Chicago’s “Reparations Won” Curriculum: Changing Everything, One Lesson at a Time

Lily Zheng
Reimagining Justice in the Chicago Police Torture Cases

Alice Kim
Durrell Washington

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Introduction

In 2015, the Reparations Won curriculum was codified into law in the first municipal reparations package for survivors of police violence. Together, the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Social Science and Civic Engagement Department, members of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), reparations activists, and torture survivors formulated the Reparations Won curriculum. In 2017, CPS mandated that all social studies teachers teach the curriculum in 8th- and 10th-grade classrooms. Once the words were on the 116-page document and in classrooms, news erupted as reparations activists and torture survivors celebrated, and law enforcement and those who are pro-law enforcement bristled. After a couple of years, news and attention died down. Details about implementation are largely unknown or hidden. Through qualitative research, I will explore the implementation of Reparations Won and the value it has created for students and survivors. While Reparations Won has delivered on some of its promises, implementation has hit a few barriers. As a revolutionary curriculum, Reparations Won and its implementation has implications for other municipalities and governments’ reparations efforts and contains lessons for activists, educators, and all seeking an end to the carceral system.

Methodology

To narrow my scope, I concentrated on researching the 10th grade Reparations Won curriculum, which includes an analysis of the systems and actors responsible for Chicago police torture. The curriculum concludes with a speculative memorial, so that students can imagine what it would mean to memorialize Chicago police torture.

My literature review mostly consisted of a few first-hand accounts from teachers of their experiences with the curriculum or outsiders’ narration of their own experience watching
Reparations Won be taught. It also included some news articles from when the curriculum was first announced, including parents’ negative reactions to it. To gain an understanding for how Reparations Won is situated within the broader context of education, I reviewed material about social justice curricula as well.

Because of the dearth of public research and knowledge around the newly implemented Reparations Won curriculum, I conducted qualitative interviews with people who were involved with the implementation of the curriculum. Because implementation seems to vary based on the neighborhood, I interviewed Dave Stieber at Kenwood Academy, a predominantly-BIPOC and mixed-income school. Then, through snowball sampling, I also interviewed Rachael Nicholas, a teacher at Taft High School, a predominantly-White school. In order to understand the perspective of torture survivors, who had been strong advocates for the curriculum, I interviewed Mark Clements and Gregory Banks from the Chicago Torture Justice Center to get their perspective on how the curriculum is implemented from an outside stakeholder’s perspective.

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Affiliation/Title</th>
<th>Date of Interview</th>
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<tr>
<td>David (Dave) Stieber</td>
<td>Social Studies &amp; Poetry Teacher at Kenwood Academy</td>
<td>February 5, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Clements</td>
<td>Chicago Police Torture Survivor &amp; Community Organizer at the Chicago Torture Justice Center</td>
<td>February 6, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gregory Banks</td>
<td>Chicago Police Torture Survivor &amp; Learning Fellow at the Chicago Torture Justice Center</td>
<td>February 12, 2021</td>
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<td>Rachael Nicholas</td>
<td>Social Studies Teacher at Taft High School</td>
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**Value Created**

The Reparations Won curriculum has radical features that have potential to create value for students and for torture survivors who speak in CPS classrooms. In these classrooms, the
curriculum encourages students to explore their position in the City and reach their own conclusions about the systems around them. For torture survivors like Mark Clements and Gregory Banks, the classroom is a space to be heard, when they weren’t heard for decades, and to make young adults aware of ongoing issues that need to be changed.

*Student Engagement with the Curriculum*

With proper implementation of the curriculum, students have the potential to engage with the Reparations Won material and the torture cases, thus transforming a painful history into steps toward growth, repair, and healing. When high school students, particularly in communities of color, learn Reparations Won in the classroom, they “quickly [make] connections between the torture cases… and recent stories of police abuse, including their own firsthand encounters” (Jones 2018). Especially given recent cases of police violence and killings, from Laquan McDonald to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, students are more aware of systemic issues involving racism and law enforcement. After learning about systemic police torture in Chicago, watching videos of the perpetrators and survivors of violence, and speaking with the survivors themselves, students respond with a variety of reactions: “I really feel some type of way about this.” “He didn’t torture them alone. Why didn’t anyone else get charged?” “I’m just… angry.” Perhaps most jarring—“That could be me!” (Baker 2019). Although Chicago police torture holds roots in pain, torture, and racism, the Reparations Won curriculum provides an opportunity to transform this history into growth for young Chicagoans, who can make connections between the past and present and channel what they learn into their actions.

