

AERA Submission

Title: Race, Resources, and Restoration: Teacher Perspectives on Adequate Supports for Effective and Equitable Restorative Practices

Abstract:

While the extant literature liberally examines the effects restorative practices have on school performance, few studies have explored teacher perspectives on restorative implementation in schools staffed with full-time on site restorative practitioners. The current study sought to highlight teacher perspectives and experiences in relation to first year restorative programming and implementation across six such schools. Findings indicate several key themes relevant to successful and equitable restorative practice implementation, including (1) the role and value of full time restorative practice coordinators; (2) program impacts at the teacher and student levels; and (3) the potential need to couple race conscious restorative efforts with intensive and focused racial equity trainings. Implications for school improvement are discussed.

Objectives/Purpose

While the extant literature liberally examines the effects that restorative practices have on school communities (Fronius et al., 2019; Song et al., 2020), minimal studies have explored teacher perspectives on restorative implementation and programming specifically as it pertains to schools with full-time on site restorative practitioners (Authors, 2023a). The current study sought to highlight teacher perspectives and experiences in relation to first year restorative programming and implementation across six different schools with full time on-site restorative practitioners. The study was guided by the following specific research questions:

1. What are the teachers' experiences of restorative practices in the first year of implementation?
2. What are the teachers' perspectives on the role and impact of the full-time on-site restorative practice coordinator?
3. To what extent do teachers experience the racial equity aims of a race-conscious restorative practice implementation?

Theoretical Frameworks

This study utilizes two key frameworks to evaluate teachers' perspectives on restorative implementation and programming. First, we conceptualize effective restorative justice implementation based on Gregory and Evans's (2020) taxonomy of five "Mis-implementation models" to be avoided and corrected. Specifically, the findings here are responsive to the "train and hope," "under-resourced, short term," and "colorblind and power-blind" mis-implementation models. In addition, this study is informed by Authors' (2023b), spectrum of teachers' racial beliefs, which in addition to race-blind and race conscious, includes an intermediate category, *color-cautious* racial attitudes, whereby teachers reject color-blind ideology in broader society, but struggle to implement a color-conscious perspective in their own schools and classrooms.

Methods

This study leverages focus group methodology and inductive coding analytics. Participating teachers were recruited from six elementary schools serving an overall majority of African American and economically disadvantaged youth in a northeastern city. These schools were in their first year as a part of a treatment condition of a randomized control trial of the Restorative School Communities Program (RSC),ⁱ which has in preliminary studies demonstrated substantial reductions in exclusionary discipline usage, school-level academic gains, and modest racial disparity reductions. Staff were recruited with purposive sampling intended to capture diverse backgrounds and experiences, including race, gender, years of experience, and levels of engagement with the restorative practice programming. Overall, six end-of-year 60-minute focus groups were held electronically with a total of 31 educators. Interview transcripts were examined using inductive thematic analysis, whereby within the broad themes of the protocol questions, a nuanced set of subcodes were inductively drawn from respondents' narratives. Team members met to re-review transcripts and to validate new codes as they emerged, and then to formalize and finalize the coded findings.

Results

Teachers' responses illuminated several key themes relevant to successful and equitable restorative practice implementation, including (1) the role and value of the full time restorative practice coordinators; (2) program impacts at the teacher and student levels; and (3) the need for not only race conscious restorative efforts, but for more intensive and focused racial equity training.

The Role and Value of a Full-Time Restorative Practitioner

Teachers placed significant value on their restorative practitioners. They indicated that the program's success and sustainability was highly contingent on the added expertise of a restorative practitioner in the building under the RSC model, a component that is often missing from restorative practice efforts (Authors, 2023a). Ms. Anderson, a teacher at Southbound Elementary noted her restorative practitioner Ms. Sally's excellent rapport and effectiveness in response to conflict or harm:

“The healing circles have been amazing. And usually when you would have two kids that were having a conflict with each other, they tend to not- my experience in the past, they tend to not want to talk about it with each other being the same room... I don't think there's not one student that does not want to go to Ms. Sally to have a healing circle. When I see a conflict occurring, I'll say, 'let's go have a healing circle with Ms. Sally, and I've never had one student turn that down. So, the rapport that Ms. Sally has made with these individuals, I think has also helped tremendously.’”

Restorative practitioners also modeled the more proactive community circles, in the process building the relationships up front that are essential to successful implementation and that allow teachers greater focus on classroom instruction. Ms. Fountaine, a fourth grade teacher noted how their restorative practitioner conducted circles in their classrooms regularly in a way that compelled her to make time for it: “It was helpful for me that Ms. Althea was scheduled, and

she would come in at that time because I couldn't then use that time for anything else. That is sometimes a struggle, you know what I mean? Because there's so many things you're trying to get done. So, I appreciated that."

Some teachers indicated that the presence of an on-site restorative practitioner to lead the work has also had an overall positive impact on teacher burnout. Ms. Parson, a fifth grade teacher indicates, "I cannot even remember what the event was, but Ms. Rhonda came in and said, 'hey, do you need to walk away for a minute?' And I said, 'absolutely.' And she helped me with that- watched the class for a few minutes while I walked away. As far as burnout, maybe just having another ear to talk to, I say a shoulder to cry on, but you know what I mean, just someone to vent to... sometimes that's all we need to finish the day." Ultimately, the presence of the full-time practitioner helped address shortcomings that have been identified in the "Train and Hope" and "Underresourced" mis-implementation models Gregory and Evans (2020) have described.

