

BOOK REVIEW

Justice of Both Sides: Transforming Education Through Restorative Justice By Maisha Winn

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Abstract

This is a book review of *Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education Through Restorative Justice* by Maisha Winn. The book's central claim is that restorative justice is a transformative practice that should be implemented in schools to correct inequities in school discipline. Winn (2018) provides an explanation of the paradigmatic shift needed by educators to successfully implement the program. She explores current programs through a qualitative study and uses ethnographic data to tell the story of students, faculty, and administrators as they participate in restorative justice. This book does not provide any easy answers or a step by step guide. But it does offer the path to critical consciousness that educators need to effectively implement a restorative justice program.

Educators are “street-level bureaucrats”, which means, in the end, policy implementation comes down to the people who implement it (Lipsky, 1980). In Maisha Winn’s book, “Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education Through Restorative Justice”, she places the majority of responsibility for quelling the perennial problems of disproportionality of school discipline, the achievement gap, and the resulting school-to-prison pipeline on the street-level bureaucrats: educators in our schools. However, for educators to take that responsibility, a paradigm shift has to occur within their collective ideologies.

The Challenge of Teaching and Facilitating Restorative Justice

The following quote is from Ms. Reese, an English teacher that recounted her journey towards a shifted paradigm to Winn (2018) but realizes the transformation in how discipline is handled is not complete. Ms. Reese identifies the core issue that is discussed throughout Winn’s book and will be central to this book review:

“I believe that restorative justice practices intend to hold students accountable. But I have not witnessed real transformation yet...expecting teachers to teach content to higher expectations, aligning brand-new assessments, measuring growth through teacher evaluations, while creating engaging lessons and giving timely feedback, incorporating social and emotional learning standards and brand-new technology, communicating regularly with parents (of 150 students), and then complete repetitive practices every time a student ditches class, flips you off, sleeps through class, disrespects others, all while being responsive to cultural differences to close the achievement gap... is insane [her emphasis]. We are simply not capable of doing all those things, even the most skilled vodou magic teachers among us” (Winn, p.141, 2018)

The question that this quote presents is: how can educators on the front lines balance all of their duties, while adding the additional burden of restorative justice (RJ)? Equity minded educators seeking to answer that question may be drawn to Winn’s (2018) book for answers. This book does contain answers, but they are not easy ones. There is unequivocally no simple path for creating equity-minded educators that effectively implement transformative RJ practices. Winn (2018) lays out her plan in this 183-page, part informative, part case study, book on RJ implementation in schools.

Structure of the Book

Winn’s (2018) book can be divided into three sections: (1) a discussion of a paradigm shift towards Restorative Justice (RJ) (chapters 1-2), an account of her case study at Kennedy High School as they seek to implement RJ (chapters 3-5), and (3) a call to action for educating our teachers about RJ practices (chapter 6). The structure of the book contributes to its strengths as an excellent scholarly work. However, at the same time, the book sacrifices some accessibility to practitioners looking for a practical guide to RJ. This is the paradox of RJ and one that Winn (2018) clearly understands and develops.

RJ is not a simple program that can be written down in a how-to book and delivered to educators. If delivered in that way it simply becomes another educational acronym or initiative that gets marginalized to the periphery of schools, loved by some and ignored by others. This is the situation that Winn (2018) points to throughout her book and the reason she began with a discussion of paradigm. This book review briefly reviews and analyzes the three main sections of Winn’s book and then provide a short critique of them.

A Shift in Paradigm Towards Restorative Justice

RJ is more than a program. At its very core, it is a shift in paradigm. Winn (2018) does not promote a specific program or set of curricula in her book. She lays out a social justice-oriented paradigm that aims to keep historically marginalized students in the classroom learning and allow them to receive the free and appropriate education that they are rightfully due. Winn (2018) does this both through story and through creating a theoretical frame: “four pedagogical stances for engaging in restorative justice work in education”.

