

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRINCIPLES: A LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK TO DE-ESCALATE UNRESTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The persistent unrest in South African higher education highlights the pressing need for an innovative approach to conflict resolution. This conceptual article explores restorative justice as a leadership framework to overcome this societal menace. Traditional approaches to managing unrest have proven insufficient to address the root causes of conflict. This article adopts a conceptual research design of a theory synthesis approach within the transformative paradigm. This involves reviewing, analysing, and conceptualising the integration of existing concepts and theories or literature streams. Restorative justice grounded in the value of empathy, accountability, and collaboration offers a transformative approach to promoting a culture of trust and mutual respect. This article emphasises the essential role of education leaders in championing this framework, emphasising strategies such as articulating a shared vision, providing professional development, creating supportive structures and modelling restorative practices. It is concluded that leaders who embrace restorative justice principles can de-escalate conflicts, enhance relationships and promote social cohesion.

Keywords: restorative justice, Ubuntu philosophy, student unrest, South Africa, higher education institutions

INTRODUCTION

South African higher education institutions are popularly known as avenues for socio-economic and political contestations, indicating complex societal inequality, systemic discrimination and historical injustices. The persistence of student unrest in South African higher education institutions has been a great concern to education stakeholders (government, higher institutions management, lecturers, supporting staff, and parents, students, and host communities) (Pillay 2019). These incessant unrests characterised by civil disobedience, protest and strike action have had significant implications on institutional stability. Like other countries worldwide, South Africa has recorded numerous student unrests in its higher education institutions. One of the most remarkable examples of students struggle in the history of South Africa was the protest against unpleasant rule of the apartheid government. Student activists in South Africa stage a protest against the apartheid government in 1976 (Manulak 2024). The protest which took place in Soweto was led by high school students against unpleasant education policies against black students, imposing African language as the language of instruction. Several decades later another students led protest tagged “fees must fall” was recorded in 2016 against obnoxious school fees and inequalities in higher institutions (Ntombana, Sibanda, and Gwala 2023). These incidents implies that student unrests in South Africa are deeply rooted in complex socio-economic and political struggles. These protests were a direct challenge to racial segregation, systemic oppression and marginalisation of disadvantaged students. The persistence of students’ unrests in South African higher education institutions align with global trends where students massively mobilise against perceived injustices within the education system. is a pointer to the persistent challenge to achieving equitable access to higher education.

This unrest has had numerous unpalatable consequential effects on the higher institutions' peace existence and mandate delivery. These unrests, though legitimately organised have had far reaching negative effect on student, lecturers, supporting staff and institutional infrastructure. The long term consequence is usually seen on students career success, institutional reputation and national development. Swart and Hertzog (2017) observed that unrest in South African higher institutions has affected students' well-being, academic performance and career paths. For instance, the students' protest at the University of Witwatersrand reported fatalities, including burnt cars (Tau and Kgosana 2016). Students unrests often cause reduction in instructional time, psychological distress, which often lead to students’ attrition, restricted career prospects, and economic mobility. This underscores an urgent need for proactive conflict resolution strategies, inclusive dialogue, and policy reforms that address students’ grievances while maintaining institutional integrity.

The South African social milieu continues to present unique challenges. The legacy of apartheid continues to shape social relations and power dynamics (Randle 2024). Potentially influencing the implementation and effectiveness of restorative justice. Ntombana et al (2023) In their reflection on student unrest in South Africa, they submit that the situation still remained the same as the education landscape, which still has socio-economic imbalances. In 2022, there was another student protest against compulsory COVID-19 vaccination, registration difficulties, financial exclusion and historical yet-to-be-addressed challenges (O'Regan 2022).

Despite various interventions, traditional approaches to managing unrest have often proved insufficient to address the root causes of conflict. Traditional leadership or security-driven responses to unrest often depend on punitive measures, such as deploying military and paramilitary teams to enforce punitive measures, which seem to suppress immediate disruptions but do little to foster trust and promote long-term solutions. Clark (2014) submits that the traditional disciplinary approach uses win-lose dynamics. This often leads to resentment, alienation, and isolation among students, failing to address the root causes of unrest. It may increase tensions rather than resolve underlying issues. Practices of restorative justice as a non-punitive approach have been found to have a positive relationship with reducing school suspension in schools (Lustick 2022).

