Expanding Opportunity through Critical Restorative Justice

Portraits of Resilience at the Individual and School Level

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AUTHORS' NOTE: The stories and portraits presented in this article emerge from our respective experiences with a previous student while teaching in San Francisco and from research at a credit recovery program in a large urban high school in Boston. One of us, David, is a black male and special education teacher at a Boston arts high school. The other, Anita, is a South Asian female who coordinates a restorative justice program at an alternative high school in Houston. We hope that these portraits reveal how relationships among adults, students, and communities influence individuals as well as whole-school structures. We also hope to show that resilience is much more than a "special something" possessed by the few, but something experienced by many students and the adults who support them. At the same time, we witness how the school-to-prison pipeline hinders the resilience of many urban students of color. Therefore, to ground ourselves in an issue relevant to our times, we show the promise restorative justice practices hold in the nurturing of resilience. Yours, in solidarity, ANITA WADHWA AND DAVID KNIGHT

Hakim, a 14-year-old, skateboarding African American graffiti artist, was asked three years ago to name some key things about himself that his teachers overlooked. Hakim looked down and said, "That inside, I'm a

good person. . . . They just keep missing the changes that I'm going through to be this good person."

Hakim's schooling history mirrors that of many urban youth: inconsistent grades, multiple school placements, and a laundry list of suspensions and disciplinary referrals. But his description of himself belies these surface-level statistics. Hakim attests, "I'm going somewhere. I'm going somewhere bigger than just hanging out on the corner, you know, doing drugs and stuff, talking trash. . . . That's not how I am. I skateboard and stuff. Nobody really does that. . . . I'm a graffiti artist. People do things with stupid tags in the bathroom and stuff, but I don't do that. I wanna create. I wanna do something with color."

Hakim's words are striking on several counts. Perhaps most striking is his awareness of how his educators perceive him. Although they recognized his ability, teachers and staff members described Hakim as academically inconsistent, truant, and withdrawn. As a black 14-year-old skateboarding graffiti artist, one would think Hakim's teachers would have much to discuss with him. His interests alone set him apart from his classmates. Yet the fact that he had ADHD was a social category that weighed heavily in teachers' thinking about him, and Hakim sensed it. Instead of understanding Hakim in the context of "the changes [he was] . . . going through," many teachers saw him through a narrow lens. They distilled his complex self-representations of identity into "a vague social marker": the withdrawn, inconsistent African American male youth (Shelby 2005, 23). Still, Hakim's story is not new or unusual. Many students—particularly African American and Latino boys—are similarly cast as troublemakers and shut out of schools across the nation through suspensions and expulsions.

Unique among the 450 other students at his San Francisco high school, Hakim's method of expression—graffiti art—coupled with his desire to go somewhere "bigger" than the neighborhood corner suggest that Hakim is resilient. Indeed, his words and story point toward underacknowledged elements of resilience—that it's an ongoing, dynamic experience, rather than an individual attribute. Resilience also tends to be a deeply relational experience (Knight 2012). Viewed as one student in a school, adults see Hakim as withdrawn and inconsistent, but viewed more broadly as a son and a friend, he is connected and dedicated: Hakim supports his mother and friends, and he continues to strive and to hope, even under harsh circumstances and adult criticism (Desetta and Wolin 2000). Thus, although Hakim is not perfect, he is resilient. According to researchers, resilience (or patterns of positive development in the face of adversity) arises through

interactions between students and their environment (Masten and Obradovic 2006). This framework is important for educators because some of the most powerful interactions that promote and safeguard resilience occur in school settings. Resilience, then, is built on opportunity.

Decades of research also reveal that resilience is best promoted through several key factors, including positive relationships with adults and mentors, in addition to opportunities to actively engage in community and share perspectives (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008; Rutter 1987; Winfield 1991). In this article, we tackle the disadvantaging conditions of zero tolerance policies in school settings and advocate using an alternative approach—critical restorative justice through peacemaking circles—to nurture resilience and open opportunity at the school level.

Zero Tolerance Policies: A Barrier to Resilience

Over the past two decades, schools have begun using automatic suspensions and expulsions to keep order and mitigate violence, drug use, and misbehavior. These zero tolerance policies hinder resilience and limit opportunity because they push students out of classrooms and schools, increase the risk of dropout, and disproportionately discipline African American, Latino, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning), and special education students (Council of State Governments 2011; Eaton and DeLauri 2010). To put this in stark relief: African American students—15 percent of the US student population—make up 37 percent of students who are suspended (Planty et al. 2009). This pattern, according to the American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force, creates a pipeline to student failure that exacerbates the number of student referrals to the juvenile justice system and creates an atmosphere of distrust between students and schools (2008). With these issues taken together, how can educators and practitioners help students, particularly students of color, to experience positive outcomes in school settings?

