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Restorative Practices in Schools

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School discipline is at a crossroad. Most researchers have concluded that years of punitive discipline measures have produced harmful consequences for students. Suspended students are more likely to fail courses and become chronically absent (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007). Increased disengagement and subsequent drop-out imposes significant social and economic costs (Rumberger & Losen, 2016). Receiving just one out-of-school suspension can potentially alter a student's educational trajectory (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013). Minority students often bear the brunt of this harm, as they are suspended at significantly higher rates than their white peers (Noltemeyer, Marie, Mccloughlin, & Vanderwood, 2015).

To address these imbalances, districts nationwide have explored the use of preventive, early response disciplinary models. Restorative practices are one such model. Restorative practices represent an attempt to reform school discipline and improve relationships among stakeholders while minimizing punitive disciplinary measures (Vaandeering, 2010). Morrison and Vaandeering (2012) posit that restorative practices address “power and status imbalances” by promoting the “soft” power of relationship building and understanding, rather than “hard” power of the institution to sanctions as a motivator.”

Defining restorative practices in schools, however, is no easy task; there is no consensus around what constitutes a restorative practice¹ (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016) and the research base on the impact of a wide variety of measures that might be included under the term is still emerging. However, most restorative practices programs include ongoing communication across the school and reparative opportunities designed to produce the following outcomes:

- Accountability, community safety, and competency development (Ashley & Burke, 2009);
- A reduction in racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline (Rumberger & Losen, 2016);
- A reversal of the negative academic effects of zero tolerance school discipline policies (Rumberger & Losen, 2016); and
- A reduction in contact between police and students on school discipline issues (Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2012).

¹Braithwaite (1999) defines restorative practices as those that promote healing rather than hurting, community participation and community caring, respectful dialogue, forgiveness, and making amends. On the other hand, Hopkins' (2003) definition is focused on practices that manage behavior and shift away from punitive measures.

Sellman, Cremlin and McCluskey (as cited in Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016) argue that restorative justice is a contested concept and may never have an agreed upon definition. Given this judgment, Fronius et. al (2016) suggest that restorative justice practices be broadly described as non-punitive approaches to handling conflict. This can include practices using a variety of terms such as “restorative practices,” “restorative approaches,” and similar language.

Researchers have examined a range of models and frameworks in schools, and some offer potentially promising evidence. Currently, the empirical research base is in the preliminary stages (Fronius et al., 2016). There are several large-scale studies underway that will subject restorative practices to the more rigorous evaluations needed to determine correlational and causal impact.

Restorative Practices as a Whole-school Model

While there are schools that implement, or seek to implement, individual components of the restorative practices protocols, the research that exists generally considers a whole-school approach most promising (Guckenburg, Hurley, Persson, Fronius, & Petrosino, 2015). A whole-school approach establishes common values and norms, promotes a sense of belonging to the school community, and builds trusting relationships, leaving fewer students in crisis (Kidde & Alfred, 2011). Behavioral and inter-personal issues are dealt with quickly and deeply, reducing the need for punitive discipline measures (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Tyler, 2006). The goal of these various practices is that fewer students will need targeted interventions and even fewer, intensive ones.

Morrison, Thorsborne, and Blood (2005) illustrate the application of restorative practices—from prevention to intense intervention—using a hierarchical, whole-school approach. The framework begins with establishing foundational, school-wide prevention practices, upon which subsequent interventions rest. Each step narrows the population and focus, from proactive to reactive responses (Kidde & Alfred, 2011):²

- *School-wide Prevention Practices- (Tier I)*
Reaffirming relationships through developing social and emotional skills
 - Identify common values and guidelines.
 - Promote and strengthen sense of belonging and ownership.
 - Develop social-emotional understanding and skills; build healthy relationships.
- *Managing Targeted Difficulties- (Tier II)*
Repairing relationships
 - Prevent harm.
 - Resolve differences with restorative intention.
 - Build social-emotional capacity.
- *Intense Interventions- (Tier III)*
Rebuilding relationships
 - Focus on accountability.
 - Organize resources to address behavioral and academic concern.
 - 1:1 support and successful reintegration for youth in crisis.

The premise for these tiers of strategies is that together they can create school-wide cultural norms of the kind that research has previously found effective (Bryk, 2010).

² Restorative practices can be used at all three interventions levels. Morrison et al., (2005) describe the use of restorative circles as a critical function in intensive interventions, hence their placement as a Tier III example.

These Three Components in Practice

School-wide Prevention Practices

Whole-school implementation seeks to prevent problems by cultivating, in students and teachers, the skills to deal with behavioral and inter-personal issues before they escalate. Kidde & Alfred (2011) note that building a school-wide culture of common values and meaningful support makes restorative practices much more likely to succeed. Creating norms around the principles and application of restorative practices develops students' social-emotional learning, builds community within the school, and strengthens social and human capital. This leads to greater levels of trust, empathy and respect within the school among students, staff, and teachers (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). As the authors note, "creating the space to explore and understand shared values in the classroom foster[s] a [school culture] more conducive to establishing deepening relationships among members of the school community" (2012, p.146). An additional research finding: students' buy-in and participation in restorative practices influences their trust and relationship with those implementing the practice (Anyon, 2016a).

