

Toward a Restorative English Education



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In this essay I argue for a Restorative English Education—that is, a pedagogy of possibilities that employs literature and writing to seek justice and restore (and, in some cases, create) peace that reaches beyond the classroom walls. A Restorative English Education requires English language arts teachers to resist zero-tolerance policies that sort, label, and eventually isolate particular youth, embracing a discourse of restoration in which all young people have an opportunity to experience “radical healing” through engaging in deliberate literate acts that illuminate pathways of resilience.

As an ethnographer and co-teacher in a youth spoken word class in an urban public high school and, later, as a participant observer and teaching artist in Girl Time, a woman-focused theater company working with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls using the medium of playwriting and performing, I have asked how performing writing and literacy can serve as tools for youth to build and sustain literate identities (Fisher, 2007b; Winn, 2011, 2012). While youth in these two spaces may have been in seemingly different contexts, they shared an ethos of confinement; that is, they routinely encountered physical isolation (e.g., referrals, suspensions, and expulsions) as well as symbolic alienation (e.g., low expectations and labels such as “at risk”) throughout their academic trajectories. However, they also encountered teachers who sought to “teach freedom” in these spaces of confinement. In my work in both communities, youth expressed their desire to have access to a learning space where they could generate their own stories, work with “practitioners of the craft”—teachers who embodied the subjects they taught—and be viewed as literate and, thus, capable citizens of the world (Fisher, 2007b). More than any youth I have encountered, these young people recognized that “to be literate is to be legitimate” (Stuckey, 1990, p. 18). Simply put, they were ready for their words to “work” (to borrow from poet/educator Gwendolyn Brooks), ready to use their poems, plays, stories, and performances to declare themselves poets, playwrights, writers, and artists while rejecting troubling labels such as *delinquent*, *criminal*, and *at-risk*. Youth poets, writers, and artists are learning to use their work

and performances of their work to reintroduce themselves as capable and evolving. As an English educator, I am challenged with the task of translating this notion of “teaching freedom” that I have observed and engaged in as a researcher to a new generation of English teachers.

In this essay I argue for a Restorative English Education, a pedagogy of possibilities that employs literature and writing to seek justice and restore (and, in some cases, create) peace that reaches beyond the classroom walls. A Restorative English Education requires English language arts teachers to resist zero-tolerance policies that sort, label, and eventually isolate particular youth, embracing a discourse of restoration in which all young people have an opportunity to experience “radical healing” through engaging in deliberate literate acts that illuminate pathways of resilience (Ginwright, 2010).¹ Restorative English Education is at the intersection of restorative justice and critical pedagogy. While restorative justice is typically seen as an alternative response to retributive practices in both juvenile and criminal justice systems, there is a growing movement to employ restorative justice in schools and communities where Black and Brown youth have experienced circuits of “dispossession” (Fine and Ruglis, 2009). Here I call for English education to grapple with tensions in classrooms and schools initiated by zero-tolerance policies and reimagine English classrooms as sites for relationship-building, peacemaking, and peacekeeping. Ultimately I argue that teacher educators—in all content areas—need to engage in a Restorative English Education.

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From Restorative Justice to Restorative English Education

Restorative justice can be defined in many ways; however, scholarship is consistent with the premise that it “begins with a concern for victims and how to meet their needs, for repairing the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically” (Zehr, 1997, p. 68). While the roots of restorative justice are in the legal field, scholars are now examining the role it can play in schools in the United States (Haft, 2000; Karp & Breslin, 2001) and abroad (McCluskey, Lloyd, Kane, Riddell, Stead, & Weedon, 2008). Some scholars are advocating “to apply principles of restorative justice more aggressively to school settings” in order to decenter punitive approaches to harm. A punitive approach to harm, according to Haft (2000), “runs directly counter to a fundamental purpose of public education—the purpose of preparing children to live in a democratic society” (p. 797). Restorative English Education is grounded in restorative justice theory and practice. According to Zehr (1997), restorative justice “involves a reorientation of how we think about crime and justice” (p. 68) by asking who experienced harm, how the harm impacted people and relationships, and how the various stakeholders can seek a community response to the harm as opposed to fueling further polarization of those involved. Ultimately, restorative justice “assumes that justice can and should promote healing, both individual and societal” (p. 70).

