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Embracing uncertainty: A narrative case study on teacher-learner relationships through restorative justice practices in education

Zachary Schafer
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, zschafer@huskers.unl.edu

Guy Trainin
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, gtrainin2@unl.edu

ARTICLE

Embracing uncertainty: A narrative case study on teacher-learner relationships through restorative justice practices in education

Zachary Schafer and Guy Trainin*

Abstract

Restorative justice practices in educational settings recognising trauma and extreme life circumstances have become increasingly relevant since the COVID-19 pandemic and the growing impacts of climate change. This narrative inquiry uses Clandinin and Connelly's suggestions for data collection and narrative structure to describe the interactions between one teacher and one learner over the course of two years in a programme created as an alternative to school suspension. Using a dual framework combining a variety of perspectives from restorative justice practices and Chen's model of uncertainty management in science education, the researchers iteratively and thematically analysed the teacher-learner interactions. The storied results unveiled the layered complexities within ongoing restorative conversations and relationships.

Keywords: uncertainty, analogous processing, self-justification.

Rainy Day Light

Languid light
Creates still space
With chaos quieted
Only hearts and thoughts can be heard
It hurts to hear one's halting heart, one's mangled mind.
External chaos is better than internal chaos
Schafer (2019)

This poem came after an interaction with a learner named Clara (all names in this manuscript are pseudonyms). She had just exploded with anger, yelling and cursing at staff. When she got to a safe and quiet place, I saw her sit there and in time, cry.

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*   Zachary Schafer is a Doctoral Student at the College of Education and Human Sciences of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA. Guy Trainin is Professor of Education at the University of California-Riverside, USA.
     Corresponding author: Zachary Schafer at zschafer3@gmail.com.

Soon after, I watched as she went back to doing her schoolwork. I asked myself, *Why would a person explode with anger in such a public setting? Why does it seem like some learners feed off chaos?* To these questions, I came back to my observation about the quiet stillness of a grey, rainy day. The quiet and stillness of such light invites quiet meditation. In this space, if the mind's chaos is loud, maybe quiet is painful and external chaos is an easy alternative. I felt deeply for Clara. I had seen this battle within many learners. As a restorative educator, I found myself asking 'How do we embrace uncertainty with our learners?' As a science teacher I asked, 'How can science in both nature and content act as an agent of healing and growth?'

1 Introduction

1.1 Restorative justice in educational contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the importance of the interconnected world that we live in. The increased degree of general uncertainty in the world in addition to being isolated led to many people struggling with decreases in mental, physical and emotional health. In response to this and the large degree of problems that arose from the pandemic, people were empowered to change their ways of thinking and reorient their lives around relationships (Llewellyn, 2021). While the pandemic subsides and some choose to return to traditional systems, uncertainties still linger in the long-term mental, emotional, physical and social effects on humanity. These uncertainties will continue to have implications for the well-being, quality of life and disparities within multiple demographic categories, meaning that we must continually seek innovative solutions to address these issues in relational ways that will allow us to manage the uncertainties together. Education is one tool that allows us to address these uncertainties and study the effects of restorative justice on multiple systematic levels and highlight the reflexive nature and importance of each level from macro to micro.

Lodi and colleagues conducted a systematic review of the literature on restorative practices in schools. They identified 34 relevant studies that helped them create a comprehensive description of the school-based restorative justice literature. They noted that restorative justice is an alternative to punitive discipline methods such as zero-tolerance policies, focusing instead on involving all parties in resolving conflicts and preventing harmful behaviours. The use of punitive policies has historically led to outcomes that perpetuated harmful behaviours, fuelling the creation and sustainability of the school to prison pipeline (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). As noted by Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa and Patrizi (2021), zero-tolerance polices fuel negative outcomes by ignoring the underlying disparities of race, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status which contribute to harmful behaviours as expressions of unmet needs of developing learners.

Lodi et al. (2021) found that schools employing restorative justice typically use practices that involve multiple people, including circles and restorative conferences, as opposed to the more traditional victim and perpetrator approach common in interventions affiliated with criminal justice. This indicates a more systemic approach to restorative justice that considers broader relationships and dynamics.

Their review suggests that restorative practices reduce conflict, improve discipline, lower suspension rates and lessen the need for punitive measures. Restorative justice also serves as a preventive measure to foster positive relationships and community-building. Schools implementing restorative justice have seen improved academic performance, reduced absenteeism and decreased dropout rates. While Lodi et al. (2021) does not diminish the need for punishments such as suspensions in certain contexts, the authors do note the need for innovative restorative approaches to be implemented outside of the justice system, which focus on repairing harm and healing the offender. This contributes to safe, equitable and inclusive school communities. With reduced health-risk behaviours among students, such as substance abuse or dangerous sexual behaviours.

As Lodi and colleagues noted, the literature is focused on group interactions and there is limited attention in the Restorative Justice literature to the change process in student-teacher relationships and the meaning of ongoing restorative conversations. This article tells the story of a relationship and its outcomes between one learner (Steven) and one science teacher (who is also a learner) across multiple years in a restorative educational context. Throughout this article, many different relationships are mentioned. All the information about other relationships is from the perspective of the learner alone.

The relationship between teacher and learner developed intermittently over the course of two years in a school suspension programme. The alternative suspension programme (ASP) is a partnership between a Mid-Western US school district and a community non-profit organisation (The Beacon) that recognised suspended learners needed a place during out-of-school suspensions to stay safe, complete work and process the suspension event.

The restorative model used at The Beacon holds that everyone has a story and a right to tell it, explore it and retell it. Staff employ a mind-set of curiosity and respect. In the curious, respectful pursuit of learner stories, the programme works to separate the deed from the doer (Braithwaite, 1989), ensuring that suspended learners are treated as humans rather than as problems or even as criminals.

This article aims to give voice to the story of one youth with a chaotic life and to show how restorative practices and uncertainty management can be tools to facilitate learner growth and development. Restorative practice is the framework we use to work with learners. Uncertainty management emerging from science education (Chen, Benus & Hernandez, 2019; Chen, 2021) provides a way to understand the learner's transformation. We use science as a method of the mind to contextualise relevant learner behaviour. We use science content as a medium through which to reflect on the narratives of the learner as they exist in the past, the present and the perceived future. We use a narrative inquiry followed by thematic analysis to highlight the complexity in the stories of teacher and learner. We attempt to bring nuance by combining uncertainty management to extend the framework of restorative practices.

1.2 Theoretical framework
Individuals in the restorative process are treated with *respect* and invited into a voluntary *relationship* that comes to bear shared *responsibility* and derives

motivation to *repair* and *reintegrate* into the system where dignity is thriving (Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014; Restorative Solutions, 2022; Wachtel, 2016). Restorative Justice Practices are guided by the humanistic paradigm which is a holistic approach that focuses on the whole person who is in the process of becoming (Taylor, 2001). In becoming, each person has dignity or an inherent worth full of knowledge and wisdom (Evans & Vaandering, 2016: 32), which is to be nurtured and used to make the community stronger. As guides of young people in educational contexts, the educators in the alternative suspension programme, we take it as a responsibility to honour the origins of the word education and call forth or 'draw out' (Evans & Vaandering, 2016: 7) this dignity for the healing and strength of the humanity in our community as we walk through uncertainty to places of transformation. While we hope this framework can be applied to everyone, the participation in the programme is a family decision made by the learner and their guardian.