Reenvisioning Adults as Guideposts

Because zero tolerance policies arise from an exclusionary, often punitive approach to schooling—disregarding the student and the assets that he or she brings to school—a resilient, opportunity-rich school is one whose climate inclusively fosters supportive relationships among students and adults. Young people, particularly adolescents, need to believe that adults care about

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   13

them in order for mentoring relationships and opportunities for participation to safeguard their resilience (Benard and Scales 2009).

To meet this need, school staff can reenvision who they are and who they can be. First of all, school staff members—teachers, paraprofessionals, janitors, and administrators—*are* the school. Schools are much more than physical places but, more importantly, constellations of human resources, relationships, even experiences. Traditionally, "at-risk" students who experience success—including academically vulnerable students, immigrant students, and LGBTQ students—often describe that one adult in the school who was "there" for her or him through difficulty (Sadowski 2013). Second, resilient adults make resilient schools. Psychologist Ann Masten and colleagues write, "The resilience of adults who work in schools is important because these individuals often play a central role in school resilience while also serving as protective adults or brokers of resources in the lives of high-risk children" (2008, 76). Urban educators' ability to return to school, positive and rejuvenated, even after a rough day, establishes the tone and culture of a school. Educators' approach to challenge and conflict also signals to students how they should respond. Both of us have seen this in our capacities as teachers and adults in urban middle and high schools. Therefore, school staff should see themselves as "brokers" and guideposts in a school's opportunity pipeline.

Resilience through Restorative Justice

One approach to nurturing positive youth development and creating an "opportunity pipeline" for especially vulnerable students is restorative justice. Restorative justice is an alternative to zero tolerance discipline intended to safeguard students' resilience and improve their behavior and self-esteem. A framework that recasts youth as problem-solvers and assets to school communities, restorative justice focuses on developing and mending relationships among students, educators, parents, and community members to address and redress conflict and violence. Instead of alienating victimized or accused youth, restorative justice works to empower all while also holding appropriate parties accountable. Individual students are therefore given room to reflect, critique, and positively develop within a collective context focused on understanding and justice for all its members.

The roots of restorative justice extend centuries back to indigenous peoples in every continent who felt collectively responsible for building and repairing community (Boyes-Watson 2008). If a member of a community committed an offense, he was expected to face those he harmed and commit to an agreement to rectify the problem. Since then, restorative justice

has been broadly conceived as a philosophy and practice in which a variety of harms—interpersonal harm, harm against communities, and violation of state laws—are reframed not as a traditional breach between individual parties but as harms among relationships that are felt by an entire community. Thus, restorative justice builds student resilience by emphasizing two "developmental opportunities" (Nakkula 2008): supportive relationships (which are created, sustained, and repaired when harm occurs) and equitable opportunity to participate (Benard 2000).

Peacemaking Circles

Schools can "do" restorative justice in many different ways, including peer mediation programs, classroom community meetings, youth courts, or community circles. In this article, we explore the use of peacemaking circles as a school-level resilience-building strategy for both educators and the young people they teach.

Although it is common practice to see students in elementary school seated in circles as teachers read to them or direct conversations, we speak of peacemaking circles differently and specifically regarding the interpersonal and social-emotional texture of school communities. Increasingly, the restorative practice of circles is being used at the secondary level for a multitude of purposes: "talking" circles for having formal and informal conversations and building community, and "healing" circles for addressing conflict (Pranis 2005). In healing circles, the responsible parties, the harmed parties, and other members of the community engage in conversation by sitting in a circle. The dialogue is embedded with rituals based on Native American practices, such as having a keeper and a talking piece. A "keeper" acts as a facilitator, and participants pass the talking piece—which can be any small object, such as a stone or a shell—from person to person and can only speak when the piece is in their possession. Therefore, these key elements of circle are embedded to ensure greater equity for all and to build collective capacity to deal with conflict and violence. This focus on community ties nurtures resilience within and among students, adults, and other stakeholders within and around schools. Talking circles—circles that focus on building community and teaching content—provide an important foundation for a restorative culture by allowing adults in students the equal opportunity to express themselves and understand their commonalities and differences.

The healing circle employs three core principles of restorative justice: identify the harm, ask community members to say how they were impacted by the harm, and then come up with concrete ways for the responsible

party to repair the harm (Zehr 1990). Restorative practices such as circles have been found to help educators and students uncover the root of conflicts, create space for individuals to be accountable for their actions, teach social and emotional literacy, foster a sense of community, and improve academic outcomes, relationships, and school climate overall (Cameron and Thorsborne 2000; Karp and Breslin 2001; Lewis 2009; Macready 2009; Morrison et al. 2006; Shaw 2007; Varnham 2005). All of these outcomes relate to positive youth development and play a role in students' overall resilience in the face of personal, family, neighborhood, and academic challenges.

