

**Building a Restorative School-Family Community**

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## **Introduction:**

Relationships are the foundation of any meaningful exchange between individuals, including the learning process. Relationships need a healthy balance of trust, boundaries, authenticity, communication and vulnerability which all takes an incredible amount of intention and consistency to develop. These intricate and at times fragile bonds create the communities in which we exist; however, I find that many times the school community inhabits a space outside of the family and neighborhood networks students belong to beyond their classroom. Shifting Power and the Gates Foundation have provided the perfect opportunity to explore this dynamic to deconstruct the barriers that obstruct the connectedness of schools, students, and families.

## **Context:**

Extensive research has demonstrated the importance of a positive school climate characterized by strong relationships among adults and young people, as well as between schools and families (Bryk et al., 2010). At Braddock Hills HS, a few teachers (like Judy!) already hold strong relationships with their students and their families. However, the same may not be true across the school. Braddock Hills had the lowest participation in student-led conferences across the Propel schools (74%). Braddock Hills does have a parent group, but at a recent meeting only 1 parent attended. Moreover, the majority of students at Braddock Hills are Black (76%), while the majority of the teaching staff is white. Black history and culture is not emphasized in the school curriculum. Due to implicit bias and a lack of cultural knowledge and skills, Braddock Hills' white teachers may have difficulty understanding students' motivations (e.g. developmental processes, mental health challenges, etc.) and generally developing trusting authentic relationships with their students and their students' families.

While restorative justice is often used as an alternative to punitive systems for responding to harm after it has been inflicted, the foundation of any restorative process is a community with strong relationships. Our restorative lens foregrounds the need to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders. If harms have been committed, a restorative approach requires learning from those involved about what has happened, why it happened, who was impacted, and what can be done to make it right (Boyes-Watson et al., 2015).

## **Purpose, Research Design and Goals:**

The purpose of the study, therefore is to identify key barriers or harms that disrupt the connectedness between the school, students, and families. In order to do so, we developed a plan to conduct focus groups with students and families around questions developed with the

help of a group of student leaders. The questions delve into students' and families' experiences and relationships at Propel Braddock Hills. Studies and families would be invited to participate in a forum for students and a separate forum for parents, with opportunities for follow up interviews or surveys for anyone wanting to share more.

Beyond developing our own understanding of how students and families perceive their relationships with their school, the goals of this research are to change the school's approach to implementing restorative practices to one that is more effective. Once all the responses were gathered and analyzed, we envisioned formatted them into an illustrative professional development for Braddock Hills staff. In alignment with the goal of amplifying student voices, this PD might take the form of a student performance where creative writing students would act out scenarios that demonstrate the essence of the harms pulled from the research. The hope is that staff will be able to see how small or great interactions contribute to the barriers without blaming individual staff but more as a reflective moment for staff to consider the perspective of our students and families.

In addition to this PD, creating a strong parent group would be next in line. Demonstrating that parents' experiences and concerns are valued, and bringing them collectively to school leadership and staff will serve as a step towards sustaining a school culture that includes all its members, especially those the institution should be designed to serve.

### **Key Achievements & Learning Opportunities**

#### **Dialogue with students**

In order to capture student and family perspectives with accuracy and depth, and to *shift power* in the classroom, Judy and Eleanor decided to involve the students in Judy's "crew" (advisory class) as collaborators in the research. Judy began this process by inviting Eleanor to attend several of her crew classes, and participate with Judy and the students in discussing issues around school climate and relationships between students, teachers, and families in school. These conversations culminated in a set of questions, generated by students, designed to prompt discussion of these issues among fellow students in future focus groups. (See Appendix A)

#### **Poster Presentation**

In February & March, Judy and Eleanor applied and were selected to participate in a (virtual) poster session as part of Pitt's Annual Community Engaged Scholarship Forum. (See Appendix B). This presentation gave Judy and Eleanor a chance to share their ideas with a broader audience.

#### **IRB Training**

One decision point Judy & Eleanor faced in designing the study was how to navigate considerations of human subjects research. After discussing options with one another, as well as with staff from Pitt's IRB office, Judy and Eleanor decided to frame the study broadly—reflecting its relevance beyond Propel Braddock Hills—and therefore to move through Pitt's formal IRB approval process.

