Classroom peace circles: Teachers' professional learning and implementation of restorative dialogue ☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' implementation of restorative practices increased engagement of quieter and English language learner students;
- Preparation (for the content and the process) of questions teachers asked made a difference;
- Elicitation of talk about social conflicts in planned curriculum content increased opportunities for peacemaking dialogue;
- Coaching and mentorship beyond professional development training needed for supporting teachers to implement restorative practices.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Teachers' professional learning about how to facilitate dialogue about conflicts is a core element of both peacemaking and democratic citizenship. Dialogue enables students to develop relationships and skills for handling conflict, proactively in classroom pedagogies and in response to disputes. Yet, such practices are challenging to fully implement and sustain in schools. Drawing on classroom observations and interviews with teachers and students, this article shows how four middle-grade public school teachers in Southern Ontario, Canada facilitated peace circles and how their students responded. The research sheds light on key principles and challenges in facilitating restorative dialogue in diverse classrooms.

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Democratic dialogue practices help create inclusive spaces for people, including those usually marginalized, in which they may voice their perspectives and be heard, thereby replacing patterns of control with proactive peacebuilding education (Macready, 2009; McCluskey et al., 2008). One such practice, the restorative peace circle, offers participants the opportunity to articulate their own concerns and attend to the concerns of others: circles have value in school classrooms, both for post-incident peacemaking and as a proactive pedagogy for citizenship, academic learning, and developing mutual understanding (Pranis, 2014). The authors'

restorative justice education work draws on principles from democratic citizenship and peacebuilding education. We, the authors, believe that circles, as they connect to dialogue, peace, and conflict resolution, are all part of what they conceive as a proactive educative process that builds classroom community, strengthens relationships, and infuses equity across the curriculum.

In classroom peace circle processes, at a basic level, students and teachers are seated in a circle facing each other and are given the opportunity to talk and listen to peers about a concern (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). Often, a talking piece is circulated. A talking piece may be anything the group chooses—a stone, a stick, a stuffed animal. It is passed from person to person, and only the person holding it may speak. It therefore provides everyone the chance to speak and to communicate and listen to each other. Peace circles may have any of three goals:

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- *responsive peacemaking*: post-incident interventions taking into account the perspectives of all stakeholders, to recognize and repair conflict or aggression;
- *proactive peace education*: teaching how to communicate and make collective decisions constructively, building students' awareness of how constructive or destructive responses to conflict impact themselves, peers, and society;
- *engaging pedagogy*: using students' perspectives on the conflicts embedded in curriculum subject matter as learning opportunities.

In peace circles, drawn from Indigenous ways of learning and being together, the process of knowing and communicating is communal. Such revitalization of circles as a cultural practice acknowledges the sociohistorical and contemporary contexts of Indigenous peoples, interrupting a settler-colonial erasure (Lee & McCarty, 2017; Nxumalo, Vintimilla, & Nelson, 2018). Peace circles can emphasize "teaching with" discussions—engaging students in subject matter through inclusive, thoughtful talk; "teaching for" discussions—how to discern and exchange viewpoints constructively (Parker & Hess, 2001); and restorative peacemaking—diverting interpersonal problems out of the punishment system toward dialogic resolution, thereby changing the language and culture of school communities so as to nurture caring relationships, learning from conflicts, and joint problem solving (Bickmore, 2013; Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Knight & Wadhwa, 2014).

In this article, we provide a nuanced understanding of how teachers implement their professional learning about circles and raise some critical concerns for how students' perspectives and identities are taken up through dialogic pedagogy. We profile what facilitating such peace circle conversations about conflicts actually looked like in four urban, middle-grade classrooms, and how diverse students responded. We offer classroom-level illustrations of key principles and strategies in implementing restorative circle dialogue, and we examine how teachers used circles, who they included, what kind of issues they raised, and how this influenced quality of students' discourse.

1. Equity in deliberation, dialogue, and peacemaking

Constructive, inclusive facilitated restorative dialogue about conflict can be transformational, because it engages hearts as well as minds (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). Morrison (2007) explains: "The power of the [restorative justice dialogue] process comes from the engine of emotional engagement of the participants, in contrast to the suppression of participants' emotions in [legalistic] determinations of guilt" (p. 85). Peace circles and related restorative dialogue practices can help to interrupt cycles of violence, replace punitive or repressive approaches to conflict, and build capacity for a sustainable, just peace (Morrison, 2007). Post-incident and proactive restorative dialogue circles may support young people in developing skills to challenge violence and social injustices, while deepening their capacities for positive conflict resolution and democracy and helping them to feel included and affirmed at school (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011; McCluskey et al., 2008).

Related democratic dialogue pedagogies, such as class meetings, seem to have similar implications (Angell, 2004). When enacting cooperative activities, positive interactions between more confident students and quieter or less dominant students could contribute to building students' relational capacities and skills for communicating on an equity-oriented basis (Aronson, 2000; Parker, 2016a). Research substantiates a robust association between constructive, inclusive student-centred dialogue in classroom

pedagogy and democratic learning outcomes relevant to peace-building—including interpretations of alternative points of view, sensitivity to discrimination and equity, and skills and inclinations to participate in democratic processes (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). While students may benefit from almost any classroom discussion, extended opportunities for deep, thoughtful deliberation have been shown to increase students' civic sense of identity and engagement as active democratic citizens (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Kahne, Crow, & Lee (2013) illustrate through large-scale evidence that open discussion of conflictual social issues promotes young people's engagement with political issues and processes.

Still, democratic deliberation necessitates a careful consideration of power. Since language is ideological, classroom discussions are enactments of power; thus, political struggles are bound to occur (Backer, 2017). Those exchanging views need to be aware of how power dynamics influence how people listen and are heard. As Sanders (1997) noted, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups such as women and people of color may be discredited when articulating their arguments. Other people's privileged positionalities allow them to be better equipped to speak and be heard: "Deliberation requires not only equality in resources and the guarantee of equal opportunity to articulate persuasive arguments but also equality in 'epistemological authority,' in the capacity to evoke acknowledgement of one's arguments" (Sanders, 1997, p. 349).

