Whole School Restorative Approaches for Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development highlights the promotion of skills through engaging and caring settings and building opportunities for bidirectional and constructive relationships. Whole School Restorative Approaches (WSRA) promote school community relationships and social and emotional skills which are core components for positive youth development.

1. Introduction

The plasticity of individual development comes from the integration of contextual and biological systems [1]. One could take part in plasticity of developmental trajectories by promoting bidirectional and positive relationships between individuals and their context and, thus, supporting adaptive development [2]. Considering the above, positive youth development evolves as a framework that emphasizes the promotion of capacities by means of engaging and caring environments and creating opportunities for bidirectional and beneficial youth-context relationships rather than focusing on deficits [3][4][5]. Such an approach goes beyond single-level efforts and addresses a complex interaction of levels [6] including family, peer, school, and community environments. It is based on the importance of a successful attainment of milestones in terms of psychosocial development involving, for instance, social, emotional, and behavioral skills [7]. In particular, developmental outcomes in the acquisition and improvement of these skills can be influenced by the interaction of youth development and characteristics of the learning environment. Indeed, educational environments that promote particular safety, support, and youth interaction and engagement with the school have a considerable impact on youth behavior, and therefore, create positive youth development [8]. In this regard, restorative practices provide a unique and hopeful approach to address reframing social connection and bolstering mental and emotional wellbeing in educational contexts.

Restorative practices have their origins in restorative justice, a way of mediating a conflict [9] that allows those who may have committed harm to take responsibility for their acts by focusing on the victim and giving him/her a voice [10]. The principles of restorative justice are: (a) harm and related needs (victims, communities, and offenders); (b) obligations that have resulted from (and given rise to) this harm (offenders and communities); and (c) engagement of those who have a legitimate interest in the offense and its resolution (victims, offenders, and community members) [11]. The notions of the original framework of restorative justice are the central basis of the implementation of restorative approaches in many schools of many countries. Restorative approaches in schools involve pocket restorative approaches and Whole School Restorative Approaches (WSRA) [12]. While pocket school restorative approaches are implemented to deal with conflicts by means of responsive restorative practices such as mediation, restorative circles, or conferencing, WSRA go further and aim to promote a more inclusive and beneficial school culture [13][14] that involves a reorientation of the management of relationships and conflicts and considers and validates the whole school community's experiences and needs [15][16]. They are in line with the positive youth development framework since they promote the relationship of all school community actors and address the interaction of individual motivation, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as social interaction, curriculum, pedagogical practices, neighborhood contexts, and educational systems [17][18]. By means of creating opportunities for bidirectional and beneficial youth-context relationships, they improve school community relationships and promote social and emotional skills including, for instance, self-regulation, self-management, emotional regulation skills, and empathy [19]. Improvement of school community relationships and social and emotional skills are both core components for positive youth development [20]. WSRA involve a comprehensive set of components and practices. Along with responsive restorative practices, they include the proactive type such as community-building circles. That is, active and participatory methodologies aimed at the development of social and emotional skills, group cohesion, or preventive measures for conflicts including bullying [21]. The importance of WSRA implementation has been strengthened by

longitudinal studies showing promising outcomes for changing school climate and promoting positive relationships while improving people's senses of belonging and decreasing conflicts [6][15].

2. The Effects of WSRA Implementation on Positive Youth Development

Most studies showed positive results associated with its implementation and, especially, on improving social and emotional skills and behavior. Those are key components of approaches directed at promoting positive youth development [20]. The results suggest that the WSRA provide a valuable framework that allows the development of successful restorative youth programs that improve conflict resolution skills, reduce discipline and disruptive problems, and enhance school attendance. Additionally, the WSRA approach improves communication competences and emotional literacy in teachers, other school staff, families, and students, which boosts both social-emotional development and long-term mental well-being in school-age children and adolescents. It is noteworthy that the WSRA have been used successfully in different cultural contexts, enhancing a school climate of equity, inclusion, and sensitivity to diversity where respect to the traditional ethnic culture of each school is fundamental.

When looking into specific WSRA, the highest level of scientific evidence is for secondary education. On the one hand, the Learning Together Intervention [22] is associated with improvements in quality of life and psychological wellbeing. It is also efficacious in reducing police contacts and substance use. There is also scientific evidence supporting another specific approach in secondary education, The Restorative Whole-School Approach [23] to decrease bullying while improving social and emotional skills. Again, outcomes considered key components of approaches aimed at promoting positive youth development [20].

The need for more rigorous methodological research concerning such approaches, but also the other identified WSRA and in primary and secondary education is suggested. On the one hand, more rigorous quasi-experimental studies and randomized controls are needed [8]. In this sense, it is also necessary to use evaluation measures within a psychometric analysis framework (i.e., validity, reliability, and responsiveness) [24] to evaluate the effects of WSRA and the use of blind raters to evaluate their effects to minimize biases. A high degree of fidelity is also recommended to the implementation of WSRA controlling the challenges that are involved (e.g., lack of staff buy-in) [8], as only a few studies did so since poor implementation may yield mixed outcomes [25]. The impact of the implementation of WSRA on outcomes such as academic achievement and satisfaction of participants is also suggested. They should address the limitations of those that have already been carried out [6] and provide a higher level of evidence of those with a low grade of recommendation. The lowest grade of recommendations does not support the use of a specific educational practice. Even so, it points out scientific evidence on such practice and future lines of research. In addition, more studies in primary education are needed. The sooner approaches that promote positive youth development are implemented, the better for prevention of relational and emotional difficulties.

It should be noted that research in the field is complex because WSRA may vary in their conceptual basis, principles, and methods according to their origins, and they may also have to adapt to a specific school's way of doing things, the cultural setting and related factors [10]. Specifically, the implementation of WSRA in schools involves careful awareness of the setting (e.g., clinical, state, private, etc.), participants (e.g., mixed ethnic groups, staff reticence, expectations of students, etc.), school culture (e.g., secular, religious, level of authoritarianism, etc.), and the history of the school community (e.g., school policy and commitment to move to a new educational approach, etc.) [26][27]. As for the setting, most of the studies were conducted in educational centers with a high degree of student diversity and situated in vulnerable areas at a social and economic level, which may make it difficult to generalize the results to other contexts. Carrying out further studies in other settings is suggested to have more scientific data available to support the implementation of WSRA in broader international contexts. Further research should also consider the effect of context, type of school, and developmental stage on WSRA implementation. The sustainability of the WSRA implementation is relevant. It depends on the variability of financial support and the guarantee of stability in the training processes that support staff rotation. This makes study comparisons difficult, and in addition, each approach may have its own specificity. For instance, the Restorative Practices Intervention [6] and the Learning Together Intervention [22] may seem comparable but drilling down into the models shows they use different processes and practices. This should not be seen as a drawback but rather as the potential of WSRA to adapt to school reality by changing or creating processes to fit the setting.

3. Conclusions

The evidence is offered on the different approaches of WSRA used in schools and may generate leads about the links among WSRA and positive youth development, since as suggested by Acosta et al. (2021), restorative principles could be an effective means to boost positive youth development in school settings. That involves selecting an evidence-based

approach that promotes positive youth development through supporting safe and protective school climates that may improve social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students. The research support for the implementation of WSRA approaches is encouraging especially for secondary education, adapting restorative principles to the heterogeneity of the cultural background in schooling context. They could be used to deal with diversity in terms of ethnicity and socio-economic adversity. The implementation of WSRA seems to generate a school culture of peace that promotes skills for the positive management of relationships and conflicts. Those skills are essential for daily-life functioning. Thus, their implementation may be promoting mental health and nurturing the resilience of the whole school community.

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