IMPLICATIONS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN CONFLICT REDUCTION: A CASE STUDY IN OLINDA, PERNAMBUCO

IMPLICAÇÕES DA JUSTIÇA RESTAURATIVA NA REDUÇÃO DE CONFLITOS: UM ESTUDO DE CASO EM OLINDA, PERNAMBUCO

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ABSTRACT
With this qualitative research we aimed to analyze reverberations of restorative justice practices in Brazilian basic education schools. We discuss retributive and restorative justice concepts through a case study carried out in a school in Olinda, a Brazilian northeast municipality. We present data on the restorative practices project implementation in the school. It appears that episodes of conflict and violence prevailed among girls. As a result of the Project implementation, it appears that there is resistance from teachers and part of the students, but a new culture of peace also emerges through affirmative and preventive actions against violence, with emphasis on “female empowerment”. We conclude that such practices are contextualized in particular schools, under democratic leadership, such as the Brazilian case studied.

Keywords: Restorative Justice. Brazil. Democratic Leadership. Female Empowerment.

RESUMO
Objetivamos analisar, através de pesquisa qualitativa, as reverberações das práticas de justiça restaurativa nas escolas de educação básica brasileiras. Discutimos conceitos de justiça retributiva e restaurativa por meio de um estudo de caso realizado em uma escola de Olinda, município do Nordeste brasileiro. Apresentamos dados sobre a implementação do projeto de práticas restaurativas na escola. Indentificamos que os episódios de conflito e violência prevaleceram entre as meninas. Como resultado da implementação do Projeto, verifica-se que há resistência por parte dos professores e parte dos alunos, mas também emerge uma nova cultura de paz através de ações afirmativas e preventivas.

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contra a violência, com ênfase no “empoderamento feminino”. Concluímos que tais práticas são contextualizadas em escolas particulares, sob liderança democrática, como o caso brasileiro estudado.


**RESUMEN**

Con esta investigación cualitativa pretendemos analizar las repercusiones de las prácticas de justicia restaurativa en las escuelas de educación básica brasileñas. Discutimos conceptos de justicia retributiva y restaurativa a través de un estudio de caso realizado en una escuela de Olinda, ciudad del Nordeste brasileño. Presentamos datos sobre la implementación del proyecto de prácticas restaurativas en el colegio. Identificamos que los episodios de conflicto y violencia prevalecieron entre las niñas. Como resultado de la implementación del Proyecto, hay resistencia por parte de docentes y estudiantes, pero también emerge una nueva cultura de paz a través de acciones afirmativas y preventivas contra la violencia, con énfasis en el “empoderamiento femenino”. Concluimos que tales prácticas se contextualizan en escuelas privadas, bajo liderazgo democrático, como el caso brasileño estudiado.

**Palabras-clave:** Justicia Restaurativa. Brasil. Liderazgo Democrático. Empoderamiento femenino.

**INTRODUCTION**

Brazil has become internationally recognized for its neoconservative bias since the Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration, with expansion into the Lula and Dilma administrations, and a special deepening in the Bolsonaro administration, which understands education as a tool to produce human resources destined for the market economy. Educational policies have been characterized by exclusionary regulatory mechanisms. Although the political opening in Brazil\(^1\) made it possible to create participatory democratic mechanisms, such as the *National Education Guidelines and Framework Law*, Law no. 9.394 of December 20, 1996, which was a decisive milestone in the reorganization of the educational and school systems, actual events do not always follow the law. Instead, there is a certain bureaucratic compliance with the educational system, one that fails to take into account inter- and extra-school...

\(^1\) The end of the 1980s was a period of political opening for the country that had just emerged from the military dictatorship. The Federal Constitution of 1988 was distinguished by a discourse of democracy and citizenship.
relationships, the needs and realities of the students, community representation. Such aspects cause everyday phenomena such as instrumental learning, the absence of collaboration and sharing, inequalities, indiscipline, conflicts, violence, injustice. In this regard, Lopes (2004) states that certain global and local junctures need to be intellectually and politically faced, inserting into them meanings more in tune with a political-social project that aims to reduce the different forms of exclusion.