The limited adoption of restorative justice in international and South African higher education presents a significant research gap (Clark 2014; Carson et al. 2009). While restorative justice has demonstrated effectiveness in K-12 settings (Carson et al. 2009; Clark 2014) and even with some criminal justice systems, its application in higher education remains relatively unexplored (Meagher 2009; Wade 2022). This limitation highlights the need to have a deeper understanding of the influencing role of restorative justice principles in addressing the unique challenge of recurring unrest faced by South African higher education

This conceptual article argues that a restorative justice (RJ) leadership framework provides a more effective alternative. Restorative justice emphasises repairing harm, fostering dialogue, and promoting accountability, making it particularly suited to addressing the complex socio-political dynamics of educational institutions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This conceptual article proposes a conceptual framework for applying the restorative justice principle as a leadership approach to de-escalating unrest in higher education institutions, particularly in South Africa. In other words, it strives to add to the existing literature by conceptualising a restorative justice leadership framework tailored to South African higher

education institutions' unique challenges. The study presents strategies that school leaders can use to adapt restorative justice principles to restore everlasting peace in schools.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the specific stated research objective, The conceptual article will provide answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: How can restorative justice principles be adapted into leadership in educational institutions?

RQ2: What mechanisms are needed to effectively use restorative justice principles to address conflict in educational institutions?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The unique socio-cultural South African context necessitates a strategic approach to implementing restorative justice in higher education. This conceptual article is therefore anchored on two-pronged theories: Ubuntu and Restorative Justice. The primary focal points of ubuntu African philosophy include interconnectedness, community responsibility, and respect for human dignity (Randle, 2024; Adewale, 2023). Tutu (1999) submits that the values of restorative justice have some connections with Ubuntu's philosophy of interconnectedness and communal healing.

Ubuntu allows a culturally relevant approach to the application of restorative justice in South African higher education institutions. For instance, the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University have integrated Ubuntu-inspired restorative justice principles to address university conflicts such as racial discrimination, student activism and gender-based violence (Graham and Patel 2019).

This framework will be of significance to leadership in conflict resolution studies. Similarly, this conceptual article offers a practical, beneficial approach to addressing systemic inequalities, which have always been the root cause of social unrest, especially among students in South African educational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This article adopts a conceptual research design of a theory synthesis approach. This involves reviewing, analysing, conceptualising, and integrating existing concepts and theories or

literature streams (Jaakkola 2020). It builds on the existing research on restorative justice in education (Lustick 2022; González, Sattler, and Buth 2019), and explores how restorative justice principles can be applied within a higher education framework. The goal of the conceptual article is to take stock of, digest, and recap what is known as a manageable set of key takeaways (Hulland 2020). In line with this, we mobilised restorative justice principles, precisely that of Howard Zehr (Zehr and Gohar 2003), to discuss the leadership framework for de-escalating unrest in South African educational institutions. This article is also located in the transformative research paradigm, which takes cognisance of political agenda and social justice (Omodan 2021).

This conceptual article takes solace in restorative justice principles and Ubuntu philosophy to propose and conceptualise a restorative justice leadership approach to de-escalate student unrest in South African higher education institutions. These theories and their assumptions were explored as practical dimensions of social justice capable of establishing harmonious relationships among stakeholders (students, parents, academic staff, non-academic staff, host communities and government) of higher education institutions.

This study relies on secondary data sources comprising academic literature (peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly reports on institutional unrest, restorative justice, conflict resolutions, leadership and South African education). We also used case studies and reports of historical and contemporary case studies of unrest in South African educational institutions. We also source data on conflict and resolution practices from government agencies, NGOs, and educational institutions. We analysed the generated data for this conceptual article through thematic analysis and conceptual synthesis. Thematic analysis was used to facilitate a comprehensive analysis of the subject matter (Terry et al. 2017).

