Phenomenological exploration of the implementation of restorative justice in schools: Teachers' beliefs in a public School Coexistence Committee[*]

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Un'esplorazione fenomenologica dell'attuazione della giustizia riparativa nelle scuole: le convinzioni degli insegnanti in un Comitato Scolastico Pubblico per la Convivenza

This phenomenological study explores teachers' beliefs about implementing Restorative School Justice (RSJ) in a public school in Bogotá. Through in-depth interviews and analysis of coexistence committee minutes, tensions between restorative ideals and the punitive mentality prevalent in the educational context were identified. The findings show that although teachers recognize the transformative value of RSJ, there is still considerable skepticism about its effectiveness in serious situations, which limits its full adoption. This research highlights the need for a profound cultural shift that transcends the disciplinary vision of justice and promotes a holistic understanding of justice as part of a process of reconciliation and restoration. It is concluded that the widespread adoption of RSJ depends on the recognition and transformation of teachers' beliefs, highlighting the importance of ongoing training in restorative approaches within the education system.

Questo studio fenomenologico esplora le opinioni degli insegnanti sull'attuazione della giustizia riparativa scolastica (RSJ) in una scuola pubblica di Bogotá. Attraverso interviste approfondite e l'analisi dei verbali del comitato di convivenza, sono state individuate tensioni tra gli ideali riparativi e la mentalità punitiva prevalente nel contesto educativo. I risultati mostrano che, sebbene gli insegnanti riconoscano il valore trasformativo della RSJ, permane un notevole scetticismo sulla sua efficacia in situazioni gravi, il che ne limita la piena adozione. Questa ricerca evidenzia la necessità di un profondo cambiamento culturale che trascenda la visione disciplinare della giustizia e promuova una comprensione olistica della giustizia come parte di un processo di riconciliazione e riparazione. Si conclude che l'adozione diffusa della RSJ dipende dal riconoscimento e dalla trasformazione delle convinzioni degli insegnanti, sottolineando l'importanza della formazione continua sugli approcci riparativi all'interno del sistema educativo.

Keywords: Teacher beliefs; Public school; Restorative school justice; Phenomenology.

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1. Introduction

This article describes the experiences of teachers who are members of the Coexistence Committee of a District Educational Institution (DEI) in Bogotá regarding the implementation of Restorative School Justice (RSJ). Developed as an alternative to the traditional punitive model, RSJ seeks not only to punish but also to restore the relationships affected by the conflict through reparation and dialogue. This approach is based on the principles of empathy, responsibility, and cooperation: key elements for transforming school dynamics into a space for learning and reconciliation (Zehr, 2015; Morrison, 2007). That is, restorative justice is presented as an innovative alternative to traditional disciplinary approaches, by being grounded in dialogue, reparation of harm, and the promotion of values (Munevar Sáenz, 2025) such as those already mentioned.

The implementation of RSJ in the school context takes on a special dimension when it is placed within the framework of transitional justice, especially in countries such as Colombia, where the armed conflict has left deep social scars. In this sense, schools become spaces not only for education, but also for the reconstruction of the social fabric, where transitional justice and RSJ converge to promote peace and mutual respect among students, teachers, and the educational community in general (Teitel, 2000; Laplante, 2015).

Nevertheless, the implementation of RSJ in Colombian schools encounters considerable obstacles, with the proliferation of punitive populism representing a particularly significant challenge. This phenomenon, characterized by an increased demand for harsher punishments and a preference for strict disciplinary measures, has the potential to impede the implementation of restorative approaches that promote dialogue and reconciliation (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). In the District Educational Institution context, this study analyses the impact of teachers' beliefs, shaped by a punitive social environment, on their willingness and capacity to implement restorative practices within the school setting.