Uncertainty, 'The psychological disposition accompanying the struggle, dubiety, ambiguity, confusion, curiosity, wonder, about how to unfold, respond to and interpret encountered situations' (Chen, 2021: 384), lays the groundwork that describes the transformation of the events and characters within the narrative. We utilise Chen's model for uncertainty management that includes three phases: *Raise, Maintain, and Reduce* (Chen et al., 2019) to organise the development of the relationship. We describe the process of embracing uncertainty using the lens of science as a method of mind and as a discipline that created artful analogies for cognitive processing. While Chen et al. (2019) uses this model to identify dialogic patterns, we are using this model to ask questions about what circumstances at the beginning of the relationship led to 'raised' uncertainty, how was that uncertainty 'maintained' throughout the interactions between learner and teacher and how that uncertainty was 'reduced'. Figure 1 (Restorative Solutions, 2022; Chen et al., 2019) shows how these frameworks are used through the progression of the narrative.

Figure 1   *Dual framework for restorative practices and uncertainty management*
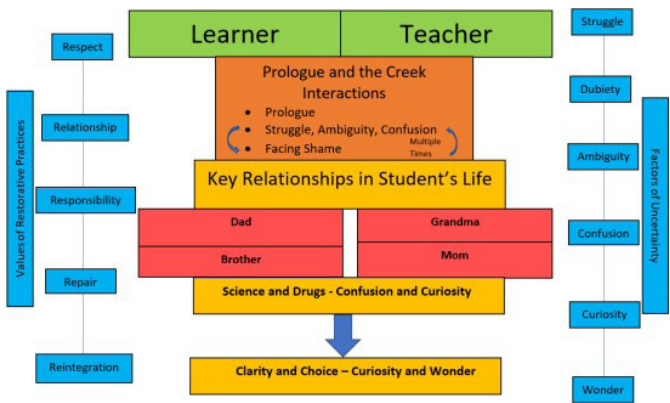
1.3 Knowledge development driven by uncertainty

The research aims to address current gaps in uncertainty management research within science education by using restorative practices to provide a nuanced understanding of how uncertainty is raised, maintained and reduced.

> Even though some recent research in modelling emphasises the process of engaging learners as they move between phenomena, data collection, data interpretation, and theory (Baumfalk et al., 2019; Tobin et al., 2018), the field has not yet fully explored how learners progressively develop knowledge when spontaneously dealing with and being driven by uncertainty. So far, there is little understanding of how teachers can productively integrate epistemic uncertainty as a pedagogical resource to *facilitate learner learning of science*, how epistemic uncertainty is designed *and embedded in scientific modelling and made visible to learners, and how learners respond to the uncertainty they encounter* in different phases of modelling. (Chen, 2021: 385)

'Facilitation' through learner-centred interaction found in the dual framework seeks to uncover shame and work towards healing. Shame is defined through Restorative Practices (Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014) as a behavioural response to an event that reveals one's shortcomings. Through the learner-centred approach, a deep understanding of learners, the situation that led to their suspension, the important relationships in their lives and where they converge is gathered in pursuit of uncovering shame and healing. As the learner's understanding grows, the learner is motivated to do the restorative work that is necessary for real change. Personal history is embedded into the models created to investigate events scientifically, aesthetically and theologically (Scharmann, 2020). The process of science through asking questions and doing research brings clarity and can be leveraged for learning and restoration. Figure 2 (Chen et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016) helps to visualize this process.

Figure 2   Model for uncertainty management using restorative justice practices
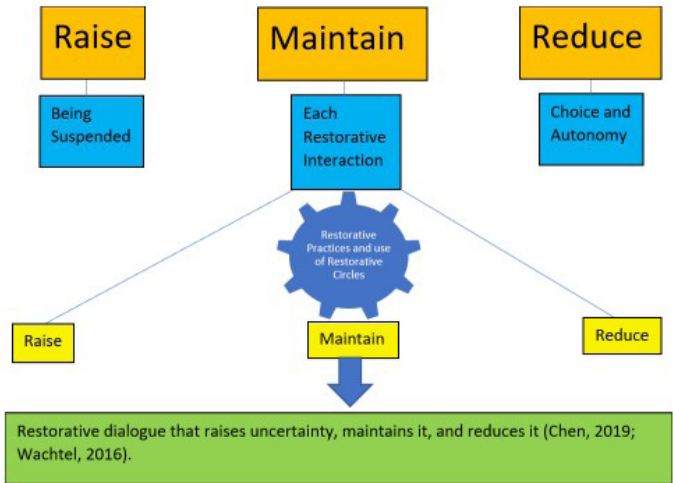
When we consider what has been *raised*, we consider learners as people. Suspended learners often face academic and emotional uncertainty. Many learners who have been suspended struggle with academic achievement in the years that they are suspended (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). In combination, unapproached academic and emotional uncertainty have emergent consequences that often lead to unresolved conflict and repeated suspension without recognising root causes or giving regulative strategies (Lorsen, 2011).

Suspensions punish learners and remove them from school and academic support causing *raised* uncertainty and raised associated emotions (Chen, 2021; Figure 2). Throughout the suspension, uncertainty was *maintained* through dialogic interactions during restorative circles (Costello, Wachtel & Wachtel, 2010). In restorative circles, we used academics, specifically science content, as a lens for the student to better understand the situation. This lens created room for further conversations where trained staff utilised Restorative Practices and uncertainty management to *maintain* uncertainty in productive ways. Co-development methods (Chen et al., 2019; Chen, 2021; Wachtel, 2016) provided learners with the tools to actively *reduce* uncertainty and work towards clear choices (Chen et al., 2019; Wachtel, 2016).

2   Methods of inquiry

2.1 Rationale for methods

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method that focuses on understanding and exploring the stories or narratives of individuals to gain insight into their experiences and perspectives. Narrative inquiry is a valuable approach when investigating various aspects of schooling, including the complex systems around student behaviour. The key advantage of narrative inquiry in educational research

is its ability to capture the richness and complexity of individuals' experiences. It allows researchers to delve into the personal, emotional and cultural dimensions of education, offering a more holistic understanding of the educational phenomenon being studied.

2.2 Methodology

This narrative inquiry followed Clandinin and Connelly (1990, 1994, 2000) as it relied on chronological data collection, weaving together 'multiple I's' and 'stories of experience', acting as 'ingots of time' allowing the narrative to emerge. The narrative is mapped out according to the model proposed by Clandinin (2013) of *coming alongside the participant, telling, re-telling and re-storying*. This model allowed us to view the transformations of the characters within the narrative and paralleled with the iterative nature and developmental techniques within restorative practices.

Restorative practices commonly involve conversations and circles where individuals work through the five values of *respect, relationship, responsibility, repair* and *reintegration* (Restorative Solutions, 2022). General restorative conversations or circles may or may not focus on the suspension event, but do build rapport that is in line with the five restorative questions: 'What happened?' 'What were you thinking at the time?' 'What have you thought about since?' 'Who was affected?' and 'What should be done to make things right?' (Wachtel, 2016). These questions worked to build a language with the learner that focused on investigating interactions, whether personal or otherwise, gaining awareness in one's thinking and processing patterns, being thoughtful about how various relationships within an interaction are affected and how to move forward and amend mistakes if necessary. Restorative questions promote introspection, thoughtful interactions and learning from mistakes for growth. Multiple conversations and/or circles are needed for each learner to facilitate the *telling* and *re-telling* of the learner's story.

2.3 Data sources

Data was collected from five suspension events over two years. We used three data sources: artefacts representing learner resources such as storybooks and collaboratively written work with learners, field notes and audio recorded interviews in the form of general restorative conversations and restorative circles (Costello et al., 2010).