Theories of circle practice dialogue share Freire's (1970) critique of the *banking* model of education; they challenge the idea that students are empty vessels that teachers are meant to fill (Vaandering, 2010). Rather, through developing students' critical consciousness and drawing on their individual expertise and lived experiences, students are viewed as equal contributors to knowledge. Building students' capacities for conflict talk comes more naturally in a culture of care that values mutual respect (Noddings, 2012) and nurtures students' inclusion (Parker, 2016a). These kinds of dialogue processes elicit and deepen students' talk about social conflicts through critical thinking and purposeful engagement in a safe, inclusive space (Noddings and Brooks, 2017; Pace, 2019).

Even though many students find their voices in inclusive democratic discussions, silent—and silenced—students also exist in all classroom spaces (Parker, 2020). To facilitate balanced democratic dialogue, silent voices need to be included and acknowledged. Silence carries hidden meanings that can be made explicit when teachers integrate dialogic pedagogies, supporting students' diverse positions and locations (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011; Wortham, 2010). Students' silence can indicate their exclusion, or at other times, perhaps, agreement with their peers and/or the teacher (Schultz, 2010). Pedagogies such as circles that honour silence can open up space to question or respond in silence.

2. Teacher enactment: barriers and supports to restorative dialogue

While promising, adequate implementation of dialogic pedagogies, whether focused on peacemaking or on citizenship education, is not common in public schools (Bickmore, 2012; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Reimer, 2011, 2018b). It's not easy: the traditional expectations of teachers, that they be "disciplinarians and curriculum deliverers," can pose barriers for implementing restorative justice processes (Russell & Crocker, 2016, p. 208). School institutions often emphasize control and reinforce social inequalities, through the explicit curriculum and the hidden curriculum of routine actions and assumptions (Apple, 2004). Peacebuilding or restorative justice are by no means immune: while some initiatives, in practice, facilitate relatively just relations

and constructive social engagement, others may reinforce racialized hierarchies and fail to nurture socially transformative learning (Lopes-Cardozo, Higgins, & Le Mat, 2015; Lustick, 2017; Utheim, 2014). Defensive teaching for classroom control (McNeil, 2013) perpetuates colonial pedagogy and limits opportunities for dialogue (Abdi, 2012; Williams, 2013).

Students bring many diversities to any classroom. We work with student diversity as a means of acknowledging the many identities and factors that shape positionality and perspectives. When students are in a minority or marginalized position in relation to one or more risk factors—e.g., socioeconomic status, race, language, gender, sexual identity, immigration status, developmental characteristics, and environmental and psychological factors—this may influence how they choose to participate in a restorative process, and how their teacher might facilitate it (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015).

Peace circles are a unique strategy, with which teachers can facilitate equitable student communication and alternative forms of engagement with social conflict. What's needed is research on *how* teachers can actually implement such pedagogies with diverse students, attending to equity while coping with institutional pressures to force-feed curriculum and blame within a culture of continuous school reform initiatives (Cuban, 1998; McLaughlin, 1987).

Many teachers sidestep conflict management, whether in proactive education or responsive peacemaking. They retreat instead into control-based peacekeeping—referring student discipline to administrators, or avoiding sensitive issues in their implemented curriculum (Parker & Bickmore, 2012). This process is further exacerbated when some of their students are marginalized (Schiff, 2018). Such conflict-avoidant or punitive approaches further oppress students and limit their opportunities for social and emotional learning (Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Alternative peacemaking and peacebuilding responses to conflict may be used in isolated pockets, such as single classrooms or curriculum activities, instead as part of systemic, school-wide, proactive and post-incident restorative practices (Bickmore, 2011; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Normalized destructive or avoidant approaches to conflict impedes peacebuilding transformation of communities (Bishop, Picard, Ramkay, & Sargent, 2015).

Teachers' enactment of dialogic and restorative practices is constrained by factors such as professional development (PD) opportunities, curriculum mandates, school staffing timetables, and discipline policies (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Russell & Crocker, 2016; Vaandering, 2014). Yet, schools are sites for struggles toward social transformation to build just peace (Lopes-Cardozo et al., 2015). Winn (2018) has argued that a systemic and philosophical paradigm shift in schools is required, to address inequity and build relationships through restorative justice education. Peace circles are one such tool that can support a restorative shift, providing unique opportunities for students to learn how to communicate, and to engage in alternative ways with social conflict and social hierarchy (Parker, 2016b). This study adds to the existing limited research on how teachers implement restorative and dialogue pedagogies with diverse students.

3. Method and participants: classroom teacher case studies

This study's practice-based qualitative research was designed to illustrate how interested public-school teachers of middle grades would interpret and implement restorative peace circle practices in their classrooms for teaching about and responding to conflicts relevant to their diverse students' experience. The goal was to illuminate key challenges and principles.

Through interviews with students and teachers, and observations of in-service teacher trainings and classroom practices, we explored how these teachers in diverse inner-city classrooms learned to implement classroom dialogue practice. As the catalyst for our research, we observed two workshops for teachers that focused on restorative principles and practices, including peace circles. Four workshop participants, from four different schools, volunteered to be interviewed and observed, as an opportunity to receive coaching with an experienced facilitator (the first author) as they implemented peace circles in their classrooms based on what they had learned in the workshops. Four classroom-based qualitative case studies resulted, which are compared and contrasted here, to explore how each teacher learned, facilitated, and thought about restorative principles and peacemaking-related dialogue strategies, and how diverse students responded. We received IRB permission from the university and school board to conduct this study, in addition to obtaining consent from administrators, teachers, parents/guardians, and students.

