own creative voices lead to a deeper level of trust in me because they saw that I was working with them to make the lessons as suitable for them as they could be; I wasn't deciding what I thought the students would want to do, I was listening to examples of what the students had wanted to do. (Note: see, for example, the earlier discussion of Circle practice allowing students to build trust in one's own voice.) In the CYES department at Clark, we learn about the idea of co-creating knowledge. This is a practice used in research that claims that research done on human subjects should be collaborative, and not just what the researcher thinks should be done; the researcher and the participants need to co-create the understanding of how the research should be conducted. And this was no different for the project that I assigned. Right when I announced that we were going to be making Canvas, there was a twinge of excitement in the air; students started to sit up straight in their chairs, they started looking around and pointing at the people with whom they wanted to work, and they started asking me all kinds of questions about to what degree of creative liberty they could take. Bruce,

a student in Ms. Max's class, who sits the closest to me, high-fived me, and exclaimed "Fire project idea, Ezra!" The transition from announcing the directions for the assignment to the students beginning to work was also the quickest transition of all the lessons. Within one minute of me finishing the instructions, every student had their Chromebooks out and had gotten into their groups. The students, across both classes, were also on task the entire time, and genuinely excited to be working on this. The enjoyment was evident through their eagerness and proudness to share their final projects. Ms. Max's class unfortunately did not have enough time at the end of the period for the students to share their work, but we had ten minutes or so for Ms. Jackson's students to share. And *everyone* chomped at the bit to do so – genuinely every group wanted to share their projects, and there was a spirited argument about which group was going to go first.

This level of engagement was a complete shift from our first art project. During the second week of lessons, on community care, I had the students do art projects on what community care means to them, and when it came time for a group share-out of their work, it felt like pulling teeth. Across both of the classes, there was a real reluctance to share. In Ms. Jackson's class, when I prompted the groups to share their projects, there was a 42 second pause before someone volunteered; there was a 34 second pause in Ms. Max's class. However, with a project that inspired natural engagement, mixed with the trust that I had worked to build during the seven weeks of lessons prior, the engagement and willingness to share increased exponentially. This wasn't the only time that there was more engagement to share. When we did our role playing exercise, I wasn't planning on having students share their role playing, but one group of students specifically asked to. I listened to what they wanted, and allowed them to share with the full class, and the other four groups in Ms. Jackson's class also then volunteered to

share. I believe that demonstrating my response to their needs around their own educational activities, was, in fact, part of the trust building process. The engagement rose because the students saw that I was willing to do what they wanted, and not just mandating what I thought we should do.

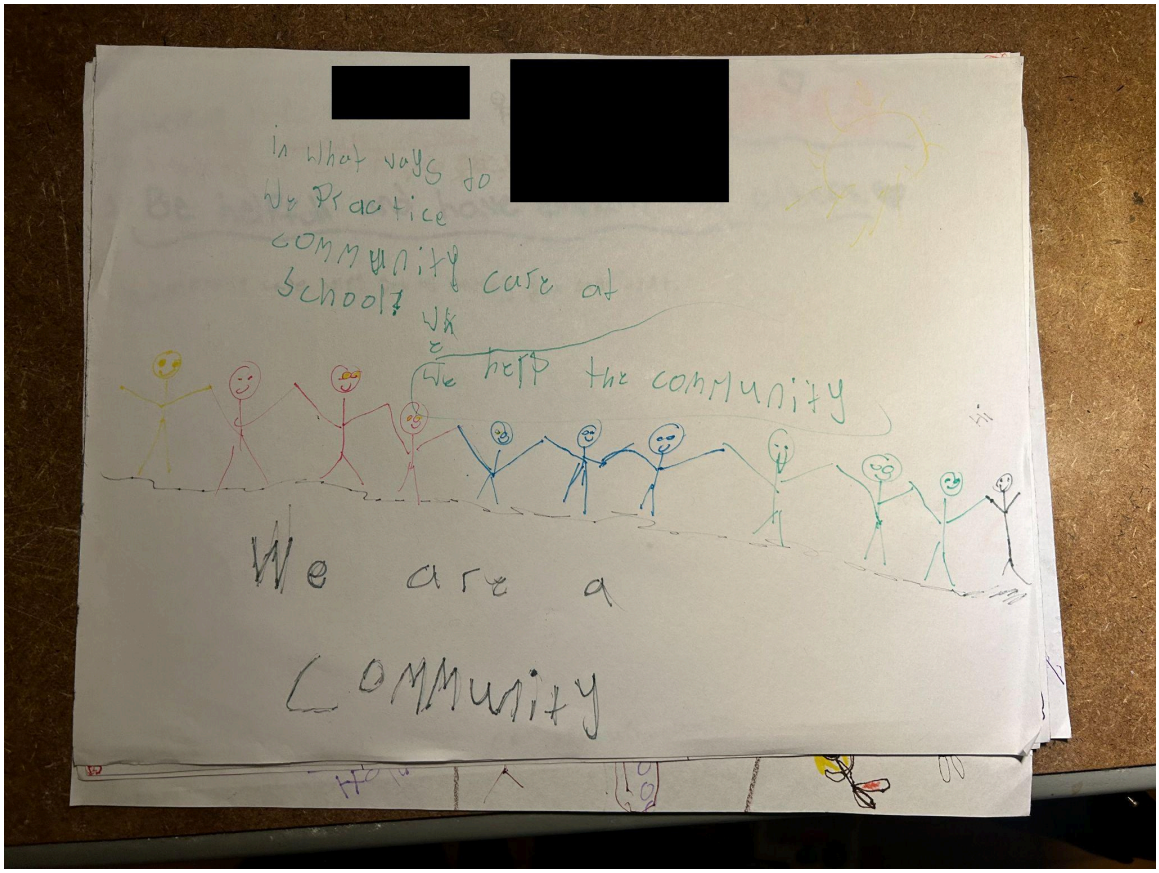
My plan was to spend the first few weeks of the class working on building trust with the students so the engagement would be considerably enhanced from what it was before. My hypothesis was that greater trust in me, specifically, would lead to higher levels of engagement, and a higher level of engagement would, in turn help to build a more cohesive community; I saw it as a parallel relationship, and the two phenomena are not mutually exclusive. This has been my experience in all my ventures with youth work and teaching. Over this past summer, for example, I taught middle school law and debate for rising eighth graders at a STEAM enrichment academy. The class had some issues with engagement – i.e not volunteering to share answers, not wanting to participate in group activities, not filling out worksheets – but at the end of the week, we took a trip to the bowling alley. At the bowling alley, the teachers played bowling matches with the students, not just creating a lane for the teachers to play and a separate lane for the students to use; we played together as equals[3], and worked to dismantle the power dynamics at play – no pun intended. What I discovered was that creation of equality fostered students' trust in us as teachers, and led to an increase of engagement: students who never had participated aloud in class began to, and the students started to request more group projects! I wanted to implement this trust in my classes at Millard Fillmore Elementary. When I got to Millard Fillmore, there already seemed to be a pretty strong community. When I asked about

[3] Again, the Circle process is designed to create a body of equals without hierarchy.

how that grew to come about, Ms. Jackson explained to me that "They've been in the same classes for years… I think it was like three classes but they've been the kids that have been going here since kindergarten, now it's 5th grade. So they really are [close]." These students have been doing community-building work within the *same* communities for almost half of their life[4] spans. The product of that work was evident to an outsider of the classroom, like myself. However, because I was entering their classroom as an outsider, I didn't want to rely on the already established community, and I had to build a new aspect of trust, specific to my class periods; I needed them to have trust in me, and bring me into their already-cohesive classroom community. I was a stranger to them, and I set out to build trust with them. By the first few weeks of lessons, I felt that I had accomplished that goal! The students and I would joke with and sas each other, and the students began to share with me experiences from their lives. We had a real trusting community, and the teachers could see it too. Ms. Max remarked to me, "I think you're doing a great job. Yeah, like, even like, the first day, like, I was like, oh… they're participating pretty well! I think that they have respect for you. Which is good." The students themselves also felt that we had built a community for the class. One of the prompts that the students could choose to incorporate into their final projects was "What are some examples of community?" In Jonathon, Gabriel, and Charles's project – three students in Ms. Jackson's class that, on my first day of lessons, I remarked in my field notes as "distracting, rambunctious, and need to keep an eye on" – in response to that prompt, wrote, "Are [*sic*] class is a community!" Additionally, while doing a drawing on what community is, Travis, Nelson, and Frank, three

[4] The students in the two classes were ten to eleven years old.

other students of Ms. Jackson – students I classified in my field notes[5] as "quiet, and could use prompting." – included the phrase, "We are a community." That drawing is below:



The drawing is a depiction of the Millard Fillmore class, classified as a community. The drawing also consists of nearly a dozen figures of different colors; I chose to understand that artistic decision to represent the multiracial and diverse makeup of Millard Fillmore. The students saw that their class was a community, and the differences in identity between the community members did not prohibit the space from being a community. At the time of my mid-point interviews with Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max, which was five weeks after my first lesson, both the

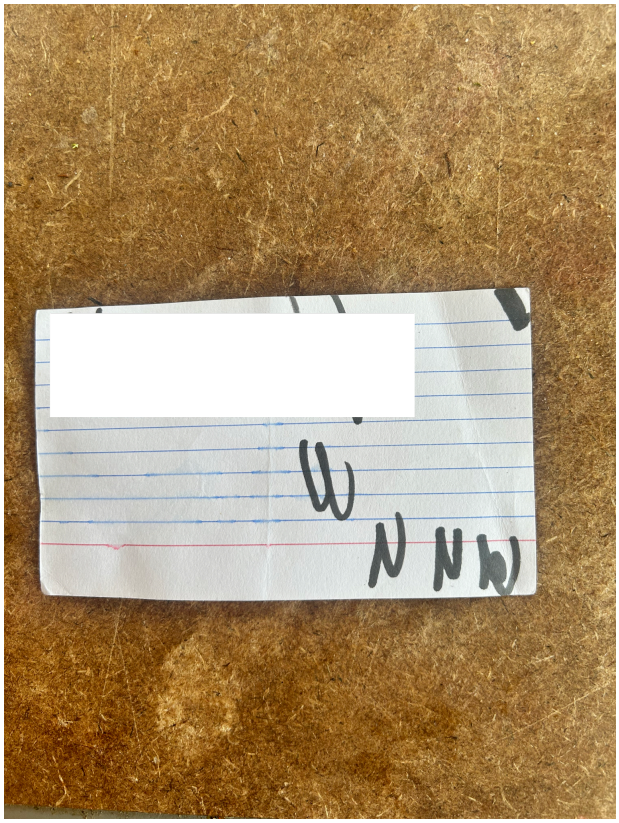
[5] After the first lesson in each class, I jotted down notes on the initially displayed characteristics of each student; that way I had a baseline assessment from which I could judge behavior shifts.

students and the teachers agreed that we had built a trust-filled community, and that there was a high level of engagement. To me, the markers of a trust-filled community were the students' excitement to talk with me about their lives outside of the classroom, and the vulnerability they displayed when discussing with me areas of their lives that caused harm or trauma. In regards to the former, I would spend transition time before and after the lesson talking with my students about the Celtics, art projects they had been working on, or what they did for their birthday – anything to connect with the students on a human level. The students also trusted me enough to reveal information about their lives outside of the classroom. Because Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max were in the room for my lessons and were the ones facilitating transition time, I was able to have freedom to converse with the students who had finished the transition between periods. Had the two teachers not been present, and I had to be the facilitator at the time, it would have been harder to find time to have extracurricular conversations with my students.

Moreover, the trusting community we had built was explicated through the vulnerability that students displayed in sharing hard and painful experiences in their lives. The students felt comfortable telling me about teachers who had harmed them in the past – more on that later. They shared stories of losing friendships and getting in fights; they told me about their suspensions and what that did to their self-esteem. These are not lived experiences that students typically share with someone whom they do not trust; I earned their trust, and through that, I earned the recitation of these stories.

As much as I think the projects and the interviews demonstrate the relationship between trust and engagement, this idea can really be explicated through a case study of one of Ms. Max's students, Nathan. Nathan is a "tough nut to crack" (Ms. Max's words). During the first three

classes, Nathan didn't say a word, and had his head on his desk for the majority of the time. He would participate in the exit tickets and art projects – my guess is because the instructions partially came from Ms. Max – but the work was the least possible information he could write while technically answering the prompt. For the first exit ticket, I had the students answer the questions, "Do you think you are in a community? Do you think community helps you? Have you ever been helped by your community?" Below is a picture of Nathan's index card:



The big blank space is due to me masking his name for confidentiality purposes; but his name takes up more space on his index card than the actual answers do. Those "Ns" that represent his answer refer to him answering "no" to each prompt. This is what he told me, at least. When I say

he gave the least possible information for his answers, he took the liberty of abbreviating down a two-letter word. And that is how class went for him for the first three weeks.