2.3.1. *General restorative conversations, impromptu restorative circles and formal restorative circles.*

General restorative conversations addressed subjects unrelated to the suspension, but built rapport in line with the five restorative questions: 'What happened?' 'What were you thinking at the time?' 'What have you thought about since?' 'Who was affected?' and 'What should be done to make things right?' (Wachtel, 2016). These questions worked to build a language with the learner that focused on investigating interactions, whether personal or otherwise, gaining awareness in one's thinking and processing patterns, being thoughtful about how various relationships within an interaction are affected and how to make move forward

and amend mistakes if necessary. Impromptu circles addressed challenges related to behaviours, but unrelated to the suspension. Formal restorative circles focused on suspension-related actions.

Institutional Review Board approval was secured for the data collection with regard to this project.

2.4 Analysis

Field notes were reviewed multiple times in audio form and then summarised through reflexive analysis, using the theoretical framework noted earlier. These summaries from field notes were again reflexively revised according to the emergent narrative "ingots" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990) gathered from analysis of the recorded circles and conversations. The recorded circles and conversations were transcribed and then coded within Atlas Ti9, using open coding methods in line with Saldaña (2016) to execute a thematic analysis described by Miles and Huberman (1994). The coding scheme was based on the dual framework as articulated in Figure 1, while attending to un-hypothesised phenomena with emergent coding and memos. To execute this, we followed suggestions from Connelly and Clandinin (1990) by first synthesising the narrative through-line for each event and allowed it to form into one of the 'ingots' within the growing story. As we moved through the coding process, we inevitably saw new patterns arise and reconciled the new patterns with the old patterns. Through this process we allowed the themes and narrative through-line to expand in depth. With this, each suspension event and the associated data uncovered layers of experience that brought light to the deep narrative and transformations.

3   Prologue and researcher positioning

Working with suspended youth, I have recognised patterns in the communication between school administrators and suspended learners. When a learner is suspended for something as obvious as smoking marijuana from a vape pen in the bathroom, adults in the school and at home often just react. They look at learners as a series of good and bad behaviours. This perspective neglects to recognise that behind those behaviours are a mind that thinks and a heart that pumps. They fail to see that these learners are navigating the world in the best way they know how and that learning must occur to make lasting change. For those who live in uncertain worlds, constantly marred with events outside their control – divorce, mental health challenges, grief, abuse, rejection, uncertainty may be all they know and what looks like 'just another kid smoking marijuana in the bathroom' is a kid trying to silence the trepid tones, dampen the effects of the external events, so they can find a sense of rest.

3.1 The learner – Steven

When I (the I refers to the first Author) first met Steven, he was at the beginning of his 8th-grade year when Steven was 13. He was a skinny young man who wore the same pair of fashionably ripped jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt each day. He chose

a seat in the corner of our room where he could easily hide. He frequently and casually tossed his hair around and shifted his body away from people to signal that he was not interested in whatever was happening. It was evident that Steven was acting on some degree of shame using the withdraw type response as described (Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014; Nathanson, 1992).

Steven was suspended for smoking marijuana from a vape pen in the bathroom. He was upset when he got to the suspension programme. He felt that the whole thing was 'stupid'. If asked any questions about the event, he just changed the subject or blamed someone else. For someone that was caught red-handed, this was curious. It was evident here that his shame responses were complex as he too used 'avoidant' techniques (Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014; Nathanson, 1992) to shy away from the hard work of restoration.

Steven struggled to understand any school material. Feedback caused him to cross his arms, stop any effort and shut down. His parents had recently divorced, and his father with whom he was living, had remarried. Steven found himself in a new household with new siblings and a new relational dynamic. At this same time, his mother, with whom he had a better relationship, moved away. His grandmother who acted as his second most trusted adult, died. Steven's father tried to cope, but he struggled to manage his son's needs while Steven was mourning his mother's move to another city and adjusting to a new family. Lacking effective parenting strategies Steven's father relied on a more traditional, authoritative and punitive parenting style.

Steven told me he often felt dismissed by his teachers and family. He felt like no one really listened to him and never really gave him the opportunity to share his thoughts or his side of the story. Steven knew he had made bad decisions over the years and now had a reputation as a 'bad kid' that others needed to 'keep an eye on'. As I listened to him speak about his frustrations, he told me how he tried many times to do right, but anything he did, others interpreted as bad. Each portion of Steven's life (at school and at home) seemed to compound, amplifying what Kelly and Thorsborne (2014) would call Steven's desire for autonomy and power of his situation, which was complex and included a high degree of uncertainty that led to complex layers of shame for us to uncover and approach.

3.2 The teacher

I was 26 when I first met Steven. I intentionally dressed very casually as I wanted to communicate to learners in the suspension programme that I was there to meet them where they were. At this point, I had been working with kids in various settings for six years. In my early 20s I worked with grieving children and used music and art to tell the stories of grief. Separately, I created and ran programmes that taught elementary learners wildlife education. Just before I started working at The Beacon, I taught in a traditional school setting as a biology teacher.

I grew up in the outdoors, walking amongst the trees, the leaves and quiet animal feet. When I look at learners, I see them as I see organisms in the natural world – as complex and integral to the ecosystem they live in. I see them as grievers, experiencing loss in many ways. I see my learners as people that want to support the world around them while simultaneously fulfilling their own needs.

Along with these experiences, I was always curiously focused on my learners' stories. These stories had themes and patterns, a beginning, a middle and an end, and, most importantly, characters. Good stories are not simply a series of exciting events, but events that reveal the change in mind-set and transformation of a character.

In the beginning of my interactions with Steven, I had been working at The Beacon for a year and a half and was well practiced in my abilities to identify themes and patterns in learner's stories. I could see where the stories started and how the characters were developing. It is through these lenses that I best connect to people. At the core of this work is deep connection and understanding. For me, to do that with learners, I must look through the lenses of science and compassionate humanity. What follows is not just an account of a teacher working with a learner. It is the story of how a science teacher, learner and naturalist used education to walk with a struggling learner through uncertain terrain.

Through training in restorative practices, I learned a sense of calm when confronted with challenging learner behaviours. I came to see them all as opportunities to learn about who learners are – to observe, make inferences and test those ideas through artful interaction. I listen well and always try to hear what lies at the core of a person's story. Many suspended learners have been rejected repeatedly. For many of them it is easier to keep people at arm's length. I saw this in Steven and leaned in.

3.3 The setting – The Beacon

The alternative suspension programme at The Beacon was calm and inviting. When learners entered, suspension programme staff engaged them in casual conversation to welcome, got to know them and provided them time to adjust. We used this time at the beginning of the programme to instil a culture of peace and understanding. We set expectations for learners to be open, honest, productive and connected to the quiet, safe space. The space is used for recovery; little productive or connective work can happen when a person is tired or hungry. Quiet, safe spaces can be used for deep connection to self and other people. Finally, the space was used for productivity (academic or otherwise) and creativity.

4   Coming alongside the learner – struggle and respect

Chen's model (2019, 2021) for managing uncertainty starts with recognising the type of uncertainty that is being dealt with. Most learners come to the suspension programme already in a *raised* state – they are suspended and often have other external stressors. Many learners struggle because of lack of support, guidance and clear understanding of how to break negative patterns. As a result, learners need to know that they are in a place that is both physically and psychologically safe. In a calm space that is respectful, curious and compassionate, the initial relationship is built. Trust is crucial for the learner to engage and open to new *raised* phenomenon that could negotiate uncertainty. To facilitate this, we used multiple restorative conversations that worked to develop a sense of *respect* and *relationship*. These

conversations looked to meet Steven at the place he was in and to take him to a new place of trust.

...