Given space to process the curriculum’s material in the context of their own experiences, students can form their own opinions about what they think justice should look like and how they should approach it, whether through advocacy, organizing, education, or other avenues. For
example, in Dave Stieber’s first year of teaching Reparations Won, his students at Kenwood Academy were inspired to organize and lead a mayoral forum.

In particular, having torture survivors speak in their classrooms has been particularly impactful for students while they process the curriculum material. Through his years of teaching, Stieber noted that, in his end of the year survey, out of all the guests who come into his class, “the torture survivors are always by far [who] the students remember and their favorite guests, and one of their favorite things was when the survivors [would] come.” The curriculum material itself does not operate on its own. Going through the activities, projects, and speculative memorial, and listening to torture survivors is what makes Chicago police torture, reparations, and transformative justice real for students. Stieber explains:

“The students are learning about these things, but then also are able to meet someone who went through that, and then just hear the ways that the survivors speak about their experiences, but also speak about why they purposely chose to go for reparations the way they did versus just getting compensation… When the kids hear that, too, it's super empowering.”

The survivors humanize the material so that students realize that what might seem like history actually exists in the present and the struggle for justice and against injustice is ongoing.

Students also have the opportunity to engage with the curriculum material by asking survivors questions and having conversations with them. By having torture survivors speak to them about their experiences, students, particularly Black and Brown students, are able to speak to survivors about their own experiences with being policed and facing racism. When torture survivor Mark Clements comes into speak, he makes sure to “know their particular community and… bring up subject issues [he thinks] they would know,” especially occurrences of police violence in their communities. Kids might say, “Well, you know, I tried to bring this forward, but the police, they didn't want to listen to me. And as a result, maybe my father or my mother told me to leave that issue alone.” Clements might even know about that case and be able to talk
students through the systems behind police violence and lack of accountability, as well as how it relates to his own experience with Chicago police torture. In this way, torture survivors like Clements can connect the Reparations Won curriculum to current issues and experiences of students. At the same time, students might come with preconceived notions about torture and its harm. They might say that “if they were in that position, ‘Man, Ima grab their genitals and testicles,’ meaning the officers or, ‘Man, they can grab it as hard as they want. I'm not going to confess.’” Clements can dispel some of these lofty fantasies. When students ask torture survivor Gregory Banks what it was like to be tortured, he responds, “when I was in that situation, the only thing that I was thinking about was sustaining my life. And however I had, whatever I had to do to sustain my life, I was going to do it.” Even after reading about police torture and survivors’ experiences, students may still doubt survivors’ experiences. Having knowledge about youthful confidence and what students might experience and might think, Clements and Banks are uniquely positioned to be able to change their minds.¹

In other cases, students may be pro-police or hold preconceptions about people they perceive as criminals. The curriculum itself as well as the testimonies from torture survivors will often be able to humanize police torture and dispel some of their beliefs. Whereas mostly White, pro-cop parents might condemn Reparations Won for being anti-police and perhaps prejudiced against police, their children might reject these ideas after learning Reparations Won and speaking with survivors. Gregory Banks, a survivor who often speaks in CPS schools, said, “I think a lot of students kind of drop [those ideas] after they hear you. They go through, they read up on reparations, and they find out a lot… I think that you just simply can't draw no conclusions

¹ In no way do I think that survivors have a duty to educate people or students if they do not wish to get up and recount their stories over and over again or answer students’ sometimes-crude questions. I do not think that retraumatizing people against their will for the sake of education is a worthwhile endeavor.
from one instance.” While the curriculum does not tell students what to believe, Reparations Won exposes students to ideas and realities that they might not have access to otherwise. They interact with the knowledge and actors, ask survivors questions, and think about their own positions. The curriculum thus has tremendous potential to create value and empower students to make decisions and act based on their knowledge.

Believing Survivors and (Potentially) Helping Them Heal

Beyond what the curriculum can do for students, Reparations Won also holds importance for torture survivors. Not only did they advocate for it to be part of the reparations package, but the classroom is a space for survivors to be heard and draw inspiration from students, after being wrongfully incarcerated for so long.

Students’ engagement is helpful for their understanding and is a powerful lens through which they can process their own experiences and knowledge. However, for survivors, the classroom is where students, who are close to the age some survivors were when they were incarcerated, listen to their story and do not question its validity. Instead, students ask about how the survivor is doing, what students can do to make change, survivors’ thoughts on other issues, and more. Students of Juanita Douglas’s class at Lincoln Park High asked survivor Ronald Kitchen questions like, “How can we, as young people, make change in police systems?” and “Are you actually able to sleep better now?” (Jones 2018). After speaking, Ronald Kitchen said, “I love y’all giving me so much attention. I never had this much attention” (Jones 2018). The simple act of listening and paying attention is drastically different from what survivors have experienced, whether in the penitentiary, in court, or even in other spaces even after incarceration.
For Gregory Banks, telling his story allows him to process it and heal. Although completely recovering and healing from the trauma is not possible because “your body keeps the score,” when he speaks in front of an audience, he gets excited and is adamant about telling his story. Though he never thought that he would heal by talking about his experience and would not talk about it for a long time, he found,

“The more I talk about that situation, the better I get, the better I can understand human nature… I don't know if I'm getting it out of me. Or I'm making people aware of what happened. And this stuff still happens. It still happens every day, it's happening. And I guess the more we talk about it, the better we have become as a society.”

