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Student, Teacher and Administrator Perspectives on Harm:

Implications for implementing Safe and Caring School Initiatives

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Abstract:

This article reports on a study that examines student, teacher and administrator perspectives on harm and how their schools address harm. It presents an overview of these perspectives within and across 3 different school environments. In doing so, the study contributes to a better understanding of the often ineffective implementation of safe and caring school initiatives. By drawing on restorative justice and relational theory, the findings illustrate how a focus on well-being and relationship is critical for meeting the needs of those harmed and those causing harm. Such a focus requires interaction rooted in social engagement rather than social control (Morrison 2012) and challenges current recommendations for combining the strengths of several current approaches for a more effective outcome (Osher et al. 2010).

Creating safe, caring school environments continues to generate ongoing conversation in the media, professional journals, and academic research especially through the persistent attention given to incidents and impact of bullying on youth. In Canada, several provincial governments have instituted or are debating the implementation of anti-bullying laws for school contexts (Mitchell 2012). Similar laws that threaten youth with criminal records in hopes of curbing bullying behaviours are in place in various states and countries around the world (Ali 2010; Dayton and Dupree 2009). In spite of research that indicates clearly that zero-tolerance policies and practices actually increase bullying behaviour (Woods and Wolke 2003; Jull 2000; Stinchcombe, Bazemore and Riestenberg 2006; Tebo 2000; Skiba and Peterson 1999), many continue to believe that inappropriate behaviour can be changed with laws and law enforcement. This rampant perspective requires third-party intervention, which removes responsibility and accountability from those directly involved, increases anger and alienation, and perpetuates further harm (Christie 1977).

The philosophical and theoretical foundation of restorative justice (rj) suggests an alternative paradigm, one where the focus shifts from following and enforcing rules, to identifying who has been harmed, what their needs are, and how the harm can be repaired (Zehr 2005). This focus makes space for addressing the relational needs of all those involved instead of only highlighting the behaviour. Responsibility and accountability for the impact of the harm is not handed over to a neutral party, but remains with those directly involved. In essence, rj is grounded in an understanding that stronger

relationships result in the reduced likelihood of people harming each other, not increased punishment (IIRP, n.d.).

Early research indicates that schools engaged with rj practices are able to cultivate more supportive relationships amongst all participants in the school community so that aggressive incidents are lowered substantially. Quantitatively this is evident in the reduced numbers of suspensions, expulsions, and office referrals (Porter, 2007). Qualitatively reports indicate participants are satisfied with the process employed to address incidents of harm, have increased sense of safety and contentment while in school, and have an increased ability to focus on academic tasks (Thorsborne, 2000), . Though there may be other contributing factors to these outcomes, as studies examining rj increase, it is becoming clear that rj principles and practices have the potential to impact school culture (McClutsky et al. 2008; Mirsky and Wachtel 2008; Morrison and Ahmed 2006; Porter 2007; Youth Justice Board 2004).

Nevertheless, challenges do exist in implementing rj approaches. Recent research indicates that institutional structures and participants may be responsible for co-opting rj principles to reinforce rule-based culture rather than the relationship-based culture it seeks to nurture (McClutsky et al. 2008; Vaandering 2009). Rj principles which presume a view of human beings as relational, are particularly difficult to embody in a school context where adults are used to being in power. Unacquainted and inexperienced with environments where power is shared, well-intentioned adults seeking to implement rj tend to employ its practices to shape student behaviour, which allows them as adults to maintain their hierarchical position. This reflects the rationale for the limited effectiveness of other anti-bullying and safe school initiatives (Cross et al. 2002; Rigby

2004; Pepler and Craig 2007) which are seen to be limited due to: (a) being rooted in the same power relationships underlying the punitive approaches the new ones are seeking to replace (Morrison 2005, 100); (b) their emphasis is on the individual rather than the relationship between those experiencing conflict (Jones 2004; Lindstrom 2007; Morrison 2005); and (c) the strategies for their development, implementation, or sustainability are weak (Crosse et al. 2002; Rigby 2004; Pepler and Craig 2007).

To better understand this phenomenon which is threatening to interfere with the credibility and sustainability of rj, this research project employed the conceptual framework of rj to analyze what may be occurring. In particular, given that repairing harm is considered to be central to the approach, I set out to explore *how students, educators, and administrators' perspectives of harm and their school's response to harm might inform the theory, implementation and practice of rj in schools.* The findings that emerged are significant for the development of theory and practice of rj but may also explain why other initiatives that began with promise find themselves producing results counter to their initial intentions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that supports this study comes from two rj theorists. First, early theory proposed by Zehr (2002) suggests that looking at harm done instead of rules broken allows for a focus on the people involved. He concludes that harm will be repaired when three aspects of rj are acknowledged: 1. *harm* done and the resulting *needs*; 2. *obligations* arising from the incident; 3. *engagement* with one another (p. 23). Significant research and theoretical development in the field of criminal justice and education highlight the effectiveness of returning problems and their need for resolution

to those experiencing them (Christie 1977; Porter 2007; Morrison 2007; Sherman and Strang 2007). To understand why such a process is effective, theorists and practitioners drawing on various indigenous and spiritual traditions have identified as foundational the belief that human beings are 'profoundly relational' (Pranis 2007). This is in contrast to contemporary Western social and institutional structures such as the criminal justice system, health care, and education that are actually grounded in a liberal individualism that prohibits interconnectedness and group accountability.