This study was based on a two-dimensional, generally prescriptive training program that was selected and required by the participants' school administration, and a generally elicitive and collaborative series of classroom collaborations with the first author. In addition to research interviews and classroom observations, the teachers received mentoring and coaching to facilitate their implementation of restorative dialogue—especially peacemaking circles—in ways that made sense to them, building on their own capacities and relationships with their students. While we as researchers did not set out, as part of our research process, to participate in furthering teachers' professional development, as participant observers in each of the classrooms we found that our perspectives and contributions during circle dialogues influenced teachers' learning. Furthermore, the teachers who volunteered to participate in the research described feeling more confident about implementing circles, knowing that they had what they felt was a partner in learning about the process. In this way, methodologically speaking, this research adopted a restorative approach: it allowed for opportunities to collectively build knowledge about the circle process.

First, we participated in 35 classroom observations of the teachers implementing circles (see Table 1) and conducted short interviews with them linked to that practice. Some teachers were observed more than others, due both to scheduling and to their commitment to consistently implementing circles. Still, we observed each teacher as they facilitated circles multiple times throughout the school year, and as described above included ourselves in the circles as participant observers. We wrote ethnographic field notes for each observation, in addition to a reflective journal entry for each field visit; these shaped our detailed descriptions and reproductions of dialogue (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Next, we participated in 10 talking circles with twenty-seven students across the four classes, with two or three students in each circle. We also met in one talking circle with the four teachers, to reflect on what they had experienced. The goal was to investigate how the selected teachers and students addressed, discussed, and experienced conflict in peace circles.

As part of the data analysis process, we conducted a preliminary analysis of our observation and interview transcripts, reflecting on our research questions, and continually compared themes found in the literature to those generated in the preliminary analysis. We developed coding guidelines generated from our analysis of emergent themes, ongoing observations, and research literature and coded each observation and interview transcript line by line (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000), we compared and contrasted the similarities and

Table 1
Cases and classroom observations summary.

Teachers (pseudonyms)	Grade	Units observed	Observations
Ms. Spence	6–8 (Special Needs)	Language Arts; Social Skills	4 x 50 min
Ms. Harding	8	History; Language Arts; Drama	18 x 50–120 min
Ms. Weaver	7/8	Language Arts; Visual Arts; Drama; Health	10 x 50–120 min
Ms. Rossi	8	Language Arts; Science	4 x 30–50 min

differences among the many diverse students represented in the classes, and their respective teachers' pedagogies, as we continued to refine our codes. We generated themes, noting particular dialogic patterns and strategies that teachers implemented.

3.1. School and classroom context

We recruited a purposive sample of self-nominated teachers from four different schools where restorative peacemaking circle pedagogy initiatives were occurring, each with diverse student populations and some community violence. The principals of each school had identified one or two Grade 7/8 teachers from each school to participate in the training, for a total of 33 teachers. We used purposive sampling to identify four case study teachers. These four teachers volunteered to participate in this collaborative classroom-based study because they wanted to further develop restorative practices already in use in their classrooms. The participants took part in two PD workshops on restorative principles that emphasized how and why to facilitate peacemaking circle dialogue practices. Subsequently, the intention was for the teachers to share the tools and techniques with additional colleagues in their schools.

The four schools were in a similar area of a large urban city in southern Ontario, where violence in the community—including bullying, gang violence, and shootings in public areas—were ongoing issues. While some areas surrounding these schools were experiencing gentrification, most of the families in these school communities were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The students' ethnic origins were diverse; their backgrounds represented South Asian, East Asian, Middle Eastern or Black identities. Some were born in Canada, while others were recent immigrants or refugees from places such as Romania, Russia, India, Pakistan, China, Vietnam. Thus, the students in our sampling came from various socioeconomic backgrounds, migration histories, and experiences of inclusion and marginalization. In our intentions and efforts to pay attention to how students' identities influenced their engagement and choices to participate, we include, where possible, students' gender, race, and ethnicity in our analysis. While students' gender or racial identity didn't appear to always explicitly shape their engagement in circles, we note the importance of paying attention to marginalized groups so that we could illustrate the varying ways students experienced circles.

The cases had similarities and differences. All four teachers were White women who taught mostly students of color—intermediate students from various socioeconomic and ethnocultural backgrounds. All four had participated in the same two professional workshops—one on restorative justice principles and one on classroom peace circles as a restorative pedagogy. The degree to which they implemented peace circles (weekly or sporadically), as well as the particular processes and strategies they used, varied significantly among the four teachers. The conflict topics they broached in circles also varied, from post-incident peacemaking to reflections on curriculum content, to peacebuilding discussions about social aggression. Participants ranged from novices to 20-year veterans. One had some experience with peace circles prior to the professional workshops.

Administrator support—for example, when the principal actively creates a learning environment, contributes to delivering the content, and is an advocate—has been known to influence teachers' implementation of their professional training (Bredeson, 2000). In this study, the varying levels of administrator support were discerned based on perspectives shared during interviews with each administrator and teacher. The administrators took various steps to offer support, such as co-facilitating circles with teachers, sharing resources and suggestions with staff, and using circles in their own practice, including in staff meetings and with students. Two teachers had strong administrative support for restorative circle implementation and two did not; this was not correlated with teacher implementation levels (see Table 2).

4. Findings

The case studies illustrate four broad principles representing dimensions of restorative circle dialogue implementation. We identified these principles across the classrooms and provide the most salient examples that offer illustrations of how teachers and students exhibited these principles. Still, based on the teachers' institutional constraints and their subsequent willingness to implement circles, some classrooms exhibited one principle more than another.

The four principles are presented here.