The first time I met Steven was challenging. Steven's only response to staff was to disconnect. We tried all the moves we had to help motivate and connect. When we tried to help with homework, he got up to go the bathroom or just refused, daring us to act. When we offered to simply talk, he quickly shut down and said nothing. If we were able to build momentum, right when we got to a point that would have been connective or productive, he folded his arms and returned to defiance. One day, I tried a different tactic.

I looked at what was on his computer screen and empathically declared, 'What's that? What's that? What's that? Click on it! Click on it! Click on it!' He did and we found something else on a new web page. He then started to run his mouse back and forth with no coherent reasoning. I encouraged the behaviour. Every time he escalated the behaviour, I encouraged and joined in. He got to a screen with a picture of a cartoon character that had face tattoos, making the cartoon look like a 'thug'. He held the picture up to the screen and began to trace it. He looked at me and started to laugh uncontrollably saying, 'It's you! It's you! It's you!' I laughed with him and then suggested we hang it on the wall. Every movement or thought he made, I matched and further encouraged him. After about 20 minutes, he stopped and chose to work on school assignments. He knew I would be open to who he was. Finally, we could start.

The intuitive reaction to irrationality is to turn to logic and facts, as it seems like this is what is missing. This reaction assumes a person acting irrationally is not aware of his or her actions. When emotion has been *raised*, the logical part of the brain is fine; it is the illogical part of the brain that is struggling. In fact, the logical part of the brain knows this, making it even worse, deriving deeper shame and thoughts that sound like, *Who could possibly care for someone like me? I am a monster*. Logic is not helpful. The first step is creating a safe and inclusive space. After this space is established, connection and restoration can start. While we had built trust, it would be months and another suspension before Steven and I could uncover his story, begin to piece the puzzle together and start to look for solutions.

5 Telling – ambiguity, respect, relationship and reversion back to dubiety and struggle

After we built trust, Steve opened and engaged during activities, especially ones where we got to move around and be outside. I saw him become more willing to openly talk about his life. He began to seek opportunities to talk. Because this was the first instances where Steven was tentatively open to talk, we coded this instance as *ambiguity*. Ambiguity in this context is defined by instances where the learner is exhibiting 'the quality of being open to more than one interpretation' (Simpson, Weiner & Oxford University Press, 1989). The ambiguity was then leveraged with an analogy from our experiences at the creek (Vendetti, Matlen, Richland & Bunge,

2015). These general restorative conversations further built respect and developed the relationship with Steven using a non-threatening and indirect medium (Scharmann, 2020) to build rapport about the values and decision-making process that Steven had.

5.1 The creek interactions

During breaks in the alternative suspension programme day, we took trips to a nearby creek. On our trips Steven was a different learner, who willingly explored the area near the creek, connecting deeply to all the things he saw. He was a keen observer and many observations led to deeper conversations. The science teacher in me was teeming with excitement, as I saw how these experiences were stepping stones that helped Steven to understand the circumstances and harm surrounding his suspension.

The day after our first creek adventure, Steven asked to meet with me. Even though it was his idea to talk, he proceeded to put defensive walls back up. He sat across from me cross-armed and gave short answers to my questions.

…

Teacher: We never bring these things [harms Steven had caused to others] to your attention just to make you feel bad, but to make you more aware. So many people are affected by the things that you do because so many people are, in a way, connected to you. Do you know what I mean by that? What do you think I mean by 'connected to you?'

Steven: Maybe like, I don't know.

Teacher: Let's use an analogy. How might a fish be connected to a grasshopper?

Steven: Genes.

Teacher: Similar to things like that, yeah, that's a connection. What about food chain-wise?

Steven: I don't know. Fish eat worms and bugs. Grasshoppers eat grass, I think.

Teacher: Right. I make that analogy because the things that you do, the movements you make in the world can have an effect on people you'll never meet, like the parents who called with concern. If parents feel a certain way, they could talk to the principal, the principal to the teachers and on and on. It could have a spidering effect. It affects so many different people in that way.

…

The conversation was one-sided in many ways. At first, I thought that he was not listening, but later I realised that while his body seemed closed off, he was listening. The conversation allowed for a re-framing of his internal narrative allowing him the opportunity to rewrite the narrative with new possible outcomes. In response to the day at the creek, Steven wrote:

Figure 3   Steven's observations and insights
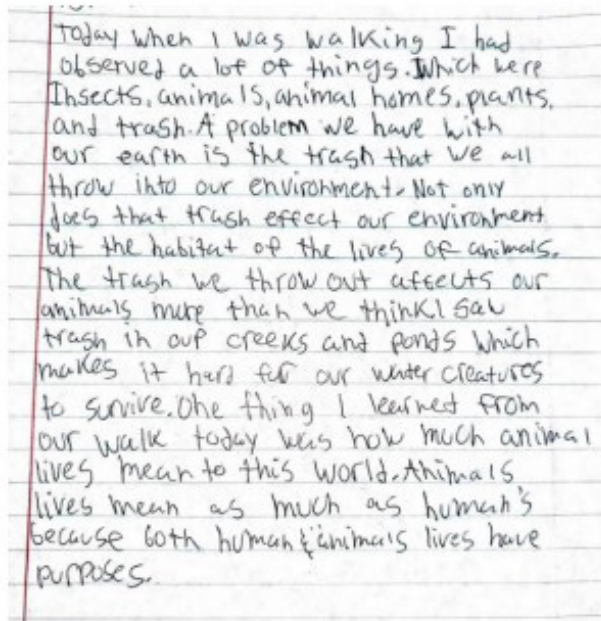
> Today when I was walking, I had observed a lot of things, which were, insects, animals, animal homes, plants and trash. A problem we have with our earth is the trash that we all throw in our environment. Not only does that trash affect our environment, but also the habitat of the lives of animals. The trash we throw out affects our animals more than we think. I saw trash in our creeks and ponds, which makes it hard for our water creatures to survive. One thing I learned from our walk today was how much animal lives mean to this world. Animal lives mean as much as humans because both human and animal lives have purpose.

In our travels to the creek, we saved fish that had been washed up onto dry areas of the creek. Joyfully, we helped them along to deeper water using sticks to move a build-up of duckweed that inhibited the flow of water. These experiences brought substance to the words Steven spoke and wrote. When probed to think about the lives that matter most in his world, he spoke about his mom, his dad, his brother and especially his grandma. When probed to think about the 'duckweed' that needed to be cleaned in his own life, he made the connection to smoking marijuana. While the letter showed that he was listening and open during our conversation, it was evident from his body language that he was confused. What preceded and followed this conversation was still avoidance and self-justification (Aronson, 2019; Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014).

Steven had few adults he trusted. This meant I had to listen first. Steven trusted me enough to listen, but then emotionally and physically backed off to the safety of familiar patterns. Steven was stuck, wanting to change but finding it hard.

5.2 The storybook

5.2.1 The teacher
I recognised Steven's situation through the lens of grief. In my personal travels through life as a scientist, as someone who experienced the death of a parent at a young age and as someone who has worked with a wide variety of grieving children, I viewed grief as a generalised term that can explain the complex emotions that accompany loss and trial. When I thought about Steven, these lenses provided me a way to further understand and connect. The interactions to follow would be classified as somewhere between general restorative conversations and impromptu circles, as they use an indirect medium (the storybook) to help the more direct processing of challenges related to the behaviours that got Steven in trouble.

5.2.2 Steven
Steven had experienced a loss of family to divorce. The loss added to his sense of uncertainty and lack of control. To ease this struggle, he began smoking marijuana. He told me that he started to realise that smoking was creating further harm in his life by straining relationships and compounding the loss he was experiencing. Amid personal realisation, Steven felt shame while knowing he still had to go home at the end of the day, back into uncertainty.

