

# Restorative and community-building practices as social justice for English learners

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## Abstract

In this theory-based practice article, the authors introduce restorative and community-building practices as social justice for English learners. As circle keepers and educators of English learners, the authors emphasize the necessity for reimagining English for speakers of other languages classrooms as not only places of learning English, but places of meditation, reflection, and healing for our students and ourselves. The article is divided into four main sections. In the first section, the authors define restorative and community-building practices. In the second section, they investigate how and why restorative practices involve social justice. In the third section, they reflect on their work as restorative practices educators by sharing insights on some things teachers should consider when hoping to adopt restorative practices in their classes. In the fourth section, they share a sample of a restorative and community-building circle educators can use with their English learners.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that punitive and exclusionary forms of discipline in schools generate collateral damage and negatively affect the academic achievement of learners (see Perry & Morris, 2014). For students of color, traditional punitive and exclusionary policies affect them at a disproportionate rate (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017). This is certainly true for English learners (ELs), who experienced a dramatic 10-percentage-point increase in suspension rates from elementary schools to middle school in 2013 (Terry, 2017) and who generally have much larger suspension and expulsion rates than their non-EL counterparts. These statements are further evidenced by Burke (2015), who found that approximately 3% of ELs and non-ELs were suspended or expelled in elementary school, and by

middle school, 18% of ELs were suspended compared to 11% of non-ELs (Burke, 2015). Exclusionary punitive practices of discipline in schools continue to perpetuate the marginalization and disenfranchisement of ELs in our educational spaces.

With a vision of reimagining school discipline from an asset-based, inclusive perspective, increased attention has been (re)directed to ongoing efforts of designing proactive school programs that support emotional, humane learning and that acknowledge the importance of social justice in educational settings. One of the theories gaining momentum in social justice education is restorative practices (RP), which “uniquely emphasizes social engagement over social control” (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 138). RP is an egalitarian paradigm because it allows students to learn about, negotiate, and deal with human emotions, conflicts, and situations in a safe environment. Different from traditional forms of pedagogy, RP permits behavioral growth and seeks social and personal healing and improvement through active dialogues, community-building circles, and human connections.

In the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) field, pioneer works on social-emotional, humane learning are beginning to place a necessary focus on the role personal and community-building relationships have in English language education. As a result, publications inspired by topics embraced under the social-emotional learning umbrella, such as peace in English education (Birch, 2009; Oxford, 2017), trauma-informed practices for refugees (Montero, 2018), humanizing literacy instruction for refugees (Montero, 2019), exploring ELs’ moral values and behavior (Pentón Herrera, 2019), and promoting ELs’ emotional health (Rajuan & Gidoni, 2014), to name a few, have gained ESOL teachers’ and scholars’ attention. This exciting trend of publications focusing on mental and emotional health in TESOL classrooms is awakening interest in the incorporation and further exploration of these practices in ESOL and English as a foreign language (EFL) learning contexts. Inspired by these transformational works supporting the social-emotional and mental needs of ELs, we propose RP as a beneficial, holistic paradigm to support ELs in English learning environments.

In this study, we share our experiences as a high school ESOL educator and RP circle keeper (Luis) and as a former classroom teacher and current restorative practices coordinator at the county level (Robin). We have divided this article into four main sections. In the first section, we define restorative and community-building practices. In the second section, we investigate how and why restorative practices involve social justice. In the third section, we reflect on our own practices as RP educators and practitioners and share insights on some considerations teachers should have when hoping to adopt RP in their own classes. In the fourth section, we share a sample of a restorative and community-building circle educators can use with their English learners.