CONCEPTUALISING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE LEADERSHIP FOR DE-ESCALATING UNREST

Traditionally, restorative justice is applied in the criminal justice system worldwide. However, its application in behavioural management as a valuable approach to conflict resolution and community building within education settings is becoming popular (Kim, 2024; Perrella et al., 2024; Sandwick, Hahn, and Ayoub, 2019). According to Gaarder (2017), “restorative justice aims to involve the parties to a dispute and others affected by the harm (victims, offenders, families, concerned and community) in collectively identifying harms, needs and obligations through accepting responsibilities, making resolution, and taking measures to prevent a

recurrence and promoting reconciliation”. It involves a planned dialogue among parties to identify harm committed and determine how to repair damages, rehabilitate the offender and restore social cohesion (Frias-Armenta et al., 2018). Restorative justice principles developed over the past three decades (Mirsky 2011; Bartanen 2016) highlight repairing harm, fostering accountability, and restoring relationships (Mansfield, Rainbolt, and Fowler 2018). Therefore, restorative justice leadership is a leadership approach that emphasises repairing, promoting inclusivity, accountability, and rebuilding.

CASE STUDIES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE APPLICATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The traditional approach's failure to manage unrest in higher education institutions has popularised adopting restorative justice principles to reconcile, repair harm and foster accountability. It is imperative to compare the application of RJ in South African, Canadian, and United States universities as a case study. The implementation strategies adopted by each region depend on the individual's unique history, society, and institution.

The broader history of reconciliation and transitional justice following the apartheid experience in South Africa is reflected in the application of restorative justice in the universities. Notable universities, including the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, have adopted RJ principles to promote dialogues on decolonisation, racial discrimination, and gender-based violence (Bowers du Toit and Nkomo 2014; Mokomane 2024). This model has also been influenced by the Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises interconnectedness, community healing and collective responsibility (Tutu 1999).

Conversely, the RJ approach has been applied in Canadian Universities to manage policies on student conduct, emphasising Indigenous perspectives and reconciliation (Sharma 2024). Having recognised the benefits of RJ, the government of Canada has also embraced these initiatives and encouraged educational institutions to embrace Indigenous techniques in justice and conflict resolution (Government of Canada 2015). This is one of the ways by which Canadian universities are creating culturally responsive mechanisms that promote healing and inclusivity.

Moreover, universities in the United States have also embraced restorative justice principles as part of their disciplinary procedures in cases of academic misconduct, racial discrimination, and sexual harassment. Karp and Sacks (2014) reported that the University of San Diego and the University of Michigan developed restorative justice programmes centred

around students' development and harm repair. This implies that the universities in the U.S are adapting RJ into the university environments (Zehr 2015).

While the universities in these three countries are committed to restorative justice as a veritable alternative to traditional punitive measures, differences in history and culture have shaped their approaches to its application. South African universities see it as an integral part of decolonisation and social justice. While Canadian Universities integrate Indigenous perspectives into their restorative justice frameworks, U.S. universities center on student development and campus conduct reform.

RQ1: How can restorative justice principles be adapted into leadership in educational institutions?

CORE PRINCIPLES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

The application of the core principles of restorative justice in higher education leadership highlights a shift from a punitive, reactive approach to disruption and indiscipline towards a proactive, relational approach centred on community building and addressing the root cause of conflict (Lustick, Cho, and Miller 2024; Sandwick et al 2019). The integration of the core principles of restorative justice in higher education institution leadership is an approach that gives preference to healing, accountability, and community building over punitive measures when resolving conflicts and misconduct in the citadel of learning. It, therefore, requires that the leadership approach be changed from an authoritarian style to a more collaborative, participatory models that empower both students and staff (Fine 2024). It also seeks to establish and promote a culture of fairness, dialogue and understanding among stakeholders within and outside the educational institutions. Consequently, leadership will easily manage student unrest, lecturers' disputes, and institutional governance issues. The adapted core principles include:

Relationship building

Restorative justice proposes that the leadership of higher institutions should give preference to establishing a cordial relationship between students, lecturers, administrators and the wider school community (Bruhn 2020). Leaders in higher education institutions must encourage a culture of trust, respect, and empathy in a safe and inclusive school environment where students feel heard and valued. It is a preventative measure that encourages trust-building among all

higher education institution stakeholders (Lustick 2022). This could be actualised by investing meaningful time in familiarising themselves with every student to understand their individual needs (Kim 2024).

Shared decision-making

Another essential principle restorative justice emphasises is shared decision-making processes. Therefore, leaders can uphold this principle to de-escalate unrest in higher institutions by carrying students and staff along in drafting school policies and procedures concerning conflict resolution. When all stakeholders are engaged in decision-making, they feel concerned and have a sense of belonging and ownership (Bruhn 2020). Education institutions that uphold this principle will always welcome opinions and contributions from subjects who have diverse views when deciding matters that affect them (Lustick et al., 2024).