...

After one of our creek visits, I decided to try something new. We spent time at the creek using the interactions in the natural world to form analogies we could use to process through his decisions while thinking about important relationships in his life. The interaction reminded me of a children's story I wrote for children working through grief.

The story is of a child whose hat blows into a forest. He chases this hat being 'called in new directions'. As he does this, he is faced with the experience of being lost in the woods as the sun sets. Figure 4 speaks to the juxtaposition felt when one encounters something new that one must embrace – 'I do not want to stay and I also do not want to go. I am scared and worried.'

Figure 4   Pages from Book on Grief
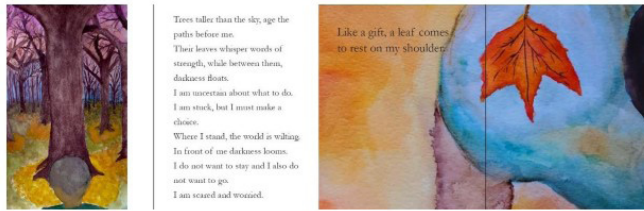
As the boy in the story stands there, a leaf lands on his shoulder. He takes the leaf and as he examines its intricacies, it wilts in his hands and leaves him glowing in the darkness. He is covered with leaves and left glowing as the leaves give him the light he needs to see his way through the forest. With the aid of the leaves, he is comforted and finds the fortitude to look up and allow the stars to guide him to where he needs to go.

I asked Steven to read this story and pick out something that stood out to him. He picked the two images here and we talked about his 'leaves'

....

Teacher: What do you think?

Steven: I think I relate to that a lot. I'm stuck. I've got my grandma and my mom over here and they're here to help me. Kind of like that leaf.

Teacher: This is about the leaves on your shoulder. Who are the leaves in your life? You said your mom and your grandma …

Teacher: There are these things that come around and fill us up and the more we get that feeling, the more we want to look and see where it actually is and experience, 'that feels good'. We want those things to continue. Those are the paths we follow. You also recognise that there's a discrepancy there between the leaves in your life that are your family and the leaves in your life that are –

Steven: I know that my dad's biggest fear is me … He told me last night that my mom's biggest fear is me ending my life because I've been in a very depressed state for years. I just don't like to show it or talk to people about it. I've been more open this week.

Teacher: Did you appreciate that conversation?

Steven: I cried.

Teacher: That's fair bro.

Steven: I got very emotional. I could tell he was too.

Teacher: Where did it come from?

Steven: Having those types of conversations. I didn't want that to be known. Sometimes I get lonely and I have to think about it and how I was actually feeling.

Teacher: I'm kind of the same way, I get that. What kind of things did you write about? How were you feeling?

Steven: I wrote how I feel like I'm trapped. That energy and how I feel like I can't do it right and how I feel like I've been needing to do drugs more. I told him that I'm sorry for being a disappointment. That changed him. I also wrote about how I don't really learn my lessons. I've seen other people relapse. I deserve to be happier. I've been mad at myself for a long time.

Teacher: Have you ever considered, 'How you will forgive yourself?'

Steven: I don't know if I can. You know, my grandma has done so much for me and I've stolen from her. I've stolen from my mom before. Just to get money for marijuana. That's one thing I regret. My mom is one of the hardest-working people. She had to pick up another job because she wasn't making enough money. I don't want her to have to do that. They were forced to move out of the house they were living in and they got moved down to the one we live in now.

Teacher: I know it doesn't seem like its man, but even for you to be able to say all these things, that is huge. You just gotta keep going man.

Steven: I guess.

…

On that day Steven had the most energy I had seen throughout the entire programme. He read the story and used it to process what he was going through. As I started to ask him questions, it became evident that he had a lot weighing on his chest and wanted to tell his story. Throughout the interaction, Steven shared his emotions, something he previously avoided by shutting down and withdrawing from situations. I saw Steven processing shame.

According to Kelly and Thorsborne (2014), once shame is admitted and faced through verbalisation of feelings and emotions, there is an emptying effect, where the learner allows everything they have been holding on to, to be seen. Once this occurred, Steven was able to accept his situation and work through the complex feelings. This was his final day of suspension. After making these connections, it was evident he saw the harm. Then, he returned home to an environment in which the new strategies meant little.

Over the course of the next year and a half during multiple suspensions I heard more of Steven's story – characters, scenes and plots that played a role in his life. He told me how his father tried to connect in ways, but (at least from Steven's perspective) struggled to be consistent and many times reverted to parenting practices that harmed their relationship. He shared that his brother continued to smoke marijuana and continued to pressure him to do the same. He spoke about his grandmother and mom increasingly. Through each iteration of the story and

with careful attention to those most important things in his life, change started to emerge.

6 Re-telling – confusion, relationship and responsibility

6.1 Key relationships in the learner's life

At the core of restorative practices are relationships. The approach is different from punitive approaches, as it shifts perspectives from 'rules broken', to 'harm caused to relationships' (Wachtel, 2016). Embracing these relationships as important and admitting that they have been harmed, elicited states of ambiguity and confusion in the form of cognitive dissonance for Steven. In the previous interactions, Steven used self-justification (Aronson, 2019) to revert to a state of struggle. To understand the use of self-justification, it is important to understand Steven's home life. The following is from a series of circles in which there were combinations of impromptu and formal circles. These interactions addressed challenges related to Steven's behaviour and occasionally touched on the harmful behaviours bound in drug use and stealing.

6.2 Home Life

6.2.1 Stepbrother

Steven and his stepbrother bonded over smoking marijuana together. Even though in many of the interactions Steven noted that he knew it was not good for him, his stepbrother was one of the only people in his life Steven considered a friend. His stepbrother was someone he could talk to about life.

Teacher: So, what's up man, what do you want to talk about today?

Steven: I just kind of liked the talks.

Teacher: Me too. What do you like about them?

Steven: Its social and I like conversation. I don't have much conversations unless it's with like my brother.

While he felt he could confide in his brother he also struggled with the connection – 'I have noticed that being alone, when my brother isn't there actually does make my mood a little better. I'm not as irritable.' Steven even noticed that he tended to not get into trouble when he takes time for himself – 'I guess also when you do your own things, you don't get in trouble really. You know what I mean?' Steven still had a drive for human connection, unfortunately the bond occurred using drugs.

Steven: 'But like you know I live with my brother and he's into weed so you know they kind of peer pressure me into doing it. So, like when you are with people you are more likely to get in trouble.'

Teacher: Totally.

Steven: And a lot of people don't really understand that. They think that it is my decision, but when you live with them …

Teacher: It's hard.

Steven: And you want to stay close to them too. You want them to trust you and all that.

Steven struggled to hold these dissonant thoughts. I presented them to him using an 'and' statement – 'You may see that you love your brothers *and* realise that they aren't good for you.'

This was hard for Steven to work through. Our conversation used the concept of healthy relational boundaries to accommodate the dissonance. While Steven understood the use of boundaries as a tool, he recognised that his brother, as a teenager, would not necessarily receive those boundaries with respect. Instead, Steven feared ridicule, harming an important relationship with no hope for change. As he strived to maintain relationships, he too recognised that the drugs have had a negative effect.

Steven: When I'm not high I just don't have motivation. When I'm not high, I'm sad or angry and just tend to over think a lot.

Teacher: That's kind of where my brain went. You told me you were up all last night.

Steven: Yeah, when I tried to sleep I just couldn't.

Teacher: How do you think you get those thoughts to resolve themselves?

Steven: Sometimes I talk with my brother about it.

Teacher: Do the thoughts come back?

