

The Starts and Stumbles of Restorative Justice in Education: Where Do We Go from Here?



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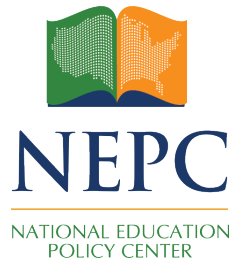


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Executive Summary

Schools are implementing Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) initiatives across the United States, often to reduce the use of out-of-school suspension, which is known to increase the risk for dropout and arrest. Many RJE initiatives also aim to strengthen social and emotional competencies, reduce gender and racial disparities in discipline, and increase access to equitable and supportive environments for students from marginalized groups.

We view RJE as a comprehensive, whole school approach to shifting school culture in ways that prioritize relational pedagogies, justice and equity, resilience-fostering, and well-being. Guided by a set of restorative values and principles (e.g., dignity, respect, accountability, and fairness), RJE practices are both proactive and responsive in nurturing healthy relationships, repairing harm, transforming conflict, and promoting justice and equity. Drawing on the writings of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, educators in RJE schools and classrooms work to ensure that the “vulnerable are cared for, the marginalized are included, the dignity and humanity of each person in the educational setting matters, and everyone’s needs are heard and met.”¹

Restorative Justice is grounded in indigenous teachings and points to a way of life experienced by pre-modern communities, such as the Maori and the Navajo. It was introduced into the Western judicial system as a response to crime and wrongdoing; it sought to meet the needs of those harmed, to repair the harm, and to restore relationships for all affected by an incident. As these practices were introduced into school settings, they initially emulated the processes used in correctional facilities. These included restorative conversations, circles, and conferences in which those involved in a disciplinary incident worked with a structured set of questions to explore who was harmed and how to repair the harm. In recent years, RJE has been grounded in a more holistic mindset that, in addition to those responsive practices, also

emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline, attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students, recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe learning environments.²

These more holistic practices include facilitating community-building circles, understanding and communicating emotions, and using transparency and fairness in decision-making.

This policy brief summarizes research on restorative initiatives, with a focus on implementation and outcomes in U.S. schools. We present the *accumulating* evidence that restorative approaches can reduce the use of exclusionary discipline. We describe *promising* evidence that such approaches can narrow racial disparities in discipline. We consider the *mixed* findings related to improving school climate and student development in light of possibly faulty models and mis-implementation of RJE. Finally, we offer recommendations for comprehensive RJE models and strategic implementation plans that we believe will result in more consistent positive outcomes.

It is recommended that schools adopt principle-based, comprehensive, and equity-oriented RJE.

- 1. Use principle-based RJE.** Restorative practices must align with the values of RJE, namely: respect, dignity, and mutual concern for all members of the learning community; a commitment to justice and equity; and a belief in the value and worth of each person.
- 2. Take a comprehensive approach to RJE.** RJE practices should encompass not only student behaviors, but also staff behaviors, policies and procedures, pedagogical choices, curricular decisions, and schoolwide decision-making processes.
- 3. Emphasize the equity focus of RJE.** Consistent with the values of RJE, attention should be paid to disrupting hierarchies and rampant individualism, and to honoring the humanity of each member of the learning community. RJE practices need to explicitly identify opportunity gaps and challenge disciplinary disproportionality as it relates to a range of student characteristics including race, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, language, culture, sexuality, and gender expression. Sole focus on a reduction in suspensions and expulsions will not address the systemic and structural inequalities that impact students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

It is recommended that schools implement RJE with contextually sensitive, strategic, and long-term implementation plans and practices.

- 4. Develop contextually sensitive implementation plans.** There is not a step-by-step implementation model that will work for each school or district. RJE implementation should align with the particular strengths and needs of the environment. Further, the implementation plan should change and evolve as needed and ensure that each

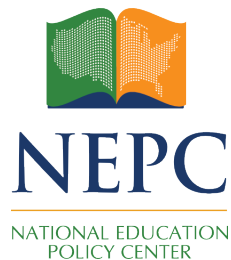
step is grounded in the particular context and developed with input from stakeholders.