Considering the current context, with the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants in the country as 28.9%, in Pernambuco it has risen to 41.2% (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada [IPEA], 2017), which shows us the significant incidence of violence in this Federation Unit and the possible reverberations of this indicator within the school environment. In literature on violences, among the authors consulted, we found those who analyze the relationship between the social environment and aggressive behavior at school (Becker & Kassouf, 2016); the role of the school as a victim, author and/or space of violence (Charlot, 2002; Debarbieux & Blaya, 2011; Venas, 2008); violence as intimidation and bullying (Fante, 2011; Gomes, 2013; Grossi & Santos, 2008). We highlight study of the relationship between violence and gender (Neves, 2008; Torres & Araújo, 2015), which helped us to understand the higher incidence of episodes of violence involving girls within the context we were studying.

Silva (2013) highlights that episodes of conflicts and violence in schools have been one of the greatest challenges for school directors, and that it is through a democratic approach that this challenge can be addressed collectively. Silva understands that dealing with violence is not a task of the school only and yet, not being apathetic to this phenomenon, the school must respond through developing alternatives that allow for the prevention of violence at school.

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2 Brazil is a country with a republican political regime, being organized in autonomous federative entities (states). It is divided into 26 states and one Federal District. Pernambuco is one of the oldest states, located in the northeast of the country.
3 Institute of Applied Economic Research.
4 We agree with Michaud (2001) that one cannot speak of violence, but of violences, in the plural, given its different meanings as a result of historical, social and cultural factors. What is defined as violence depends on the type of society and the forms of control and resistance.
5 We carried out a survey of published papers, theses and dissertations using the descriptor “school violence” and invoking the time frame since 2020. Of the 38 productions obtained, we selected those focused on the prevention of violence in public schools, resulting in 12 works.

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alternatives that involve those implicated or affected. When analyzing violence among girls in a school context of political dislocation, obstruction of the State and isolation resulting from a pandemic and global paralysis (Dowbor, 2020), it is worth reflecting on the changes that need to happen in the school space and how to (re)construct the school so as to reduce social inequalities. Such shifts in political governance are seen by Futuro (2017), not as problem of a technical nature, but as matters of political exclusion against which resistance rises up. Such resistances can be consolidated as opportunities for the elaboration of creative projects, such as introducing restorative justice in a school reality permeated by violence.

This study is based on the concepts of restorative justice (principles, relationships, methods), as defined by Zehr (2008), and empowerment according to Couto and Saiani (2021). Our analysis has pointed to restorative justice practices in schools as being motivated to provide adequate conditions for argumentation motivated by dissent, which is characteristic of democracy. Considering that there are still few studies in this regard, the research presented here aimed to analyze the reverberations of restorative justice practices in basic education in Brazil, through a case study in Olinda, a municipality located in the northeast of the country, in the state of Pernambuco. This region is characterized by a high concentration of low income, a high rate of homicides in adolescence, and discrimination (of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, class). In this context, the transformative role of the school in promoting citizen education is central. To this end, we describe an intervention project that implemented restorative justice actions in order to clarify the possibilities and limits of this model in school organization.

This paper is divided into three sections: the first deals with restorative justice as an alternative principle for dealing with conflicts in society and at school. The second presents the research methodology, and the third reports study

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6 The term democracy is complex and polysemic, as well as addressed in several theoretical currents ranging from the liberal perspective to the social perspective. We defend democracy in the participatory and social sense, as a mechanism for dialogue and dissent in favor of collective decision-making, in addition to formal mechanisms such as laws and voting.

7 Primary and Secondary Education in the UK; Elementary and High School education in the United States.
findings in a school chosen for having implemented the *Eu Vejo Flores em Você* [I See Flowers in You] Project. Finally, we highlight the possibilities and limitations of using restorative justice projects to reduce conflicts in schools in Brazil.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**

Dealing with restorative justice first demands clarifying some conceptual aspects related to justice in general. Justice can be understood from a formal point of view, referring to global social norms, or as a relational concept, affecting the ways of being, acting, conceiving and thinking about society. Its object is the notion of what is *fair* based on social and cultural differences and particularities. Thus, justice organizes human relationships or the behavior of those who adapt to this order, and can have at least two meanings: one, of conformity of conduct to a norm (judgment of human behavior); the other, of adequacy of the norm (judgment of the norm itself).

From a retribution perspective, the focus is on the concept of crime or harm as a violation of the law. Justice is legitimized by the public interest through the state monopoly. Guilt is considered individual, since the individual acts according to his/her own will/freedom, and the offender/aggressor must pay for what he/she has done.