However, I broke through with Nathan during the fourth week. In the first week of lessons, I had been talking to Jonathon about music, specifically New York Drill Music. As a kid who attended public high schools in Brooklyn during the emergence and initial boom of New York Drill Music, there are few topics I'm more well-versed in. I am of the opinion that ten-year-old students should not be listening to drill music, but that is for another praxis project. But I saw our mutual interest in drill music as a way to connect with Jonathon on this very first day of lessons. Throughout all my time as a youth worker and teacher, music has been one of the most effective ways to bridge that stranger-to-stranger roadblock. I told Jonathon that my favorite drill artist was, Brooklyn rapper, Bizzy Banks, and that my favorite song of his was "Don't Start, pt. 2." Seemingly, Jonathan and Nathan had discussed our shared interest, because right as I walked into Ms. Max's classroom, Nathan walked right up to me and went, "I hear you like Bizzy Banks." With a smile beaming across my face, rivaled only by the Cheshire Cat, I responded with, "I do! 'Don't Start pt. 2' is my favorite song of his!" Nathan told me that "Don't Start pt. 1" was his favorite Bizzy track – an opinion I cannot fault him for having. Nathan and I talked about how I was a junior in high school when that song came out, and how I vividly remember my friends and I huddling together in a pizzeria booth to watch the music video when it first came out. After that interaction, Nathan participated aloud in class for the first time in the entire unit. Granted, his participation was to push back against a conjecture I was levying, but any participation is good participation when it comes from a kid who hasn't been previously participating. This particular lesson was the class' first introduction to conflict mediation. I had

said that violence is not an effective way to work through conflict, and leads to more problems. This is when Nathan shot his hand up, while grinning. He stated that, “If I tell someone to stop talking about me, they might not stop. But if I punch them in the face, I bet they’ll stop.” Nathan, in fourth grade, was suspended out of school for getting in a brawl of sorts over a football game during recess; it was not a shock to me that violence was his initial go-to for problem solving. This was the first time he had participated, and after this, he participated in every class, and his quality of turned-in work improved. Ms. Max noticed that Nathan was participating at a level uncommon for him, and explained to me,

> Especially [Nathan] can be a tough nut to crack. And the fact that he's doing what he's supposed to be doing for you is like a really good sign because he has a hard time in, like, specials and things like that. Sometimes even like a math class, he has a difficult time doing what he's supposed to be doing. So you can, you know, if you can engage with him and get him to do what he's supposed to be doing that's, that's good.

Ms. Jackson, the teacher who sees Nathan for much less of the day than Ms. Max, shared those sentiments: “So this is good we can talk about him too because in my class he doesn't do anything, but he does question me: ‘why do I need this, why do I do this, blah blah blah.’” If Nathan is having a hard time focusing, doing work, and participating in his regular classes, then I received a whole new Nathan during mine. That trust that he felt towards me, based on something we can share, sparked a new level of participation for him that carried on every week after; past the fourth week, not a week went by where Nathan didn’t participate in class discussions.

By the end, he did not see me as a random academic stranger, someone to whom he has no connection. I met him where he was, and by building a connection with each other, the trust built from there. Building a connection, even on something nonacademic, like New York Drill, helped him to see me as someone who he could trust. Once he trusted me, he was able to understand that my lessons were designed to help him deal with struggles he has faced in his educational career. He trusted me enough to push back against my claims that I made in class; without the trust being built, he may have been more nervous to disagree with a conjecture made by a teacher. He trusted his own voice. When trust is established, students are more likely to engage with the material and participate in lessons, Nathan is the proof of that; when students are more likely to engage the lessons and material, the students are more able to absorb and internalize the lessons. It is one thing to be in the classroom for the unit, however not participating and having your head on the desk, but students learn more when they are adding comments in discussions and putting their best into the activities. I've discovered that, in all classes, not just lessons around RPs, students who trust the teacher are more likely to understand the teachings. When they see that the teacher trusts them and believes in them, they focus more on education. There is a quote attributed to Theodore Roosevelt that reads, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." My students would not have learned as much about RPs and conflict resolution had I not built the trust that I did with both classes.

Students Trust Each Other, Creating a Community of Care and Support

I spent significant time in the early weeks enforcing the importance of community, and what it meant to be a member of a caring community. I wanted the students to understand that a community built on trust and care would nurture relationships and create bonds and circles of support within the community. The claim I made to my students is that being in a community built on principles of care would decrease the likelihood of dealing with conflict in violent ways; I said that communities that are built on care more often than not will be able to handle conflict in healthy, dialogue-based ways. But, on top of this, I told my students that when we trust each other as supportive members of the community, then conflict is less likely to come about. We discussed how when friendships are built on support and care, and each person can trust the other to help them when it's needed, you won't get into conflict too often. RPs are about making communities caring and supportive communities as a way to diminish conflict.

The first instance of some of the students seeing community as a way to support each other occurred during the first week of lessons. I spent the first lesson doing ice breakers, making a social contract with each class, and answering the question, "What is community, and how does it help us?" I wanted to leave it purposefully ambiguous as a way to gauge the students' baseline understanding of the concept of community. A lot of the answers, across both classes, were pretty basic; for example, one student in Ms. Jackson's class said that community was "a group of people together" which technically is true. However, two answers stood out to me, one in each class. The first came in Ms. Jackson's class. A girl named Marcy sheepishly raised her hand. Marcy is a student who blossomed over the course of our lessons; she started as timid to an extent, but ended the sessions feeling comfortable to speak louder than she ever had, and was

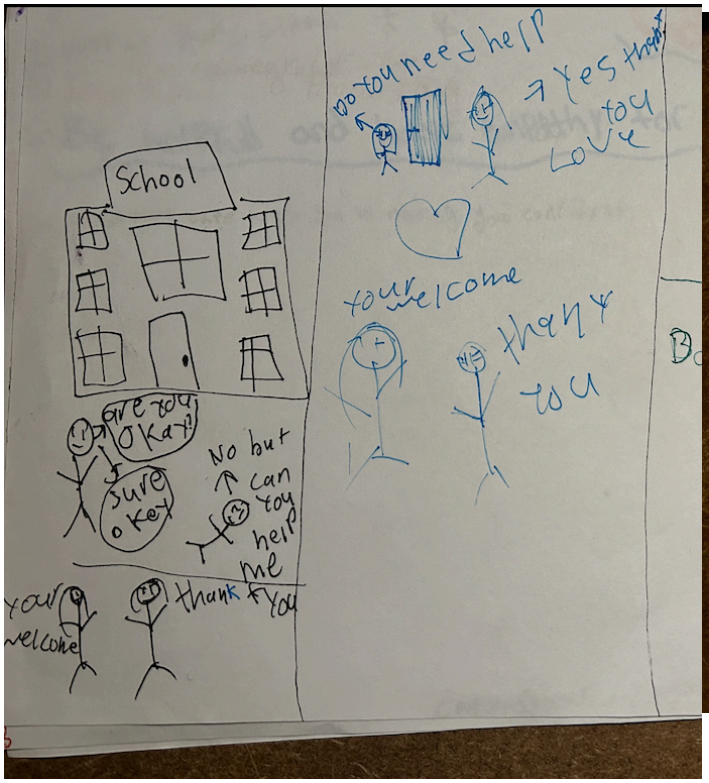
always telling me jokes, stories about funny things that happened to her and her friends at recess, and updating me on her robotics team – when the Millard Fillmore team came in fourth out of 25 Worcester elementary schools, Marcy ran up to me, beaming, and brandishing her medal. Marcy and I had built a relationship where she wanted to show me things she did that she was proud of; she trusted me enough to make herself vulnerable in that capacity, and knew that I would never diminish her accomplishments. When I called on her, in an extremely quiet voice – so quiet that my audio recorder did not pick it up, and I had to write it in my field notes – Marcy said, "Community is a place where we can rely on each other and help each other with our problems." I told her that was a beautiful thought, and one we were going to discuss more in depth in the coming weeks.With no prompting or attempts to elicit a specific response, Marcy had hit the nail on the head. I was curious if anyone else would share that initial sentiment. As much as Marcy gave the answer for which I was hoping, I continued to take responses. I both wanted everyone who had an idea to share, but I was worried that if I stopped with Marcy's answer, I would too obviously reveal that she gave the answer I wanted. One big goal that I had for the lessons was that the students should understand the learning outcomes as important, rather than me just telling them my ideal answers. If I didn't take any answers past Marcy's, I feared the students would understand her comment to be the idyllic answer, and whether they agreed with it or not, that would be the sentiment they took away. The next day, when I asked the same question to Ms. Max's class, this time I was blown away by an answer delivered by Bruce, the student who told me my final project idea was "fire." He raised his hand and said, "community is important because you can help people." A very similar idea to Marcy's. After the first week, those were the only two students that saw community as a method of care and help.

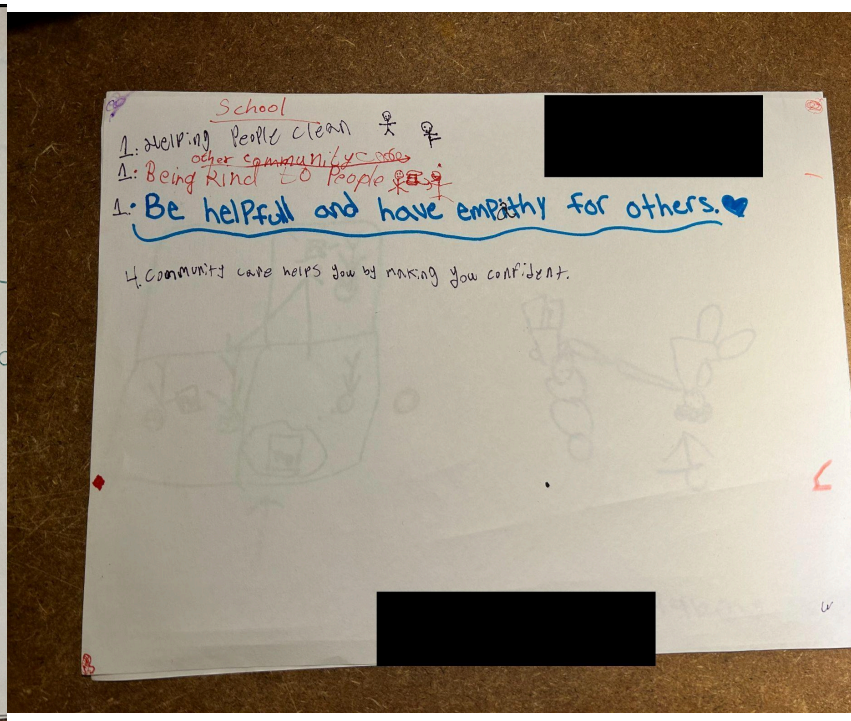
Nonetheless, the rest of the class, within the next few weeks, caught up to Marcy and Bruce's understanding of what community can provide. Marcy was actually very helpful in relaying this understanding to the rest of her peers. Week two of my lessons was on community care and what that could look like, and we discussed and brainstormed ideas on how community can be helpful. The following piece of transcription is a chunk of discussion that Marcy and I had in front of the rest of the class:

> Ezra: …Does anyone have another example of what community care could look like? *Eugenia and Christina have their hands up*. We've heard from you two a lot today, thank you, does somebody else who maybe hasn't spoken that much today have an idea? Marcy?
>
> Marcy: Like today, during recess, I was feeling really nervous and upset and everyone was there for me.
>
> Ezra: Everyone was there for you! What were they doing for you?
>
> Marcy: Well, Christina, Maryanne, everybody, just helped me out.
>
> Ezra: That's great! What did they do to help you out?
>
> Marcy: They, uh, came up to me… *gets interrupted by Charles*
>
> Ezra: Charles, let's make sure we're listening to Marcy.
>
> Marcy: They came over to me and talked to me about what was making me nervous.
>
> Ezra: And did it help make you feel better? *Marcy nods* Yeah, right! Cause we in our communities can make each other feel better, and that's what community care is.

This is an example of how community care is already enacted in the school setting. The rest of the class got to hear about this incident and how community care came into play. When it came

time for the students to do drawings on community care, these themes carried over and permeated the artwork. Below are two drawings done by Ms. Jackson's students; the first is done by Suta, Jasmine, and Marie, and the second is by Angel and Eugenia.





What struck me instantly in the drawing on the left was the building labeled "school." The authors of this drawing understood it to be a place where they had built community! I was also thrilled to see two pieces in the dark blue dialogue. The first was that the student who seemingly got hurt was willing to be vulnerable by stating that they were *not* ok and directly asking for help. In our Western world, it seems as if we are almost trained to reflexively answer "yes" to the "Are you okay?" question, no matter the validity of that statement. However, in Suta, Jasmine, and Marie's drawing, the hurt student trusts the other student to tell them that they are, in fact,

not okay and could use some assistance. The three girls drew trusting bonds into their depiction of community, and viewed community as a vehicle of support for bringing help to those members of the community who they trust.

In the drawing on the right, I was specifically drawn to the last line, reading "Community Care helps you by making you confident." This was not a sentiment that any members of the class shared publicly, and became an idea harbored by Angel and Eugenia. The class and I discussed how Restorative Practices work to create trust for peers and in the community, but it also creates trust for the individual. In a few sections earlier, I mentioned that Circles create trust in the students' own voices, and this drawing depicts that aspect of the practices. A trusting community will lead to students developing trust in themselves.

Both of these drawings echo an understanding that community can bring help and support to all of us within the community. These drawings focus specifically on the school community, as that's what I was working the hardest to build. This notion stayed consistent with the students up until the end of the sessions. One of the topics about which the students could write was community as a whole. Let's take a look at what Gabriel said about community on Week two vs. week eight. On week two, Gabriel wrote that "community mean [*sic*] all of us." Another true answer, but doesn't explicitly hit on what I wanted it to mention. However, in his final project, on week eight, Gabriel stated that, "Community is when you have people caring for [you] and people that love you and think of you as family." His definition of community changed to encapsulate the idea of caring for and being loved by your community! The same sentiments can be seen in Ms. Max's students' projects as well. Paula, Courtney, and Lulu wrote that,

> We can use Community care to help each other, and self care to help yourself and others. Community care helps a lot of people. Community care helps many people with maybe rent and their saving and get a job. Community care also helps people by maybe sometimes if someone has a problem with their leg or anything the [community] with [*sic*] help pay or hire someone to help them get around places or anything.

The same goes for the project created by Jeremy, Abraham, Andrew, and William. When explaining what community means to them, at the end of the eight weeks, the four boys wrote, "Caring for your community is importance [*sic*] because you need people or you be lonely. Some examples of community care is like giving people food of just think about other people. Help people if they need it help the community like picking up trash." A lot of the work on community was tailored to how community can help *us* feel better and supported, but this group went another route, and chose to discuss how *we* can help our communities. All of these understandings and ideas on what community means and why it is important are starkly different than when I first asked the question. The students grew to learn – and more importantly understand and internalize – how community can be a vehicle and method of support, and what that looks like in the school setting.