The School Coexistence Committee at the DEI plays a pivotal role in the implementation of the RSJ. The aforementioned committee, which is comprised of teachers, principals, and other members of the educational community, bears responsibility for the management of school conflicts and the promotion of an environment of respect and safety (Colombian Ministry of National Education, 2013). The objective of this phenomenological study is to describe how teachers participating in the committee perceive the implementation of the RSJ and the tensions and resistance they face in this exercise. The analysis thus provides insight into teachers' beliefs and experiences, offering valuable lessons for the effective implementation of RSJ in other similar educational contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The context: Reluctance and tensions in Colombia's transitional justice system

The success of peace processes that seek to overcome armed conflicts such as the civil war in Colombia hinges on the deployment of a set of public policies that counteract the structural causes of the conflict and the implementation of a transitional justice system that allows for the dignifying, comprehensively and permanently, of the lives of people and communities affected by the conflict (Fernández & Bermudez, 2022). In the Colombian case, the Special Justice for Peace (SJP) represents a theoretical mechanism that is designed to guarantee the rights of victims of the armed conflict, while simultaneously facilitating the reincorporation of the FARC into the social and political fabric of the country. The agreement states that this would constitute the "justice" component of the agreement.

However, in a context as marked by violence as Colombia's, defining justice is a challenging endeavor. It can be argued that, in many instances, particularly within the context of media discourse, a specific interpretation of the term "justice" has been imposed that is closely associated with the notion of a custodial sentence (Rodríguez, 2015). It appears that there is an inextricable connection between the concepts of justice and incarceration. Nevertheless, it is challenging to perceive that this correlation is not essential, nor is it consistently advantageous. In contrast to the concept of retributive justice, which posits that an equal punishment must be meted out to rectify a wrongdoing, the notion of restorative

justice prioritizes the creation of an environment where the circumstances that lead to victimization and the violation of human rights are addressed, rather than the imposition of a punitive measure.

In the Colombian context, transitional justice is understood as a dynamic and contextual concept of justice that adapts to the specificities of the country and the complexities inherent to a prolonged conflict that has spanned over five decades (Valderrama, 2017). In light of the aforementioned, it is imperative to consider that:

> The concept of justice is inherently subjective and contextual, closely intertwined with the ethical actions and moral convictions of society and its individuals. Consequently, even the most idealistic conceptions of justice that claim to be absolute are subject to changeable axiological criteria that regulate the individual or society (Valderrama, 2017, p. 247).

Nevertheless, some political circles in Colombian society have expressed significant reservations about the efficacy of the SJP as a means of addressing the complexities of the armed conflict through a judicial framework. The lack of comprehension of a dynamic conception of justice—which is distinct from idealistic, solution-oriented approaches that fail to address the complexities of historical conflict—has likely contributed to the perception that this judicial modality is lenient in prosecuting individuals responsible for systematic atrocities, including forced disappearances, kidnappings, extortion, extrajudicial killings, rape, and terrorism (Fernandez & Bermudez, 2022). One consequence of this misunderstanding in Colombian society is the proliferation of what has been termed "punitive populism."

2.2. Punitive populism

In Colombia, a history marked by social conflict, structural inequality, and high levels of exclusion not only influence the formation of criminal law (Sarmiento, Bula, & Mariño, 2019) but also shape perceptions of the very concept of justice. In such societies, the distinction between "us" and "them," along with distrust and fear of crime, finds deep-rooted resonance among the population (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Consequently, the promise of stiffer punishments for those who break the law is often presented by political leaders as a means of projecting a certain "image of firmness" to the public, while overlooking crucial considerations such as the efficacy of crime prevention strategies or the rehabilitation of offenders. Consequently, in Colombia, criminal justice has been primarily oriented towards the subjugation of those criminals that the governments in power have identified as the most significant social threat (Iturralde, 2010). This approach has, in some instances, resulted in the limitation of alternative perspectives and the delegitimization of certain social movements and popular demands. Iturralde (2010, p. 57) asserts that the defeat of those who seek to challenge political and social orders is a prerequisite for the full enjoyment of citizens' rights and freedoms.

These attitudes are indicative of a phenomenon that has been termed "punitive populism" by various scholars, including Garland (2005), Bottoms (1995), and Ferrajoli (2014). As Uribe Barrera (2012) has observed, this concept can be applied to examine the relationship between punitive citizen attitudes and the expansion of criminal policy in Colombia. This is because, for several decades, Colombians have been witnessing the emergence of a new environment, which González (2010) has termed a "punitive optimism." This phenomenon encompasses the resurgence of criminal authoritarianism and repressive public policies that would advance in step with the punitive demands of a current society that is characterized by attitudes that oscillate between anguish, fear, and anxiety (Uribe Barrera, 2012).