The establishing of guilt does not observe the circumstances and constraints of the person who committed the infraction, characterizing these in a technical, abstract or descriptive way (author, 2019). In this regard, Zehr (2008) states that the social, economic, political and psychological context is important, but the individualistic concept of guilt ignores the context, referring instead to the liberal and personal sense of guilt since, for this model, the person who committed the crime did so by choice and must pay for what he/she has done. Guilt is thus a moral quality, being a primary characteristic that defines the person and forms stereotypes.

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8 The Project was created in 2017 as a way of dealing with conflicts and violence among girls in the school field of research. Initially, it focused on dealing with situations of conflict and the classes in which these episodes were repeated. In 2018, the project also focused on the families and the community.
Restorative justice, on the other hand, is “a process of negotiation and learning opportunity, with the aim of (re)constructing meanings in interpersonal relationships in the strict sense, and rescuing the solutions and accountability of the conflict in a community aspect” (author, 2019, p. 46). It is not a new concept, properly speaking, as restorative justice refers to ways of resolving conflicts and infractions that have existed since ancient tribal communities (Saliba, 2007). According to Pallamolla (2009), there are several ways in which this concept has been constructed and applied in each context and reality, in accordance with the cultural and social characteristics of each society.

Restorative justice brings a philosophical-practical look and at the same time a set of social/community procedures that have emerged and/or rescued to deal with negative conflicts, stimulating the socializing relational potential that is inherent to human groups (Pellizoli, 2014). Restorative justice is understood as a set of practices and programs, a philosophy, a set of principles and values and an alternative way of looking at and dealing with conflict (Saliba, 2007). Among the principles, values and pillars of restorative justice, the main one is the notion of reparation for the damage caused by the harmful act, not only of the victim, but also of the offender. According to Zehr (2008), when it comes to restoring the victim, it is not about forgetting or diminishing the act for the victim, but returning the sense and the meaning of life and relationships. For the offender, recovery occurs through awareness and the possibility of changing actions through accountability. This perspective presupposes ending the cycle of violence and hostile relationships, which were established a priori by the act committed. Recovery refers to thinking about the parties not only in terms of what happened in the past, but in relation to the future.

The affected relationships are a second focus of restorative justice, which involves the dynamics of changing the initial relationship between those involved, which can bring about reconciliation. In each restorative practice, the path of reconciliation is specific to the situation and lived experience. Zehr (2008) clarifies that restorative justice creates the obligation to correct errors. It involves the victim, the offender and the community in a search for solutions that promote reparation, reconciliation and security (p. 171).
The restorative circle⁹ constitutes a way of approaching the conflict in which the victim, offenders, supporters of both sides, community members, are gathered in an environment in order to organize group communication to (re)build relationships, make decisions and resolve conflicts (Pranis, 2010). This method is generally characterized by good effectiveness and participation, considering that community or group circumstances may be causing the violations, and there is a vested interest to bring the violence to an end and restore harmony.

Restorative justice, therefore, is a contextualized practice, concerning the singularities of what happened and of those involved, seeking to clarify the motivation of the conflict, which should not be simply rejected, but worked upon and worked through. According to Melo (2005), this model points to the breaking of the limits placed by liberal law, opening us beyond the interpersonal to a social perception of the problems posed in conflictive situations. Author 2, (2016), when dealing with justice, focuses precisely on the scope of real practices that exist beyond the parameters of formal law.

Such characteristics have led school directors in Brazil and other educators to consider the idea of dealing alternatively with conflicts and violence that occur internally in schools. It is an approach that carries out notions of protection provided for in national legislation, such as in the Statute of Children and Adolescents and, at the international level, the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Restorative justice provides a way to resolve conflicts and cases of violence between students extra judicially, and by keeping their solution within the educational limits of the school.

This is relevant because Brazilian culture traditionally favors a retributive approach, which starts from the conception of a formal and universalistic justice (Estêvão, 2000), in which the damage caused to its agent is paid, or paid back. Retributive approaches limit the possibilities for relearning and rebuilding relationships through the treatment of conflicts. For its part, restorative justice

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⁹ It is divided into pre-circle, circle and post-circle. The pre-circle seeks to understand the situation and the reasons that led to the act that occurred. In the circle, there is a dialogue between the parties in the definition of needs and responsibilities to rescue the violated relationship; in the post-circle, the agreement made is verified.
points to the possibility of redefining punishment through education, encouraging each subject to put himself/herself in the other’s shoes (Boonen, 2011).

