doi.org/10.58725/rivjr.v3i2.140

2

# Beliefs Matter: Concrete theoretical discourse for clarity of restorative justice practice

*As Crenças Importam: Discurso teórico concreto para a clareza da prática da justiça restaurativa*

**Dorothy Vaandering**
M.Ed.; PhD: University of Western Ontario, Professor
Memorial University of Newfoundland
e-mail: **dvaandering@mun.ca**

**Data do envio: 20.07.2025**
**Data do aceite: 23.07.2025**

# Beliefs Matter: Concrete theoretical discourse for clarity of restorative justice practice

*As Crenças Importam: Discurso teórico concreto para a clareza da prática da justiça restaurativa*



## ABSTRACT

In Western neo-liberal contexts, discussions regarding beliefs are ignored, dismissed, or avoided as they are deemed irrelevant without empirical evidence. People are encouraged to treat beliefs as purely a private matter. Yet, denying that everyone holds beliefs, does not mean that beliefs cease to exist. Conscious or unconscious, what individuals or societies believe, fundamentally shapes how people engage with one another. In this article, I explain how *beliefs matter* in (a) defining restorative justice (b) implementing restorative justice and (c) sustaining restorative justice. I make the case for declaring boldly that the belief that *all people and their environments are worthy and interconnected* must reside at the core of restorative justice if it is to have the transformative effect advocates wish.

**Keywords:** restorative justice; beliefs; worth and interconnectedness; conscientization; praxis

## RESUMO

Nos contextos neoliberais ocidentais, as discussões sobre crenças são ignoradas, descartadas ou evitadas, pois são consideradas irrelevantes sem evidências empíricas. As pessoas são incentivadas a tratar crenças como uma questão puramente privada. No entanto, negar que todos têm crenças não significa que essas crenças deixem de existir. Conscientes ou inconscientes, o que indivíduos ou sociedades acreditam molda fundamentalmente como as pessoas interagem umas com as outras. Neste artigo, explico como as crenças são importantes para (a) definir a justiça restaurativa, (b) implementar a justiça restaurativa e (c) sustentar a justiça restaurativa. Defendo que declarar ousadamente a crença de que todas as pessoas e seus ambientes são dignos e interconectados deve estar no cerne da justiça restaurativa, se ela pretende

ter o efeito transformador que os defensores desejam.

**Palavras-chave:** justiça restaurativa; crenças; dignidade e interconexão.

## RESUMEN

En los contextos neoliberales occidentales, las discusiones sobre creencias son ignoradas, descartadas o evitadas, ya que se consideran irrelevantes sin evidencia empírica. Se anima a las personas a tratar las creencias como un asunto puramente privado. Sin embargo, negar que todos tienen creencias no significa que estas creencias dejen de existir. Conscientes o inconscientes, lo que los individuos o las sociedades creen moldea fundamentalmente cómo interactúan las personas entre sí. En este artículo, explico cómo las creencias son importantes para (a) definir la justicia restaurativa, (b) implementar la justicia restaurativa y (c) sostener la justicia restaurativa. Defiendo que declarar audazmente la creencia de que todas las personas y sus entornos son dignos y están interconectados debe estar en el núcleo de la justicia restaurativa, si se busca que tenga el efecto transformador que los defensores desean.

**Palabras clave:** justicia restaurativa; creencias; dignidad e interconexión;

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans les contextes néolibéraux occidentaux, les discussions sur les croyances sont ignorées, rejetées ou évitées, car elles sont jugées non pertinentes sans preuve empirique. Les individus sont encouragés à traiter les croyances comme une affaire purement privée. Cependant, nier que tout le monde a des croyances ne signifie pas que ces croyances cessent d'exister. Conscientes ou inconscientes, les croyances des individus ou des sociétés façonnent fondamentalement la manière dont les personnes interagissent entre elles. Dans cet article, j'explique comment les croyances sont importantes pour (a) définir la justice restaurative, (b) mettre en œuvre la justice restaurative et (c) maintenir la justice restaurative. Je soutiens qu'affirmer avec audace la croyance selon laquelle toutes les personnes et leurs environnements sont dignes et interconnectés doit se situer au cœur de la justice restaurative, si l'on souhaite qu'elle ait l'effet transformateur recherché par ses défenseurs.

**Mots-clés:** justice restaurative ; croyances ; dignité et interconnexion.

## RIASSUNTO

Nei contesti neoliberali occidentali, le discussioni sulle credenze sono ignorate, respinte o evitate, poiché sono considerate irrilevanti senza prove empiriche. Le persone sono incoraggiate a trattare le credenze come una questione puramente privata. Tuttavia, negare che tutti abbiano delle credenze non significa che queste smettano di esistere. Consce o inconsce, le credenze degli individui o delle società plasmano fondamentalmente il modo in cui le persone interagiscono tra loro. In questo articolo, spiego l'importanza delle credenze per (a) definire la giustizia riparativa, (b) implementare la giustizia riparativa e (c) sostenere la giustizia riparativa. Sostengo che dichiarare audacemente che la convinzione che tutte le persone e i loro ambienti siano degni e interconnessi debba essere al centro della giustizia riparativa, se si vuole ottenere l'effetto trasformativo desiderato dai sostenitori.


**Parole chiave:** giustizia riparativa; credenze; dignità e interconnessione;

## Introduction

In a Western context, the word 'belief' is often met with discomfort or dismissal as scientific evidence is considered to be the necessary standard for decision-making. In dominant Western discourse, beliefs are often treated as irrelevant or merely personal, frequently associated with religion rather than critical inquiry and commitment to science, secularism, or rationalism. In academia, the experience is no different, however, when needed, elements of "belief" are often couched within concepts such as theoretical frameworks or ontology. In this environment, the dismissal and discomfort continue as it is common to hear educators (and practitioners of any kind), expressing the sentiment, "That sounds good in theory, but it's not real life."