## 2 | DEFINING RESTORATIVE AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING PRACTICES

We believe a comprehensive definition is needed because the topic of restorative and community-building practices is relatively new in TESOL. More specifically, in this section we provide a thorough explanation of restorative and community-building practices to provide ESOL educators with a solid foundation of how these concepts are used in social justice. Furthermore, we believe equipping our readers with a solid background of these concepts will ease them into the following sections of this article, where we incorporate restorative and community-building practices into TESOL. Importantly, although diverse definitions of restorative and community-building practices exist in the literature, we purposefully define both terms in the context of social justice and English language education. In addition, it is necessary to clarify that RP is beneficial for learners of all grade levels and age groups (i.e., learners in K–12, adult education, and higher education programs) and can be implemented as

part of a formal curriculum in the classroom or as after-school activities depending on the educational institution where RP is being implemented.

## 2.1 | Restorative practices

The International Institute for Restorative Practices defines RP as “a social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making” (Wachtel, 2016, p. 2). Thought of as a science of human dignity (Bailie, 2019), RP envisions to strengthen the spirit of communities by acknowledging the human desire to be treated with dignity and the need to create thriving and meaningful connections (Bailie, 2019). As such, restorative practices hope to improve communities and strengthen civil societies by improving human behavior, providing effective leadership, reducing violence and crime, restoring human relationships, and repairing harm (Wachtel, 2016).

Although often paired in the literature, RP is not the same as restorative justice. Restorative justice—a paradigm and framework rooted in relationships and the reparation of harm (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012)—represents the roots and is a subset of RP (Wachtel, 2016). From this perspective, RP is thought of as an umbrella term encompassing proactive restorative and justice-based philosophies and frameworks practiced at in schools and communities, such as social justice practices (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012), restorative justice (Zehr & Gohar, 2003), restorative discipline (Stutzman Amstutz & Mullet, 2005), and restorative circles (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). Importantly, all of these paradigms, frameworks, and practices are grounded in traditional Indigenous practices from North America (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012) and around the world (Wachtel, 2016).

## 2.2 | Community-building practices

RP has diverse forms and representations in schools because it is a flexible model that can be modified to specific settings. Nonetheless, circles are one of the most distinctive and flexible staples within RP because they symbolize community (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009), shared leadership, equality, connection, and inclusion. In addition, RP promotes focus, accountability, and participation from all (Pranis, 2005). In RP, the circle is the seedbed for adults, as well as for young people, to develop the skills they need to build, maintain, and repair relationships (Hopkins, 2011).

The use of circles can range from broad (also known as universal), targeted, to intensive strategies. These strategies can be organized into a responsive framework that divides circles into three levels, or tiers. *Tier 1*—or universal—circles primarily focus on building and reaffirming relationships (Morrison, 2007). These are known as community-building circles and involve all members of the school community with the primary goal of developing students’ social and emotional skills and competencies (Morrison, 2007). *Tier 2*—or targeted—circles seek to respond to conflict and repair relationships through facilitated and supported dialogue. Known as restorative circles, they often involve a small- to medium-size group of the school community. Importantly, these circles are geared toward young people who have caused harm because of conflict or inappropriate behavior. *Tier 3*—or intensive—circles work to repair and rebuild relationships through intensive facilitated dialogue usually inclusive of wider community support. They are supportive in welcoming youth reentering their communities from sustained absence such as suspension, incarceration, and involuntary transfer (Sandel, Yusem, & Kong-Wick, 2013). For the purpose of this article, we focus on community-building circles (*Tier 1*), whose main purpose is to build relationships and foster connections through empathy and

self-reflection while creating a sense of belonging/community through shared values, storytelling, and active listening (Sandel et al., 2013). Importantly, processes practiced in Tier 1 become the foundation of all RP practiced in school communities.

### 3 | RESTORATIVE PRACTICES AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

We agree with Hastings and Jacob (2016) that “language teaching should not be separated from its context; the issues of human rights, peace, global citizenship, and the environment deserve a significant place in the classroom” (p. ix). In addition, we share the belief that education is political in nature and that creating safe spaces for emancipatory dialogues addressing mental and emotional well-being while challenging traditional systems of oppression in our society is of the utmost importance. The circle is the container that holds these critical conversations. Thus we, as RP practitioners and educators, approach social justice in our school settings as an overarching framework centered around “(a) ensuring that all individuals are treated with respect and dignity and (b) protecting the rights and opportunities for all” (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 144).