Restorative English Education is a reimagining of the English classroom to include restorative justice principles, practices, and more specifically circle processes. Circle processes—which restorative justice scholars argue are deeply indebted to Indigenous communities throughout the United States, Canada, and New Zealand—are often a tool to promote healthy dialogue, discussion, and understanding. The circle processes being employed by Indigenous and Aboriginal people as an

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alternative to traditional criminal justice sentencing practices are now being explored in school contexts.² It is important to underscore that circles, and peacemaking circles in particular, “are not a neutral, value free process” (Pranis, 2005, p. 24). Together, people in the circle choose a set of shared values before exploring a range of topics and ideas

through a series of questions, posed by a circle keeper, that are in alignment with the circle’s purpose. Everyone has a time to speak. Everyone has a time to listen. Like the restorative justice peacemaking circle, a Restorative English classroom requires everyone to stay in the room and engage in dialogue; it demands collaboration and consensus. Peacemaking circles do more than establish consensus; these circles offer an opportunity for teachers to support their students in finding what Mary Rose O’Reilley (1993) and her colleagues dared to call the “sacred center” by showing how each “exists within another circle; a community. To find voice and to mediate voice in a circle of others,” which is central to what has been referred to as the “peaceable classroom” (p. 40). Circles are catalysts for blending communities in which facilitators are committed to eliminating hierarchies based on academic prowess or social and cultural capital. There is a particular kind of power-sharing in circle processes that is undeniable and necessary for establishing consensus.

Why Restorative English Education? Why Now?

For years I was haunted by the question that Mary Rose O’Reilley grappled with as a student in a colloquium for teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, facilitated by English professor Ihab Hassan: “I wonder if it is possible to teach literature in such a way that people stop killing each other?” (O’Reilley, 1984, p. 109). This quote/question sat on my desk unanswered, and while it inspired me, I also felt paralyzed by the magnitude of the work it would take to operationalize such a pedagogy. O’Reilley and her colleagues in composition studies and English grappled with this question during the height of the Vietnam War, and I was facing a different struggle. I had the task of preparing a new generation of English educators to use their craft in such a way that they could facilitate robust learning opportunities and incite a desire for literacy and participation in a literate community, against the backdrop of mass incarceration and public school culture that privileged policing and surveillance. I thought about my ethnohistorical research with Black poets, writers, and community organizers and, more specifically, my interview with Jitu Weusi, co-founder of The EAST organization, which housed a school, food cooperative, printing press, and performance center that served working-class and working poor Black and Puerto Rican families in Brooklyn in

the aftermath of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville struggle for community control of schools (Fisher, 2009). Throughout our interviews, Weusi spoke at length about *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the lasting effect it had on people after it was published in 1965. “Non-readers,” according to Weusi, understood that they had to “read” *The Autobiography*; they enlisted partners, spouses, and children who could read because it was simply a text that Black Americans, and eventually the world, needed to experience. This account of Malcolm X’s life, for Weusi and countless others, became a blueprint for transformation; it demonstrated how a young Malcolm Little could internalize racism and self-hatred, leading him to become Detroit Red. However, life did not stop there. A Detroit Red could emerge from incarceration, become a local leader, and eventually embrace global citizenry through his faith. One of my favorite English classrooms, located in Brooklyn, New York, chronicled this journey in a dedicated bulletin that hung throughout the academic year, with photos of Malcolm Little (an elementary school photo), Detroit Red (a mug shot), Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. The classroom teacher explained that she left this bulletin in place after reading *The Autobiography* with her students as a reminder that everyone is a work in progress. *The Autobiography* was also effective in that it begged the question, how many more Malcolms or potential leaders and thinkers were warehoused in America’s prisons? In a Restorative English Education curriculum, *The Autobiography* marks that restoration and second chances are, indeed, possible and that people are evolving and in a process of becoming; therefore a young person should never be cast aside (Winn, 2010).