Restorative justice discourse and practice is not immune to this aversion to articulating beliefs and advocates work hard to ensure it can be justified and supported with clear evidence and descriptions that are logical, practical, and cost effective. While science, empirical evidence, and logic are all necessary and helpful, ignoring or discrediting the role of beliefs, doesn't negate that everyone holds beliefs and these commitments, conscious or unconscious, have substantive impact.

In this article, I reiterate and build on a theoretical foundation for the practice of restorative justice that I articulated 20 years ago when I explored its potential for education in the context of critical theory and pedagogy as informed by Paulo Freire (VAANDERING, 2010, 2011). At that time, I introduced the need for explicitly articulating the beliefs at the root of the concept of *justice* if our Western efforts for transforming oppressive justice systems were to be implemented in a sustainable manner. Today in a global context reeling from the impact of neo-liberalism (PARKER, 2025) and corporatization arising from a culture committed to secularization, I outline with greater confidence and urgency how *beliefs matter* in (a) defining restorative justice (b) implementing restorative justice and (c) sustaining restorative justice.

Regardless of the time that has passed, in the context of engaging with restorative justice principles and practices, Paulo Freire's (1970) call for conscientization remains essential for recognizing and ensuring that justice is not co-opted by the dominant neo-liberal mindset that continues to work in subversive and overtly oppressive ways to separate mind and heart. Freire's call for connecting theory to practice through the 'radical interaction' of reflection and action or *praxis* (1970, p. 87), must be employed to keep the field alert. He states later,

> Thinking critically about practice, of today or yesterday, makes possible the improvement of tomorrow's practice. Even theoretical discourse itself, necessary as it is to critical reflection, must be concrete enough to be clearly identifiable with practice. Its epistemological distance from practice as an object of analysis ought to be compensated for by an even greater proximity to the object of analysis, in terms of lived experience (FREIRE, 1998).

While restorative justice has been functioning to address concerns with the traditional Western systems of justice since the 1970's, today in 2025, advocates and practitioners would do well to recognize that 'thinking *critically* about practice, of today or yesterday, [for] the improvement of tomorrow's practice" (emphasis added) is an ongoing challenge in a society entrenched in defining justice narrowly as adversarial and retributive.

To ground this argument that *beliefs matter*, I first define beliefs in the context of values, theories and paradigms. Then I outline my earlier conceptual framework and its connection to Freire's concept of critical pedagogy as a holistic way of being.

## 1. Beliefs, values, theories and paradigms

The term *belief* is often subsumed in the more acceptable concepts of values, theories and paradigms. In identifying why beliefs matter, it is therefore important to define and briefly differentiate between them to ensure clarity.

In *The little book of restorative justice in education* (EVANS & VAANDERING, 2018, 2022) beliefs are defined as concepts or "ideas that people accept as true but cannot be fully proven". They are what people think of the world (ZAKI, 2024, p. 27) and grow from the contexts we are born into–familial, societal, experiential. They range from acceptance of what has happened in the distant past, what will happen in the future, the existence or non-existence of a deity, trust in theories or things unseen, and more. Beliefs turn into assumptions when they are not questioned and opinions when they are; they can be conscious or unconscious. They are tied to identity and as a result are resistant to change.

EVANS & VAANDERING (2022) highlight that values emerge from our beliefs and represent what we think is important about life (p.36). As such, values create direction for how we live and shape the character of who we are. They are wholly different from beliefs (ZAKI, 2024, p.27). Examples include, honesty, curiosity, adaptability, courage, and integrity.

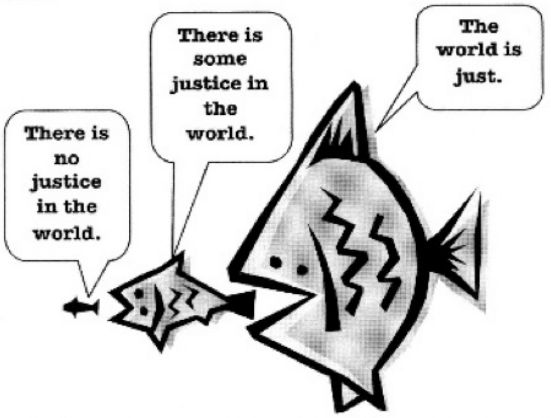
When beliefs and values are combined they are like a pair of glasses, where the frames (beliefs) hold the lenses (values) in place and influence how we see the world. Our actions then are an expression of our beliefs and values and, like a pair of eye glasses, we can forget we are wearing them, yet they completely influence what we do, until our vision is disrupted or the glasses break (EVANS & VAANDERING, 2022, p. 34-44). As such, Willard (1999) concludes, "You always live up to what you believe, not to what you profess to believe."

Theories articulate the rationale for a phenomenon as evidenced by what one observes. While the phenomenon appears to match the theory created to understand it, on closer observation or with time when further evidence arises, a theory may change. While a theory is similar to a belief, it requires the support of empirical evidence, beliefs do not.

A paradigm draws on theories, values, and beliefs to become a complete framework for how one sees and makes sense of the world. As such, it is an overarching perspective that evolves to guide both individuals and society alike. As an example, when Apollo 8 in 1968 captured an image of the earth rising beside the moon, and then in 1971, a full image of the earth was captured by astronauts of Apollo 17, public perception of the earth was transformed. People understood the organic nature of the earth along with its fragility. Environmental movements arose advocating for greater earth care (GERETSEN, 2025). A more current example that is being challenged by the previous example, is articulated by Mark Carney, Canada's Prime Minister. He identifies that our Western democracies have moved from having market economies to becoming market societies driven by a common crisis of values as capitalism has grown so that all components of society, human and non-human, are now assigned a static, monetary *value* (CARNEY, 2021, p. 4-10). This neo-liberal paradigm has emerged to undermine any and all efforts for social justice which challenge societies to uphold the well-being of all, in particular those who are most vulnerable.