Connecting back to my conceptual framework, restorative justice is not only a tool to mediate harm and conflict that has already happened, but additionally a resource for *preventing* conflict and violence before it can be enacted. Community building is one of the ways that this can happen because students who see community as a way to care for and help each other are less likely to commit acts of violence within those communities of care. The students in both classes walked away from my lessons with a deeper understanding that their 5th grade class

could be, and was, a healthy, caring community. Restorative Practices created bonds and relationships in the class that were built on support and care. The students learned that, while in a community, such as their class, they could trust the other members of their community for support and guidance. Trusting bonds creates circles and communities of care, and that is a clear takeaway that my students had from the community lessons – one that I hope will stay with them in future years.

Repairing Broken Trust: Mending Bonds and Friendships

I set out to explain Restorative Justice to my students as an approach to learn how to productively solve conflict, prevent conflict in the first place, and repair relationships tarnished by unhealthy conflict. I mentioned that when we trust each other, both as a community and in our individual relationships, bonds are able to be repaired more easily than when trust isn't present. As class went on, it was apparently that repairing bonds was the aspect the students were really drawn to.

When it came time to discuss repairing relationships I brought in a story based on my own middle school experience; the violence in the story is an exaggeration, but the initial conflict and harm in the story is exactly true. In this story, a friend of mine named Frank got a question in math class wrong and everyone started laughing at him[6]. Frank, during recess, went up to Alex, the student who initiated the laughter, and pushed him off the top of the slide. Frank was promptly suspended from school for three days, and when he came back to school, everyone was scared of him, and didn't want to be his friend anymore; thus, he had lunch alone everyday for

[6] I was Frank; that left some academic scars.

the rest of seventh grade. Despite this not being exactly true of my middle-school experience, I'm sure in many places across the country, this is all too common. The students had lots of comments and questions about the story. Some I didn't love all that much, namely Andrew asking "why didn't Alex push him back?" In my panic to not reveal that the story was indeed a fabrication, I responded that he was on the floor hurt, and the teachers had come quickly to pull Frank away. But the question that I received by far most frequently, across both classes, was "Did you stop being friends with Frank?" I somberly explained to the students that I did, in fact, stop being friends with Frank because I was scared of him, but after a couple of weeks, I felt bad, and we talked it over and discussed our feelings, and went back to being friends. I wanted the students to see a real-world – or real to them – application of dialogue and restorative practices being used to repair friendships. After the story, we took some time to break down what the term "restorative" means, based on the root word, "restore." In Ms. Jackson's class, Eugenia was quick to say that it meant "to repair," and in Ms. Max's class, Vanessa, a student who had already impressed me with her vocabulary by explaining the definition of the word "penultimate" weeks before, said that to restore meant "to fix and make new and good again." I thought both definitions sufficed and was impressed.

The next thing we did, in regards to mending friendship bonds, was discuss the importance of hearing both sides of a conflict – this kind of deep listening is core to the RP philosophy. We had worked for the two weeks prior in discovering that conflict always has at least two sides, despite, as Bruce eloquently put it, "when someone is *very* clearly in the wrong." I asked the students what the two sides of the Frank-Alex conflict were, and everyone understood that one side was Frank pushing Alex. However, it was harder, and required more prompting, for

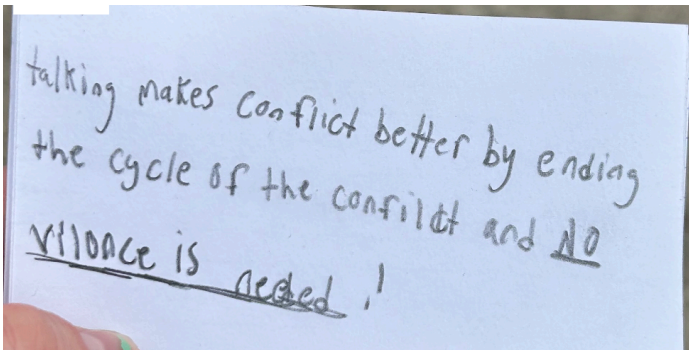
the students to see how Alex might have been in the wrong. Moreover, RPs aren't about who is wrong and who is right; the practices understand that harm came to both parties, and assigning blame isn't useful for repairing that harm. The concept of right and wrong came up in the second week of lessons, for both classes, coincidentally; this was a lesson on community care and how we can use the practice in our school setting. In Ms. Jackson's class, Charles said, "I had to help my friend one time because he was being teased, and it was wrong to tease him." In Ms. Max's class, the introduction of the term came in a similar manner: Roberta stated that "not helping your friends is wrong." In both of these cases, I outlined that, "during the course of these coming weeks, we are going to try to avoid the using the words 'right and wrong.'" I told them that Restorative Practices work "without putting blame on either person, and solving the issue at hand with understanding and without blame." So the students and I ceased to use the terms "right" and "wrong" moving forward.

It took some time, but the students decided that Alex hurt Frank when he laughed at Frank, which is 100% true. However, in Ms. Jackson's class, Jasmine, one of the funniest, sweetest, smiliest kids I've ever met, told me that "Alex *hurt* Frank by laughing at him." All the other answers I received, regardless of how true they may have been, only saw Frank's side of the conflict from Alex's standpoint: we shouldn't laugh at people, it's mean to laugh at people. However, Jasmine understood that Alex had hurt Frank and really upset him, not just that Alex did something we're not supposed to do. Understanding how violent aggressors are hurt before they get violent is a key understanding when it comes to breaking out of the punitive punishment cycle and conflict mediation. As much as Frank hurt Alex by pushing him, which is way more observable to an outsider's perspective, Alex hurt Frank by making fun of him. Again, we see the

conflict between Alex and Frank, and the interest the classmates had in solving the conflicts and restoring the bonds, demonstrating their engagement and interest in the repair process of Restorative Justice.

Later in this lesson, we talked about the role of a mediator, and how it was important to listen to both sides of the conflict to help restore the relationship. Charles told me that he already had been a mediator before. I asked him what he did, and he told me that he, "had two friends that were fighting. I told them that I could see the future and that they were going to be friends again after the fight was over… They did end up going back to being friends." Marie then said that a mediator was "kinda like a judge in court where they have to listen to both sides." I told her that was a great way of thinking about it.

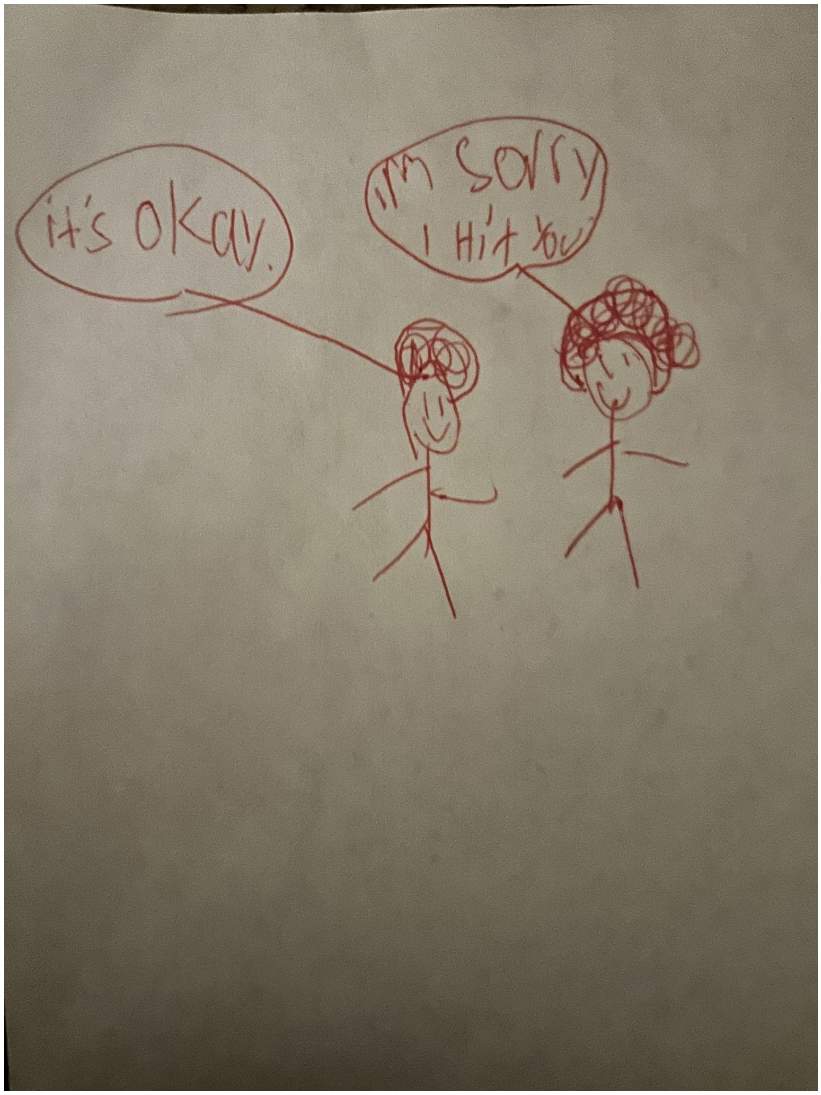
This idea of repairing friendships really stood out to the students, and the final projects, across both classes, were filled with takeaways on this. For Samantha's final project, she included the conjecture, "If you talk through a conflict it will make the situation better so you could even become friends." In Jasmine's group project, she had an animation of two other people in her group, Marcy and Rebecca, engaging in a fight. Rebecca goes to get a "trusted adult" to help mediate their conflict, and I was delighted to see that I was the aforementioned trusted adult! After discussing the problem, the pair reached an understanding, and Rebecca asked Marcy if she "want[ed] to be friends again?" "Yes," was the resounding answer. Maryanne, another student in the group, included her own reflection, separate from the fictitious Rebecca-Marcy fight, stating, "talking makes conflict better by ending the cycles of conflict and no violence is needed!" See image below: Maryanne, I couldn't have put it better myself. The term "cycles of conflict" was 100% her own idea, and made me tear up when I read it. It allowed



me to understand that the students understood the concepts which we were discussing, and understood them at such a deep level, that they could unpack new and deeper aspects of the concepts without prompting from me. I sat down with Jasmine and asked her why she chose to use conflict mediation in her reflection on the class. She told me a story about her and her friend and getting into a, in her words, "pretty bad argument" in church and the two of them stopped being friends. She explained that she was really upset by this, and at the time, wasn't sure what she could do to make it better, and was excited to "try out this new strategy of mediation." I told her that was really sweet and I hope it works out. In Angel and Victoria's project, the two used clipart artworks to set a scene of mediation in progress, resulting in the two fighting girls forgiving one another, and the last slide is them jumping rope together again.

Ms. Max's class had similar reflections on the importance of repairing relationships. Mitch, Bruce, and Jonah's project was about a bully who goes around terrorizing his classmates by pouring milk on their heads and dumping their school lunch trays, but results in mediation mending the relationship, and the bully becoming friends with his two former targets. Continuing on, Jeremy, Abraham, Andrew, and William stated that, "Restorative practices is when you solve a without problems [*sic*] using Violence [*sic*] important because you don't get hurt. An example of restorative practice is if some hit you at school instead of hit him back you can tell a teacher or

talk about it and could become friends." Even Nathan bought into the idea that talking about conflict could help lead to a path of forgiveness. His drawing is as follows:



Granted, there is still violence being displayed in the drawing, but he understood how talking through conflict could help repair the bonds and lead to levels of forgiveness.

I was curious why so many of the students were drawn to the idea of Restorative Justice being used as a method of repairing friendships. Think about when you were in fifth grade, and something may have happened to ruin one of your close, sacred friendships. That alone is a sad thought, but now think about that experience and not having any skills to mitigate that conflict and repair your friendships. Friendships are so powerful to us – especially at that young of an age – and bring us so much joy, that anything that can be done to tarnish the sanctity of that is a travesty. I remember my best friend in fourth grade telling me that if I didn't stop pretending I was a vampire's sidekick, the Blood Bunny, then he wasn't going to invite me to his birthday party. It was really hard to know how to handle that situation, and I was filled with anguish. When one of our sacred peer-to-peer bonds is broken, we need strategies in ways to fix them; for young students like mine, it felt hopeful to learn a way to handle that conflict. Very natural conflict between close friends stopped feeling so futile, now that the students had strategies to mend and restore the initial bonds. The students learned some of these strategies through role playing exercises; we would simulate conflict, and assign roles, such as mediator, and party one and party two of the conflict, and the students would get to practice the things they would say and the actions they would take in each of those situations. We did role playing in the class based around the Frank and Alex story. I split the students into groups of three. Using the story shared in last week's class, the students took turns using the mediation sentence starters to engage in mediation of the story's conflict. One member was the mediator, one was party one, and the other party two. Students were assigned to rotate assignments after a few minutes to get practice with each role. I allowed the students to share their role playing with the full class if they so chose.

RPs teach us how to maintain the relationships that we have built; it's one thing to have a bond and then conflict arises and that bond is decimated, but it is a deeper bond if it can withstand conflict. The students worked on creating bonds built on trust, and RPs allowed the students to strengthen the bonds to withstand conflict. It is my belief that conflict is not all bad. Conflict is natural and comes up in typical everyday life. The negative aspect of conflict is when the parties don't know how to resolve the conflict, and the bonds shatter. The students learned how to not let this happen, and how to use RPs to mend bonds that previously had shattered. DeMeulenaere (2012) tells us that engaging in conflict is healthy, and when students who trust each other are able to embrace the conflict, and have discussions about resolving it, the conflict resolution muscles strengthen, and so does the trusting bond. They trusted the bonds that they had built enough to have difficult dialogues around how conflict arises and how to move forward with healing and restoring those relationships. They also, and maybe more importantly, trusted the RJ process, and trusted the Community Guidelines we had created enough to work to mend the fractured bonds. They believed that our class had bonds built on trust and could use that space to have dialogue centered around repairing bonds. They trusted the members of their community to engage in those conversations. Even Nathan was able to translate that feeling into a piece of art depicting repairing trust between members who had engaged in violent conflict.