Punitive Punishment for Students of Color

The initial story Winn leads with on page 1 of the text paints a bleak picture of the realities for students of color. She describes a situation that many might have seen, with hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube and several news stories circulating the internet, that show “Shakara”, a young African American student, being violently thrown out of her chair by the school resource officer. The incident began because the student refused to put away her cell phone. This incident epitomizes the paradigms of many educators. The classroom teacher, with sixteen years of experience, who initially responded to the student’s cell phone and the administrator that came to support the teacher felt they had no other option but to call in a police officer to deal with a non-violent case of defiance. The police officer, not receiving the compliance that he is trained to expect, felt he had no other option but to violently attack the student in front of her peers. Winn (2018) leads with this stark example as if to say: “how did we get to this point?”

Introducing a New Model for an Equity Minded Paradigm

Winn (2018) leads her discussion about the lack of commitment among teachers to restorative practices by identifying two patterns: “(1) they have not been trained in restorative justice, and (2) they have not engaged in the mind-set work that must occur for practitioners to be open to and fully immersed in restorative practice” (Winn, p.32, 2018). These statements may be an oversimplification of a more complex problem, but Winn (2018) seems to capture the complete problem in the framework below. Winn (2018) conceptualized a model that educators can use to begin shifting their paradigm to one that unequivocally condemns violence against children and moves towards a reconciliatory approach. For equity-minded educators, this discussion may seem very familiar, but Winn (2018) created a practical framework that could be shaped into a professional development tool.

Winn’s (2018) Four Pedagogical Stances



Figure 1. Four Pedagogical Stances

Retrieved: http://www.teachingworks.org/images/files/Winn_TeachingWorks.pdf

Many readers of this book review will be familiar with the endemic nature of racism or how implicit biases, even for the most equity-minded educators, plays a role in how educators interact with students. They may also be familiar with the gross inequities determined by the socio-economic status of students in our communities. These ideas, and other similar forms of inequity, create systems of oppression that continually marginalize already disadvantaged groups. Winn's (2018) framework provides an accessible, but comprehensive overview of the changes that educators need to make to remove these barriers.

Pedagogical Stance 1: History Matters. History Matters is along the outer ring of the model to symbolize the "infinite journey of educators to learn about the historical contexts that affect the schools and communities in which they teach" (Winn, p.32, 2018). Educators must understand how histories of oppression and racism continue to play out in group-level power dynamics and the broader socio-political contexts of our communities.

Pedagogical Stance 2: Race Matters. Race Matters prompts educators to learn more about race and racism and its continual effects on students and communities. Winn (2018) is espousing the idea that learning about the role of race throughout history and in our everyday contexts will help educators to unlearn some of their racist ideologies, which are both implicit and explicit.

Pedagogical Stance 3: Justice Matters. Justice Matters is the core purpose of this work. Or as Winn (2018) puts it: "Justice Matters brings to the forefront social movements that dare to imagine a world where everyone -- irrespective of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, or ability -- is able to live with dignity and is recognized as belonging" (Winn, p. 36, 2018). It is hard to imagine an educator that would not agree with these goals. However, as Winn (2018) states, they first have to reconcile the histories of racism and discrimination that still play an active role in society today.

Pedagogical Stance 4: Language Matters. Finally, Language Matters focuses on practical tools for navigating the complex world of reconciling history, race, and justice. Educators should be quite familiar with the idea of a deficit mindset. In 2018, legislators, with the issuance of Assembly Bill 413, went as far as to legally change "at-risk" to "at-promise". Winn (2018) recognizes that the way we speak about students from historically marginalized communities can have a profound effect on how we treat them.

Summarizing the Model

Each one of these pedagogical stances provides a key step for educators on the path to shifting their paradigm on student discipline. There are also leadership and change management strategies needed to guide this work. However, these are not readily addressed in Winn's (2018) book. Instead, she relies on the data gathered in her qualitative case study at Kennedy High School to create a picture of what is missing and what should come next in RJ implementation.

