

Case Studies in Empowerment Evaluation: Restorative Practices Interventions in Educational Contexts

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Background: Empowerment evaluation is a participant-led evaluation model that aligns with restorative justice principles by centering the needs of the person or persons impacted.

Purpose: This article shares two longitudinal case studies: one using a practical empowerment evaluation approach with six U.S. Catholic institutions of higher education (IHEs), and another using a transformative empowerment evaluation approach with a cohort of eight K–12 educators. These cases illustrate the benefits and challenges of utilizing empowerment evaluation for restorative justice programs in educational settings.

Setting: U.S. institutions of higher education (IHEs) and U.S. K–12 classrooms.

Intervention: Empowerment evaluation as a method to evaluate restorative justice implementation in multiple K–16 contexts.

Research Design: Two longitudinal qualitative case studies.

Data Collection and Analysis: Restorative circle dialogues, individual interviews, data collected during webinars, and an e-gallery walk provided data. Transcripts from circles and individual interviews were reviewed and organized by key themes to illustrate the benefits and challenges of using empowerment evaluation.

Findings: Empowerment evaluation can be conceptualized as a practical approach to evaluation, like formative evaluation, which aligns with the values of restorative justice and focuses on program improvement. Transformative empowerment evaluation emphasizes liberation by empowering participants to step outside of typical roles, traditional structures, and assumed power relations. Due to the variation in these evaluation approaches, the case studies below vary in the emphasis placed on aspects of the evaluation process. Yet, both case studies highlighted participants' needs for dedicated time for thinking and planning for restorative interventions; peer-to-peer support from colleagues from one's own school or campus and from other campuses; sharing strategies for planting the "seeds" of restorative justice; and evaluation as an ongoing process of reflection and action.

Keywords: *restorative justice; K–12 education; higher education; empowerment evaluation; multisite evaluation*

Across the U.S., there has been a dramatic rise in the number of K–12 schools, colleges, and universities that utilize restorative justice as an approach to addressing and preventing conflict and harm (Fronius et al., 2019; Karp, 2023). Restorative approaches in educational settings can nurture relationship building, encourage innovative problem-solving, and build prosocial communities (DePaoli et al., 2021). Yet, it can be difficult to evaluate these interventions in educational settings for a number of reasons, including a tendency to focus on student learning outcomes instead of program evaluation (Morrison et al., 2005; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013); a “practice to research” gap for K–12 restorative justice implementation (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021); and a general lack of alignment between restorative philosophies and traditional evaluation methods. To date, there is no agreed-upon approach to evaluating restorative justice programs in educational settings.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a philosophy and set of practices that are rooted in Indigenous cultures including those of Native Americans in the United States and the Māori people of New Zealand, and are reflected in the southern African ethos of *ubuntu* (“I am because we are”; Davis, 2019, pp. 17–18). Beginning in the 1970s, restorative justice reemerged in a variety of communities seeking to reform traditional criminal legal system approaches to harm (Allen, 2022; Umbreit, 2022). Fundamentally, restorative justice is a philosophy that challenges the punishment-as-accountability paradigm with an approach that centers harmed parties’ needs and provides support for meaningful accountability (Zehr, 2015). In other words, rather than relying on narrow policies or laws divorced from individuals’ lived experiences to determine outcomes in a situation of conflict or harm, restorative justice processes engage those most directly involved to consider the harm, ask the harmed party what is needed to make things right, and then determine whose obligation it is to make things right (for an illustration, see WorldTrustTV, 2016).

Restorative justice practices center maintaining and restoring right relationships to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. As a response to harm, restorative justice has been applied across diverse contexts, including as a criminal legal system response to harm by individuals (Wood et al., 2022); to address intimate partner violence in community settings

(Kim et al., 2022); as an intervention to disrupt punitive and exclusionary discipline in K–12 education (Alexander et al., 2024; Armour, 2016; González, 2012; Wadhwa, 2016); and in higher education to address student conduct issues (Karp & Sacks, 2014; Kimball, 2017) as well as to strengthen peer relationships on campus (McMahon & Karp, 2020).

Restorative Justice in K–12

Restorative justice in K–12 (primary and secondary) education represented a significant shift from harmful and oppressive punitive and zero-tolerance discipline policies that have historically targeted students of color (Armour, 2016; González, 2012; Wadhwa, 2016). Conversely, the restorative justice movement presents a philosophy and set of practices designed to develop school communities that value the well-being of every person in the community (Armour, 2016; Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2020). Since the 1990s, restorative practices in K–12 education have grown to a whole-school model with applications from the classroom to the broader school community (González et al., 2019; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). Restorative practices place focus on the “primacy and quality of relationships” and are “impossible to achieve with short-term thinking or through traditional teaching methods” (Hollweck et al., 2019, p. 5). Therefore, in any instance where restorative practices are implemented, emphasis needs to be placed on relational and dialogical processes to foster connection and community thriving (Vaandering, 2010). For many K–12 institutions, such practices demand the difficult task of a culture change within fixed institutions (Hollweck et al., 2019; Morrison et al., 2005; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

Evaluation of K–12 Restorative Justice Programs.