There is even discourse suggesting a "punitive turn" (Palma & Escobar, 2020) in Colombian society, whereby the growing expansion of this phenomenon is accentuated. This is a process of transformation that is occurring concurrently in the discourse on security issues and in the role that justice institutions are expected to assume. This transformation unites two forms of control that previously addressed social order through disparate practices and discourses: state criminal justice controls and social controls that emerge and gain legitimacy in the everyday life of society due to a growing sense of insecurity. Such sentiments are subtly perpetuated by the social anxiety and uncertainty surrounding unemployment, corruption, and the obstacles to accessing health and education systems. However, these concerns are predominantly addressed through a punitive lens that narrowly defines insecurity in terms of crime,

overlooking the socioeconomic dimensions of these phenomena (García Magna, 2018, p. 285). Furthermore, in a country that has endured the violence of an armed conflict, as is the case in Colombia, the aforementioned punitive optimism appears to be intensified and pervades beliefs and practices related to the administration of justice at all levels and dimensions of social life. It is evident that the challenges associated with school coexistence are also a prominent feature of this scenario.

2.3. Restorative practices imply a paradigm shift

A significant achievement in the pursuit of a culture of peace through education in Colombia was the establishment of the National System of Coexistence (Congress of the Republic of Colombia, 2013) through Law 1620. The objective of this legislation is to advance the tenets of school coexistence, instill human rights awareness, provide comprehensive sexuality education, reinforce citizenship training, and mitigate instances of violence and teenage pregnancy within educational institutions. This legislation adopts a restorative approach as a principal methodology for addressing conflictual situations within the educational context. Nevertheless, the adoption of this model of justice by educational institutions cannot be achieved through the imposition of a legal norm that is incapable of transforming established practices within the educational community. In many instances, these practices are influenced by the logic of punitive populism.

As Albertí and Pedrol (2017) have observed, implementing the restorative approach cannot be understood without confronting the old paradigm and changing structures, and without a change of mentality. Consequently, Blood and Thorsborne (2006) highlight the necessity for a significant shift in perspective and belief regarding the purpose and practice of discipline in educational settings to facilitate the development of restorative philosophy in such environments. Hopkins (2009) asserts that promoting restorative practices in schools is not merely a matter of implementation; rather, it is fundamentally a process of paradigmatic change. Without such a change, the implementation of these practices would be devoid of meaning. In light of this, Albertí and Pedrol (2017) posit that it is crucial to identify the resistances that arise from such a paradigm shift. These can be classified into two categories: resistance to the change itself and resistance to the abandonment of punishment (Albertí & Boqué, 2015). Such resistance is not limited to that expressed by teachers; it is also evident among school institutions, the administration, and families, among other.

This is because the implementation of punishment is relatively straightforward and expeditious (Kohn, 2006; Stutzman & Mullet, 2005), in comparison to the restorative model, which necessitates a more protracted and contemplative process, as well as the acquisition of specific competencies (Albertí & Pedrol, 2017). Conversely, there are deeply entrenched beliefs that present a significant challenge to the transition away from the punitive model. Kohn (2006) identifies three fundamental beliefs: custom, which is based on the assumption that a particular approach has always been effective; the initial belief that punishment is an effective means of achieving obedience, although it does not address the underlying issue; and the final belief that if someone engages in negative behavior, they should be held accountable for it. In other words, it is an expression of a primitive and primary sense of justice. Consequently, attempts at dialogue with the student are perceived as futile (Khon, 2006).

It is therefore evident that in the absence of the requisite relational and emotional literacy, the lack of awareness of new strategies among teachers and the wider educational community, and the absence of the necessary competencies to facilitate an alternative approach to current problems, it will not be possible to achieve the objectives of restorative practices (Hopkins, 2009; Vaandering, 2013; Albertí, 2016a).

2.4. The School Coexistence Committee: Regulatory framework and pedagogical meaning

The consolidation of a culture for peace in Colombian educational institutions has been accompanied by a regulatory transition that recognizes school coexistence as a fundamental axis for guaranteeing the full exercise of human, sexual, and reproductive rights. Along these lines, Law 1620 of 2013 represented a significant milestone by establishing the National System of School Coexistence and Training for Hu-

man, Sexual, and Reproductive Rights, whose purposes are oriented toward strengthening respectful, supportive, and safe school environments.

This law configured a framework of mechanisms intended for both promotion and prevention, seeking to reduce practices and situations that violate the coexistence and rights of students inside and outside the school space (Lozada-Ballesteros & Barrios-Galvis, 2024).