Talking has not only been a source of healing for Banks but also for society. By making people aware, Banks feels like he is making a difference and making change despite or perhaps because of his experience. These lessons can be built upon by the youth Banks and other survivors speak to as students make connections to mass police shootings and violence, in the street, not just in CPD interrogation rooms.

In fact, in addition to providing healing, Clements finds speaking to students exciting and inspiring, since students often seem to be more radical and more willing to push for change than many adults. At Lincoln Park High School, he discovered that “many [students] are well abreast about their place in the city of Chicago, many of them have at least made vows inside of their classrooms that they move and elevate in their lives, that they will want to fight against this [violence and racism].” His interactions with students has produced a lot of hope for change in contrast to the hopelessness he felt “sitting behind the prison walls, [meditating] on what it would take to somewhat change some of the things that we going through.” Additionally, by being able to exchange information with students and reach out to people who are “the approximate age that [he] was stripped out of society,” he is able to educate them on how racist
the carceral system is. This knowledge furthers both the students’ awareness and makes Clements hopeful for some change in the future that is propelled by educated youth.

**Challenges to Accessing the Curriculum’s Value**

Despite all the benefits, for students and for survivors, that can be accessed through Reparations Won, significant barriers stand in the way. Combined with the parents’ resistance to the Reparations Won curriculum and schools’ fear and resistance to teaching it, lack of support from CPS discourages proper implementation in all schools. Therefore, not all students are given the opportunity to access this curriculum and the value it can provide.

Because the curriculum discusses public officials and law enforcement officers’ complicity and participation in the torture of Black men and women, for some (typically White) parents and even some students, the Reparations Won curriculum is perceived as anti-police. This perception of the curriculum can prevent it from being adapted to suit the needs of students or to complete all the activities, like inviting torture survivors, that are recommended to complement and amplify students’ understanding. Rachael Nicholas, a teacher at Taft High School in a White, pro-cop neighborhood, received some pushback from parents and some difficulties with teaching her students, many of whom were related to police officers and only had positive interactions with them. Even some of them who have knowledge about systemic racism, after having discussed it in class or watched the documentary 13th, still have trouble with recognizing and holding police officers accountable. Nicholas describes this: “even when you talk about [these] things and they still have that background, it’s just like when you kind of go to the police part… ehhh?” While Gregory Banks said that these students’ preconceived notions
might drop away after hearing survivors speak, at Taft, Nicholas says that she has actually never had a survivor speak:

“I did not feel comfortable actually inviting a survivor… I don't think the parents would have gone for that. Or my principal. I just don't—no. I'm being honest… they would have been like, ‘Well, why don't you have a police perspective?’… I don't want any police officer in my classroom.”

Even though she teaches Reparations Won in full at Taft, she is prevented by administration and potentially angry parents from making adjustments to help students better understand their position in the context of police torture and violence. Moreover, only BIPOC social studies teachers, the few there are, actually teach the curriculum. Other teachers at Taft get away with either not teaching it at all or relegating it to a few days, which is easy because Reparations Won is taught at the end of the 10th grade year of US History. Thus, teachers can reason that they had to rush through it. Across CPS, other teachers also either do not teach Reparations Won or rush through it, picking and choosing what to talk about. This practice not only flouts the Reparations Ordinance and CPS mandate but it also deprives students of learning about their city and its history (and present) of police violence and racism.