Restorative justice, from an educational perspective, tends to deal palliatively with the violence already committed, but in a preventive and alternative way with indiscipline so that such situations do not reverberate in violence. This is done through the construction of a responsive regulation in which those involved build rules and agreements of conduct identifying responsibilities (Morrison, 2005), constituting as values such elements as “empowerment, participation, autonomy, respect, search for meaning and belonging in accountability for the damage caused (…) in the fulfillment of the needs that emerged from the situation of conflict” (Santana, 2011, p. 98).

Therefore, the restorative approach is advocated as a powerful form of intervention and (re)organization of school culture, since restorative practices assume their own characteristics, inserted in a context of understanding the socioeconomic and cultural injustices in which the school environment finds itself, but materializing as emancipatory educational practices (see Pallamolla, 2009 and Pelizzoli, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

We investigated the experience of a state public school, located in the municipality of Olinda, state of Pernambuco, which incorporated restorative justice practices as a strategy to deal with conflicts and violence. We surveyed various institutions that carried out interventions based on restorative justice, this through the participation of one of the researchers in the course entitled Restorative Justice at the School for a Culture of Peace\(^{10}\). We found that in the school located in Olinda, a project in Restorative Justice existed, whose director was willing to participate in our research.

A case study approach (Yin, 2001) provided us with the means to characterize the school and its daily life, the relationships between the actors and

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\(^{10}\) The course (in Portuguese Justiça Restaurativa na Escola para uma Cultura de Paz) was carried out by the School of Innovation and Public Policies (Escola de Inovação e Políticas Públicas – EIPP) of the Joaquim Nabuco Foundation (FUNDAJ/MEC) in 2017. The target audience of the course were educators and security personnel interested in the subject and who already had experience of restorative justice in organizations.
the subjects' understandings of reality, with a special focus on practices related to restorative justice. The school is 32 years old and has 1,200 students, enrolled in Elementary School II, High School and the Teaching Degree in High School level, in addition to Youth and Adult Education. The director came with 20 years of experience at the school as a teacher, 5 of which were as a director. The director had observed that the surrounding community was losing its cultural identity and expression through phenomena such as violence and drug trafficking, which was coming to profoundly influence school routines.

The Project was implemented by the director and some teachers and students aiming to work on female empowerment so that each student could express his/her dreams and anxieties from within the restorative circles, in affirmative ways. The project had three phases. Phase I consisted of developing restorative circles with all Elementary School classes. Phase II comprised the holding of circles with the students sensitized by the 1st phase, and where participation took place on a voluntary basis. Phase III involved the search for partnerships: the realization of restorative circles with the students, as well as with community mediations using the provision of school spaces.

Since our first visit at the school, we were well received and the director was available to support the research. We conducted semi-structured interviews that were organized into three axes: 1. characterization of the subjects; 2. school management and violence; 3. justice and restorative justice at school. For the interviews, we selected the school’s management team and three teachers who had incorporated restorative practices in their classrooms; these three represented 10% of the total number of teachers. Students that had finished the 9th grade of Elementary School also participated in the project. We approached the students who responded spontaneously Students approached us spontaneously during the class break. We followed a semi-structured interview script, from which we highlighted dialogues about situations of violence where the students were present reports about episodes of violence, their participation in the circles or other forms of intervention. The subjects were identified with acronyms: management team (GGEF, GVGF, GCPF), teachers (P1M, P2M, P3F) and students (A1F to A9F).
In addition to the interviews, we carried out a documentary survey of school records on conflict situations from the so-called occurrence books, a common tool used in schools in the Brazilian context. Our attention was drawn to the high incidence of conflicts between girls, for apparently frivolous reasons or concerning boyfriends. A difference found in the reality of this particular school was the structure of its book, which was not organized by situations that had occurred, but by student profile, which allowed the school to better monitor each student.

After the collection and processing of data, we used as analytical procedures Content Analysis (Bardin, 1979), which examines the information contained in the message; it is not restricted to the content, but cover its several meanings, and even the presence or absence of certain characteristics. Inferences were constructed from verbalizations in their contexts of use. In this way, we obtained, for example, the female empowerment category, especially reflected in the responses to Axis 3 of the interview and document analysis script.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION: LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF THE PRACTICE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AT SCHOOL**

The director took over the school amid a profusion of conflicts and violence: physical and verbal aggression between peers, intimidation between girls from different classes, disputes and rivalries in relationships, drug use, disrespect for the teacher, arguments and name-calling in the classroom, among other situations. Sensitized with the various issues, she sought training in a course on restorative practices so as to become a facilitator in the mediation of conflicts. She presented on the subject to the pedagogical and teaching staff, encouraging teachers to also take courses based on restorative practices.