The system is sustained by a broad legal architecture that articulates actions between different state levels, in order to promote active citizenship and guarantee institutional conditions for the exercise of rights. To this end, several bodies were created, including the National, Territorial, and School Coexistence Committees, as well as tools such as the Comprehensive Care Route and the Unified School Coexistence Information System (SIUCE). With these components, Law 1620 introduces a fundamental shift: it displaces the traditional punitive perspective and positions coexistence and conflict as pedagogical opportunities for civic education, in coherence with the principles established in the Political Constitution and the General Education Law (Law 115 of 1994).

Subsequently, Decree 1965 of 2013 specified the responsibilities and procedures of these bodies, offering a unified framework that guides the prevention, promotion, and attention to situations affecting coexistence. In particular, this decree reinforces the articulating role of territorial and school committees, responsible for guiding institutional decisions, promoting the development of civic competencies, and ensuring compliance with the Care Route (Lozada-Ballesteros & Barrios-Galvis, 2024).

Within this framework, the School Coexistence Committee acquires a privileged position. Law 1620 grants it the responsibility of managing conflicts that arise in the institution, either at the request of a member of the educational community or on its own initiative, when a risk is identified that could lead to greater harm. Additionally, the committee must promote pedagogical projects, guide promotion and prevention actions, and coordinate care and follow-up processes according to the levels established in the Comprehensive Care Route. Thus, it becomes the operational nucleus of national policy within each educational institution (Benítez Moreno, 2020).

This regulatory design conceives the committee not as a sanctioning body, but as a space for participatory management of coexistence, based on dialogue and the search for pedagogical solutions. From this perspective, the committee is oriented toward strengthening the right to peace and consolidating restorative practices that promote reparation, reflection, and the reconstruction of bonds within the educational community. To this end, Decree 1965 establishes protocols and guidelines that guide the institutional management of conflicts and decision-making regarding situations affecting coexistence.

The broad understanding of school coexistence proposed by Fierro-Evans and Carbajal-Padilla (2019) provides a complementary reading to this regulatory structure. For these authors, coexistence transcends conflictive events and encompasses three interrelated areas: the pedagogical-curricular, which includes teaching practices and didactic planning; the organizational-administrative, linked to institutional management dynamics; and the socio-community, which strengthens relationships with families, external actors, and support networks. Each of these areas unfolds, moreover, from the dimensions of inclusion, equity, and participation—essential elements for the management and transformation of conflicts.

In coherence with this framework, the phenomenological approach developed in the present research allows understanding the School Coexistence Committee not only as a regulatory structure, but as a space lived by teachers, where their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences converge. The regulations establish the procedures; however, it is the meanings that teachers assign to their participation that determine its real effectiveness. Thus, the committee is revealed as a scenario where inherited punitive practices and emerging restorative approaches are in tension, and where the decisions adopted embody the intersection between what is prescribed and what is lived.

3.   Method

The orientation of this research is qualitative and phenomenological, with a descriptive approach. The design of this research is structured in three phases: a preliminary phase, a diagnostic phase and a phenomenological phase. This article presents the findings corresponding to the phenomenological phase, which aims to describe how the teachers of the Coexistence Committee of a District Educational Insti-

tution (DEI) perceive the implementation of Restorative School Justice (RSJ). This phase focuses on exploring the experiences of teachers during the implementation process, addressing their beliefs and experiences from a phenomenological perspective.

A phenomenological study describes the shared meaning of the lived experiences of different people around a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences around a phenomenon to a description of what would be the "grasp of the nature of the thing" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177). This is done by first identifying a phenomenon or "object" of human experience (van Manen, 1990)—in this case, the phenomenon of RSJ implementation. Next, data are collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon and a description is developed of what the individuals' accounts of their experiences have in common. This description focuses on 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

The methodological design of this study is based on the transcendental or psychological phenomenology of Moustakas (1994), which focuses on the description of participants' experiences. This is based on the Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology (e.g., Giorgi, 1985, 2009) and the data analysis procedures of Van Kaam (1966) and Colaizzi (1978). The approach is based on one of Husserl's concepts, epoché (or bracketing), in which the researcher sets aside his or her experience as much as possible in order to adopt a new perspective on the phenomenon under study. Thus, the idea of the transcendental refers to an approach "in which everything is perceived as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). After identifying the phenomenon to be studied, bracketing one's own experiences, and collecting data from several people who have experienced the phenomenon, the researcher analyzes the data by reducing the information to meaningful statements or quotations and organizing the statements into themes. Finally, the researcher develops a textual description of people's experiences—what they experienced—a structural description of their experiences—how they experienced it in terms of conditions, situations, or contexts—and a combination of the textual and structural descriptions to convey the overall essence of the experience.