5. **Employ strategic rollout.** Drawing on organizational change theories that emphasize both top-down and bottom-up initiatives, educators can build a strong base of RJE advocates and leaders as they work to shift policies and practices. To improve buy-in and investment, initial efforts can engage fully supportive allies while honoring slow adopters, whose critiques and questions can help chart direction.
6. **Create long-term implementation plans focused on sustainability and professional support.** Ongoing professional development is needed to build school and district capacity for continual growth (e.g., coaching, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities) and to account for staff turnover and the induction of new staff. Widespread change may take considerable time and resources. Two-year plans are common, but longer plans may be required if major shifts in mindset are needed. Leaders should manage expectations about how long it may take to see quantifiable results.

It is recommended that policymakers and researchers examine change over a minimum of three to five years and focus on fidelity of RJE implementation using mixed method designs.

7. **Invest in long-term, mixed-methods research examining RJE implementation.** In light of the myriad ways in which RJE has been implemented and mis-implemented, researchers should focus on RJE implementation, not simply RJE outcomes. This includes rigorous examination of fidelity of implementation to RJE principles that will ascertain if the initiative authentically embodies restorative values and offers *consistent* opportunities for relationship-building, repairing harm, and promoting justice and equity. Additional research is also needed on *how* RJE practices can foster an achievement orientation and social-emotional growth.

We caution against funding short-term evaluations. Funded evaluations should allow for a minimum of three to five years before outcomes are measured. Finally, we recommend holistic, mixed method approaches to program evaluation, with a commitment to including stakeholders in the evaluation process.



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Introduction

Following the U.S. Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1996, a “zero tolerance” approach to student behavior became popular.³ Schools began suspending and expelling students from school for non-safety-threatening behaviors as they followed rigid policies that ignored context or mitigating circumstances.⁴ In the last decade, however, schools have begun reforming their approach to school discipline and reducing their punitive, exclusionary, and zero tolerance responses to student misconduct.⁵ This is largely due to accruing evidence that suspensions *increase* students’ risk for low achievement, dropout, and arrest.⁶ This evidence suggests punitive discipline may exacerbate challenging behavior and erode safe and nurturing school climates.

Discipline reform is also being spurred by concerns about differential treatment and discrimination. Students from marginalized groups are more likely than their peers to be suspended, which can in turn increase their chances of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.⁷ Consistently over-represented in exclusionary discipline are Black and African American youth, students in special education, Native American youth, and low-income students.⁸ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth are also more likely to receive discipline sanctions relative to their straight peers.⁹ To identify whether students from marginalized groups are being treated more punitively than students from privileged groups, rigorous studies account for school factors (e.g., school size, percent low income), student behavior (self-, parent-, and/or teacher-report), and/or student achievement. Most of this research has compared Black and White students. Taken together, the studies have found substantial evidence that Black students receive more punitive sanctions than White students, even when accounting for the aforementioned student and school characteristics.¹⁰ Scholars have argued that the differential treatment is fueled by educators’ explicit/implicit bias and by structural racism which has led to widespread racial opportunity gaps.¹¹

As schools shift away from zero tolerance, punitive, and exclusionary approaches to student misconduct, many have adopted restorative initiatives.¹² Those using a comprehensive conceptualization of Restorative Justice in Education (RJE) aim to address challenging behaviors *and* to nurture school climates that promote learning through relational and supportive practices, rather than punitive and exclusionary ones.¹³ That is, practitioners implementing RJE aim to proactively address relational, emotional, academic, cognitive, and physical needs before challenging behaviors occur. When challenging behaviors do occur, they work to address those behaviors in ways that heal, teach, repair harm, and attend to the needs of *both* those harmed and those who caused the harm. Moreover, they work to integrate RJE with racial and social justice initiatives.¹⁴

In this report, we begin with a comprehensive conceptualization of RJE. Then, we synthesize research on the broad impacts of school-based restorative initiatives: reducing exclusionary discipline, narrowing racial disparities, improving school climate, and strengthening student and staff well-being. In light of mixed findings, we go on to offer insight into the ways faulty models or plans may produce mis-implementation of restorative initiatives. Aiming to help schools reach more consistently positive outcomes, we conclude with recommendations for comprehensive RJE models and strategic implementation plans.