It was precisely from the problems that we were experiencing, the violence, the conflicts, the use of drugs at school and I was looking for another way to solve the problems, because just calling mother and father was not solving it, it did not have an effect directly on the student. He was the only one who wouldn’t talk, he would sit there and I’d stay talking to the parents and then we would decide. (GGEF)

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11 We made a total of 8 field visits with weekly intervals. Each visit lasted around 3 hours, with direct observations, using the field notebook and recorder as a data collection instrument.
We managed to transfer around 5 students [to another school] during this term, but today we understand that this is not the way to go, because it’s just about transferring a problem, and I also lost something. I didn’t do my part. (GVGF)

The sensitivity expressed in the extracts above denotes attention to listening to the student, as well as caring about how to improve relationships in the school environment. It also denotes that the retributive tradition of the school culture was being questioned and, in its place, the reception of the aggressor was proposed, removing him from the restricted condition of being blamed, recognizing him in the peculiar condition of a person in development and as a subject and protagonist of a sociability process, as stated by Zehr (2008). The idea of culture change is also observed in the expression of the vice-director (GVGF), when it comes to transference, which means that the new proposal implies accepting responsibility for oneself, instead of alienating oneself from the problem.

Such aspects allowed us to perceive the objective of experiencing, in practice, democratic value based on collective effort. Oliveira and Carvalho (2018) clarify that certain intra-school factors (e.g., leadership) contribute to effectiveness and equity in educational provision, which can help to reduce problems that emerge from extra-school factors, such as social origin. These authors have pointed out that, among the characteristics associated with successful leadership, is “strong purpose”, that is, clarity in objectives, as observed in the extracts above. Often, however, leadership works more behind the scenes, although here, this was not the case.

With this spirit of leadership, the director sought training, from which she developed, together with a teacher, a project that aimed at female empowerment, considering that there was a high incidence of conflicts between girls, so that each student was heard and could express her anxieties, needs, and dreams. One teacher explains why he started with the girls:

The focus is on girls because most of the conflicts that occur at school are created by girls, whether due to lack of empowerment, the issue of relationships, which is blatant; whether due to lack of family support, drug use, violence. So they focused on that, to handle what they can now, because they can’t handle everyone. And there is also the issue of girls’ vulnerability, which in society is greater. (P2M)
The extract denotes awareness that the process is slow and gradual, which generates the clarity that they will not be able to eliminate conflicts, but focus on the most present ones. It also shows attention to the broader social aspect, specifically to the female condition itself, a cultural aspect related to gender in a sexist social context, historically inherited in Pernambuco’s Northeastern Brazilian society. Couto and Saiani (2021) clarify that female empowerment is understood as a multidimensional process of transforming the social role of women, who are no longer subordinated to men and instead start to appear as active, capable agents with the power to make personal and collective decisions.

Couto and Saiani also clarify that although the empowerment process must be achieved by the group, a policy or project can catalyze efforts to reduce the subordination relationship. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that occurs at the individual and structural level and, according to Moura (2020), serve as a space for the visibility of students’ political positions and to draw attention to issues that affect them directly.

The teacher interviewee also stated that the choice to work with the circles was based on the selection of groups that were involved in more episodes of violence: “This survey was carried out through meetings and each teacher mentioned what needed to be improved in relation to the problem of violence among students” (P2M). Among the most cited situations, they characterized the high incidence of episodes of lack of respect for the teacher as well as lack of interest in classes, bullying among students and also swearing.

Author 2, (2016) clarifies the distinction between indiscipline, conflicts and violence at school, noting that a feeling of injustice is related to reduced well-being, which tends to generate conflicts and violence in the school space. To minimize its consequences, it is important to put in place educational and preventive actions, provided that both violent practices and their agents are made visible, which, in our view, was intended by the aforementioned project.