3.1. Bracketing or positioning of the researcher

In the phenomenological perspective adopted, the researchers place themselves "in parentheses," outside the study, by talking about their personal experiences with the phenomenon. However, this does not mean that the researchers place themselves completely outside the study, but rather serves to identify the researchers' previous personal experiences with the phenomenon so that they can partially set them aside to focus on the participants' experiences in the study (Creswell, 2009). Readers who know about the researchers' experiences can judge whether the researchers focused only on describing the participants' experiences without including themselves. This parenthesis does not consist of forgetting what has been lived, but of not letting the knowledge of the past intervene in the determination of the experiences (Giorgi, 2009).

In the context of this research project, the bracketing process was conducted over the initial three-month period. During this phase, the researchers engaged in a process of documenting their worldview and subjectivity, to explore the extent to which the research process has influenced their experiences. The researchers placed particular emphasis on identifying and reflecting on several key assumptions, both internal and external. The internal assumptions in question relate to the researchers' own experiences, personal histories, and beliefs, while the external assumptions pertain to beliefs and values held about RSJ implementation and the school context. This process occurred between August and December 2020. It is noteworthy that the findings of the preliminary literature review were not incorporated into the design of the in-depth interviews. Instead, this knowledge was integrated during the period of information triangulation, which constituted the final phase of the research.

3.2. Participants

Considering that a central characteristic of a phenomenological study is that the participants have a deep experience with the phenomenon under study, this study focused on one of the educational institutions in the city of Bogota with the greatest recognition in the implementation of the RSJ. In the selection

process of interviews and protocols, the relevance of the community actors who participated in the Institutional Coexistence Committee was taken into account, since this committee is the space where key decisions are made at the institutional level.

3.3. Data collection

The analysis was based on two main sources of information: institutional minutes of the coexistence committee of a district school and in-depth interviews with practicing teachers who are part of this committee. The interviews were conducted in late 2023 and early 2024. The structure of the interviews included a demographic section, a segment on teachers' access to training and moments of participation in restorative school justice, and two guiding questions that sought to facilitate deeper answers and promote meaningful dialogues about how teachers perceive the exercise of implementing RSJ. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted an average of one hour and thirty minutes. In total, five in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers who had participated in the Institutional Coexistence Committee. All the teachers interviewed stated that they had participated in and received training in RSJ.

In addition to the interviews, 15 institutional minutes of the coexistence committee of the district public school were analyzed, as well as two additional minutes with the participation of external entities. These minutes covered the period from January to November 2019. The integrated data from the interviews and the minutes of the Coexistence Committee provided a comprehensive view of how teaching beliefs are reflected in actions in the school environment.

3.4. Analysis

The data analysis process was systematic, starting with the initial coding using Atlas.ti version 9 software. To process the data, we began with a process of leveling of the information, which allowed us to treat each utterance or significant statement with equal importance. From this analysis, groups of meanings or categories were identified, in line with the phenomenological approach proposed by Moustakas (2004). The description of Restorative School Justice (RSJ) was approached from two perspectives: a textual one, to answer the question "What did the teachers experience?" and a structural one, focused on knowing "How did they experience it?"

To ensure the quality and validity of this study, the information was triangulated at two levels: data triangulation and researcher triangulation. Regarding data triangulation, two key sources of information were integrated: the institutional minutes of the coexistence committee and the in-depth interviews with teachers. This combination allowed for a more complete and nuanced view of the phenomenon under study and ensured that the findings did not depend exclusively on a single source of data.

In turn, the triangulation of researchers was a fundamental process to strengthen the validity of the analysis. The researchers involved in the study collaborated in the coding and analysis of the data, which included the leveling of information and the construction of units of meaning. This collaborative approach made it possible to contrast interpretations and enrich the understanding of the phenomenon, ensuring that the conclusions were the product of a critical and multidimensional analysis process.