Review of the Literature

Definition of Restorative Justice in Education

Restorative justice has its origins in indigenous communities, embedded as a worldview, an ethos, a “thread woven into the fabric of their lives.”¹⁵ For First Nations people, the Navajo, and other native people, this worldview has been a way of being that prioritizes relationships, interdependency, fairness, shared decision making, solidarity, and healing.¹⁶ Although Western iterations of RJ emerged initially as an alternative approach to responding to harm and crime, schools are returning to the historical roots of RJ, with people adopting a more holistic framing and recognizing the importance of living well together in communities.¹⁷ Many are rightly attributing this movement to a “resurgence of indigenous knowledges” and a rejection of punitive and adversarial forms of justice.¹⁸

The field of RJE emerged primarily from educators who were learning about the principles, values, and practices of restorative justice that had been implemented within the criminal legal system and applying those principles within their own educational contexts. Initially, most applications of restorative justice were introduced as alternatives to school discipline; recently those applications have been evolving toward a more holistic and transformative conception of RJE.¹⁹ This transformative conception of RJE is viewed not simply as a program or a process, but rather a set of values and principles that serve to guide programs and processes aimed at both reducing exclusionary discipline and improving school climate.²⁰

RJE incorporates the values of respect, dignity, and mutual concern, based on the core belief that all people are worthy of being honored and valued.²¹ Key principles of RJE include transforming schools from rule-based institutions to relationship-based communities;²² re-

placing punitive models of discipline with restorative models that promote repair of harm; moving from systems of social control to systems of social engagement;²³ confronting hierarchical and authoritarian systems that instill attitudes of obedience and conformity;²⁴ and a commitment to disrupting oppressive structures and systems.²⁵

Stemming from these restorative values and principles, Evans and Vaandering (2016) identified three core components of RJE that inform the implementation of practices and processes: (a) nurturing healthy relationships, (b) building processes that support the repair of harm and the transformation of conflict, and (c) supporting learning environments characterized by justice and equity.²⁶

- (a) Healthy relationships between and among all members of the learning community—including students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents and caregivers, and the local community—are essential for effective learning. In RJE schools, relationships are built, nurtured, and sustained by intentional practices, such as Circle processes,²⁷ social-emotional learning, active listening, conflict resolution, and resilience-fostering practices.²⁸
- (b) All relationships can experience conflict and harm; when relationships are threatened, RJE provides practices, grounded in values, for making things right, addressing the needs of those harmed, and restoring relationships when possible.²⁹ Rather than viewing challenging student behavior solely as a “discipline problem,” RJE views challenging student behaviors as stemming from escalating conflict, unmet needs, or unaddressed harm.³⁰ Punishment, such as suspension and expulsions, exacerbates feelings of victimization and exclusion, increasing harm and escalating conflict.³¹ RJE “does not ignore harmful behavior but shifts the focus to honoring and preserving the dignity of people through relational practices that focus concurrently on individual and community well-being and responsibility.”³²
- (c) Fostering justice and equity in schools requires responding actively to issues of oppression and marginalization, including those based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, culture, and ability.³³ RJE schools and classrooms work to ensure that the “vulnerable are cared for, the marginalized are included, the dignity and humanity of each person in the educational setting matters, and everyone’s needs are heard and met.”³⁴

School-based practices that (a) center healthy relationships, (b) work to heal harms and transform conflict, and (c) advocate for justice and equity include both preventative and responsive practices. As responsive practices, restorative approaches to discipline contrast with punitive models in that they address the needs of the person(s) harmed and provide opportunities for those who caused the harm to make amends.³⁵ In the aftermath of harm or wrongdoing, RJE offers opportunities to promote empathy, restore dignity, repair harm, and promote authentic accountability for students.³⁶

RJE provides an opportunity for those harmed to have their needs met and the harm repaired. It also provides an opportunity for those who have caused the harm to make things right by healing the harm they caused, to learn and grow, and to restore their sense of self

in the aftermath of wrongdoing. Responsive RJE practices build accountability, promote social-emotional growth, and support positive behaviors in schools. However, if an RJE effort does not also address the need for preventative practices to transform school climate, the singular emphasis on behavior management may distort the initiative and preclude the opportunity to promote interconnectedness and well-being.³⁷