Second, Llewellyn (2009), formalizes this foundational belief and solidifies Zehr's framework by identifying that *in order to focus on harm, obligations and engagement* it is necessary to accept that as human beings we are relational and connected to each other. This relational theory recognizes that when *respect, concern and dignity* for others are given individually or collectively, the well-being of all involved is nurtured—it is reciprocal.

This framework structures the analysis of participants' perspectives in this study and uncovers the degree to which the desire for each other's well-being is actually in place in schools prior to being introduced to rj.

Why examine perspectives of harm?

In viewing an iceberg from land, only 10 percent of its mass is visible. For a perspective of the entire berg, one would need to go below the waterline where the foundation of the icberg's tip could be seen. As concerns regarding the safety of students in schools continue to grow and are addressed by an array of approaches with varied results, this analogy illustrates why perspectives of harm are helpful. What is visible to the general

public and even school participants are the inappropriate behaviours that result in disrupted learning environments. Programs are then designed to address these behaviours which are actually symptoms of underlying issues. However, examining student, teachers and administrators perspectives on harm and how their schools address harm, shifts attention to the submerged 90% of the mass supporting the visible tip of the iceberg.

From rules to relationship to views of humanity: restorative justice in schools

In 1976 in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada the practice of rj was reintroduced to contemporary Western society through the judicial system when parole officer Mark Yantzi requested that two youth involved in vandalism meet the owners of the properties they had vandalized. Out of this successful intervention and subsequent similar events, early theoretical groundwork emerged that shifted attention away from rules broken, who was responsible, and what consequences were deserved to a focus on who had been hurt, what were their needs, and what was required for the harm to be repaired (Zehr 2005). As this focus on repairing harm was introduced in alternative schools that worked with delinquent youth, evidence pointed to positive changes not just in behaviour of individual students but also in relationships within the school and broader community. Thus educators recognized the potential of rj for all educational contexts and introduced various rj practices to several pilot schools (Wachtel 1997). Though much can be said about the wide variety of goals of schooling and the political agendas they serve, in general it can be said the introduction of rj to schools met with a different environment than that of the judicial system's behavioural focus where it originated. Its impact resulted in the development of theory highlighting how rj presumes and encourages comprehensive relational school cultures where building, maintaining and repairing

relationships is understood and emphasized (Hopkins 2011; Morrison 2007; Thorsborne and Vinegrad 2003; Vaandering 2011). Foundational to this emphasis on relationship is a view of humanity where all people are recognized as being worthy of *respect, concern and dignity.* Nurturing the well-being of all becomes a priority. Theorists in the field (Bianchi 1994; Downie and Llewellyn 2008; Hadley 2001; Pranis 2007; Vaandering 2011; Zehr 2005) identify this foundation as significant as it clearly identifies that rj is much more than a practice or strategy. It is a philosophy. Zehr articulates this in identifying rj as requiring a paradigm shift; Morrison (2012) elaborates by identifying the need for social institutions to move away from exercising *social control* to encouraging *social engagement*. From this vantage point the gaps in effectiveness of several current safe and caring school approaches and the significance for examining perspectives of harm becomes more apparent. The following is a brief overview of these approaches and their underlying philosophies and perspectives of humanity, as well as a description of the contribution rj makes.

Anti-bullying legislation:

The recent trend for government intervention in regards to anti-bullying laws for schools is an example of practice that relies on the reinforcement of power positions and a focus on the individual incidents abstracted from their context. Youth are placed in the precarious position of being subject to convictions and established criminal records at an early age and they are left with little hope for making adequate restitution. School culture becomes grounded in compliance and fear where offending students are marginalized and compliant students learn to navigate a system. The interconnected, relational structure

that emerges relies on an oppressive power dynamic that objectifies students and encourages a hierarchical structure where youth serve adultist agendas.

SWPBS and SEL:

School Wide Positive Behaviour Supports (SWPBS), and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are examples of current, less punitive approaches, which identify the importance of whole school culture development. Osher, Bear, Sprague and Doyle (2010) review the impact and potential of each identifying the two as current major approaches of school discipline and student self-regulation that are beneficial yet neither sufficiently addresses the problems for which they were designed. While SWPBS targets inappropriate behaviour, recurring behaviour problems, and is teacher centred, SEL targets self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship, responsible decision making and is student-centred. SWPBS have intervention strengths; SEL have personal development strengths. Future initiatives, Osher and his colleagues (2010) recommend, should consider a blend of elements of SWPBS and SEL. However, doing so may be short-sighted. Because each continues to emphasize the benefits of curbing inappropriate and encouraging appropriate individual behaviour as deemed necessary by those in control(Sugai and Horner 2008; Luiselli et al. 2010), they actually minimize the importance of relational cultures (Hoffman, 2009). In doing so both give evidence of being rooted in behaviourism allowing for continued objectification of students and reliance on uneven power dynamics that encourages control rather than engagement (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kappler 2007).