In our practices, we understand the importance of holistic education, one that acknowledges the whole student and their mental and emotional needs as much as their hunger for content learning. We also understand that restorative practices are not just mechanisms for discipline, but also mechanisms to achieve social justice, physical and mental safety and well-being, and improvement in academic performance (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Furthermore, we also acknowledge that in the TESOL field, we educators rarely have the opportunity to reflect inward (Coney, 2016) or with our students. It is in this realization that we, as educators and RP practitioners, learn from our own biases, life experiences, and teaching practices. It is through this negotiation that we take the first step toward a pedagogy of social justice and transformation for our students and ourselves (Coney, 2016).

We then arrive at this important question: *Why is restorative practice a social justice practice?* To reach our answer we must first refer to Ihab Hassan’s question: “I wonder if it is possible to teach literature in such a way that people stop killing each other?” (as cited in Winn, 2013, p. 128). Like Professor Hassan, we grapple with the question of how we could teach English to ELs while helping them heal from anxiety, depression, trauma, and feelings of uneasiness caused by their lived experiences, their migration, and/or the natural changes experienced through adolescence. Even more, compounding these experiences with the current challenges faced in the United States as individuals of color, immigrants, ELs, and undocumented people (see Pentón Herrera, 2017; Pentón Herrera & Obregón, 2018), we believe that RP and a restorative English education is not only recommended but essential to ensure ELs’ present and future success. For us, incorporating RP in our teaching practices is an opportunity to reimagine our ESOL classroom as not only a place of learning English, but a place of meditation, reflection, and healing for our students and for ourselves.

As an ESOL educator I (Luis), have learned that the incorporation of RP into my classroom has given my students and me the opportunity to become closer as teacher–student and as individuals. By replacing social control with social engagement (Vaandering, 2014), we have come to respect each other not because of social titles, but because we understand and support each other as human beings. As one of my high school ELs once shared in an informal conversation, “[In the circle], I had adults listen to what I felt [and] I got to listen to each individual in the circle and learn new things about them. We translated for each other. They felt comfortable when we translated what they were thinking.” In addition to this, I have seen how in our circles we have had the opportunity to resolve problems among students that could have escalated, and we have talked about important life events, lessons, and mental health concerns that my students have gone or are going through.

For many of my ELs, our circles are the only safe space they have to feel vulnerable and supported; our circles are a visual and emotional representation and reminder of the community they have at our school. Recently, one of my high school newcomer ELs shared with me after one of our circles, “*Mr. Pentón, gracias a los círculos es que sigo viniendo a la escuela. Me ayudan a sentirme mejor.*” (Mr. Pentón, [it is] thanks to the circles that I keep coming back to school. They help me feel better.) It is through this process of healing, problem solving, and human connection that RP becomes a mechanism for social justice, and, by extension, the ESOL classroom becomes an instrument of restoration and peacemaking.

## 4 | REFLECTING ON PRACTICE: CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The better the relationships in the classroom between teachers and students, and between the students themselves, the better teachers can teach, the better students can learn, and the fewer challenges and conflicts there will be (Hopkins, 2011). Young people need the skills to make new relationships; the vocabulary to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs; and the ability to listen to others doing the same. They must have many opportunities to interact with others who have a diversity of beliefs, opinions, personalities, and temperaments (Hopkins, 2011). By becoming circle keepers,<sup>1</sup> teachers can provide the time and space for students to build a strong climate of respect for others, procedural fairness, and the strong social and emotional skills (Morrison, 2007) needed to make and develop good relationships (Hopkins, 2011). With this in mind, we share in this section some things teachers hoping to become circle keepers should consider before, during, and after implementing RP in their classrooms.