Thus, transformative approaches to RJE are comprehensive, working to shift school culture in ways that privilege relational pedagogies, justice and equity, resilience, and well-being.³⁸ This focus on wellness includes: empowering those who have been affected; healing or repairing relationships; encouraging accountability through collaborative decision-making; reintegrating students into their learning community; and creating caring climates that prevent further harm and conflict.³⁹

An RJE approach guided by values and principles challenges schools to resist simple roadmaps, or reductive “how to” manuals. Instead, it functions as a compass pointing in a desired direction.⁴⁰ While Winn acknowledges this need for efforts to align with values and principles, she extends the conceptualization by also calling for detailed roadmaps that include specific practices.⁴¹ In this sense, RJE is both an art and a science—an approach guided by beliefs, worldviews and lenses; enacted through a set of theoretically aligned practices; and faithful to a restorative ethos. Schiff challenges practitioners to approach RJE not as a strategy or program, but rather as a movement. By promoting a restorative perspective and providing relevant knowledge and strategies, an RJE movement has the potential to empower youth and school personnel to serve as transformative agents of cultural change—leaders who promote justice and equity through relational and organizational reform.⁴²

Review of Research on Restorative Initiatives

Districts and schools implement restorative initiatives with varying levels of depth and breadth. Some educators focus more on responding to harm and disciplinary incidents, while others focus on strengthening community and social-emotional wellness.⁴³ Research on such initiatives also varies widely in their unit of analysis. Some studies focus on individual student impacts, while others focus on schoolwide outcomes.⁴⁴ Thus, comparing studies is challenging. Moreover, studies have only recently begun including comparison groups to determine whether schools with restorative initiatives make measurable gains relative to similar schools without them. Yet even in light of these challenges, we conclude that results from case studies, district-wide correlational studies, and experimental trials *convincingly demonstrate* that when schools implement a restorative initiative, their out-of-school suspension rates decrease.⁴⁵ We further conclude that restorative initiatives have *promise* to narrow racial disparities in suspension⁴⁶ as well as to foster positive student development.⁴⁷ However, mixed findings indicate that the promise is not always realized.⁴⁸

Restorative initiatives and suspension. Initial claims that restorative initiatives reduce suspension were based on single group pre-post designs in which researchers examined suspension rates before and after implementation.⁴⁹ Pre-post declines in suspension have been found at the school level⁵⁰ and the district level.⁵¹ In Denver, Colorado from 2006 to

2013, for example, overall suspension rates fell dramatically (from 11% to 6%) as the district undertook restorative initiatives in schools.⁵² These studies' single group designs, however, cannot rule out that other factors, including districtwide policy shifts, may have caused the change. In other words, the designs have low internal validity. The reduced suspension rates cannot be positively attributed to the restorative initiative itself.

Some portion of reduced suspension may simply stem from new district or school policies discouraging or banning the use of suspensions for certain infractions. In fact, the correlates of policy change have been studied in large urban cities. For example, in 2011-2012, the Los Angeles Unified School District enacted a ban prohibiting schools from suspending students for willful defiance. After rigorously analyzing trends over time, Hashim and colleagues found that the probability of students receiving suspension dropped *after* the policy change relative to the district's pre-policy trend. Importantly, however, they *also* found another time-ordered shift: In 2014-2015, the year the district started restorative practice training in the highest suspension schools, there was another reduction in the probability of students being suspended.⁵³

A recent randomized controlled trial (RCT) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania increased confidence in the claim that restorative approaches can *cause* lower suspension rates. In the two-year study, between 44% and 69% of surveyed staff reported using affective statements, proactive circles, impromptu conferences, and responsive circles "often" or "always." Comparing outcomes of the restorative practice initiative in 22 program schools and 22 comparison schools, Augustine and colleagues found that the number of suspensions and days lost to suspension decreased more significantly in the program schools than in the control schools. Specifically, the program schools' days lost to suspension declined by 36%, whereas this decline was only 18% in the comparison schools. Also noteworthy was that in the program schools, students were less likely to be repeatedly suspended relative to students in the comparison schools.⁵⁴

