

Implications of Restorative Justice Practice and Policy for Youth of Color, LGB/T Students and Students with Disabilities in Urban School Districts



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Restorative Justice in Schools Project

This collaborative research project brings together expertise from Policy Studies, Special Education, and Human Development and Educational Psychology. In addition, the faculty involved in the project have proven track records studying the development of and the educational and policy issues affecting urban youth, youth of color, LGB/T youth, and youth with disabilities—all students who are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline. This type of inter- and trans-disciplinary collaboration is essential to investigating issues or school discipline and the effects of alternative discipline frameworks on young people historically marginalized within educational settings

Background and Significance

Zero-tolerance policies have been widely used in the U.S. K-12 school system since the 1990's. Such policies, specify a list of "unacceptable behaviors" and inform how students who violate school policy will be reprimanded. Commonly, students are suspended or expelled. In some cases, minor offenses committed in schools are referred to law enforcement, rather than handled by school personnel, resulting in more youth arrests (Casella, 2003).

However, there are several critical problems with punitive disciplinary actions. First, students of color are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline (e.g., Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013; Brown & Tillio, 2013; Finn & Servoss, 2013; Wallace et al., 2008). In CPS specifically, African American students experience higher suspension and expulsion rates compared to Latino and White students (Chicago Public Schools, 2014). Further, punitive discipline disproportionately impacts youth with disabilities (particularly youth with Emotional and Behavior Disorders and youth with Mental Health Diagnoses; Losen & Gillespie, 2012), as well as LGB/T young people (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011). Second, simply removing students from the school or classroom teaches them nothing about the alleged violation, and can also negatively impact social and emotional skills that are important for student's academic and future success (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Third, suspensions and expulsions contribute to the notion of school "push out" or student dropout (Sullivan & Keeney, 2008), as students miss out on essential instructional time and become further disconnected from valuable educational material. Research clearly indicates that punitive disciplinary actions do NOT help the student or promote a sense of school safety (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

Applying a restorative justice framework, is one way of addressing student's behavior that particularly shows promise for urban schools. Central characteristics of restorative discipline practices include: reparations for transgressions, developing student accountability, fostering community safety, and facilitating competency development. Some commonly used practices under the restorative justice framework include use of: 1) **peace circles** – a trained facilitator brings groups of students together to discuss issues and resolve conflict in a safe environment, a preventative approach; 2) **meditation** – a trained facilitator, adult or peer, meets with the victim and "offender" to resolve a specific misunderstanding and prevent future conflict, an intervention approach; and 3) **peer jury** – youth representative of the school student body oversee minor offenses committed in the school. What is less clear about restorative justice practices as an alternative form of discipline, is how frequently urban schools implement such practices and the impact of these practices on student's well-being and future academic success.

PHASE ONE

Aim 1: To begin a systematic critical literature review on restorative justice research and policies as well as the application of restorative frameworks to educational contexts and school discipline



Aim 2: To initiate investigation of restorative justice implementation in Chicago schools through an environmental scan and key stakeholder interviews

- We will conduct one-hour individual interviews with six key stakeholders who are involved in the statewide policy initiative. From these interviews, we will identify three schools to participate in preliminary data collection to address Aim 3.

PHASE TWO

Aim 3: To initiate investigation of adolescent's perceptions of restorative discipline practices in select Chicago Public Schools

- We will examine students' experiences with and perceptions of restorative justice policies. We will recruit adolescents (n = 72) from three target schools, to participate in focus group interviews.
- We will lead semi-structured focus group interviews with a list of potential probes to solicit additional information from youth. The interviews will begin with neutral questions to generate discussion (e.g., name, year in school, favorite subject) and will progress to more detailed questions relevant to the team's research questions, such as "What happens when a student violates the school code?" "Who decides disciplinary actions for students?" "Have you noticed a difference in the school climate as a result of the <restorative practices used at that school>", and "What do you think you have gained from being involved with restorative practices at your school?"

Aim 4: To utilize the results of this initial pilot project to launch the development of a federal grant on the effects of diverse discipline frameworks, policies and practices on the educational experiences, health, and development of young people in urban contexts, specifically youth of color, youth with disabilities, and LGB/T youth