In terms of quality criteria, a research protocol was followed that included not only discussion of the results by the research team but also discussion of the results with the participants themselves. This process not only ensured the validity of the findings but also provided valuable feedback to refine the interpretations and strengthen the study's validity. In addition, ethical committee approval was obtained to ensure that all ethical considerations were adequately addressed and that the rights and welfare of participants were protected at all times.

4. Results

This section presents the textual description of the proposed phenomenological design. It is about describing 'what' teachers experience when faced with the implementation of restorative practices in their

schools. Thus, the experience of teachers implementing RSJ in the public school under study is permeated by a strong perception of inequality and injustice. This belief manifests itself in their comments on the social and economic reality. As one of the teachers said: "The world is not a fair place because we find people who are not honest, respectful and lack empathy" (Teacher 3). This pessimistic view of society reflects a deep concern about the lack of basic values in human interactions. Moreover, there is no possibility of transformation in the face of this unjust world: "It is better to understand that it won't change" (Teacher 3).

Justice is understood in the light of the values that society seems to have lost: "[...] justice [...] has a lot to do with values, [...] I think it is the set of values that a society has" (Teacher 1). Here, justice seems to be intrinsically linked to shared values. The influence of the family on the formation of values is also evident among teachers. Some recall a home where fairness was encouraged: "I grew up in a home where we had enough money to live on, not luxuriously but well, where my parents never gave more to one child than the other, neither by age nor by sex" (Teacher 5). But in this family environment, justice was learned to be identified with the figure of authority: "Apparently, justice was very much given by the matriarchy, that is, my mother was the strong voice in my house, and this strong voice was because, although she worked, she had the vision of the whole household" (Teacher 1).

This association of justice with the idea of authority is present in the perception of some of the teachers interviewed about the role of the Special Justice for Peace in Colombia. At this point, the tensions between the idea of justice associated with punishment and the restorative practices that are to be implemented as mechanisms of transitional justice become evident: on the one hand, it is recognized that the mechanism of the Special Justice for Peace is a strategy that is coherent with the search for peace in a scenario of armed conflict such as the Colombian one. At the same time, it recognizes the complexity of the profound changes that it implies: it is a matter of abandoning the idea that the perpetrators of atrocious crimes, such as those that took place in the context of the armed conflict, should be punished by the ordinary justice system, with only custodial sentences, and instead imposing sanctions that imply a symbolic reparation to the victims.

In this regard, the views of the teachers interviewed are diverse. Some understand that a peace process implies certain concessions and paradigm shifts in the administration of justice: "The victims and their families have had to go through a very deep and dense exercise to understand that another path can be sought, one that does not necessarily involve serving a prison sentence. But it is very difficult and complex" (Teacher 2). Others, for their part, are categorical in expressing their skepticism about the SJP and its restorative practices: "I firmly believe that serious crimes, such as those committed during the conflict, should be punished through the ordinary justice system. I believe that many of those responsible have benefited too much from the SJP and have not received the punishment they deserve. Reparations to victims are important, but they should not be a substitute for punishment" (Teacher 5).

These divergent perceptions have generated discrepancies among teachers as to how to interpret and address perceived inequality and injustice in the school context. While some are motivated to actively address these inequities through restorative justice, others may experience challenges in reconciling this vision with the complexity of school reality. This tension between resignation and indignation represents a fundamental aspect of the phenomenon of restorative justice implementation in this public school.

Thus, despite the divergence of opinions about the mechanisms of Transitional Justice in Colombia, when the issue of restorative justice is transferred to the school environment, there is consensus that the school is still anchored to a punitive paradigm. This is associated with the situation of violence and inequality in Colombian society. The school is perceived as a punitive institution, characterized by a rigid, hierarchical structure. It is seen as a microcosm of societal and cultural norms, which are often perceived as violent. In the view of the teaching staff, the pervasive presence of violence in the school setting calls for decisive action. "In many respects, it appears that we remain firmly rooted in the punitive paradigm. Based on my observations, offenses such as physical violence or bullying necessitate a robust response, and in such instances, restorative justice may not be the optimal approach" (Teacher 4).