Steven: Yeah, a little bit. And then when I'm alone, I just like hold them in.

The complicated relationship with his brother left him stuck. The more time he spent with his brother, the better he felt because he had a friend. Though, with his brother he smoked marijuana and felt more disconnected and anxious.

6.2.2   Dad
Steven struggled in his relationship with his dad. His dad was very traditional and authoritative, punishing Steven without an effort to understand what led to the behaviour. Still, Steven loved his father and was able to recognise how his behaviour affected the relationship. After Steven shared that his dad's biggest fear was that Steven would harm himself, he was able to say that he deserved to be happier.

Steven's responses to his father were driven by shame – he felt like a disappointment. While the complexities of this relationship did not resolve in the years I interacted with Steven, he did come to realise that he deserved to be happy and knew that it was not happening in his current environment.

6.3 Away from home

6.3.1 Grandma

In many of our conversations, Steven spoke about his grandmother, telling stories, both good and bad. In the context of all the harmful behaviours Steven had exhibited over the years, he often referred to his grandmother's consistency in his life.

> I saw her a lot. The difference also is when our parents split. When we were together, our family was a whole family. We used to go over there for dinner, Christmas, everything. Ever since the split, there would be Christmases we wouldn't go over there. It hurts.

> Something that I have been thinking about is my grandma and how she sees me. I remind her of her son because he got into alcohol and he died at a young age, so she saw how I kind of look like. In the end, we started getting closer. She let me stay at her house because some things were happening at my house that made me not want to be there. She was about to pass and that was about the time I started getting into drugs and trouble. My grandma had trust issues too because, this is going to sound bad to say – I've stolen money from her just to buy drugs for myself. It's hard for her to trust me. That's what I hate myself for. I know it hurt her because she told me, 'Sometimes I may not like you, but I'll always love you. Though, I want her to see that I'm doing good and not bad. I'm kind of thinking to myself about that.'

Teacher: Does she know that you feel bad about stealing money from her?

Steven: She knows.

Teacher: So, what's the harm in telling her, 'I know I did this, and it was wrong, and I'm sorry for that.'

Steven: I told her that I'm sorry, but sometimes saying sorry doesn't always bring it back.

Teacher: You're right. You're right, so what do you do?

Steven: She told me to prove people wrong and start doing right. I've done so much wrong in my life that people look at me as always doing wrong. Prove them wrong and I start doing things right so she can trust me more. People see me doing right and they might hate that I'm doing right because there are people like that in this world. I got to put them people out of my life and keep around people that matter to me.

6.3.2 Mom

Steven and his mother were close, even though they did not live together. He knew well how he affected her – 'My mom's biggest fear is me ending my life because I've been in a very depressed state for years.' Steven's relationship with his mom was similar to the one he had with his grandmother. He felt love and acceptance – 'I'm

stuck. I've got my grandma and my mom over here and they're here to help me. Kind of like that leaf.'

Steven took responsibility for the harm he caused to the relationship with his mom and the deep remorse for his actions – 'I've stolen from my mom before. Just to get money for marijuana. That's one thing I regret. My mom is one of the hardest-working people. She works really hard. She had to pick up another job because she wasn't making enough money. I don't want her to have to do that.'

Throughout the time that I had known Steven, he often spoke about moving to live with his mom. Steven knew he needed to 'prove them wrong' like his grandma said and work to make amends. Steven knew that he deserved to be happy and to thrive. Though it was evident he was stuck. He was young and did not have much control over where he lived.

While he did not have the ability to change his living situation, the things he learned from his grandmother gave him a way to start moving forward. In the following interaction, Steven used the lessons from restorative conversations as we worked towards a way for him to repair the harm he caused.

6.4 Critical relationships

There are many relationships in Steven's story. It is important at this point to step back and avoid demonising any of the characters, as each one has a story and a perspective of their own. He had harmed all the relationships and would do well to repair each of them. Though, in practice, I have recognised over the years that young people are most motivated to make amends in relationships in which they feel loved and accepted. Making amends in relationships that diminish and harmed them is a considerably harder expectation.

Steven's dad and stepbrother were people that Steven loved and cared for. Though they were people he recognised as unhelpful and even destructive as he tried to change. In contrast, memories of his grandmother and his relationship with his mom held great meaning for Steven at that juncture in his life. It was the loving relationships he valued that led him to embrace uncertainty with curiosity rather than dubiety.

7 Re-storying – curiosity, responsibility and repair

7.1 Science of drugs

In the spring of his 8th-grade year, Steven was suspended again. Though this time he was more aware. He trusted the Beacon staff and welcomed the conversation telling his story with lowered shoulders and head. He had learned to process his thoughts and actions and articulated them ten minutes from his arrival. He understood how he was affecting the relationships in his life and how it affected him in return.

In this formal restorative circle, I worked with Steven to explore his drug use through the lens of science in a way that was very direct and that addressed those affected and his plans to make amends. I carefully guided him through the process of scientific investigation of his life-choice and its effects on himself and others. In

this interaction, we did research to examine claims about drugs. Then, he constructed a written plan to repair harm that he could share with the people in his life. This investigation of the issue that was relevant to Steven led to a new perspective and an opportunity for actionable change.

The document that we co-constructed (Figure 5) follows.

Figure 5   Co-constructed document between Steven and teacher

How has using marijuana/getting in trouble affected my relationships with the family that I really care about?
They [parents] see me doing drugs. I have stolen money to buy it. I have gotten in trouble because of it. This affects them because they don't want to see me doing bad things because they care about me. It makes them feel upset and stressed, which they have told me. When they tell me these things, I feel bad because I care about my family because they have shown me that they care and have done things for me, like helping me when I needed it. I needed help when things were going bad with my dad and step mom. My grandma let me stay at her house. My mom helps me by always talking to me by helping me to feel better and provides me a house where I feel at home.

How do you want to show these people that you care back?
I want to do good. I want to do better in school. I want to not get in as much trouble at home, including bringing vapes and marijuana in the house. I want to spend time with the people that are important, just doing anything like go out for lunch.

How long would I need to experiment with not smoking and what can I expect the experience to be like?

  a. *What I may experience.* "Common cannabis withdrawal symptoms that I experience are anxiety, depression, irritability, and insomnia (Mayo Clinic, 2019)". This is what I can expect to feel.
  b. *When I can expect to feel better.* "Some people start feeling positive effects within a week. It takes anywhere from 3 weeks to 10 months to kick a habit and form new habits (Mayo Clinic, 2019)."
  c. *Reaction.* When I see this, I see this as a pretty big number. It seems like a huge number because it is not something I have done and it kind of seems like something that is hard to do.

Do I want to try not smoking for an extended period of time?
Yes. I want to try experimenting by stopping smoking by first reaching 2 weeks.
  a. *When?*
Each day I will write down:
1. How I feel (in general)
2. What symptoms above I am experiencing that day
3. How I have been feeling since I have stopped (general thoughts)

Who is this for?
The experiment is for me, family, and Beacon staff. The above people are people I will share my insights with. I can write down a time in the journal and complete them I go into the bathroom to sit for a bit.

When you will share them:
I will share with Lighthouse on Monday the 1st. I will share with my grandma, (February 27th/28th). I will share with my mom on March 6th.

Together Steven and I moved towards taking action. Steven sought logic, now through exploration of his fears associated with change. Steven was honest about his fears and expressed vulnerability. Together we used curiosity about the biological effects of marijuana on the mind and body to transform these fears.

When I asked the final restorative question 'How will you make things right?' Steven answered by deciding to try taking personal realistic responsibility. Steven understood how his thoughts and feelings affected his decisions and planned to record these just as a scientist would during an experiment.