Using literature, writing, and the English classroom as sites of restoration and peacemaking should not be a revolutionary concept, considering the climate of zero-tolerance and punitive policies that can dictate American public-school culture. In fact, the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights held a hearing on December 12, 2012, entitled “Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline.”³ In one statement for the record, the acting administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Melodee Hanes, asserted that there are “profound negative short-term and long-term consequences” for youth who experience arrests and court appearances, even if they do not actually serve a sentence. “Mental and physical health, education success and future employment opportunities,” are jeopardized once children experience any aspect of this cycle (*Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 2012, p. 2). The impact of zero-tolerance policies on Black and Latino youth is well documented; Black and Latino youth are disproportionately funneled into the school/prison nexus through referrals, suspensions, and expulsions for misconduct at school (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, Martinez, & Gillespie, 2012; Morris, 2012; Yang, 2009). Suspensions and expulsions result in missed classroom time and serve to further isolate young people who may have already experienced marginalization.

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perienced the school/prison nexus; it is also important for youth who have had a relatively successful academic trajectory free and clear of a paper trail of referrals and other forms of removal. Youth who are performing well academically must be nourished and cultivated as agentic citizens who seek equality and justice for themselves and their peers. When youth who stand on the more fertile side of the “education debt” continually witness their peers being policed and removed, they begin to suffer from a lack of imagination for creative solutions to build and sustain communities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Over time, academically successful students learn to view their peers through a deficit lens and grow comfortable in being sorted and separated from them.

What Does a Restorative English Education Look and Sound Like?

In order to understand what is necessary in establishing a Restorative English classroom, I immersed myself in participatory literacy communities far away from formal institutions of learning. I desperately wanted to learn where writers, poets, and thinkers on the periphery of English classrooms did their work in the world (Fisher, 2007a). Much like Gwendolyn Brooks, I wanted to witness literate practices in the places where one did not expect to experience them. For Brooks and her colleagues in the Black Arts Movement, these spaces included sidewalks, taverns, and prisons; for me they were restaurants, cafés, extended-day writing classes in urban high schools, and youth detention centers. Equally important to my program of research was returning to the English classroom, where the poet, actor, and/or practitioner of the craft reinvented him- or herself as an English teacher in a school setting.

When I first visited poet/teacher Joseph Ubiles’ Power Writing class, where I have served as a “worthy witness” for more than a decade (Winn & Ubiles, 2011; Paris & Winn, 2013), I did not initially have the language to describe what I experienced. In the Power Writing circle—a circle of youth poets representing many countries (the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Belize, the United States) and languages (Spanish, English, and Bronxionics)—youth exchanged their lived experiences and shared truths using the medium of poetry (Fisher, 2007b). The “read and feed” circle in Power Writing was a peacemaking circle where everyone was offered a seat at the table to listen and to be heard. While the structure was often criticized by onlookers who dismissed it as frivolous and extracurricular, it had both a purpose and a mission to invite youth into a writing community where they could foster literate identities without fear, limitations, or judgment. When Joseph recruited students for his class, he did not seek out those who were already excelling in school; he approached the students roaming the hallways, the students who sat in the back of class with their hoodies on, and even the students who had been kicked out of their other classes. This circle process in Power Writing, or read-and-feed, invited youth who had experienced marginalization, isolation, and removal, and restored them as citizens of a peacemaking process through the exchange of writing and ideas, where all participants could resist posturing in order to embrace vulnerability and dialogue, including the teachers. Joseph and

his co-teachers learned that Power Writing was needed in many contexts. Through an exchange with students at a private preparatory school in the same borough as the Power Writing original site—yet seemingly a universe away—youth created a read-and-feed circle of peacemaking and healing that replaced their mistrust and misunderstanding of each other with poetry and prose that inspired relationships. This was a space for “wounded healing,” or “an ongoing process of negotiating various personal and ideological struggles in reflective, collective, and productive fashion,” to unfold (Hill, 2009, p. 265). This process has been introduced in many different spaces, responding to the needs of youth.