Placing Trust in Negative Classroom Role Models

The next couple of sections is about role models, an area paramount to trust. Role models are people in whom we place our trust, but sometimes that trust leads students astray and down a path of bad behavior. This became clear to me through watching how students would behave in

comparison to other louder students who the class viewed more as leaders. The two discoveries of this that I found are not unique to Millard Fillmore Elementary; this same concept was true when I was in middle school.

When I was in sixth and seventh grade, I made Honor Roll every marking period, and it wasn't super challenging for me to do so. I did all my work on time, and I was respectful to my teachers. But in eighth grade, I had a new-found desire to be cool. I do not know where the desire came from, it just felt natural to me as I was growing to become a teenager and getting ready for high school. To do so, I started to mimic the behavior and social cues from the students in my grade that I had decided were cool – and their behavior was very different from my behavior at the time. I took on enough of that behavior to the point where my teachers were able to notice the changes in me. The most illustrative moment in this development was in Ms. Vaughn's class, my eighth-grade math class. To this day, I have never been in a classroom space where the students disrespected the teacher like the way my class disrespected Ms. Vaughn. Our decision was to return the favor, and be rude and disengaged from her teaching. I stopped doing a portion of my homework, and my grades began to slip a bit – I was surrounded by students, who I considered to be cool, who were not turning in the homework either. But the biggest change in my behavior came from how I would address Ms. Vaughn: I was extremely close with basically all of my teachers in middle school. I would always greet them by name, and some teachers I was close enough with to call by Mr. or Ms. their first name. In my school – and this I have observed being true in a good chunk of middle-school settings – a lot of students would just refer to the teachers as plain Miss or Mister, and in no class was this more prevalent than Ms. Vaughn's class. This is a practice among Spanish speaking students that is actually a sign of respect, but it was so

prevalent in Ms. Vaughn's class because it wasn't just Spanish speaking students who were doing it. Everyone did it, as a disrespectful way to deindividualize her. I started to do the same thing, and began to call her "Miss." I will never forget my mother coming home after parent-teacher conferences and telling me that Ms. Vaughn had told her that I, like all the other students, call her "Miss." It was enough of a drastic change from my typical behavior to the point where she found it pertinent to let my mother know. On top of this, she wielded the dagger through my heart with the line, "he's doing it because he hears the other students do it too." I was not consciously doing it for this reason – or I didn't know at the time – but she was absolutely correct.

In childhood development and elementary-middle school, students are coming into their own identity, and discovering what it means to be their own individual; unfortunately, a lot of this comes at the hand of mimicking peers' behavior, and a lot of times, this is a way that "bad" or unhealthy behavior gets replicated (Rymanowicz, 2015; Sun & Shek, 2011). In each of my classes in Millard Fillmore, there are students who take on unhealthy behavior because they see it as cool to do so. One I knew was happening, and the other came as a surprise to me. For the former, in Ms. Jackson's class there is a trio of distracting students and students who get in trouble the most for conflict; two of whom I've mentioned, Jonathon and Gabriel, the ring leaders. The third member of the trio is a student named Jaylen. Jaylen is the quietest of the three and the one who distracts and interrupts the class the least. Week by week, I would observe their dynamic, and by the third week, it became glaringly obvious to me that Jaylen was replicating "cool" behavior he observed. The final piece of the puzzle to me was how he would parrot the exact back-talk responses that Jonathon and Gabriel would offer to Ms. Jackson, and he would do so verbatim. In week three, Jonathan and Charles were playing with a ball during class.

Charles walked up to Jonathon and smacked it out of his hand, and the ball rolled across the classroom. Ms. Jackson told Jonathon to give her the ball, and Jonathon retorted with the line every teacher knows all too well, “I didn’t even do nothing!” From all the way across the classroom, as far away from the incident as possible, Jaylen exclaims, “Yeah, he didn’t even do anything!” At that moment, I knew for sure what dynamic we had on our hands. In the midpoint interview with Ms. Jackson, I wanted to ask her about this, but she beat me to the punch, saying, “And I have another student who’s trying to act like the bad students, do you know what I mean? So he’s trying to follow that. He’s trying to be cool because he sees his friends do it, so he’s trying to talk back to me.” I asked her if she was allowed to say who, after I assured her everything would be confidential. She furthered, “Jaylen is trying to follow in Gabriel and Jonathan’s footsteps with talking back to me.” I told her that was who I assumed she meant, and she went on to explain how she and Ms. Max have been attempting to handle the situation.

> Mhm, I had to have a conversation with him yesterday, and Ms. Max had a conversation with him, and Angela Martinez, the AP[7], also had a conversation with him. He’s been better today, but he’s trying to follow in his friends’ footsteps, I feel like he’s trying to act cool, and I’m like ‘Jaylen you wouldn’t do this, and now you’re doing this and I don't know why.’ and he like won’t open up about it.

A lot of times, students don’t know why they’re doing this, it just comes with growing up and starting puberty, as was alluded to by both Ms. Max and Ms. Jackson independently of one another. It is tough for us to reconcile with why we are choosing to go down this path of mimicking behavior, and tough to see how we can divert from this path down which we are

[7] Assistant Principal

heading. Jaylen is fortunate to have teachers like Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max who understand the position in which he finds himself, and wants to work with him to understand, break down, and rectify the behavior shown.

The mimicked behavior in Ms. Max's class was tougher for me to identify, and was a shock when Ms. Max revealed it to me. This relationship was between Nathan and Andrew. When Nathan was spending his time participating to tell me that violence is the best way to solve conflict and get your point across, Andrew was right there to back his ideas up, and even offer a very helpful miming to the class of how one should go about using violence as a solution. I talked to Ms. Max about this, and our conversation was as follows:

> Ezra: And so just because like Andrew has kind of broken out of his shell a little bit, but he's still really trapped in the idea of 'look, violence is the only way to solve problems.' Which is, which is, what – I, I knew there were some kids that were gonna still be in that mindset.
>
> Ms. Max: Andrew is a pretender, by the way; he has never gotten in a fight. He would never, he's like the most innocent. Yeah, he's, he's, he's acting tough. And sometimes he does like in front of Nathan. Like, he's actually one of the role model students, in fifth grade. So sometimes he'll act like that. Never gotten into a fight or like would never because he hates to get in trouble.

This was a lot more surprising to me than hearing about Jaylen. It seemed so natural that Andrew was also in this violent mindset, rather than he was doing it to mimic Nathan's behavior that he decided was cool. It just goes to show, any behavior that we, as a society, deem as unhealthy and punishable, might not be the student's true colors – not to say that any bad behavior is indicative of a student's true colors.. We might end up punishing behavior that isn't natural to the student. I

believe that bad behavior is learned behavior and translated through role models. Positive role models have the ability to make good behavior the norm among the students in the classroom.

The implications for this finding is that it is our job as educators to be aware of this phenomenon and do our best to nip it in the bud when we see it. We, as educators, also can work to create new visions of what cool is. If we are able to create a model of cool around someone who follows the Classroom guidelines, then that positive behavior becomes the role model. This is done through earning "street credit," essentially. Students whom the others view as cool are often the ones who have the most credit in school – whether that be fashion sense, technology, basketball skills, dance skills, etc. etc. If the teachers build up that credibility among the students, our behavior becomes the model behavior, and we become the positive role models. But we also have to focus on winning over the students the class views as cool. When the "cool student" endorses the teacher through following their behavior, the rest of the class should follow. Building credibility among the students is tantamount to building trust.

Restorative Justice gives us educators the skills to treat bad behavior as fixable, rather than defaulting straight to punishment. If we punish students for behavior that isn't even true to them, without getting to the root issue, we are replicating the oppressive punitive cycles on students to whom they wouldn't pertain. We also need to show good, healthy behavior as much attention as bad, unhealthy behavior. That was my philosophy for the project and what I aimed to do each lesson: No student would make a comment in class without receiving positive affirmation from me about the comment; I wanted the class to feel that every comment they made was valued and important to the full-class discussion. Even with a comment like Nathan's comment advocating for the importance of violence, I still treated it as a great comment. I told

him that was an interesting thought and asked why he believed it to be true. Too often bad behavior gets the attention more than good behavior, because good behavior is seen as the norm and not worthy of an interaction. But if we want students to replicate that good behavior, rather than the bad behavior, it falls on our shoulders as educators to publicly praise that good behavior worthy of replication, as much as, and even more so than, we publicly chastise the bad behavior. It builds trust when educators praise student behavior and strengthens the student-teacher bond. In turn, the students are less likely to fall into traps of replicating bad behavior that is getting shown attention; the good behavior is the norm that is receiving praise, and it is coming from a trusted role model.

Harm That is Caused by Betraying Trust with Students

This next section is another example of the damage that role models using the trust instilled in them can do when that trust is used negatively. Students hate getting in trouble; it is one of the worst feelings that we have in school. Sometimes, when students get punished, it alters the way that they view themselves, in a negative way. Schools enforce punishment as a way to punish behavior it deems as unacceptable, and students believe that if they were punished, it means that they were acting poorly. If that happens enough, students might begin to believe that they are just "bad kids," and are more likely to continue to act out in the future (D'Orio, 2023, paragraph 5). I wanted to address this in my lessons, and see if I could get the students to not think of themselves as problem children if they get in trouble.

I found that my students, in both classes, responded well to games that were played as introductory material to the lessons; higher levels of engagement were shown, and the students

were more likely to absorb the material if there was a game component attached to the lesson – their exit tickets and assessments showed greater quality in work for these lessons. For my lesson on punishment, I designed a game to counter reinforcing self-fulfilling prophecies of bad students. In Ms. Max's class, I passed each student an index card with a species of animal written on it, e.g dog, cat, horse, sheep, etc. I explained that we were going to walk around the room and have conversations with all of our classmates. However, the caveat was that the students could *only* communicate through the sounds that the animal on their card would make; a student who received a "cat" card had to walk around the class "meowing" at their peers. The students were very excited about this, and everyone did the game to great success: no one spoke in English, and no one spoke with the wrong animal noise. Vanessa immediately asked if I had included a fox in my cards; I told her I debated it, but chose to omit a fox because "weren't you guys like three when that song[8] came out." After three minutes, I instructed everyone to return to their seats to await the next set of instructions. This time, for the next three minutes, I told the students to *pick* what animal they wanted to mimic to engage in conversation; the freedom to choose was on the shoulders of each individual. The same excitement ensued, and not one student picked the same animal that they had received on their card, which I found interesting. I wanted that game to sit with the students, so instead of immediately explaining my thought behind the game's development, I began the class with a discussion on punishment, by first asking what some types of punishment they receive in school. The most common responses I got were: "have a conversation with the principal"; "lose Fun Friday[9]"; "Get a phone call home." All very common

[8] Ylvis – "What Does the Fox Say?"

[9] Fun Friday is a time that Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max hold every Friday afternoon, where the kids are able to go and play outside and essentially have an extended recess. However, if any student has outstanding work still or were being distracted enough, one of the teachers will stay inside with the student(s) for a period of Fun Friday.

punishments for elementary students. Nathan pulled from his prior experiences, and listed "getting suspended from school for a day." One that I thought was interesting was Paula mentioning, "having to write an apology letter." I had never heard that one before, but it seemed like it could be an example of Restorative Justice! After these were all listed, I asked the class two questions: "How does punishment make you feel emotionally?" and "How does punishment make you feel about yourself?" Paula raised her hand, and said "it seems like there's no way to avoid punishment. It makes me feel defeated." Andrew replied with, "It makes me feel bored." The last comment came from Vanessa, who said, "It takes over my emotions and makes me really angry." I was moving on to discuss the next aspect of punishment, how it makes us feel about ourselves. I said,

> Let's say, right. Everybody in our lives says that people who get detention and get suspended are bad kids, right? And anybody who gets in trouble for punching somebody is a mean kid, is a bad kid. Is, is, you know, a problem to the school, a troublemaker. And that's what you are hearing all your time in school, right? It's what your parents are saying. The principal is saying your teachers are saying, right, your classmates are saying. So what happens when you get into tension? What might you think about yourself?

Jonah raised his hand and said, "I might make you feel like you're a bad kid, a disappointment." Next was Bruce: "It makes you feel like a monster." Vanessa chimed in, and stated, "It might make you feel like you don't *deserve* Fun Friday or something like that." I told them they all hit the nail on the head, and that hearing all this stuff about what kids who are punished are like changes the way we feel about ourselves inside. At this point, I shifted the discussion back

towards the opening game, asking, “How do we think that game might be related to that idea of punishment that we just discussed?” I was blown away by the responses, and they were ideas I did not consider. Brianna, a student who has opted to sit by herself in the back of the class, said, “It made us think that we’re, like, crazy kids.” I told her it was a good thought, but not what I had in mind; Gracie’s idea was that it made us unable to understand and speak with others – another good thought. Jonah thought that, “it made us seem like we were wild animals,” similar to the thought that punishment makes us feel like monsters. I professed that these were all great ideas and not what I had in mind, but was very impressed at their collective interpretation. The way I explained it was:

> But the way that I'm thinking of right, is, let's say, you know, hypothetically, let's say Bruce didn't want to be a dog, right? But I told Bruce that he had to be. And in the end, Bruce was acting like a dog because people were telling him he was a dog, right? People were telling Vanessa she was a seal. So she had to act like it, right? People are telling Lily she was a cat. She had to act like a cat. Nathan was a rooster, right? He had to act like a rooster. And so this is kind of how punishment works too. If somebody tells you you're a bad kid, and you're doing things that are bad, you might start acting like a bad kid even if that isn't what you're like. Just because that's what you feel like you are, that's what you've been told that you are.