Building School-Level Resilience

Portraits included in this article emerge from research conducted on the use of circles in one of the small learning communities (SLCs) at Bridge High School in Boston.[1] Bridge struggled for years with fights, misbehaviors, and deep-seated gang violence. In response, a group of educators got together to implement restorative justice to strengthen student-teacher relationships and to empower students (Wadhwa 2013). Restorative justice was implemented as Project Graduation, a SLC at Bridge High; circles are used to support about 60 students who have failed at least one grade level and have consistently been unsuccessful in school and/or are on the verge of dropping out. It is a place where students' lack of credits, failures in schooling, and even past criminal behaviors are put aside, and where dedicated teachers and administrators reach out to students to create personal bonds and flexible scheduling to help students recover credit and get on a fast track to graduating. Project Graduation promotes a restorative philosophy by engaging in weekly program-wide talking circles and smaller healing circles when conflicts arise. The following teacher and student portraits reveal how restorative practices, coupled with outside mentoring and support, can cultivate resilience.

Restorative Portraits

Jaylen epitomizes the positive impact that restorative justice can have on a student, showing his persistence in the face of challenges over an extended period of time. In tenth grade he regularly yelled out profanities at other

1. Bridge High School is a pseudonym.

students, threw paper, slept through class, and refused to do work. His teacher, Angela, struggled with his homophobic and sexist remarks in English class. In fact, the entire class was disruptive as she taught. In place of writing referrals for the most disruptive students in the class—who would ultimately be suspended—Angela organized a healing circle and invited parents and other teachers and began by asking how students in this class contributed to the climate. Her classroom was packed with approximately 25 students and six parents. She stated the purpose of the healing circle at the beginning and asked a series of questions one round at a time, including, "What does an ideal classroom look like to you?" And "What positive or negative behaviors do you engage in during this class?" "What are you going to do to improve the classroom climate?" During the circle Jaylen said, "I fall asleep in class because of how bad things are in here. I'm up at the door ready to leave before the bell rings." Once Jaylen's mother received the talking piece, she said, "It's hard to hear that Jaylen is not being productive. This is the first day of the rest of your life."

Jaylen stated he began to improve his behavior after the circle: "The reason I've been improving . . . is because my mother came in and that really . . . shocked me, because my mother, she never comes for anything." He says the healing circle was the first time that he publicly owned up to sleeping during class and not doing his work. He cannot always be honest with his mother, and admitting his behaviors in front of a group helped keep him accountable. "[In a circle] I'm with a group of people and I can open up. I have a lot of witnesses that prove that I'm being serious now."

Although Jaylen's class did not improve by leaps and bounds simply after one circle, Angela did notice changes in individual behaviors. Angela met with Jaylen, as well as other students in the class who spoke out of turn, at least once a month to keep them accountable for coming to school on time and completing their work. Several of these meetings included Laura and Roland, two of his friends from the same class who also needed support. During each meeting Angela, and sometimes other teachers, discussed agreements that had been made and whether they had been fulfilled:

> Angela starts by checking in about what goals had been set last week in contracts the students had signed. Jaylen says his goal was to get to school on time. Angela says, "The coming here on time—definitely not working." She laughs, and he smiles. He also says he wanted to do homework but was not finishing it on time.
>   "Is the issue organization?" asks Angela.

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   17

"I'm just lazy," says Jaylen.

"I don't buy laziness."

Jaylen reveals all the responsibilities he has when he gets home. "My mother always wants me to clean." Mondays from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. he participates in a group to prepare him for college. Tuesdays he participates in basketball games from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. and practices afterward. Wednesday he has Bible study. Angela says, "A teenage boy in Bible study? That's really good. We respect that." He says on Saturdays he goes to sleep by 2 a.m. so that he can sleep five hours and get to church on Sunday, but as a result he falls asleep in class.

Angela suggests, "What if we try to do a homework club before school. . . . I can bring breakfast." Jaylen says that his alarm goes off, but he turns it off. Angela narrows her eyes and says, "It's not about the alarm." He plays with a long gold rope chain, maintaining eye contact with Angela. She has never seen him listen so intently.

She asks Jaylen how his grades are, and he says he doesn't know because he didn't look at his report card. Angela sounds surprised. "You were the most improved tenth grader—you went from an F to a B." "An F?" he says. "That's good," says Laura. Angela says she is willing to help students "fight this battle" of getting to school on time if they could come by 7 a.m. and she would bring breakfast and they could do homework. Both students agree to come, especially if there is breakfast.