Similar to the youth poets in Power Writing, Girl Time student artists learned how to listen to and engage their peers’ writing through the medium of playwriting. In this more explicitly justice-seeking space, the Girl Time scripts served as talking pieces that began a healing process far beyond the circle of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls who participated in youth detention center workshops and the summer program for girls who had been released. Girl Time’s restorative work also took place with the audience, who had an opportunity to become a part of the process during the talk-back circles following the performances of plays written and performed by the girls. The writing process for these powerful scripts was often the first opportunity student artists had to tell any part(s) of their stories. Student artists learned through this process that their writing and performances of their peers’ writing were potentially transformative for the people who experienced them. In the talk-back circles, mothers admitted to making choices that presented consequences during their adolescent years and were finally able to explain to their daughters that as mothers, they feared for their children and did not want their children to struggle as they did throughout their lives. Junior Correctional Officers revealed that they were not simply the evil characters depicted in the plays, but rather explained that their stoic demeanor masked their frustration at seeing so many young people in the detention centers who they did not believe should be there. Talk-back circles in the detention centers invited peers to challenge each other; boys often wanted to understand why most of the male characters were portrayed as villains, and the girls were happy to tell them why. Last, but not least, the teachers experienced healing in this circle as well; privileging student artists’ scripts invited teachers into the girls’ worlds, and this site of restoration allowed teachers to suspend judgment and ask broader questions about youth imprisonment, education, healthcare, housing, laws, and policies. Over time, the Girl Time summer program started receiving more requests from parents of children who had not experienced incarceration, because they believed the Girl Time student artists’ lived experiences had important lessons for their daughters as well. Student artists learned that their writing could be a part of a peacemaking process that extended beyond their confinement and prepared them for agentive lives.

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In my work with preservice teachers, we spend our first class meetings in circle. I ask students to bring a piece of literature (broadly defined to include po-

etry, plays, their own writing, letters, etc.) to share in the circle and include in our centerpiece. We begin by responding to questions such as “Who are you?” “Why are you here?” “Why teach English?” “Why now?” A guest circle-keeper and Restorative Justice Coordinator at the Madison YWCA, Ananda Mirrilli, added another question: “Who were you as a student? Describe a time when you were at your worst as a student.” Later, we respond to the prompt, “Share a piece of literature that has influenced you and discuss.” Once students complete their sharing, they place their literacy artifact on a centerpiece—typically a piece of cloth with a story behind it—in the middle of the circle that serves as a focal point for the group. This process takes time, and I am often reminded of a story told by restorative attorney Sujatha Baliga about her work with schools in Oakland, California. Baliga recounts working with a teacher who was very resistant to restorative justice and circle work in particular. “I don’t have time for this,” the teacher expressed in the beginning; however, after engaging in the process with her students she began to say, “I don’t have time to not do this,” because of the foundation it provided in building and sustaining relationships for the rest of the academic year. After participating in circles, the preservice teachers I work with spend time reading selections from Mary Rose O’Reilly’s *The Peaceable Classroom* and J. Elspeth Stuckey’s *The Violence of Literacy* before addressing O’Reilly’s mentor’s question in the circle: How do we teach English in such a way that people stop killing each other? One of students’ ongoing assignments throughout the semester is to record critical field responses to their encounters with racism, classism, and sexism in classrooms and in schools. Preservice teachers are able to recognize and respond to the ways in which they see youth being silenced and isolated, and they use their critical field responses as a site to imagine alternatives.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In her 1982 keynote address to the National Council of Teachers of English, poet, essayist, and educator June Jordan asked, “What to do? What to do?” about the role and responsibility of English education. In an effort to get English teachers to reexamine their purpose for teaching literature and writing, Jordan asserted that “English education acts as a gatekeeper . . . closes down opportunities . . . narrows rather than opens possibilities of social meaning and social action” (quoted in Stuckey, 1990, p. 97). A Restorative English Education can be messy and will be uncomfortable because it is an “unquiet pedagogy” that demands that English educators explicitly address mass incarceration, juvenile injustice, and the policing and silencing of youth, and return to English education as a site for imagination and creativity (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991). However, it is also full of hope and possibility as it seeks to make the English classroom “an instrument of peacemaking” (Jordan’s phrase) and thus a site for restoration. Restorative English Education is an opportunity to use the field and work with transformative mediums. So, what is Restorative English Education restoring? Restorative English Education not only seeks to restore classrooms and schools into peacemaking and peacekeeping spaces where students learn empathy as well as how to build healthy relationships through