For a short time, Steven did try. However, returning to the same environment that contributed to his struggles and provided access to drugs, he went back to smoking marijuana.

8 Re-storying – wonder and reintegration

8.1 Clarity and choice

One year later, in the spring of his 9th-grade year, now 15 years old, Steven was suspended again. When he saw me, he was both excited and ashamed of being suspended again. He immediately asked if we could talk. It was quickly evident that he had already processed much on his own and had been working through the challenges that led to his suspension. The following excerpts from this formal restorative circle show Steven's gained skills and ability to directly engage with challenging issues.

Steven: It's been up and down. I have been good since [school in the school district that focuses on behaviour]. I was doing really good actually. First part of the year I got suspended again in the beginning of 9th grade for weed again. Ever since then my life has been up and down, from girl problems to school and home problems … mental health too, but you know I'm still trying.

Teacher: How have you been dealing with all that stuff?

Steven: I smoke weed. That's the only … I still feel like that is the only way I know how to cope. When I'm like sober and all that, I just don't know how to put all that stuff to the side you know and just not think about it.

As I listened, Steven's words stood out to me, 'I just don't know how to put all that stuff to the side you know and just not think about it.' This is related to the *Compass of Shame (*Nathanson, 1992*;* Wachtel, 2016) that outlines the way people react when they feel shame, in Steven's case, the shame of not being enough to figure out all the challenges in his life (Brown, 2013; Kelly & Thorsborne, 2014). Steven avoided the challenges for a short while, using drugs to push the 'stuff to the side', but when he sobered up, he realised they were still there.

Teacher: I think that's the thing. You can't. Do you know what I mean?

Steven: Yeah (with a big breath and sigh of realisation).

Teacher: You aren't supposed to. Those are the things that happen in your life. What does weed do? It makes them kind of disappear.

Steven: Yeah.

Teacher: They aren't supposed to disappear. That's your life.

Steven: I just want to do the best I can.

Teacher: And it's the good, the bad and the ugly. And if you think about it, this one bad thing happens and you smoke, you push it over here (motions to an imaginary pile on the table). Then two bad things happen and you smoke (motions again to the pile), now how many bad things have you got over here?

Steven: Two.

Teacher: After a year how many things have you got over here?

Steven: A lot (sombre tone). It just keeps building up.

Teacher: And then it becomes exceedingly difficult to not do that because now you've got how many things over here?

Steven: Too many.

Steven paused for a moment to reflect on this. It was evident that he was considering this reality. His hung face and shoulders said more than his words. Though, he was still aware of the factors that he could not control, as well as his fears of change.

Steven: Yeah. See like there are also things that I can't control. My living situation. Like I have an option to go and live with my mom full time, but like in my past I would move schools' way too much and I'm not trying to do that whole everything new thing you know? See the thing is that I have gone and spent the summers with my mom for the last two years. There is nothing wrong up there. It's when I'm at my best. The only problem is that I don't know anybody. I feel alone a lot. I don't have anyone to talk to. Though, my mom gives me more freedom. And like … me and my mom and my stepdad, we just have more respect for each other than what it's like at my dad's house. It's also not as chaotic.

At this point, Steven told me the same thing he told me at the beginning of our relationship – he lives in an environment that is chaotic and knows its counterproductive to him and his peace. Now tired of dealing with the repeated cycle he was ready to face it.

Teacher: So, what stops you? What are you afraid of? It sounds like it could be a positive thing in your life.

Steven: I guess my only fear is I'm not the kind of person to go off and make new friends. I mean, I can. I am a social person. I'm just the kind of person to stick with the people I have been with. Though, I have one friend who I have known since second grade. That's the same friend that I hope that, when I die, he is still my friend, you know? I want him to be there forever.

At this point, he started to look on the positive side and attempted to find a way to reconcile with the fact that he didn't want to lose his friend and home, even if it had been chaotic and harmful. In response to his fears, I had one final question:

Teacher: What do you want for yourself then?

As our conversation ended, Steven continued to entertain the idea of moving to stay with his mom. We talked about what that would be like. We talked about what it would be like to be in a new school, forming new relationships and, if he were to move, what he might say to his new principal and teachers so that they knew he really wanted to 'do better'. His suspension lasted a few more days. On his final day he came to me and said, 'I'm going to go live with my mom.'

9   Epilogue: no fairy-tale ending

At the end of our last conversation and I was hopeful. A few days later I had gotten word that Steven had gotten in trouble again for selling a gift I had given him for marijuana. I was confused and upset. I was now the one left in a state of uncertainty and harm. I had to embrace this uncertainty, just as I had asked Steven for the last two years. I had to reconcile the fact that Steven had finally made a choice to step out of the loud, chaotic environment he had been living in and was still struggling. I had to realise that I could not fix the situation because I wasn't Steven. In all my work in restorative practices, I knew that building strong relationships was key to helping young people find a deeper sense of respect and responsibility for themselves and others. Though I had to realise that it was not up to me when a person was ready to act positively.

9.1 My learning

As a teacher and positive adult using restorative practices, I interact with young people and often have the experience of, 'I know what this learner needs to do to get back on track.' This thought early in my career (and still, at times) was often followed with advice to help the learner along. Though often learners continue their thought patterns and repeat the same harmful behaviour. My advice fell short and Steven seemed even more defeated. For a time I grew to resent the learner and indulge in my own defensive statements, 'I told them and they decided not to listen,' ignoring the impact of external factors neither of us controlled and the incremental rate of change.

It hurt me to know that I could see the path forward. It felt harmful to withhold information as I thought, 'I have to tell them that it is a good idea to stay away from marijuana in adolescence because it can harm the brain. I don't want my learners to grow up and be unable to function properly. I want them to be healthy, happy and engaged with the world.' Though I had to realise that I had no real control over those outcomes. I could not stop the kids from smoking marijuana. I could not take them out of their toxic homes. I had to reconcile that though my intentions in giving advice were good, the impact was small (Stanier, 2020). I had to realise that the learner knew right from wrong, but what they did not know was how to navigate all the conflicting situations and emotions they were struggling with.

When I realised this, I was left with the question, 'How do I help provide learners with tools that they will embrace?' I realised that if I want the learners to listen, I must listen; all I could do was listen, reflect, teach through science and be willing to sit with my learners and let them know that I care and that they matter. I could live knowing I had done my job and still had faith that Steven could find a better way.

10   Discussion

10.1   *Science as a framework of mind*

Uncertainty is uncomfortable and stressful. People avoid uncertainty and find ways to reduce it as soon as possible. Though, when uncertainty is *maintained* with compassion and curiosity (Wachtel, 2016) learners are given the chance to 'progressively develop knowledge when spontaneously dealing with and being driven by uncertainty' (Chen, 2021: 385). As a pedagogical resource, this energy can be used to facilitate learning to make science modelling techniques visible to students, and provide space for the learners to understand and 'respond to the uncertainty they encounter' (Chen, 2021: 385). In the alternative suspension programme, Steven was provided with guidance to better understand his harmful behaviours, his needs as a person and how to best move forward.

The use of science as a tool to help learners to process challenges through the identification and unveiling of patterns in their lives. In the narrative, we used two scientific disciplines: ecology and biology. The ecological framework proved useful for Steven when considering how his life was tightly intertwined with the relationships in his life. This framework allowed him to process and to open up about the complex dynamics in his family life. The research-oriented approach to biological understanding of how marijuana affects the body, allowed Steven to more directly process how his own life decisions affected him and his body. As the narrative showed, the process imbedded within the teacher-learner relationship proved to be complex, though using the dual framework can be explained.

