

# WRITING LESSON

# RESTORATIVE JUSTICE



The YES! Magazine article **Where Dignity is Part of the School Day** by **Fania Davis** is a story about using restorative justice in school in lieu of zero-tolerance punishment. Fania Davis shows how giving a student the chance to tell his or her story can help teachers and administrators get to the root of a behavioral problem, and ultimately keep kids in school and out of jail.

Students will use Fania Davis' story to write about how restorative justice can help resolve conflicts and heal those who have been harmed.

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## Where Dignity Is Part of the School Day

As executive director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, Fania Davis sees programs like hers as part of the way to end the school-to-prison pipeline.



Fania Davis, executive director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, with students from Ralph Bunche High School in Oakland. YES! photo By Lane Hartwell.

### By Fania Davis

*Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Winter 2014 issue*

TOMMY, AN AGITATED 14-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN OAKLAND, CALIF., was in the hallway cursing out his teacher at the top of his lungs. A few minutes earlier, in the classroom, he'd called her a "b\_\_\_" after she twice told him to lift his head from the desk and sit up straight. Eric Butler, the school coordinator for Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY—the author is executive director of the organization) heard

the ruckus and rushed to the scene. The principal also heard it and appeared. Though Butler tried to engage him in conversation, Tommy was in a rage and heard nothing. He even took a swing at Butler that missed. Grabbing the walkie-talkie to call security, the principal angrily told Tommy he would be suspended.

"We were about to put this kid out of school, when what he really deserved was a medal."

“I don’t care if I’m suspended. I don’t care about anything,” Tommy defiantly responded. Butler asked the principal to allow him to try a restorative approach with Tommy instead of suspending him.

Butler immediately began to try to reach Tommy’s mother. This angered Tommy even more. “Don’t call my momma. She ain’t gonna

**“We were about to put this kid out of school, when what he really deserved was a medal.”**

do nothing. I don’t care about her either.”

“Is everything OK?” The concern in Butler’s voice produced a noticeable shift in Tommy’s energy.

“No, everything is not OK.”

“What’s wrong?” Eric asked. Tommy was mistrustful and wouldn’t say anything else. “Man, you took a swing at me, I didn’t fight back. I’m just trying my best to keep you in school. You know I’m not trying to hurt you. Come to my classroom. Let’s talk.”

They walked together to the restorative justice room. Slowly, the boy began to open up and share what was weighing on him. His mom, who had been successfully doing drug rehabilitation, had relapsed. She’d been out for three days. The 14-year-old was going home every night to a motherless household and two younger siblings. He had been holding it together as best he could, even getting his brother and sister breakfast and getting them off to school. He had his head down on the desk in class that day because he was exhausted from sleepless nights and worry.

After the principal heard Tommy’s story, he said, “We were about to put this kid out of school, when what he really deserved was a medal.”

Eric tracked down Tommy’s mother, did some prep work, and facilitated a restorative justice circle with her, Tommy, the teacher, and the principal. Using a technique borrowed from indigenous traditions, each had a turn with

the talking piece, an object that has a special meaning to the group. It moves from person to person, tracing a circle. The person holding the talking piece is the only one talking, and the holder speaks with respect and from the heart.

Everyone else in the circle listens with respect and from the heart.

As Tommy held the talking piece, he told his story. On the day of the incident, he had not slept, and he was hungry and scared. He felt the teacher was nagging him. He’d lost it. Tommy apologized. He passed the talking piece to his teacher and heard her story.

Earlier in the year another student had assaulted her. She was terrified it was about to happen again with Tommy. After the incident with Tommy, as much as she loved teaching, she had considered quitting. Tommy apologized again for the outburst and offered to make amends by helping her with after-school chores for the next few weeks. The teacher agreed to show more compassion in the future if she noticed a student’s head down on the desk.

Taking responsibility, Tommy’s mother apologized to her son and all present. She rededicated herself to treatment and was referred to the campus drug rehabilitation counselor. After the circle and with follow-up, Tommy’s family life, grades, and behavior improved. The teacher remained at the school.