The web of interactions occurring amongst beliefs, values, theories, and paradigms inform and uphold identity and culture. My premise in this article is that while each informs the others, because examining and articulating beliefs are avoided by those in power, to transform our ways of being as restorative justice asks, it is necessary to explicitly identify, articulate, and critique what we believe individually and collectively.

## Conceptual framework




*Source: The idea for this image came from Dr. Kaylene Faith, Professor Emerita in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University.*

Figure 1: from ELLIOT, 2011, p. 48

In my early work with understanding the essence of restorative justice, I began grappling with the term *justice* and what was being *restored*. Drawing on the work of philosophers and theorists from various fields (WOLTERSTORFF, 2006;BIANCHI, 1994; FREIRE, 1970; BUBER, 1958; HOOKS, 1994), I was challenged to first define what it is to be human and to recognize that like others in a dominant Western context I, too, was differentiating and seeing the world divided into those who belong and those who don't, those I need to pay attention to and those I can ignore. Freire named this explicitly showing that in doing this, people become objects that exist to be acted upon or to act, rather than subjects engaged in *being* that initiate living. This echoes philosopher Martin Buber's (1958) "I-it" or "I-Thou" relationships. I was noting evidence in my life that indicated I was treating others in my life as objects (It) more frequently than subjects (Thou). Reflecting critically, I realized that I had unconsciously accepted dehumanizing everyone including myself, turning us all into objects most often independent of one another. While realizing that this is first a personal responsibility, Freire's brilliance lies in connecting how one's awareness of their personal identity as human, evolves into being able to recognize the systemic oppression acting on them keeping them trapped in these cycles. As the world has experienced crises of climate, covid and credit (CARNEY, 2021) in the past 20 years, the clarity with which we see how dehumanization has been central and intentional in Western societies' pursuit of capitalism for centuries, has been magnified.

When a clear definition of being human emerges, it is then possible to explore a definition of justice as according to Wolterstorff (2006), it relies on what it is to be human. He explains,

> If meting out justice and rendering judgment become relevant when injustice has occurred or is said to have occurred, then there has to be another kind of justice and injustice than that of meting out justice and rendering judgment. (p. 25)

This other kind of justice he names *primary justice* which is present in social relationships when no one is wronged, when the worth of the other is placed in the forefront of our attention (pp. 31—32). This 'worth of the other' hearkens then to Freire's call for us to recognize that our vocation, whether we are those who are oppressed or oppress, is to become more fully human, treating ourselves and others as beings who initiate and nurture living.

The definition of a human that first emerged from this examination of what justice is, developed to state that a person has inherent dignity simply because they are a living, breathing being, which implies they are dependent on their environments, including other people. As there is no proof for inherent dignity, it stands as a belief. In defining justice, the core belief I first expressed was *all people are worthy and interconnected* (VAANDERING, 2010, 2011). As Indigenous insights and climate crises have become more prominent, environment was included- *all people and their environments are worthy and interconnected* And today, as my relationship deepens and restorative justice is evolving to include environmental justice, I am leaning towards a core belief statement that says, *all beings and their environments are worthy and interconnected.*

As individuals recognize the cycles of oppression inflicted by dominant societies, as Freire predicted, the voices of those who have been oppressed are being heard. In particular, Indigenous peoples globally are articulating clearly the insidious nature of colonization that has resulted in nothing less than genocide (YOUNG, 2018). In these messages a deeper understanding of the interconnected nature of who we are as human beings with each other is emerging. Non-indigenous peoples are beginning to grapple with the worldviews they see their Indigenous counterparts living, worldviews that encapsulate interdependencies that include a deep respect for a Creator who provides all manner of gifts that are essential for what is needed for a thriving circle of life. This contrasts with and magnifies how Western cultures are living individualistic disconnected lives in service to the agendas of the very rich who have convinced the dominant population that commodifying

the earth's resources and its people for personal gain simply reflects that life is about the 'survival of the fittest' (SPENCER, 1864; DARWIN, 1859), humans as objects to use for my own well-being. Colonization, the control of one power over a region and its people (MIRIAM-WEBSTER), clearly endorses this mentality objectifying everything in its path. In expounding on colonization, Cree education theorist Dwayne Donald (2021) identifies it poignantly as the "unending process of learning to deny relationship" and decolonization as the "unending process of learning to honour relationship.".

While Western approaches to restorative justice have long recognized that it has its historical roots in Indigenous cultures (PRANIS, STUART & WEDGE, 2003; ROSS, 1996) and Indigenous peoples are to be credited for living out and keeping the essence of restorative justice alive over the centuries, the field has struggled to find ways to express how the concept of interconnectedness is fundamental to what it is. This is evident in restorative justice's ongoing imbalance of an almost singular focus, even in education, on repairing harm apart from how society functions relationally. This struggle is a mirror image of Freire's insights re the banking model of education, an approach where educators treat students as receptacles to be filled with knowledge, ignoring the reality that each student, educator, and the content also, come with a living context. His resulting development of critical pedagogy grounded in conscientization, dialog and collaboration, is a call to deep interconnected reciprocal relationship. While my early conceptual framework (See Fig. 2 & Fig. 3) included interconnectedness, it was Donald's (2021) insights more recently that deepened and confirmed the need for articulating that beliefs matter. Colonization as "the unending process of learning to deny relationships" highlights how restorative justice, if it expects not to be co-opted by the dominant neo-liberal market-society, needs to be "an unending process of learning to affirm and honour relationships". Why? Affirming and honouring relationships recognizes a complete and total *interdependence* that is grounded in the belief that *all people and their environments are worthy.*

This core belief for restorative justice that developed 20 years ago emerged from the questions I was asking at the time. "Why is repairing harm so important? What is harm? What does it mean to cause harm? To experience harm? What is it about circle dialogue that makes such a difference? What is at the base of the three-tiered integrated whole school approach to restorative justice that focuses on affirming, repairing and rebuilding relationships (MORRISON, 2007)? What makes relationship important?