Though Jaylen claimed that he was unable to complete his schoolwork because of "laziness," it was clear from his daily schedule—his dedication to religion, sports, and ironically, college preparation—that this was untrue. In the circle he revealed that he was more than a student who yelled back at Angela from time to time or tore up assignments. Angela was able to remind him of his own agency, asserting that his lateness was not due to the alarm clock. In one-on-one conversations he told Angela about his private struggles with family and the roots of his anger, which stemmed from not feeling nurtured at home. Over the next three years, he blossomed into a serious student and was offered a full scholarship to University of California, Los Angeles. His senior year he joined Project Graduation where he continued to receive individualized attention in a restorative climate. Along with other Bridge students, he also led circle trainings at Harvard, speaking to preservice teachers about how restorative justice helped him succeed and improve relationships with teachers.

It would be reductive to ascribe his positive development solely to the restorative culture, including the practice of circles, at his school. He says he was inspired to turn his life around once he got arrested for trespassing at a school and worked with a male mentor outside of school to counteract this negative experience. Nevertheless, it seems clear that had he been suspended every time he used profanity or engaged in horseplay, he might have had a very different educational journey. Some students might be immediately impacted after one circle; other students like Jaylen need years of support by the same group of teachers before feeling motivated enough to commit to their studies. The close relationships he forged with his teachers provided a foundation and safeguard for his burgeoning resilience. "Circle showed me that my teachers care," he said. "It's a good feeling because you build a relationship most people don't have with their teachers. It calms me down, and I can focus better."

Despite the larger school-wide punitive disciplinary culture at Bridge that relied on suspensions, Project Graduation staff strove to use healing circles and individual conferences to discipline students. The assistant principal, Nancy, says "the only time we do a suspension [is] when it warrants involvement with the entire school." In fact, according to all teachers in the program, students were hardly ever suspended for behavior within the program. Students were more responsive and deferential to teachers within Project Graduation than they were outside of it. These fractured responses possibly speak to the atomization of small learning communities at Bridge, and the lack of a school-wide sense of community and mutual respect. As one educator points out, Project Graduation students do not have the same kind of relationships with other teachers at Bridge:

> The bad . . . the disrespectful stuff is not happening as nearly as much in our [program]. It's happening with our students in different classes in a big way but not with us really because I think the circles have worked. They trust us as their teachers, but then they go out into the rest of the building, and they're treated like the "Project Graduation" kids, and it's bad . . . . As far as discipline goes, it's always a problem in a big school, but what's unique about this situation is we really sort of don't have any power. The discipline stuff that we're having is stuff that we can control [and] we're going to try to use circle for.

In fact, sometimes students did speak to staff in raised, heated voices, yelled in response to directives, or walked away and slammed doors. The state-

ment that "disrespectful stuff" does not occur may arise from educators' subjective experience with what constitutes "disrespect." Aware of students' individual circumstances, a Project Graduation teacher might forgive behavior that would not be overlooked in the rest of the school. After all, staff members were sensitive to the fact that it was common to hear teachers around the building typecast "those PG [Project Graduation] kids" as troublemakers. Project Graduation teachers promoted students' resilience, their positive development in the face of struggle, by focusing on their strengths and positive attributes.

In this way, circles not only implicitly addressed obvious harms such as interpersonal disagreements or rule infractions. At Project Graduation in particular, there was a deeper, more pervasive need to heal students' relationships with the institution of schooling, to help students develop resilience and experience positive growth within the school context. For instance, Darius, a Project Graduation student, was expelled from a previous high school for possession of a knife that he carried for safety. As a result, Darius was removed from school for three months and not provided an alternative placement. When he entered Bridge, the principal recommended that he enroll in Project Graduation, where he says he finally felt engaged in school. "I don't know if they know this, but [all the teachers] are like a role model to me, they actually help a lot. . . . The work that they give me, the way that they challenge me. . . . I haven't really been challenged like this before." The week of his interview, Darius was one of eight students who were "in good standing," which meant he completed all of his assignments and was on track for graduation. He ascribes his academic success to the culture created by the teachers; circle is one piece that cultivated relationships:

> When I first started the program there were a lot of separate groups. We weren't as one, as a family and there was a lot of animosity. . . . Now it seems like after all the circles and after all the hell that they [the teachers] have been going through. . . . It just feels like we've come closer together. Circle now is like one big unit, a bunch of kids who can actually express themselves.

Circles cultivated resilience in Darius because he had a community of support with adults as guideposts—teachers who encouraged him to stretch beyond his own limitations and a principal willing to accept him at Bridge despite his prior expulsions. In addition, Darius conveyed how circle allowed his peers to join this community of support because the format al-

lowed students to "actually express themselves" and come "closer together." In all, circles provided students and the adults who supported them with a structure and space to be vulnerable with one another, engage in important conversations, move beyond fixed positions as pupil and authority, and ultimately create common ground.

