

Bigger Than An RJ Circle: Youth Organizing for Restorative Justice in Education

by Jonathan Stith

This essay was inspired from a speech named “Bigger Than A Hamburger” which was delivered by Black Freedom Movement and Civil Rights Organizer Ella Baker after she organized a student leadership conference to bring together Black youth who had initiated sit-ins across the south in April 1960.¹ The conference led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the resurgence of the Civil Rights movement. In her speech, Ella Baker challenges the audience of well-meaning adults to see the political significance of the young people sitting in at lunch counters as more than them trying to meet the physical need of hunger.

Rooted in the legacy of Ella Baker and the lineage of youth organizing she birthed, I now seek to affirm the political significance of the youth organizing efforts of Black and Brown high school students in the expansion of restorative justice in education. The essay poses youth of color as both radically imaginative political actors and expert restorative justice practitioners who have blended the restorative justice principles of justice and equity with youth organizing to create a transformative insurgency and a democratic movement for education justice. At the close of her speech, Ella Baker offers an invitation for youth and adults to work together to provide genuine leadership based on principles of cooperation and trust to build an intergenerational movement capable of realizing freedom. And as Ella Baker did then, this essay is an invitation for restorative justice practitioners in education to reimagine themselves and radicalize their practice as part of this insurgency WITH young people of color as a powerful

¹ <http://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/all/files/Bigger%20than%20a%20Hamburger%20-%20Ella%20Baker.pdf>

and transformative intergenerational movement to disrupt and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

RiiiiinnnnGGGGG!! It is the final bell of the day, signaling the end of another school day. As Black and Brown high school students spill out of the building swiftly, about a dozen students form a circle with one young person in the middle. She yells “Mic Check!!!” The circle responds back “Mic Check!!!” Then she smiles and spirals to see everyone in the circle. Other youth, reminded, quickly fall in and the circle naturally expands to include them. Curious youth and adults stand a few paces away, indirectly observing the circle. She begins again this time with all bravado that embodies Black Girl magicness. “Miiiiiccccc Chhhhhhheeeecckkkk!” All parts of the circle enliven with laughter and meet her energy. “MIIIIIIICCCC CCHHHEEECCCKKK!!!”

“Why are we out?” The facilitator pauses and pivots. One student blurts out, “Because we are not criminals. We want to go to college.” She affirms his answer. “Let’s start on the left.” As the next student begins answering, she joins the circle standing next to another classmate. One by one, they go around the circle answering the question. Some say they are there because a friend brought them or they got offered extra credit by a teacher. Others mention the buzzwords: school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice, and mass incarceration. A few share stories of being unfairly suspended or witnessing an injustice in the classroom that went unaddressed. Instead of a traditional rally, where a few charismatic leaders get to speak and all others listen, youth organizers have blended the restorative justice practice of circles into their organizing

praxis to acknowledge the inherent leadership of all and to build collective leadership of the group.

The youth organizers are preparing for a “Walk-In,” a direct action to demand their school principal to adopt and implement restorative justice. They have four demands. They want the principal to agree to a moratorium on suspensions for willful defiance, start a restorative justice program with part of the school’s budget, approve youth-led professional development for teachers, and allow youth involvement on the school’s safety committee. They have chosen to do their walk-in afterschool, starting in the courtyard as an act of defiance. The students are occupying space where they are normally rushed about and pushed out of every day by the school’s security into the waiting stare and snare of the local police department.

In 2016, similar walk-ins also happened in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. In New York, Black and Brown students walked into the office of the school resource officer and demanded that the security staff attend a mandatory professional development training on restorative justice. In Los Angeles, students walked into the office of their School Board representative, demanding that the representative sign on to a letter calling for the LAUSD school police to return the military-grade weapons they received from the Federal 1033 Program. In Chicago, students walked into an office to affirm their human right to an education against state budget cuts, stating that they are “more than a number on a spreadsheet.” These stories are snapshots from a youth-led movement to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and advance education equity, a movement fueled by the power of youth organizing.

Youth Organizing and Restorative Justice

Youth organizing is a youth development and social justice strategy that involves young people in community organizing and advocacy to alter power relations that lead to meaningful institutional change in their communities.² It is the dynamic praxis of youth-led activities like research, policy creation, leadership development, political analysis, and direct action that brings young people together in defining issues for themselves, constructing youth-driven membership organizations that take collective action, and working together long-term to bring about strategic, sustainable and systemic change. By centering the power and leadership of youth acting on issues impacting them and their communities, young people transform the way they view themselves and the way adults view young people.³

The Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ) is a national network of 30 youth and intergenerational groups organizing to shift local, state and federal policy away from punitive discipline and towards restorative justice in order to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. The Alliance congealed in 2008 around the political moment of the new Obama administration and the pending reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. The original 19 organizations first formed the Alliance after arriving at a shared analysis through their local organizing campaigns that No Child Left Behind was being used as a shield to defend discriminatory school discipline and mask other education inequities by local decision-makers and school leaders.