1. *How*: Nonviolence and mutual respect in student interactions. We show how preparation (for the content and the process), the talking piece tool, and the questions teachers asked made a difference.
2. *Who*: Inclusion of diverse students in peer talk. We consider how formerly quiet and English-language learner students began to verbally engage.
3. *About what*: Elicitation of talk about social conflicts. Only one teacher included peacemaking dialogue about an emergent dispute; others planned curriculum content around students' human relations or issues in literature.
4. *Quality of student talk*: We explored what invited peer responsiveness to contrasting viewpoints, and depth of critical reflection.

4.1. Nonviolence and mutual respect in student interactions

It is not easy, in the competitive environment of a school, to facilitate cooperative, communicative mutual engagement among students in contexts of conflict. How teachers prepared their students for the circle dialogue process, and for the topics students would address together, were critically important in influencing whether principles of nonviolence, inclusion, thoughtful engagement, and mutual respect were practised by the students (Freire, 1970; Noddings, 2012). Some participating teachers began by teaching the peace circles process and building community relationships by asking simple sharing questions, before proceeding to sensitive topics. In contrast, circles conducted without adequate preparation had unintended outcomes.

Table 2
Varying approaches to circle implementation.

Name	Teaching experience	Circle experience	Administrative support	Circle frequency
Ms. Spence	2 years	Novice	Strong support	Low
Ms. Harding	20 years	Novice	Unsupportive	High
Ms. Weaver	10 years	Novice	Strong support	Medium
Ms. Rossi	4 years	Some	Minimal support	High

Ms. Spence's special-needs class, where all students had a diagnosis of autism, provided unique insight into the value of preparation and circulating a talking piece to symbolize and facilitate attentive listening and sharing the floor. Some of these students could not help speaking or making verbal sounds during the circle. Teaching aides joined the circles to scaffold student participation: for instance, to take students who needed a break to another room, or give them noise-cancelling headphones or an object to hold, which according to Ms. Spence allowed her to continue facilitating "without as many interruptions."

Ms. Spence taught two key guidelines for restorative circle dialogue: passing a talking piece to encourage every student to choose whether to speak or not, and insisting upon listening (silence and attention) and nonjudgmental responses to peer contributions. As the implementation process began, Ms. Spence expressed in an interview some skepticism about her students' capacity to engage in peer dialogue circles: "I don't know if my kids could handle it." When preparing for circles, she consistently planned for her autistic students' emotions and unpredictable behaviour: "Some of my students have a lot of anxiety, and a lot of impulsivity, so these circles can be challenging for them. . . . They don't do well when there's a difference of opinion." Ms. Spence struggled with positioning herself at the centre of the implementation process (Reimer, 2018a). Many restorative teachers experience a similar tension: they intend to hold a welcoming space for all students, but some students' actions or needs make that challenging. They may display potentially disruptive behaviour, which conflicts with the restorative circle's ideal student as complacent and non-disruptive. Circles are meant to be able to safely hold arguments and disagreements, allowing for constructive deliberation. However, disagreeing people are disruptive (Sanders, 1997). Ms. Spence's experience illustrates that the ideals of the restorative circle process require students to maintain a normative status quo for dialogue to occur.

In her second circle, Ms. Spence introduced the talking piece as a symbol of sharing the floor and listening respectfully to peers when they held the talking piece. Despite these students' inexperience with circles or other peer dialogue, Ms. Spence chose the topic of bullying—with which all of her students had direct personal experience. She prompted students: "Share a time you were bullied. And again, we're not going to be using names: you could just say what happened and share how this made you feel."

Ms. Spence began by passing the talking piece sequentially around the circle, as taught in the professional workshop—a strategy to increase inclusivity and reflectivity in conversations. Soon, though, she invited students to pass the talking piece, out of sequence, to whoever wanted to speak, thereby shifting to a typical pedagogy dominated by a few volunteer speakers, leaving little time for thoughtfulness or quieter voices. Two of the (White, male) students consistently asked for the talking piece, or spoke aloud when not holding the talking piece, to share their experiences and perspectives on bullying, while peers remained relatively silent.

For instance, a (White) male student indicated that he would like the talking piece by reaching his hand out; Ms. Spence passed it to him across the circle:

Paul: So, there used to be a lot of bullies at my school, mostly just toward me, but they have the strangest ways of insulting. Whenever I would try to sit down, one person actually tried to pull out the bus seat from under me.
Alicia: (*a mostly nonverbal, South Asian, female student, wearing headphones, without the talking piece*) Bullying!
Derek: (*interrupting*) I would be so amused at that. (*other students laugh*)
Ms. Spence: Thank you for sharing, Paul. Do you want to pass it on to someone else who might want to share? (*he passes it to Mark*)
Mark: Whenever I see bullying in real life or in fiction or nonfiction, I just get this bubbling rage inside of me, just this urge to do something about it, and I usually try to, but usually my actions have no effect. I've tried over and over again. I've witnessed a lot of bullying these days, and I've been trying to stop it, but I've tried everything I could think of and none of them work. (*Paul reaches to reclaim the talking piece*)
Derek: (*interrupting*) Two things you need to make sure of, if it gets physical: one, make sure you're a bit bigger than them, and two, make sure you know how to take them down. This is (*raises voice*) only when it resorts to violence! Just saying! (*peers laugh*)

Ms. Spence did not respond directly to Derek's (or Alicia's) outbursts, continuing to model listening by giving her attention to whoever held the talking piece (thus, to the more confident students who were playing by the rules).