In the research and evaluation literature on restorative justice in K–12 schools, scholars have noted that there is a practice-to-research gap, meaning that schools have implemented restorative justice practices at a rate that has far exceeded the speed of research on the efficacy of such practices (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Evaluation of K–12 restorative justice programs is further complicated because educational institutions tend to focus on individual student learning outcomes and assessment rather than program evaluation (Morrison et al., 2005; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

In the first few decades of implementation, it has become apparent that restorative practices necessitate change both within self as well as within

the cultures of educational institutions. Evaluation of restorative practices in K–12 education demands a critical lens that is concerned with recognizing bias in education and dismantling harmful and oppressive practices at all levels of educational institutions (Vaandering, 2010; Ruffin, 2020). Lastly, Morrison et al. (2005), advised that a culture shift toward restorative practices needs to capture the hearts and minds of all professionals, through developing a shared vision for the community and beginning to cultivate new ways of being in community together. Case Study #2 (TEEM) offers one example of an evaluation method aimed toward reaching these goals.

Restorative Justice in Higher Education (4-Year Institutions)

The documented application of formal restorative justice programs within higher education settings in the U.S. began in the late 1990s (Karp, 2004; Sebok & Goldblum, 1999). Approximately 70 U.S. campuses out of nearly 4,000 higher education institutions in the U.S. have formalized restorative justice programs, primarily focused on student life (LaCroix, 2018; McMurtrie, 2015). Among these institutions, Catholic colleges and universities have formed a national network to support restorative justice implementation efforts on campuses. Catholic colleges and universities share a common mission and values-based approach to higher education (Rizzi, 2019), which suggests that Catholic colleges and universities could be uniquely fertile ground for a restorative philosophy and approach to campus life. Restorative justice philosophies are reflected in the principles identified by organizations such as the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU, 2024), including commitments to social and racial justice. Scholars have recommended that these institutions implement restorative approaches to campus life and then carefully evaluate their restorative justice processes for efficacy and sustainability (LaCroix, 2018).

Evaluation of Higher Education Restorative Justice Programs. As restorative justice work continues to grow in U.S. higher education settings, it is helpful to evaluate these efforts to ensure that restorative approaches are trauma-responsive and equity-minded and positively impact the quality of life on campus. Yet, there is not a commonly agreed-upon approach to evaluation within higher education (and more specifically within student affairs departments, where restorative justice programs tend to be located). Two foundational

professional associations for student affairs (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and American College Personnel Association) have included assessment, research, and evaluation as core competencies for student affairs staff, but it is not clear whether these recommendations are primarily aspirational or whether U.S. campuses have systematically fostered the necessary conditions for meaningful evaluation to take place. Nor is there a widely used approach to evaluation among restorative justice practitioners on campus or elsewhere, despite the clear need to evaluate restorative justice programs on campuses (Karp & Sacks, 2014; LaCroix, 2018). While there have been some evaluations of university-based restorative justice programs (Karp, 2024), they have tended to use traditional evaluation methods that do not mirror restorative justice philosophy and practices.

Overview of Empowerment Evaluation

Empowerment evaluation can be defined as “[t]he use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination” (Fetterman, 1994, p. 1) through active processes in which individuals and communities develop a greater sense of self-efficacy, shared power, and work toward social justice (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004). The aim of empowerment evaluation is to develop program leaders’ capacity to define, plan, and evaluate their own programs (Fetterman, 2018). Moreover, empowerment evaluation allows school and campus leaders to engage in a continuous process of reflection and program refinement (Phillips et al., 2019), rather than being limited by a point-in-time evaluation approach that can result in recommendations that do not capture the changing landscape of a given school or college campus’s climate, culture, and community. Perhaps most importantly, empowerment evaluation is explicitly grounded in a values-based approach to evaluation. Empowerment evaluation emphasizes improvement without judgment, community ownership, inclusion of perspectives from multiple positionalities, open and fair decision-making, addressing social inequities, respect for community knowledge, integration of evidence-based or evidence-informed approaches, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability (Fetterman et al., 2018). Empowerment evaluation invites growth and program improvement from a place of self-determination (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2018, p. 76).

Empowerment evaluation can be applied as practice in multiple paths of inquiry (Fetterman, 2017). One path, the practical empowerment evaluation method (PEEM), is designed to enhance program performance outcomes and productivity. Another, the transformative empowerment evaluation method (TEEM), includes “psychological, social, and political liberation,” emphasizing praxis as means for people to take greater control of their own lives and local resources (Fetterman, 2017, p. 112). In this paper we present two case studies in empowerment evaluation: one applied with a PEEM approach and the other with a TEEM approach.

Aligning Restorative Justice and Empowerment Evaluation

An empowerment evaluation approach (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2018) is appropriate for evaluation related to restorative practices in large part because of its alignment with restorative justice principles. As the case studies below explain, restorative justice philosophy and practices are values-based and benefit from approaches to evaluation that center values such as inclusion, being in right relationships, authenticity, and honoring the wisdom each person brings to any community (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2020). Both restorative justice and empowerment evaluation invite participants to move out of expected roles and ways of doing things into active engagement in a democratic process that centers the wisdom of all participants to build socially just, accountable communities (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2018). Rather than treating evaluation as an exercise done *to* educators and/or learners by external experts, restorative justice philosophies invite evaluation processes that center power with participants, whereby the process and outcomes are relevant to all parties involved. This restorative approach is closely aligned with an empowerment approach to evaluation.