After this, Paula raised her hand, and told me I “was speaking a lot of true facts from last year in fourth grade,” and explained how she viewed the game.

Before I get into Paula’s explanation, I feel the need to contextualize the educational journey on which the Millard Fillmore students have embarked upon until this point. COVID

shut down their class in first grade; they were fully online until third grade, and missed key social development periods due to Zoom classes. In fourth grade, midway through the year, their teacher had a very public mental breakdown, and had to be removed from the school. I asked Ms. Jackson about all of those incidents and if they had Social-Emotional Learning ramifications. Ms. Jackson said,

> Oh 100%. They've missed a lot of first grade, a lot of second grade, and honestly, fourth grade sucked for them… [the teacher] quit, and then it was [the principal and AP teaching them], so they really missed 2 ½ years of their elementary school, so we're like, they're so bright, but the SEL intelligence is lacking. And that's why I think it's great that you're coming, like I think it's very helpful and they need that.

This grade has had a lot of challenges and roadblocks in their educational journey, and they are doing their best to overcome them. The fourth-grade teacher incident is what Paula was referencing.

Paula continued on by saying, "One of our teachers was calling us bad kids, and saying that we were always going to be bad kids, and that we didn't listen. And we were just, like, bad in general… My behavior was bad, but it ended up becoming more bad after that." Nathan chimed in to add his experiences with the teacher: "She kept saying we were bad, so I thought, 'if she already thinks we're bad, I might as well act bad.'" Roberta spoke next, and stated that "some teachers kept thinking we were bad, disgusting, terrible, and gross because we would talk back to them, and so we heard this – and I don't know how she was a teacher – and we started to feel bad, disgusting, terrible, and gross." Even the teachers they have now could see the

long-term effects this had on the students. In my conversation with Ms. Max about the fourth grade incident, she stated,

> So they came in [to fifth grade], like very, you know, they were not confident. They came in thinking they were bad kids, because they were told they were bad kids. And if a teacher, you know, basically, from what they perceived, either quit on them or got fired, they're thinking that they're bad kids, because they made a teacher leave. So um, that has kind of just stuck with them.

The students had internalized that denotation of being "bad kids," and it permeated into the next year, even with a new set of teachers – a set of teachers, I will add, hellbent on making them see that they are *not* bad kids – they came into the new year with an identity of being bad kids, all because they were told that they were.

Punishment works very similarly, and Nathan and Jonathon are examples of that. One day, as I walked up the three flights of stairs to Ms. Jackson's class, Jonathon was seated at the top of the steps, in tears. I sat down next to him, and asked if he felt comfortable sharing with me what happened. He explained that he was in trouble for changing the name of someone's computer username to a mean name. He was adamant that he didn't do it, and claimed that he was only blamed because "someone who didn't see [him] do it, told Ms. Jackson that [he] had done it." His plan was to just sit at the top of the steps until dismissal came forty minutes later. I have no way of knowing whether or not Jonathon actually did commit this act; from his recounting, he seemed innocent, but Ms. Jackson has told me that, "He has a really hard time with accepting ownership and responsibility of his actions and that's like the biggest thing with him; he'll twist any story for him to be the victim." I was conducting this conversation

impartially and without focusing on blame being cast. I asked Jonathon if he thought that explaining his side of the story to Ms. Jackson would be helpful, to which he replied, "No because I'm already in trouble. It's no use; they see me as the bad kid." Jonathan thought that there was no way he could get out of punishment because the school already knows of him as being a troublemaker or a bad kid. Hypothetically, let's say Jonathon was not the one who changed the username. When it comes down to explaining his side of story, Jonathon would find it futile because he has taken on the persona of being the bad kid. He will continue to be punished as the bad kid, and the cycle and self-fulfilling bad kid prophecy will continue.

I discovered something similar with Nathan. When Nathan was regaling me with tales of his football fight and how he had to spend a day in Out-of-School Suspensension (OSS), he very lightly – almost like he paid it no mind – explained to me that he was sent to "the bad kids school." I asked him how he felt about that, and he said that "he felt like a bad kid and that I shouldn't be in Millard Fillmore." This OSS school has been colloquialized among the students at Millard Fillmore as "the bad kids school," and they have started to believe that anyone who is sent to the bad kids school, must, in turn, be a bad kid themselves. Nathan started to feel like a bad kid, and didn't think he had a choice until I started to teach his class about restorative justice and alternative methods for conflict resolution and school punishment. When discussing Nathan with Ms. Max, she had a comment that I was delighted to hear; she explained,

> And what he did say, which I thought was really great. Last week, he says, 'oh, like, so I, you know, I got suspended. Can that like ever, like be like erased like off my record?' So I think it got through to him a little bit. And I was like, well, It can't be erased, But, you know, it happened in fourth grade, and you can work to change it. He started to realize that people change. So just one year of [not getting into fights], and then

you have a clean record the rest of the year, then you'll be fine.

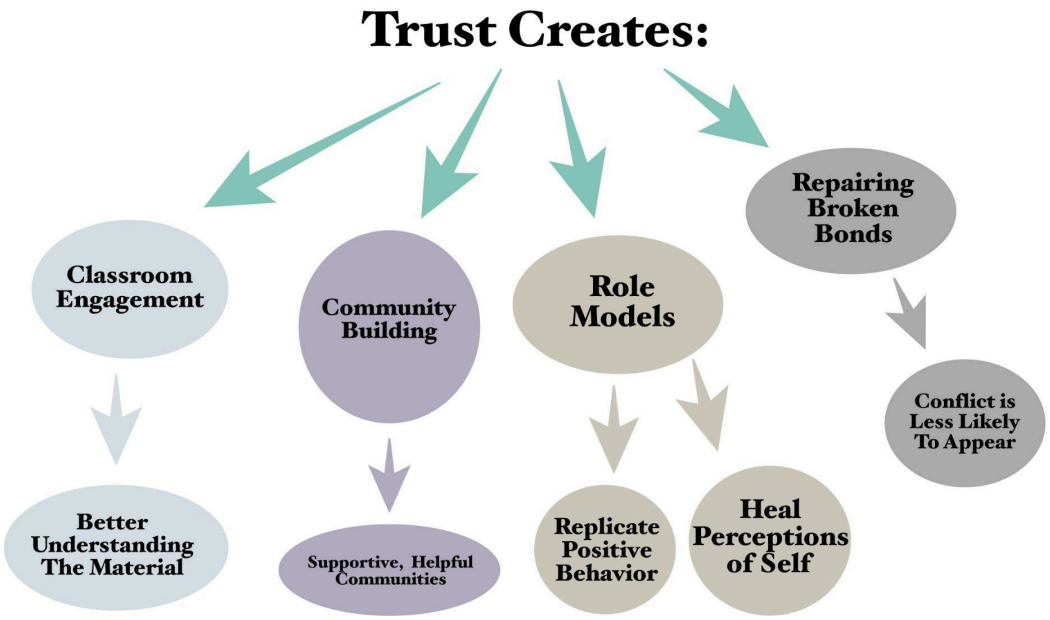
Nathan, for what Ms. Max made it seem like the first time, discovered that he could change the way he is viewed in schools, and the way he acts. He discovered that he doesn't *have* to be a bad kid, just because people in authority deem that he is, and tells him that he is. As educators of young, developing minds, we have to be incredibly mindful of how we are viewing our students, because they start to believe it. We cannot publicly deem that a generation of students are bad and misbehaving, and then get confused why the students start to misbehave. In rap music, there is an all-too common trope of rappers rapping about how their teachers said they were going to fail and not amount to anything. That is *mind boggling* to me that, as role models, we would instill such low levels of self-confidence in our students. Restorative justice acts as a tool to make sure that we are not fulfilling cycles of bad behavior and making our students understand that one mistake does not make them a "monster" or a "terrible, gross student." But it is also a way that RPs allow students to trust themselves. When a teacher tells the student that they believe in them, the student trusts that they are worthy of praise and success – it is the opposite of telling your student they won't amount to anything in life. Ms. Max begins her school year by telling her students that "it is [her] job to make sure that they learn, but it is also [her] job to make sure that you all believe in yourselves." When educators – as role models, whether it is positive or negative role models – tell their students that they believe in them, the students start to work to build trust in themselves, relating to higher levels of trust for the whole community.

Conclusion

Summary

To reiterate the above, trust and relationship building creates communities that are engaged and supportive. Trust builds bonds that can be relied on for receiving help and guidance. In schools, a lot of that guidance comes from teachers who have worked hard to earn that trust from their students, and so teachers need to be mindful of how they honor that trust. Do not allow the trust that students have in their teachers to create self-fulfilling prophecies around bad behavior; do not allow the trust that students have in their teachers to create disproportionate attention shown to bad behavior. Trust is a powerful force that, when built into the school community, creates rich levels of engagement; it creates supportive circles of students willing to help and support their peers; and it works to break students free of punitive punishment cycles in play and dismantle stereotypes they might believe about themselves.

Collective Analysis



Above is a diagram to illustrate the areas of what building trust created; this is the Millard Fillmore-specific chart of what I outlined in my Conceptual Framework as potential outcomes of building trust in the classroom community. First, building trust with the class led to higher levels of classroom engagement; the students, after I had worked to establish trust, participated at a higher level and had more advanced answers to questions on their exit tickets – there was also greater willingness to volunteer to share student work in front of the whole class. On top of higher levels of engagement being displayed, building trust with the class led to students having an easier time of absorbing and internalizing the material. Once the engagement was boosted, the students were actively listening and participating, and that resulted in the students better understanding the material the Circles covered.

Second, building trust led to the students establishing a community built on trust, and creating communities filled with support and care. The trust that existed between the students manifested itself in support circles and in helping out a friend in need. By the end of our mini unit on community, the students agreed that they were in a caring community, and a community on which they could rely for help; the students didn't just agree they were in a community because they were in the same class or from the same city, but rather because they trusted each other and felt comfortable being vulnerable enough to ask one another for help – a clear indicator of a community predicated on trust and care.

On top of this, trust between members in the community allowed the members to be able to repair bonds that were harmed by conflict. The students learned how to engage in collaborative problem solving and peer mediation. Trust between the students creates bonds that are less likely to cause conflict, but were it to arise, the students now have the skills to restore the bonds back to their strength. If a bond was broken between two students who didn't trust each other, the bond is less likely to be able to be restored; but when students trust their fellow community members, they can engage in a dialogue to rebuild the trust and the initial relationship. The class now doesn't have to be as nervous about dealing with engaging in conflict mediation – they can embrace the conflict and work to rectify it, and the trust is honored and strengthened by doing so.

Students' behavior in the classroom also indicated how trust becomes clear in role models. Role models are, for better or for worse, people into whom we have placed our trust. Role models have the power to shape the behavior of those who follow them. In Millard Fillmore, I saw that some classroom role models were displaying negative behavior, and the

students who followed them were replicating the negative aspects of their behavior – due to the role model being perceived as cool. When students trust themselves, they are less likely to need a role model whose behavior should be mimicked; they trust themselves to have their own behavior. Additionally, as teachers, we can build up trust with our students to, in turn, build up credibility. When that becomes the case, the students start to see the teachers as a role model, and the positive behavior that teachers can model permeates itself into becoming the behavioral norm within the classroom.

However, teachers have been known to use that trust the students instilled into them, and their status as a role model, to cause harm to their students, and I saw that to be true for the two classes' fourth grade teacher. She created a self-fulfilling prophecy around the students by calling them bad kids, causing the students to internalize that description, and behave like bad kids. When trust gets broken like that, it is hard for students to build that trust up again in a teacher, and the teachers have to work hard to earn the trust of their students. It is important that the students grow to trust themselves and believe in themselves as good people, and students worthy of care, compassion, and support. Students believing in themselves, and trusting that their teachers and role models see them as good and worthy kids, the students learn that there is a difference between a bad kid and a bad choice. That way, any time when a student does get in trouble – because we are all bound to get into trouble at some point in our lives! – the student doesn't automatically start to think of themselves as a bad kid; rather they trust themselves enough to understand they are still a good and respectful student, they just made a not ideal choice. The self-fulfilling prophecy of being a bad kid and acting bad does not continue to prey

on students who are filled with trust for themselves, their community, their teachers, and their fellow students.

Theoretical Implications

My experience with facilitating this set of RPs can offer insight into who can benefit from Restorative Practices. When I was doing my research for this project, elementary schools were an under-researched and understudied setting for RPs; most of the cases of RPs I found were in middle to high school settings. However, elementary school is the time where the students first are developing their theories and philosophies and learning socialization skills. I was confused why students at that age weren't afforded practices to help with those aspects of their development. When students get to high school, it is much harder to change the ways of handling conflict that they have known for a decade or more. It makes sense to start teaching students at a younger age these strategies, rather than after violence and punishment is already burned into their psyches. I hope that this project demonstrates that elementary students can have success in learning about and experimenting with RPs and depicts that elementary educators should work to introduce their students to RPs.

When elementary students build trust with members of their class, they also build trust in themselves, an aspect of trust that I think people often ignore. It is important, of course, to be able to trust your community, your friends, and your teachers, but the true power of trust is not fully developed if we are not empowering students to trust themselves and their voices. Students trusting their voices and thoughts is a key to lifelong learning; the students believe that their thoughts matter and are valued, and they are more likely to stay committed to education –

building trust in one's voice, in turn, builds a sense of belonging in school. It is increasingly difficult to trust your teacher or classmates, if you do not trust yourself. RPs are a seamless way to inspire the students to trust their own voice and individuality. Authors writing about trust should include this in their analysis.