Learning ecologies:

Learning ecologies are rooted in an understanding of education as a dynamic, organic, living process where participants impact and are impacted by their environment and interaction with it. This approach encourages social engagement in a very comprehensive manner and is grounded in an understanding in relationships where each is respected and power is shared (Mitchell and Sackney 2009). In spite of this focus, Osher et al. (2010) identify limitations when some students resist participating in classroom activities. In these contexts, frustrations arise as more direct student interventions are required and are not available to educators (49). Being unprepared for this response by students indicates a limited understanding of interconnectedness and accountability that must accompany participation in such a context.

Character education:

Character-education programs are often also considered as having potential for providing this shift towards well-being of all and enhancing school culture. While there is evidence to support this (Benninga et al. 2006; Berkowitz, Battistich and Bier 2008), caution is also necessary (Winton 2008, 2010; Davis 2003) as traditional character education that highlights specific character traits without a commitment to caring relationships (Noddings 2008) or critical democratic citizenship (Winton 2010), results in adults manipulating student behaviour. Winton (2008) indicates that to "define character in terms of behaviour and identify behavioural changes as the outcomes to be achieved through character education… reveal[s] desires to regulate behaviour and morality and [thus] expose fears of difference and unpredictability. (Winton, 2008, p. 309). Once again engagement is sacrificed for control and interdependence is sacrificed for independence.

Going below the surface

By consciously or subconsciously focusing on individuals and their particular behaviours, proponents of each of the above approaches ignore the political nature of human interaction within schools and fail to recognize how uneven power relationships interfere with nurturing the communal cultures they desire. Any goals for positive change are co-opted to allow power structures to be maintained where students bear the brunt of adultist agendas (Moore 2009). Continuing with the iceberg analogy, if effective change is truly desired, educators must don scuba gear and enter the frigid waters. Restorative justice, grounded firmly in justice as honouring the inherent well-being of all (Vaandering 2011), allows educators and researchers to do this.

Though Morrison (2012) identifies rj as an ecological approach and many rj approaches integrate and highlight values and character development, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) identify how rj does much more than blend the benefits of SWPBS, SEL, and learning ecologies because social control is replaced with social engagement. When implemented effectively, rj provides means for intervening and encourages the development of social and emotional competencies honouring individual worth, but also nurtures relational, classroom and school ecologies that provide spaces for students to gain appropriate status within the entire web of relationships that exists amongst all participants in a school community (Morrison 2006). This more comprehensive approach does not ignore harmful behaviour but shifts the focus to honouring and preserving the dignity of people through relational practices that focus concurrently on individual and community well-being and responsibility. Behaviour is thus embedded within this

context, not removed from it as engagement and accountability become paramount.

As is evidenced in this overview, the shift from control to engagement is very challenging. To understand this more fully, this research set out to uncover the hidden elements that interfere with this shift by drawing on the centrality of harm in rj theory, and then inviting students, teachers, and administrators to share perspectives on harm and their schools' ability to address it.

Methodology

As a relatively new initiative, rj theory continues to lag behind practice (Braithwaite 2006; Morrison and Ahmed 2006; Sherman and Strang 2007). Though empirical research is growing, studies exploring how harm, a central component of rj, is understood are absent. As qualitative case studies are "of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalizability" (Stake 2003, 156) it was used as a methodology for this work. Purposeful sampling which allows for the selection of information rich cases (Patton 2002) was employed in the selection of an elementary school (Grades 4-6), a junior high school (Grades 7-9), and a high school (Grades 10-12) in St. John's, Newfoundland, a location particularly well-suited for this study as the region has had little to no exposure to rj in schools. Focus groups of students, of teachers, and of administrators were formed in each school. At each location, 20-30 students (equal numbers from each gender and grade level) were selected randomly to receive an invitation to participate. Students who responded with parental consent took part. All teachers received a letter of invitation and

those responding, participated. Administrators and vice-principals were interviewed either individually or together depending on time available.

Focus group interviews were 60-90 minutes long and dialogue was initiated by three key questions: What is harm? Tell a story of harm as observed or experienced personally at school. From your perspective, what does your school do to address harm caused? The sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Using the theoretical framework as a lens for understanding the insights of the participants, analysis began with careful readings of each transcript by the principle researcher and a research assistant. Key responses received for each question were summarized in chart form where each group of participant comments from one school were laid side by side. These summaries were then analyzed for similarities and differences amongst the group and initial themes were identified. This was deepened through the writing of case reports (Patton 2002) to further identify and understand the significance of the similarities and differences, to identify critical incidents (Tripp 1993), and solidify themes relating to the central question posed by the research: *How do students', educators', and administrators' perspectives of harm and their school's response to harm inform the theory, implementation and practice of rj in schools*.

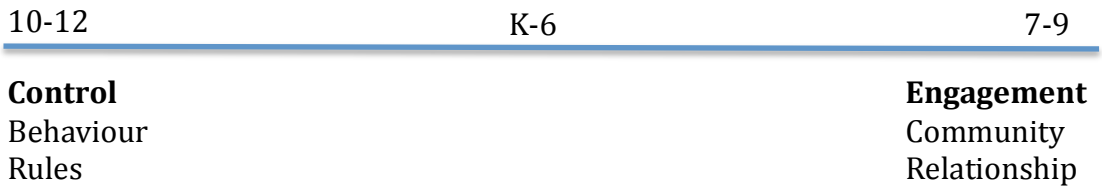
Results

Gathering data from three different schools at three different levels produced varied insights that illustrate how different emphases on relationship and behaviour influence perspectives of and responses to harm and are significant in shaping school culture. Each school can be informative as a case on its own, but when considered together, it becomes

evident how the different perspectives and emphases inform and strengthen current trends in the implementation of rj in schools.