By 2008, the national youth-led movement against the school-to-prison pipeline grew to be so powerful that the concerns of youth organizers and their allies was a top priority of the Federal Department of Education. Under the Obama administration, the Department of Education spent eight years disavowing Zero Tolerance as federal education policy, requiring

² FCYO Occasional Paper #1

³ Taj James, FCYO Paper.

and reporting discipline data from schools along the intersections of race, gender and ability. The Department targeted egregious districts and used legal strategies like consent decrees to encourage cities and states to take responsibility and make right by those directly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline while shifting federal resources and policies towards restorative justice. In 2011, the Supportive School Discipline Initiative was launched, an interagency collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, created to “address the school-to-prison pipeline and the disciplinary policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the justice system.”⁴ A year later, youth organizers would win the first ever Senate hearing on the school-to-prison pipeline.⁵ Two years later, the Supportive School Discipline Initiative announced a series of federal guidelines aimed to help school districts and stakeholders to remedy racial discrimination in school discipline at Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, MD. During his speech, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan affirmed the youth organizers who present and their insurgency, and stated how “the school-to-prison pipeline must be challenged every day” and identifying that “it is adult behavior that needs to change.”⁶ The work of youth organizers was a critical catalyst to this moment which established a powerful platform for ongoing organizing at the local level.

Young people in AEJ-member organizations (Alliance for Educational Justice) are responsible for the presence of restorative justice within dozens of schools and school districts across the United States by winning radical changes in school discipline policy and practice, pushing systems to invest more in education than incarceration. In New York City, youth

⁴<https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-departments-education-and-justice-release-school-discipline-guidance-package->

⁵ Press Release - Durbin Holds Hearing on Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline. U.S. Senate. <https://www.durbin.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/durbin-holds-hearing-on-ending-the-school-to-prison-pipeline>

⁶ <https://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/rethinking-school-discipline>

organizers in the Urban Youth Collaborative won the elimination of suspensions for defying authority. In addition, they won \$2.4 million from the New York City Council for investment in a citywide Restorative Justice Initiative.⁷ After more than eight years of struggle in Miami, the youth of Power U Center for Social Change won district-wide implementation of restorative justice in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the third largest school system in the country.⁸ Padres y Jovenes Unidos, an intergenerational organizing group, won the creation of the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, a three school restorative justice project that serves as a local and national teaching and learning site.⁹ In Los Angeles, a collaborative of youth organizing groups including the Youth Justice Coalition, Labor Community Strategy Center, Inner City Struggle, and Community Coalition-South LA, waged effective campaigns to end police citations for minor student offenses like tardiness. They also moved the Los Angeles Unified School District to adopt the School Climate Bill of Rights in May 2013 and to commit to implementing Restorative Justice practices in all schools by 2020.¹⁰

These and other campaigns happening in cities across the United States constitute a movement for restorative justice in schools and communities that is primarily led by young people of color. However, these efforts are not entirely new. The Alliance for Educational Justice is the flower of a nearly 20-year struggle led by youth of color to end the school-to-prison pipeline. Moreover, this youth-led movement for education justice is part of an even longer tradition of young people of color organizing for civil rights, freedom, democracy and dignity within and outside of educational institutions. In words remixed from civil rights leader Ella

⁷ <http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org/ending-school-to-prison-pipeline/>

⁸ <http://poweru.org/our-schools/>

⁹ <http://localprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Restorative-Practices-Insights-From-3-Denver-Schools.pdf>

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<https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib08/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/293/Restorative%20Justice%20Statement.pdf>

Baker, the grandmother of youth organizing, the goals of these struggles are even bigger than winning alternative school discipline policies or bringing Peacemaking Circles to classrooms.