Other students, such as Jacob, came to Project Graduation with similar school histories marred by failing grades and school exclusion. Tall and somewhat heavyset, Jacob has a round face, cherubic cheeks, and a wide smile with perfectly straight teeth. In middle school his teachers repeatedly suspended him; he spent more time out of school than in class but was still promoted to high school. A few eighth-grade teachers placed a chair permanently outside of the classroom, where he could sit once he returned from a suspension—quite a contrast to his experience sitting in a chair as part of a large supportive circle in Project Graduation. "Sometimes [my middle school teachers] wouldn't even let me in the classroom." He doesn't remember exactly why he was suspended so much, though he says he was sent home for "little things," like talking back or chewing gum. He was not close with any of his teachers and did not feel comfortable telling them how he had witnessed domestic abuse at home and that he was homeless at the time—circumstances he has shared with some of his teachers in Project Graduation. A therapist also recently discovered an undiagnosed learning disability that he thinks explains his past struggles with schoolwork. But he attributes his academic motivation to the relationships he has with teachers, who consistently show how much they care: "At the end of class every day, when I'm doing my work, she [my teacher] will tell me she's very proud of me for how I've been acting in class."

Circles composed one feature of a larger program-wide culture rooted in developing relationships, critical promotive factors for resilience in youth. But circles also cultivated resilience among the staff and allowed them to expand their capacity to establish safe and supportive classroom environments for students. For instance, study skills teacher Mary Spellman speaks in a no-nonsense way, declaring that she initially "didn't have any faith at all" that a weekly talking circle with more than 50 students in the program would work. She now describes them as "invaluable," going so far as to say that the tradition has helped sustain her through the difficult transition from doing administrative work the previous year to teaching in the program: "They put me back together at the end [of the week] when we're doing them on Friday. I wouldn't have been able to make it this far at all, if we didn't have a bunch of those. . . . It helped me remember what it is we're trying to do, and give chances to connect with everybody in a mean-

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   21

ingful way. I like them a lot for myself." The formative experience that revealed the value of circles occurred a few months into the year when conflicts arose among a small group of female students in one of her classes:

The staff has decided to organize a series of small talking circles composed entirely of the girls from Mary's class. Before one of these circles in January, she says, "I don't look forward to teaching the class." The girls quibble with each other, sometimes putting each other down. Girls who were friends have been arguing loudly with one another during class, though it is unclear to her why. "I like every student individually but not the class. I raised three boys. I don't know how to deal with difficult girls."

Fourteen people—four teachers and nine students—gather in Mary's room, a sparsely decorated space with a whiteboard, chalkboard, old wooden teacher's desk, and a smattering of student desks. We push the desks aside and pull the chairs in to form a small, intimate circle. There is a plant on one side of the room, and a glass case of dictionaries in the back, as well as a black and white poster of Martin Luther King with the quote, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that."

For much of the circle students are asked about what they like and don't like about being female. They say they like how women trust one another but not how they can become jealous. As the minutes pass, they begin talking about boys and dating. The students become so verbal that they decide to "popcorn" by handing the talking piece to whoever wants to talk, rather than passing it sequentially. Natasha, a sophomore, asks Charlotte, a junior, whose arms are folded across her chest, "How does it feel to be pregnant?" Charlotte says, "I'm scared."

Charlotte turns to her elders for advice. She asks, "Should I consider myself a single mother if the father's around but we are not together?" One adult says, "I would think yes because you are going to raise a child mostly on your own."

"Yeah, so that's what I'll call myself, a single mother," says Charlotte with a decisive nod, as if with pride. "I haven't met the child, but I love it!" She then turns to Mary. "What was it like to be a mother?"

This is the first time Mary has discussed her personal life with students. "I had my children in daycare from the time they were three months old, because I was a single mother too," says Mary. "From the time they were that little to the time they entered elementary school, I couldn't think about anything but them. It was like I had no other life

but a life about protecting my children." Charlotte nods, and the circle is quiet. We are out of time and end by each providing one word to describe the circle. Several contribute. "Sweet. Mature. Babies. Nice. Maturity. Joy."

Though Mary says she does not know how to relate to girls, this heartfelt exchange about single motherhood transformed relationships within the group. According to Carol, Charlotte can be taciturn and have "a more tough exterior." But in circle she became more vulnerable. This was not a formal healing circle—none of the conflicts between the girls were mentioned, and no agreements were made—but after this second circle, Mary noticed a significant shift in how the girls related to one another:

> MARY: The whole class calmed down. They started to support each other. I remember [one student] would say we're gonna make sure everybody in here does all their work, stuff like that. It didn't carry itself beyond a point, but it really did bring them into some sort of supportive group of each other.
> ANITA: Did that happen right after circle, you could see a dramatic shift?
> MARY: Yeah. I don't know if it was after the first [circle] or by the end of the second one, but yeah, it was very, with you, noticeable very soon.