One of the three teaching aides in the circle asked for the talking piece and told the students that it was important to tell an adult about bullying experiences (in a teacherly voice—coaching students, rather than answering the dialogue question from her own experience). Ms. Spence expressed agreement. This triggered Derek to continue to speak. Ms. Spence asked him if he wanted the talking piece, and passed it across to him. He passionately spoke to the issue:

Derek: Um, comment on what you said: no. But I've tried that like so many times, and I'm going to say it right now, that it does not work. Like, in [a school], the principal would be like, OK, we'll do something about it. And the guy got called in… and I'm the one who ended up with the suspension. Like it's me, always. And (*raising voice*) I even came in with a black eye once! And they still blamed me.
Paul: (*calling out*) You started the fiiiiggghttt!!!
Ms. Spence: (*closing the dialogue*) OK, guys, you did a good job, a little bit of silliness, but overall a good job.
Mark: (*calling out*) It just gets depressing over time!
Ms. Spence: OK, and I get that it's not an easy topic to talk about, because I think that no matter who you are, you've probably seen bullying, or been a victim, or an aggressor, or a bystander, and so we all understand what bullying is, so it is a sensitive topic for sure.

Overall, in this circle, three of the male students spoke consistently, often speaking over and laughing at each other. Alicia's verbal participation, and her peers' silence, were ignored. Thus, the

conversation seemed to reinforce the hierarchy among students, rather than shedding light on the consequences of bullying ("how this made you feel"). On the other hand, the social aggression topic generated interest. Apparently, the students had not been adequately prepared, either for the sensitive topic or for the circle dialogue process (Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

While sitting in a circle and passing a talking piece may have helped some students who had limited capacities for self-control in participating verbally and listening, its use (and non-use) in this instance mirrored existing relations of dominance: the patterns of who spoke and how, apparently were not changed by the circle process as implemented.

However, over time, as Ms. Spence gained courage and the capacity to facilitate peace circles as designed, the students demonstrated that they were clearly capable of participating in these speaking and listening activities, with the scaffolding support offered by the presence of the teaching aides as well as by the circulation of the talking piece. Toward the end of the school year, Ms. Spence facilitated a circle on accepting diverse sexual identities. Building on the students' several months of experience in circles, in addition to prior lesson activities in this classroom about diverse sexual identities, one quieter male student disclosed to the class that he identified as gay. In an interview after this circle, Ms. Spence said she felt that this boy likely became comfortable enough to disclose his sexual identity to his peers because of the series of circle processes. Overall, with practice, both Ms. Spence and her students felt increasingly prepared to engage in dialogue regarding sensitive topics in circles.

Another teacher, Ms. Harding, a veteran teacher, reflected on the challenges of implementing restorative practices. In an interview, Ms. Harding said she had found it difficult to reframe the language she used with students during conversations with them after incidents of aggression. In keeping with restorative justice principles, she was attempting to replace blaming-and-shaming "why" questions with restorative (what-happened-and-how-it-felt) questions, to invite each young person to voice their own concerns and to imagine empathetically those of others. Ms. Harding often sent students to the office and limited classroom talk. Yet she continually expressed interest in learning and practising more restorative and dialogic approaches in her classroom. In the teacher group interview, she said:

I think with [the researcher's] support I really found the confidence to try it out. . . . The kids talked about how they felt listened to and enjoyed using the talking piece and that was helpful for me, but some days I feel like I really can't do this.

Through continued practice, she came to recognize, like Ms. Spence, that mutually respectful interactions among students would be shaped in large part by her own interactions with them.

4.2. Inclusion of diverse students in peer talk

A related challenge was to create sufficient scaffolding support so that marginalized students, who might be quieter or less engaged because of the dominant social structures in schooling, were included in learning activities and the peer community. Ms. Harding had many special-needs students, identified as having behavioural issues, in her regular Grade 8 class. Similar to students in Ms. Spence's class, they had engaged in ongoing interpersonal conflict throughout the school year, including physical fights. This class also had many English-language learner (ELL) newcomers. When Ms. Harding began to introduce the circle process and struggled to get them to participate, these students mostly remained quiet—passing the talking piece without taking a turn to

speak, or mumbling quiet responses. Even with the implementation of dialogic tools, such as the circle, silences and marginalized voices were still present. Ms. Weaver reflected in a teacher group interview on the differences between students' participation in a whole-class discussion and a circle:

[The circles] made me realize how many kids in the class that I never hear speak. [Outside of circles] there's five kids that are always dominating the discussions and you try to get that wait time and air time with the other kids, but it's not always possible, and even though it's a lot of kids in the circle, with 31, some of the kids really benefit from being about to think for that long, and then they have something to say, rather than having to answer right on the spot.

Thus, any restorative process necessitates careful consideration of historical oppressions and marginalization of certain cultural groups, values, and beliefs (Llewellyn & Parker, 2018). When societal structures perpetuate a culture of silence, marginalized and oppressed people are further silenced, constraining possibilities for relational and dialogic connection (Freire, 1970).

Preparing students for dialogue includes paying attention to both content and pedagogy, including developing students' skills for interacting and debriefing the issues (see Bickmore & Parker, 2014). For Ms. Harding, a key aspect of her preparation for each peace circle was to invite students to engage in pre-circle writing—which seemed to increase their confidence and willingness to participate. In addition, Ms. Harding's circulation of a talking piece gave each student at least one turn to speak per circle, which encouraged many to contribute to classroom dialogue. Apparently as a result, many of the ELL students in this class overcame initial apprehension and saw an increase in their capability and willingness to communicate fluently in English and in their inclusion in the class community.

In a post-observation reflection circle, a high-performing student in Ms. Harding's class shared similar appreciation for the communication and inclusion implications of peace circles:

Abdi: (*Black, African descent*) [Circles] build our social skills and our oral communication. Everyone learns new things about each other and how we think and about how others think. And it's an important skill to know how to collaborate with everyone in the classroom… because in life you're going to be working with people you don't know, so it is important to know how to speak and how to be social with people you don't know.

Another male student (East Asian descent) explained: "The talking piece enables someone to state their opinion without being interrupted. That specific person: it's like their time to shine, and gives them a chance to be in the group."

