



Implementing Restorative Justice in Schools: Lessons Learned from Restorative Justice Practitioners in Four Brooklyn Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Districts are turning to restorative justice (RJ) programming for whole-school and equity-oriented discipline reform. They are facing unanswered questions about the scope of needed change, priorities in the start-up phase, and strategies to confront typical implementation obstacles. This report identifies relevant “lessons learned” described during interviews with seven RJ practitioners after their initial six months of RJ implementation in four schools in Brooklyn, New York. Their insights include the following:

Schools need a comprehensive vision of Restorative Justice

The RJ practitioners urged schools to embrace a comprehensive vision of change as they implement RJ programming. Describing the potential of RJ to transform daily interactions, they see RJ as shifting school culture by:

- Recognizing the humanity and individuality of students and educators,
- Making room for all “voices” and honoring the need for self-determination,
- Offering opportunities to forgive and repair harm,
- Prioritizing cultural competence and relevance,
- Interconnecting efforts for social/racial justice and restorative justice.

Paradigm shifting requires “all in”

The RJ practitioners agreed that transforming community and disciplinary practices requires a broad alliance of engaged staff and students. At the same time, administrator support is vital. Administrators can help to ensure RJ is not marginalized but, instead, is infused into everyday activities. When RJ is new to a school, they recommend:

- Reaching out to engage diverse sectors of the school community in the change process,
- Obtaining instrumental support from administrators to help surmount the very real scheduling and time constraints for RJ activities and professional development.

Starting points for whole school change

The RJ practitioners agreed that, at the beginning of implementation, it is essential to prioritize the community-building aspects of the programming. To many, this meant engaging adults first. Thus, a starting point was to increase staff buy-in by making RJ relevant to staff goals. Accordingly, introducing a school to RJ begins with:

- Community building efforts,
- Prioritizing work with adults,
- Making RJ relevant to stakeholders.

Engage in capacity-building and long term sustainability from the beginning

The RJ practitioners described how the schools are influenced by larger systems and stressors. Therefore, schools need the resources and capacity to withstand changes driven by external forces. According to the RJ practitioners, this will require:

- Vision and resources from the New York City Department of Education,
- An understanding that transformation is incremental and a long term process.

Background

In 2015, the Brooklyn Community Foundation initiated the *Brooklyn Restorative Justice Project*. Their aim is to “to create a racially just and sustainable disciplinary model that can be scaled across the New York City school system” and to ultimately “halt the school-to-prison pipeline by providing powerful disciplinary alternatives.” In this way, the project aims to forefront RJ’s promise for promoting racial and social justice.

Working in partnership with NYC Department of Education and the Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, the Brooklyn Community Foundation has committed \$1.6 million to support four Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) for four years (2015-2019) as they implement RJ programming in four Brooklyn schools. As of 2015, they selected CBOs and facilitated their pairing with the schools. In their designated school, each CBO hired an RJ coordinator to implement RJ in a full time capacity and an RJ supervisor to support the implementation process.

Brooklyn Schools	Community Based Organization
Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies (Coney Island)	New York Peace Institute
School for Democracy and Leadership (East Flatbush)	Good Shepherd Services
Ebbets Field Middle School (Crown Heights)	Partnership with Children
Science Skills Center High School (Downtown Brooklyn)	Sweet River Consulting

The need to share implementation “lessons learned”

Although RJ has a long history rooted in cultural healing of indigenous communities (Johnstone, & Van Ness, 2007), the use of restorative approaches to building community and repairing harm is relatively new in U.S. schools. Evidence has accrued that schools using RJ reduce their use of exclusionary discipline (Anyon et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014), but like any new initiative, RJ implementation can be challenging (Anyon, 2016).

Districts and schools across the nation are “rolling out” RJ training but little is known about best practices for early implementation (Hurley et al., 2015). This underscores the need for disseminating implementation “lessons learned” to schools across the nation as they undertake discipline reform to reduce their use of exclusionary discipline and eradicate racial disparities in school suspension.