A Case Study: Kennedy High School

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Winn's (2018) book are essentially a summary of her case study on Kennedy High School. Winn (2018) completed a case study of Kennedy High School during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. However, she indicates that she spent the two years prior visiting the school, attending restorative justice training on campus, and getting to know students and staff. Chapter 3 describes the experiences of Student Circle Keepers. Chapter 4 describes the experiences of educators and administrators facilitating the program. Lastly, chapter 5 describes challenges in RJ implementation. Instead of describing each of these chapters in-depth, this review will simply identify the strengths and weaknesses of structuring an informational book in this way and highlight some key points that are of note.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Book

The experience of reading this book is interesting. It begins in a way that captures the attention of those who are likely to pick it up in the first place: someone that is already working to shift their paradigm or already has and is looking for tools to teach others. The case study itself represents the majority of the book and does not contain the tools one needs to create an RJ program or to train others in RJ practices. The reader may become lost in the many anecdotes and observations that fill the pages. This could prevent the reader from completing the reading. This, however, would be a mistake.

The lessons to be learned from this book, while there are some direct examples of best practices, are truly learned from the experiences relayed in the case study material. These stories are powerful and sequenced in a way that builds a clear picture of where RJ is and where it is going. At Kennedy High School the facilitation of RJ is the responsibility of a few students (mostly young women of color) and some passionate educators (a resource officer, a couple of administrators, a coach, a dean, a school psychologist, and one English teacher). As relayed at the beginning of this book review, there is a huge gap when it comes to one of the most important players in the system: classroom teachers.

In chapter 5, Winn (2018) describes the Student Circle Keepers' attitudes about the tensions and challenges of RJ practices. The students have become the main laborers in the RJ practices at Kennedy High School. They are supported by the educators listed above, but they feel that the classroom teachers don't know exactly what they do in restorative circles. As a result, the Student Circle Keepers perceive the teachers to be unsupportive. One Student Circle Keeper describes to Winn (2018) his feelings about teacher involvement: "...teachers actually should be more involved in the circle keeping thing, because all my teachers don't even know that I'm a circle keeper. So, I know they probably heard of restorative justice, but they don't know. I don't think they know what it's doing for our school and the students that are a part of it, or the student leaders that are helping another student during conflict" (Winn, p.134, 2018). This sentiment is echoed throughout the book.

Winn (2018) shows Student Circle Keepers' working and learning from through the RJ process. She tells the stories of passionate educators that are fully invested in the process. Then she lets the narratives of students demonstrate what RJ needs to reach its full potential. Classroom teachers (the street-level bureaucrat) must shift paradigms and become fully invested in restorative practices. The final chapter of Winn's (2018) book points to the type of teacher preparation that is needed to accomplish this task.

Transformative Justice Teacher Education

The close of Winn's (2018) book points to where we should head next in the journey towards social justice in our schools. Winn (2018) recommends Transformative Justice Teacher Education (TJTE). This method, once again, does not present itself as a methodology that anyone can pull off the shelf, read, and utilize. TJTE is the process of walking teachers through the pedagogical stances and helping them to embed those new paradigms into their teaching. Winn (2018) calls teachers to shift away from a deficit lens, be aware of the language they use about students, and be part of RJ circles to find "Justice on Both Sides".

Closing Comments

The work outlined in "Justice on Both Sides: Transformative Education Through Restorative Justice" is designed to create justice on both sides of the classroom. Traditional power structures put the teacher in a place of authority and "unruly or disrespectful" students are ejected from the classroom. What if our educational system valued the perspective of student and teacher as equal? When there was an altercation or disruption, then both viewpoints would be heard through an RJ circle. The goal would be the reconciliation of the relationship and the continuance of learning in the classroom. Winn (2018) does not give any easy answers. Perhaps there are none. Those who read her book may find only more questions. However, maybe that is the lesson to be learned. We must continue to ask questions about what is just and what is fair when it comes to serving the youth in our care.

Reference

Winn, M. T. (2018). *Justice on both sides: Transforming education through restorative justice*.
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