The other Grade 8 teacher in this study, Ms. Rossi, had more previous training in circle facilitation than the other three teachers. She taught circle dialogue norms and circulated a talking piece, although she did not use pre-circle writing prompts. She indicated in an interview that she felt the circle process was really beneficial for her very transient class population, including several refugee students. For instance, one of her newcomer students, who was learning English, spoke for the first time in front of his peers when they were in circle. After he spoke, all of his student peers spontaneously clapped to acknowledge him.

Another class, Ms. Weaver's Grade 7/8, had about equal numbers of female and male students, but in the typical (non-circle) pedagogies she used, in which students raise their hands to volunteer, the male students typically spoke up more than the female students. During several post-observation small-group interviews,

students in this class confirmed their awareness of gender participation inequalities. Boys said that they had "more confidence" and "like to talk a lot" and that girls "feel shy and they feel like they're going to get judged if they put their hand up." Another boy elaborated that girls "have more to lose if they mess up. . . . People will judge them." When asked what could be done to address this dynamic in their classroom, the boys enthusiastically responded that circles (compared to typically structured class discussions) provided greater opportunities for their peers to engage; similarly, female students said that, even though they might not participate as much, circles allowed them to "share thoughts" and "talk to people they don't usually talk to."

In Ms. Rossi and Ms. Harding's classrooms and to some degree in Ms. Weaver's, the opportunity to speak in well-facilitated circle dialogues seemed to lead, over time, to more students participating orally, while also nurturing healthy peer relationships. Ms. Rossi's circle implementation, in particular, illustrated how well-prepared and well-facilitated circles evidently invited quieter and ELL students to participate more orally, with implications for learning as well as class community. Overall, the change over time in peer participation in these teachers' classrooms suggests how language learners, low-status students, and quieter girls may benefit, socially and academically, from well-prepared and facilitated peace circle processes. In this way, close attention to consistent integration of circles while building strong student relationships through caring, collaborative, and nonviolence processes invited greater academic and social engagement (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Noddings & Brooks, 2017).

However, while the students from Ms. Rossi's class who volunteered to be interviewed indicated their "love" for peace circles, simultaneously a number of students in this class appeared to dislike the circle process. Those students typically passed the talking piece without contributing; some slouched in their chairs, and others whispered to their peers. Ms. Rossi often quickly addressed these issues, calling out to these students to remain on task—to listen attentively, and to vocalize their perspectives. While most students responded to such interventions by practising what appeared to be attentive listening, most of those already disengaged did not verbally participate in the content of the circle dialogues. In a post-observation talking circle, one quieter (White) boy explained: "Some people… don't want to share anything. So, they'll just pass." Clearly, even in circle processes that appeared to be relatively respectful and thoughtful, some students chose to not engage in self-disclosure or dialogue with peers. In keeping with Utheim's (2014) challenge to the assumed cultural responsiveness and equity of restorative practices in schools, this pattern of only partial inclusion raises questions for further study.

4.3. Eliciting talk about (which) social conflicts

Across all cases, we found that when teachers engaged students in circle conversations about conflictual topics—whether as post-incident peacemaking, as planned dialogue about difficult issues in their community, or in curriculum content—this invited meaningful dialogue, often including typically disengaged students.

Ms. Harding encouraged her students to talk in circle about current events on a weekly basis, often inviting them to select issues they identified as important. One male student, recently arrived from Syria, was often absent or late, and even when present, he often sat in the back corner, outside the circle—at times answering his cell phone in class—even though Ms. Harding made many efforts to include him. One day, as students talked in a peace circle about what they had heard in the news about ISIS and chemical weapons, this boy joined the circle, feeling compelled to share that he had witnessed firsthand how people were affected by

chemical weapons. This prompted other students to chime in with their perspectives about whether this crisis would lead to WW III.

Ms. Harding commended all of the students for their engagement, reflecting aloud that she had never imagined having a conversation with students about WW III: "I didn't plan for that; it turned out to be quite deep." In this instance, we see how both the teacher and the students took a risk to address difficult conflicts including violence. The compelling topic, as well as the restorative peace circle format, invited and scaffolded them to dive deeper into dialogue—sharing aspects of their identities, asking questions, responding to and challenging peers' perspectives. Since the circle process invites the use of a talking piece, as Ms. Harding consistently implemented, it allowed for a democratic facilitation of dialogue. When discussions are based on student-directed questions (e.g., will there be WW III?) then teachers move toward a facilitative role and away from their typically central role as questioners—which has been known to improve the depth of students' discourse (Jewell & Pratt, 1999).

Also emphasizing language arts and social studies goals, Ms. Weaver planned circles focused on conflictual (human rights) content in literature. Her students read Iqbal (D'Adamo & Leonori, 2004) based on a true story about child labour in Pakistan. Ms. Weaver brought the students into circle to reflect on critical incidents within the novel and encouraged students to empathize by identifying personal connections to the experiences of the children they read about, such as what it would be like to work in inhumane conditions. Thus, Ms. Weaver invited students' expression of divergent social conflict experiences, to stimulate dialogue and facilitate inclusivity. For instance, in response to Ms. Weaver's question of how it would feel to be separated from their parents and family, one girl shared her experience of living with her father and being separated from her mother. Ms. Weaver and another female student responded to this student empathetically, sharing their own personal experience of single-parent families, prompting further dialogue about different types of non-nuclear families represented within the class. One male student said that he had two moms.

In an interview later, Ms. Weaver (an experienced teacher but a novice circle facilitator) reflected that this circle had elicited student sharing and mutual engagement that had not previously arisen in her class:

> Ms. Weaver: I learned so much about them during this circle. They were sharing a lot. Some really deep stuff about their families—I didn't even know about a lot of it.