When students learn about building trust and conflict resolution in school at a young age, it strengthens those muscles and builds a psyche of trust. Trust, just the same as your biceps or quads, is a muscle that needs to be developed and worked out. The Circle process acts as reps and workouts for those muscles, and engaging in healthy conflict resolution helps to strengthen that muscle. Just as is true in human anatomy, the trust muscle can atrophy if not used correctly or consistently. What I mean by this is, as educators, we cannot abandon trust exercises once we have determined trust is present in our classrooms; the lessons and trust-building work needs to continue throughout the duration of the school year, so it continues to be developed and improved upon. When young students learn the Circle process at a young age, the students grow up in school with an understanding of the six points DeMeulenaere outlines in “Towards a Pedagogy of Trust,” with my additional point of building trust in themselves.

Practical Implications

So what, as teachers, can we do to fulfill this role? There are two ways, in my opinion, and they can be done through an “and/or” method, depending on what the specific school will allow. The first way, the hardest but perhaps the most fulfilling in the end, is to work with the school administration to build restorative practices into its default punishment procedure. The school should also build Circles into its full school atmosphere, rather than in select few classes.

I see benefits from this in a couple of areas. For one, this way all students receive lessons on trust, community, and conflict resolution, so when conflict comes up, every member of the school has the skills of how to handle that conflict; but a whole school atmosphere built on trust and community should see fewer instances of conflict emerging to begin with. Second, a schoolwide approach to RPs and trust building will also build trust among the teachers and staff at the school, it isn't just for the students. If teachers do not trust their co-teachers and co-staff in the school, it becomes harder to pass along the importance of trust to the students. When everyone in the school has lessons and training on RPs and Circles, restorative justice becomes the norm in the school, and all school members become immersed in its framework. Also, teachers and administration can work to foster community relationship building within the school. They can have blocks devoted to teaching about what a community is and can be done similarly to what my lessons on community taught.

If your school is unwilling to build this infrastructure into the institution, the second way of implementing these lessons falls on the shoulders of the teacher. We can build RPs into our lessons; we can host conflict mediation circles independently from the school administration. Teacher can do what I did and teach the curriculum on RPs – see Appendix A for a full breakdown of the lessons I taught. This will be something that I will do in my class (and hopefully my school) as a young teacher when I have my own classroom. These lessons are adaptable and can be used for any classroom and for any age. I will work to create communities of trust and support and carry those bonds for the 180 days of the school year, and then into the next school years. I have seen first hand how classrooms built on RPs can be these spaces of trust and support, and I will take it upon myself to continue that work throughout my teaching career.

I think that the lessons on community care and conflict mediation were crucial. The former changed the ways that students viewed community; it turned their definition of community of just a group of people interacting in the same space, to understanding that community can be vessels and forces to bring help and support to the people around us about whom we care. This will permeate the classroom, and students will get more out of the lessons, especially if the teachers have built up trust with them. In terms of conflict resolution, these are lessons about which the importance cannot be overstated. It is imperative that students understand healthy resolution and mediation skills so conflict doesn't deter from learning. When Jonathon was in conflict and crying at the top of the steps, he was outside of the learning space; he was content to stay on the steps and miss all of the learning that came from that time. As educators, we need to be able to teach strategies on how to deal with anything that will take away from our students' learning time. I trust that teachers building their classes around principles of RPs will see greater success from their students, academically, and also socially and developmentally. The students will also trust their own voices more inside and out of the classroom.

Limitations:

One of the main limitations in my research came from scheduling around the times to conduct my lesson. Millard Fillmore Elementary builds in a period devoted to SEL time. It fell during the last block of the day, right after specials – like gym, music, or chorus. Because it was later in the afternoon, and the shortest block, I think the kids were mentally tired and drained from the day. Ms. Max and Ms. Jackson agreed with that. Ms. Jackson explained it to me as, "They come back from specials. So imagine, like, they go to lunch, then they go to recess, then

they go to specials, so after that, it's like, they're like 'I want to go home!' Right, like, their class periods are like a hundred minutes learning, a hundred minutes learning, lunch, recess, specials." Ms. Max built off of this sentiment, saying, "I think the afternoon is a challenging time for both classes in general, but because they're coming from lunch recess and then specials, and they often are separate at recess." I would have liked to experiment with coming in during a different time of the day, but I didn't want to take away from the CORE curricula on which Ms. Jackson and Ms. Max spend the mornings – also, a good portion of my classes and work shifts fell during the morning hours, as well.

I also think that eight weeks wasn't long enough to spend. I really believe that the students had great takeaways from the lessons and absorbed a lot of the material, but it all felt rushed and short. I would've liked to spend more time, for example, on conflict mediation strategies. More time would've allowed the classes to roleplay as mediators, test out their own strategies, and even use those learnings to conduct real mediation circles for any conflicts that occurred that day during recess. I am thrilled with what the students were able to learn in this short time span, but I have no doubts that more lessons could only boost and further the takeaways they had. On top of that, I would've liked to come in maybe more than once a week. I found that students had tough times remembering the concepts from the week prior, without prompting questions. They remembered the main ideas of the concepts, but the names and niche facets of the terms escaped them until prompted – the students had a particularly challenging time remembering the terms "collaborative problem solving" and "restorative practices." It probably would have been helpful for the students to come up with their own names for these

terms. The students also had mid-winter break and a couple of snow days during the span of lessons, so there was a longer gap between lessons in those weeks.

I would also be remiss to not mention that I am not trained in Restorative Practices. The Circle Keepers and RP facilitators that I read from have all been trained in bringing RPs to whichever space they did; they received formal training on the best methods of facilitation. They have workshops on how to be the best listeners possible, how to communicate effectively, and even how to handle students who are causing disruptions in the Circles. I do not have any of that training. I, at the time of doing this research, am a 21 year old undergraduate senior who has never facilitated RPs before this. All that I was able to do for this project came without training. Were I to be trained, I wholeheartedly believe that my communication would have been more effective. If I were to do things differently, I would spend more time allowing the students to share their experiences with the class; I would create more spaces built on sharing stories and listening. I didn't do this because I was worried about timing and wanted to get the most out of each time block. Formal training in RPs would allow me to know how to do that. I think that I did as well as I could for the circumstances, but I think we owe it to our students to be trained in whatever methods we want to bring into our classrooms. A large-scale intervention – more than eight weeks of forty minute periods – without formal training has the potential to do harm in ways the facilitator didn't realize, especially with a framework this nuanced and sensitive. If Circle Keepers allow their students to share accounts of their harm and past traumatic experiences, without the crucial listening skills and empathy skills, it has the power to make the sharer feel unheard or not understood; that has the potential to turn a healing, restorative space

into a space that replicates harm again. I would not have attempted to do a longer program of RPs without training, and I think formal training would have made what I consider to be a successful intervention an even more successful program. For example, the Morningside Center requires that educators have 25 hours of training before they are allowed to implement the curriculum; additionally, the organization will not sell schools any curricula unless coaching is also purchased.

Final Thoughts

These eight weeks that I spent with the students is one of the most rewarding and fulfilling experiences I have had; I am grateful for the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Department for creating a space through which I was able to do what I love. On my last lesson for each class, the students surprised me with beautiful, thoughtful, and sweet cards, which I call my forty little letters of recommendation. It warmed my heart getting to hear about the students' lives, experiences, and ideas. But my biggest takeaway was hope and inspiration: The willingness and eagerness that these students displayed for learning about how we can handle our problems through talking and without violence filled me with so much confidence for this generation and future generations of children. The students *wanted* to learn what can be done to change how they viewed conflict; we just had to show them the tools to do so in a way they could comprehend and understand the importance. In the card that Jasmine wrote for me, she said, "You really helped me understand that it's better to talk things out rather than going straight into violence. Lots of teachers have taught me this, but so far, you've made it the most clear." If we meet students where they are (as is mentioned in DeMeulenaere, 2012, point "teachers'

alignment with students," (p. 30, 36), and build lessons that are engaging, fun, and *interesting,* students will get the takeaways from them; we have to trust that students are capable of that understanding. In the same way that we build up trust with our students so they trust us as beacons of guidance and support, educators need to trust that students want to do good and be productive members of society, they just haven't learned how; lessons on RPs become that teaching. My experience as a student was often educators not understanding the challenges of being a young person trying to navigate the ever-changing world in which we live. It is scary, confusing, and lonely to navigate it by yourself, and young people look for support from adults who can guide them. More often than not, students turn to their teachers for that role, as teachers spend longer periods of the day with them than their guardians at home. If we, as teachers, are not empathetic to the unique plights that children face, we are doing them a disservice; if we assume their lives are easy because they don't have to worry about employment, bills, or rent, we are doing them a disservice. We have to honor the struggles that children face, and build empathy and compassion for them into our teaching. That is how trust gets built.

All this to say, I think we need to give elementary students more credit than we do for wanting to change their behavior, they just don't know how; I saw forty examples of this. My belief is that education has the opportunity to be liberatory and healing. Outside forces, including capitalism, racism, and classism, have co-opted that innate educational power. It is our duty as conscientious educators to do our part, individually and as a community, to disrupt the oppressive norms within public education. We owe it to the students who have instilled their trust in us to try to make education as just as possible, and that is what restorative practices aim to do.

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Appendix A

Here will be an outline of the curriculum that I used in my teaching. It is a combination of lessons that I built, with some material from the Morningside Center for Teaching and Social Responsibility (MSC) added in. Each lesson was between 35-40 minutes depending on transition times, and all the lessons can be modified to any specific time parameter. I omitted Week 3's lesson because it was specific to the Snow Day that Millard Fillmore had the day prior to the lessons. If you are curious, the lesson can be found at https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/navigating-winter-blues

Week 1: Introductions

- Start with introductions; this is a way to get to know everyone in the classroom.
    - I had the students, as an icebreaker, share one thing that made them special/amazing. If a student didn't want to share, allow another student in the class to share one thing about the initial student.
    - Afterwards, introduce yourself as the teacher.
        - My introductions were name, pronouns, hometown, major in school, favorite music artist, favorite animal, favorite food, and two fun facts.
- Next, explain the goals of the curriculum. I told my students that they were going to learn about community, about conflict – I had a student define conflict –, and strategies to

solve and repair conflict. I explained that all of these things fell under the umbrella term of Restorative Justice.

- Then, the students and I created community guidelines for how all of us were going to behave in class over the next couple of months. I made sure that I was not the only one making the guidelines, and the students were helping come up with the rules they wanted to follow.
    - I got the ball rolling by pitching "don't speak when someone else is talking," and then let the students take it from there.
- We ended the first lesson with the students answering the questions "What is community?" and "Why is community important?" I did not move on to the latter question until I felt that the students had a good enough and deep enough understanding of what a community was.
    - I gave some examples of community, such as dance teams, football teams, neighborhoods – purposefully leaving out "school" until a student mentioned that one on their own.

Week 2: Self-Care vs. Community Care

- I start each lesson going over the date and the agenda for the day.
- The lesson began with a game called the Emotion Machine Game (MSC)
    - In this game, we will be learning about empathy and the magnification of emotions in a community. One student will go to the front of the classroom and pick an emotion (anger, sadness, joy, anxious) and decide a sound and movement

that corresponds with the chosen emotion. In 15 second intervals, I called a couple students up at a time to come and duplicate that original emotion, but with a new sound and a new motion. Notice how the machine gets louder and louder as more students join the group. After all the eager participants are in the machine, in small chunks, get students to sit down in their seats, until the original emotion chooser is the only participant left in the machine. Notice how the machine got quieter as students exited. This game shows us how when members of a community are feeling a specific emotion, empathy might compel us community members to replicate that emotion. We had a quick discussion on what empathy was.

- Once all the students were back in their seats and settled down, we engaged in a discussion around self-care and community care (MSC). I had the students define what they thought self-care was, and list examples of ways that they engage with self-care. After each student who wanted to share their examples of self-care got to share, move on to discuss what community care is, and allow students to brainstorm ideas of what they thought would be examples of community care. My guess is that it will be trickier for students to find CC examples than to list SC examples.
- After SC and CC are discussed in enough length for the students to truly absorb the differences between them and examples of both, begin to explain the group project that will follow.

- This group project will be an artwork around four questions about SC and CC. I stipulated that the students did not have to complete drawings for all four questions, but should try to get through at least any two:
    - In what ways do we practice community care at school?
    - In what ways could we better practice community care at school?
    - In what ways do you practice community care within other communities?
    - How does community care help you?
- After the time you have allotted for the project has passed, allow any groups who would like to share their work to share it with the rest of the class; this can be done as either a presentation or as a gallery walk.
- To finish out the lesson, I passed out index cards as exit tickets, on which the students answered the question: What is one way you will practice community care this week?

Week 4: Introduction to Restorative Practices and Collaborative Problem Solving

- Go over date and agenda
- Explain that we are going to start talking about some serious topics for the next coming weeks, and we want to go over the community guidelines we made earlier to enforce the rules of the classroom.
- After going over the classroom guidelines, begin to explain what restorative justice is, very basically. Break down the words “justice” and “restore.”

- Next, I played two videos to help explain Restorative Practices (RPs) and Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS). Both videos I paused frequently to make sure the students were absorbing the salient information.
    - https://youtu.be/Oyhh7znxAbw
    - https://youtu.be/u8XY4G3Im1Y
- Once the videos are over, move on to discussing the takeaways of the videos. Have the students define RPs and CPS in their own words. Start to also brainstorm how we can use CPS in the classroom to solve conflicts.
- Afterwards, turn the conversation to violence in conflicts vs. solving conflicts through talking. Work the students through four questions:
    - Why is violence not helpful for problem solving?
    - How can violence make the problems worse?
    - How does talking repair relationships?
    - How is community care similar to Restorative Practices?
- For the Exit Ticket, the students will respond to the prompt, “How can we use Restorative Practices or Collaborative Problem Solving in our school?” This can be done either written or in picture/artistic form.