Restorative initiatives and disparities in suspension. Research studies suggest that restorative initiatives may have the potential, as yet not fully realized, to reduce disparities in suspensions. For example, experience in some large urban districts indicates some promise. In Oakland, California and Los Angeles, California where the districts are implementing broad school discipline reform and restorative initiatives, suspension gaps between Black and White students have narrowed.⁵⁵ In the Pittsburgh RCT cited above, evaluators found that relative to the comparison schools, program schools had steeper declines in the suspension rates of Black students and low-income students, thereby reducing disparities.⁵⁶ However, the effects in Pittsburgh were seen primarily at the elementary and not the middle and high school levels. Other studies have shown comparable reductions in suspension for diverse racial and ethnic groups, thereby reducing schoolwide suspension rates for all groups but with only minimal narrowing of the disparities.⁵⁷

Restorative initiatives and student and staff wellness. A singular focus on reducing suspension is narrow and fails to capture the prevention-oriented and systemic reform goals of RJE. In theory, restorative initiatives strengthen relationships, increase skills in solving interpersonal conflict, and reduce staff members' punitive reaction to students.⁵⁸ While U.S. research on broad, positive interpersonal outcomes is somewhat new, an accumulation of

studies suggests that restorative initiatives may yield positive benefits in these domains. For example, numerous single group studies show dramatic reductions in discipline referrals after restorative initiatives were implemented in schools.⁵⁹ Using Denver, Colorado public school records, Anyon and colleagues and Gregory and colleagues showed that discipline-referred students who participated in restorative conferences or mediations were less likely to receive a discipline referral or suspension compared to discipline-referred students who did not participate in such interactions. The authors speculated that strengthened social-emotional learning skills and improved student and staff relationships prevented future disciplinary interactions.⁶⁰

Teachers working in schools with restorative initiatives have also reported interpersonal and school climate benefits. Staff surveys in Oakland, California demonstrated a generally positive perception of the restorative initiative with almost 70% of respondents reporting that restorative practices helped to improve school climate. Additionally, 80% of respondents supported continuing the initiative. The Oakland evaluators also found graduation rates for schools that implemented restorative practices rose 60%, relative to 7% in comparison schools.⁶¹ The Pittsburgh RCT showed that teachers in the restorative initiative schools considered their schools to have better working conditions and a climate more conducive to learning than teachers in the comparison schools. Two-thirds of surveyed staff in restorative schools said the initiative had improved their relationships with students. However, despite these staff-reported gains, not all findings in this RCT were positive. Researchers identified that students in Grades 3-8 in the restorative schools had lower scores on the state standardized math tests than their peers in the comparison schools. Also, African American and White student performance on the state standardized math and reading tests was lower in schools with a predominantly African American student population.⁶²

Students themselves have reported benefits from restorative processes such as circles and conferences; perceived benefits include strengthened social and emotional skills.⁶³ As a qualitative researcher leading circles with adolescent girls for two years in one high school, Schumacher identified students' self-reported benefits from the circle process. Benefits included strengthened skills in listening, empathy, and anger management.⁶⁴ Similarly, in one high school, Ortega and colleagues analyzed interviews of adults and students who participated in restorative circles intended to repair harm after conflict. Interviewees discussed how the circles helped improve relationships and taught new ways of handling conflict, thereby preventing future altercations.⁶⁵

Overall, restorative initiatives appear to be well received by students and staff.

Survey findings in an Oakland, California middle school corroborated that a majority of students perceived restorative initiatives as helping relationships with both adults and peers.⁶⁶

Despite these positive student reports, however, findings from two recent RCTs offer mixed evidence of school climate and student gains. On the one hand, in their experimental study comparing 40 secondary schools in England at the end of three years of implementation, Bonell and colleagues found that students in the schools implementing a restorative initiative with social-emotional curricula reported less victimization from bullying than students in comparison schools.⁶⁷ On the other hand, in their experimental study in 14 Maine middle schools, Acosta and colleagues found no significant differences in the seven restorative in-

intervention schools compared to the seven comparison schools on student-reported school connectedness, positive peer relationships and victimization from bullying at the end of two years. The authors questioned whether the restorative initiative offered added value relative to what the school was already doing to engage student voice and elicit problem-solving when conflict arose.⁶⁸

Research Summary

Taken together, there is substantial evidence that restorative initiatives can reduce suspensions and show promise for narrowing racial disparities in exclusionary discipline. Overall, restorative initiatives appear to be well received by students and staff, with a majority of staff perceiving benefits.⁶⁹ Numerous studies indicate promise for improving school climate and interactions among students, although one recent study did not corroborate these findings.⁷⁰ In addition, one study showed schools with restorative initiatives had lower achievement in some schools relative to the comparison schools.⁷¹ This mixed evidence on positive youth development suggests the need to scrutinize varying types of restorative models and implementation processes that schools use, discussed below.