This vignette and Ms. Weaver's insights illustrate how students find conflictual content meaningful with adequate circle process preparation. Open descriptive questions—inviting students to share experiences they consider relevant—was seen as eliciting thoughtful depth in classroom dialogue. Thus, the power of student agency over the content deepened students' engagement and comfort participating in conflictual dialogue.

Unique in this sample of four cases, Ms. Rossi facilitated peace circles to discuss students' interpersonal conflicts after incidents arose, in addition to pre-planned topics. Ms. Rossi's consistent implementation of circles on pre-planned topics in her classroom pedagogy apparently prepared her students for coming together constructively in circles to address actual disputes among themselves. For instance, students had approached Ms. Rossi after a field trip incident, saying "We need to have a circle." This was done. In a talking circle later, they said that the regular practice with dialogue circles had increased their empathy in peer relationships, particularly in response to some bullying in their own class. After the incident, two female students reflected in a small group interview:

Jimena (Latina, US born): We were sort of dealing with like some bullying incidents, so with the circle we used it to practice being nice to everybody. And once we started talking about bullying then everybody could relate to it.

Svetlana (White, Russian heritage): I, like, feel empathy for [male student who was bullied] because I know it's hard for him and everyone wants to fit in. And the circle helped a lot,… because it just makes me feel like I have a closer bond with everyone, and I like to hear what others think about… how we could all improve.

In sum, teachers' choices to address conflictual content embedded in the curriculum, and use open-ended questions to elicit links to students' experience, served as opportunities to build the students' capability to express and respond constructively to peers' contrasting perspectives. In nearly a year of implementation after the professional workshop, only one of four participating teachers chose to use peace circles for post-incident peacemaking, although others addressed broader relational patterns among their students such as bias and bullying.

4.4. Quality of student talk: opportunities for thoughtful reflection

In the cases where teachers adequately prepared students for circles (including preparatory activities and pre-written responses), implemented them fairly frequently, and also insisted that students follow the circle process guidelines such as listening attentively and speaking respectfully, the quality of students' individual and collective participation increased over time. In these cases, more students engaged, and did so in a thoughtful and articulate manner—such as by using full sentences, articulating their ideas thoughtfully with supporting evidence, and demonstrating openness to each other's viewpoints, which included willingness to engage constructively in conflict (DeNicolo & Franquiz, 2006; Maloch, 2002). While circles are often used to respond to interpersonal disputes or for building classroom community, they could also be used to cover academic content and goals (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). By generating interpersonal dialogue connected to the curricula, students have greater opportunities to deepen their learning as they discern multiple and contrasting perspectives (Bickmore & Parker, 2014).

As in Ms. Spence's class, described above, circles in Ms. Harding's class at times provided a platform for aggressive students to target others, while at other times, they opened up space to name and challenge destructive behaviour. Ms. Spence was the least experienced teacher among the participants, and Ms. Harding the most; peace circle dialogue pedagogies were new to both of them. Each had to learn how to invite high-quality student verbal exchange about the conflictual issues that held meaning in their lives, in contrast to the aggressive or thoughtless conflict talk reinforced by popular culture.

Ms. Harding sometimes pulled a discussion prompt for a peace circle from a deck of cards. One day, many groaned and shook their heads "No" at the sight of the cards. The prompt was, "Talk about something interesting that you've found." Despite that initial resistance, students went in turn around the circle and answered the question. One Black male happily pulled a 1,000-peso bill out of his pocket, excited by the seemingly large currency. A White boy sitting beside him laughed, telling him it was worth next to nothing. Ms. Harding interrupted the circle to tell the boy not to laugh; she acknowledged that individual pesos were worth much less than Canadian dollars, but said that the peso was still a cool thing.

Other students' interest was sparked, and perhaps the teacher's intervention to insist upon respectful behaviour also curbed some

reluctance to openly share things they had found in the park, such as bullet shells and bags of blood. When one South Asian boy said he had found bullet shells from a police gun, Ms. Harding asked him how he knew it was from the police. He responded, "I just know stuff about guns." Perhaps to model thoughtful consideration of evidence, she pressed him on how he knew it was a police gun. Omar, the Syrian student—who Ms. Harding privately suspected was associated with a local gang—interrupted: "Wait, wait, wait." After a long pause, he asked the South Asian boy, "Have you ever shot a gun?" At this point, Ms. Harding stopped this line of dialogue, firmly asking the students to move on to another topic. Unlike in the WW III dialogue described above, Ms. Harding did not encourage her students to discuss this sensitive and contentious topic, and allowed little room for peer-to-peer dialogue. As the circle continued after that redirection, many students passed, and the few who spoke mentioned generic things like money or lost toys.

Ms. Harding's administrator's resistance to her integration of classroom dialogue circles may have contributed to her reluctance to delve into the conflictual experiences raised by these few students. This administrator frequently walked the school hallways, and had explicitly instructed Ms. Harding to not use circles to discuss students' personal issues and conflicts. This presumably constrained her willingness to explore sensitive student experiences in depth, such as their experiences of violence in their communities. Where else could they have had such opportunities for constructive talk about destructive issues? This is another area for further inquiry: educators may disagree about whether and when such topics and disclosures are worth the risk, and how to facilitate thoughtful interaction around truly difficult topics.

Over the course of the year, as Ms. Weaver learned how to facilitate (and her students to participate in) restorative dialogue circles, she increasingly integrated the kind of restorative language taught in the professional workshop (mentioned above), inviting her students to critically reflect on their experiences, feelings and behaviour in conflictual situations.

Toward the end of the school year, after the class had experienced eight months of classroom circles, Ms. Weaver facilitated a series of lessons on the topic of diverse sexual identities and homophobic bias, which prepared her students for sharing respectfully about this potentially sensitive content in circles. The depth of content knowledge her students had developed seemed to drive the quality of dialogue in Ms. Weaver's circles.