In the course of describing the experience of implementing the RSJ, a number of recurring expressions emerge. These include the observation that "The RSJ is beautiful, but sometimes an iron fist is needed" (Teacher 3), the view that "it is necessary to privilege the common good" (Teacher 1), and the as-

sertion that "a rotten apple damages the basket" (Teacher 5). These phrases reflect a belief that is shared by a number of teachers. They consider the RSJ to be more adequate for resolving minor conflicts, while in serious situations its effectiveness is questioned. This skepticism is based on the perception that the RSJ lacks the necessary severity to address acts of indiscipline or violence that threaten the safety and order of the school. Consequently, some educators feel compelled to supplement the RSJ with more conventional disciplinary measures in instances of significant misconduct.

The capacity for change is presented as a crucial aspect of the phenomenon, with particular attention paid to the influence of internal and external factors in this process. Teachers acknowledge the significance of cultivating an open and reflective discourse about personal values and their correlation with justice in teacher training. This underscores the necessity for a comprehensive and supportive approach to facilitate constructive change in the educational setting and beyond. In conclusion, the implementation of restorative justice in this public school in Bogotá has entailed not only the introduction of new practices but also a profound questioning of long-held beliefs and an active pursuit of equity and justice within the school context.

5. Discussion

In this section, we present the structural description, also referred to as an imaginative variation, derived from the phenomenological inquiry process. In other words, this section demonstrates the "how" of the experience under investigation, which necessitates an examination of the manner in which contextual conditions have shaped teachers' perceptions and actions concerning implementing the RSJ. The implementation of the RSJ in the public school in Bogotá, where the study was conducted, has not only resulted in a transformation of the school's dynamics but has also prompted a profound introspective process among teachers. These educators, situated within an environment marked by inequality and perceived injustice in society, are confronted with a complex phenomenon that extends beyond the mere implementation of a disciplinary approach. Here, the experience of restorative justice manifests itself as a holistic phenomenon that encompasses the totality of their perceptions, family influences, and ingrained beliefs, which, in turn, shape their educational practices and their understanding of the world.

5.1. Belief in the world as an unjust place

The perception of inequality and injustice among teachers is reflected in their discourse on the social and economic reality surrounding them. Some adopt a pessimistic stance, expressing concern about the degradation of fundamental values in human interactions. Others appear resigned to the idea that inequality is an immutable constant, a shadow that looms over society with no possibility of dissolution. This resignation, however, is not merely a cognitive phenomenon; rather, it is an experience that integrates emotions, memories, and a critical reading of one's environment. To the extent that inequality is experienced, it becomes an integral aspect of the human experience rather than a mere collection of isolated components.

The history of social conflict, structural inequality, and high levels of exclusion in Colombia has undoubtedly influenced not only the configuration of criminal law (Sarmiento, Bula, & Mariño, 2019) but also, more fundamentally, the perception of justice itself. A perception in which the fear of crime has found deep roots in the population (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) seems to advocate for a stiffening of penalties as the only form of effective justice, which distrusts other mechanisms and forms of administration of justice that involve, for example, the re-socialization of the criminal.

The role of family in the formation of values and beliefs about justice is of great significance. For the educators who took part in the study, memories of a home environment where fairness and authority were fundamental tenets are intertwined with their current pedagogical practices of justice in the classroom. Therefore, in the context of global injustice, the notion that it necessitates the intervention of an authority figure to ensure that all individuals receive what they are entitled to or what they deserve, by the principle of fairness, is reinforced. These experiences not only inform their conceptualization of justice as an abstract principle but also exemplify its embodiment in their daily interactions. This is why Blood and Thorsborne (2006) posit that, in the absence of a shift in mentality, position, and system,

restorative practices may inadvertently become a form of covert punishment. For this reason, as Albertí and Pedrol (2017) posit, it is imperative to be mindful of our actions, as there is always the possibility of reframing existing practices in a new light while perpetuating outdated patterns.

5.2. Reluctance to change

An intriguing aspect that emerges is the underlying tension between the principles of restorative justice and the firmly held beliefs of some educators, who question the efficacy of this approach in serious situations. This perception that RSJ may be inadequate in high-severity contexts reflects a conflict between the desire for transformative education and the persistence of a punitive mentality. In this sense, skepticism toward RSJ not only constrains its implementation but also indicates a partial understanding of its true potential. This resistance, rooted in the necessity for more robust responses in extreme cases, highlights the obstacles RSJ faces in its endeavor to be fully integrated into an educational system that continues to prioritize exemplary punishment over reconciliation and reparation. The full acceptance of RSJ necessitates a profound transformation in school culture, one that extends beyond the conventional notion of discipline as an act of retribution and instead espouses a comprehensive view of justice as a multifaceted process of community-building and the restoration of social cohesion.