It is important to note that the participants at all three schools were concerned with the well-being of all people and were eager to have school environments where everyone felt they belonged. However, due to different circumstances, roles, goals, and perspectives of individuals each school had developed a culture that emphasized *control* or *engagement* (Morrison 2012) to different degrees which then undermined or supported their ability to engage in the reciprocal nurturing of well-being (Downie & Llewelyn 2008). Though these categories are not mutually exclusive, identifying a school's tendency for one or the other can prove helpful for understanding what impacts culture change within schools.

In terms of this study, it is interesting to observe that the high school was primarily focused on control as individual behaviour and rules were seen as responsible for creating safe environments; the jr high was focused on engagement as developing a relational environment was highlighted to meet the needs of their students; and in the elementary school the teachers relied on behaviour and rules, while the administrator identified relationship as a primary means for responding to harm in the school context. (Fig 1)



What follows are details that led to the identification of these tendencies.

Elementary School:

The primary elementary school is an urban school of approximately 250 students and 36 educational staff. The student focus group consisted of six students, 3 boys, 3 girls from grades 4-6. The teacher focus group consisted of 5 teachers from grades 1,3,5, 6, and music. Individual interviews were held with the guidance counsellor and the administrator. What emerged indicates that in spite of a desire to reduce harm, each group had different goals. These resulted in a fragmented approach to addressing harm effectively.

Student perspectives

The students at this age, struggled to define harm. They were more focused on the pain of the experience and its impact on their sense of belonging than the behaviour that caused it. Their goal for addressing harm was to come to a greater sense of belonging. To this end they viewed the school's approach as being predominantly punitive and ineffective. They all agreed as one student stated, "I don't think punishment works cause mostly I just want to get this over with." This along with their preference for the contributions of the guidance counsellor who supported them in rebuilding relationships over the teachers' surveillance of their behaviour to prevent harm, highlights their goal of wanting to belong and be in safe relationships.

Teacher perspectives

A critical incident occurring during the interview with the teachers revealed their goal for addressing harm was to change behaviour through consequences. After sharing perspectives and stories of harm, they identified proactive approaches used to address harm that created space for students strengths to be highlighted. However, in the face of actual harmful incidents, they shared that their primary responses were reactive and inconsistent as most relied on behaviour tracking methods and punitive consequences such as removal of privileges.

> I have to deal with that one hitting situation but we're not dealing with what got him to that stage in order to hit. You know, so that's what's frustrating for me as a teacher. I feel that it's often we're reacting instead of trying to prevent or be proactive. (E-T1)

When asked how those harmed were addressed, all participants stopped short. It was evident that the question puzzled them. Slowly each acknowledged that other than a kind word, a pat on the shoulder, or a treat, they did not consider or address the needs of the one harmed.

> I think a lot of times in schools we don't do anything for the children who have been harmed…. Often they are children who are very quiet and laid back, and they don't complain much, they don't draw much attention to themselves and it's very easy to forget about them being there and that maybe they do need some, you know, extra attention or something extra special to

> happen for them. I've never really thought about it before. (E-T2)

Through the interview, teachers became aware that relationship played little role in their response to harm.

Guidance counsellor perspective

The guidance counsellor, as indicated by the students, recognized the role of relationship in responding to harm. However, in his description of the school's SWPBS approach to addressing harm, he also emphasizes his commitment to controlling behaviour. He attempts to juggle the different emphases of this approach with his counselling role. He appreciates how SWPBS helped students understand appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. On its own however, he believed that the program encouraged an ineffective punitive response for serious offenses. His personal belief that "our ability to reduce harm in our society is based on creating powerful, positive, caring relationships between people" led him to augment SWPBS.

> Bring[ing] those kids together to try to solve their differences as part of the process … [so that] piece of resentment being carried, that the person who has been hurt when [the one causing harm] goes back to the school, they feel there is a safety factor, that this is a relationship that has been somehow repaired to a point at least where it's functioning again.

Even with this perspective, he indicated that the school does little to acknowledge or address the needs of the one harmed.

Administrator perspective

The administrator's goal was most aligned with the students in that she believed that relationship was the ultimate goal. She clearly differentiated between relationship and behaviour and was dismissive of approaches that focused on behaviour stating "actual human relationships are more complex than formulas." In response to each of the questions, references to student behaviour were rare. Instead, she chose to identify how each situation required careful thought and involvement from all participants. She acknowledged the complex needs of many of the students but highlighted how the school worked hard to develop a family like atmosphere where all students belong. She did not like to differentiate between the one causing harm or the one harmed as she believed each had responsibility in responding to their own experience with the incident and that it was the educator's role to help them with this. Her goal was to nurture a school where relationship was central. "If you are connected with kids and you have a relationship with them, they are not going to default to acting out." However she also realized that this manner of caring has consequences.

> I've seen a lot of caring in this building, but I tell you it drains people, and I lose people from this building… it breaks people. … some people are more suited to this kind of environment than others.