The case studies below represent a first attempt to integrate empowerment evaluation practices with the philosophy and practices of restorative justice in U.S. educational settings, to create a more values-aligned approach to evaluating restorative programs.

Case Studies

In this paper, we present two case studies offering examples of empowerment evaluation of restorative practices in educational context. These

case studies represent a unique effort to match evaluation methods with restorative justice philosophy and practices in both K–12 and higher education settings by pairing restorative justice implementation efforts with empowerment evaluation. By sharing these inaugural studies together across K–12 and higher education settings, we aim to (1) provide examples of evaluation efforts that meld restorative practices with restorative evaluation methods (as exemplified by PEEM and TEEM), (2) model approaches to evaluation that support momentum for continued restorative justice implementation, and (3) offer practitioners meaningful evaluation methods that center the insights and experiences of those doing restorative work. In doing so, we propose the concept of restorative evaluation.

To support campus-based restorative justice practitioners, Case Study #1 (PEEM) outlines an empowerment evaluation process that was developed for a multi-campus, national initiative to evaluate restorative justice implementation. The process used restorative circle practice to structure the PEEM. This longitudinal study traces the experiences of restorative justice practitioners from six different Catholic campuses across the country who participated in a PEEM of their restorative justice programs on their respective campuses. Beginning in 2019, the empowerment evaluation spanned the COVID-19 pandemic and provided these practitioners with opportunities for greater collaboration within and across institutions of higher education.

To support practitioners in K–12 contexts, Case Study #2 (TEEM) outlines an empowerment evaluation process that was developed as part of a two-phase study. In Phase 1 of the study, 12 educators and school leaders working in schools located within the city of San Diego completed a three-day training (August 1–3, 2022) in restorative and intercultural teaching practices. In Phase 2, 8 participants went on to complete empowerment evaluation in the subsequent fall semester to support their implementation of the training curriculum. This empowerment evaluation longitudinal study employed restorative circle practice as a means to trace practitioners’ experiences with navigating implementation across four different school sites. A total of nine in-person and virtual sessions were offered between September 13, 2022, and October 26, 2022.

Case Study #1: Practical Empowerment Evaluation Method (PEEM) in Higher Education

The following case study is based upon a national, multi-site empowerment evaluation that represents the first published effort in the U.S. to address the need for routine evaluation of restorative justice programs on Catholic campuses, using methods consistent with the values and philosophy of restorative justice. This PEEM was conducted in the context of a network of Catholic college campuses that are engaged in building restorative justice philosophy and programs on their respective campuses. Six campuses with existing implementation teams voluntarily participated in a series of four restorative justice circles to learn how to use empowerment evaluation to support their campus restorative justice implementation processes. There were 33 participants from across the six campuses, with all participants participating in at least one session. Six individuals acted as the team leaders for their respective campus teams in order to increase organization and participation. To understand their needs, promote cross-institutional collaboration, and encourage ongoing evaluation of their restorative justice work, participants from six campuses gathered in four consecutive Zoom sessions to reflect upon their restorative justice implementation work. Because of challenges posed by the pandemic, the empowerment evaluation was conducted in a fully online format over a 24-month period.

Methods. This empowerment evaluation included four phases of data collection. Phase I included community building meetings with the representatives from each of the institutions, during which participants could try on the three-step model of empowerment evaluation: (1) Articulating the program's mission, (2) Taking stock of current restorative justice programmatic work, and (3) Planning for the future. These were conducted in restorative justice circle format, which is described in greater detail below. As part of this phase, participants worked with their respective institutions' teams to develop empowerment evaluation dashboards. They created compilations of their institutions' current restorative justice programs and initiatives. These compilations were shared on Google slides with other empowerment evaluation participants, who perused them in a virtual "gallery walk." During Phase II, the researchers conducted a 6-month follow-up with team leaders from each institution to understand their successes and challenges; the notes from these meetings are included in our analysis. Phase III entailed two webinars conducted with members of the empowerment evaluation team for the larger membership of the network of campuses; polling data from the dissemination webinars were also included in our analysis. Finally, Phase IV consisted of a restorative justice circle with four of the campus team leaders to debrief the empowerment evaluation process. Further details of the phases are outlined below, and Table 1 summarizes the phases of the evaluation and the data collected at each phase.

Table 1. RJNCC Empowerment Evaluation: Phases of Activity, Participants, and Data Collected

Phase	Format	Participants	Data collected
Phase I	Four RJ circles conducted over an 8-week period	33 members of RJ teams from six different Catholic campuses located in California, Ohio, Indiana, Maryland, New York, and Virginia with all team leads from different areas within student affairs (including offices of Student Conduct; Residential Life; Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion; and Title IX)	Transcripts of conversations in circle; empowerment dashboard; gallery walk of RJ programs by campus
Phase II	Individual interviews	Team leaders from six campuses, interviewed individually	Notes from the interviews
Phase III	Webinars	Two webinars featuring four of the team leaders, for a group of approximately 75 individuals from Catholic campuses across the U.S.	Notes from the webinars; polling data from webinars
Phase IV	RJ circle (focus group)	Nine individuals from four campuses met to debrief the empowerment evaluation process	Transcript of the focus group conversation

Phase I: Convening and Learning the Empowerment Evaluation Process. Restorative circles are typically facilitated by one or two facilitators. A facilitator will first lead the group in an opening that may include introductions, acknowledgments, sharing of values, agreements regarding how people will engage in the circle, and elements of ritual appropriate for the group or the topic of the circle. Participants are then invited to respond to prepared questions, speaking one at a time and passing a “talking piece” around the circle so that each person has an opportunity to share or to pass.