Though the changes in behavior were not fully consistent—they "didn't carry itself beyond a point"—these initial small circles, which did not focus on the negative interactions between the girls but instead sought proactively to reveal their commonalities, produced changes in behavior typically achieved with reactive, healing circles.

Across the board, circles help to deepen and strengthen relationships. And, as a result, nearly every student described doing better academically in the program because of relationships. Says Jacob, "Without circles I don't think I'd know half of the kids in Project Graduation." Marisol, a junior student, says, "I'm doing well because of the program." She points upward to the floor above where another small learning community is located. "There it's like the ocean, and they let you drown. This one teacher stopped giving me the paper each day with our work. I wasn't going to do it anyway," she admits with a laugh, "but still, that's what made me give up." Marisol, a petite Latina girl with side-swept bangs, curly shoulder-length black hair, and clear braces, did not begin the year feeling positive

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   23

about the program. A friend of hers states, "When Marisol first came [to the program], she just sat in the back of class and talked, and she wouldn't do her work. Now she's real serious, and she even helps the rest of us out." Marisol's poor relationship with schooling at Bridge, where she felt like she was in an "ocean" where she might drown, began to heal through such relationships with Project Graduation teachers—and she became a consistently vocal participant in classes and circles. She even tried to make amends for past behavior during one circle:

> Marisol says, "Finally, I have a shocking shout out." She waits for silence somewhat dramatically. "I want to shout out Natasha. I know we are not friends and have not gotten along in the past, but in class you do what you have to do so that we can get our work done, and I really respect that, so I want you to know that."
>
> A few students gasp, and several start clapping. Natasha, a Latina girl with a round face, sharp jutting chin, and straightened hair, has a look on her face that is hard to read—is she rolling her eyes? Is she perturbed?
>
> "Take it Natasha!" a few students say.
>
> "No, I'm happy she said that," clarified Natasha, before smiling and looking down.

As one can see in this exchange, circle creates a space for students to democratically engage with one another in order to respect difference and overcome previous conflicts. In short, the circle allows students to not only build academic resilience, but a broader social resilience. While brief, teachers note that this exchange between the two Latina students was significant: Natasha had violated her parole the previous year because of a fight with Marisol. In this sense, Marisol's actions in the circle were restorative: despite not expressing her culpability in the conflict, she worked to repair the relationship by acknowledging Natasha's academic improvement. Doing so in a public forum amplifies the restorative aspect of what feels like an implicit apology—and sometimes the only concrete action necessary to repair harm *is* an apology. Like Darius and James, the longer Marisol was exposed to the circle, the more comfortable she became participating, and the more academically engaged she became in school: "At first I didn't want to do circle, but I'm glad we do them." Put differently, students like Marisol are given the opportunity to develop a sense of safety and vulnerability with others, which also connects them more deeply to the school community— both academically and socially.

A Critical Restorative Justice

Restorative educators at Project Graduation were not just interested in building resilience in students by supporting them emotionally or reforming individual student behaviors. They saw restorative justice as part of a larger social justice agenda that also promoted student engagement and resilience. Through circles, Project Graduation educators were able to meet the four qualities that, according to the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents, form a "portrait of resilience" (2008). In addition to "building relationships" among students and teachers and "providing equal opportunity" to participate when the talking circle passed around, the circle "promoted critical mindedness of social inequities" (e.g., racism and homophobia) through deep conversation and "cultural flexibility" by teaching students to hear multiple viewpoints and hold their reactions until they received the talking piece (APA Task Force on Resilience 2008).

Embedded in circles at Project Graduation was an egalitarian philosophy and a critical lens that empowered students to question why the world operates as it does, and to become agents to change conditions with which they disagreed. Jaylen, for example, was not an unusual case; there were several students like him who flourished in the small program for a number of factors but mainly through relationships and trainings about power structures around the world. Thus, several students learned not only how to thrive in the face of institutional or societal barriers—they were taught to question, critique, and change those barriers, which in turn further strengthened their resilience. But staff were also strengthened in the circle process as adult support.

In Project Graduation, Angela and other teachers used circles to explicitly teach students about the school-to-prison pipeline and to provide a context for why they were implementing restorative justice, showing how an alternative paradigm of punishment and community building could disrupt racial inequity in school disciplinary outcomes.