Elementary summary

In summary, different perspectives and approaches used at the elementary school are significant to note as they point to a lack of cohesiveness in the school that results in

students, teachers, administrators working individually to address harm. They assume they are all working towards the same goal of safety and relationship, yet in reality are working at cross purposes. It is particularly interesting to hear the administrator's strong stance on relationship, her thought that they as a school highlight relationship, yet, the teachers, who are most involved with students, are almost singularly focussed on curbing inappropriate behaviour through punitive consequences. Though the administrator may be modelling her philosophy, she has not found a way to communicate the effectiveness of this to the staff.

Junior High School

Like the elementary school, the junior high school is an urban school with approximately 170 students and 28 educational staff. The student focus group included 5 youth from grades 7-9; the teacher group was comprised of 4 teachers; the vice-principal and principal were interviewed individually.

The overall picture that emerged was that of a culture where students, teachers and administrators first priority was to support and respect each other as human beings. Their second priority was to grow intellectually. Harm was seen as a result of systemic social and governing structures that did not provide for the basic needs of many of the students whose family situations were limited. In response the educators banded together to be a stabilizing base for students' lives and thus emphasised building and maintaining relationships. Alongside this relational emphasis, however, there were indications harm caused within the school was not being addressed directly and bystander apathy was being nurtured at all levels.

Student perspectives

The students identified harm as being multi-dimensional, ranging from physical to psychological. It resulted from personal irresponsibility or clashes between individuals. Stories indicated that harmful incidents were rooted in the need to belong, to be recognized or to protect someone. Though suspensions, detentions and office referrals were identified as means used by the teachers/administrators to address harm caused, these were connected with policies that were part of the school's institutional structure and teachers and administrators were not seen as being responsible for their origin or use.

> [The principal] he was like if I had it my way I wouldn't suspend you but it is school policy and you get suspended for fights. (Student A)

> It wouldn't be fair to everybody else who gets suspended when they gets in a fight. (Student B)

Students indicated that teachers provided space to reflect on incidents and used individual and whole group discussion to address problems. One student showed appreciation for this when she stated, "I think it is good that he [discusses] and doesn't just send them off to the office. … Everyone tries to be good in his class." They also identified proactive programs for addressing harm such as special days (Pink Shirt Day) and the Red Cross RespectED which trained a team of students to mentor their peers and conduct presentations for the school regarding harassment and violence issues.

Teacher and administrator perspectives

In comparing the details provided by the teachers and administrators they closely aligned with each other and are thus presented together. They were unified in their perspectives that relationships and trust, respect and support for each other and the students were of primary importance. In addressing harm, whole school activities were highlighted as important for providing cohesiveness, while responses to specific incidents were seen as problem-solving opportunities that would provide students with life skills. Though suspensions and detentions were used occasionally, they were seen as required by departmental policy and were turned into avenues through which rapport could be built, always with the goal of bringing students back into community. In-school policies were viewed by the administrators as being organic. They were presented to students, parents, and educators with the invitation to suggest changes so that the school could be a more supportive environment. Though the policies at times required standardized responses to specific incidents, these were never applied without hearing all sides of the story and considering the students' best interest. Respect, well-being, and dialogue characterized the junior high school response to harm essentially creating significant cohesiveness. In essence theirs can be identified as an ecological approach (Morrison 2007) that was understood clearly by all participants in the school.

In such a complex environment, however, several details emerged that challenged this cohesiveness. First, one of the students became increasingly shy and withdrawn as the discussion developed. Then, another related a story in which he beat up a peer who was 'picking on his sister' which resulted in a suspension. This incident, he admitted, occurred after he had several days of RespectED training in understanding harassment. He justified his actions based on rationale that indicated family loyalty comes before

school/community culture. He also related that the principal said he didn't want to suspend him, but was required to because of departmental policy. When he returned after the suspension, he met the student he had beat up in the principal's office. After a discussion they were asked to shake hands. When asked if he felt the issue was resolved, he indicated that it was not.

Finally, the vice principal relayed details about a fight in which a grade 9 boy was beat up by a grade 7 boy on the school yard. The fight was videotaped and posted on YouTube. The grade 9 student was often the brunt of physical and emotional bullying, and the grade 7 boy who had had no previous record of similar altercations had been encouraged by his peers and older students to prove himself by initiating the fight. This serious incident was addressed in a manner that the administrators felt supported all involved. The vice principal's chief concern and frustration however, emerged from her observation that the students who gathered to cheer on those involved refused to acknowledge their responsibility, stating clearly that being bystanders did not require any action on their part.

Junior high summary

In summary, these incidents that are woven with hidden threads into the relational cultural cloth of this school indicate that the complexity of developing a social ecology may leave a school without a comprehensive means for addressing specific situations where students are held accountable for their actions (Osher et al. 2010). At the junior high school, however, by subconsciously excusing students because of the neglectful environments they come from, do the adults encourage a bystander culture? Are the

educators so focussed on compensating for the systemic neglect the students experience that they are not held directly accountable for the harm they initiate?