## **Restoration, not punishment**

Nelson Mandela’s adage, “I destroy my enemies when I make them my friends” captures the profoundly inclusive nature of restorative justice (RJ). The hallmark of RJ is intentionally bringing together people with seemingly diametrically opposed viewpoints, particularly people who have harmed with people who have been harmed, in a carefully prepared face-to-face encounter where everyone listens and speaks with respect and from the heart no matter their differences. The talking piece is a powerful equalizer, allowing everyone’s voice to be heard and honored, whether that of a police officer, a judge, or a 14-year-old youth.

If the school had responded in the usual way by suspending Tommy, harm would have been



Fania Davis: “Punitive justice asks only what rule of law was broken, who did it, and how they should be punished. It responds to the original harm with more harm. Restorative justice asks who was harmed, what are the needs and obligations of all affected, and how does everyone affected figure out how to heal the harm.” YES! photo by Lane Hartwell.

replicated, not healed. Punitive justice asks only what rule or law was broken, who did it, and how they should be punished. It responds to the original harm with more harm. Restorative justice asks who was harmed, what are the needs and obligations of all affected, and how do they figure out how to heal the harm.

Had punitive discipline ruled the day, Tommy’s story would have gone unheard and his needs unmet. Had he been suspended, Tommy’s chances of engaging in violence and being incarcerated would have dramatically increased. Suspension likely would have exacerbated harm on all sides—to Tommy,

his teacher, his family, and ultimately, his community. His teacher would have been deprived of hearing Tommy’s story. She might have quit teaching and remained trapped in trauma.

If Tommy had been suspended and left unsupervised—as most suspended students are—he would have been behind in his coursework when he returned. Trapped in an under-resourced school without adequate tutoring and counseling, Tommy would have had a hard time catching up. According to a national study, he would have been three times more likely to drop out by 10th grade than students who had never been suspended.

Worse, had Tommy dropped out, his chances of being incarcerated later in life would have tripled. Seventy-five percent of the nation’s inmates are high school dropouts.

### Getting kids out of the pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the alarming national trend of punishing and criminalizing our youth instead of educating and nurturing them. Exclusionary discipline policies such as suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests are increasingly being used to address even the most minor infractions: a 5-year-old girl’s temper tantrum, a child doodling on her desk with erasable ink, or adolescent students having a milk fight in the cafeteria. Use of suspensions has almost doubled since the 1970’s. Black students are disproportionately impacted. According to data from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts for comparable offenses.

In 2010, the Oakland school board passed a resolution adopting restorative justice as a system-wide alternative to zero-tolerance discipline.

Overreliance on exclusionary school discipline that disproportionately impacts African American youth led the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education recently to announce the launch of a national initiative to help schools and districts meet their legal

obligation to administer discipline without unlawfully discriminating. At the January 8, 2014 release of a Guidance Package on equitable and effective school discipline, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “Racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem today, and not just an issue from 40 to 50 years ago.”

**In 2010, the Oakland school board passed a resolution adopting restorative justice as a system-wide alternative to zero-tolerance discipline.**

According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control, a student’s sense of belonging to a high school community is a top protective factor against violence and incarceration. In addition to convening restorative justice circles like Tommy’s, RJOY also uses circles proactively to deepen relationships and create a school culture of connectivity, thereby reducing the likelihood that harm will occur.

A UC Berkeley Law study found RJOY’s 2007 middle school pilot eliminated violence and expulsions, while reducing school suspension rates by 87 percent. After two years of training and participation in RJ practices, whenever conflict arose, RJOY middle school students knew how to respond by coming to the RJ room to ask for a talking piece and space to facilitate a circle. Today, at one of the RJOY school sites, student suspensions decreased 74 percent after two years and referrals for violence fell 77 percent after one year. Racial disparity in discipline was eliminated. Graduation rates and test scores increased.