In Phase I, the PEEM approach was introduced to the group over the course of four restorative

circles conducted via Zoom. The questions or prompts for each session were based on Fetterman’s three-step approach to empowerment evaluation: (1) identifying the mission, (2) taking stock, and (3) planning for the future. We also added a preliminary Zoom session to allow time for relationship building before beginning the three empowerment evaluation steps. Table 2 summarizes the empowerment evaluation steps and activities associated with Phase I of the empowerment evaluation.

Table 2. Phase I: Empowerment Evaluation 3-Step Model in Restorative Circle Format

<p>Session I – Convening and Connecting</p> <p><i>Welcome & Introductions</i></p> <p><i>Acknowledgements</i></p> <p><i>Agreements</i></p> <p><i>Check-in:</i> Add to your Zoom name a value that you are bringing to the circle today.</p> <p><i>Question 1:</i> (all share response) Please share the name you would like us to call you, your pronouns, institution name / What are your hopes for your institution regarding implementing RJ on your campus?</p> <p><i>Question 2:</i> (in two small breakout groups, then debrief in large group) What would be most valuable for you/your institution regarding RJ resource sharing within and across participating RJNCC campuses (people, time, and financial resources)?</p> <p><i>Question 3:</i> (in chat) What are you leaving with today? Could be a certain feeling, an idea, a concern, or a request.</p>
<p>Session II – EE Step 1: Identifying the Mission</p> <p><i>Welcome</i></p> <p><i>Acknowledgements</i></p> <p><i>Agreements</i></p> <p><i>Check-in:</i> Using your fingers, or by entering a number in chat, share how you’re feeling on a scale of 1–10. One would mean that you’re feeling really low / it’s hard to be here today, and 10 would mean that you’re having a truly wonderful, stress-free, happy day. How are you doing? Take time to look around at the community and notice where people are right now. Who might benefit from some support or extra patience today? Who might be an uplifter for the group?</p> <p><i>Question 1:</i> (in small groups, 2–3 people) Please read the 7 core assumptions (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2020) and then share with your group a brief reflection on a time you experienced one of these aspects of RJ philosophy?</p> <p><i>Question 2:</i> (in large group) Building on what you heard and shared in the small group, what is one thing you see as essential to the RJ vision for/with your campus?</p> <p><i>Question 3:</i> (in small groups with others from the same institution, taking notes in a google doc) What concerns/needs should your RJ mission statement reflect or address?</p> <p><i>Question 4:</i> (sharing with large group) What were the headlines of your discussion? Aspects of the RJ mission for your campus?</p>
<p>Homework: Taking Stock Activity</p>

 Session III – EE Step 2: Taking Stock

Welcome

Check-in: (in the chat) What is something that is bringing you joy this week?

Acknowledgements

Agreements

Opening Quote: <<John Lewis quote>>

Question 1: (individual drawing time, then brief sharing in large group) Please find a paper/pen/electronic pad and draw an image of what you see as the current state of RJ on your campus?

Question 2: (in campus groups) Please brainstorm together all of the RJ-related activities, knowledge, and interest on your campus. Write in the shared google doc.

Question 3: (in large group) Return to large group to share what you learned from each other in your small group about your RJ implementation?

Question 4: (in large group) As a result of this conversation, what about RJ implementation on your campus is becoming clearer to you?

Homework: Creating your campus's e-gallery walk in PPT

Session IV – EE Step 3: Planning for the Future

Welcome

Check-in: (in the chat) What is the light at the end of your tunnel?

Acknowledgements

Agreements

Share "Gallery Walk" of RJ Activities from each Campus

Question 1: Please take a moment to view other campuses' lists of RJ activities. One representative from each campus, please share the highlights of what's on your slide, what is the current RJ work that's happening on your campus?

Introduce Empowerment Evaluation Tool – Note: We will be circling back with individual campuses in 3 months to see how the use of the tool is going / next steps. Opportunity to get more support...

Closing: One word check-out

Homework: Track your team's process in the Empowerment Evaluation Tool (separate spreadsheet templates for each campus group)

Phase II: Documenting Formal Follow-Ups by Campus. In Phase II, at 6 months, we conducted remote follow-ups with team leaders from each institution to understand their successes and challenges. During these campus-team interviews, we asked about empowerment evaluation participants' experiences with using the empowerment evaluation process and tool. One of the most notable challenges identified by this group was COVID-related responsibilities that limited their ability to expand restorative justice efforts on their respective campuses. This period was also marked by significant staff turnover at Catholic colleges (consistent with a broader national trend) across the country, so several of the original team members from key sites were no longer in their roles.