Educators also forged connections with community organizations, inviting them into their classrooms for trainings and lesson plans on the impact of racism in our daily lives. For example, the group Reflect and Strengthen (R&S) regularly visited once a week for a few months to facilitate talking circles; the members of this all-female organization taught students about institutionalized, internalized, ideological, and interpersonal oppression, or the "4 I's of Oppression." After they reviewed the meaning of internalized oppression, Angela connected classroom literature to themes

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   25

about power and oppression, using the circle format to discuss how in Orwell's *Animal Farm* the pig leaders did not have the best interest of all the animals. Teachers also cultivated resilience by offering students leadership opportunities—after a unit on the novel *Native Son* by Richard Wright, students held a community forum in which they led circles about the enduring effects of racism:

> Angela has assigned everyone to a small talking circle to discuss the book with student facilitators. One circle includes a total of eight participants—an administrator, a school police officer, a community member, two other students, and the school nurse.
>
> Thomas, a Project Graduation student, engages the group in an intimate conversation about their experiences with racism. He asks participants to connect their stories to the themes in the text, particularly focusing on the impact of racism on both the oppressed and the oppressor. Thomas then passes the talking piece around after each of the following prompts: Do you know anyone like Bigger? When was the first time you remember talking to someone of a different race? For people of color, when did you first experience racism? For white people, was there a time when you thought something racist was happening but you did not intervene?
>
> The head school police officer, Sergeant Randolph Holmes, is a tall, approachable man with a youthful face that belies years of experience. He is African American and says he experienced repercussions when he decided to marry a white woman. "Some of my family members were . . ." He trails off, squinting his light brown eyes. "It took them some time, but they finally began to open up and accept her. I think a lot of times we operate out of ignorance and fear because of our past experiences." Luis, another student who is facilitating the circle, is the last person to speak. "The principal at my last school, whenever I got in trouble he would say, 'Your kind always messes up.' I asked him what you mean by 'my kind'?" Luis makes air quotes. "He's like, 'Hispanic.'" Several of us shake our heads. Thomas gets the piece and for the final round asks, "Should *Native Son* be taught in schools? The answer to the last question is a resounding "Yes."
>
> Circle participants disband and rejoin the rest of the attendees in the orchestra room. Upon reconvening the entire group, Angela asks participants to debrief the circle process and their conversations. One

white woman with silver hair pulled back into a ponytail says, "I've been in education 20 years, and this is the most moving event I have attended. To read such a powerful book, and have students lead us in conversations about something as difficult as race . . ." She turns her head around and extends her arm to the students. "You all are truly impressive." Once the event is over, Angela approaches me and looks exultant. "This is all because of circles! It's something we've been building over time. This is a process, and students are buying in."

Thus, teachers at Bridge cultivated resilience through a *critical* restorative justice, focusing not just on the success of each individual case-by-case basis but on how structures such as institutionalized racism affected them as individuals and impacted the community and society writ large. By connecting curriculum to the historical context of economic and racial inequality in this country, students were able to reflect on their own experiences with power structures as they played out through school disciplinary practices; Luis had been suspended and expelled numerous times because of his gang affiliation and because he was found with a knife. During the circle he used his turn with the talking piece to contextualize his own experiences of interpersonal racism with administrators to a larger dialogue about structural racism in the country. The power of circle is its ability to draw out such personal stories among strangers in such a short period of time.

Thus, through circles on racism, different forms of oppression, and the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice empowered students to address the harms they had experienced and move on to bigger dreams—all the young people in this section graduated despite all the barriers of past schooling experiences, and all left with the ability to understand their individual experiences as representative of the experiences of millions of other people in this country.

Shoring up Justice and Opportunity

Put simply, restorative justice fosters resilience by countering zero tolerance policies that push students out of classrooms and schools and exposes students to risks of dropping out, school failure, even incarceration (Council of State Governments 2011). Still worse, students such as those in Project Graduation are those most in need of opportunities where they can build supportive relationships and productively express their thoughts and emotions in school. In the face of zero tolerance settings, circles act as "sanc-

tuaries," or positive alternatives where youth can find respect, refuge, and supportive relationships (Rodriquez 2001). As restorative practices, peace-making circles achieve two aims. By nurturing "developmental opportunities" such as relationships and student voice, circles contribute to student resilience in addition to establishing alternative, asset-based approaches to handling student discipline.