Recent Developments

Scrutinizing Restorative Models and Their Implementation

Some of the mixed findings about school climate shifts might be due to what we call “mis-implementation” models of RJE. This is hinted at in a recent survey of a nationally representative sample of teachers: 80% of teachers agreed that a disciplinary approach focused on repairing harm to relationships and community was “somewhat” or “very effective.”⁷² However, about 20% disagreed. Open-ended comments suggested some teachers felt students were not being held accountable for student misconduct and administrators were not supporting teachers who struggled with student behavior.

Drawing on research and practice-based observations,⁷³ we offer five mis-implementation models to capture the range of ways restorative initiatives can falter and undermine the potential for nurturing positive change. Such models include: (1) mandated top-down initiatives misaligned with values of RJE; (2) narrow approaches focused on a single restorative practice; (3) colorblind or power blind approaches to marginalizing dynamics; (4) “train and hope” approaches that offer few implementation supports, and (5) under-resourced and short-term initiatives that likely result in minimal buy-in, inconsistent practices, and teacher frustration and burnout.

Mandated top-down mis-implementation model. Top-down district-level initiatives mandating quick change are philosophically misaligned with RJE values of fair process, voice, and collaboration. Collaborative decision-making among all stakeholders, teaching and non-teaching staff alike, is fundamental to RJE. Policy and practice changes must be jointly developed, iteratively improved, and clearly communicated and instituted.⁷⁴ So of-

ten, districts mandate change with little consideration that individuals and institutions vary in their readiness and openness to innovation.⁷⁵ While administrative support for RJE initiatives is essential,⁷⁶ top-down mandates may evoke reluctant compliance or active resistance.⁷⁷ Thorsborne and Blood, pioneers in the field of RJ in education, suggest the need for strategic approaches to introducing restorative initiatives and to leveraging the buy-in of early adopters.⁷⁸ There is also increasing recognition that, early on, districts need to assess readiness for change and identify concerns. For example, in their case study assessing readiness for implementation, Garnett and colleagues found that educators felt they needed greater clarity about how the restorative initiative would dovetail with existing reforms and which concrete resources and training would be made available. The authors conclude that attending to adults' expressed needs early in the process is essential for launching effective implementation.⁷⁹

Narrow mis-implementation model. Narrow models of RJE can overemphasize student participation in responsive circles and conferences, minimizing the importance of whole community participation (including instructional assistants, paraprofessionals, office staff, and administrators, for example).⁸⁰ With a singular focus on changing student behavior, narrow models may neglect to address deeply held beliefs about the effectiveness of punitive responses.⁸¹ Narrowly defined restorative models may also be experienced as just another program, piling on top of similar types of initiatives focused on equity, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed care. A comprehensive approach considers how similar initiatives can complement one another⁸²—although complementarity should not be assumed. Some initiatives may fundamentally be at odds with or undermine others (for example, hiring additional police *and* restorative justice personnel).⁸³

Colorblind and power blind mis-implementation model. Davis' expert opinion is that that restorative initiatives have all too often neglected to explicitly address racial justice, which she sees as inherently connected. Davis writes, "Healing interpersonal harm requires commitment to transforming the context in which the injury occurs, the socio-historical conditions and institutions that are structured precisely to perpetuate harm."⁸⁴ In other words, a focus on individuals that ignores the structural racism undergirding policies and practices is ultimately not restorative at all. Winn also makes the case that educators need to ground their restorative work in a series of pedagogical stances, including one insisting that history and race matter. For instance, Winn posits that educators need to consider how enslavement of Africans impacts all Americans today and how racism impacts the ways that teachers think about and interact with students.⁸⁵

Restorative initiatives have all too often neglected to explicitly address racial justice.