Phase III: Dissemination Efforts. Phase III entailed webinars conducted for the larger membership of

the network of Catholic campuses. To reach a broader audience to disseminate lessons learned from participating campuses and restorative justice leaders on Catholic campuses, we worked with the national team to create the spring webinar series. This series included several events, notably webinars featuring facilitators and participants from the Catholic campuses' empowerment evaluation process. Topics for the webinars were determined by the researchers and campus team leaders in consultation with their respective campus colleagues and incorporated themes that had emerged during the empowerment evaluation process. Webinar titles included: (1) Strategies and Approaches for Campus-Wide Coalition Building and Cross-Campus Engagement, (2) Integrating Restorative Justice into Undergraduate Courses, and (3) Navigating Complexity with Contemplation: Restorative Justice and Alignment to Catholic Institutional Mission. Each webinar

averaged over 100 participants. Table 3 summarizes the key questions and corresponding challenges faced by campus leaders attempting to implement RJ processes and programs:

Table 3. Challenges of Campus-Based RJ Implementation

Questions	Most popular responses
1) Where do you see RJ growing on your campus (e.g., Student Affairs, Academic Departments, Conduct, Mission & Ministry, Student Activities, etc.)?	<i>Student Affairs</i>
2) What do you see as the biggest obstacle(s) to building an RJ program on your campus? a) Resistance from Administration b) Lack of funding c) Lack of other resources d) Policy challenges e) Lack of time for implementation f) Limited RJ facilitators g) Other:	<i>Lack of funding or other resources</i>
3) What has helped your campus's RJ implementation to succeed (e.g., cross-departmental collaborations, supportive senior administrators, connecting RJ and mission, etc.)?	<i>Cross-departmental collaborations</i>
4) What kind of support can the [National Network Name] offer to your campus? a) RJ trainings ("101") b) RJ trainings (advanced) c) Networking with other campuses d) RJ Retreat e) Empowerment Evaluation f) Other:	<i>RJ training</i>

The webinar responses underscored what our six campus teams had previously shared: Resources on campus were often limited; cross-departmental collaboration was needed for restorative justice implementation to succeed; and training was still a big need, one that overshadowed the recognition of the importance of evaluating restorative justice implementation efforts.

Phase IV. Finally, Phase IV consisted of a restorative justice circle with four of the campus team leaders to debrief the empowerment evaluation process. Separately, one of the researchers met with a fifth campus team that had experienced significant implementation challenges after a key staff member who had championed restorative justice on campus left the institution to pursue a new role.

To analyze this longitudinal data, our two-person team conducted initial coding independently from one another. Because this study was the first use of empowerment evaluation in restorative justice evaluation in higher education, we used an inductive approach to coding (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). We then met to compare codes and discuss discrepancies in the codes we had selected. This resulted in several more rounds of independent coding followed by comparison between coders to reach agreement and ensure intercoder reliability (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Once we reached agreement between the researchers on the codes and saturation of the data, we then determined the themes that are reflected in the following section.

Findings. In our analysis of the Phase I circles and the Phase III follow-up sessions by campus, participants identified three benefits of empowerment evaluation for restorative justice: First, the empowerment evaluation process gave campus teams dedicated time to gather, which they had not been able to do, largely as a result of additional pandemic-related duties. The shared Google slides helped restorative justice leaders to remember and to recognize the good restorative work they were already doing on their campus. Finally, empowerment evaluation participants reported that learning what others were doing restorative justice-wise on their campuses was both affirming and inspiring.

At the same time, we found that the study participants were far less focused on questions pertaining to the PEEM or evaluation of restorative justice programs more broadly. Rather, participants focused on restorative justice implementation efforts. Some discussed overcoming institutional resistance to restorative approaches, while others described building trust in restorative justice processes (especially among students) as their primary focus. While restorative justice campus leaders saw a very clear connection

between restorative justice / restorative practices and their institutional missions, many continued to struggle to secure the necessary institutional resources (e.g., time, funding, and staffing) to implement a comprehensive, campus-wide or even division-wide restorative program.

We turn our attention to Case Study #2, which utilized a TEEM process, which may address some of these concerns raised by participants in the campus-based PEEM.

Case Study #2: Transformative Empowerment Evaluation Method (TEEM) with K–12 Educators

The following case study included two phases: first, a three-day training in restorative and intercultural teaching practices; and second a transformative empowerment evaluation in the fall semester of the following academic year. The following section describes the study design and methods employed in the TEEM project.

Methods. In Phase 1 of the study, in August 2022, 12 participants engaged in a three-day training in restorative and intercultural teaching practices. The participants included eight elementary or middle school teachers, two teachers in an adult transition program (one who coordinated restorative programs at their school site), a leader of a before-and-after-school program, and an elementary school principal. In Phase 2, 8 of the original 12 participants went on to complete the TEEM during the subsequent fall semester.

Circle Design. The restorative practice of circle was used throughout Phase 1 and 2 of the TEEM, as it provided participants the opportunity to share their own stories and hear the stories of others, an essential element of transformation-of-self. Participants arranged their chairs in a physical circle with no other furniture, only the centerpiece (a visual representation of the group's values) in the middle. The group also affirmed agreements of how they would treat one another. During the circle, participants passed a talking piece to recognize the speaker. If a person chose not to speak in the round, they could pass the talking piece or hold the piece for a moment in silence. In sessions held via Zoom, participants affirmed agreements and developed a sharing order, given that the online format prohibited the group from creating a shared physical centerpiece or passing a physical talking piece.