Week 5: Conflict in Schools

- Go over the date and the agenda for the day

- Start with a content/vocab review; I had students remind the class what conflict, RPs, and CPS were. We then reviewed why violence doesn't help solve problems, and how we can incorporate RPs and CPS into our daily school practice.
- After the review, bring in a story that involves two-party conflict. Try to pick one that involves a violent response to harm being done. Spend some time going over the story in depth; maybe even read the story twice. Allow students to ask questions about facets of the story,
- Once the students don't have any more questions, introduce a pair-share to unpack the story. In pairs, the students will be addressing how both parties in the conflict were hurt, how violence made the conflict worse, how more problems outside the initial conflict arose from the violence, and what some other methods of addressing the conflict might have been.
- The exit ticket for this lesson is a full-class share out of the last question.

Week 6: Role Playing and Mediation

- As always, go over date and agenda first
- We are going to start this lesson with a mini game. This will be a team competition – I chose to split the students up table groups. Announce that teams will be given 15 index cards and six minutes allotted to build the *tallest* possible index card tower; the towers have to be able to stand up by themselves after the six minutes. Explain that the students are allowed to fold, roll, or shape their index cards any way they would like. The only caveat is the students are not prohibited to rip, tape, or glue the cards. Please emphasize

that the groups must listen to everyone's ideas from the group. Once the time is up, use a ruler to measure the index card tower. The discussion around this game after all the groups have disassembled their index cards should address the fact that each group just used Collaborative Problem Solving! CPS doesn't only work to solve conflict, but it can be used during a wide slate of challenges and assignments.

- After the game has concluded, play a video about ways to deal with conflict resolution. Again, pause after each strategy in the video and recap the information to make sure students are engaged throughout the video. At the end, take any questions and have the students remind the class of the strategies outlined in the video.
    - https://youtu.be/arFGdviw_ys?feature=shared
- Next, I introduced the class to the concept of a third-party mediator. I explained that they are there to listen to how each party hurt the other, and work to manage the harm caused in the conflict. We then went over a bunch of sentence starters that the students could use in their own mediation. We pulled from the options of:
    - "How did it feel when ____ did _____ blank?
    - Do you see, ___ how you hurt ____?
    - Why did you do _____?
    - Do you hear what ____ is saying to you?
    - How can we help solve this conflict?
    - Is there a way we can compromise?
    - I'm really sorry that happened to you. I know that must be tough."

- After these starters have been introduced, split the students into groups of three. Using the story shared in last week's class, the students will take turns using the mediation sentence starters to engage in mediation of the story's conflict. One member will be the mediator, one will be party one, and the other party two. Students should rotate assignments after a few minutes to get practice with each role. Students may share their role playing with the full class if they would like.
- The exit ticket for this lesson is answering the question, via index card, "What is one thing you learned about conflict mediation?"

Week 7: Punishment

- Start with the date and the agenda.
- This week's mini game will be the animal noise game that I outlined in the findings section of the paper. To reiterate, I passed each student an index card with a species of animal written on it, e.g dog, cat, horse, sheep, etc. I explained that we were going to walk around the room and have conversations with all of our classmates. However, the caveat was that the students could only communicate through the sounds that the animal on their card would make; a student who received a "cat" card had to walk around the class "meowing" at their peers. After three minutes, I instructed everyone to return to their seats to await the next set of instructions. This time, for the next three minutes, I told the students to pick what animal they wanted to mimic to engage in conversation. At the end of these three minutes, have all the students return to their seats.

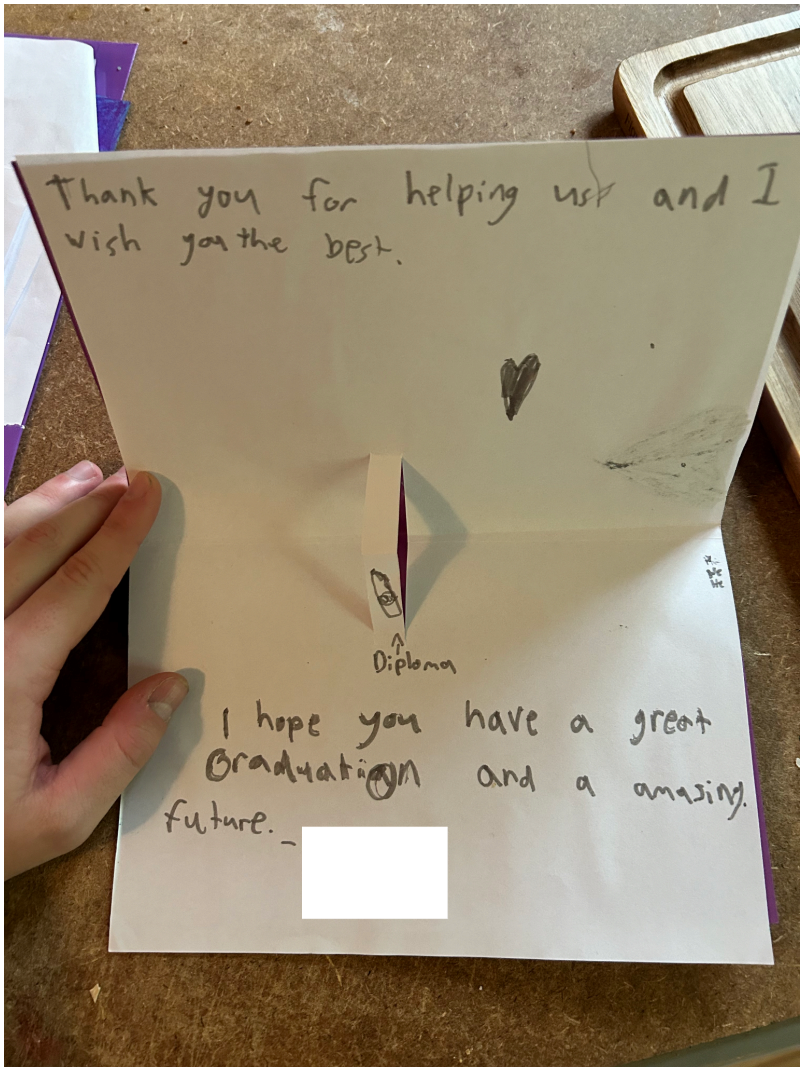
- Before explaining the point of the game, introduce the students to a discussion on punishment. I asked “What are some examples of punishment in school?” and “How does punishment make us feel?” We also talked about what punishment did to our emotions and the decisions that we make. The discussion should come to a close with the introduction to the idea that students hearing that punishment is for “bad kids” makes students feel like bad kids if they were to be punished.
- Instead of explaining the idea behind the game, have students take guesses on why they thought we played the animal noise game during the lesson about punishment. After a few tries, exp;ain that this game demonstrates the idea that students who are called “bad kids” are more likely to behave in “bad” ways, even if they wouldn’t normally engage in that behavior.
- The lesson should conclude with a project on conflict, either as a group or individually. The students should write a story, draw a picture, or make a comic book about people who get into a conflict at school, and the conflict is solved without punishment.

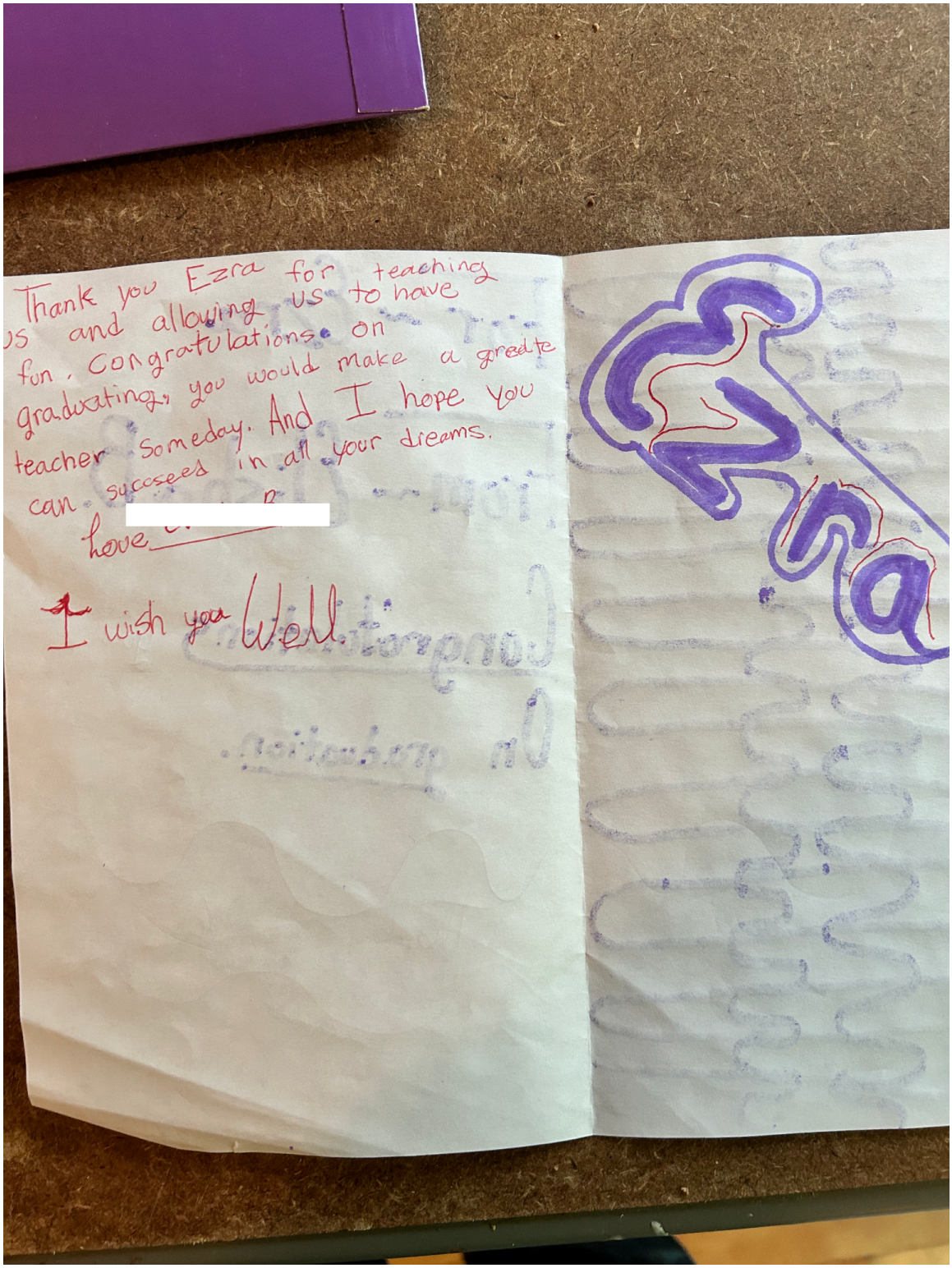
Week 8: Final Week

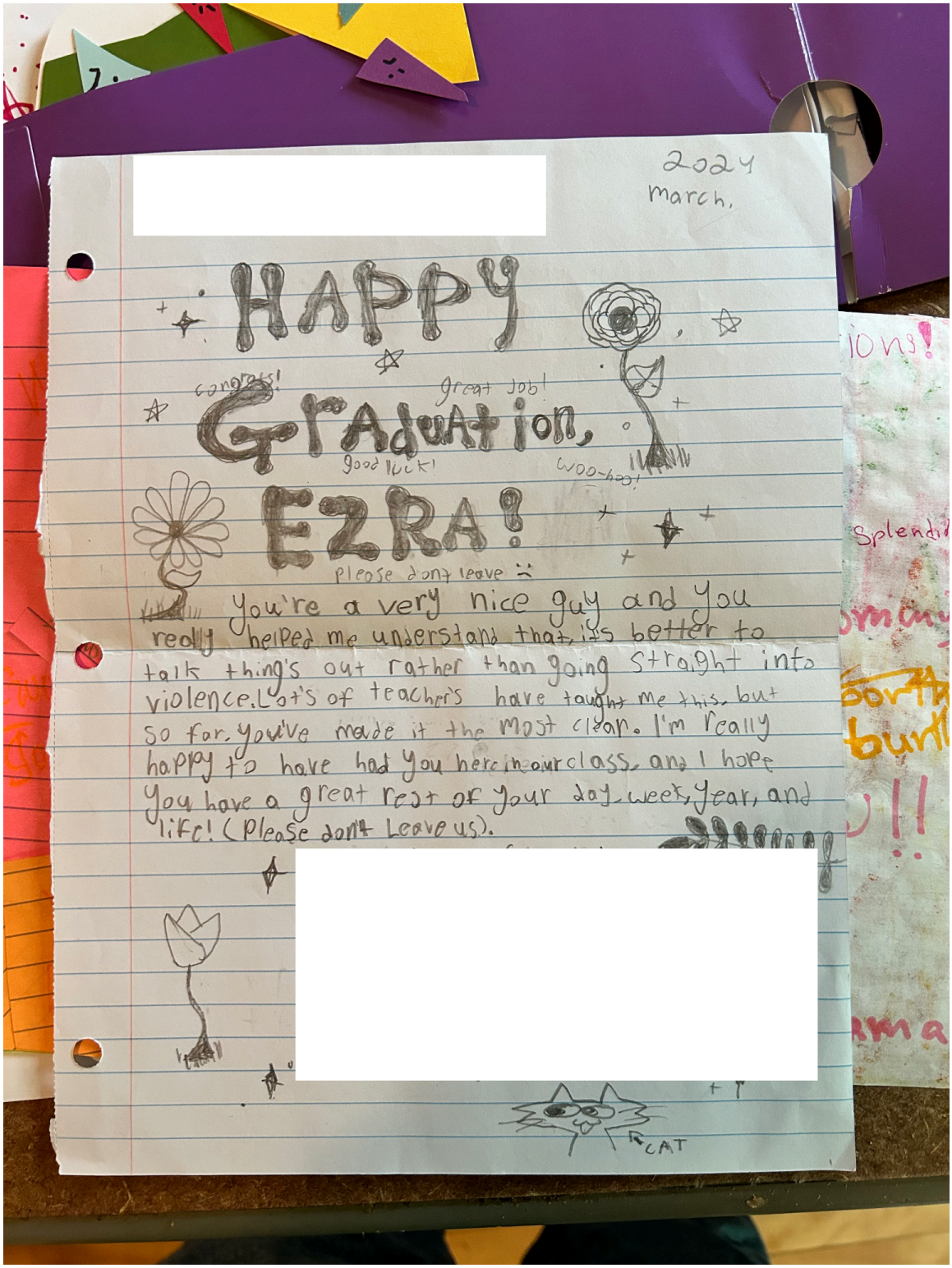
- This week, the students will have the whole session to create their final project on their reflections on the curriculum. Again, can be done either in a group or independently. We did our projects digitally, on either Canva or Google Slides. The students can pick from writing about: Community, Self-Care/Community Care, CPS, RPs, Mediation, How we can solve conflicts in school, or Punishment. Wrap up with five minutes for a full-class share out of each group’s project.