High School

The high school was situated outside the city core in a suburban area. It had approximately 700 students with 46 educational staff. The student focus group included 3 female students from years 2 and 3 (grades 11, 12). The teacher group was comprised of 6 teachers, and the vice-principal and principal were interviewed together. The overall picture that emerged was of a school where all participants seemed focussed primarily on their roles regarding academic development. In spite of this seemingly common purpose, the interviews indicated that students, educators and administrators were isolated from each other in their concerns and goals relating to social well-being and in their daily experiences at school. This separation was maintained by a cycle that operated invisibly amongst the three groups. In looking at harm, the cycle becomes visible. Students were fully aware of their lives as a whole and thus focused on the *past*. Teachers, needing to provide for students' current academic needs, thought of incidents of harm in the *present*. Administrators who were charged with the on-going effectiveness of the school as a whole, focused on the *future*. These different epistemological positions then had implications for how each group felt and functioned within the school environment. The students' input suggested feelings of being *trapped*, the teachers repeatedly expressed feeling *bogged down*, and the administrators insights carried with them the weight of *responsibility*.

Themes of past, present, and future began to emerge in the definitions of harm. Though all 3 groups identified harm as occurring in the physical, emotional and psychological domains impacting how people affect each other, each group emphasized different things.

Student perspectives

Students tended to define harm as being purposeful for the intention of power and control.

> In high school, people try to hurt each other. (Student 1)
>
> They enjoy hurting other people cause when they make somebody else feel bad about themselves, it makes them feel good (Student 2).

As they shared their stories of harm they began with incidents that were recent--on-line anonymous criticism of students' council decisions; birthday teasing that began face to face but ended in harassing text messages; making fun of individuality such as pink hair--but then quickly identified how these incidents were actually rooted in *past* experiences as many of them had been together since primary school. Student (1) states:

> It's hard being with the same people for so many years…they know everything about you…they might be great people now, but if they did stuff to you back in elementary school, its still there…you're are stuck with these people for so long you can't get over what they did to you."

S(3) summed up the significance of this when she stated: “They don't need to know I peed my pants when I was three but they need to know that I am really good at math.” Feelings of being *trapped* were evident in these statements but also when referencing current incidents. Harassing texts induced fear that “they would come and find me” and conforming to expected social norms resulted in further dominance as “they would feel they have taken over your life.” When describing how the school addressed harm the students continued to exude these feelings of being trapped. In regards to suspensions which they identified as being issued for physical harm they stated they were a “waste of time.” In regards to emotional harm, it was ignored as warnings were given instead of action taken that would change things; and supportive guidance counseling “is helpful but it’s not making it stop.” In all that the students described, they longed for relationship, but indicated clearly that their emotional needs were minimized while behaviour was addressed.

Teacher perspectives

Teachers defined harm as anything that limited a person’s ability to thrive through incidents that ranged from being self-inflicted, caused by peers or caused by adults in the school. Examples included: self-mutilation, “making bad decisions” about academics or choosing harmful relationships; how students and teachers interacted with each other where what is said may inadvertantly be harmful to a student. Interspersed within these definitions and stories were recurring questions such as “Is not being prepared for class harm?” as teachers realized that similar consequences were issued for both this type of behaviour and that where harm to another occurred. In all of these comments, the theme

of ***present*** was evident with an emphasis on what was happening, not its cause. For example:

- Name-calling to a point where it was just a part of everyday language so that it resulted in becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy was identified and resolved by teachers moving into close proximity or distracting the class from focusing on inappropriate comments;

- In response to bullying and on-line bullying resulting from difference, a teacher stated, "I was trying to deal with it in my classroom without making a big deal out of it because it was not happening in school …I try to make my classroom very safe with what I am teaching… I don't know if they came to terms with it, or if they just moved on from it."

- In response to abusive boy-girl relationships, a teacher indicated frustration with the ineffectiveness of having frequent "real in-depth conversations to explain to them the proper way to be treated."

- Finally in response to a traumatic experience where a girl with a difficult home situation and anxiety issues was terrorized in the bathroom for over an hour by peers, the teachers expressed sadness and helplessness. One stated, "The things we say about zero tolerance is all useless … nothing's been kind of effectively done. Not because people haven't tried."

In further discussion about their personal and school responses, the teachers spoke of proactive approaches such as theatre productions, a gay-straight alliance to create safe spaces for students to talk, two full-time guidance counsellors to address students with

more rooted problems, and administrators who were trying to bring about reconciliation. Then their comments became peppered with phrases indicating a sense of helplessness and feeling ***bogged down*** in the present. "As teachers we kind of hit our heads against the wall…we try to be open…we don't know how to intervene…I don't know if we know how to properly address the issues kids are dealing with."

Administrator perspectives

Administrators defined harm as occurring when any person, "in any way shape or form, is affected negatively by the doings of somebody else." The emphasis on ***future*** and ***responsibility*** emerged quickly as they indicated that harm required external intervention and control. Carrying the overall responsibility for the well-being of all in the school, the principal indicated that to do their best, "we are getting cameras installed … I have seen the very positive effect that they can have on preventing harm."