From Banks’ experience, it may be that the curriculum alone is simply not enough for some students to understand issues with the carceral system. In some Whiter, pro-cop neighborhoods, he detailed students commenting to him, “You had to be doing something in order for them to bother you. If they bother you, if they got to you, you had to be.” Although Banks just gives one example which is not necessarily representative, I have to question what this means about the effectiveness of the curriculum and how, specifically, it is allowed to be taught. While I described the possible value students could gain from the curriculum, depending on the teacher and depending on students’ backgrounds, simply having the curriculum may not be enough to cause them to question these systems of carcerality and punishment.
Contrary to news about pushback in White neighborhoods, Reparations Won seems to not be reaching even majority-Black areas, which is particularly alarming because, according to survivor Mark Clements, it is particularly beneficial in Black communities where these tortures occurred. Kenwood Academy teacher Dave Stieber corroborated that, while teaching Reparations Won, he found that many students were willing to open up about their own experiences and process them with the class during Talking Circles and through journaling. Clearly, a tremendous amount of harm occurred in these areas in the past and in the present; yet, torture survivors like Clements cannot even get in the door in Chatham, South Shore, Englewood, and more. These students are “dealing with police misconduct, through their family lines, or maybe dealing with issues of mass incarceration, through family lines, and it hurts their kids… where do they go for healing, once they have been wounded by [the system]?” (Clements). In fact, contrary to Taft teacher Rachael Nicholas and fellow survivor Gregory Banks, Clements found it easier to talk to students in White, wealthier areas because they seemed to be better informed. Despite the healing it can provide to students in the communities where these tortures occurred, Clements states that, instead, “It has been sidetracked in those communities as if it's an issue that no longer exists… It's just being hid, which makes it appear like it's not being affected, but [the curriculum is] not effective in the Black and Brown communities at all. Because we can't get into the doors of the black and brown schools.” These issues with implementation prevent access not only to the curriculum itself and the value it creates for students, but also, more generally, to educational opportunities. The curriculum itself is good. However, it was created to help heal Chicago and specifically Black communities; it is not reaching these communities, and CPS is not being held accountable to make sure it reaches all of CPS.
Changing Everything

All four respondents have ideas for how to change Reparations Won to make it better—more effective at achieving, according to Northwestern’s Martha Biondi, “a deep sense of skepticism toward this moment of punishment and policing” and realizing “it’s a failure of imagination… to govern a city this way” (Jones 2018). University of Illinois at Chicago’s Elizabeth Todd-Breland has a slightly tamer goal of “[making] sure that this history is never forgotten and [making] sure it is continuously taught and engaged with and remains alive in young people’s minds” (Jones 2018). Yet, because of issues with implementation, these values have yet to be fully realized. Reparations Won is just one part of the Reparations Ordinance, and as Mark Clements says, “[reparations] was a start, but it falls short. And it falls short with accountability being measured out to City employees to make sure that those City employees do right.” As Rachael Nicholas, Dave Stieber, Mark Clements, and Gregory Banks can attest, there is more work to be done.

CPS and reparations activists still face many challenges and need to implement many changes to make the goals of Reparations Won a reality. Only then will the value some students have experienced be accessible to all students in Chicago, particularly those in communities who were/are directly harmed by police torture and violence. For example, Dave Stieber suggested that CPS hire curriculum coordinators to make sure that teachers actually have enough time and support to implement the curriculum. Stieber and Rachael Nicholas both advocated for more context to be included in the curriculum so that students can be taught how police torture in the 1970s-1990s relates to police violence and carcerality today, especially given the recent, widely-publicized killings of Laquan McDonald, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. Nicholas even proposed an activity modelled after Tonika Lewis Johnson's Folded Map Project to help students
understand their positionality in Chicago, including examinations of their identity, neighborhood, and more. Of course, there still exists the issue of even getting torture survivors in the doors of schools to talk about their experiences and engage in some, at least partial, collective healing.

Conclusion

Reparations Won holds the potential to and has already created value for students and survivors to heal, learn, and grow. The curriculum is a revolutionary model for other governments, activists, and stakeholders to reimagine what role education can play in reparations and social justice. Some barriers that stand in the way of Reparations Won include lack of support for teachers and lack of accountability by CPS. It is necessary that we continue imagining and reimagining this curriculum and its implementation. Reparations Won is part of a larger story about social justice education that can be traced back to the development of the Mississippi Freedom Schools by Charlie Cobb in 1963. The Freedom Schools were intended “to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippi, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands and questions” (Ayers 2016). In his book Demand the Impossible!: a Radical Manifesto, Bill Ayers claims that, now, more than fifty years later, we have still not achieved this kind of radical education. Though Reparations Won is revolutionary, it does not fully achieve its radical intentions, partially because, as Ayers points out, it depends on teachers, activists, and others to push against the status quo.

When we consider what has to be done, I am reminded of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s call to change everything. Reparations Won cannot stand alone without having torture survivors speak in classrooms; curriculum support for teachers; a restructuring of the way teachers teach material that is not on the AP US History test; people in CPS constantly making sure that the mandate is
fulfilled… the list goes on. What needs to change, beyond this curriculum but also for this curriculum, is everything. The work is not over just because words are on a 116-page document entitled “Reparations Won.”
References