At that time, drawing on Freire and Wolterstorff, I was able to answer

each question with the core belief I was identifying as foundational to restorative justice–that all people were worthy and interconnected. Why is repairing harm so important? Because all people are *worthy and interconnected.* What is harm? Harm is any action that diminishes someone's worth and interconnectedness. What is it about circle dialogue that makes such a difference? It creates space for all participants as they need because they are worthy and interconnected. What is at the base of the three-tiered approach? A person's worth and interconnectedness. What makes relationship so important? People's individual and communal worth and interconnectedness are enhanced.

Wolterstorff (2006) identifying primary justice laid the foundation for deeper, grounded understanding of secondary justice and the reinforcement of the communal experience that all people and their environments are worthy and interconnected, and society thrives when we work collectively and collaboratively. From this a clear answer emerges for 'what is being restored? W*orth and interconnectedness are being restored*, a definitive response in a field that continues to waffle on the question.


FIGURE 2 Primary-secondary justice (EVANS & VAANDERING, 2022, p. 8)

This developed into a three-fold framework where EVANS & VAANDERING (2022) highlighted the need for restorative justice to balance repairing harm and transforming conflict, with creating just and equitable environments and nurturing healthy relationships, all embedded in an ethos of dignity, respect, and mutual concern/reciprocity. While developed for education contexts, like Freire's work, has become relevant across social contexts.


FIGURE 3–Three-fold framework
(adapted from EVANS & VAANDERING, 2022, p. 45)

While the framework has held strong over time, it has also deepened as relationships with racialized, Indigenous, and marginalized peoples have grown with many of them endorsing this model (WADHWA, 2015; PARKER-SHANDAL, 2022) but also challenging us to acknowledge our privilege through more intentional engagement with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations, anti-racist and 2SLGTBQIA movements (VALANDRA, 2020). By articulating and refining the core belief to state *all beings and their environments are worthy and interconnected,* proponents of restorative justice in Western contexts are challenged to recognize, learn, and embody restorative justice as holistic and a way of being. In addition to this, it is clear that this work must be applied first and foremost to Westernized populations in hopes that they no longer restrict the ancient memory of worth and interconnectedness alive in other cultures and societies and that they accept that they have much to learn from others, rather than being the prime source of truth.

The truth in the cartoon used to begin this section arises from the belief of a neo-liberal population that only some are worthy and there is no direct 'negative' consequence for the dominant in swallowing up those they see as subordinate. A holistic understanding of restorative justice has the capacity

to redraw this current truth.

## 2. *Beliefs matter* in defining restorative justice

Definitions of restorative justice abound, many with overlapping components, some with very little similarity. Literature repeatedly indicates that definitions are in flux (MARSHALL, 2020; DALY, 2015). Examples of definitions across the criminal legal system, education, health, and community include:

> Restorative justice refers to "an approach to justice that seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime" (FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL-TERRITORIAL MINISTERS, 2018)

> Restorative justice brings those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward. (RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COUNCIL, UK)

> Restorative justice (RJ) represents a humanistic approach to addressing the harm caused by juvenile and adult offenders. RJ practices have been shown to reduce recidivism and enhance the holistic wellness of victims and offenders. (SCHOLL & TOWNSEND, 2023)

> Restorative Practice is an effective way to implement progressive discipline. When an administrator becomes aware that a student has been harmed, an investigation takes place and appropriate consequences are given. In certain situations, it becomes apparent restorative practice is the best way to meet the needs of students, staff and parents. Restorative Justice seeks to be socially and emotionally intelligent justice. (WATERLOO REGION DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD)

> Restorative justice (RJ) is a way to prevent or respond to harm in a community with an emphasis on healing, social support and active accountability. (KARP, 2023)

From these definitions the range of definitive details while broad, consistently emphasize it as a response to harm. Like most restorative justice definitions arising from Western organizations and institutions, these examples contain no references to beliefs or values and as a result restorative justice is understood primarily as a practice. When beliefs and values are excluded from definitions, people have no choice but to position it in their current cultural context because this is where it is presented to them and it is what they

know and live. If people's personal worldviews are geared towards social justice and the communal well-being of all, restorative justice could potentially grow and thrive towards a holistic understanding of justice. However, as Western society's predominant ideology is a competitive, individualistic, and commodified perspective of life (human and non-human) this will inevitably inform and shape what restorative justice becomes. As a practice or strategy, restorative justice in Western societies is defined for it to be measured empirically to ensure that the approach is cost effective and reduces crime, harm, suspensions, expulsions, legal procedures and jail. And so it is. The rationale for engaging with restorative justice in the public sector is always justified by statistics that illustrate impact measured with numbers.

