

BOOK REVIEW

Marisol Quevedo Rerucha, *Beyond the surface of restorative practices: building a culture of equity, connection, and healing*. San Diego: Dave Burgess Consulting, 2021, 143pp., ISBN: 978-1-951600-58-7 (hbk).

Rerucha's book is a passionate, compassionate and compelling offering to educators, parents, as well as business, community and faith leaders. It is more than a traditional restorative implementation toolbox or blueprint. Rather, from the very first page, with her conversational and approachable style, the reader is taken in by Rerucha's infectious commitment to restorative practices as a mindset (or 'heartset') that inspires you to appreciate the importance of building a trusting and relational environment for addressing systemic oppression, gender discrimination, racism and other inequities. Her focus is on healing, justice and equity. We are all part of the human family with one heart, the human heart, which can connect with others through trust and restorative relationships that transcend our differences.

Rerucha writes with clarity and focus and honours the indigeneity of restorative practices and her faith and belief in others. Her motivation for creating a healthy restorative environment derives from her recognition of the contributions of our ancestors and the responsibility we have to our children, our descendants, to address trauma, bias, intergenerational harms and other personal harms that, if continued unchecked, will perpetuate those burdens and harms into future generations. To accomplish this, all members of a community must be paddling in the same direction to accomplish the healing work and to build the necessary environment of trust, respect and responsibility.

We all have an obligation and a responsibility to address systemic oppression fuelled by prejudice, discrimination, racism and implicit biases, in order to help make the world a better place so we can all bring to the future a fresh and unburdened perspective. As Howard Zehr (2015), one of the founding fathers of restorative justice, explained, it is optimal to become so adept at restorative practices that we practice these skills in all our affairs.

Although the book is for everyone from beginners to experienced restorative practitioners, it is focused on educators who embrace and believe in teaching as an opportunity for healing.

Rerucha's process promises to improve respect among teachers and students, create a less stressful and more peaceful school community and classroom climate, lessen racial disparities in disciplinary action and improve academic performance. The first and most important criteria is a willingness and commitment to building a trusting restorative environment sensitive to the various cultures and contexts in any given community.

On a practical level, Rerucha's approach is accessible and explains both the 'why' and the 'how' to develop and implement a whole-school restorative strategic plan that addresses school systems, policies, resources and learning, including a mission, set of beliefs and values, as well as vision statements, guidelines and

agreements. Implementation at this level requires building internal capacity, empowering staff and students, and engaging key stakeholders.

The book never leaves you wondering how to address or accomplish those tasks and goals; rather, it offers a robust resource section with prompts, suggestions and usable examples to prepare for circles, difficult conversations and staff resistance, as well as many other tools that are helpful for preparing, creating and maintaining a restorative practices implementation.

Lest you jump to the conclusion that this is only a 'lightweight' book with just some good, heartfelt ideas, Rerucha's approach is principled and based on lived experiences as a Chicana teacher, principal, mother and successful strategic leader. Adding to the richness and substantive integrity of the book are additional chapters written by other scholars on the importance of and skills necessary for active listening and active observation (by Dr. Enjolie Lourdes LaFaurie) and on the importance of understanding the impacts of trauma (by Dr. Carolyn Gery). There are also contributions by Pedro Terrazas – a restorative practices specialist working with students, parents and teachers – on restorative practices in the classroom.

Rerucha's book also describes traditional restorative practices as a continuum of interventions and strategies that are both proactive and responsive. Included are descriptions of the key elements of circle facilitation and process (including a variety of optional approaches, guidelines and suggestions for talking pieces and physical setup), as well as conferencing. These restorative activities help students get to know one another and create meaningful connections with their classmates and teachers. Once these connections and trust are established, circles can then be used to have participants speak honestly and listen actively to respond to a variety of issues.

One of the approaches unique to this book is an emphasis on the importance of adults doing their own personal work to address their own harms, emotions and challenges before expecting their students to trust and be willing to be vulnerable. How can our youth learn in a restorative environment if all the adults in the room are not participating fully in a restorative climate? Without teachers understanding and appreciating their own issues (or, indeed, being restorative with and among themselves), the necessary empathy and understanding for their students is more difficult to access. Classroom experiences that are disruptive or difficult to manage become more manageable when teachers can see their students with greater empathy, humanity and appreciation for their unique experiences. Also emphasised is the value of active listening and active observation skills to help teachers identify and express their own emotions and help them identify and understand student behaviours and motivations.

Beyond the practical, why is this book important and how does it fit into the advancement of the restorative practices literature? Rerucha's book reflects the recent trajectory of restorative justice in education from reactive practices implemented to address disciplinary and exclusionary issues, to proactive restorative practices focused on relational experiences which help students learn the basic skills (empathy, active listening and conflict resolution) necessary to be a member of a (restorative) community.

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This approach is well aligned with Howard Zehr's (2015) idea of living restoratively in all our affairs and Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy, which describes the relationship between teachers and students as one in which the teacher learns while in dialogue with the students and the students learn while teaching. This approach allows students the opportunity to experience and identify reality and to respond to those awarenesses rather than being limited to receiving, sorting and storing information delivered by their teacher (Freire, 1970). Rerucha writes: 'A community that learns together, grows together' (92).

Shadd Maruna (2014) also identified that a facilitator, during a formal conference with a young person, which might include family members (usually parents or grandparents), community elders, trained mediators and other persons of authority, cannot exclude themselves from being part of the trust-building and healing process which requires self-awareness, active listening and active observational skills, as well as empathy, especially when they have responsibility to be part of the trust-building and healing process. According to Maruna (2014), without the facilitator manifesting these skills, it is remarkable that connection and healing can occur especially when shame is part of the equation. He argues that everyone, including adults, do their own restorative work so they can bring their best selves, unimpeded by their own biases and traumas, to the important work of conferences and circles. Likewise, John Bailie, former president of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, also emphasised that all human beings (students included) want dignity, which includes the need to be heard, to have a voice and to experience a sense of agency (Bailie, 2019).

As noted, restorative practices are in transition. Many practitioners and theorists now consider restorative justice and restorative practices as a way of life with an inherently positive value system and an acknowledgement that we are all connected, live in relationship with one another and that the impact of our actions gives rise to responsibilities. This approach is also referred to as 'transformative' restorative practices, described by several contributors in the book *Listening to the Movement* (Lewis & Stauffer, 2021). The foundational idea behind transformative restorative practices is that restorative justice is a practice and a philosophy for social justice and societal transformation by righting wrongs, addressing harm and preventing harm not only to the victim, the offender and the community but to society at large. There must be transformation of both the individual and the larger social structure. Fania E. Davis writes, 'it is not enough to *have a vision* of a justice that heals; we must *be* that vision ... [we must] transform ourselves in ways we wish to transform our world' (Davis, 2021: x). Rerucha's book thoroughly falls within the transformative approach to restorative justice and restorative practices.

The only recommendation to add to an already robust work would be to include some suggestions as to the type of data that would be helpful to collect to encourage funding, implementation and maintenance of restorative practices in the school system or any organisation. For example, what sort of qualitative and quantitative data should be gathered to further inform administrators, funders, staff, executive leadership, teachers, parents and students to illustrate success?

In conclusion, Rerucha's book is practical and applicable, and is especially relevant for educators and students. Rerucha reaches right in for that soft spot

that we all have, acknowledging our humanity and need to heal our children and to provide a more equitable world for them. After reading this book, anyone attempting or interested in restorative implementation will have a better chance at success by applying its suggestions and recommendations.

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