Despite synergy between RJE and social justice, too often implementation of restorative practices fails to address policies and practices related to oppression, abuses of power, and silencing of voices. This disconnect has surfaced in case studies. For example, in her multi-case ethnography, Lustick concluded that there was "a reticence on the part of the administration to address racism in school policy," which led to restorative practices becoming "a means of reinforcing and reproducing inequality."⁸⁶ Knight and Wadhwa, however, offer a counter example where they describe their experience with *critical* restorative justice, which they describe as part of a larger social justice agenda focused on student engagement and resilience. Concretely, they describe how they have used

the circle process to increase students' critical consciousness: "through circles on racism, different forms of oppression, and the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice empowered students to address the harms they had experienced and move on to bigger dreams."⁸⁷

Train and hope mis-implementation model. Stokes and Baer first identified the strategy of "train and hope" to describe the faulty assumptions behind efforts to generalize individual behavior change. They argue that teaching an individual a new behavior and then hoping it will generalize to other settings, times, or individuals is not an effective strategy.⁸⁸ Recent newspaper accounts indicate that districts too often rely on "train and hope" models that provide school staff with one to three days of training but little in-person follow-up, coaching, demonstration, or performance feedback.⁸⁹ Such models lack strategic, context specific, and locally designed rollout as well as substantive, tailored supports.⁹⁰ Mayworm and colleagues, for example, recommend one-on-one coaching and consultation for teachers.⁹¹ Similar calls for more intensive and ongoing training and support have been documented in a growing number of studies.⁹²

Under-resourced, short-term mis-implementation model. Implementation research emphasizes the need for full adherence to program models, which can take considerable time, commitment, and resources.⁹³ One study showed that *partial* implementation of a comprehensive restorative initiative differed little from *no* implementation. In a study of middle schoolers in Hong Kong, Wong, Cheng, Ngan, and Ma found that only students in schools with full implementation reported significantly less bullying and made significant gains in self-reported empathy when compared to students in schools *without* the initiative or *with only partial implementation*.⁹⁴ Even fully implementing schools can lose gains over the years without sustained commitment and adequate resources, including a full time RJE coordinator.⁹⁵ This suggests that it is shortsighted to fully fund initiatives on a short-term basis and expect measurable outcomes, as two recent studies indicate. In their RCT, Bonell and colleagues found that a restorative initiative reduced bullying by the end of the third year, but *not* the end of the second year.⁹⁶ And, in a longitudinal case study, Gonzalez documented that it took the school *four years* to reach full implementation of a value-aligned implementation model. In this model, the school developed "a restorative and relational framework [occupying] space at all levels of a school community."⁹⁷ Taken together, studies suggest that RJE gains depend upon adequate resources and a longer term implementation plan.

Recommendations

It is recommended that schools adopt principle-based, comprehensive, and equity-oriented RJE.

1. **Use principle-based RJE.** Restorative practices must align with the values of RJE, namely: respect, dignity, and mutual concern for all members of the learning community; a commitment to justice and equity; and a belief in the value and worth of each person.

2. **Take a comprehensive approach to RJE.** RJE practices should encompass not only student behaviors, but also staff behaviors, policies and procedures, pedagogical choices, curricular decisions, and schoolwide decision-making processes.
3. **Emphasize the equity focus of RJE.** Consistent with the values of RJE, attention should be paid to disrupting hierarchies and rampant individualism, and to honoring the humanity of each member of the learning community. RJE practices need to explicitly identify opportunity gaps and challenge disciplinary disproportionality as it relates to a range of student characteristics including race, ethnicity, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, language, culture, sexuality, and gender expression. Sole focus on a reduction in suspensions and expulsions will not address the systemic and structural inequalities that impact students' social, emotional, and academic well-being.

It is recommended that schools implement RJE with contextually sensitive, strategic, and long-term implementation plans and practices.

