

Belonging to a community has always been an interesting one for me. I spent my high school, undergraduate, and now postgraduate years in countries other than my home country. As someone whose parents were part of the anti-Apartheid movement, being a free South African was something that filled me with immense pride and I felt a fervent connection to South Africa. Yet, when I was informed that I would be moving to India in Grade 9, I was excited too. As a South African of Indian heritage, the thought of returning to the land of my foremothers seemed like my identity would start making sense. But a combination of my dark skin and moving to the north of India resulted in feelings of rejection within the country itself. This is when I leaned into the notion that I was a third culture kid (TCK), or a person whose sense of home was fluid. Even so, this question around belonging has followed me as I entered my thirties.

When I think about my sense of belonging, I think about my high school experience in South Africa. I was lucky enough that my parents were able to afford to send me to a private high school for a short period before I left for India. It was at this school that I experienced and witnessed bullying. Students were bullied for their appearance, their socio-economic class, their race, and their gender. With each grade only consisting of 20-30 students, the friend groups that emerged were usually formed along racial and gendered lines. If you wanted friends, you become friends with the group that looked most like you. Even within those groups, microaggressions and bullying would take place. To the point where one student, transferred back to her previous public school due to the bullying she experienced. I wish I could say I was the bigger person, who tried to dissuade or prevent this bullying, but I was not. I was just happy the target was no longer on my back. I took these experiences with me as I moved to India, anticipating similar sentiments around who I was and what I represented. I was surprised to find that in an international school, people were less inclined to prescribe qualities and values to others. This is not to say that bullying did not occur, it definitely did. I don't believe any school environment is void of bullying, bias, and microaggressions. The problem of bullying and questions around my identity were magnified when I began working in learning environments in South Africa, when I returned home after 10 years of living and working abroad.

I worked in the education space and wrote curriculum and policies for private institutions, and facilitated workshops for students, interns, and professionals in both the private and public sector. My identity was often in the front of my mind when I entered spaces in terms of how I would be perceived. Pre-conceived notions around who I was and my value systems would accompany me into a room, much of them formed by others who have had to experience the continuously divisive country that is South Africa.

I was once asked by a local ward councillor to help address a string of racial-based bullying incidents that took place at a primary school. He wanted me to implement an anti-bullying workshop for the students and the teachers. Unfortunately, it was only a one-day workshop, after which COVID happened so any attempts to monitor the long-term effects of the workshop were not possible. Nevertheless, what I saw was that the subconscious biases from the teachers were trickling down into the students. This paired with the messages received from their homes and communities that fed into the mistrust, suspicion and disdain for peers from other racial backgrounds, resulting in these divisions.

It was through this project that I learned about restorative approaches in education. Restorative approaches in education stems from the restorative justice framework. It is a framework born out of indigenous practices, namely communities from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, which prioritized the community and aimed to tackle the harm that was caused to the individuals and the community when an offence had taken place (Wachtel, 2016; Zehr, 2015). Restorative justice was introduced to the criminology space as an alternative to retributive justice. Criminologists then turned to this framework as it sought to address harm rather than focus on the punishment to be handed down. This framework had two underlying principles – that every human has inherent worth and that we are all interconnected (Evans & Vaandering, 2016).

Within the education context, restorative practices began entering schools when it was discovered that zero tolerance policies and punitive approaches to disciplinary actions were deemed ineffective (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). These restorative practices were reactionary i.e. they were implemented once harm had been caused.

But practitioners and educators noted that there was a need to mitigate against harm caused, and thus proactive restorative practices emerged in learning contexts (Richards, 2006).

One of the most widely used proactive restorative practice is the restorative circle, sometimes referred to as the talking circle. It is a space wherein students engage in dialogue around a myriad of issues, and are invited to speak on their own experiences. The objectives are to instill virtues of empathy and understanding and foster skills related to open communication and active listening. Restorative practices in education promote a model of education that prioritises community building and collective engagement.

There are a few key elements to establishing a restorative circle. Firstly, the circle must take the shape of an actual circle or sphere. Each participant should be facing the inside of the circle and there must be no physical barriers, such as chairs or tables. The use of a talking piece should be used. A talking piece is an object that is passed around once the circle has been initiated. Only the individual who is in possession of the talking piece may speak and all other participants in the circle must engage in active listening. Active listening is an act of listening to understand, and not listening to engage. Sometimes follow up questions and conversations are allowed, but for the most part, each person is asked to speak their own truth (Marcucci, 2021). Participants are not part of the circle as the representative of any group, and they are asked to speak about their own experiences and beliefs. At the onset of each circle, the participants collectively agree to a set of agreements which are to be followed once the circle has been opened. These agreements must be reached in consensus and must be unanimously agreed upon (Clifford, 2013).

A restorative circle has a circle leader or circle facilitator. This is the person who is tasked with ensuring that the participants keep to the agreements, and that the circle remains an open and safe space. Further, the circle leader is the one who devises the prompt or the question to be posed to the participants. There are different types of questions, such as those which allow participants to become acquainted with one another, or those which address current events. Regardless of the type of question or prompt, they should be relevant and open-ended, formulated using clear and simple language and should be about inquiry not advocacy (Clifford, 2013). A well

formulated prompt or question grabs attention, and supports the re-examination of ourselves and of others. Circle leaders are not just part of the circle to lead, they are also asked to answer the question or consider the prompt. This unpacks some of the inherent power dynamics that exist, and assists in finding common ground between the participants and the circle leader.

I believe that restorative circles have the potential to usher in inclusive learning environments in schools. Not only are they a great tool for students to share their experiences, but it helps build connections among students, and between students and teachers. The skills learned through restorative circles also have an impact on how students view their world and how they interact with that world. By experiencing and expressing empathy and understanding, they then interact with others outside of their school through the same lens.

The use of restorative practices in schools also have positive impacts on student wellbeing. Students who have engaged in restorative practices have reported lower stress and anxiety and higher levels of motivation, and their academic performance has improved (Preston, 2015). Through restorative practices, student social and emotional learning is supported, which then supports their technical learning.

I think back to moments in my life where restorative circles would have been beneficial. In the high school where I experienced bullying, opening up a dialogue on how it made students feel and where it impacted them may have exposed those who bullied others to the consequences of their actions. It would also have enlightened teachers to the extent of the bullying that was taking place, which I believe many teachers were blind to. I would have felt that I had a safe space to share what I was going through and which gave me a voice, something I felt had been taken away from me.

In my high school in India, having a space to unpack my sense of belonging may have removed some of the uncertainty I still have about it. My unanswerable questions around where I belong and what this should be based on would have been voiced, even if there wasn't a response to put me at ease. I could have found solidarity among my peers who may have felt the same way. We could have shared

what we do to alleviate some of the tension and anxiety these existential questions cause.

As I move through life, interrogating the spaces in which I belong still brings me existential dread. I move between countries attempting to cling on to any semblance of a community that I can find. But when I take a step back I realise that first and foremost I crave connection, in any respect, and with any person. I may not be able to implement a restorative circle in every room I enter but I like to take the essence and nature of a circle and use it in my approach to establishing these connections. I try to engage in active listening, identify and park my preconceived ideas around what the person is saying, and speak my truth. Maybe I will never reach the answer of what it means to belong and where I belong. But once I get to that point of realization, I may find that parts of me belong with all the connections I made along the way, scattered in different parts of the world.

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