To justify this need, the administrators shared stories of serious harm such as physical and psychological harassment, physical fights on the schoolyard, swearing at the teacher, chronic drug abuse, and chronic lateness. Throughout these stories and in the details they gave of how they addressed harm, the administrators indicated repeatedly their desire to be preventative, developing proactive responses so authentic change occurs. However, they admit openly that the limitations of time and resources often push them to be reactive for the overall safety of the school environment. Interspersed with the examples of building rapport, connection and relationships with students, increased surveillance and external control were considered proactive solutions that would allow them to hold students accountable for their actions. "If we can catch them, we can help them.' The

themes of *future* and *responsibility* came out most clearly in examples of efforts 'to ensure that it won't happen again', 'for the sake of a better future', and 'a safer school environment.' The weight of responsibility brought them to anecdotes of what '*they'* as administrators were doing based on what '*they'* thought needed to happen, not based on what the students were saying they needed.

High school summary

In summarizing the cycle that is at work in this high school, administrators who are charged with and personally take on the responsibility for creating a safe learning environment so students can be educated for their well-being and a successful future, feel a strong need to *control* and therefore are supportive of surveillance. They convey this to teachers who then become *incident-focussed* hoping to contain and prevent harm so that they can accomplish their task of delivering content. Focussing on these incidents results in the students feeling trapped with *no voice* to explain why or to ask for help to address the past, which brought them to the incidents of harm.

In contrast students suggest that a solution requires *respect* for who they are and for a space to have their voice heard so that the past can be addressed. For this to occur, they want teachers to *listen*, and administrators to *trust* them with responsibility, not *catch* them through surveillance and then act in an effort to minimize the impact of harm.

Discussion

This study's exposure of students, teachers, and administrators perspectives on harm and their schools' response to harm is important for understanding why many seemingly credible safe and caring schools initiatives, including rj, are not changing the cultures of schools as significantly as anticipated or desired. Three key insights emerge.

1. A rhetoric of care

First, the schools in this study, like other social institutions, ignore or avoid addressing harm and its impact on those involved favouring instead to address individual student behaviour (elementary and high school) or to compensate for the impact of the social and institutional structures which bear upon the students. As a result, like Zehr (2005) and Llewellyn (2009) indicate, avoiding harm and its impact on those involved cannot result in spaces and places where well-being flourishes. This study reveals that educators and institutional policies, either consciously or subconsciously work out of a position of control rather than engagement, though they articulate care and concern for the well-being of students. Toshalis (2012) identifies this as a rhetoric of care.

> Social distancing of teacher from student sometimes occurs not because of an absence of care but through the expression of it. Because the [educators] care is rarely grounded in a consideration of the contextual factors that shape the teacher-student relationship, the efficacy of that care and the likelihood that it will be received by the student is undermined…. [T]he rhetoric of care, often articulated as "an *in*vestment in the students success," may actually function as a *di*vestment. This divestment is mediated by deficit discourses,

> lowered expectations, and infantilizing practices, each of which teaches students a great deal about how to relate to or appease those with institutional power over them." (p. 28)

This rhetoric of care is evident in each of the schools in varying degrees both in the actions of the educators but also in the policies which do not engage the perspectives of the students in any significant manner. Ultimately, returning to Llewellyn's relational theory, in the case of the elementary and high school educators, in spite of an articulated expression of well-being, there seems to be a fear that if the needs and well-being of others are given attention, then resources for one's own well-being will not be available. In terms of the junior high school, the deficit discourses and displacement of responsibility for harmful behaviour onto institutional and social structures undermines the opportunities for students involved in harmful situations to fulfill obligations and take advantage of prospects for engagement, creating a bystander culture.

2. Walking together, walking apart

Second, the study illustrates how in spite of a common desire to nurture well-being, this does not guarantee that it occurs. In fact it appears that schools such as the elementary and high school that prioritize academic development, create strict roles and minimize commonality, resulting in people within the school community walking past each other (See Figure 1).

However, when schools have a common purpose to support and encourage each others' well-being, there is much to share (Llewellyn, 2012) as demonstrated in the junior high,

where supportive relationships develop within which academic growth can also occur (See Figure 2).

Mutual support and accountability are critical elements in authentically caring communities, however. Without them paternalistic attitudes can take hold as is also evident in the junior high. The resulting **rhetoric of care** creates a different kind of relationship that impedes the development of student autonomy (See Figure 3).

3. Listening to students

Finally, this study indicates that students in general have learned to navigate the school system and the expectations of educators rather than had opportunity to address the harm they experience or cause. They indicate they feel trapped, ignored and see the schools' approach as limited in terms of addressing harm, regardless of how well-meaning the adults are. However, in all three schools, students identify that open discussions, like the the focus group interview, would allow them to address harmful past events, enact solutions in the present, and thus impact the future. These suggestions describe the key components of a rj talking circle/conference. Substantial school culture change may be initiated when adult priorities are set aside and space/time is created where students' perspectives can be articulated and heard.

Implications and Conclusions

Historically, school culture is assumed, yet, in order to effectively address on-going dilemmas regarding bullying and the development of safe and caring school

environments, a clear base-line assessment of a school culture is critical. Without this, well-intentioned responses simply address symptoms rather than causes. By evaluating perspectives of harm, a beginning understanding of the philosophical foundations and purposes of educators and school policy are revealed. From here approaches can be chosen and implemented more effectively.

