**Piloting Restorative Justice Practices in Middle School: “Giving Students Equal Voice”**

**Purpose of the study:** Our overall purpose is to deepen understanding of the dynamics of implementing equity policies and change in schools, and to identify challenges and possible lessons for policymakers and school leaders for future efforts to design, implement and institutionalize change that benefits students.

**Significance:** The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline fits well with the theme of the conference. Learning about efforts of school leaders to treat students with dignity and providing space for their voices to build community, engage in learning, and repair harm is important school leadership practice and preparation.

**Literature Review**

Harsh disciplinary actions (i.e., suspension or expulsion) predicated on zero-tolerance policies, originally implemented to address issues of school violence, have been applied to nonviolent infractions such as tardiness, absences, and willful disobedience (Lospennato, 2009). Schools that rely on these disciplinary methods experience greater disciplinary concerns that impact students of color disproportionately (Lospennato, 2009; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). According to Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010), the “achievement gap” is rooted in the “discipline gap.” Disproportionality in disciplinary actions particularly impacts students of color (male and female) who are referred at higher rates for minor infractions such as disrespect and excessive noise, regardless of socioeconomic backgrounds (Kim, 2009).

Evolving practices of school-based interventions such as Positive Behavioral Supports (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009), and Response To Intervention (RTI) (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Justice, 2006) that align services to specific student needs can curtail entry into the juvenile system. Additionally, many schools have implemented restorative justice practices. According to Hamilton (2008) restorative circles contributed to a healthier school climate and impacted student behavior in positive ways.

**Theoretical Framework**

Restorative Justice (RJ) embodies a philosophical approach to wrongdoing. Namely, it arises from a humanist tradition in which the victim and the disputant’s subjective experiences of the wrongdoing are highlighted along with a belief in the need for collaborative problem solving. Fundamentally, RJ’s core underlying value is respect. Zehr (2002) has traced RJ’s roots back to a range of diverse cultures (e.g., American Indian, Maori) and religious traditions (e.g., Judaism). In schools, RJ is operationalized as a set of practices that are oriented towards prevention of infractions. In the U.S. context, Amstutz and Mullet (2005) describe restorative school environments as prevention oriented when they emphasize an ethos of care and social and emotional learning. Thus, the notion of ‘‘restorative’’ encompasses more than a set of procedures that occur after a rule infraction. Some of the preventive and community building RJ practices are proactive circles, staff circles, restorative approach with community/families, and fundamental hypothesis understanding. The intervention or repairing harm practices include restorative questions, responsive or re-entry circles, small impromptu circles, peer court, restorative conference circles, and reintegrative management of shame (Gregory et al., 2015).

**Methods**

**Study design:** This is a longitudinal case study that examined the implementation of restorative justice practices in a middle school and its impact on students. With IRB approval, in the summer of 2015, the researchers began documenting the activities between the district administrators and the school staff.

**Population and sample size.** Study population includes district administrators involved in the initiative and school staff who led and implemented restorative practices the middle school that served as a pilot school. Eight individuals were interviewed for the study. Four were district administrators and four were professionals from the school. After initial interviews, we focused on a smaller number of individuals who have frequent contact with discipline either as the ones administering it or implementing restorative justice practices with students.

**Data collection methods.** We have conducted a total of 10 individual interviews and two focus groups with eight individuals who are mostly in either administrative or student support positions. Researchers keptobservational data and reflections during school visits. Each participant, district and school administrator, were interviewed twice. Additionally, we have observed and participated in restorative circles with the school administrators, with school staff, and with students and teachers in the past two years.

**Analysis of data:** We used inductive and apriori codes to analyze the data. Apriori codes were based on the study’s questions and restorative justice framework constituted initial coding.

**Findings**

There are six major findings in the study: 1) Vision and careful planning; 2) Common definition of RJ practices by participants; 3) Starting restorative circles with students in most need; 4) RJ circles as community building practices that allow students equal voice; 5) Divergent purposes, goals, and hopes; and 6) Barriers and challenges.

**Vision and careful planning.** The principal was deliberate in his efforts to not rush the implementation of the change until the school personnel in student services fully understood RJ practices, received training and modeling of RJ circles, and resources for planning. The change began with students receiving Tier II behavioral supports as part of the school’s MTSS. The plan is to carefully expand its implementation more broadly in the school.

**Common definition of RJ practices by participants:** There was a common understanding about RJ practices as relation building, as a safe space for kids and adults, helping kids develop a sense of community and interdependence, and taking a proactive approach to discipline. Or as Annie (pseudonym) said: “if you put healthy things like this in place you get healthy results.”

**Starting restorative circles with students in most need**: The participants in RJ were targeted based on previously identified gaps in areas of behavior and academics; more often identified because of a combination of underperformance in both areas. The students targeted to become part of RJ circles were labeled “the heavy hitters,” “the frequent fliers,” “the tough cookie street boys,” “autism spectrum kids,” and “kids in Tier II.” Six restorative circle groups were created, each facilitated by two adults. They met each week during 2015 spring semester. After two sessions, students became comfortable sharing with each other suggesting establishment of trust within the group community.

**RJ circles as community building practices that allow students equal voice.** Overall, those adults engaging with the students who participated in the RJ circles saw improvements in not only student behavior (“Help calls from teachers have gone down.”), but also in community building interactions among students and between adults and students. All participants agreed the students who participated in RJ circles liked them, the facilitators have noticed “significant change in the kids,” as the students felt they were not alone. The school counselor observed: “you see them caring when a kid is talking in the group, you know, they are not just sitting there with their arms folded, slouched in the chair, they are engaged, they are staring full force to them and that is awesome to see when two months ago they were playing with a pencil, laughing at the other kid”. Students participated in rule setting, they could choose to speak uninterrupted or not at all, and they were able to suggest topics for circle time.

**Divergent purposes, goals, and hopes:** While all had a clear understanding of what RJ circles were, different educators seemed to have differing expectations on outcomes. For example, the Assistant Principal wanted a quicker drop in referrals, the ESE specialist wanted skill development, the school counselor deeper feelings, the PBIS coordinator would like to expand the circles to Tier III students, while the school psychologists would like to see the RJ circles be implemented at the classroom level. There was a varying level of believing in the value of RJ practices as well.

**Barriers and challenges.** As in any new change, time, resources, and additional training were some of the ongoing needs at the school level. New “free services” that are offered by outside organizations risk diminishing the scope and frequency of RJ circles. Planning the circles is paramount for their success. Finally, commitment from school leaders is necessary for their continuation.

**Conclusions**

Restorative justice practices offer promise to schools interested in instituting changes to their culture. In this particular context, the practice of circles was utilized to promote the building of community and `produce positive outcomes specific to behavior and academic progress with the groups of students that were repeatedly suspended and expelled. These practices provided space for the “frequent fliers” to be included in the community, to feel supported by peers and adults, and to have a say on what matters to them. Despite success and observable changes in students, barriers and challenges continue in implementing these practices. For educational leaders and policymakers, considerations for addressing the barriers that can surface when orchestrating changes to philosophy and practice of schools should remain a priority. Deconstruction of barriers in improving access to supportive resources for teachers and students can help “cast a vision that ideally it is for repair, it is not for being punitive” (Annie, p. 4).

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