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Putting children and families first to ensure high academic achievement for all

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Restorative Practices in Education

AT A GLANCE

Restorative practices help to improve school culture by promoting inclusion, community, self-efficacy, self-worth, and teach strategies to resolve conflict and manage misbehavior in a peaceful manner (Kline, 2016). Research from the past two decades shows that exclusionary discipline practices are inequitable and educators across the country have begun looking for alternative methods. Restorative practices have been implemented to help prevent biased and ineffective disciplinary actions and to assist with ensuring that all students are provided equitable access to a high-quality learning experience. This research capsule summarizes recently published research findings on the effectiveness of restorative practices in schools along with a brief description of how schools implement these strategies.

What are School-Based Restorative Practices?

While restorative practices have historical roots in diverse religions and cultures (Gregory, 2018), the restorative justice system gave rise to educationally-based restorative practices. The International Institute for Restorative Practices developed school-based restorative practice interventions in 1999. Restorative practices can be described as an umbrella of tools that educators can use to establish positive relationships with all students and stakeholders. They are also used to respond to conflict and repair relationships that have been damaged. Its philosophical foundation is built on the belief that we are all connected through a web of relationships and when a wrongdoing has occurred, the web becomes torn (Kline, 2016; Vaandering, 2014). Restorative practices have shown capacity to build social and emotional skills by focusing on relational practices that empower students to resolve conflict (Hemphill, 2018).

Restorative approaches to discipline include a variety of practices on the prevention-intervention continuum. Some practices aim to prevent infractions through building community, while other practices intervene after infractions have occurred (Gregory, 2018). Although a universal definition of restorative practices in schools does not seem to exist, educators agree that they encompass a multitude of positive behavioral support approaches that foster communication, mutual respect, and understanding among all people. Engaging students socially in the school community takes precedence over social control through the use of goal setting, mutual resolution, and a solution focused approach (Mansfield, 2018).

Restorative practices are predicated on the theory that individuals are less likely to change their behavior when authority figures do things to or for them (Mansfield, 2018). Alternatively, positive behavioral changes are more likely to occur in a context where those in authority do things with students and relationships are established rather than having fear of the institution and its punishments (Vaandering, 2014; Mansfield, 2018).

Restorative practices can be generalized into two categories. The first involves a “proactive” application in which positive school communities and healthy relationships are encouraged through the avoidance of conflict. Additionally, school staff integrate values of trust, respect, tolerance, supportive tone, and warm body language into daily activities (Norris, 2018). The second category of restorative practices is commonly referred to a “reactive” application in which practices are used in response to a certain conflict. This commonly includes using formal restorative conferences among all parties involved to repair the impacts of the harm inflicted on all who have been affected (Norris, 2018).

Restorative practices are evidence-based strategies that support a positive school culture and have been found to impact schools’ discipline data. They are intended to keep students in schools and engaged in the learning process. On the contrary, research shows that exclusionary practices are ineffective and contribute to the achievement gap.

Why Schools use Restorative Practices

A national survey in 2016 found that schools in more than half the states and the District of Columbia were in some stage of restorative practice implementation (Gonzalez, 2018). According to Anyon (2016), schools began using restorative practices because they recognized that strictly using punitive school discipline is often not very effective and tends to disproportionately impact students of color. Prior research indicated that punishment alone, such as suspensions, only intensified problems for students, schools, and communities (Kline, 2016). Findings indicated that suspensions keep students out of classrooms away from learning opportunities and therefore have been linked to lower achievement, reduced engagement, truancy, risk-taking behaviors, and dropping out of school (Mansfield, 2018).

Research from the past two decades shows that exclusionary discipline practices are also inequitable. African American students and those with disabilities are suspended at far higher rates than their peers (Mansfield, 2018). Punitive measures are often ineffective and school exclusion starts a chain reaction of events that put students more at risk of entering the juvenile justice system often referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Mansfield, 2018; Flannery, 2015; Kline, 2016). Restorative practices have been implemented to help educators prevent biased and ineffective disciplinary actions and to help ensure that all students are provided equitable access to a high-quality learning experience.