RJ practitioner interviews

In the report, we highlight “lessons learned” from hour-long interviews with seven RJ practitioners conducted by the first author of this report. With one exception, two RJ practitioners from *each* CBO participated in the interviews. They were asked to reflect on their first six months (November, 2015 to May, 2016) in their designated school as they led the implementation of RJ programming. The first author led open coding and axial coding of the transcribed interviews, and identified converging and diverging perspectives on lessons learned in the early implementation process (Strauss, & Corbin, 1990). A team of graduate student coders also reviewed the transcripts to examine the credibility of the coding. The interviewees also offered feedback during a “member check.”

RJ practitioners

The one male and six female interviewees were diverse in professional background and sociodemographic characteristics. Several individuals noted a background in community organizing. Others noted social work, education, youth development, or mediation/case management. All of the interviewees were born inside the United States and their ethnic heritage was diverse including African, Caribbean, African American, Mediterranean, and Western European descent. Four of the interviewees identified their race as Black and three as White. The sexual identities of the interviewees were varied, with five identifying as heterosexual and two identifying as bisexual and/or queer.

Sociodemographic characteristics of the four Brooklyn schools in the RJ project

2015-2106	Science Skills Center High School for Science	Ebbets Field Middle School	School for Democracy and Leadership	Rachel Carson High School for Coastal Studies
Enrollment				
Total Enrollment	551	165	249	589
Grades Served	09-12, SE	06-08, SE	06-12, SE	09-12, SE
Gender				
% Female/% Male	44%/56%	44%/56%	43%/57%	45/55%
Race				
% Black	71%	63%	91%	20%
% Hispanic	18%	28%	5%	23%
% White	3%	2%	2%	44%
% Asian	6%	4%	0.4%	11%
% Other	2%	3%	2%	2%
Other Demographics				
Free/Reduced Lunch	74%	96%	71%	100%
Special Education (students with IEPs)	16%	26%	25%	20%
English Language Learners	5%	19%	6%	12%

“I think a restorative approach in schools is really slowing down a process. Schools move at lightning pace and are often highly reactive instead of proactive. I think restorative justice asks us to slow down and really create time to authentically listen for the purpose of building healthy foundations.”

SCHOOLS NEED A COMPREHENSIVE VISION OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

The RJ practitioners urge change-agents to draw on a comprehensive vision of change and they resist being sidelined as service providers who solely repair harm or mediate conflict. Accordingly, they saw the potential of RJ in its capacity to transform how students, staff, and families interact on a daily basis. As one RJ practitioner explained, “What we are doing is not necessarily going into schools and restoring the harm but bigger than that. We’re looking at a cultural shift.” Spanning the social-emotional and instructional aspects of schooling, five “culture shifting” tenets of RJ emerged from the interviews. Specifically, RJ a) recognizes humanity and individuality, b) gives voice to those in the school community and honors the need for self-determination, c) offers opportunity to forgive and repair harm, d) prioritizes cultural competence and relevance and e) interconnects efforts for social/racial justice and restorative justice.

Recognize humanity and individuality.

An RJ practitioner stated that in the typical school environment “there’s very little time...to acknowledge or see what’s going on with the whole person, the whole student.” A colleague further explained that, “We’re not actually accountable to the young people... we don’t have embedded within our school structure that space and that value around reflective, active listening and tending to the human need to be honest.” She continued, “RJ is about a shift in culture...it’s not just about solving conflict.”

Breaking from typical practices in schools, the RJ practitioners described that RJ offers promise for transforming interactions—one practitioner said, “When you enter a space of restorative justice, it comes with recognizing humanity.” Another practitioner reflected, “...you see everyone as playing a role...you see everyone as important...you see everyone as having something to offer.”

Recognizing individuality opens the door to a different way of problem-solving after discipline incidents occur. An RJ practitioner noted, “... restorative justice is figuring out what’s going on elsewhere that’s causing (students) to behave this way, instead of just disciplining them and thinking that it’s going to solve the problem.” Another RJ practitioner explained the link between knowing students and helping to address challenges. Speaking from a teacher’s perspective, she noted, “Because I know who you are and I understand who you are, I can better understand your actions. I can better understand the way that you learn. It can help us build a relationship and therefore I can celebrate your success and I can stand with you in your failure and understand what’s going on and help you do something different because I know who you are.”