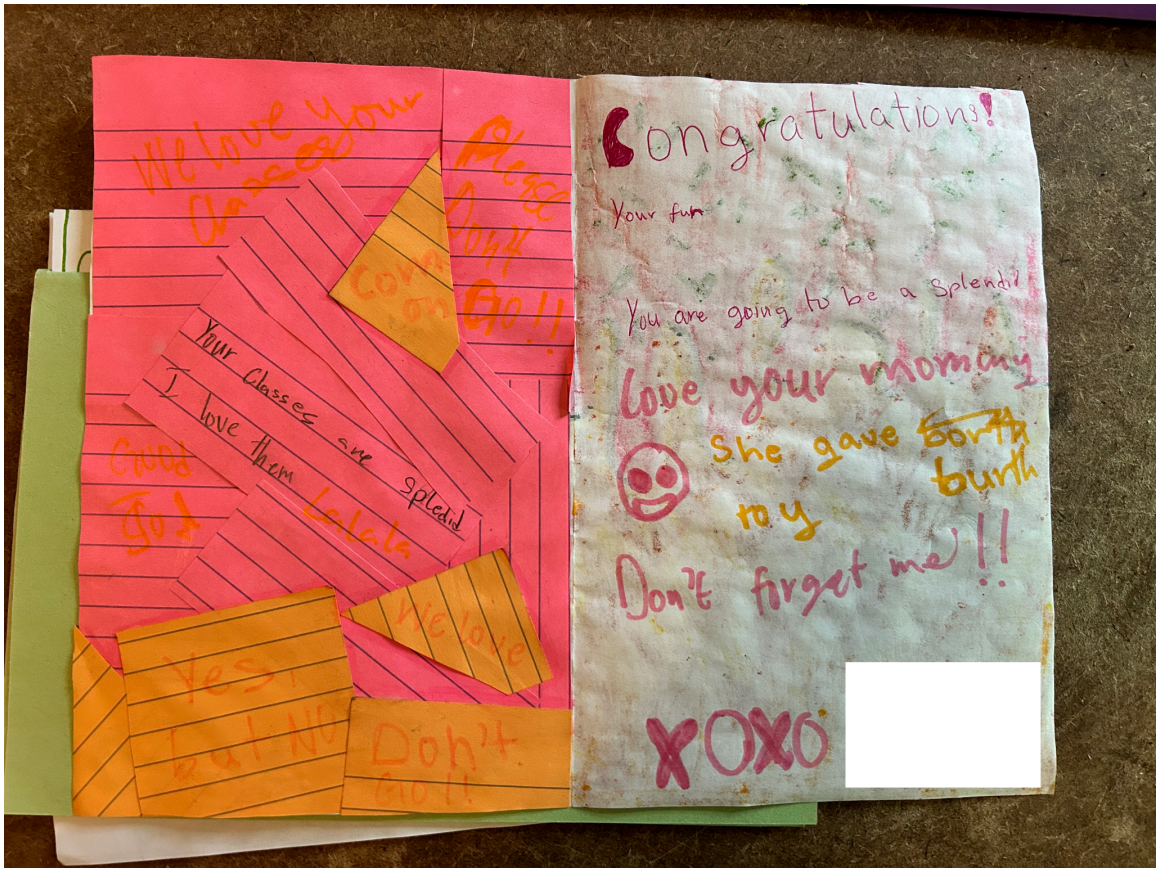
Appendix B

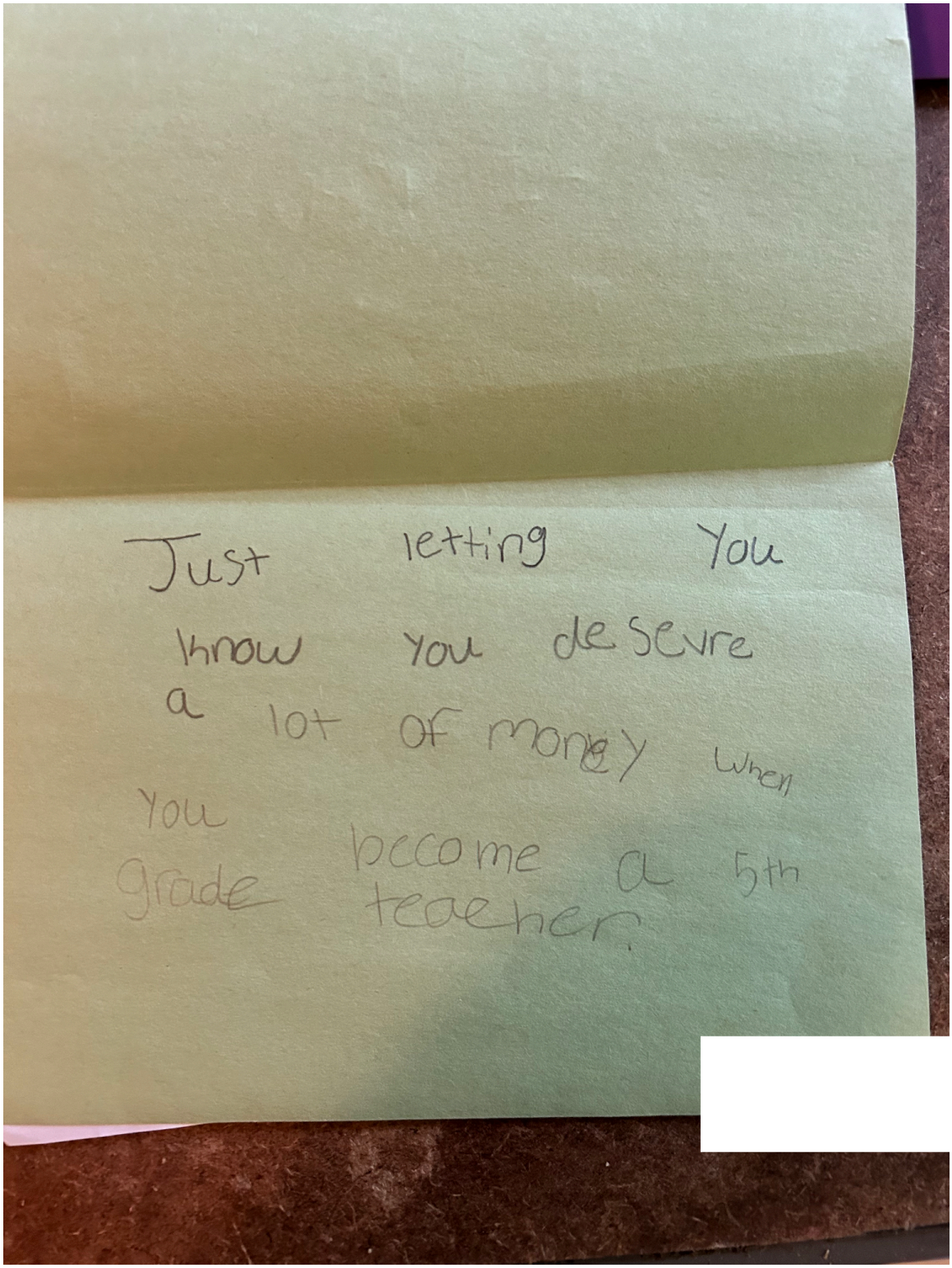
This appendix showcases examples of the cards my students made me for our final class. The cards revealed that the students both had fun during the lessons, and understood the importance of what the lessons teach. All names have been deleted to preserve anonymity.

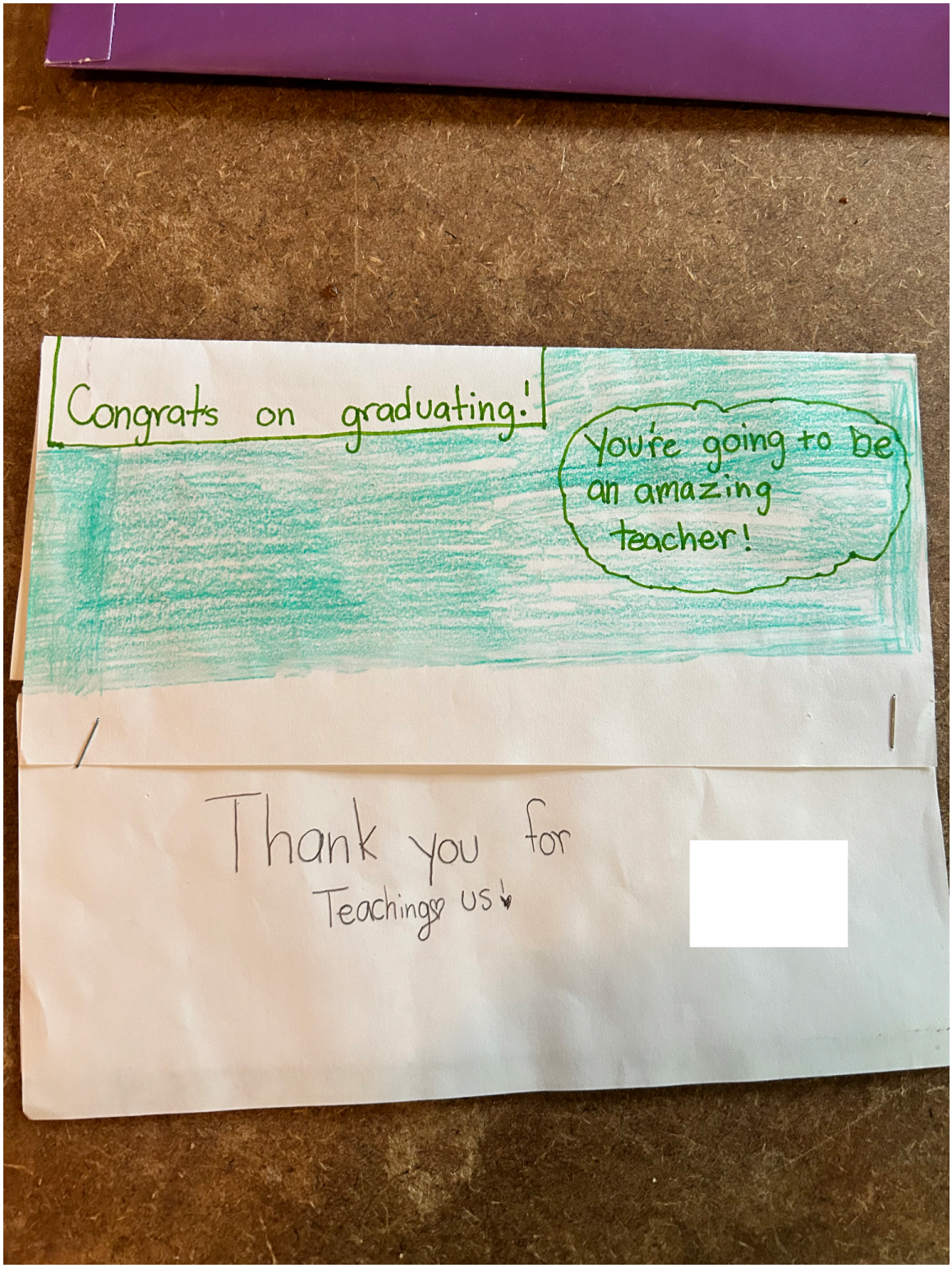



Thank you Ezra for teaching
us and allowing us to have
fun. Congratulations on
graduating, you would make a greate
teacher Someday. And I hope you
can succeed in all your dreams.
love
I wish you Well.
Ezra


2024
March,
HAPPY
congrats!
great job!
Graduation,
good luck!
woo-hoo!
EZRA!
please dont leave :(
You're a very nice guy and you really helped me understand that it's better to talk things out rather than going straight into violence. Lot's of teachers have taught me this, but so far, you've made it the most clear. I'm really happy to have had you here in our class, and I hope you have a great rest of your day, week, year, and life! (Please don't leave us).
CAT


We love how
Please
Don't
Go!!
Your classes are
I love them
Good
Go!
We love
Yes!
No!
Don't
Congratulations!
Your fun
You are going to be a Splendid
Love your mommy
She gave
birth
to y
Don't forget me!!
XOXO


Just letting You
know you deserve
a lot of money when
you become a 5th
grade teacher.


Congrats on graduating!
You're going to be an amazing teacher!
Thank you for Teaching us!


HAPPY
Graduation
Pls
Dont
Leave
us