Teacher- and Student-Level Impacts

Teachers reported that in their schools, their colleagues who were buying in took new approaches to behavioral challenges by using them as moments to educate, restore relationships, and repair harm. Teachers noted a commitment amongst staff to make relationship-building and student belonging a priority. Through this dialogue, teachers indicated that behavior management is becoming more proactive, and that When conflict and harm did occur, teachers reported shifts toward more restorative practices and procedures. For example, although not required under the RSC agreement, some schools determined to modify their written disciplinary policies through restorative lenses. These policy shifts were at times facilitated by the effectiveness of the healing circle response to conflict, rather than defaulting to punitive responses. As Mr. V notes, "I keep on saying, like, the healing circles, but having those healing circles has really helped those individuals who struggle with problem solving and want to go right away to fighting...it has helped a lot with the behaviors." Teachers reported noticing a reduction in the number of suspensions since the RSC model was implemented.

Meanwhile, restorative practices also had a positive impact on student relational and social-emotional repertoires. Students began to see their classroom as a family unit, and to view their ways of being in relation to others' wellbeing. Teachers noted that students were taking greater initiative to proactively de-escalating conflicts through leading healing circles themselves, asking for healing circles, or seeking out their restorative practitioners for support. As Mr. Mansion, an elementary school teacher describes, "I've had students that have said to me, Mr. Mansion, why don't we just have a circle right now? So, like, after a music class they've had some struggles, they come back and they're like, let's just have a circle, Mr. M, before we start with our work. And that seems to help to bring them back to focus and to regroup so that they can learn throughout the lesson."

Beyond Race and Restoration: The Need for Intensive Racial Equity Trainings

While the RSC programming explicitly incorporates racial equity concepts into their framing, professional development, and ongoing data analytic supports for schools. through the

teacher responses, it became clear that such trainings were not happening with regularity independent of the RSC work, and that teachers in participating schools had historically experienced minimal supports surrounding racial consciousness or racial equity work in their buildings. When asked about racial equity training, professional development frequency responses ranged from “one staff meeting for like 45 minutes” to “I don't know if we've had any.” Mr. Lawrence captures the overall sentiment of participants when he notes, “to be honest, I just don't think it's enough.” Moreover, when teachers discussed trainings they have had in the past related to racial equity, participants reported overall negative experiences and common excuses for disengagement, including staff not “being ready for it,” and regarded their prior equity trainings as something that “teachers usually don't like.”

This lack of focused racial equity training is aligned with what scholars have cautioned against regarding attention to race in restorative practice efforts (Gregory and Evans, 2020; Winn 2018), and it was evident in teachers' dialogue surrounding race and school discipline disparities. When participants were asked about restorative practices and discipline disparities, many teachers deferred the question by noting they did not have access to disciplinary records or data. Others responded race-neutrally using colorblind responses. As one participant exemplifies: “I don't think (racial differences in disciplinary outcomes) has anything to do with racial disparity. I just think that our district is not suspending kids for things, and if there is a suspension, it's warranted. I don't know if there's a focus on which group is being suspended more. I don't know. I just feel like I don't know of numbers. I don't know if numbers have gone down or not.” Others may acknowledge racial issues in society, but in response to questions about their school, specifically avoided acknowledging potential local racial biases with race neutral responses like “I feel like we don't suspend a lot in general,” or “My referrals, at least for my room, have drastically gone down.” These response types of responses were consistent with Author's (2023) observation of teachers responding using not only color blind, but also *color cautious* sentiments, whereby they may acknowledge racial injustice broadly in society or schools, but still deny or avoid acknowledging such issues in their own schools or classrooms. Ultimately, findings here suggest that it is not enough for restorative practice programs to be color conscious in their own approaches, but rather that due to the level of need around fundamental racial equity training in schools, intensive racial equity training is necessary. These efforts should work in tandem with restorative practice implementation, but also likely need the time and space to thoroughly examine racial equity frameworks, thinking, and actions through the educative process.

Scholarly Significance

Despite facing common barriers to restorative practice implementation (time constraints, competing priorities, etc.), teachers in these schools generally thought the restorative programming was improving their school climate and performance, and results demonstrate that the on-site restorative practitioner support is vital for effective implementation. Further, despite race neutral endorsements of the restorative efforts, findings here also show that the restorative practice implementation must go beyond incorporating race conscious frameworks and processes, and must be coupled with intensive professional intensive racial equity training particularly in schools where such training may be historically lacking (Gregory & Evan, 2020; Huguley et al., 2022; Winn, 2018). Issues of racism impact outcomes at both the student and

teacher level locally, and research indicates that because of a history of structural racism, students of color and students with trauma histories are particularly overrepresented within rates of exclusionary discipline, even after controlling for offense types (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Paterson, 2002; Pierce, Jones & Gibbs, 2022; Zeng et al., 2019). Meanwhile, teachers' racial attitudes impact teacher engagement in the classroom and significantly alter student experiences (Alvarez & Milner, 2018; Ullucci & Battey, 2011). It is therefore essential that restorative programming be coupled with professional learning explicitly focused on anti-racism and equity, and that the efforts are mutually coordinated.

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ⁱ All names are of programming, schools, and individual participants are pseudonyms.