Judy spent many hours working through the various IRB trainings, completing trainings in Responsible Conduct of Research and Social and Behavioral Sciences Human Subjects, as well as working on training regarding Conflicts of Interest.

While this decision slowed down the research process, it also provided learning opportunities for both Judy and Eleanor. Judy learned more about formal research processes, and the ways that universities think about research ethics. Eleanor learned more about IRB considerations for studies involving students in more active roles than she had previously experienced.

## **Implications & Reflections**

### Judy

Initially, I was inspired by a previous employer that organically developed within a community that wanted to provide culturally relevant education for children of Native American descent and evolved into a program that reached students of many backgrounds. The really cool aspect of this company was that 80% of the staff had either been a parent with children in the program or was actually a child in the program. Quite naturally this work environment created an atmosphere of family. The moments that connected everyone that worked in these Head Start centers was much more than the work tasks. In my short 4 years working there I observed how families interacted with the staff and how staff interacted with each other. I made relationships that I continue to engage in even though I have not worked there in six years. In no way am I saying things were perfect, just like any real family you have your issues, your favorites, and those you avoid at all costs. Coming into Propel Charter Schools with this background I quickly noticed that I did not see this level of relationship between the school and families. Now there were some staff I saw exhibit a level of rapport with families that I found quite exceptional, but initially, mostly what I noticed was that staff did not stay long enough to really sustain the quality of relationships I was previously exposed to. In fact, many times I was inundated with the complaints of teenagers and their grievances with school. This school, previous schools, and the system of school itself. All this has laid the foundation to examine the harms our specific school has committed, maybe unknowingly that has created barriers between our school and our families. To be fair our school has endeavored to correct this sore spot through the implementation of restorative practices. But let's be clear, many times the

“theme” of the school year sounds really great on paper and even during back to school PDs however, the application often does not match the initial enthusiasm.

When it comes to the Shifting Power experience, I am absolutely grateful with how I was paired with my research partner! Not only was I excited to pick Eleanor’s brain about everything restorative justice related but I actually felt like all my ideas and thoughts mattered in the research process. I felt like the work that was taking place was a true collaboration that put the concerns, fears, perceptions, and voices of black and brown children and families as a driving point of the research rather than to be researched or examined like a lab rat for deficiencies. It really felt like the institution was being questioned rather than the validity of the existence of being black. There is so many trainings and research that I participate or read and I get the sense that the research was conducted in attempt to “fix these broken black people”. It felt really good to start from the place that my people are not inherently broken but rather harmed by a society that needs to be accountable for the ways it treats us. I can’t think of any other research partner I would have rather explored these realities with than Eleanor. I couldn’t help but notice the expression on her face during some of our Zoom discussions that was a mixture of sadness, disgust, and even a little anger for what my students have experienced and thinking wow these realities are not as widely known as what I thought. For me, my students’ responses did not come as a surprise but rather a frustration that these same issues that I or family, or friends, or people I know faced generation after generation. Eleanor has been a great anchor for me within the cohort to come back and discuss ideas, text, videos, guest speakers, etc. In all honesty I am not ready for this experience to end. This has given me that fire I need to be intentional about bettering the educational ecosystem I am a part of. Some of my favorite people in the whole world is children and the elderly. I find that both groups are often the most vulnerable in any society and therefore the ones that should be most protected. In many ways this process has been therapeutic, served as a way for me to protect some of my “favorite people”, which in times past I have not been able to protect while in school as child. Though I cannot undue the pain of past harms between schools, students, and families; I can start from here to best correct or even prevent the harms my students encounter now.

### Eleanor

This project has been meaningful to me in many ways. It connects to my previous research on restorative justice, creating a bridge from what I had worked on in Chicago to my new home in Pittsburgh.

Judy is a fountain of knowledge about the region and the opportunities (and challenges) youth navigate here. It was a beautiful learning experience for me just to watch Judy interact with her students, particularly in the immensely difficult format of hybrid instruction. Her warmth and genuine interest in her students ideas and experiences was palpable. Her skill in drawing students in the classroom and at home into the conversation across the barriers of

zoom delays; blank video screens; and games, siblings, and food competing for student attention, made the nearly-impossible look like a walk in the park.