The Small Things Count: A Return to Where We Started

"Seeing" Hakim Differently

The portraits of students and adults at Project Graduation reveal the importance of circles as an equalizing and humanizing structure within the school. Circles reflected a larger instructional and relational ethos within the institution. However, the seeds to its development began with individuals—people. The portrait of Hakim, from our perspective, shows that opportunities for relationship development and equalizing and humanizing experiences start one-on-one between the teachers and student. As said before, many adults' saw Hakim as truant and socially withdrawn. Yet, seated in a circle with his male peers and discussing the theme of friendship, one discovers that he was committed to his friends. This exchange between Hakim and his friend, Malcolm, makes the point:

> DAVID: I want to talk with both of you about friendships. . . . and what is important about a friendship. . . . So my first question is what makes someone a good friend?
> HAKIM: What makes a friend a *friend*?
> DAVID: Yeah. What are some things about a person that would make you wanna be friends with them?
> MALCOLM: He has my back, you know.
> HAKIM: I have all my friends' back.
> MALCOLM: Trustworthy, you know.
> HAKIM: You can . . .
> MALCOLM: Loyal . . .
> HAKIM: You can, you can tell them anything. You can tell them *anything*.

This exchange about the importance of friendships is a powerful counterpoint to the notion that Hakim is inconsistent and socially withdrawn. He and his two best friends—Javier and Malcolm—grew up in the Mission

District of San Francisco, played basketball after school, and attended a college-readiness program with him three days a week. Hakim's deep investment in friendship and relationships belies adult opinions that he is socially withdrawn. Hakim stated, "I have all my friends' back[s]." And his ability to maintain multiple responsibilities—school, a grocery store job, college-readiness program, and hanging out with friends—challenges adult opinions that he is truant. Thus, rather than depend on isolated observations, techniques that invite students to speak and adults to listen—techniques like circles—push school staff to see students in a new light. For David, hearing Hakim's perspective in the context of a circle conversation pushed him to see Hakim as relationally very strong and resilient, and to attempt supporting Hakim relationally, notably through one-on-one conversations, dialogue with his mother, and motivational strategies.

Hakim at Present

Hakim is now 17 years old, a high school senior. He still skateboards and designs graffiti art. He still comes late every now and then. But he's matured. He's taller, and his voice is fuller and deeper. David, who had been his teacher three years ago, left San Francisco wondering what would become of him. David had written all of his students parting letters of encouragement. Hakim's letter was particularly encouraging, as part of a motivational strategy. But school ended before David was ever able to speak with Hakim individually about it. He assumed that Hakim had simply thrown the letter away. But when David returned to San Francisco last spring, he was shocked when he visited Hakim's school and Hakim reminded him of the letter and said that it was framed in his room. Such a gesture, long forgotten by the teacher, mattered to the student. So what does this show? First, the small things count. And, second, resilience depends on relationships (see Knight 2012). Relationships do not simply fade. Even as change occurs and they must adapt, students use key relationships, moments, and memories in making a future for themselves. If you doubt this fact, then just think of Hakim.

Recommendations for Implementing Circles

While circles are not a cure-all for school discipline, they do offer promise as a tool to foster relationships, empowerment, and accountability among students. Here are some recommendations based on research on and facil-

David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   29

itation of peacemaking circles for how circles can be implemented in classrooms and schools:

Start small.—We suggest that teachers, counselors, or administrators begin this work in small and reasonable ways. Perhaps the best way is to assess one conflict or difficulty, and think of one peacemaking circle, program, or partnership that can address the challenge.

Define the purpose.—During professional development, present statistics on the school to prison pipeline and its relationship to daily disciplinary decisions by teachers and administrators. Connect circles to a broader agenda of promoting social change, nurturing student resilience, strengthening relationships among staff and teachers, and keeping students engaged in school. Discuss candidly whether and how circles will work alongside practices of suspension.

Draw on the resources and networks around you in proactive ways.—Over the past couple of decades, many schools have adopted models to provide students and families with social services, including mental health, adult education classes, and connections to programs in their neighborhoods (Dryfoos 1998). Coordinate these resources at your school, and bring in knowledgeable partners to share their expertise. Perhaps a peacemaking circle could include a local social worker, a police officer, an artist, or a disability activist as a community representative.

Include potential mentors in the circle process.—Circle is a great first contact between a mentor and a mentee. If attended regularly, circle could also be a great opportunity for mentors to get to know teachers, friends, peers and other important people in their mentee's lives.

Ensure safety.—Many students, particularly males, do not have opportunities to engage with one another in spaces where they feel safe to let their guard down. But male students who have the chance to feel safe and develop close relationships can learn how to reach out, trust, and communicate their frustrations to others, which is an important feature of mental health (Knight 2012).

Incorporate counterirritants and an analysis of power structures.—All students, especially students from marginalized communities, need opportunities to name and critique injustice and negative depictions of themselves in media. Circle allows educators to "intentionally organize" their classrooms in ways where students get to define themselves before someone else does (Perry 2003; Tatum 2009).

Be patient.—As Jaylen shows, the impact of circles is not always immediately evident. It takes time to shift thinking around school discipline. Have faith in the process, tweak as necessary, and document results over

time in order to assess whether and how circles can nurture resilience in your students.

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David Knight and Anita Wadhwa   31

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