In Oakland, RJOY is successfully influencing the school district to make the approach in Tommy’s case the new norm. The restorative justice model has been so successful in the schools where RJOY has worked that, in 2010, the Oakland school board passed

a resolution adopting RJ as a system-wide alternative to zero-tolerance discipline and as a way of creating stronger and healthier school communities.

Young high school students in Oakland with failing grades and multiple incarcerations who were not expected to graduate not only graduate but achieve 3.0-plus GPAs. Some have become class valedictorians. Girls who have been long-time enemies become friends after sitting in a peacemaking circle. Instead of fighting, students come into the restorative justice room and ask for a talking piece and circle. Youth and adults who walk into a circle feeling anger toward one another end up embracing. Youth report they are doing circles at home with their families. High school graduates are returning to their schools to ask for circles to address conflict outside the school.

Oakland is considered one of the most violent cities in the nation. However, today hundreds of Oakland students are learning a new habit. Instead of resorting to violence, they are being empowered to engage in restorative processes that bring together persons harmed with persons responsible for harm in a safe and respectful space, promoting dialogue, accountability, a deeper sense of community, and healing.

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Fania Davis wrote this article for Education Uprising, the Winter 2014 issue of YES! Magazine. She is co-founder and executive director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth. She practiced civil rights law for 27 years. Her Ph.D. in indigenous studies led to her work in restorative justice.

## Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Describe a memorable example of when you or someone you know was disciplined at school. Was everyone given the chance to tell his or her story? Imagine you have the talking piece. What would you say to the teachers or school administrators involved about how the situation was handled? What would you say to teachers and school administrators in general to encourage them to treat all students with genuine dignity and respect?

## Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

### **How did this lesson work for you and your students?**

Share your feedback with us and other teachers  
by leaving a comment on our website:

[www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/restorative-justice](http://www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/restorative-justice)

## Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

|   | <b>4</b>  | <b>3</b>   | <b>2</b>  | <b>1</b>   |
|---|---|--|---|--|
| <b>Focus on topic</b>                     | There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.                       | Main idea is clear, but general.   | Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.          | Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.   |
| <b>Organization</b>                       | Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest. | Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting. | Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.   | There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.  |
| <b>Originality and strength of ideas</b>  | Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.                     | Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.                                       | Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.                                     | Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.   |
| <b>Evidence and/or reasoning</b>          | Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.                         | Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence                          | Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position. | Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea. |
| <b>Command of grammar and conventions</b> | Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.                         | Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).  | Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.                      | Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.  |
| <b>Voice</b>                              | Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.   | Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.                                | Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.                            | Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.                                   |

\* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

# Understanding Punishment

By Reagan Elliff, Grade 7

Fania Davis, author of the YES! Magazine article “Where Dignity is Part of the School Day,” writes about how Tommy, a high school student in Oakland, California, received help during a trying time in his life. His school, his teacher, and a program whose mission is to help prevent young adults from becoming part of the prison system, ultimately saved this boy. Tommy was given a chance to speak without judgment and explain what was going on in his home. The school was able to contact his mother and arrange for her to be involved. With the help of a “talking stick,” a flood of pain and worries was released. Tommy grew up with a mom who was addicted to drugs and often absent, leaving him to take care of his siblings. When Tommy finally expressed his feelings, the adults in the room were able to help him.

Something similar happened when I was in the second grade. One day at school, a boy named Markus came up to me and said, “I’m taking karate and I can beat you up.” At the time I was taking karate lessons too. I told him I didn’t want to fight, but he kept being aggressive towards me. Suddenly Markus’ foot was headed toward my stomach. I instinctively blocked his kick. My leg made contact with his groin, and he went down to his knees. Before I left for class, I made sure that Markus got up and returned to his classroom. I didn’t think much more about it.

During class, my teacher asked me to step outside. I was scared; I had never gotten in trouble before. She said that Markus’ teacher had called the principal and they were waiting for me in the classroom next door. The principal and the other teacher accused me of using karate to attack another student. They talked to me about the “no fighting” rule and said that I could be suspended. Suddenly my heart rose to my throat, leaving me speechless. I looked at my

teacher for help.