4. **Develop contextually sensitive implementation plans.** There is not a step-by-step implementation model that will work for each school or district. RJE implementation should align with the particular strengths and needs of the environment. Further, the implementation plan should change and evolve as needed and ensure that each step is grounded in the particular context and developed with input from stakeholders.
5. **Employ strategic rollout.** Drawing on organizational change theories that emphasize both top-down and bottom-up initiatives, educators can build a strong base of RJE advocates and leaders as they work to shift policies and practices. To improve buy-in and investment, initial efforts can engage fully supportive allies while honoring slow adopters, whose critiques and questions can help chart direction.
6. **Create long-term implementation plans focused on sustainability and professional support.** Ongoing professional development is needed to build school and district capacity for continual growth (e.g., coaching, peer mentoring, and professional learning communities) and to account for staff turnover and the induction of new staff. Widespread change may take considerable time and resources. Two-year plans are common, but longer plans may be required if major shifts in mindset are needed. Leaders should manage expectations about how long it may take to see quantifiable results.

It is recommended that policymakers and researchers examine change over a minimum of three to five years and focus on fidelity of RJE implementation using mixed method designs.

7. **Invest in long-term, mixed-methods research examining RJE implementation.** In light of the myriad ways in which RJE has been implemented and mis-implemented, researchers should focus on RJE implementation, not simply RJE outcomes. This includes rigorous examination of fidelity of implementation to RJE principles

that will ascertain if the initiative authentically embodies restorative values and offers *consistent* opportunities for relationship-building, repairing harm, and promoting justice and equity. Additional research is also needed on *how* RJE practices can foster an achievement orientation and social-emotional growth.

We caution against funding short-term evaluations. Funded evaluations should allow for a minimum of three to five years before outcomes are measured. Finally, we recommend holistic, mixed method approaches to program evaluation, with a commitment to including stakeholders in the evaluation process.

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- 21 There would be a long list of restorative values, presented by different advocates of restorative justice. We chose these particular values based on our understanding of the scope of RJE. Our list reflects the following scholarship:

Evans, K.R., & Vaandering, D. (2016). *The little book of restorative justice in education: Fostering responsibility, healing, and hope in schools*. Lancaster, PA: Good Books.

Pranis, K. (2007). Restorative values. In G. Johnstone & D. Van Ness (Eds.), *Handbook of restorative justice* (pp. 59-74). Devon, England: Willan Publishing.
- 22 Vaandering, D. (2014). Relational restorative justice pedagogy in educator professional development. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 44(4), 508-530. From a RJE perspective, it is ineffective to only focus on what rules were broken and what consequences will prevent those rules from being broken again. RJ suggests that it is healthy relationships and authentic accountability that are effective at preventing behaviors that cause harm to the community and interfere with learning.
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Within learning environments, social engagement means that students and their teachers are actively engaged in learning together. When students disengage in learning practices, too often educators are tempted to assert control over those students, often through grades, rewards, or punishment, in order to coerce them into engaging with the learning. RJ suggests that it is more effective to engage those students relationally by attending to their underlying needs.

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While we are not suggesting that educators relinquish their authority in schools or classrooms, we are suggesting that to use that authority to coerce students into compliance is ineffective. RJ suggests that it is more effective to empower students, teaching them to make better decisions through relationships.
- 25 Davis, F. (2019). *The little book of race and restorative justice*. New York, NY: Good Books.

Knight, D., & Wadhwa, A. (2014). Expanding opportunity through critical restorative justice: Portraits of resilience at the individual and school level. *Schools: Studies in Education*, 11(1), 14-16.

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Schools can at times be oppressive, particularly to students who represent marginalized communities. RJ suggests that in order to engage these students in relational pedagogies for effective learning, we actually have to stand against those tools of oppression and create more just and equitable learning environments for all students.
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Many schools are developing trauma-informed schools (i.e., schools that understand the role that trauma plays in student learning and school engagement). Some schools have recently begun to talk about developing resilience-fostering school climates; particularly for LGBTQIA+ students, there is research that examines the types of school climates that promote resilience for youth who have experienced traumatic events. For more information, see Peck, S.C., Roeser, R.W., Zarrett, N., & Eccles, J.S. (2008). Exploring the roles of extracurricular activity quantity and quality in the educational resilience of vulnerable adolescents: Variable and pattern-centered approaches. *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(1), 135-155 or Beasley, C.R., Jenkins, R.A., & Valenti, M. (2015). Special section on LGBT resilience across cultures: Introduction. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 55, 64-166. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-015-9701-7>
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