Race, Violence, and The Pipeline

If the premise is true that education is the civil rights issue of our time, then for nearly two decades, Black and Brown youth have waged an intergenerational insurgency in education in the United States to challenge and defeat racist school discipline policies that have developed in reaction to the promise of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and codified in the Gun Free Zone Act of 1994 that made Zero Tolerance federal posture and policy, and laid the foundation of the school-to-prison pipeline.¹¹ In this light, the school-to-prison pipeline is the modern machination of Jim Crow education that racializes educational policies, inequitable funding and teaching practices to deny youth of color their dignity and their human right to an education. It is state violence and the first form of violence that many youth of color face. It is government power that harms, government power that hurts. Schools are agencies of state violence which promote the violent indoctrination that in America, for Black and Brown children, learning means learning to stay in your place. The same lesson the Little Rock Nine learned when trying to integrate Central High School almost over half century ago is the same one youth learn today. The national guard of yesterday has been replaced with school police armed with military grade weapons provided by the Federal 1033 Program. The #AssaultAtSpringValley is a grabbing example of the pedagogy of immediate annihilation or compulsory assimilation used to teach Black and Brown youth their place. At its depth is the genocidal impulse first found in the history that held enslaved Africans under the penalty of death for learning to read, and the forced assimilation of

¹¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero_tolerance_\(schools\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zero_tolerance_(schools))

Native Indian children into schools that sought to “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” In its modernity, the school-to-prison pipeline has widened to extend well beyond the boundaries of race to push Black girls, LGBTQ, immigrant, disabled and poor youth out of school and towards mass incarceration. The school-to-prison pipeline is a continued commitment of America’s education system to mentacide, namely the deliberate and systematic destruction of an oppressed people’s capacity for cognitive agency and collective action.

Led by Black and Brown students, LGBTQ, Disabled and Immigrant youth have fashioned an uprising through youth organizing and intergenerational alliances to massively interrupt the functioning of the country’s education system, and thereby force a rearrangement of roles, authority and power.¹² In cities like New York, Miami, Philadelphia, Denver, Chicago, New Orleans, Boston and Oakland, Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Detroit, youth organizing groups have interrupted the school-to-prison pipeline. Every victory against the school-to-prison pipeline created more space for restorative justice in our schools. These high school activists and movement builders are crystal clear that their national movement, comprised of local and state-wide campaigns and federal action, are concerned with something much bigger than a restorative justice circle. Like the Student NonViolent Student Coordinating Committee youth who fueled the sit-in movement, the youth of our day are seeking to rid education of the scourges of racial injustice, not only in the classroom, but in the world.

When you listen deeply to the call for restorative justice by today’s youth, you will hear how they want the world to know that they no longer accept the position of being second-class students. What we see time and time again is how Black and Brown youth understand that school and society are in a mutually influential relationship. Society shapes schools and school shapes

¹² Gillen, Jay. *Educating for Insurgency: The Roles of Young People in Schools of Poverty*. AK Press. 2014. p. 16.

society. The schools they attend are reflections of the oppressive society that created them. Is it not then the student's job, as it is the citizens in the world, to make schools a better place? They have been courageously willing to challenge racist, punitive and criminalizing education policy, face ridicule by peers, be looked down upon by teachers, and even suffer physical violence at the hands of school police to demand a first-class education. And some have died...

In Remembrance of the Radical Imagination of George Carter III

George Carter III was an AEJ youth leader from Rethink-NOLA. He was loved and renowned for his imagination and tender toughness. He was the embodiment of big things coming in little packages. His life and his death is a constant reminder of what is at stake and what will be lost if we do not make restorative justice a political, social and cultural imperative in education. The not-guilty verdict in the murder of Trayvon Martin was dropped in the news during the last night of the Alliance's annual conference. Shocked, scared and saddened, AEJ youth leaders stuffed the living room area of my hotel room. Each young person shared a story or sentiment on the impact of the murder of Trayvon Martin. Many of them expressed fear of the George Zimmermans of their communities. When it came time for him to share, George Carter III talked of another fear. He spoke of the fear he felt living in his New Orleans neighborhood since the time of recovery after Hurricane Katrina. He was not afraid of any George Zimmermans. Rather, he was afraid of being shot by a police officer or another desperate youth trying to survive a post-apocalyptic New Orleans. His neighborhood had been transformed into a confluence of state and intercommunal violence since people returned after Katrina. "And they haven't even opened our school back," he lamented. A few months later George was murdered

on his way to catch his 7:00 AM school bus by another youth in an act of intercommunal violence. The circumstance of his murder and his postmortem criminalization is one of the inspirations of our national movement to end state violence in education.¹³ George and other AEJ youth leaders imagined schools where restorative justice is all about preparing them to govern themselves and society by learning to build and keep peace or to make things right after harm has happened. “Can you imagine a school with mood detectors, instead of metal detectors?” he asked. George Carter III dared to transform where others only seek reform. He re-imagined schools where instead of being suspended or arrested, you got sent to pick strawberries in the school's garden. Young people are winning more than a restorative justice circle. With radical imagination, they are daring to dream out loud, waging love to build a transformative insurgency to liberate education.