Fortunately, I had an understanding teacher who knew me well. She wanted me to tell my side of the story and clarify what exactly happened. I explained that I tried to walk away, and that Markus kept following me. When he attacked me, I defended myself. I didn’t think it was fighting because I wasn’t being aggressive. In fact, I did exactly what karate is intended for—to defend myself. I used karate not to attack Markus, but to block his kick.

The principal and teacher let me go back to class. I assumed they were deciding my punishment. It was hard not knowing what was going to happen to me. I found out later that the principal and Markus’ teacher spoke to Markus. He admitted that I hadn’t started anything, and that I was innocent. The meeting also revealed that Markus not only was struggling in school, but also had behavior issues at home. Like in Fania Davis’ article, the principal brought together Markus’ mother and teacher to get to the root of Markus’ anger. After lengthy discussions, it was decided that Markus would repeat his grade so he could mature and become more confident in himself.

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# Voiceless Youth on a Dead-End Path

By Simone Phillips, Grade 12

Days were getting shorter, nights were getting cooler, and summer was finally drawing to a close. One evening before the beginning of the school year, my mother, younger brother, younger sister, and I drove out to the local technical high school for its open house. My brother PJ's freshman year was approaching and he had decided to attend VoTech, our area's vocational technical high school. We toured the automotive department and I remember thinking that this would be a great fresh start for my brother. He was always fidgeting in class and needed the hands-on curriculum that VoTech would provide. I was really proud of him for getting in and finding a place that would fortify his future.

The year started out well. He was excelling with the school's physical approach to teaching and learning, but things started to change gradually. It seemed as though one day my little brother stood in front of me, a quirky and energetic little boy, and the next thing I knew I was up worrying at 1:00 a.m., waiting for my delinquent brother to return home. He seemed to be spiraling out of control. He got involved with drugs, alcohol, and terrible people. I knew my brother needed help, but the only thing the school would do was suspend him. The constant suspensions caused him to sleep the day away and then disappear before anyone else got home. My mother was a mess. As a single mom, she didn't have the choice to stay at home so she could monitor my brother, making sure that he didn't leave the house while serving his suspension; she couldn't afford to miss work. Even when he was supposed to report to school, it was almost impossible for her to force him to go. Things continued to deteriorate for months until my brother checked into a youth home and

later a rehabilitation center.

That was over a year ago, and today, as I wait for his ever-nearing return, I imagine the grins and playfulness my baby brother once had. I still wonder how much trouble and time could have been saved if my brother's school had used a restorative justice program.

I know that having a chance to tell his side of the story wouldn't have fixed all of his problems—many of them stemmed from deep, and long-lasting incidents from his past—but it would have helped to troubleshoot my brother's behavior. Had I been given the talking piece that Tommy used to present his case in Fania Davis' article, "Where Dignity is Part of the School Day," I would have had a lot to say to both my brother and the administration. I would have reminded him how unique and amazing his opportunity for success was at VoTech. I would have told the administration that their punishments were only working as a gateway to further his destructive behaviors, and that what he really needed was one-on-one personal attention. Having the chance to hear everyone's point of view would have sped up my brother's diagnosis and ultimate rehabilitation. I understand that my brother's drug and alcohol abuse would not have been remedied through the restorative justice program. However, the early intervention would have saved months of worry and stress inflicted upon my family, and would have helped us to find the root cause of PJ's behavior. Restorative justice would have also allowed PJ's school to avoid court costs and time caused by his absences, suspensions, and outbursts.

All students have a unique background to explain their behavior. Ultimately, I am glad that my brother was able to get the help he

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Simone Phillips essay continued)*

needed. I hope that my brother's story has served to strengthen VoTech's administration's decision-making and that the mistakes made were not in vain. Both he and Tommy show how important it is to take each party's perspective into consideration. Allowing

both parties to recount their story will only strengthen and personalize the decision-making process in a way that allows everyone involved to benefit from the less than perfect situation. Restorative justice is the creative means to solve the problem of impersonal punishments. It is the true way to turn a bad situation into one in which all will grow.