In this case, each circle sought to support the aims of the TEEM process. The circle protocols were designed to (1) foster a sense of community building and strengthen relationships as critical friends; (2) support participants to *take stock* in their efforts to implement restorative and intercultural teaching practices; (3) offer participants the opportunity to reflect back on training material after some time had passed in order to guide mission development; and (4) help participants determine *next steps* in their respective restorative implementation processes. A detailed view of these phases of the TEEM is presented in Table 4:

Table 4. Phases of the TEEM K–12 Process

<p>Session I – Circle 1 Protocol</p> <p><i>Welcome & Introductions</i></p> <p><i>Acknowledgements</i></p> <p><i>Agreements</i></p> <p><i>Self-Reflection:</i> What is the color of your mood today and why? Are there reflections since we last saw each other that you would like to share with the group?</p> <p><i>Taking Stock:</i> Share / draw / search an image that represents where you see your current status with implementing the restorative and intercultural practices in your classroom?</p> <p><i>Mission Development:</i> When you look at the four types of care (emotional, physical, mental, spiritual), what stands out to you? What care is prioritized or not prioritized?</p> <p><i>Planning for the Future:</i> As a result of this conversation, what about RJ implementation in your classroom or school is becoming clearer to you?</p>
<p>Session II – Circle 2 Protocol</p> <p><i>Welcome</i></p> <p><i>Acknowledgements</i></p> <p><i>Agreements</i></p>

Self-Reflection: Tell the brief story of an interaction you had with someone this year that reminded you of the “why” of why you do this work...

Taking Stock: Share a bit briefly of how you have been able to use restorative practices in your classroom.

Mission Development: Looking back at your MMDI (model of multiple dimensions of identity) document, what thoughts come to mind? How have you been reminded of or reflected on your identities through your interactions this academic year?

Open Dialogue: As a large group: take some time to brainstorm together regarding your mission statements. Explore the ideas that have emerged for you about mission statements as a result of this conversation.

Planning for the Future: As we move into the second half of our Phase 2 sessions, what is one intent you would like to set for yourself for the next couple of weeks?

Session III - Circle 3 Protocol

Welcome

Acknowledgements

Agreements

Self-Reflection: What animal are you feeling like today and why?

Taking Stock: What have you attempted since our meeting last time? What impact have you noticed in your classroom/site/in yourself/etc?

Mission Development: What aspects of this White supremacy culture are you more aware of now? Or Can you see the edges of the White-supremacy paradigm yet? In what ways are you now noticing these beliefs coming up in yourself or around you?

Planning for the Future: What is one thing you’d like to commit to before our next meeting? What impact do you hope that action step will make?

Session IV - Circle 4 Protocol

Welcome

Acknowledgements

Agreements

Self-Reflection: If you were a drink today, what kind of drink would you be?

Taking Stock: In this next round I would like to encourage you to share what new or continuing restorative practice have you engaged in since our last meeting?

Mission Development: In this round I encourage your thoughts about current practices of the pedagogy of violence in our schools and how do you think it affects restorative work?

Next Steps: As we look at the pedagogy of transcendence, I invite you to share what you think are the possibilities you see when doing this work and what does that mean to learning spaces that we work in? As we look at the pedagogy of transcendence, I invite you to share what you think are the possibilities you see when doing this work and what does that mean to learning spaces that we work in?

Each question designed in the circle protocols was tailored to reach the aims of *transformative empowerment evaluation*. The first question emphasized self-reflection, as participants who developed self-awareness in turn developed self-determination or “the capacity to apply this worldview to all aspects of life” (Fetterman, 2017, p. 120). The aim of this prompt was to support participants in reflecting on their positionality in relation to the curriculum learned in Phase 1 of the study and their respective journeys toward implementation from that point. The second prompt was designed toward taking stock, or generating the participants “grounded ... view of

their organizational reality” (Fetterman, 2012, p. 55). Fetterman (2012) stated, “Taking stock is like seeing your reflection in the pond—for a moment suspended in time, you can see yourself for who you really are before the ripples return to hide your reflection from view” (p. 56). The third prompt, focused on mission development, aimed toward cultivating “an intellectual coherence to the endeavor ... [that] provides an internal theory guiding practice and action” (Fetterman, 2017, p. 122). This round was informed by questions like “What does the future look like for all of us?” and “How do we define prosperity and describe what it means to enhance the quality of life in our

community?” (Fetterman, 2012). The final prompt supported participants in envisioning next steps. One must note, “Planning for the future represents one step (not the final step) in the infinite loop of implementing and evaluating in empowerment evaluation” (Fetterman, 2012, p. 80). Therefore, the implication is that TEEM is an iterative process that will extend beyond the four circles and include a critical analysis of structural barriers to holistic integration of restorative justice into the school settings in which participants work.

Findings. Educators and school leaders who implemented restorative and intercultural teaching practices through an experience of TEEM spoke of experiences that the author identified as aligned to experiences of praxis (Alexander, 2023).

Storytelling. In the fall semester circles, the participants told a total of 135 stories. The robust number of stories that participants shared was indicative of the effectiveness of the circle protocol in combination with empowerment evaluation. For example, Tonio, a before-and-after-school coordinator, told a story as means to cast a vision of authentic communication in circle when he shared a story of eating lunch with kindergarteners and engaging in conversation that he perceived to be relatively removed from the influences of power, oppression, and hegemonic or organizational rules. For Tonio, this story captured the authentic communication he sought to share in professional spaces.