In comparison, Indigenous communities and organizations that provide a definition of restorative justice, include beliefs and values. For example:

> Restorative justice shifts the focus from punishment to healing, fostering accountability, and rebuilding trust. Rooted in Anishinaabe teachings, it emphasizes balance, respect, and unity to create pathways for reconciliation and community resilience. (GRAND COUNCIL TREATY 3)

> Following the steps and teachings of our Grandmothers and Grandfathers, the Listuguj Restorative Justice program assists in the restoration of harmony and peaceful relations in our community. With an emphasis on Mi'gmaq cultural values and teachings, we offer alternative ways to resolve conflict… Restorative Justice is about having a justice system that restores relations, addressing the good of the collective. (LISTUGUJ)

> Restorative justice is a collaborative approach to resolving strained relationships or harm done to a person, group or community. It is based on Indigenous principles of respect, empathy and consensus building and aims to maintain dignity, resume harmony, and repair relationships (FIRST LIGHT, NL)

In these, beliefs and values are highlighted. Harmony, healing and relationships are emphasized apart from harm or before harm is referenced. Restorative justice is not referred to as or inferred to be a practice; it is an embodiment of a way of being that is characterized by cultural values that reflect interconnectedness and worth. Because these are included, it immediately positions restorative justice in the cultural context of the people because this is where it is presented to them and it is what they know and live. While Indigenous communities are no longer sovereign nations, even those who have gained self-governance status, are influenced heavily by the non-Indigenous governments and institutions that have colonized them. As such, although Western governments have come to know restorative justice

through these Nations, the dominant need for empirical evidence to prove effectiveness is reinforced for funding to be provided. Thus, elements of respect, dignity, harmony, balance are often ignored in any reporting or planning done in Western contexts stemming from Indigenous nations experiences with restorative justice. Yet Indigenous communities engaging in restorative justice hold tight to their beliefs and commitment to each other. It is what they know and live.

What can happen if Indigenous and non-Indigenous people collaborate authentically? As a non-Indigenous scholar and proponent of restorative justice, while I am still discovering what *authentically* means, this has been my journey and I draw on this experience now to invite the global Western restorative justice community to engage in *praxis*–radical interaction of action and reflection to ensure we do not fall into verbalism or activism, but "*being* that initiate[s] living" (FREIRE, p. 87). Acknowledging my past and identity as being rooted and embedded in privilege afforded to those benefiting from the spoils of colonization, those Freire would call *oppressors*, the path has not been easy. Yet, because the importance of belief has been core to my understanding, it has led to relationships with Indigenous leaders and Elders who graciously offer me insight and invitations emerging from their holistic ways of being and living, their *meshkanau*—their good path (PENASHUE, 2025). While their definitions cannot be mine, people from non-Indigenous cultures and communities, can learn that to be sustainable restorative justice must be holistic serve as a way of being rather than a strategy existing apart from reflection. Relationships First, Newfoundland and Labrador (RFNL), an organization I direct is primarily the work of non-Indigenous peoples recognizing the need for change within our neoliberal systems. Our definition currently stands as:

> Restorative Justice is a way of being and framework through which communities nurture the capacity of people to engage with one another and their environments in a manner that supports and respects the inherent dignity and worth of all. We are led by the
>
> - interconnection of four equally significant intentions:
> - Embodying respect, dignity, and mutual concern
> - Creating just and equitable environments
> - Nurturing healthy relationships
> - Repairing harm and transforming conflict. (rfnl.org)

Having worked with versions of this definition for many years now,

personally and as an organization we (re)turn to it as a guide, a reference point, asking ourselves four questions in all contexts relating to our work with others or each other. In what we are doing:

- How are we *honouring* the worth and interconnectedness of those we engage with?
- Or how are we *measuring*/*denying* their worth and interconnectedness?
- Who is benefiting?
- Who is bearing the burden?

The first two questions, challenge us to describe our actions in relation to what we believe, where *honouring* gives full attention to the situation, the needs, and the well-being of those involved as they communicate them; *measuring* and *denying* defaults to a neo-liberal agenda where we feel we can judge the situation, needs, and well-being of the other without listening deeply. Questions three and four refine the first two recognizing that in a context that financializes all aspects of life, it is our default way of being to choose to benefit ourselves, rather than those we are in relationship with. Combined, the questions redirect us to embody our intentions more fully.

Beliefs matter in defining restorative justice. They allow us to "speak a true word" that leads to love, the foundation of dialogue and the dialogue itself" (FREIRE, 1970, p. 89).

## 3. *Beliefs matter* in implementing restorative justice

After ten or more years of grappling with both the theory and practice of restorative justice, I was convinced that my grasp of it was quite solid. Then I met Chief Mi'sel Joe, Saqamaw and traditional chief of Miawpukek First Nation, a Mi'kmaq nation in central Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) who in a presentation said, "If you want to know about restorative justice, just ask." Convicted by the reality that neither I, nor most other non-Indigenous proponents of restorative justice in NL, had sought to ask him about restorative justice, I approached him later. This led to a partnership where a small group of academics from Memorial university collaborated with him to organize an event called *Two-eared listening for deeper understanding: restorative justice for NL*. In the planning stages, he said, "Before you can talk about *restorative* justice you need to hear the stories of *injustice*. And the people of NL have not yet heard the stories of injustice experienced by Indige-

nous peoples here." As the lead on this project, I recall a distinct disappointment within, as I hoped that in the event we were planning, we could move into what restorative justice could look like in NL. This prompted serious self-reflection as I had to put aside my vision to consider what Chief Joe was highlighting. I knew fully that the first stage of a restorative justice process for harm, difficult conversations, or pedagogy for facilitating class learning discussions in an education setting was to hear the stories of what had happened to bring people together. Yet, in the planning of this event, I had unconsciously hoped to skip this step. In applying the four questions noted in the previous section to Chief Joe's insight, I had to admit that I was not honouring him or Indigenous people but assuming I knew what they needed and what the province needed to engage restorative justice. Co-opted by the need to see restorative justice materialized in practice, I was setting up the dominant population to benefit from this event which would then sideline the needs of the Indigenous population, appropriate their wisdom for our own, and further delay the possibility of reconciliation between and amongst nations.