Experiencing the Shifting Power meetings, and following Judy's lead and pacing for this project also reconnected me in a way that was deeply needed to what it looks like to be a full human being first, empathic to myself as well as others, and to reconsider how research can work in support of that way of being, rather than operate in conflict with it. Judy's consistent push to include students in every step of the process pushed me to learn more about research designs I was not as deeply familiar with before. Through our collaboration we were able to commit to one another to pursue this project in the right way, at the right pace, for the right reasons—because of what it could offer for the families of Braddock Hills HS—rather than rushing to meet arbitrary deadlines. Our relationships is also already bearing fruit in other realms as Judy is planning to serve as a guest speaker in one of my classes. I am looking forward to seeing what we can do together going forward!

## Appendix A

### Student Focus Group Questions

1. What motivates you to do your work?
2. Is it important to have friends in high school?
3. What qualities in your teacher led you to have a relationship with them?
4. How important would you say communication is in this dynamic and how well do you believe you express yourself and are understood?
5. How many of your teachers do you think have a biased mindset?
6. Is there any difference when you communicate with administrators, if yes how so?
7. What can we do to be more multi-cultural?
8. What is the most difficult situation you had to solve in school? Were you the person the event happened to or the person that initiated the event? Do you believe that the situation was handled well? What went well and what did not go in this particular situation? Are you in good standing with the person(s) involved in the situation now?
9. How would you describe the feeling of community?
10. Would you say you have this same feeling at BHHS?
11. How do high schools have an impact on the community?
12. What do you think Propel can do to have a better impact on the community

### Parent Focus Group Questions

1. What do you believe is essential for your child to learn/receive in school based on his or her cultural background?
2. If you could build the ideal school for your child what building blocks would you include? Do any of these elements specifically impact your child's cultural development as a male or female? If yes, please elaborate.
3. In what way has your experience with your child's education at Propel Braddock Hills High School met or not met your expectations as a parent?
4. Do you believe the staff of BHHS is intune with your family's cultural background? In what ways are the staff aware and in what ways blind to these cultural differences?
5. Do these blind spots create conflict in how your child is educated, disciplined, or "feeling of welcomeness(belonging)" in school?
6. Do you have any examples of this type of conflict while your student attended BHHS?
7. What do you believe could have been in place to prevent this experience for your child?
8. Do you believe your needs as a parent are met by BHHS?
9. Do you believe you have an outlet to voice your thoughts/concerns about your child's education that is received and implemented by BHHS?

10. What is the number one thing you would voice about your child's education if offered the setting to do so?
11. Do you believe BHHS plays an integral role in the community outside of the school building?
12. Do you believe BHHS should be more involved in the communities of the students it serves, if yes, in what ways do you envision this involvement?

## **Appendix B**

Poster presented at the Community Engaged Scholarship Forum, March 2, 2021

# Building a Restorative School-Family Community

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## MOTIVATION

The foundation of a restorative school culture is strong relationships. In order for Braddock Hills HS to build stronger relationships with students' families, we need to understand families perspectives, particularly about current and past harms and how they can be repaired.



## SHIFTING POWER

We are conducting this study as part of our participation in *Shifting Power in Educational Research and Development*, a joint project of Remake Learning and Pitt's School of Education.

The larger project involves a cohort of 20 educators and 20 researchers participating in the design and implementation of an innovative equity-focused research process that positions Black and Latinx educators as research leaders.

<https://remakelearning.org/shifting-power/>

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

*How do students and families perceive their relationships with the teachers, administrators and staff of Braddock Hills HS?*

*What do students and families feel would be helpful for building relationships and/or repairing harm with the school?*

## PRELIMINARY RESEARCH DESIGN

- Work with Braddock Hills HS students to develop interview protocols for students and families
- Conduct semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups with family members of of Braddock Hills
- Analyze transcripts of family interviews/focus groups to identify recurring themes
- Use findings from family interviews/focus groups as the basis for a discussion with teachers about building—and repairing—community relationships
- Work with administrators, teachers and family members to launch a re-imagined parent group at the school, incorporating strategies for building relationships and repairing past and future harms