“When you enter a space of restorative justice, it comes with recognizing humanity.”

“RJ still holds you accountable but it allows you to still be who you are, as a human...it allows for opportunity learn from our mistakes, to be accountable for our mistakes and to restore and be forgiven.”

Equity of voice and self-determination.

The practitioners emphasized that RJ makes room for “voices to be heard” and honors the fundamental need for self-determination. An RJ practitioner expounded on this idea:

“I think the core (RJ) values are that everyone’s voice matters, that there’s an equity of voice, that there is time and value given each person representing themselves on their own terms. Whether it’s in the community building...or speaking to the ways in which we’ve been harmed or needs that we have...that either lead to harmful behavior or healing...We value that—we care about the needs of individuals, whether it be students, parents, adults—that we’re actually sensitive and in tune to the needs of the individuals that make up the system.”

A colleague noted that this requires, “a general belief in people’s capacity to address conflict in their lives.” This belief is sometimes undermined by the typical way hierarchies are established in school. For example, an RJ practitioner described the way teachers can use their desks and said, “...It establishes power. It’s like I’m here and you’re there. I’m here to teach you. Instead of understanding that students are the masters of their own lives and also have a great deal to teach.”

The RJ practitioners collectively sought to create opportunities to help students “feel empowered” and “feel able to communicate negative, positive, in the middle, whatever it is.” This is particularly needed for students who have been marginalized. As an RJ practitioner explained, “[RJ] provides a sense of autonomy and agency...I think offering a conference in response to harm is a great way to start that conversation by just saying, “Here’s an opportunity. Do you want it?” ... I think that’s a

meaningful [opportunity] particularly with a population that has...not (had) a lot of choice around their behavior.”

Grace through Repairing Harm.

The practitioners describe how RJ addresses mistakes in a radically different manner than typical practices in schools. One practitioner reflected, “We get caught up in the process of just wanting to punish...The relationship is never restored. We just go our separate ways. The problem happened. The person is now gone. That’s how we deal with it instead of allowing healing to happen.” She further pointed out that RJ goes against the “grain” of “conditioning by society that punishment works.” She then described what drew her to RJ in the first place. She explained:

“What appeals to me about RJ is that (it) provides...‘grace...’ It deals with the person first and not the problem. It comes with the understanding that maybe the problem happened as a result of something going on with the person. And if we can get to the understanding of the person, of their concept of who they are and even build a relationship, then we can come up with a creative solution and alternative to dealing with the problem...The victim is able to...look at the offender in the eye... having forgiveness in their heart. The offender being able to apologize and be held accountable in the community versus just punishment, sent away to jail, or getting kicked out of school.”

It is important to note that, in the above statement, the RJ practitioner sees that accountability is built into RJ practices. Accordingly, this approach to school discipline does not ignore the need for students to take responsibility for their actions. Yet, it considers how students can learn and develop through mistakes.

“Ideally in a restorative school that is racially just, there is acknowledgement of staff that there’s a difference between themselves and their students both culturally and ethnically.”

Cultural competency and relevance.

An RJ practitioner critiqued current school practices and noted, “I think that teaching right now is about conformity and not necessarily about educating. And I think a lot of our students are pushed to conform to norms that are not their norm, are not their culture, are not their context.” She continued that her vision of RJ included, “...celebrating student cultures without demeaning them or pushing them to the side.” In a school with RJ, “School staff will understand students’ context and...be able to learn and teach to their context.” Her colleague similarly stated that acknowledgment of cultural difference is a crucial step. She said, “A restorative school to me looks like an understanding amongst staff that their students are coming from different places and that as they’re teaching or as they’re handling students, they take that into account.” For one RJ practitioner this means school staff abandoning their color blind attitudes: “I think a position of color blindness is a go-to stance for many educators, at least the educators that I’ve been encountering, and the administrators who say, ‘That’s not a problem here. It doesn’t matter what color you are.’ And I think that’s problematic. I think a racially and socially just school in the first instance looks to shift that amongst its staff and school...”