Through implementation, we have grown significantly both as educators and as circle keepers. When colleagues ask us how to become a successful circle keeper, we share with them that we can only learn by doing. If we are to immerse ourselves in restorative practices and become successful circle keepers, we must transform ourselves—personally and professionally—and continuously reflect on our responsibility as educators and advocates for social justice and restoration. With this in mind, we share in this section six important considerations based on our own personal experience as circle keepers that we believe are helpful for educators hoping to become circle keepers.

First, initial training is essential. RP is a process that needs honest and faithful implementation; without this, it will not prove effective. It is essential for educators to seek initial training (i.e., become a certified circle keeper) prior to conducting their first circle. Restorative circles can cause harm when the circle keeper is not (properly) trained. In the circle, we all come with life experiences that contribute to our values and bias. For this reason, during the circle-keeper certification process, which varies in length and training depending on where it is offered, we learn the two essential values of the circle process: *respect* and *inclusivity*. If we (teachers and circle keepers) are not properly trained to remove judgment and biases when we sit in the circle, then we will display attributes that create barriers and contribute to young people not feeling connected or feeling like they do not belong. This type of behavior by adults perpetuates the very thing social justice fights against: racial and cultural bias that impacts the most marginalized groups of people. At the same time, it is also important that we remember that the circle represents a symbol of equity where each person who shares the space operates on the same level. There is no hierarchy in the circle; therefore, no one should be in control. As

<sup>1</sup>The term *circle keepers* is used in RP to describe individuals who are considered facilitators and/or caretakers of the circle. Circle keepers' primary responsibility is ensuring the circle remains a safe, respectful place for discussion.

educators, we are used to terms like *classroom management* and *class control*, but the circle is about encouraging engagement and not controlling the space. It takes proper training to switch our mindset from one of *power over* to *power with* (Vaandering, 2014).

Second, be patient when introducing circles. The process of circling up is often a new concept for ELs. Take some time, or even days, to fully explain the concepts of RP, respect, and confidentiality to your students. If needed, include videos that demonstrate what effective circles look like and explore practical application and practice with your ELs before fully circling up for the first time. In the circle, every individual is important; as such, it takes only one person disrespecting the process to compromise the integrity and safety of that space.

Third, remember you are a circle keeper, not an enforcer. Circle keepers are just that—keepers. It is important as circle keepers to remember to take off our teacher's hat when we come into the circle and trust in the process. As members and inhabitants of that space, we (the educators) are just as responsible to stay true to the accepted group guidelines as our students. The circle is a living organism made up of many parts that contribute to the whole. Thus, the responsibility for addressing inconsistencies with behavior or not following guidelines, among other potential challenges when present in the space, belongs to the entire group. As circle keepers, it is not our role to fix any problems within the circle (unless they jeopardize the physical well-being of our students); the circle itself does this organically. Our primary duty as keepers is to maintain a safe space where participants can share feelings, thoughts, and concerns authentically. Understanding and switching between the roles of *teacher* and *circle keeper* can be difficult at first, but it is necessary for the process to be successful.

Fourth, be flexible and allow opportunities for personal connections. The building community circle can bridge connections when it seems that there are no connections to be made. Being a general education teacher, I (Robin) seldom encountered a newcomer in my classes. However, in March 2017, I was awarded a young man who was a newcomer EL from Nigeria. Although I had already established a restorative classroom where my students knew it was important to welcome new students into the community, it was a little challenging when the new student did not speak any English. Two high school students attempted to connect with him, but he shied away and mostly remained to himself. For this reason, I decided to incorporate more games and team-building activities into an upcoming circle to try and break the ice—play and laughter remind us of our connectedness to one another. To ensure, or at least hope, that the new student would participate in the check-in, I decided to use thumbs up and thumbs down to know how everyone was feeling at the start of the circle. He participated with a thumbs up. I then played the game *Grab and Get Out*, where you have to listen for a particular word and make sure you get your finger out of the palm of your neighbor's hand before someone grabbed it. Of course, he was the first to get out, but to see his face light up and continue to engage in watching who would get out next was priceless. He laughed throughout the entire game. After this circle, he opened up to students reaching out to him and I began to see him make friends. This event demonstrated how students need opportunities to have some fun and laugh together, which helps to break down barriers and open doors for connections regardless of language.