How Schools use Restorative Practices

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices, eleven essential elements of restorative practices exist. (See Table 1, Appendix A for a listing). They range from informal activities such as telling someone how you feel to formal events such as hosting a restorative circle. The three most commonly used elements include affective statements, community building circles, and restorative conferencing.

- Affective Statements are statements used to express how another person's actions make us feel (affect). It is a shift in philosophy from thinking of rule infractions or violations, i.e. "No running in the halls", to relationships and taking responsibility, i.e. "When you run in the hall, I feel worried that you or someone else might get hurt." Using affective statements puts a focus on relationships and teaches how to express thoughts and to understand how personal actions affect others (BPS Restorative FAQ, Office of School Climate).
- Community Building Circles are opportunities for people to share their stories and points of view, learn how to listen respectfully to others, to be heard, to make connections and, to learn from each other. In community building circles, which often utilize a talking piece, one person at a time shares with the group. This approach values various perspectives and participants are seen as equals. The purpose is to establish connections - when individuals connect with others, they are less likely to offend or assume bad intentions (BPS Restorative FAQ, Office of School Climate).
- Restorative Conferencing is conducted to repair harm that has been caused by the incident and restore relationships between individuals. A Conferencing Circle may be done in lieu of a suspension ending in a signed agreement. Several people are involved including the person(s) harmed, the person(s) who caused harm, support person(s), facilitator(s), and administrators (BPS Restorative FAQ, Office of School Climate).

Research on school-based restorative practice implementation demonstrates that whole-school interventions are the most effective for improving student outcomes (Gonzalez, 2018). Whole-school implementation encompasses training all school staff, faculty, and students on the eleven essential elements of restorative practices and the integration into the school culture on a daily basis (Acosta, 2019). Tiered programs are also commonly used in which tier one encompasses modeling elements by everyone within a school at all times; tier two aims to repair relationships once an infraction has occurred, and tier three involves formal, scripted restorative conferences that are held in response to a serious infraction such as a fight (Mansfield, 2018).

Have Restorative Practices Proven to be Effective?

Several studies have been conducted to determine whether school-based restorative practices have proven to be successful in changing school culture and reducing negative consequences such as suspensions. A number of the most recent studies are summarized below.

Acosta et al. (2019) conducted the first randomized, controlled trial of a comprehensive, multi-level restorative practice intervention. The study contained a total of 14 middle schools throughout Maine encompassing seven schools that implemented restorative practices on a limited basis and seven that did not implement any activities. Researchers used a web-based, self-reported student survey across multiple

domains including student, peers, and school to assess if change had occurred. They hypothesized that if a school environment was positive, adolescents would report positive developmental outcomes and experiences or perpetrate fewer incidences of bullying. Students who indicated having the greatest exposure to restorative practice experiences, primarily because of their teachers' actions, did report more positive outcomes such as school connectedness, better school climate, more positive peer relationships and developmental outcomes, and less victimization from physical and cyber bullying. No school-wide changes were identified through the study; perhaps due to the limited implementation in the treatment schools. However, findings suggested that if restorative practices are used consistently, there is great potential for reducing bullying victimization by building supportive environments.

Norris' (2018) research results indicated that schools implementing proactive restorative practices consistently had a greater impact on happiness and engagement compared to schools that inconsistently implemented either proactive or reactive practices. Consistency of implementation was key in this study.

Kehoe, Bourke-Taylor, and Broderick (2018) conducted a study focusing on both student and teacher perspectives related to how well restorative practices may have changed students' behavior. The study was conducted in Australia with six schools that had whole school implementation for at least four years. Additionally, school staff received professional development on restorative practices. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups were used. Results indicated that restorative practices impacted student behavior and built social skills in five key ways: harmony, empathy for others, awareness and accountability of one's own actions, respectful relationships, and thinking in a reflective way. Researchers and school administration summarized the five findings into the acronym H.E.A.R.T. to reflect a new framework. Results from the study also highlighted the impact that restorative approaches can have building social skills instead of only being considered a process to manage student behavior.