Acknowledging differences in culture and life experiences, as one practitioner warned, should not lead to notions that being culturally sensitive to students of color means, “making sure that it’s easier for them, making sure that it’s kind of dumbed down...” Instead, she envisions schools that set high academic expectations and are “always striving for the best out of these students and they’re not giving them shortcuts but at the same time they are acknowledging the challenges they face outside and how it comes into play within school.”

Engaging students in classrooms with high academic press and support also requires cultural competence and relevance in the instructional materials. As one practitioner noted, student engagement is facilitated through personally meaningful course content. She explained, “classroom content needs to be culturally and socially relevant. So, making sure...all voices are heard in the construction of classroom content. Making sure that students are able to reach high levels of rigor because...the level of engagement that is set first. And the engagement, I think, comes from (course content) being relevant. So, material that pertains to their lives that they can actually use...”

Another way to demonstrate cultural competency and relevance, according to this same practitioner, is to validate students’ unique experiences by connecting with their families. She explained that families must be “included and respected.” She continued, “...building those relationships with the family and making them feel comfortable to come into the school and to ask questions and to push back and to tell you what works for their child and what doesn’t and just bridge the gap that...too often exists between families and schools.”

Finally, RJ practitioners also recognized the need for students to have opportunities to share their perspectives about culture. An RJ practitioner described one such opportunity in her schools, “We started putting up big questions on our RJ board. We put up questions like, ‘What do you love about your culture? What does respect mean to you? What do you value?’ And people can anonymously write on it. For the culture question, people... talked about being Caribbean. ‘I love roti...I feel the most proud about my culture when I’m dancing. I love that my people are strong and black and survivors.’”

“It starts with honest conversations with adults and students being able to openly and honestly express themselves. I think it’s about conversations and interactions being contextualized in a general understanding and acceptance of racial and social injustice in the world.”

Racial/Social Justice and Restorative Justice.

Many RJ practitioners described how RJ is, at its core, about racial and social justice. One RJ practitioner noted, “We’re cutting through bias because we’re allowing people to speak on who they are, on their needs and we’re not allowing ourselves to tell stories based on our world view, however that has been informed by our own experiences.” Or as one practitioner described, “The circle is the container or the platform for the conversation...its mission is to end racism.” A colleague continued, “circling” and other RJ practices “are the tools for what’s underlying, which is the racial justice lens and the relationship building.”

While there was a general belief that RJ is rooted in racial and social justice, the interviewees also emphasized the need for explicit conversations about power, privilege, and bias. One practitioner noted, “...they are great teachers but without an understanding of who you’re serving and without an understanding of your own biases and thought process about the students that you serve then you do a disservice because often times how you treat them is what leads them to not be successful.” This practitioner also noted the complexity in cycles of hurt. She explained that adults themselves need time to reflect on “... where they’ve been hurt” and “how we perpetuate that on our students, especially our black and brown students...”

While it may be easy to call for explicit conversations about power, privilege, and bias, it is much harder to implement. One RJ practitioner noted, “That’s been one of our biggest difficulties...it’s such a sensitive topic and quite frankly there are a lot of white folks at our school that teach and I think it can be uncomfortable to have that conversation.” Another practitioner noted such conversations or trainings cannot be mandatory and requires a “willingness.” She explained, “It’s a tough

subject...‘Why would I want to go to an Undoing Racism workshop when I don’t think that I have racist tendencies?’ ‘Why would I want to do an implicit bias workshop when I feel like I’m not biased?’ Part of that feeling is because most people don’t want to deal with certain truths that hurt.” She discussed this issue on her “hearts and minds” RJ implementation committee comprised of a student, an educator, and other RJ staff. They recognized the need to offer “teachers a restorative process” to engage in “conversation around racism and white supremacy.” Another practitioner noted that to address the divide between generations, social class and culture between staff and students in her school, “relationship building activities that we do within circling” are key for trust building. She said, “...once you have that foundation of trust you’ll be able to have open and honest conversations about any and everything.”