One day late in this unit, Ms. Weaver invited her students to respond to a play they had seen, and specifically to share what they would do if a friend of theirs told them they were gay. While a few students in this circle remained silent, most chose to speak, homogeneously echoing their peers' and teacher's sentiments that they would support gay friends. While most of the students may have been speaking sincerely, this circle illustrates how the way a conflictual question is framed for dialogue could thwart expression of divergent perspectives. When teachers present conflicts as settled (having one correct answer), groupthink can reduce the potential for thoughtful consideration of divergent perspectives (McAvoy & Hess, 2013). In comparison, in the circle dialogue about child labour in Iqbal, described above, Ms. Weaver elicited students' comparisons to their own diverse experiences, rather than asking them simply to accept or reject her own human rights stance. Ms. Weaver's questions provoked student reflection to untangle how power dynamics continue to shape how arguments are spoken and heard (Sanders, 1997).

As three of the teachers in this study happened independently to engage their students in the sensitive topic of diverse sexual identities, it is useful to compare. As described above, Ms. Spence opened this topic before her students had much experience with

sitting together in circle (or prior education on the issues). Ms. Weaver (and Ms. Rossi, not described here) opted to engage this topic after preparation, including a series of prior experiences with participating in peace circles, which created space for relatively high-quality conversations that provided diverse students with opportunities to respectfully listen, reflect, and contribute thoughtfully to the dialogue. Thus, high-quality dialogue is learned. Classes can develop individual and collective capacities to thoughtfully examine difficult conflicts together.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The four cases discussed above illustrate the various ways that teachers interpreted, prioritized, and implemented some aspects of restorative peace circle dialogues with diverse students in their classrooms. Even in these classrooms, where the teachers expressed interest in facilitating conflictual dialogue through circles, many still felt constrained and unsure of how to engage in conflict head-on. These case studies provide glimpses of the kinds of conversations about equity, justice, and social issues that can and do take place in diverse, non-privileged classrooms. Still, the practices that some teachers chose to enact appeared to reinforce dominant and prescribed ways of interacting, such as expectations for listening and speaking in ways that might have conflicted with students' needs and ways of being.

Furthermore, while many of the students were of color, the teachers were all White females, which further complicates how these teachers may have enacted norms for participation, particularly if they themselves were not actively conscious and aware of how racial and gender dynamics influenced their pedagogical choices. While we illustrated examples of how students engaged in thoughtful dialogue, we also acknowledge that our perceptions as researchers of what counted as norms for respectful interaction were rooted in our understanding of restorative and democratic education (Freire, 1970; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Even in so-called democratic, peaceful processes, some voices still remained marginal. Some of this marginality is challenging to overcome when operating within the confines of structural institutions of control and power, such as schools (Llewellyn & Parker, 2018; Apple, 2004).

The teachers' understandings of what it meant to implement restorative peace circles centred on building classroom community and communicative fluency through participating in dialogue. Even after circles were implemented and reflective conversations were held with the first author over most of a school year, we found that these teachers mostly felt unprepared to facilitate post-incident peacemaking and problem solving using the restorative circle processes. However, they did feel confident enough to use the pedagogy for other things. Beyond community building, they focused on using circles for proactive conflict management, for discussions of social issues and current events, and for reflecting on curriculum content. All four teachers taught skills for active listening, empathy, perspective-taking (self-expression), and self-awareness, using peace circles. All four also used circulation of a talking piece and open questions eliciting their sharing experience to foster inclusion of diverse students in these learning opportunities.

Teachers' proactive, planned attention to conflicts as learning opportunities seemed to prepare young people with skills, understandings, and relationships to address conflict when it occurred. Some teachers described increased participation levels among their previously quiet students, and some believed that their students had improved their capacities to engage and reflect on conflictual social issues, near and far. Most of the students interviewed said they enjoyed participating in peace circles,

including the opportunity to practice their communication skills. Still, interpersonal conflicts among students prevailed, and usually neither teachers nor students attempted to address these conflicts through restorative dialogue.

The four case studies illustrate how important it is for teachers to provide consistent opportunities for students to have inclusive, listening-rich conversations about conflict. Yet, they also show how implementing student-centred dialogical pedagogical processes is challenging for teachers. Constraints include expectations regarding core curriculum coverage and administrator approaches to conflict and discipline.

These teachers made the pedagogical choice to use circles to discuss various issues related to students' lives and to their implemented curriculum. The perceived effectiveness of a teacher's approach is subjective and contextual; their success is marked by their students' skills, engagement in relevant content, attitudes, and behaviours (Cuban, 1998; Honig, 2006). While circles are intended to promote inclusion, there still exists space for exclusion. When implementing restorative dialogue in unequal contexts, it is necessary to consider whose voices are visible and whose concerns are being raised and addressed. Focusing the circle process on inclusive and equitable ways to discern and talk about conflict provides opportunities to build student agency and equitable agency. When done with adequate preparation (for both students and teachers), the circle process allows students to think together constructively and to feel included. Young people who feel included, particularly those who are marginalized, are much more likely to actively engage in ways that lead to further social and academic success (Parker, 2016a).

6. Limitations and further research

Implementing circle dialogues focused on conflicts—both interpersonal and broader scale—is essential for democratic education, and integral to creating peaceful classrooms. This study illustrates the need for both students' and teachers' proactive guided practice with conflict dialogue. We acknowledge that there is a selection bias in our sample, since both teachers and students volunteered to participate in the study because of their interest in wanting to implement circle pedagogy. This—along with the small sample size—means that our results are not generalizable beyond our sample. Further research is needed on how best to support teachers' implementation of restorative peace circles and other democratic dialogue learning opportunities, and how those might impact engagement of diverse students in learning for positive peace.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christina Parker: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Funding acquisition. **Kathy Bickmore:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103129.

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