The project was designed in partnership with the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called Coletivo Mulher Vida [Woman Life Collective], whose focus was on caring for women victims of violence. In 2017, they focused on
students from the 6th and 9th grades of Elementary School, and in 2018, the students from the 7th grade classes of Elementary School, a class in which a higher incidence of conflicts and violence between girls was detected, as a remnant of previous behavior. In addition, a “Culture of Peace” was created. The work with the 9th grade of elementary school focused on the fact that it was a class in transition to high school. In addition, a room was set aside at the school for meetings of restorative circles.

Initially, the project was publicized in the school as a whole so that everyone would know about them and then the restorative circles were carried out systematically fortnightly and as cases of conflict or violence broke out in the school. As a way of expanding the proposal for resolving conflicts and violence, some restorative circles also included the presence of family members, since participation and involvement between family and school tends to improve relations, in addition to the fact that some problems presented at school are a result of maladjustments in the domestic sphere, as already stated, based on Oliveira and Carvalho (2018).

The project consisted of talking separately with the aggressor and the victim to listen to them and get them to think about each other. Once sensitized and having agreed, they were then placed in a “restorative circle”, meeting with one another, and the other people involved, in order to listen to all parties and clarify problems. Then, the objective was to restore the place of both in their social context, which helped to restructure relationships along lines free of offense. Eventually, the family, community and school were also invited in to solve problems that affected relationships and, possibly, learning, as explained by Pranis (2010).

A teacher and one of the students clarified about how the system worked:

With the girls [a circle occurs] every 15 days and with the family every month. And with the students of the school, whenever there is a need. If there is demand every week, the director will make a circle every week, this depends on each need and demand. There is always a specific demand and, when there are these demands, she invites the group and makes the circle. (P3F)

At first I was a bit reserved to talk, but over time we got to know people and then we opened up more, talking more. There were people who had the pleasure of being there and wanted the day to come soon so
they could be there in front. The circles occurred more with the girls because they are the ones who practice bullying more. (A1F)

The students explained what changed for them through the project:

We learn, right? (A2F)
Because this change is individual. (…) helps to strengthen us, to have more confidence in us. It improves our self-esteem. (A1F)
It helped in every way, at school, at home, in the way of thinking about some things. It changed my posture, the way I speak, how I treat people. (A6F)
There was a situation that was resolved in a circle, of two girls who didn’t really get along, and then it was worked through well in the circles, until they gave in and recognized each other, and it worked. You think your story is the worst, you think you suffered the most, the one that got screwed. But when you participate and see, there are situations much worse than yours. The burden I’m carrying is very small compared to what that person carries. So it gives you a motivation for you to follow with more lightness, more tranquility. (A1F)

The extracts show the experiences of some of the girls and their impressions about the changes in daily life in light of restorative practices: most identified changes in themselves, the possibility of an opening that was not there before with family, the development of empathy through self-recognition in the other, as well as the fact that they came to understand that changes cannot be generalized, as they are specific to each person. A7F’s expression demonstrates both the feeling of freedom that starts to be built from the opportunities to speak and listen, as well as the student’s yearnings for participation in the circles. In this way, girls who used to be aggressive and with low self-esteem, started to be more visible and supported, according to the principles of restorative justice, which is to provide an environment for argumentation and exchange in the face of dissent, through a democratic approach, as already mentioned above, by Author 1 author, (2019), while mobilizing healthy interpersonal relationships (Zehr, 2008).

We noticed that some teachers were interested in working with restorative justice, as they could see changes with their eyes, sometimes associating improvements in behavior with favorable results, sometimes with the affirmative, non-punitive training value. The reorganization of the school, the influence of restorative actions on teaching practice through working with the circles to review teaching and learning criteria, assessment of subjects and resolution of situations
of conflict, all corroborate Zehr’s (2008) observations about replacing a sense of socialization. P1M emphasizes changes in his classroom:

I work with them in circles and we discuss how the process was in that two-month period, what they think of the classes, because I always tell them: a good class for me is not the one I think is good, but the one that you think is good. It doesn’t matter if I teach and you’re not learning! So I listen to them, although in the beginning, because they don’t acquire confidence, they don’t talk much; from the 2nd semester onwards they open up more (…). These circular practices, this listening, all this helps me a lot (…). I work sporadically in cases of fights, physical fights, because at that time we have to stop, there’s no way you can continue teaching there because it won’t have any effect. We stop and go to discuss that relationship and what is happening. (P1M)