Many of the interviewees explained that, in the future, they will draw on the mutual trust they have built in order to have difficult conversations about power, privilege, and bias. At the same time, as one practitioner noted, they do not underestimate the challenging in doing so: “I think it’s going to be a big part of the challenge over the four years is making sure that we keep (racial and social justice) in the forefront and making sure that everybody else brings it to their forefront...I think it’s going to be a lot of difficult conversations and a lot of reminding folks along the way.”

PARADIGM SHIFTING REQUIRES “ALL IN”

In order to create a fundamental transformation in relationship building and disciplinary practices, all members of the school community need to be actively engaged. At the same time, administrator support is vital in scheduling and making time for professional development. Moreover, for school climate to shift, RJ practices need to be infused into

“A key part to starting restorative justice in the school (is) making sure that it’s not just me or just a lone person trying to push this initiative but it’s a collective of people who see it and understand it and believe in it and want to get the word out and make it something that is really tangible within the school culture.”

Engage diverse constituents in the organizing and planning.

When it comes to restorative justice work, “everyone being on the same page is really critical.” An RJ practitioner explained, “if we are really talking about a paradigm shift it really needs to be owned by all people. And all people need to contribute.” Engaging “all people” in the RJ change process meant that RJ practitioners needed to connect with staff in diverse roles in the school. One interviewee described her efforts, “...I made it a point to reach out to the staff that sit in the main office which is everybody from the secretary to the attendance dean.” For further involvement, one practitioner did, “one-on-one check-ins with school security.” She further noted, “We had custodians fill out our school climate survey this year.”

Engaging staff was not always easy. One practitioner felt that “the majority of the staff is interested in restorative justice” and they “seem to agree with the approach,” yet changing their day-to-day practice was challenging. She noted, “when there’s an actual issue with the student, they seem to forget what we’re working for... there’s a disconnect when it comes to actually doing it because I think they’re so used to doing things a certain way.”

To break habits, practitioners noted the power of experiential learning. One practitioner is “a strong believer that one of the best buy-ins is to experience the power of restorative justice for yourself.” Another further explained that “teachers, they bought in this year because they were in circles. They felt it.”

Embedding RJ processes in seemingly unexpected places creates more opportunities for experiential learning. For example, at a community school forum, one practitioner “used the circle process with parents, students, community partners, and teachers.” The exercise allowed members of the school

community to “participate as equals with all of these other stakeholders and build community,” which led to many stating “I like the circle thing.”

Experiential learning can also help teachers understand that RJ “is for them” and can improve their working lives. An RJ practitioner said that, “part of creating and modelling a restorative environment and a restorative experience (is) to let (the teachers) know, “You guys are people. You guys also are in pain. You guys also need to figure out ways to communicate with each other better. We hear you...we acknowledge you and we’re invested in you as a collective unit in the school. And RJ is for you too. That actually most of the frustration that you feel about your school has to do with other adults in the building, not students.”

Instrumental support from administrators.

While all members of the school community needed to be involved for successful RJ implementation, tangible support from administrators was imperative given the scheduling obstacles. Specifically, many of RJ practitioners emphasized they faced tremendous challenges due to lack of appropriately structured time for RJ programming or insufficient time for professional development with educators in large groups.

For instance, while discussing advisory, one practitioner explained that it “is not well organized and it’s too large of a forum” and it would be most meaningful in “smaller groups or a more intimate setting.” She further explains that the large forum is “chaotic and you just can’t get a whole lot of relationship building done in that time and in that space... that’s something that I’m hoping to be able to impact over the next four years is to...make sure that people understand how important those spaces are.”

“The base of restorative justice is building community and then the latter part of it is the restorative action and addressing the issue...Because I know who you are and I understand who you are, I can better understand your actions. I can better understand the way that you learn. It can help us build relationship and therefore I can celebrate your success and I can stand with you in your failure and understand what’s going on and help you do something different because I know who you are.”