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# The Punitive Practice

By Matt Flagg, Cascadia Community College

At my middle school—and I would suppose at most schools in America—there existed a specific and rather simple system of punishment. Namely, the idea that if a kid is involved in any sort of rule-breaking act, no matter the context, that kid and all the other kids involved must be punished. This was always a point of contention among students, but not one contested by the staff. Perhaps this is because it created a system, which despite its questionable fairness, allowed school punishment to be easily carried out, straightforward, and mindless. In my opinion, punishment should never be mindless or arbitrary; there should be thoughtful reason behind it. This sort of punitive blanket used by schools around the country results in alienated children and detached teachers.

An example of this from my past is the story of a friend of mine. Let's call him George. George was always a nice guy, but he wasn't very socially aware, and often suffered because of it. He was a constant victim of verbal abuse and occasional pranks. One day, the jokes went a bit too far and George snapped. He lunged at one of the kids who teased him, and wrestled with him on the ground until a teacher pulled them apart.

The next day I found out that both George and the kid who teased him had been suspended—George for five days and the other kid for only three. This seemed and still seems like a great injustice to me, particularly since I witnessed the persistent teasing and practical jokes George went through on a daily basis. The worst part is that it was difficult to approach a teacher about this problem because it would have linked that person with the incident and given them a good chance of also being

punished. If I could have talked to them, I could have let them know the background behind the incident and protested the unfairness of the punishment system. Everything has context; no crime is committed without a back story. It's time for people to remember that before they automatically mete out punishments.

In the end, George continued to be teased for quite a long time, even after returning to school. During George's suspension, the students who bullied him spread rumors about him and he wasn't even present to defend himself against the rumors. This is a sad example where the school's discipline system failed a child when it could have tried something more positive and sustainable as described in Fania Davis' YES! Magazine article, "Where Dignity is Part of the School Day."

Restorative justice shines a ray of hope on discipline and healing in American public schools. I would gladly trade a blanket of punitive injustice for a talking stick that allows people to share their truth.

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# Restorative Justice Gone Wrong

By Kayla Rice, Grade 11

Restorative justice can be an effective way to handle conflicts, but if carried out incorrectly, it can create more problems than it solves.

Not too long ago, my friend Lyle got into an argument with some kids from his school on a social media site. The incident came to the school's attention because some kids were name-calling on the site, and one of them threatened to beat Lyle up. This student had already been suspended earlier in the year for verbally threatening Lyle.

The school attempted to use restorative justice to fix the situation, but in my opinion, they did a sloppy job. In the meeting, the guidance counselor and the student who threatened Lyle sat next to each other. This gave the appearance that they were telling Lyle what he did wrong, instead of what both students could have done differently. What I've learned about restorative justice is that when you set up a meeting, one should make sure that the chairs are spaced equally apart because otherwise someone could feel ganged up on.

Unfortunately, the majority of the meeting was focused on the comments that were made, rather than working toward restoring the relationship between Lyle and the other students involved. Lyle was also pulled out of class four times to speak with each student accused of name-calling. To other students looking in from the outside, this made it seem as though Lyle had done something wrong.

If a teacher is not invested in a subject, they will not teach as well as a teacher who is committed to a subject. Likewise, if a school is not committed to using restorative justice, it won't make restorative justice its first and only option, leaving students confused about how the school will resolve conflicts. As shown in Fania

Davis' YES! Magazine article, "Where Dignity is Part of the School Day," after some Oakland schools committed to practicing restorative justice, their students not only started expecting restorative justice as a resolution, but they also started asking counselors for restorative justice before a conflict got out of hand. Their school suspension rates dropped by 87 percent.