10.2   *Complexities in teacher-learner relationship*

Returning to the dual framework set at the beginning of the article, we can begin to make sense of all the interactions I had with Steven. Together Figures 6 and 7 allow for the visualization of how uncertainty was transformed using restorative justice practices.

Figure 6   ***Dual framework for restorative practices and uncertainty management***
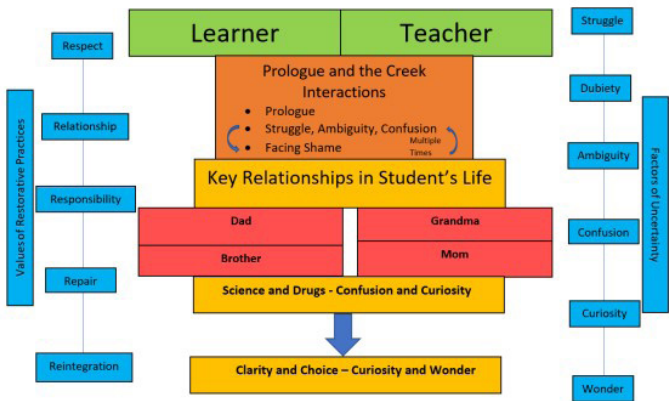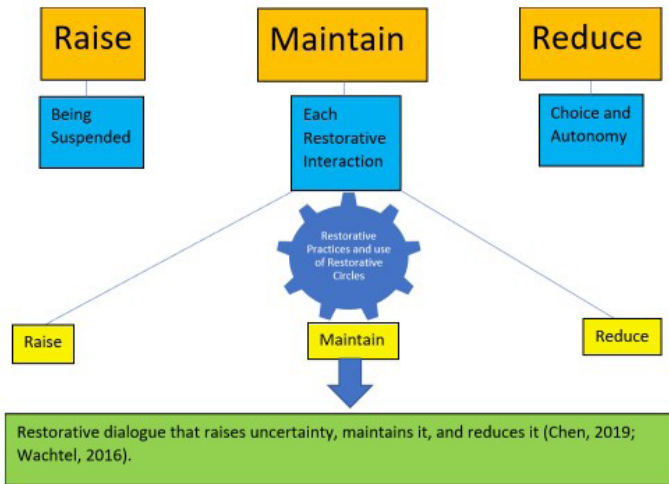

Figure 7   ***Model for uncertainty management using restorative justice practices***

As teacher and learner our initial interactions were a *struggle*. Forming a sense of mutual respect and trust was necessary for us to move forward in our *relationship*. The relationship developed through the persistent use of restorative practices through different types of restorative circles to maintain Steven's uncertainty. Steven initially fought the process with *dubiety*, leaning on self-justification (Aronson, 2019) as a tool to back away from vulnerability and restore a sense of psychological safety. As we developed respect and trust he embraced *ambiguity* and *confusion*.

Slowly, the restorative process within the interactions over the two years led us to *repairing* the relationships he had harmed, including the relationship with

himself. He approached vulnerability in his drug challenges with *curiosity* and in the end found himself in a place where he dared to *wonder* about a different life. Steven made the choice to *reduce* uncertainty and *reintegrate* by re-engaging with the world in a way that made sense to him. And Steven still struggled after he left the programme.

These interactions demonstrate the way learners and teachers can manage uncertainty with restorative practices. The study brings to light how the vulnerability that arises in relationships can either be met with a reversion to struggle and the repeating of cycles or embrace curiosity, wonder and growth (Brown, 2013; Chen, 2021; Wachtel, 2016). These interactions too highlight the complexity in teacher-learner relationships and the messy realities that intermix with efforts to help learners become self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

As noted in the beginning of the article, there has been limited attention paid to the role of ongoing restorative conversations with students. The article here attempts to provide an understanding of the nuance within the teacher-learner relationship and the complexities that arise in the restorative processes. If there is to be further incorporation of innovative approaches (Lodi et al., 2021) to restorative justice programmes within school systems, it is critical to understand these complexities and to highlight the fact that these processes are meant as tools to walk alongside learners, not to fix learners. The article further highlights that multiple suspensions are not necessarily bad, but rather have the ability to help students to grow and build skills over time. Through approaching suspensions as growth opportunities, we get the opportunity to address deep, underlying disparities in the context of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and more (Lodi et al., 2021), while also working towards repairing harm with victims.

10.3   Limitations and trade-offs

While the case highlighted a change process that can be difficult to capture, the study is limited by the fact that the student and teacher only interacted with each other during suspension events that did not have the benefit of the type of continuity that would occur in a traditional classroom. Additionally, the school that Steven returned to was not practicing restorative justice systematically. While certain people in the schools that Steven would have returned to would have aligned in practices with the foundations of restorative justice, many embodied traditional punitive mind-sets. This further led to a lack of continuity in what Steven would have been modelled outside of the programme.

While this article does not address critiques in the context of addressing macro-level systems change (Llewellyn, 2021) and thus highlights the issues with those noted earlier, the micro-level transformations that occurred were able to happen in a community-based site that was separate from the school system. Because the programme existed as a part of a community non-profit organisation, it meant that Steven and other students alike, got an opportunity to step into a new world, with a new and solidified culture based on restorative justice, where all staff operated under the same assumptions.

11 Conclusion

Steven's case exemplifies how restorative practices can work in tandem with science to 'facilitate' and 'embed' learning, in order to embrace uncertainty and replace shameful narratives with resilience. Conflict and struggle were co-developed towards an explanation of uncertainty in life with science as a lens. Science content was used to invoke analogical thinking (Vendetti et al., 2015) to construct a meaningful model that represented the phenomenon (learner's life experience). We used reflective listening techniques (Rogers, 1951) to reveal patterns found in the 'raw data' (the learner's persistent actions and thought processes). The learner was then given a chance to accept that the patterns were real and then use scientific content and investigation methods to directly address the challenges with proposed options for making amends.

While this was evident, Steven struggled to rewrite his narrative and subsequent behaviour. Nathanson (1992) defined the compass of shame as behavioural reactions to shame. These include attack on others, attack self, withdrawal and avoidance. Throughout the time I knew Steven, he showed all of these. These behaviours were autonomic when I first met Steven and meant that even in moments of clarity, he was quick to reinforce the identity that had been reflected on him by the adults in his life through self-justification (Aronson, 2019).

The perception of a bad kid had been communicated to Steven so many times that he believed it. When beliefs are strong and long-lived, self-justification acts to protect a person from thinking they are wrong and bad (Aronson, 2019). Even when we as teachers work to unveil shame by leaning in, being vulnerable and showing compassion (Brown, 2013) to separate the deed from the doer (Braithwaite, 1989) and instil a narrative that 'people can do harmful things and still be good people who can learn and grow from mistakes', it takes considerable time.

While Steven's decision to return to smoking marijuana did not change, his mind-set and his actions towards me did. Each time he returned to the alternative suspension programme, his ability to process the events in his life got better. By the end, he could clearly articulate his understanding of the events that got him suspended and had a clear understanding of how those events affected him and others. His narrative was clear and concise – he was tired of the chaos, tired of the repeated patterns and ready for transformation. He was remorseful and caring towards others affected by the situation. He wanted and knew he deserved better.

However, at the end of each day and at the end of each of his times in the programme, he was sent back home to the *trepid tones*. Outside the programme, he was presented with the choice to endure the chaos and find a new way or do what he knew how to do. Each time he returned to smoking marijuana. Though the story lacked a fairy-tale ending, real life seldom does. The *trepid tones* continue, and real strength lives in the process of learning and 'drawing out' the dignity within to become better in time.

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