Fifth, you will not have all the answers. The first circle I (Luis) ever did with my ELs was an introductory circle. By design, I did not intend to dig too deep in this first circle, and I just incorporated activities where students could get to know the process and share fun facts about themselves. However, even in that initial circle, my high school students shared very deep personal stories and the space became very emotionally charged. This first experience made me feel unequipped; I doubted my abilities to deal with and solve my students' emotional situations, feelings, and traumas. Nonetheless, going back to my readings and initial training reminded me that, as a circle keeper, I was not there to have all the answers. As a circle keeper, I was not responsible for giving words of wisdom or for

solving problems. On the contrary, my duty was to keep circle members safe and stay empathetic to their emotions and experiences while in the space. Looking back, I now understand that it was the feeling of safety that allowed my students to be and feel vulnerable in that communal space and to share their deep personal stories. In addition, I can now understand that it was through this trusting bond of sharing deep personal stories with one another that our relationships as teacher–student and student–student became stronger.

Sixth, trust the process and be present. Above all, being a circle keeper requires you to trust the process and carry your duties with fidelity. Being a circle keeper has given both of us the opportunity to grow as human beings. We have learned that, while we are in that communal space, being present, showing respect for one another, and listening with an open heart is all we need to help and support our students; it is all we need to allow the process to be successful.

## **5 | PORTRAIT OF PRACTICE**

Every circle, regardless of type, has four essential elements: (1) opening and closing ceremony, (2) values and guidelines, (3) check-in and check-out, and (4) circle rounds. In this section, we share a sample of a restorative and community-building circle activity that ESOL educators can use with their ELs regardless of their age or English proficiency. This sample lesson is adapted from Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015). The basic format is seven steps: opening ceremony, energizers, circle values and guidelines, check-in, circle rounds, check-out, and closing ceremony. Something to consider: If you have students who need a translator, please arrange this beforehand and have them sit near one another. In addition, you may also use peer translation if needed within the circle.

### **5.1 | Opening ceremony**

Open the circle with a powerful message. Read a poem or passage about togetherness or connections. If you would like, you can read it in English first, and then you can ask students to read a translated version out loud in their native language(s).

### **5.2 | Energizer: Stuffed animal toss or juggling ball**

Everyone stands in a circle. The facilitator starts by throwing a soft stuffed animal or ball to someone in the circle, saying their name as they throw it. Continue catching and throwing the ball, establishing a pattern. Each person must remember who they received the ball from and to whom they threw it. Once everyone has received the ball and a pattern has been established, introduce one or two more animals or balls so that there are always several items being thrown at the same time, following the same pattern.

### **5.3 | Values and guidelines: Introducing and agreeing on the shared core guidelines**

Choose an object that represents unity or togetherness. Introduce it to the circle and explain its significance. This object(s) will become the talking piece used in the circle.

1. Respect the talking piece (only the person holding the talking piece speaks).
2. Speak from the heart (always share the truth in the circle).
3. Listen from the heart (always listen to others empathetically).
4. Remain in the circle (do not abandon the circle physically or mentally—be present).
5. Honor others' privacy (what is shared in the circle stays in the circle).

#### **5.4 | Check-in: On a scale of 1–10, how do you feel today?**

Invite participants to draw what they would like others to know about themselves. Ask people to pair up with the person sitting next to them and share their pictures. Allow 5 minutes for sharing.

#### **5.5 | Circle rounds**

Depending on the time allotted for the circle, you can do one, two, or three circle rounds.