The event evolved to be an experience where Indigenous leaders from the Inuit, Innu, and Mi'kmaq nations in NL shared their stories of injustice while government and institution leaders (me included) serving the public learned to listen with two-ears–hearing words with our ears and minds, then filtered through the ears of our hearts. While the event was transformative for many, I share this as an example of the complexity I experienced of implementing holistic restorative justice even when I was grounded in the belief that all people and their environments are worthy and interconnected.

I am not alone in this challenge. There are a multitude of organizations and proponents of restorative justice who recognize restorative justice as a countercultural movement that requires significant social restructuring and holistic, comprehensive implementation for it to be sustainable and result in social transformation. However, in those efforts and the myriad others that are less credible, because there is a straddling of worldviews in the desire to change mainstream culture, failing to notice inconsistencies and incongruence is common because there is hope that opposing worldviews might be able co-exist so I don't change. Immersed in a Western worldview with its allure of materialism, without conscientization, a paradigm that centres interconnectedness and worth will be co-opted.

To illustrate, the following examples of incongruence provide a range:

- In community organizations, there is pressure to show suc-

cess by ensuring those involved come to a resolution that will prevent a situation from going to court. It is common to hear that "a restorative response" is often presented to the one harmed and the one causing harm without considering that they can come up with a way forward. These responses are regularly limited to doing community service (unrelated to the harm caused), writing an apology letter (not initiated by the one who caused harm), or providing financial compensation to replace stolen or damaged goods.

- It is critical that the voices of those harmed are not silenced through legal proceedings. Space must also be created for the voices of those who have caused harm as without their voices the root of the harm will not be addressed. The voices are silenced while lawyers and judges stand in as representatives.
- While Indigenous roots of restorative justice are regularly acknowledged, engagement with the holistic nature of an Indigenous perspective is often non-existent or tokenistic. Appropriation occurs as this acknowledgment is not substantiated with actual relationships with local Indigenous leaders and communities.
- Schools' rationales for engaging with restorative justice education often begins with the need to reduce suspensions and expulsions, not the well-being of the students.
- A restorative justice organization that offers services for others, resorts to hierarchical management policies for inhouse human resource issues.

Beliefs matter in the implementation of restorative justice. Without explicitly articulating the centrality of worth and interconnectedness, restorative justice has no anchor to keep its proponents from drifting off course and being subsumed or redirected by the dominant discourse of the day. With beliefs identified, restorative justice becomes part of the vocation of humans as they work to become more fully human (FREIRE, 1970, p. 75), and like decolonization–the unending process of learning to honour relationships (DONALD, 2021)-- it becomes an *organic* experience, rather than a static, measurable experience so common in the governing and organizational structures of Western societies.

## 4. *Beliefs matter* in sustaining restorative justice.

Organizations and individuals seeking to enact restorative justice for the well-being of individuals and the societies they live in, face the challenge of sustaining its principles and practices over time. While there is always the hope that pockets of innovative practices grow until they reach a tipping point and enter the mainstream (LEWIS & STAUFFER, 2021), the Indigenous experience illustrates that it takes incredible stamina and commitment to sustain ways of being across generations and through oppression brought on by dominant thought that glorifies wealth and individualism. Western restorative justice initiatives which centre justice as nurturing and re-establishing the worth and interconnectedness of all, are counter-cultural and thus must expect to do no less.

To find direction and support for sustainability, non-Indigenous restorative justice organizations can look to the core characteristics of Indigenous worldviews that undergird their resilience. Though space doesn't afford being able to explore this in detail in this paper, a summary of research by Indigenous scholars is helpful. Three things emerge.:

- Indigenous worldviews are holistic. Grounded in the spiritual belief that everything and everyone is related, Indigenous worldviews elevate values of gratitude, reciprocity, responsibility and belonging (GRATANI, et al, 2016) ensuring that the needs of all non-humans and humans alike can be met. Life and Land are sacred, and identity comes from one's connections. (JOSEPH, 2016)
    - In our restorative justice endeavours where we work to uphold the principle of interconnectedness honouring the lived experience of all of those engaged in the practices we endorse, when and how do dominant Western worldviews that rely on science and evidence take precedence?
- Indigenous worldviews rely on ancestral knowledge and actively accept responsibility for future generations. Because time is understood as cyclical, life is understood as cyclical and every stage, childhood, adulthood, elderhood, is honoured as fundamental to the past and the future. Decisions are made for the present by considering the past ancestral experience and the future experience of generations to come. In many North American Indigenous contexts, the seventh ge-

neration principle (JOSEPH, 2016) is upheld.

- In our restorative justice endeavours where we work to create space for all the voices of those impacted by the actions of the present, when do dominant Western worldviews that highlight individualism and an immediate need for resolution and gratification take precedence?

- Indigenous worldviews embrace governance structures that are inclusive of all ages, genders, and abilities. Their core concepts which include self-determination, local decision-making, self-reliance, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances (PIZARRO, 2024), are core for ensuring governance and decision-making address the local concerns and needs in the context of the larger commitment to a holistic worldview.

    - In our restorative justice work to build just and equitable environments–where relationships are nurtured and difficulties addressed–where do we see local and regional government policies of fiscal restraint, which favour the wealthy, undermining the group's insights and efforts?

These broad concepts with the accompanying questions that contrast elements of a Western worldview ready to usurp efforts of restorative justice highlight what HOOKS (2000) describes as the "constant vigilance required to sustain integrity" (p. 69). In her seminal book, *Where we stand: Class matters,* she ruthlessly describes the devastation caused by the dominant culture that worships money and possessions.