Tonio’s story and others illuminated key obstacles that impacted educators’ perceived ability to implement restorative and intercultural teaching practices, such as white supremacist culture and the social management of emotions. These social influences impact educators’ perceived abilities to engage in the transformation-of-self needed to sustain such liberatory teaching practices. The stories also highlighted that factors such as hegemonic school culture limited participants’ opportunities to locate other educators and school leaders already engaged and modeling more liberatory ways of teaching and/or ways of being.

Implementation. Despite the challenges to implementation that participants shared, every participant who went on to Phase 2 implemented restorative and intercultural teaching practices during their time in the study. These efforts at implementation were not idyllic, but by sharing their stories in the circle, participants had the opportunity to pause and reflect on their steps forward and their small victories in the imperfect worlds of everyday schools. Such efforts included

reentry circles for suspended students, class presentations on belonging, classroom community-building circles, intentional child play, generating classroom agreements, cultivating an anti-bias classroom library, mindfulness moments, student conferences, and coordinating whole-school trainings. Each of these instances were shared through participants’ stories and provided an opportunity for self-reflection and mutual support for all in the circle.

Transformation. Throughout Phase 2 of the study, participants shared stories of praxis. *Praxis* is transformation-of-self, an outcome of acts of critical consciousness (Freire, 2012). Participants shared stories that indicated that as an outcome of this TEEM process, they were no longer the same person that they once were, and therefore they no longer wanted to act as they once behaved. This transformation-of-self came through the merging of restorative practice and empowerment evaluation. Participants argued that the act of collective storytelling via restorative circle, in and of itself, supported restorative justice implementation in their work.

Further, the concepts of empowerment evaluation (i.e., cultures of evidence, critical friends, community of learners, cycles of action/reflection, reflective practitioners) offered an environment conducive to supporting participants in their pursuit of essential elements of praxis, including action and reflection. In her final circle, Lee, a site coordinator for restorative practices, stated,

What I know is that this practice is definitely not linear, right? We always ebb and flow. And it’s something that we constantly learn and grow with. And so, I think that’s kind of why this work is super exciting, super scary, all at the same time. (Fall Circle 4, Session 1)

Lee engaged in critical praxis through recognizing the hegemonic structures of schools and the emotional discomfort that rose within her when she imagined confronting such cultural norms. However, she also recognized that the practice of renewal or action/reflection was essential to restorative practice and also to the empowerment evaluation journey she had just traversed.

Lessons Learned

In the section below, we offer lessons learned in both practical and transformative empowerment evaluation (PEEM and TEEM) experiences, with

hopes that these insights will help other evaluators who may implement these methods in the future. The lessons learned include recommendations about restorative justice circle process, the importance of centering relationships, and capacity building.

Restorative Circle Processes Enhanced Empowerment Evaluation

The use of circle processes brought empowerment evaluation into alignment with restorative justice values and philosophy in a tangible way. To facilitate each circle, we included such activities as mindfulness moments, group agreements, and circle prompts. Then the researchers/facilitators offered summarizing comments, as well as participating in the opening and closing circle rounds. During the implementation of circle protocols there were moments when the lead researchers changed the way that questions were worded or did not ask every question in the circle protocol. The researchers in both studies felt the variations were necessary in consideration of the limitations of time and the duration for which participants spoke, and in moments when questions regarding implementation emerged from the group. We encourage practitioners designing both PEEM and TEEM to work *in groups* to *cocreate* circle protocols with colleagues and circle participants.

Role of Researchers/Facilitators in Restorative Empowerment Evaluation

In restorative processes a circle facilitator is also a co-participant, and in empowerment evaluation, the researcher is a co-learner. These are complementary yet distinct roles. Circle facilitation is recognized as an art, developed through experience and the resulting intuition regarding the key moments to question, prompt, and cue participants' thinking to delve deeper into key moments of investigation (Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, there is still important learning about how to be effective as a circle facilitator.

Centering Relationships

A significant aspect of integrating restorative justice and empowerment evaluation was centering relationships. We did this by adding to the empowerment evaluation protocol by leading with a relationship-building phase (in addition to the empowerment evaluation phases of taking stock,

etc.). As a result of centering relationships in this way, researchers noticed that participants took a more active role in participating and even in advocating for changes to the process to support their learning and growth. The relationship building in circle provided the necessary foundation for participants to provide this challenging feedback, as well as the structure for changing the process to better meet their needs. For example, in Case Study #2 (TEEM), a participant argued that the lead researchers' concern for time and the structure of the circle protocol was wrongly prioritized over participants' need to share wholeheartedly.

Individual Capacity Building

This restorative emphasis on relationships also enhanced the capacity-building potential of the empowerment evaluation process. For example, in the second phase of Case Study #2 (TEEM), after the first two circle protocols were implemented, study participants suggested that they should design and implement the final two protocols. Study participants offered circle protocol outlines, and the lead researcher provided feedback. The final two circle protocols were facilitated by study participants, while the lead researcher engaged as a participant. The lead researcher then implemented the participant-generated protocols in subsequent circles. This difference suggests that participants in the TEEM felt empowered enough by the evaluation process itself to question the process and to take a greater role in cocreation of the circle format for each subsequent session.