1. First round: Share a drawing with the circle, and tell us what it says about you.
2. Second round: What is something you value about your family (community, neighborhood, or culture) that shapes who you are today?
3. Third round: What is something you learned about others in the circle that interested or surprised you?

#### **5.6 | Check-out**

Share one word that summarizes how you are feeling right now.

#### **5.7 | Closing ceremony**

This ceremony serves as an opportunity for final meditation, connection, and closure. End the circle with a powerful message (different from the opening message). Read a poem or passage related to togetherness or connection. If you would like, you can read it in English first, and then you can ask students to read a translated version out loud in their native language(s).

### **6 | FINAL THOUGHTS**

In our practices as educators and RP practitioners, we have learned that restorative circles have the power to bring our ELs together as they navigate the many processes involved in arriving in a new country, including culture shock, language negotiation, and personal and mental healing. The incorporation of restorative circles has allowed us to provide—through the power of communication and human connection—relevant, authentic, relational, and highly contextualized opportunities for our newcomers (Terry, 2017). In addition, we continue to experience how our ELs receive the support they need, through our circles, to meet exceedingly high academic expectations. Because of the restorative design we implement in our classrooms, we have the opportunity to capitalize on students'

strengths, build social capital across the school community, and acknowledge the critical role healthy relationships play in all aspects of student learning. These relationships give us the strength to tackle the profound personal and cultural *change-work*, or transformation, that circles call us to do (Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2003).

As we, in the ESOL field and in education more broadly, become more aware of the importance of human relationships, respect, and mental health for our students and our learning environments, we must also become more aware of the importance RP has for supporting our ELs' personal and learning journeys. As Thorsborne and Blood (2013) share, "The preventative, proactive ... business of all adults in the school community is to deliver programmes and curriculum to all learners [that] develop their social and emotional competence ... [as well as] their personal and interpersonal effectiveness" (p. 43), with the vision of allowing ELs to feel a sense of belonging, safety, and well-being. Unifying the concept of belonging, safety, and well-being with English language learning is vital for refugees and newcomers of all ages who arrive with adverse childhood and/or life experiences. As one of our high school ELs shared, "Every time I was in the circle, it was a place where I could talk about what I feel and I could learn what other people are feeling and about their life." For this reason, we believe in the power of circles in ESOL education, and we have witnessed their healing power of transformation, human connectedness, and personal and emotional growth.

We would like to share an encouraging message for all ESOL educators considering the inclusion of RP in their learning environments. Incorporating circles in the ESOL classroom does not take away time from English instruction; on the contrary, it supplements the English language learning experience while humanizing personal connections among everyone involved. Every person has a story based on their worldview, and that story has a lesson to offer (Pranis, 2005). The act of being in a circle contributes to personal transformation and creates a space for understanding people's varied experiences related to race, privilege, oppression, and social justice, especially as it relates to intersectionality (DeWolf & Geddes, 2019). Inviting students to share their personal life experiences moves people beyond appearances, lifts off the mask, and exposes who they really are, thus developing a better understanding of one another. RP prepares youth to live in a democratic society by teaching them to accommodate the perspective of others while setting their own goals. The circle humanizes everyone through the power of storytelling more fully. While in the circle, stories are told from life experiences and stories are heard with the heart; no one fears whose story is known because, in the circle, everyone comes together as one.

As we end this article, the world is experiencing the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Now, more than ever, we reflect on the criticality and powerful potential RP has to support the emotional well-being of teachers and students alike. The flexibility of RP, and specifically restorative circles, allows for the incorporation of circles in virtual spaces where teachers and students can check on and support each other's emotional well-being. We believe RP is the answer for supporting ELs and immigrants from all ages who continue to experience feelings of uncertainty, fear, and anger, to name a few, but do not have a space to share their stories, find support, connect, and heal. In today's reality, providing healing and emotional support in our (virtual) learning spaces is, undeniably, a matter of equity and social justice for English learners.

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