The extract makes clear that indiscipline and violence have not ceased, however preventive logic has gained space in the classroom, as an interpretation and incorporation of a new culture in the school in which everyone is involved and committed to an environment of peace. This peace was brought about through conflict mediation, which reinforces the aforementioned statement by Author 2 (2016), regarding avoiding unpleasant consequences of violence and giving birth to new forms of relationships (Zehr, 2008). Likewise, such a culture involves a partnership with the family, which directly affects the student’s behavior:

We can see the result in some children, they already apologize, they stay quiet, knock on the door of the room to enter, they already know how to talk, but it is not something that we can measure. This record is the everyday observation. There are already different arguments and attitudes with that child. (…) if you call the mother, she is capable of beating the child here and this is very embarrassing. (…) we are not working with numbers, but with quality. (…) the teacher who observes the student as the one who also brings something, does not come with nothing, looks at the issue of vulnerability that the student already brings. (GCPF)

The data presented show that the project generated changes in the school routine: students were seeking help from the director and teachers for the preventive resolution of conflicts, which softened the fights. The retributive rationality was broken (Estêvão, 2000), and a new philosophy envisaged. Students replaced name-calling and swearing with dialogue. Teachers began to use preventive and restorative practices in the classroom. The school board
began to observe improvements in interpersonal relationships and gains in terms of student behavior.

The new practices incorporated based on the restorative logic showed that the involvement of the aggressor and the victim in a process that identifies and treats the damages collectively, gradually affects both parties and restores the dignity of people, enhancing the development of a pleasant and welcoming environment.

Teachers and staff emphasized, among the challenges faced, the non-involvement of some teaching colleagues, who alleged lack of training, that they do not have the conditions or time to participate due to work overload. They argued that the director is the only legitimate facilitator, that is, the authority on the subject, since the director participated in a training course and took on the challenge.

The difficulty comes from the acceptance of the faculty, also because it is a long process that does not have much availability of training because one of the obstacles here is that we only have the director as a facilitator and mediator of conflicts and if we had more teachers, we could divide this. (P1M)

The project shows that restorative justice should be taken on collectively at the school level.

In dialogue with the students, one of them reported resistance on the part of the students:

There is also a rejection of students who do not feel comfortable, or do not want to participate in something new; or they’re really focused on that, they want violence, they want aggression, they want to stay the way they are. (A1F)

This speech expresses dissatisfaction with the limits and the humanization process itself, which is slow, as well as the difficulty for some people to leave the place they occupy within the cycle of structural violence in generating positive responses to implemented practices. As it is a recent project, not all subjects are involved, such as students who simply point out that they do not understand some school situations. The school dynamics itself also implies the existence of
conflicting relationships and diverse opinions, including those that diverge from the school organization’s ideas.

Results take time, collaborative work and culture change, which accrues to the leadership profile of the school director as responsible for making decisions.

The biggest difficulty I find today is this issue of results. People, who already have training, don't change from one day to the next, and how could I expect a girl who is 12 years old, who comes from a concrete reality, to change? (...) without practice there is no restorative justice. So, if I don't practice, I don't understand it very well and I demand results. From now on, will the girl stay quiet, sit down and not say anything else? This will never happen, she will never stop being who she is, she will improve, adapt to that environment where there are norms and rules that they need to follow, but her essence will be there, she will try to adapt to the reality of the school that requires certain behaviors. (GGEF)

The director has greater argumentative consistency since she knows better the foundations that support the new practices implemented, and which are not yet institutionally configured as a guiding instrument for the entire school, which would enhance their effectiveness.

Among the potential of restorative justice at school, it is understood that conflict starts to be dealt with in a positive way, in which the groups involved build criteria and norms to deal with school situations. Thus, one teacher indicates that restorative practice has contributed new ways of looking at conflicts in the classroom, which are now configured as dilemmas to be resolved:

When we make them understand that (the conflict) started for nothing, there is no way to relapse, because they understood that it was for nothing, it was for nonsense. I deal a lot this way, with the "whys" and they come, look at each other's faces, laugh and leave and that's it. (...) Stop to think and see what is bigger than that! (P2M)

The school organization requires the teacher to work with programmed content, but when a conflict arises, the investment made to address the reasons that generated it brings a positive return, since the students understand the reasons as banal. The teacher’s feeling is that those involved advance from there, gradually contributing to improve the mood in the classroom and at school. The same teacher also explains the importance of the figure of the counselor:
Teacher (…) has the counselor meet with their class after the class council meetings, as they have the duty to pass on to the students what was discussed, the positive and negative points and what has to be improved. (P2M)

The excerpt shows that the project also works with the realization of care circles (meetings between the counselor teacher and the class) as a tool to prevent conflictive situations, which denotes that the prevention/reduction actions are carried out in a shared way.