Participants in both research studies might be described as restorative justice champions (McMahon et al., 2023), or lead stakeholders at their respective sites, leading the implementation of restorative practices for some subset. Often, restorative justice champions participate in many of the initiatives related to restorative practices that become available within their spheres of influence. Such initiatives include professional development opportunities, committees, evaluation projects, conferences, and special assignments. However, while restorative justice champions hold great personal drive to implement restorative practices, when institutions fail to support implementation efforts, the outcome often leads to practitioner burnout and employee turnover (Alexander et al., 2024). Therefore, institutions serious about the implementation of restorative practices must consider how institutional transformation is taking place in concurrence with participant transformation.

Challenging Institutional Constraints

Empowerment evaluation challenges evaluators, educational institutions, and professionals to prioritize the values-based tenets that inform the selected empowerment evaluation approaches, and more broadly, the expressed vision and mission of the institution. However, as illustrated in the two case studies in this paper, the efforts of individual practitioners quite often are not rewarded by the broader professional community or the institutional bureaucracy, even as these restorative justice champions are called upon to “fix” painful or embarrassing public incidents that often reflect not only individual harms, but also institutional blunders. In this context, the environment in which this labor goes unacknowledged can lead to employee turnover, and committed restorative justice practitioners may move on to other roles (Alexander et al., 2024). Consequently, in our case studies, we found that restorative programs at institutions may come to a halt in the aftermath of those lost champions, a finding consistent with international restorative justice research (O’Nolan et al., 2018). Institutions that are committed to the implementation of restorative practices need to take seriously the call to implement institutional transformations that emerge as an outcome of next steps in empowerment evaluation.

Selecting PEEM or TEEM

When selecting an empowerment evaluation approach, restorative justice leaders should assess the context, resources, and capacity for beginning the evaluation process. It may be helpful to consider the following questions: (1) What are the feelings, needs, and core values of this group? (2) Which evaluation approach will support these needs (PEEM or TEEM)? And (3) Taken together, how do the needs of your team and empowerment approaches (PEEM and TEEM) inform your circle design? For example, among university campus participants, the study leaders were aware of and expressed needs related to challenges with lack of time and control over workloads, especially once the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Post-pandemic, this time pressure only accelerated. Thus, these campus restorative justice champions were working in contexts with significant time constraints; limited financial resources for restorative justice training, implementation, and evaluation; and high staff turnover (which speak to capacity issues).

In contrast, the K–12 TEEM was a group of volunteers who were looking for different ways of working, specifically more restorative approaches to student engagement and learning. Their TEEM experience was built on a strong training foundation that centered critical consciousness-raising and anti-hegemonic praxis that supported the TEEM approach. In combination with the restorative circle process, the TEEM provided a space where it was possible to produce the conditions of praxis, or transformation-of-self. Further, the TEEM approach fostered an ongoing structure for evaluation that places a priority on authenticity and meaningful institutional and personal transformation. TEEM provided a powerful framework for praxis-centered evaluation in the context of a community of ongoing learning and support.

Limitations

These studies contribute valuable insights toward the implementation of PEEM and TEEM. However, some limitations need to be acknowledged. It is important to note that participants in both of the studies highlighted in this paper either held prior experience with restorative practices or wanted to see restorative practices succeed. In both cases, participants were recruited as volunteers. A key value of restorative practices is voluntariness. The application of these findings may be limited in settings where participants are mandated to participate. Because this is the first documented application of empowerment evaluation to restorative justice processes in educational settings, further study is needed to understand the utility of this approach.

Future Directions

There are many questions to answer about the integration of restorative justice practices with empowerment evaluation. Notably, when we combined our respective empowerment evaluations, we found that both PEEM and TEEM are challenging to implement in hegemonic contexts in which broader empowerment is limited. What does a generative evaluation process look like in the face of so much change, uncertainty, and work pressure? Moreover, what does it mean to engage empowerment evaluation to evaluate one’s own restorative justice praxis (as the TEEM group did), versus restorative justice as a program of an office embedded within a large institution (as the PEEM group attempted to do)? In settings in which organizational empowerment is limited, as in many

hierarchical educational institutions, does it make more sense to focus empowerment evaluation on supporting individual practitioners to maintain their own growth and momentum for the work? What is the role of empowerment evaluation in maintaining momentum for restorative practices in K–16 settings, even as restorative justice leaders' spheres of influence may be quite constrained? These are questions that invite ongoing dialogue and reflection among restorative justice practitioners and researchers who are committed to evaluation methods, such as empowerment evaluation, that reflect the restorative justice values of voluntariness, compassion, authenticity, multipartiality, voice and choice, and reflexivity.

Conclusion

Both of the case studies presented here pursued empowerment evaluation methods with restorative values and processes (i.e., restorative circles). As a result of utilizing restorative and empowerment evaluation values of inclusion, critical friends, systems analysis, and centering the wisdom of the restorative practitioners / program participants, both evaluation processes unearthed a range of restorative justice implementation and evaluation challenges, including individual burnout, institutional resistance to change, and collective harms (including the loss of colleagues as a result of structural barriers). Consequently, the call in restorative approaches to empowerment evaluation is to think intentionally about the investment of the institution in restorative approaches, as well as a shared commitment to authentic engagement that extends throughout the whole institution. The invitation is to an individual and collective process of transformation through evaluation so that we can more fully embody not only our expressed institutional mission, but also our shared values in practice.

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