Programs such as Community Conferencing Center's "Daily Rap," which Baltimore City Public Schools employs, offer opportunities to develop these skills and create understanding and connectivity. Daily Rap provides students, and more recently teachers, an opportunity to "circle" daily on a topic to identify solutions and support one another. While no studies have determined causal linkages to specific outcomes, Kidde and Alfred (2011) report anecdotal survey evidence that suggests Community Conferencing builds trust and deepens the relationship between participants.³

Stinchcomb, Bazemore, and Reistenburg (2006) evaluated a three-year, school-wide restorative practices pilot conducted by The Minnesota Dept. of Children, Families and Learning (DCFL). They focused on three St. Paul, Minnesota schools⁴—two elementary and one junior high school. Facilitators conducted circles to repair harm, cultivate empathy skills, and promote "Make the Peace"—a statewide campaign to encourage alternatives to violence.

Their study found reductions in out-of-school suspensions in all three schools. The impact on in-school suspensions and behavioral referrals were ambiguous; however, one elementary school saw reductions in both while the other saw increases. Stinchcomb et al., (2006) surmise that the disparity was due to teachers in the first school receiving additional professional development and working with a restorative practice planner to develop alternative disciplinary plans. Thus, schools that are considering implementing restorative practices may want to build on-going coaching and support for teachers.

Denver Public Schools (DPS) has taken the concepts of Morrison et al.'s (2005) approach and applied it districtwide. Starting with a school-based pilot program in 2006 and expanding districtwide in 2008, DPS adopted a disciplinary code that includes restorative practices. DPS also

³As a responsive intervention, Daily Rap offers promising evidence. Gonzalez (2012) reported that "of the 450 documented Community Conferences [in her study], 97% resulted in a written agreement, and there was a 95% rate of compliance with the agreements."

⁴ The three schools were Lincoln Center Elementary, Kaposia Elementary, and South St. Paul Junior High School.

committed to substantial professional development in how to interpret discipline policies and protocols, restorative practices, and allied relationship-building approaches (Anyon, 2016a).

A pre-post exposure analysis⁵ of the DPS restorative practices model found a five-percentage point reduction in the overall suspension rate in five years (10.5% in 2006 to 5.8% in 2013) (Baker, 2008). Additionally, a case study analysis of the practice reported a four-percentage point narrowing of the Black/White suspension gap between 2008 and 2013 (Gonzalez, 2015).

As noted, school wide prevention practices form the foundation upon which targeted and intense interventions are based.

Managing Targeted Difficulties

The premise of the next level of intervention is that most disruptions should not require intense or punitive intervention. Rather, they should become teachable moments for students to understand a harm or potential harm and identify solutions to avoid or repair that harm (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

An example of this is managing “power and status” conflicts such as bullying. Recent research calls into question the use of punitive measures to address bullying. Davis and Nixon (2010) found such measures often create additional behavioral issues and cause offenders to seek retribution. On the other hand, restorative practices promote repairing and rebuilding relationships, a feature missing from punitive discipline measures. Because of this, research views interventions featuring face-to-face contact between bully and victim as a potentially useful means to involve everyone in the peacemaking and healing process (Molnair-Mane et al., 2014; Morrison, 2002). Practices can range from a subtle or “light-touch” talk to more formalized conferencing between aggrieved parties to quell the issue and reduce discipline referrals (Kidde & Alfred, 2011).

Research by Anyon et al., (2016b) analyzed the discipline records of DPS students who received one or more discipline reports (9,921 students) over the course of a school year (2012-2013). The study sought to demonstrate the effectiveness of restorative practices at reducing multiple disciplinary incidents within a school year.

Anyon et al. found that students who received a restorative practice intervention had lower odds of receiving discipline referrals and suspensions in the following semester.⁶ However, Anyon and colleagues note that gaps in discipline persisted between students of color and poor students, and their white and wealthier peers. Anyon et al. suggest that additional interventions and professional developments, such as those focusing on cultural sensitives, could reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

Intense Interventions

The third and final level of intervention aims to repair and rebuild relationships. This category of intervention arises when direct physical or emotional harm has occurred. Such harm may include the school community as well as neighbors and family members (Morrison et al., 2005). This level

⁵ Pre- and post-test analysis is a quasi-experimental evaluation method. Participants are studied before and after the exposure to a treatment, or in this case, to restorative practices. There can be no causal evidence, as there is no random assignment or treatment group with which to compare. The above analysis included only one group who were exposed to restorative practices.

⁶ In DPS terminology, semester is synonymous with marking period.

of intervention is specifically designed for those students facing the most serious discipline issues or crises (Kidde & Alfred, 2011)

Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) uses Tier III to reintegrate the highest-risk youth. Following a sustained absence, such as incarceration or suspension, OUSD convenes “Welcome Circles” to reengage the student. This is done to provide wraparound support and promote accountability and achievement (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014).