What happened at Lyle's school is a good example of what can happen when a school fails to fully commit to using restorative justice techniques. Earlier in the year, Lyle was threatened by a certain student, and that student was suspended. Later, when Lyle was bullied on social media, the school tried restorative justice. After the restorative justice "sessions," the school took the additional step of separating all of the involved students into different classes. This shows that the school didn't trust its system of restorative justice, and begs the question: How can they expect the kids to trust it? Lyle was quick to say he had done something wrong by posting rude comments, but not all students did. He apologized. Again, not all the students did. You know you are correctly carrying out restorative justice when students aren't afraid to admit what they have done wrong, when they are committed to understanding why a situation got to the point it did, and when they understand how to prevent it from happening again. If you aren't committed to practicing restorative justice properly, it can damage someone's self-esteem, making the person who was wronged feel like they aren't important enough to be heard.

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# Taking Matters into Others' Hands

By Sohee Lee, Grade 8

I remember the first day of sixth grade as if it were yesterday. None of us knew each other, and during lunch, we all started to make friends based on appearances. And by appearances, I mostly mean race. I, too, made a new “best friend;” a girl I had met in one of my classes. I sat next to her instinctively because she was Asian, like me. I felt awkward with Americans. I didn’t think I had anything in common with kids who didn’t share my cultural background. We listened to different types of music, spoke different languages at home, and were interested in different things. Well, that’s what I thought back in sixth grade, anyway.

I guess I wasn’t the only one who thought that way because cliques soon formed that persisted through seventh grade, and, now, eighth. Once again, they’re largely based on race. I think the reason my grade has organized itself that way is that most kids feel the way I did back in sixth grade—they can’t relate to people who are culturally different from them because they can’t even imagine what those people’s lives are like. The problem is that these cliques are self-sustaining. When we separate ourselves, we don’t communicate, and, as a result, we never learn to relate to people who seem different.

Since sixth grade, I’ve learned that the best friendships are based on shared interests and personalities that complement each other, not having the same background. Unfortunately, for the most part, as my classmates and I have gotten older, I see these divisions being reinforced instead of diminished. I think it’s because teenagers feel more pressure to prove that they’re adults and can handle things by themselves. When we ask for help or try to explain where we’re coming from, we’re

admitting that we aren’t totally in control. And when we make the first move and share personal details that might make it easier for others to understand us, we also make ourselves vulnerable to being judged.

At this stage in our lives, when we feel like we have so much to prove, sometimes the last thing we want to do is take that first step. This is the obstacle that restorative justice circles address. When the other people in the circle promise to listen non-judgmentally, it’s much easier to let down our guard and share our perspective. And, when we see that others have problems, we feel less ashamed of our own.

In contrast, other systems of discipline only create greater divisions between students by stigmatizing failure. Suspension, in particular, makes students feel as if no one is listening to them and that people have given up on them. In the long run, the effects of this treatment can be devastating and can lead students to drop out of school or turn to crime.

The reason these punishments were established in the first place was to show students that their actions have consequences. This lesson, however, can be accomplished in less harmful ways. By hearing how they’ve made others feel, students learn first-hand how they have affected others. They also have the opportunity to share their own story and be heard. Instead of feeling isolated from the community, these students feel included in a circle of caring and supportive people.

Living in an ethnically divided community has shown me how important it is to be able to relate and empathize with others, and how crucial it is for us to focus on communication if we are to overcome these differences. Since reading Fania Davis’ YES! Magazine article,

## Part 5: Sample Essays

*(Sohee Lee essay continued)*

“Where Dignity is Part of the School Day,” I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what my community would look like if we used restorative justice circles instead of (or before) disciplinary punishments. I can’t help but feel that we would be less divided, and that we would be more understanding of each other.

School would cease to be a place of pressure and become a haven for personal growth. While we learn a lot from books at school, we could also learn about each other using restorative justice methods. Instead of a false community that we mock and resist, we could create something that we’d cherish and return to later in life because we know we will always be respected and accepted for who we are.

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