Accountability and Responsibility

Restorative accountability is another important principle of restorative justice that emphasises repairing the harm caused by wrongdoing rather than simply punishing the offender (Lustick, 2022). The restorative justice leadership model will equip the leaders with the necessary skills to facilitate dialogue sessions where students will acknowledge their mistakes and devise plans to repair the harm their actions might have caused (Frias-Armenta et al., 2018). For this reason, higher institution leaders must ensure fairness, equity, and restorativeness in their application of accountability. They must also avoid practices that disproportionately negatively affect marginalised groups (Ispa-Landa 2017).

Community building

One of the primary goals of restorative justice is to promote a sense of belonging and shared responsibility through community building (Sandwick et al 2019). Restorative justice leaders will actively cultivate a culture of care, empathy and support. This can be actualised by creating opportunities for students and staff to connect and build positive relationships (González et al 2019).

Inclusion and Equity

The model of restorative justice principles in higher education institution leadership fosters inclusivity by ensuring that all voices are heard, irrespective of individuals class and rank. Inclusivity and equity are effective in dismantling hierarchical structures that often silence

marginalised group in the ivory towers. More importantly, a close attention is given to perceived marginalised or underrepresented groups within the institution by addressing financial barriers, racial disparities, and all other forms of discrimination (Jin 2024; Bastos, Harnois, and Paradies 2018). Students from poor socio-economic homes, racial minorities and physically challenges individuals usually struggle to gain unrestricted access to quality education and leadership opportunities (Ntombana et al 2023). By addressing the principle of inclusivity and equity higher institution leaders create an environment where historically disadvantaged groups feel seen, heard, honoured and supported.

RQ2: What mechanisms are needed to effectively use restorative justice principles to address conflict in educational institutions?

IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS: LEADERSHIP ROLES AND CHALLENGES

Implementing restorative practices to de-escalate unrest in education institutions in South Africa requires a leader who is strong, visionary and reliable. The would-be leader is expected to play a coordinating role in implementing restorative justice using the following strategies:

Championing the Vision

The first step to implementing restorative justice practices is for the educational leaders to articulate and communicate an unambiguous vision for a restorative school culture. They must build consensus around the value of restorative justice and address concerns and resistance from staff and parents (Lustick, 2022). This presupposes that those leaders of higher education institutions in South Africa, in particular, have an essential role in presenting a coherent and compelling vision and building consensus among staff, students, and parents. However, if resistance comes up, leaders should address it transparently through collaboration and display of trust. (Sánchez, Sitú, and Murillo 2023) submit that the transformational leadership style employs effective communication to change the attitudes of employees and other stakeholders. Therefore, establishing a shared vision builds the foundation for restorative practices and ensures that all institution members feel involved and committed to the process.

Provision of professional development

Leadership training programmes that equip staff with the skill and knowledge to implement restorative justice principles should be considered by leaders. Dwioktorianto Effendy and Wibawanta (2023) reiterate that investment in high-quality capacity-building programmes for academic and non-academic staff members will equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary to implement restorative justice effectively. Leaders must train staff, students and families in restorative practice and provide infrastructural support (Gregory, Ward-Seidel, and Carter, 2021). Capacity-building programmes in the art and science of handling conflicts and unrests prepares staff theoretically and practically, enabling them to manage disputes effectively within higher education institutions. It is effective in reducing tensions, and fostering academic stability in various citadel of learning. Adewale and Adebayo (2020) assert that capacity building initiatives provides higher education personnel with frameworks for understanding conflict dynamics, mediation strategies for de-escalating tensions. It often includes series of workshops, role-playing scenarios, and training in restorative justice principles, ensuring that staff can navigate student unrest, lecturer s disputes, and institutional crises with confidence. Leaders who invest in it must be consistent in the appropriate application of restorative justice principles. Consequently, the institution's human and structural capacity will be strengthened, translating to easy adoption and sustainability of restorative practices. This initiative will also contribute to the broader goal of institutional resilience and sustainable peace in educational institutions.

