

Book Review: DONN SHORT. Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools. 2017

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DONN SHORT. *Am I Safe Here? LGBTQ Teens and Bullying in Schools*. Vancouver: On Point Press. (2017). 140 pp. \$22.95 (paperback). (ISBN: 9780774890212)

“**W**hat is school like for you?” was the question Donn Short, Associate Professor of Law at the University of Manitoba, asked students in various schools in the Toronto area. In response, students shared diverse accounts of their experiences, with variations depending on their gender and sexual identities. Indeed, the aim of Short’s book was to share the stories of LGBTQ teens and their allies – the teachers and school staff who support them – to better understand their day-to-day experiences in school. By sharing these stories, Short’s purpose was to shed light on how particular school environments are more conducive to the maintenance of a culture of bullying, harassment and exclusion towards LGBTQ adolescents.

In educational contexts where LGBTQ students still face numerous threats to their safety (e.g., Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012), Short’s findings are of great significance to expand our collective understanding of the experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by teens who identify as LGBTQ. Examples of school cultures and safety measures are shared with the reader to exemplify various ways that schools can work towards creating safe environments for their students. Short’s data – collected in various schools in the Toronto area – compel us to re-examine the notion of safety and reframe it in a more equitable and inclusive manner. In this book review, I re-frame Short’s recommendations within a lens of restorative justice, which can help advance social justice work in this area.

DONN SHORT’S RECOMMENDATIONS

Various avenues for improvement emerge from Short’s book, shaped by the many conversations he had with 26 students, their teachers and guidance counselors, as well as emerging findings that were drawn from his ethnographic observations (detailed field notes and photographs of students’ artwork). Short proposes the following recommendations: (1) Rethink safety in

terms of equity and inclusivity; (2) incorporate changes to the curriculum which reflect the realities of LGBTQ people and address a culture of heterosexism; and, (3) provide early-teacher training to promote equity. Overall, Short's findings help the reader adopt a more comprehensive perspective on the issues of safety, equity and inclusivity from the perspectives of LGBTQ teens.

HOW RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN EDUCATION MAY HELP ADVANCE SHORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to Short's recommendations, I wish to also draw attention to the field of restorative justice in education, which may help answer Donn Short's recommendations on how to better support LGBTQ teens in schools. Indeed, Short's main recommendation – to rethink safety in terms of equity and inclusivity – is at the heart of restorative justice practices in education, which makes this approach pertinent.

Restorative ideologies are grounded in Indigenous spiritual and healing traditions which emphasize the interconnected nature of relationships within a community (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). More than four decades ago, restorative ideologies were applied in judicial and youth justice settings (Government of Canada - Department of Justice, 2018). Later embraced by educational settings and termed restorative justice in education (RJE), these practices seek to honour and promote the well-being of all members of the school community through the adoption of a more comprehensive and holistic approach to education (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hadley, 2001; Lockhart & Zammit, 2005; Morrison, 2007; Pranis et al., 2003; Zehr, 2005). RJE advocates three main pillars as essential and core components of school communities: (1) To nurture healthy and positive relationships; (2) to create just and equitable learning environments; and (3) to productively address harm and conflict (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). To encourage us to think more deeply about the connections we can make between restorative justice in education, and how this approach might help answer the needs of LGBTQ youth as expressed in Short's book, an examination of each pillar of RJE is warranted.

Pillar One: Nurture Healthy Relationships

The first pillar of RJE is to nurture healthy relationships. To complete this goal, RJE aims to create school cultures where everyone feels honoured, worthy and respected for their authentic selves. To work towards this goal, RJE gives special attention to the importance of deep listening (Morrison, 2007). After being victimized or having experienced an incident of bullying in school, students should be listened to and have a chance to feel heard (Short, 2017) – a point that was highlighted by one of the students interviewed by Short.

Within RJE practices, teachers are expected to listen to their students and thereby can take on the important role of ‘caring adults’ at school. Having at least one caring adult at school serves as a protective factor for LGB youth, by reducing the likelihood of experiencing social-emotional and educational difficulties among victimized LGB students (Konishi & Saewyc, 2014). Unfortunately, this study did not include transgender youth. The specific role that supportive and caring adult relationships at school can play in promoting the safety and well-being of transgender youth is not as well known. However, a recent study has shown that a caring adult is perceived as someone who would intervene to stop harassment in the case of transgender youth (Day et al., 2018).

RJE uses distinct approaches to nurture healthy relationships including talking or restorative circles. Circles can be used to draw on best values within the classroom, to build a sense of community and to create a space for deep listening and being heard by others. Additionally, they have been shown to generate mutual understanding and respect, to make decisions by consensus, to cultivate mutual support and to honour and respect what everyone brings to the circle (i.e. their knowledge, talents and experiences). In other words, circles promote a safe space for everyone to share their thoughts on a particular subject, thereby creating a space where everyone is valued and affirmed for who they are. In the context of LGBTQ youth experiences, talking circles could explore in-depth curricular topics that are important to LGBTQ youth, while restorative circles could address harm (i.e. instances of homophobia, transphobia and/or bullying).