One of the most significant results is the development of students’ autonomy, which is manifested in the ability to solve problems, adding as a criterion the acceptance of the others and their integration into the school microsociety:

We are experiencing a conflict, a student is feeling excluded, she is not fitting in, what are we doing? We made a circle for one of the teachers to solve. She is feeling excluded, scattered and unable to adapt, she thinks people are weird with her. Then, to try to solve it, we made this circle so that the other people in the room can hear her point of view and also can expose what they think and get closer to her. (A8F)

The excerpt shows that students also take initiatives based on their own awareness, which represents a certain advance in the way of relating among peers, development of empathy, sorority, autonomy and care for the other, all via a preventive perspective. The project implemented indicates that changes involves reordering interpersonal relationships and were due to working on several fronts, whether via teachers, or restorative practices, as well as individual student initiatives.

The Culture of Peace discipline talks about conflicts in general and has a project that works only with women. It was created for the girls here at school and this circle is very good because there are things inside us (…) where you go your family goes with you, with your problems and everything. And we saw that there were people with that kept inside them who didn’t feel comfortable to talk, expose themselves and even cry. So it’s very touching. There is also an empowerment that motivates us in the project, that it works. (A1F)

This indicates mobilization generated by female empowerment, or reduction of the girls’ submissive condition, corroborating Couto and Saiani
(2021) and reconfiguring the ways in which each one looks at the other as a carrier of stories. Thus, the school can minimize conflict and qualifies as an environment for the improvement of teaching and learning, for the well-being of all and for empowerment in the face of life’s adversities.

In short, the restorative circle generated an environment in which students could let spill their anxieties, find comfort and a place to listen, all in a relationship of mutual trust, essential to recovering self-esteem and healthy sociability. Implementation of the restorative justice project had repercussions on changes in school culture, especially on female empowerment, in the way of dealing with conflicts in a preventive and non-punitive way when relating to the other.

CONCLUSION

Faced with a context of social and educational inequalities, and as conflicts and school violence increase, the school is challenged to transform itself into a space for mediation and (re)construction of relationships. The implantation of a restorative justice project in the school supposes the substitution of the logic of sanction-punishment for sanction-education, having as its referents alterity, solidarity and fraternity.

The objective of this paper has been to characterize restorative justice practices applied at a school in Brazil. Among its limitations, we highlight that the process is slow and gradual, not bringing immediate benefits, but mediate, medium and long term ones, since it is a question of changing the organization’s culture. The changes are sensitive, and difficult to measure, since they deal with aspects related to subjectivities and emotions, not just reasons. Among the difficulties of dealing with the restorative justice project at school, some teachers point out the resistance and non-involvement of colleagues.

As positive aspects of working with restorative practices, the leadership of the director, sensitized and mobilized regarding the urgency of change in interpersonal relationships, and the initial involvement of the deputy director and teacher are highlighted. Teachers indicate that such changes are perceived not only in cognitive terms, but mainly in students’ behavior. Such change appears as a virtuous circle, since it provides the gradual engagement of teachers and
students. The latter, more aware and matured from their experience with restorative circles, begin to incorporate new ways of seeing their colleagues and take on new, more pacifying behaviors.

Data analysis allows us to agree with Torres and Araújo (2015) regarding the dilemma of female empowerment that, while girls are more present in society and therefore tend to show their attitudes, actions and positions, they still face resistances, and even distorted ways of presenting their arguments, often through the use of force. The implementation of the project allowed for the resignification of female empowerment in that public, which began not only to understand the importance of their roles in school and society, but to propose new forms of conflict resolution.

As shown, the changes that took place initially came from the director who was instrumental and, with her leadership, motivated and made the other segments of the school responsible, providing the school organization with another way of dealing with conflicts and violence, thus influencing the school culture.

Restorative justice emerges as a possibility to generate changes in school relationships, promotes greater empathy and listening, and may contribute to the promotion of a fair and democratic coexistence. It provides a new perspective and equips subjects with practices that stimulate the socializing potential inherent to humanity.

REFERENCES


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