Circle participants include the student, family members, appropriate school staff (i.e. school mental health coordinators) and facilitator. Other adults, such as a coach or probation officer, may also be encouraged to participate.⁷ Facilitators begin by guiding participants through a series of positively-framed questions on how to develop a successful transition plan.⁸ Throughout the planning, participants identify their roles and responsibilities in order to build trust and show support. The facilitator tasks participants with specific activities to ensure active participation in the student’s transition. Conversely, the student’s task is to communicate with participants when they are struggling and additional support is needed. Circles continue throughout the school year to monitor progress.

The effectiveness of this level of intervention at OUSD has not been evaluated in isolation. However, student and staff survey results on the effectiveness of the OUSD model have been largely positive (Jain et al., 2014):

- Seventy percent of staff report the practice has helped to create a positive climate in schools and 60% believe the practice has contributed to the decrease in the use of suspensions;
- Eighty-eight percent of teachers have found the practice “very or somewhat” helpful in reducing classroom behavioral disruptions; and over three-quarters of students who participated in a restorative session report the practice resolved conflict and repaired harm.

Recommendations for Implementation

Restorative practices work best in the context of a strong school culture that has created norms around respecting the values of individual students and consistency with disciplinary issues (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). This takes time. Shifting the attitudes and sensibilities of school personnel may take one to three years (Karp & Breslin, 2001), and the deep shift to a restorative-oriented school climate may require three to five years (Anfara, Evans, & Lester, 2013). Guckenburg et al., (2015, p. 12) notes that “principals can feel protective of their school and resist having others (e.g. consultants and technical assistance providers) coming in to change how the school operates, especially concerning their discipline policies.”

Strong vision and commitment to restorative practices by school leadership is essential for building restorative practices school-wide (Anyon et al., (b) 2016). Implementation requires staff time, buy-in, and training, resources that traditional sanctions such as suspension do not require of schools. Fronius et al., (2016) suggests administrators and educators conduct readiness assessments to develop a theory of change and timeline for implementation. Doing so eases fears, builds interest

⁷ See Re-entry Welcome Circle [protocols](#)

⁸ See “Tier 3” video tutorial on the Oakland Unified School Districts “Restorative Justice” website: <http://www.ousd.org/restorativejustice>

and engages stakeholders in the process (Kidde & Alfred, 2011). Having a full-time restorative practices coordinator is also recommended, with one study noting “it is simply not feasible, or sustainable, to train existing administrators or mental health staff and ask them to take on restorative practices in addition to their existing responsibilities” (Anyon, 2016a, p. 4). Additionally, providing support through trainings and professional development and leveraging community resources (e.g. local non-profits focused on community building and youth engagement) can help to ease the burdens of implementation (Advancement Project, 2014).

Research Review Limitations

As this brief underscores, there are several studies that focus on specific practices (Anyon et al., 2016; Baker, 2008; Stinchcomb et al., 2006), participant satisfaction (Jain et al., 2014; Kidde & Alfred, 2011), and qualitative accounts by victim’s, offender’s parents, and other stakeholders (Gonzalez, 2012; Jain et al., 2014). That said, the empirical research base supporting restorative practices in schools still emerging. Currently, there are three-large scale randomized controlled trials (RCT) underway with the earliest findings available by late 2018 (Fronius et al., 2016).⁹ Once completed, these studies will make the research record more robust. Until that time, the majority of studies evaluate program exposure with no control comparison.

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⁹ See Appendix A for a full description and expected completion dates.

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Appendix A

Below is a description and timeline for the RCT studies currently underway:

- RAND study Reducing Problem Behaviors Through PYD: An RCT of Restorative School Practices
 - The study seeks to: assess the mechanisms of how restorative practice interventions (RPI) implementation influences the school environment; assess the effects of RPI on school staff perceptions of school climate and adolescents' reports of school connectedness, peer relationships, developmental outcomes (academic achievement and social competency), and problem behaviors (alcohol use, bullying, disciplinary referrals); and assess the extent to which the positive effects of RPI on adolescents persist over time during the transition between middle and high school.

The study is in the recruiting phase. Final data collections are scheduled for May 2018 with results tentatively due in August 2018.
(<https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT02155296>)

- National Institute of Justice (NIJ)/RAND/Institute of Restorative Practices study: Pursuing Equitable Restorative Communities:
 - Researchers will conduct an evaluation of the SaferSanerSchools whole-school reform model using a randomized control design in Pittsburgh Schools for the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 classes. No timetable established for results release (<http://nij.gov/funding/awards/pages/award-detail.aspx?award=2014-CK-BX-0020>).
- NIJ/Urban Institute (Justice Policy Center) study Using a Restorative Justice Approach to Enrich School Climate and Improve School Safety:
 - The Central Falls School District in Rhode Island will partner with three local educational agencies (LEAs) in the state to conduct a pilot implementation of restorative justice conferencing. Researchers will conduct a rigorous impact evaluation using a quasi-experimental design that will compare the outcomes of students who participate in conferencing (treatment) to students from non-treatment

LEAs who have been disciplined for similar offenses (comparison). No timetable for results has been announced.

<http://nij.gov/funding/awards/pages/award-detail.aspx?award=2014-CK-BX-0025>