Similar to advisory, finding time for training posed a challenge. As one practitioner noted, “We didn’t have time to do didactic training or training in professional learning this year.” Since she works at a renewal school, they are “tied to a plan around improving academic benchmarks and so we had to find sneak attack ways to infuse professional learning.” She further explained the need to “get creative” in fitting into schedules. At the same time, creative strategies to carve out time can only go so far. One RJ practitioners emphasized this point: “PD needs to be *scheduled*, it needs to be *planned*, it needs to *start* in August or September.”

STARTING POINTS FOR WHOLE SCHOOL CHANGE

The RJ practitioners held similar perspectives that when schools introduce RJ, they need to put their initial effort into the community-building aspect of the programming. Creating stronger community, accordingly, will then reduce conflict and discipline incidents or, facilitate more successful resolution when incidents do arise. To many, this meant that the priority is to work with adults first, rather than the students. Staff buy in to RJ, then becomes an essential initial step.

Build Community First.

In the first year of implementation, some RJ practitioners felt they had no choice but to respond to the immediate school needs of “putting out fires.” As one practitioner noted, “We were there to deal with crisis situations and conflicts...we had to meet that need.” Yet, many of the RJ practitioners agreed that, ideally, the place to start is not on the reactive end of the RJ continuum (mediation, conferencing), but on the preventative end (community- and relationship-building). In one practitioner’s words: “The base of RJ is building community...the latter

part of it is the restorative action and addressing the issue.” Working on positive relationships and interactions in schools are essential. A strong sense of community is critical. A colleague concurred and voiced, “You can’t really do anything else without it.”

Community building circles with staff and students are a “front line approach...to create this kind of environment,” one practitioner explained. “That was the a-ha moment for a lot of staff and students. Where they are like, ‘Oh I didn’t (realize) those teachers had dreams and aspirations’ and... ‘Oh, we like the same things.’ But then once we get to know each other then we can really explore and talk about other things.” Circles can help to create positive relationships that will establish “a good foundation to have a socially just, racially just school in a restorative way.”

Circles were only one avenue to help build community. Other avenues were discussed as well. A RJ practitioner noted the importance of “space created for teachers...to really take the time to get to know the students and get acquainted with them, to know their culture and their context.” Another practitioner stated that “...creating opportunities (for) staff to interact with kids in a fun way, in a team building way, in a getting-to-know each other and care-about-one-another way so that they can get comfortable having a relationship with each other.”

One practitioner proposed a special way to include everyone: “One thing that I’d like to introduce to the school is to have a list of all 500 students and have every teacher go over them and say which one do you have a connection with, an extra connection with. Then figure which of the students aren’t on any teacher’s list and prioritize them.”

“Creating opportunities (for) staff to interact with kids in a fun way, in a team building way, in a getting-to-know each other and care-about-one-another way so that they can get comfortable having a relationship with each other.”

He sees these types of efforts as part of making community a “matter of habit,” such that schools are “sharing, relating, and deepening bonds but also that (schools) are looking out for people who don’t have that.”

Building trusting relationships is also foundational for RJ practices implemented after conflict or discipline incidents. One practitioner shared her experience:

“We have a number of students who traditionally without this process would have just been suspended and they were able to encounter something different in a different way of discipline. But...I don’t think any of that could have worked without relationships being in place. So I think I’m extremely proud of the relationships our team was able to come in and form with the students to have the trust to be able to engage in this process.”

Start with adults or with students?

When RJ programming is new to a school, it is not always clear whether to prioritize activities that engage adults or prioritize activities that engage students. Interviewees weighed in on this issue with one who stated, “Base level is the outreach to the adults.” One practitioner further explained, “You definitely start with the adults...With teachers as models and as people with more power, they need to be educated and on board first, and the early adopters and innovators need to be identified.” Another practitioner in a middle school also felt the need to work with adults prior to the students. “I feel like developmentally that it’s up to the adults to set the tone and the framework for young people.” She further explained, “It’s relationships with their teachers that matter...Start

there so that teachers can reconnect and continue to strengthen their connection with students as a kind of precondition for restorative justice.”