The Rand Corporation (Augustine, 2018) conducted one of the first rigorous evaluations of restorative practices as implemented in a city school district. They found that practices in the Pittsburgh Public School District had a positive effect in schools by reducing school suspensions. Schools that implemented restorative practices had a 36 percent decline in their suspension rate between the 2014-15 and 2016-17 school years compared to schools that did not (18% reduction – mostly elementary students). Additionally, students in restorative practice schools were less likely to be transferred to an alternative school. These findings pertained to all races, low-income students, and both genders. Researchers also found strong evidence that restorative practice implementation had positive impacts on the teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning conditions. Responses to the district's survey indicated significantly higher ratings of conduct management, teacher leadership, school leadership, and overall teaching and learning conditions in the restorative practice schools than in control schools. Almost all restorative practice school staff developed at least some understanding of restorative practices over the two-year implementation period.

Gregory's (2018) study found that discipline-referred students who participated in restorative practice interventions were less likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than discipline-referred students who did not participate in restorative practices. Additionally, discipline-referred students who were enrolled in schools using primarily restorative practices in response to discipline referrals were less likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than referred students in schools with little to no restorative practices.

Recent international studies using single group designs have found reductions in office discipline referrals and out-of-school suspension rates after whole school restorative practices were introduced including New Zealand, China, and Scotland (Gregory, 2018).

Hemphill (2018) found that restorative practices may be connected to sport programs by focusing on building positive relationships by proactively addressing conflicts and viewing the definition of conflicts broadly to include problems that naturally occur in the course of sport participation. They found when conflict was handled appropriately, it provided an opportunity to strengthen relationships and hence improve team dynamics.

Lustick (2017) conducted a year-long, multi-case, ethnography that sought to find out why disproportionality still existed in some schools using restorative practices. Three New York City schools that were utilizing restorative practices as an explicit means of reducing both their overall suspension rates and the district-wide racial discipline gap were examined. Findings indicated that the individuals hired to be restorative coordinators were consistently young, non-White faculty and administration greatly depended on these coordinators to bond with, contain, and compel obedience from students of color. An overarching finding was that, despite keeping suspension rates low, restorative practices ultimately reinforced notions of order in the school. Reticence on part of the administration to address racism in school policy led to restorative practices being seen as a means of reinforcing and reproducing inequality.

Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, and Espelage (2016) studied student and staff experiences and outcomes after participating in a Restorative Circles Program. The high school under study was located in a large urban area in the southeast portion of the United States. Semi-structured interviews with students, staff and administrators from 35 high schools were conducted. Several positive outcomes were highlighted including the following. An ownership of conflict resolution was expressed because staff and students concluded that the new process was better than the old method of fighting. Students discussed how utilizing circles taught them new skills that helped to prevent destructive ways of engaging in conflict. Participants felt that their school was impacting the School-To-Prison Pipeline because students were not getting suspended or locked up as often. Students also discussed improved relationships with peers as a result of the circle process. Staff acknowledged through the interviews that punitive ways of handling conflicts and rule violations were not effective. Students did voice a few frustrations related to the circle process including feeling that not everyone told the truth during circle time and were often disappointed in peers who were unwilling to be vulnerable during the circle discussions.

Anyon et al. (2016) reviewed student record data from a large urban district (180 schools and approximately 90,546 students) to determine whether restorative practices impacted subsequent behavioral refractions such as ODRs and/or suspensions. Findings suggested that restorative practices may be useful alternatives to punitive and exclusionary consequences. With each restorative practice activity students received (circles, mediations, or conferences) during the first semester, their odds of receiving another ODR or out-of-school suspension in the second semester were lower. This association was present even after accounting for race, thus indicating that students' race did not moderate likelihood of an ODR or a suspension in the second semester. Researchers did caution that this finding is correlational and not necessarily causal, due to their inability to account for all relevant confounding variables.

Gregory et al (2016) conducted a study to examine the student classroom experiences utilizing restorative practices. Two large and diverse schools in a small city on the East Coast participated during the first year of implementation. Results indicated that greater restorative practice implementation levels were associated with better teacher-student relationships as measured by student-perceived teacher respect and teacher use of exclusionary discipline. Also, increased frequency of implementation was associated with greater teacher respect. Higher restorative practice implementation was associated with lower use of disruption/defiance disciplinary referrals with Latino and African American students.

