

Implementing a Culture of Care to Build Student/Teacher Capacity

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ABSTRACT

During the 2010-2011 school year, a research and professional development project was conducted with members of an urban school district in upstate New York to adopt restorative justice principles, focusing on relationships, by creating a **Culture of Care** in individual schools and throughout the district.

PURPOSE

The project focused on creating a continuity of relationships through a Culture of Care.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can a school create a culture of care that provides a continuity of relationships throughout students' school experiences?

What systems does a school need to have in place to support a culture of care?

What capacities do teachers and students need to develop to support a culture of care?

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Valenzuela's (1999) interpretation of the ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) guided this project. This interpretation calls for teachers to embrace two kinds of caring, which formed the theoretical foundation for typological coding of the data collected:

- **Authentic caring**, where educators in the participating schools care for their ethnically diverse students as culturally located individuals, with an emphasis on reciprocal relationships and interactions between these students and their teachers, and
- **Aesthetic caring**, where these educators care for the learning of these students, based on a commitment to ideas and practices that purportedly lead to improved educational outcomes.

PROBLEM

In May of 2010 the Assistant Superintendent of the subject school district contacted me "to provide some turn key training for my PBIS coaches in the area of restorative justice." She stated the problem as being, "We have astronomical statistics in the area of **suspensions** amongst our Hispanic and Black male students in my district."

PROCEDURES

Given the nature of the research questions, which focused on schools, the qualitative research tradition that best fit was **ethnography** (Creswell, 2007). Data were gathered throughout the 2010-2011 school year, relying primarily on **group interviews** and **observation** methods.

FINDINGS

Based on analyses of the data, individual teachers and some schools have begun the process of creating a Culture of Care in the following ways:

- Most of the elementary schools have introduced talking circles in at least some of the classrooms, usually as part of Morning Meetings.
- Also these schools have engaged in other activities to demonstrate they care for the students as individuals, as well as caring for their learning, such as greeting each student by name as they arrive at school each morning and visiting the neighborhoods and homes of students who come from ethnically diverse and low socioeconomic neighborhoods.

CONCLUSIONS

Over time, the **capacity** of elementary school students and their teachers to create and maintain relationships was being built through the use of Talking Circles at Morning Meetings to solve problems nonviolently and to respond to wrongdoing and conflict in such a way as to heal the harm to these relationships. These students will hopefully bring the skills they have acquired with them on into middle school and high school. As a result, the fundamental ideas of a Culture of Care will spread from the elementary schools to the middle school and ultimately to the high school.

SOCIAL CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

If a Culture of Care is embedded in the participating schools, the capacity of students and teachers will be built to respond to wrongdoing and conflict in nonviolent ways. As a result, **relationships will be maintained and strengthened** because the harm to those relationships caused by wrongdoing and conflict will be addressed and repaired. Thus, students, particularly ethnically diverse students, will be motivated to attend school and to succeed and ultimately become **peaceful citizens**.



Talking Circles

DATA ANALYSIS

Typological analysis (Hatch, 2002) guided initial analyses; in addition, as suggested by Hatch (2002).

Inductive analysis was used to fill in the gaps left by typological analysis so that a thorough understanding of the underlying meaning of the data could be accomplished.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited to one school district. Readers of this study are cautioned to not generalize the findings from this study to other contexts. A **rich, thick description** of the study is being provided in the hopes that those educators who believe these findings might be beneficial to their schools will adopt these ideas in ways that are appropriate in their context.