Although working first with adults was a priority for many, one RJ practitioner mentioned activities with students and teachers “happen simultaneously” and that “kids actually really grasp onto it quickly and started asking... ‘Oh can you come to this class. It was great when you did it in my math class. Can we do it in my science class?’ Or talking to me in the hallway or asking me more about what I do or who I am or stopping by the office to say, ‘I need justice restored!’” Another colleague added, “you can cultivate student buy-in so that it, in-and-of-itself, can be a leverage point for administrators and adults to buy in.”

Make it relevant to stakeholders.

Given the stress of juggling numerous demands, educators need RJ practices to feel useful to them and not like another disjointed program pulling them away from their priorities. As one RJ practitioner pointed out, “Ninety-five percent of teachers wanted something that linked to their curriculum as opposed to just come in and let’s do a general relationship building circle.” She explained that rather than using a standard format for every circle, “I tailored all of them to the conversation that I had (with) the individual classroom teachers and then the content that they were teaching.” She further stated “it didn’t necessarily feel like people were all that excited about circles because they didn’t really see how to use it on a day to day basis...I just really wanted them to know that you can use these (circles) every day and every way if you really want to...then I think people are really receptive.”

“We have to tear down the monster that’s in place before we can build something new and beautiful and an entire paradigm shift. And I’m not totally sure what that looks like but I know it will take more than a couple years to do.”

ENGAGE IN CAPACITY-BUILDING AND LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY FROM THE BEGINNING

To sustain changes over years to come, schools need to develop the internal capacity to weather staff turnover and the end of fiscal support from outside sources, such as the Brooklyn Community Foundation. According to the RJ practitioners, this will require that the New York City Department of Education (DOE) to clarify its vision and role, and allocate adequate resources. Furthermore, they noted that establishing RJ within a school is not a quick process, especially when intended to remain long term. As one RJ practitioner stated “we don’t just (want to) do a drive-by but (be) able to build the capacity.”

The need for vision and resources from the NYC Dept. of Education.

As previously stated RJ is not a short-term process, as one practitioner felt that “the four years is (not) an endpoint so...I don’t think we’ll have transformed the school and then it will just be set to go. I think there needs to be ongoing support to sustain it.” As this practitioner declared such long term planning would require further involvement from higher ups in the school system such as the “DOE really taking ownership over (RJ) in addition to principals.” Such ownership starts, according to her, with a vision: “And so I think that a vision, whether it’s my district or the DOE, a real concrete vision is really the only thing that’s going to make sure that if we get there that we keep growing and keep staying on this restorative justice path.”

A colleague had a different opinion. She felt as though DOE involvement should strictly be in the realm of providing resources as she stated, “I think the only support we would want from (DOE)

that would be important is additional money for students, for parents, for the programs to occur. And for them to just move out the way. Just let us do our thing and help us do our thing. So back us up, support us.”

In fact, schoolwide systems change requires a significant amount of resources. Yet, currently, the schools are struggling. One practitioner explained, “they’re doing what they can with what they’ve been given but...it is not easy.” Some of the constraints include fundamentals such as “time and space” for RJ programming. A lack of necessary resources not only makes it difficult for RJ implementation but as this practitioner noted,

“I think young people are aware that their schools do not have everything that they think it should have... And that also creates a culture where young people don’t feel valued. And teachers definitely are aware of this. Administrators are aware of this and then they themselves also don’t feel valued in the larger spectrum of being committed to education or a system of schooling... I think schools should have more money.”

Long term process.

The RJ practitioners made it clear that incorporating RJ into school is a lengthy process that required realistic smaller steps before achieving maximum effect. As one RJ practitioner put it:

“I think it’s just a matter of people understanding the overall timeline of this process and that they won’t see all of the tangible changes right away and that it’s a four-year build. And that year two is also going to be very foundational just around trying to get people to understand what (RJ) is and how to feel comfortable within the circling and to take ownership of it within their classrooms a little bit more.”

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Skye Roper-Moses & Glenn Parker,
New York Peace Institute

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