Creating supportive structures

Establishing institutional policies that support restorative approaches is a goal-getting approach that leadership must embrace. Higher education institution leaders should endeavour to inaugurate restorative teams, develop clear policies and procedures, and allocate resources for training and support (Abdou et al., 2023). This implies that the availability of supportive structures eases the integration of restorative practices into the daily routines of higher education institutions. In other words, policies that support regular restorative meetings, resource allocation and institutional commitment must be encouraged (Adewale 2023b; 2022). The availability of this structure will automatically deescalate tension and unrest in higher education institutions. All over the world, education institutions acknowledge that punitive measures often fail to address the root causes of misunderstanding. In contrast, restorative justice approaches promote a more supportive and rehabilitative learning environment. It is

instructive that any leader who aspires to enjoy sustainable peace in their institution must remain proactive in implementing policies that can enhance students' and staff's well-being.

Modelling restorative practices

higher institution leaders must, as a priority, model restorative practices in their interactions with students and staff (Bruhn 2020). This can be done through empathy, giving rapt attention, active listening, and collaborative problem-solving (Lustick et al 2024). Leaders who demonstrate restorative practices inspire trust and commitment among staff and students. Actions such as giving undivided attention, resolving conflicts collaboratively, and listening empathetically signal a genuine commitment to promoting a restorative culture. This approach also sets the tone for expected behaviour across the institution, encouraging others to emulate these values in their interactions. In modelling restorative practices, leaders demonstrate their commitment to the cause and pave the way for others to follow, ensuring the cultural shift necessary for successful implementation.

Data-Driven Assessment

Institutional leaders, as a matter of importance, must regularly conduct assessments and data collection (Smith 2019). Systematic evaluation enables higher education institutions to identify challenges, measure progress, and implement evidence-based policies that enhance academic and administrative efficiency. This effort will provide evidence of programme effectiveness, inform adjustments and demonstrate the value of restorative justice to stakeholders. Consequently, the institution will enjoy accountability and continuous improvement. Universities that engage in periodic evaluations report improvements in academic outcomes and institutional transparency. A practical example is the data collected on student experiences and satisfaction that helps universities refine their academic programmes, enhance student support services, and address emerging issues (Faker and Jantjies 2020). This will continuously promote a culture of continuous improvement, accountability, and institutional excellence.

Community Engagement and Cultural Sensitivity

Leaders must introduce a participatory approach to foster ownership and increase the possibility of restorative justice leadership practices. Research evidence suggests that effective leadership in restorative justice practices requires a participatory approach that promotes ownership and

inclusivity (Karanxha, Bailey, and Henry-Lewis 2020). Leaders must shift from zero-tolerance policies to co-constructing vision and meaning with stakeholders, building common understanding and goals. Implementing restorative justice must be culturally sensitive and responsive to the specific needs and experiences of the South African student population. There is also a need for the higher institution leader to involve community members in designing and executing restorative justice programmes. This will bring about cultural relevance and buy-in from key stakeholders. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) also opine that authentic participation should be embraced as it is crucial for advancing social justice, requiring leaders to work with communities rather than on them, and fostering a flexible and democratic organisational structure.

ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

There are substantial challenges that higher education institution leadership should envisage and be prepared to address in integrating restorative justice (RJ) principles into higher education leadership as a strategy for de-escalating student unrest. Although restorative justice promotes dialogue, reconciliation, and community-building, the effective implementation of its principles necessitates substantial institutional modifications. Examples of these barriers could be resistance to change, lack of training, resource constraints, skepticism from stakeholders, and difficulty balancing accountability with reconciliation.

First and foremost, resistance from traditional leadership structures might be challenging to successfully adopt restorative justice practices in higher institutions. Overcoming this resistance requires strong leadership, effective communication, and a clear demonstration of restorative justice benefits. Moreover, certain student and community opposition can be a barrier to the efficacy of RJ endeavours. In fact, many students and faculty might tend to see restorative justice as a soft approach that does not implement the consequence that is much needed in ensuring order (Beneke 2020). Elements of this skepticism will be especially strong in situations where indifference or appalling institutional responses to the first student grievance involved have previously been very apparent. Students will not engage in restorative processes if they do not believe RJ can create meaningful change and unrest will continue.

Another key challenge is lack of training and knowledge in restorative practices (Beneke 2020). Facilitators experienced in mediation, conflict resolution, and restorative dialogue are all necessary for effective restorative justice programming. Unfortunately, many university staff members and administrators do not have such specialised knowledge and have difficulty implementing restorative justice principles and practices appropriately. Without the appropriate

training, restorative processes can be misapplied, resulting in ineffective conflict resolution, further mistrust with students and faculty.