The fact that schools and educators in this study ignore or avoid addressing harm effectively, reiterates that in an educational context, like the judicial context within which Zehr (2005) and Llewelyn (2009) are situated, rules and behaviour *are* given priority over repairing harm and rebuilding relationships. It also illustrates how simply using language of well-being, flourishing, respect, dignity and concern does not ensure that these will characterize the culture. Thus, in implementing rj, grounding professional development and practice in a strong theoretical and philosophical base that includes careful on-going examination of principles and practice is necessary. Because every school environment is different, a one-size-fits-all implementation approach will be limited in terms of affecting change. For example, the professional development for the educators in the junior high school needs to include reassurance that their emphasis on human wellbeing is commendable. However, they would better serve their students and school community by implementing opportunities for students involved to address harm through a circle process that included adults who influence their lives personally and institutionally. In so doing, all could be held accountable both for the specific incident but also the context within which the harm occurred. Thus practice in facilitating comprehensive circles would be most beneficial for these educators. Professional development for educators in the elementary and high school needs to include acknowledgement of their concern for

the well-being of the students, as well as a wide variety of activities that challenge them to identify their personal and institutional philosophical stance. Then engaging with the philosophical and theoretical foundations of rj, they will be able to reflect on how this informs and challenges their personal and institutional practice and engagement with students on a daily basis. Initially, facilitating comprehensive circles is less important in these contexts as a stronger relational culture is required if the work involved in addressing serious incidents of harm is not to be discredited or co-opted to serve the purposes of the adults.

The significance of the circle process cannot be ignored as a means for creating a more even distribution of power where student voice becomes more prominent. The power imbalances present in the very structure of educational institutions requires explicit effort on the part of educators and policy makers to find ways to hear and listen to students. Thus, professional development that explores the potential of and provides practice in facilitating various talking circles is necessary. This will provide space not only for addressing harm, but more importantly for affecting the contexts in which students and educators interact, i.e. establishing democratic classroom communities, expanding pedagogical practice, and considering curriculum content.

Osher, Sprague, Bear, and Doyle (2010) identify the strengths and gaps in SEL, Ecologies of Learning, SWPBS and conclude that creating approaches that combine the strengths of each is necessary. By looking at perspectives and practices of addressing harm each can be better informed as they will be challenged to examine an underlying perspective on human development and capacity as individuals and communities. Restorative justice provides a conceptual framework for this kind of examination and

leads the way in understanding and establishing authentic relational cultures that go beyond rhetoric--but only if its proponents recognize that it too can be co-opted by institutions and people who fear loosing control when they open themselves up to engaging in equitable dialogue.

This study has begun to scratch the surface of an assumed component of rj theory and has only caught a glimpse of how educators perceive and address harm in schools. Future research is necessary to address the reality that institutions 'institutionalize' harmful practices as normal (i.e. inequity, authoritarianism, etc.) and that existing and new programs can perpetuate such harm. This leads to the need for a deeper understanding of harm itself in the broad context of education and schooling, but in particular in regards to rj. Such knowledge has the potential for revolutionizing restorative justice, propelling it forward, and providing further direction for implementing all safe and caring school initiatives.

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Figures for:

Student, Teacher and Administrator Perspectives on Harm: Implications for Implementing Safe and Caring School Initiatives (p. 30)

Figure 1: Walking past each other

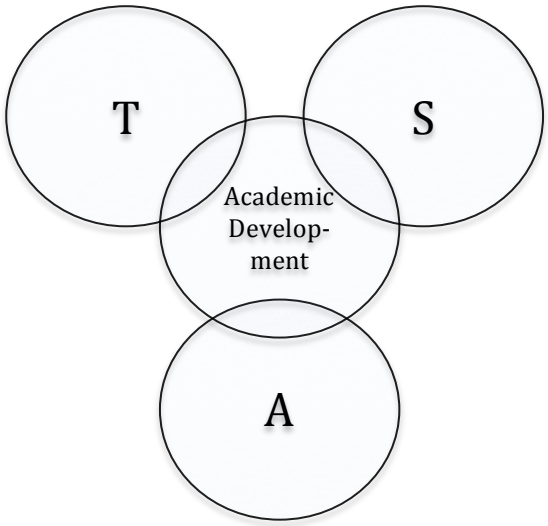

Figure 2:Walking together

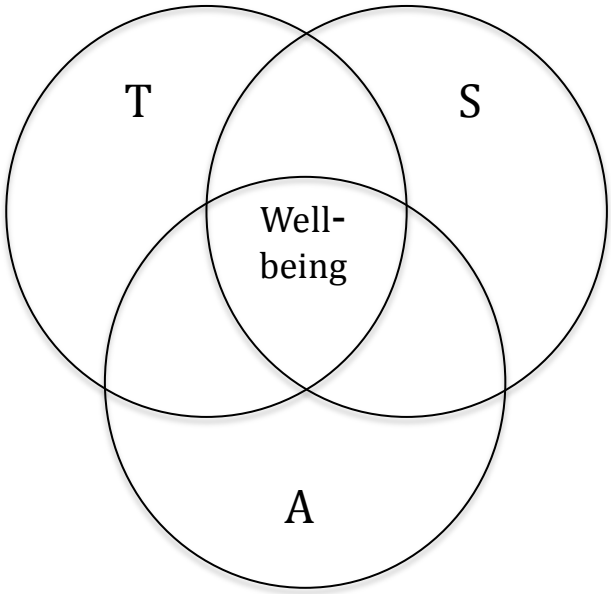

Figure 3:Walking paternalistically