learning about themselves and each other; it is also a movement to encourage youth to be civic actors and engage in a process that promotes a literocracy (Fisher, 2005a, 2005b). This is not an attempt to romanticize or even promote the notion of a safe space. Like my colleagues Leonardo and Porter (2010), I believe one can never guarantee a safe space even in seemingly homogeneous contexts. Tensions are mediated through shared literary experiences. Students and teachers historicize their own lives in circles. I believe this work can and should be done across content areas. As teacher educators our work is disrupted when we send new teachers to schools and communities without any knowledge of the policing, surveillance, and exclusion of particular youth and without strategies to reintegrate youth back into classroom communities through restorative practices.

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NOTES

1. Ginwright (2010) offers the concept of radical healing, which specifically “focuses on how hope, imagination, and care transform the capacity of communities to confront community problems” (p. 11).
2. More specifically, Bazemore and Schiff (2001) assert that the draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides important principles of restorative justice such as “self determination” that are central to restorative work (p. 247). Other examples of circle work across communities include Melanie Spiteri’s (2002) “Sentencing Circles for Aboriginal Offenders in Canada: Furthering the Idea of Aboriginal Justice in a Western Justice Framework.”
3. The “Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline” hearing solicited testimony from youth, community organizations, educators, and scholars to respond to the presence of zero-tolerance policies and policing in American public schools that contribute to the school/prison nexus.

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CEE Research Initiative 2013–2014 Call for Proposals

The Conference on English Education (CEE) invites proposals for research projects that will advance the mission of the organization as articulated through our various position statements and sponsored publications. Particular questions of interest include: What constitutes an effective or innovative English/language arts education licensure program, and how do we know? What constitutes an effective or innovative English/language arts education graduate program, and how do we know? How does English/language arts education practice compare to various accreditation agency expectations? What are the relationships between research-supported English/language arts education pedagogies and effective secondary teaching? What is “teacher quality” and what does it mean to be an effective English/language arts teacher? What are the connections/disconnections between the Common Core State Standards and research-based English/language arts teacher education?

We hope that research conducted through this program will support CEE’s efforts to communicate more effectively with state and federal policy makers, accreditation agencies, and school/department administrators. We welcome proposals from applicants representing all levels of instruction, PreK–college/university.

CEE plans to fund up to four proposals at a maximum of \$4,000 each. The principal investigators of each proposal **must be members of CEE**. We invite proposals employing a variety of methods, including qualitative or mixed method research designs, case studies, interview or survey-based projects, and teacher research projects. Proposals should state research questions, describe methods of gathering and analyzing data, and explain how the evidence and its analysis will address both the research questions and current educational policy issues of interest to CEE members. **Doctoral students and early career faculty members are encouraged to apply. Previous CEE Research Initiative recipients are eligible to apply only once in every five-year period.**

Proposals are to be submitted no later than September 22, 2013, as email attachments to the CEE Administrative Liaison at cee@ncte.org. Decisions will be announced by October 15, 2013, and award winners will be recognized at the annual CEE Social/Membership Reunion at the NCTE Annual Convention in Boston. Investigator(s) will be expected to present their research at the 2014 or 2015 NCTE Convention or at the 2015 CEE Summer Conference. For more information, see www.ncte.org/cee/researchinitiative.