**NOTE:** Parts of this document have been adapted from an academic journal article that is currently in press and scheduled to be released in the next few weeks. The full citation for that work is below. Please check it out when you can!

Daneshzadeh, A. & **Sirrakos, G.** (In Press). Restorative justice as a double-edged sword: Conflating restoration of Black youth with transformation of schools. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education.*

**Mason’s Story**

Mason, a 17-year-old Black male student, sat quietly and alone at a table near the edge of the school cafeteria.  By all accounts, Mason was a well-behaved student who earned good grades and was an active part of the school and the community.  On this particular morning, he rested his head face down on the table with his arms wrapped around his torso, seemingly hugging himself.  Several students and teachers walked by Mason, yet it seemed that no one noticed him.  One teacher approached Mason, however, instead of asking if everything was alright or if he needed any help, the teacher authoritatively demanded that Mason remove the fitted baseball cap he was wearing on his head.  After all, the school policy was clear; students were not allowed to wear fitted baseball caps in the school building.  Mason’s response of “Leave me alone” prompted the teacher to raise his voice and again demand removal of the cap.  Mason sat quietly, unmoving until the teacher took it upon himself to remove the cap.  In an instant, Mason sprang from his chair, grabbed the teacher’s arms, gazed deep into his eyes, and repeated, “Just leave me the [expletive] alone!”  As the teacher cried for help, Mason released his hold and apologized profusely, none of which mattered to the school-based police officers who shoved Mason to the ground and placed him in handcuffs.

Later that afternoon, the school’s assistant principal informed the teacher that the administration would be pursuing a long-term, out-of-school suspension at an alternative educational site because Mason violated the school’s zero-tolerance policy on physical violence.  About two months after the incident, the teacher inquired about Mason’s return with the school’s disciplinarian, who provided two updates.  During the suspension process, Mason revealed the underlying cause for his uncharacteristic behavior that morning. Mason explained that he had been the victim of an armed robbery while on his way to school.  With a gun pointed at his chest, Mason was forced to give up his jewelry, wallet, and mobile phone.  The second, and perhaps more disheartening, update was that Mason spent a little over one month at the alternative school site before deciding to drop out.

**Talking Points Related to Mason’s Story**

* Mason’s story sheds light on some of the overarching problems associated with zero-tolerance policies, which have been disproportionately applied to students of color attending urban schools.
* Such policies are often enforced on urban students of color for behaviors that do not pose a threat to safety, are highly subjective, and based on perceptions of those in power within the school structure.
* When such discipline procedures are applied repeatedly to the same student, the chances that the student will drop out of school significantly increase. Research also suggests that students of color who leave high school prior to earning a diploma are at greater risk of being imprisoned at some point in their life.
* As the number of Black and Brown youth entering the school-to-prison pipeline increases, researchers from various fields have put forth a call for action to identify and explore alternatives to zero-tolerance and other harsh discipline policies. This session explores Restorative Practices as viable alternatives.

**Case Study #1**

Joanna, a white teacher with 5 years experience, teaches 8th grade mathematics to middle-income suburban students at a school in the northeast. The students in her classes represent the mainstream track and represent a diverse range of background and school readiness. Across the school, approximately 35% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch, 40% are white, 35% are African American, and 25% are Latinx. Joanna teaches one section of honors 8th grade mathematics (Honors Algebra), 3 sections of 8th grade mathematics (Algebra), and one section of 8th grade mathematics (Algebra) with 10 students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). She coteaches the last section with a Latina faculty member from the Special Education department, Marianna. Student demographics within each section are not consistent: the Honors Algebra section is 80% white and the cotaught section of Algebra is 70% not white, while the three middle sections are roughly 50% white/nonwhite.

At the start of this year, Joanna’s middle school implemented a staff in-service on Restorative Practices with the expectation that faculty and staff employ a new approach to student behavior. This was prompted when the principal first noticed and then collected disaggregated data on the rates of exclusion from class (teaching sending students out of the room) as well as assignments of detentions and suspensions.

It is now December and Joanna has just had her routine classroom observation from the principal, Jennifer, an African American woman. The following is an excerpt from their post-observation meeting where they discuss her classroom climate and implementation of restorative practices.

*Brenda:* Talk to me about the classroom climate during your observation.

*Joanna:*  I thought it went pretty well! I’m working on that this year, especially with the in-service at the beginning of the year, which made me think a lot about how to manage my students’ off task behavior.

*Brenda:* Tell me more about what you learned that day and how it’s changed what you do in the classroom.

*Joanna:* Well, I’ve been implementing some of the different practices in different classes throughout the day. For example, my honors section, well I hardly ever sent kids out of that class last year, and I’m happy to report that I haven’t had any behaviors that I need to address with the practices in that class. I run a circle with my class about once a week and the students really love this!

*Brenda:* How does it build community?

*Joanna:* Well the students talk about what’s hard for them in the math class, what’s going on in their lives that they want to share, and … Well, the first time some of them were goofing off but after just that one time they saw that this was a fun thing we could do in math class and they are on board with it. We do it once a week. Like I said these students were never a problem for me before so I don’t notice a change there, but it’s a fun thing that we do together and I like getting to know my students.

*Brenda:* That’s good! Did you have more to say about Restorative Practices thus far?