Gonzalez' (2015) five-year study of restorative practice in the Denver Public School system found that the use of restorative approaches in Denver decreased overall risk for suspensions by five points, and for African Americans by more than 7%, Latinos 6%, and Whites 3%. They also determined that restorative practices was a protective factor for students of color from having out-of-school suspensions.

Although a vast body of research exists regarding educationally-based restorative practices, continued research and evaluation are needed to enhance our understanding of its impact at both student and school levels. Dissemination of restorative practices in schools has outpaced research (Gregory, 2018) and future studies are needed to see how strategies focused on racial equity, community building, and social-emotional learning can serve as a primary preventive model to avoid disciplinary incidents. Much of the research has been conducted out of the United Kingdom and therefore, supplemental research is needed in large throughout the United States (Kline, 2016). In addition, many of the studies have been anecdotal in nature, leaving researchers calling for more rigorous evaluation studies of restorative practices in schools, including the use of standardized instruments (Norris, 2018).

On a Local Note

Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) began implementing restorative practices in a few pilot schools during the 2014-2015 school year. Due to the initial success of these efforts and identified need throughout the District, a strategic and systematic roll out of a restorative practice implementation plan for all schools began in the 2017-2018 school year. This plan was informed by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) and the School for Democracy and Leadership and is being executed through school cohorts over the next three years. Research has shown that it typically takes 3-5 years on average to fully change a school's culture to reflect restorative practice principles. Not only is a major shift in thinking difficult and time consuming, schools have encountered challenges such as teacher turnover and funding for professional development which often leads to longer implementation time frames (Mansfield, 2018).

Many BPS schools currently have regular classroom community building and academic circles happening daily and are beginning to respond to disciplinary issues with restorative responses. Staff from the BPS Office of School Climate continue to deliver professional development and technical assistance regarding specialized restorative practices to staff and faculty throughout the District. If you are interested in obtaining more information regarding restorative practices or would like to request coaching from the Office of School Climate, contact Nicole Bycina at 816-3007 NCbycina@buffaloschools.org.

Appendix A

Table 1: Essential restorative practices and sample indicators of proficiency

Essential Practices	Sample Indicators of Proficiency in Practice
1. Affective statements	Use “I” statements; make students aware of the positive or negative impact of their behavior; focus on behavior, encourage students to express their feelings
2. Restorative questions	Reflect standard restorative questions (What harm has been done? How has it impacted you? What needs to happen to make things right?); require a response, written or verbal
3. Small impromptu conferences	Use to resolve low-level incidents between 2 people; takes place as soon as possible after the incident has occurred; use the standard set of restorative questions, use affective statements, ask students to conduct a specific activity to repair harm from the incident.
4. Proactive circles (comprise at least 80% of circles conducted at a school)	Use to set behavioral expectations (e.g. for academic goal setting or planning, to establish ground rules for student projects, to monitor or build understanding of academic content); use standard set of restorative questions; use affective statements
5. Responsive circles (comprise no more than 20% of circles conducted at a school)	Use in response to behavior or tensions affecting a group of students or entire class: Require all people involved to play a role; Use standard set of restorative questions, use affective statements
6. Restorative conferences	Use in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of repeated less serious incidents; use scripted approach and trained facilitator; use standard set of restorative questions and affective statements
7. Fair process	Allow students to provide input into decisions affecting them; explain the reasoning behind decisions to the students affected; clarify expectations so students understand implications of the decision, specific expectations for carrying out the decision, and consequences for not meeting expectations
8. Reintegrative management of shame	Avoid labels that stigmatize wrong-doers; discourage dwelling on shame; acknowledge person’s worth while rejecting unacceptable behavior (i.e. separate the deed from the doer)
9. Restorative staff community	Use restorative practices to resolve staff conflicts and practice circles to build sense of community among staff
10. Restorative approach with families	Use restorative practices during interactions with family members, Including practice circles that focus on intentional communication of positive student behavior and academic achievement
11. Fundamental hypothesis	Maintain high expectations for behavior; do not ignore inappropriate behavior; use the appropriate mix of control/pressure and support; minimize the role of staff facilitators

Source: Acosta, 2019

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