> "This is the generation of the young who worship at the throne of the assassins who mock, ridicule, and destroy every value or ethical *belief* that challenges the rule of the dollar…Without a core identity, *belief system,* or place within a beloved community, they lack the resources to ward off the awesome allure that says unprecedented wealth awaits everyone, that we have only to imagine…Without education for *critical consciousness* that begins when children are entering the world of consumer capitalism, there will never be a set of basic values that can ward off the politics of predatory greed." (emphasis added; p. 87-88)

This siren call was issued over two decades ago; Freire's call came five decades ago. Today, in 2025, in world where oppressors enthralled with greed are governing, restorative justice must recognize the complexity and urgency of what it is inviting the Western world to embrace.

Looking to Indigenous examples to understand the role of beliefs in the sustainability of restorative justice in all its various components is applicable as Indigenous roots are regularly called upon in the field in Western contexts responsible for Indigenous cultures suffering greatly under regimes like those in power today eager to turn all humans and non-humans into economic objects. Much can be learned through these examples but what would be most beneficial is if this engagement would lead to authentic reciprocal relationships and reconciliation across cultures. Such relationships are needed to support a greater challenge to a worldview that feels impermeable.

Finally, while it may be appealing to want to engage restorative justice praxis at a societal level and raise the call for commitment in a revolutionary or systemically transformative manner, the reality is that sustaining restorative justice happens first and foremost at the personal and professional levels. With relationship that honours the worth and interconnectedness of all at its core, contributing to restorative justice's sustainability occurs first by ensuring that I am engaged in the *unending process of learning to honour my relationship with myself.* Do I honour myself as worthy and interconnected? Without this, self-deprecation or elevated ego serves only to confuse the messages I send to those whose worth and interconnectedness I hope to uphold. I cannot diminish myself, or those closest to me, and hope others will feel honoured. I cannot diminish my colleagues and employees and expect them to be able to fully honour those we serve as an organization. My colleagues cannot dismiss or disrespect me and expect me to be able to live out restorative justice principles with them or others with whom we are involved. I cannot discriminate against a group that wishes to destroy me and expect that my overall message to honour the worth and interconnectedness of all is clear. When we consciously choose our vocation of becoming more fully human, we accept that this path–our belief that all people and their environments are worthy and interconnected--will not always be clear and we will take wrong turns.

Restorative justice becomes a sustainable way of being and knowing when our personal, professional, and communal beliefs align and are applied to every moment of every day. A community that articulates clear beliefs and values that uphold the nurturing and re-establishing of worth and interconnectedness of all, has a rationale it can return to regularly for sustaining restorative justice over the long term.

Beliefs matter in the sustainability of restorative justice.

## Conclusion

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) was established in 1948 in an effort to articulate aspirations of world leaders at the time for what would be the universal protection of fundamental human rights. Later, in 2007 the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was written, a testament to the reality that the UNDHR had not been successful in its protection of the fundamental human rights for Indigenous Peoples. In both, a definition of what it is to be human was attempted and ultimately, because there is no scientific proof for these, a statement of belief was created.

> "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." (UNDHR, Article 1).

> Indigenous peoples and individuals are free and equal to all other peoples and individuals and have the right to be free from any kind of discrimination, in the exercise of their rights, in particular that based on their indigenous origin or identity. (UNDRIP, Article 2).

In 2025 as the world witnesses atrocities across the globe supported by many of the countries who have signed on to the UNDHR and UNDRIP, those directly suffering are identifying how, in spite of its promise, the universality of the details in both documents continues to be conditional in defining "who has a right to life, liberty and the security of the person (Article 3)?" As such, the documents are questioned as to their potential for re-colonizing because of their creation by the global north (AYAD, 2024).

I draw on both documents as examples in the conclusion of my argument that beliefs matter in the definition, implementation, and sustainability of restorative justice. Their attempt to define humanity is like the call in this article to define humanity as informed by Freire (1970), hooks (2000), Donald (2021), etc. as the core for understanding restorative justice. The declarations have served as a reference point and aspiration for establishing societies that are well. Although they have not been able to prevent war and oppression and may also be lacking and oppressive in ways, they serve as a call to believe something specific about who we are as humans; they keep a path visible.

Restorative justice in its commitment to nurturing and re-establishing justice in societies where the criminal legal systems have undermined a holistic understanding of justice can serve a similar role as the Declarations and might also serve to support and inform a more effective articulation in the

Declarations. But first, the field of restorative justice and its proponents in a Western context, if they wish for it to survive and see the transformation of society, will need to recognize that *beliefs matter.*

In a society dominated by greed and individualism, that has destroyed respect for communal belief systems, and wants justice to be adversarial and retributive, if the transformative nature of restorative justice is to take hold, part of the answer must be to reclaim the core belief that all beings and their environments are worthy and interconnected. How do we do this? We begin by saying it Aloud. Often. Everyday. To ourselves. To each other. To our communities. To the world.

## Bibliography

BIANCHI, Herman. **Justice as sanctuary.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

BUBER, Martin. **I and thou**. Translated by R. Gregory Smith. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958.

AYED, Nahlah. **Is our right to freedom of expression limitless?** [Audio podcast episode]. In: WOLFOND, B. (Executive Producer). Ideas. CBC, 5 Sept. 2024.

AYED, Nahlah. **Who has a 'right to life'?** [Audio podcast episode]. In: WOLFOND, B. (Executive Producer). Ideas. CBC, 2 Sept. 2024

CARNEY, Mark. Value(s): **Building a better world for all.** Toronto: McClelland & Stuart, 2021.

DALY, Kathleen. **What is restorative justice? Fresh answers to a vexed question.** Victims & Offenders, vol. 11, no. 1, p. 9—29, 2015. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2015.1107797. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

DARWIN, Charles. **On the origin of the species.** John Murray: London. 1859.

DONALD, Dwayne. Personal conversation at Decolonizing Professional Learning Conference, St. John's, NL. August 10, 2021

DONALD, Dwayne. **Antidotes to colonialism–A disciple if story shares his views, featuring Dwayne Donald.** [Audio podcast] Episode 8: Unsettled: Journeys in Truth and Reconciliation (podcast). March 10, 2021.