In light of the aforementioned factors, Albertí and Boqué (2015) posit that the implementation of the restorative approach inevitably entails grappling with resistance to change, manifesting in two principal forms. Firstly, the tangible nature of the change process itself presents a challenge. Secondly, there is the difficulty of moving away from the punitive model of conflict resolution. In this regard, Kohn (2006) posits a pivotal question: if it is evident that punishment is an ineffective approach, why do we persist in its use? He offers at least three reasons for this: firstly, punishment achieves obedience, at least initially; secondly, many teachers have been immersed in the punitive management of conflict and have not acquired the capacity to act differently. In conclusion, Kohn (2006) posits that the act of punishing provides a sense of power and fulfills a fundamental desire for justice, which effectively aligns with the deeply entrenched belief in society that "what goes around comes around."

As previously stated in the theoretical framework of this paper, the various forms of violence that have emerged alongside the Colombian internal conflict have shaped the development of a social environment in which justice is perceived as the implementation of exemplary punishments for those who have been involved in such violence. This environment provides an ideal context for the proliferation of punitive populism among individuals. Educators are not unfamiliar with these rationales yet frequently appear unaware of them. When compelled by governmental or institutional directives to adopt a novel approach to school coexistence issues, many educators merely adopt the discourses without embracing the new perspectives these discourses demand.

This situation highlights a significant tension between the principles of restorative justice (RSJ) and the demand for punitive measures, which may impede the comprehensive implementation of RSJ in educational settings where a punitive mindset is prevalent. Accordingly, as posited by Hopkins (2009), Vaandering (2013), and Albertí (2016a), among others, the attainment of the objectives of the restorative approach is contingent upon the acquisition of requisite relational and emotional literacy, an adequate understanding of the tenets of restorative practices, and the development of the necessary competencies—which enable a novel approach to the current coexistence problems—by teachers and the entire educational community.

The acknowledgment of restorative justice as a nuanced process entailing a significant shift in perspective underscores the profound impact of teachers' lived experiences. This process is not linear; rather, it is multifaceted, necessitating an ongoing reconciliation between aspirations for justice and the complex realities of the school environment. In this context, restorative justice serves as an expression of the human capacity to forgive and rebuild. This experience integrates emotion, reason, and context in a holistic unity that resists simplistic divisions. The collective experience of these teachers prompts us to reframe our understanding of justice as an experiential phenomenon that permeates all facets of human existence. This experience, in its intricate complexity, serves as a reflection of societal structures and a potential avenue for their transformation.

6.   In conclusion: What does implementing RSJ in a Transitional Justice context mean in essence?

As a conclusion to the phenomenological analysis proposed in this study, we present what would be the essence of the phenomenon analyzed. That is the fundamental structure of the experience of the implementation of RSJ, resulting from the articulation of the textual and structural descriptions of this experience.

The implementation of restorative practices in the Bogotá public school studied is presented as a deeply personal and contextualized process, in which the experience of each teacher is influenced by his or her history, beliefs, and the social environment in which he or she operates. In a context marked by violence, inequality, and social injustice, teachers are immersed in an individual reflection on their role in education and how they apply restorative justice.

By recalling and reinterpreting their upbringing and experiences, teachers seek to integrate restorative justice in an authentic and meaningful way, revealing a tension between the restorative ideal and the punitive beliefs still held by some. This tension is particularly evident in the perception that RSJ is more appropriate for resolving minor conflicts, while its effectiveness in serious situations is questioned. Such tensions reflect not only resistance to the full adoption of RSJ but also a limited understanding of its transformative potential. However, when faced with the unique challenges of their contexts, teachers seek to adapt restorative justice so that it resonates with their personal and professional experiences and becomes a living and transformative tool capable of adapting to the particularities and needs of each educational community.

In this way, restorative justice becomes a dynamic process in which the interaction between social and individual beliefs and restorative ideals creates a space for continuous learning, both for teachers and for the school community as a whole. The full acceptance of RSJ requires a profound cultural change that overcomes the punitive view of discipline and embraces justice as a holistic process of community building and social fabric restoration.

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