An Invitation To Restorative Insurgency

Restorative Justice Education (RJE) practitioners have a critical and important role in this insurgency to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and build a better world. As young people and their organizing asserts, it is bigger than an RJ circle. To align this restorative insurgency, RJE practitioners must orient themselves to be prefigurative and transformative in their praxis as, according to Vincent Harding, “practitioners in an education system that does not exist yet.”

Restorative Justice Education (RJE) must adopt anti-racism as a core competency in the profession and practicum to address the historic and current anti-blackness in America and its schools. Most of the schools that RJE will be entering are not just and equitable learning

¹³ “Anti-blackness is the paradigm that will not only kill a black person, but will then use their image and even their death as a hollow symbol to represent everything they stood against” (Nicholas Brady)
<https://progressivepupil.wordpress.com/2014/02/27/right-to-death-defining-anti-blackness/>

environments for Black and Brown students where their respect and dignity ought to be nurtured. White supremacy is deeply ingrained in America, in education, and even in the field of restorative justice. In spite of successes in policy that decreased the number of suspensions of Black and Brown youth, the racial disparity has remained the same. Moreover, since the 2016 elections, there has been an upsurge in racialized bullying in schools of Black and Brown students by White students and teachers. Without anti-racism as a competency, RJE practitioners will pat themselves on the back for getting a Black student to apologize to a White student in a circle for fighting after being called the N-word repeatedly. Believing they have restored justice, they have only reinforced White supremacy. The RJE field must challenge its own inherent anti-blackness and not only acknowledge the indigenous roots of restorative justice in the Americas but also its African roots as a transplanted practice carried by Black people into the Western Hemisphere. Contemporary Black restorative justice practitioners should be accorded the same dignity and right to self-determination over what is restorative and what justice looks like within their communities.

RJE practitioners must see themselves as politicized healers,¹⁴ view restorative justice in education as the antithesis to the school-to-prison pipeline, and understand restorative justice as a prefigurative practice place of the society we seek to transform. Every one of the 20 documented #AssaultAt¹⁵ incidents since and including the #AssaultAtSpringValley could have been prevented if the school had a culture of restorative justice or a restorative justice program. In its politicization, Restorative Justice in Education must also break the criminalizing binary ‘offender-victim’ framework that continues to characterize restorative justice practice within the

¹⁴ I heard this term from Mama Lisa in a BOLD training.

¹⁵ An AssaultAt is when a school police officer (SRO) harms or hurts a student for any reason.

criminal legal system and beyond. In education, the leading cause of school suspensions is not intercommunal crime or violence between students or by a student toward a teacher, but “willful defiance.” The tolerant acceptance of racially-biased student discipline codes and culture can lead to reinforcing power and structural inequalities, which determine who gets to define what is right (and even what is making things right) in a way that only mirrors the world as it is and not as it should be. In doing so, we miss the transformative impact of restorative justice on school culture and society.

The Restorative Justice in Education field and practitioners must actively support young people’s contributions to restorative justice not only as activists, advocates and policymakers, but also as theoreticians, practitioners and experts of their own experience. Both practitioners and organizations that gain from the expansion of restorative justice in education have an obligation to give back with their time, tithe and talent to further this youth movement. RJE practitioners and organizations can aid youth organizing campaigns to win restorative justice by publicly endorsing, financially supporting and joining them in advocacy activities such as testifying at hearings, writing op-eds and sign-on letters. RJE organizations should insist that school systems which are implementing restorative justice need to collect rigorous data and stories that it are publicly reported. Also, those working with schools districts must support the right and responsibility of students of color and their parents to participate in the shaping and implementation of any and all restorative justice programs in their schools. *Nothing about youth without youth* should be the mandate and the praxis of every restorative justice practitioner and organization working within a school system, if the true goal for restorative justice is to root itself and transform education. This requires that young people should have access to meaningful

opportunities to learn and develop their proficiency and mastery in restorative justice both in and out of school.

Young people, specifically Black and Brown youth organizers, have been on the frontlines, winning campaigns to implement restorative justice in schools. They understand the political significance of restorative justice as a social change strategy to transform schools and reshape society. For them, it is bigger than a circle. Like their SNCC forerunners during the Civil Rights movement, they are attempting to fulfill their generation's destiny to build a new world through organizing, starting in their schools with restorative justice. Their invitation to reimagine education and change the world with restorative justice comes with this final radical request. "If you have come here to restore us, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your restoration is bound up with ours, then let us circle together."