Nurturing healthy relationships can also be conceptualized as part of Brenda Morrison’s (2007) three-tiered approach to restorative justice in education. Developing caring and healthy relationships is part of the primary tier that acts preventatively with its emphasis on building student-student and student-teacher relationships through class meetings or circle processes. Additionally, nurturing healthy relationships can be achieved via the development of sound social and emotional skills (Morrison, 2007) such as empathetic listening, self-regulation, problem-solving and perspective taking. Indeed, developing such relationships entails being active and making school a place where problems do not arise in the first place, as was stressed by one student Short interviewed (Short, 2017). Furthermore, Morrison’s primary tier is grounded in a ‘whole school’ approach and constitutes a “defense” strategy so that conflict does not lead to violence (Morrison, 2007, p.107).

Pillar Two: Create Just and Equitable Learning Environments

The second pillar of RJE is to create just and equitable learning environments. RJE seeks to facilitate relationships in which everyone is treated with worth and dignity, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, socio-

economic background, language, body type, gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). To facilitate just and equitable relationships, circles processes are designed to be a space in which no person is more important than another and everyone's perspective is respected. In addition, having an inclusive curriculum that promotes justice and equity is an important aspect of this pillar. In the context of LGBTQ youth experiences, RJE would help facilitate safe spaces for LGBTQ youth. Safe spaces could be attained by explicitly focusing on injustices such as homophobic or transphobic bullying incidents in the classroom. By addressing the needs of who has been harmed and whose needs must be addressed, restorative circles aim to reinforce values of justice and equity in the classroom.

In addition, according to Meyer (2010), teaching about gender and sexual diversity and including diverse voices in the curriculum is another way to create fair learning environments for all students. By having teachers include the "hidden and marginalized experiences as well as the dominant and mainstream perspectives" (Meyer, 2010, p.6), RJE could help LGBTQ youth feel like they belong and provide them with spaces in which they feel safe. In Short's book, participants raise various points about the importance of a curriculum that reflects the lives of LGBTQ people and LGBTQ realities as well as one that encourages heterosexual students to contemplate their own privilege. As stated by Short, even the math teacher has the power to control what will be taught in their classroom; for example, they can develop math problems that are more inclusive of LGBTQ families. Having an inclusive curriculum is indeed a major aspect of the 'whole school approach' to restorative justice which is in line with Short's recommendation of incorporating changes to the curriculum starting from primary school.

Pillar Three: Repair Harm and Transform Conflict

Finally, the third pillar of RJE is to productively address harm and conflict. To work towards this goal, RJE aims to understand who was harmed, the needs and obligations of all persons affected and how they can most effectively heal through restorative circles. Moreover, to transform conflict, RJE seeks to address the immediate situation and build capacity to strengthen the relationships amongst all who are involved. In the spirit of repairing harm and transforming conflict, RJE also proposes to rethink school punitive cultures. In fact, it has been shown that there are discipline disparities between LGBTQ youth and heterosexual youth. For example, LGBTQ youth are more likely to be expelled and are more frequently suspended than their heterosexual peers (Burdge et al., 2014a; Burdge et al., 2014b; Himmelstein and Bruckner, 2011; and Snapp et al., 2015).

In addition, zero-tolerance discipline policies are increasingly recognized as ineffective and disproportionately targeting of students of color, as they facilitate the movement of youth out of school and into the juvenile justice system (i.e., the “school-to-prison pipeline”) (Carter et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2014). Furthermore, from an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007), discipline discrepancies have been found to be experienced by LGBTQ youth of color (Burdge et al., 2014b; Chmielewski et al., 2016). These findings led researchers Chmielewski et al. (2016) to state that: “[...] restorative justice programs can explore the many layers of oppression, as well as forms of wisdom, that LGBTQ youth of color embody” (p. 182). Hence, researchers have recommended restorative justice programs to reduce these discipline disparities.

In a similar vein, a teacher in Short’s book described their school as one that has a police mentality, one that focuses on “getting rid of the so-called dangerous students” (Short, 2017, p. 27). Students thought that a dialogue approach would lead to better results; they also thought that incidents of bullying should not be resolved using an authoritarian-style (Short, 2017). Some students suggested a mediation approach to address physical and verbal harassment (Short, 2017), which is very much in line with restorative circle processes. Students interviewed in Short’s book wished for policies that stress equity and not just punitive responses to incidents of bullying.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous context, it is reasonable to think that restorative justice in education may be particularly beneficial for working towards greater safety for LGBTQ teens in schools. Indeed, RJE seeks to nurture healthy relationships, create just and equitable learning environments, and repair harm and transform conflict. These three RJE pillars are particularly pertinent for working towards greater safety for LGBTQ teens in school because they would help create school cultures that are inclusive and equitable, thereby being experienced as safe and welcoming by LGBTQ teens. Nevertheless, RJE as a potential framework for working towards safety for LGBTQ teens in schools has not been investigated previously. I wish to encourage researchers in education to explore this new perspective and thus follow Donn Short’s call for a transformative approach in education that will put restorative justice practices at the forefront.

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