Furthermore, insufficient human and material resource has also been identified as another major challenge hindering the incorporation of restorative justice in higher education institutions. Implementing and sustaining restorative programmes involves investing funds for training, personnel and mediation sessions (Marder and Wexler 2021). However, many universities, particularly those with already constrained budgets, may find it difficult to provide the resources necessary to sustain restorative justice efforts. Insufficient financial resources and lack of investment in restorative justice processes can leave restorative justice initiatives underdeveloped or ineffective over time.

Another difficulty is the management of large-scale student unrest through RJ practices. While restorative justice is most effective when applied to individual conflicts or small-group disputes, it can be challenging to implement in situations involving widespread protests or deep-rooted institutional grievances (Jonas 2024). In such cases, university leadership must find a way to balance RJ approaches with administrative measures to restore stability while addressing student concerns.

Additionally, ensuring accountability while promoting healing is a critical challenge in restorative justice implementation. The success of restorative justice depends on individuals taking responsibility for their actions and participating in reconciliation efforts (Jonas 2024). However, some students or staff members may refuse to engage in the process or deny wrongdoing. Institutions must develop strategies to ensure that accountability is maintained while still fostering a culture of dialogue and understanding.

Legal and policy constraints further complicate the adoption of restorative justice in higher education institutions. Many universities operate under national and institutional regulations that prioritise punitive disciplinary actions (Parkhid and Rasoulmoghdam 2024). Adapting RJ principles to fit within existing legal frameworks may require policy revisions, which can be a slow and bureaucratic process. Without legal backing, restorative justice may be difficult to institutionalize effectively.

Despite these challenges, the integration of restorative justice principles into higher education leadership remains a promising approach to managing student unrest and fostering a more inclusive and just academic environment. Overcoming these barriers requires strong institutional commitment, adequate training, resource allocation, and meaningful engagement with all stakeholders. If successfully implemented, restorative justice can contribute to long-term peace, trust, and conflict resolution within higher education institutions.

IMPLICATIONS

This conceptual article has implications for theory, practice and policy, which are discussed as follows:

Implication for theory

This conceptual article bridges restorative justice and leadership theories to produce a novel framework for managing conflicts in South African higher education. It is transitioning from punitive approaches to restorative measures through repairing harm, restoring relationships and promoting accountability. Similarly, this article further explores the expansion and application of restorative justice beyond its traditional domains. While often associated with conflict resolution in schools and criminal justice, restorative justice has the potential to be used to address human rights violations within higher institutions and a wider range of societal challenges.

Implication for Practice and Policy

The practical implications of this study focus on guiding leadership practices in South African educational institutions. This implies that leaders should be able to foster a culture of peace and reconciliation, transitioning from punitive to restorative approaches. This could be done by providing necessary training and support to staff, students, and community members involved in conflict resolution. Furthermore, this research will inform the development of policies to address the unrest in educational sections globally. Having recorded success in many places, it is widely accepted. However, the specific implementation strategies will need to be adapted to suit the unique cultural and institutional context of each setting.

Furthermore, it implies that integrating restorative justice into institutional governance requires a multifaceted approach involving policy changes, structural reforms, and a cultural shift in the higher institutions. The successful implementation of restorative justice requires a top-down approach with buy-in from all levels of the higher education institution, including senior management, lecturers, supporting staff, and students.

The national-level adoption of restorative practices in education requires a coordinated effort involving government agencies, educational institutions and community-based organisations. In other words, it implies a need to develop national standards and guidelines

for restorative justice implementation, provide adequate training and resources and establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Restorative justice as a transformative leadership approach for South African education offers a robust framework for de-escalating unrest and promoting a more peaceful and inclusive environment in South African higher education institutions. Integrating Ubuntu principles into restorative justice practices enables higher institutions to create culturally relevant and effective programmes that address their students' specific needs and experiences. The potential of the proposed framework is to address the root causes of unrest in higher education institutions. However, successful implementation requires strong leadership, sufficient resources, and meticulous attention to potential challenges. As such, leaders who leverage a phased approach, community engagement, data-driven assessment, and continuous leadership support will achieve long-term success in restorative justice practices in South African higher institutions. The potential advantages of restorative justice for promoting a more supporting, just, and equitable campus culture are substantial and warrant further investigation and investment.

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