ELLIOT, Elizabeth. **Security with care:** Restorative Justice and healthy societies. Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, 2011.

EVANS, K. & VAANDERING, D. (2018) **Justiça Restaurativa na Educação: Promover Responsabilidade, Cura e Esperanca nas Escolas**. Sao Paulo: Palas Athena (Portuguese Translation of Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education, 2016)

EVANS, K. & VAANDERING, D. (2022). T**he Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education** Second Edition. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

FEDERAL-PROVINCIAL-TERRITORIAL MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR JUSTICE AND PUBLIC SAFETY. **Principles and guidelines for restorative practice in the criminal matters.** https://scics.ca/en/product-produit/principles-and-guidelines-for-restorative-justice-practice-in-criminal-matters-2018/, 2018. Retrieved 12 July, 2025.

FIRST LIGHT. In **Restorative Justice in Newfoundland and Labrador: A catalogue, summary, and brief history.** St. John's, 2024. https://www.rfnl.org/project-

s-8?lightbox=dataItem-m48q1zh1__item-kes9ajk2

FREIRE, Paulo. **Pedagogy of the oppressed.** 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum, 1970.

FREIRE, Paula. **Pedagogy of freedom:** Ethics, democracy and civic courage. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998.

GERETSEN, Isabelle. **The 1968 photo that changed the world.** BBC, 22 Apr. 2024. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20230511-earthrise-the-photo-that-sparked-an-environmental-movement. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

GRAND COUNCIL TREATY 3. **What is restorative justice?** https://www.instagram.com/p/DChIpEyRG7g/ , 18 November, 2024. Retrieved 12 July, 2025.

GRATANI, M.; SUTTON, S. G.; BUTLER, J. R. A.; BOHENSKY, E. L.; FOALE, S. **Indigenous environmental values as human values.** Cogent Social Sciences, vol. 2, 2016. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2016.1185811. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

HOOKS, bell. **Teaching to transgress: education as the practice of freedom.** New York: Routledge, 1994.

HOOKS, bell. **Where we stand: Class Matters.** New York: Routledge, 2000.

JOSEPH, Bob. **Indigenous worldviews vs. western worldviews,** 2016. Available at: https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/indigenous-worldviews-vs-western-worldviews. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

JOSEPH, Bob. **The seventh generation principle,** 2016. Available at: https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/seventh-generation-principle. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

KARP, David. **Restorative justice in higher education.** University of San Diego, School of Leadership and Education Sciences. April 25, 2023. https://solesstories.sandiego.edu/degree-of-difference/restorative-justice-in-higher-education-an-interview-with-david-karp

LEWIS, Ted.; STAUFFER, Carl. **Listening to the movement: Essays on new growth and new challenges in restorative justice.** Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2021.

LISTUGUJ MIG'MAQ GOVERNMENT. **Restorative Justice.** https://listuguj.ca/directorates/listuguj-community-social-services-directorate/restorative-justice/ Retrieved 12 July, 2025.

MARSHALL, Chris. D. **Restorative justice.** In: BABIE, P.; SARRE, R. (eds.). Religion matters. Singapore: Springer, 2020. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2489-9_7.

MERRIAM-WEBSTER. "**colonization**" Retrieved JULY 14, 2025, from https://www.

merriam-webster.com/dictionary/colonization

MORRISON, Brenda. **Restoring safe school communities.** Alexandria: Federation Press, 2007.

PARKER-SHANDAL, Chrystena. A. H. **Restorative justice in the classroom: Liberating students' voices through relational pedagogy.** New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

PENASHUE, Elizabeth (Innu elder). **Personal conversation.** 17 June, 2025.

PRANIS, Kay.; STUART, Barry.; WEDGE, Mark. P**eacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community.** St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press, 2003.

RELATIONSHIPS FIRST NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR (RFNL). **Mission and history** www.rfnl.org. Retrieved 12 July, 2025.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COUNCIL, UK. **About restorative justice.** https://restorativejustice.org.uk/about-restorative-justice Retrieved 12 July, 2025.

ROSS, Rupert. **Returning to the teachings: Exploring aboriginal justice.** Toronto: Penguin, 1996.

SCHOLL, Mark; TOWNSEND, Christoper. **Restorative justice: A humanistic paradigm for addressing the needs of victims, offenders, and communities.** The Journal of Humanistic Counselling. https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12204, 2023.

SPENCER, Herbert. **Principles of biology.** Volume 1. Williams and Norgate, 1864.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS. https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES.

https://www.un.org › 2018/11 › UNDRIP_E_web

VAANDERING, D. (2010). **The significance of critical theory for restorative justice in education.** *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 32(2), 145-176.

VAANDERING, D. (2011). **A faithful compass: Rethinking the term restorative justice to find clarity.** *Contemporary Justice* Review, 14(3), 307-328.

WADHWA, Anita. **Restorative justice in urban schools: disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline.** New York: Routledge, 2015.

WILLARD, Dallas. **Spiritual formation meets the gospel.** Regent College Lectures, 1999.

WOLTERSTORFF, Nicholas. **Teaching justly for justice.** The Journal of Education & Christian Belief, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 23—37, https://doi.org/10.1177/20569971060100020

2006.

WATERLOO REGION DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD. **Restorative practices.** https://www.wrdsb.ca/our-schools/safe-schools/restorative-practicesrestorative-justice/ Retrieved 12 July 2025.

YOUNG, John. **Confronting genocide in Canada.** Available at: https://humanrights.ca/news/confronting-genocide-canada, 2018. Accessed on: 14 Jul. 2025.

ZAKI, Jamil. **Hope for cynics: the surprising science of human goodness.** New York: Grand Central, 2024.