*Joanna:* Yea, I mean, I can’t say that the circles are working for all of my classes. I do them on occasion but my students haven’t realized that it’s a fun thing. Just like the honors class I ask them to talk about what’s going on in their lives, but sometimes it gets off track and the students start interrupting. I’m not sure they can do it. But, onto some positives with these classes, I am really happy because this time last year, I had about 4 students who I was kicking out of class at least a few times a week, and this year I don’t have any!

*Brenda:* That’s some good news. What have you changed? How has this affected your students?

*Joanna:* So with the in-service, I learned about having conferences to address problematic student behavior. In my five years I’ve always had an assertive discipline approach, but hearing the conferences really got me thinking. So, before this year it used to be First infraction: Private Warning, Second: Contact to parents, Third: Removal from classroom. But I’ve modified this this year. They still have a private warning on the first infraction, but if they do it a second time then we have a conference.

*Brenda:* Tell me about how you run a conference.

*Joanna:* It’s usually me and the student who is causing a problem. I start with the first question “What happened?” Eventually I get them to see how it has affected my feelings and the feelings of other students. And yea, then they don’t usually do make the mistake again and so we don’t get to the third step nearly as often. I’ve only sent one student to your office this whole fall. And for my honors class, I never had anyone go beyond a level 1 this year so I’ve never had a conference. Overall I’m pleased to be implementing some new strategies into my own methods that I’ve worked with for the last few years. It’s great to learn new things and implement them!

**Case Study #2**

John O’Connell is a three-storied urban high school located at the southeast corner of San Francisco’s famous Mission District. The Mission neighborhood is popularized and renowned for its lineage of poets and musicians who championed cultural sovereignty and political liberation. O’Connell is heavily populated by what is left of the rapidly displaced modest-to-low income Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian community. In contrast to the neighborhood’s rich history of activism, John O’Connell, which ascribed to a rigid zero-tolerance policy, was marred by a growing rate of suspensions for infractions such as truancy and “disrespect”. While Black youth comprised roughly nine percent of O’Connell’s students in 2010, they represented a whopping 77 percent of its suspensions. According to archival data from the San Francisco Unified School District, in the Academic Year 2011-2012, there were 2,311 suspensions across K-12 schools. Black youth represented a subset of 1,063 suspensions, despite accounting for merely ten percent of the overall student demographic. Under the leadership of a new district superintendent, three new school site principals, and a community school coordinator, John O’Connell made a dramatic shift in its disciplinary model, in order to circumvent the troubling numbers that had tarnished its image and advanced a reputation among the general public as an unsafe school where youth prepare for a future life behind bars.

The school employed an all-hands-on-deck approach to discipline. This model of school-based interventions, harnessed a pluralistic and wide array of stakeholders. Students were no longer susceptible to suspension or expulsion for subjective and minor infractions, unless they were found in violation of more documentable and provable violations that involved drugs, weapons, or physical assault. The goal of this model was to cultivate a space where students and practitioners work in concert to find mutually beneficial solutions to systemic issues, like poverty and truancy, rather than in top-down opposition. By employing a larger consortium of community-school partners, that included student ambassadors, parent liaisons, and local community-based agencies from a variety of specializations (i.e., college and career counselors from TRIO and GEAR UP Programs, transcendental meditation experts, Hip Hop/spoken word artists, urban gardeners, chess masters, mural artists, mental health clinicians, case managers for formerly incarcerated youth, etc), O’Connell was able to create classrooms that fostered long-term and active participation by students and families.

Counselors also played a central role in moving this restorative mission forward. A different counselor was allocated to each grade level and responsible for facilitating a Restorative class that was beholden to restorative ideals of equity and community building. Counselors led group discussions on a student-led Community Practicum Project (CPP). The CPP was meant to synthesize curriculum garnered in the students’ other foundational classes while allowing students the space to forge blended learning from their personal and academic experiences. The class required teachers, counselors, and community-based organizations to work in small learning teams with assigned student ambassadors to ensure that curriculum was informed by the consciousness of its students. As a result, O’Connell’s emerging CPP’s made strides in redressing systemic issues around The Mission and San Francisco, including but not limited to: Subsidized transportation for youth displaced by gentrification, eye glasses for families and youth who cannot afford federal health care, and free soil lead testing and soil for families whose gardens were found to be high in toxins. This approach to restorative curriculum not only shifted the locus of control from schools to community, but also engaged students as partners, pivoting away from the hyper-individualized focus on youth (mis)behavior and, instead, transforming the conditions of the students’ immediate environments.

**Revisiting Mason’s Story**

We end by revisiting Mason’s story and thinking about how different the outcome could have been had the school ascribed to an organizational framework and discipline philosophy informed by restorative practices. What if, after the incident, Mason knew to whom he could go for support? How might have the school better supported the rebuilding of the teacher’s and Mason’s relationship? What if Mason was given an opportunity to directly address the teacher who he grabbed? What if there were fewer school-based police officers and more counseling staff in the school? How could have Mason’s family and friends been more actively involved during the disciplinary process? What if Mason’s history of academic achievement and community service were taken into account? Could restorative practices have prevented Mason from dropping out of school? How could the school and surrounding community have come together to address issues of violence and weapons? These questions, and a plethora of others, remind us of at least some of the wickedness of zero-tolerance policies and the critical lens through which they must be examined, particularly as they are applied to students of color.