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Fostering Community, Sharing Power:
Lessons for Building Restorative Justice School Cultures

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Abstract: Increasingly, education policymakers are touting restorative justice as a way to interrupt the "school-to-prison pipeline," which disproportionately impacts students by race, sexuality, and disability. A small but growing research literature suggests that restorative justice decreases suspension and behavioral incidents, while improving school climate—particularly when embraced as a schoolwide ethos, rather than a targeted disciplinary strategy. Restorative justice represents a marked departure from long-standing punitive approaches to discipline, however, and school communities are eager for support in navigating this culture shift. To this end, this article presents findings from case studies of five diverse NYC schools using restorative justice approaches. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with educators, students, parents, and school safety

agents, our findings provide insight into key practices and resources, stakeholder perceptions, and challenges of and practical strategies for building holistic, schoolwide restorative justice. We present a series of "lessons" to inform restorative justice practice and policy, underscoring the importance of community-building, deliberate resources and infrastructure, interrogating localized and systemic power dynamics, and elevating student leadership.
Keywords: restorative justice; school culture; school discipline; school safety; positive discipline

Fomentar la comunidad, compartir el poder: Lecciones para construir culturas escolares de justicia restaurativa
Resumen: Cada vez más, los formuladores de políticas educativas recomiendan la justicia restaurativa como una forma de interrumpir la "*pipeline* de la escuela a la prisión", que impacta desproporcionadamente a los estudiantes por raza, sexualidad y discapacidad. Los investigadores sugieren que la justicia restaurativa disminuye la suspensión y los incidentes de comportamiento, al tiempo que mejora el clima escolar, particularmente cuando se adopta como un espíritu de toda la escuela, no como una estrategia disciplinaria. Este artículo presenta los resultados de estudios de caso de cinco escuelas diversas de Nueva York que utilizan enfoques de justicia restaurativa. Basándose en datos cualitativos de entrevistas y grupos focales con educadores, estudiantes, padres y agentes de seguridad escolar, nuestros hallazgos brindan información sobre prácticas y recursos clave, percepciones de las partes interesadas y estrategias para construir justicia restaurativa holística en toda la escuela. Presentamos una serie de "lecciones" para informar la práctica y la política de justicia restaurativa, subrayando la importancia de la construcción de la comunidad, recursos e infraestructura deliberados, interrogando dinámicas de poder localizadas y sistémicas, y elevando el liderazgo estudiantil.
Palabras-clave: justicia restaurativa; cultura escolar; disciplina escolar; seguridad escolar; disciplina positiva

Promovendo a comunidade, compartilhando poder: lições para a construção de culturas escolares de justiça restaurativa
Resumo: Cada vez mais, os formuladores de políticas educacionais recomendam justiça restaurativa como uma maneira de interromper o "*pipeline* da escola para a prisão", que afeta de forma desproporcional os alunos por raça, sexualidade e deficiência. Os pesquisadores sugerem que a justiça restaurativa diminui a suspensão e os incidentes comportamentais, ao mesmo tempo em que melhora o clima escolar - principalmente quando adotado como ethos em toda a escola, não como uma estratégia disciplinar. Este artigo apresenta as conclusões de estudos de caso de cinco escolas de Nova York usando abordagens de justiça restaurativa. Com base em dados qualitativos de entrevistas e grupos focais com educadores, alunos, pais e agentes de segurança da escola, nossas descobertas fornecem informações sobre práticas e recursos importantes, percepções das partes interessadas e estratégias para a construção de justiça restaurativa holística em toda a escola. Apresentamos uma série de "lições" para informar práticas e políticas de justiça restaurativa, ressaltando a importância da construção da comunidade, recursos e infraestrutura deliberados, interrogando a dinâmica de poder localizada e sistêmica e elevando a liderança dos estudantes.

Palavras-chave: justiça restaurativa; cultura escolar; disciplina escolar; segurança escolar; disciplina positiva

The Rise of Restorative Justice in Schools

Over the past several years, a growing number of schools across the US have begun embracing restorative justice approaches to respond to and prevent school-based conflict, bullying, and violence. This turn represents a marked departure from a decades-long national trend of punitive school discipline, characterized by increased reliance on "zero-tolerance" policies, school exclusion (e.g., suspension, expulsion), and securitization, including police, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras (Addington, 2009; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Monahan & Torres, 2010). Amidst mounting evidence and advocacy decrying the harmful, discriminatory, and ineffective nature of such policies, restorative justice ("RJ") is promoted as a more humane and just approach than punitive discipline (APA, 2009). Influenced by practices of indigenous peoples in the Americas and New Zealand (McCaslin, 2005), RJ is an approach to conflict that emphasizes mitigating harm; attending to root causes of conflict; and, fostering relationships, empathic dialogue, and community accountability (Fronius et al., 2019; Morrison, 2003; Zehr, 2014). As the US grapples with the devastating racialized consequences of mass incarceration, the call for school-based RJ is one part of a broader movement, with growing numbers of RJ initiatives in community settings and the criminal legal system (Davis, 2019; Fronius et al., 2019).

In education, the movement for RJ is being pushed forward on multiple fronts: grassroots organizing within and beyond schools, district initiatives, and local, state, and federal policy (González, 2016; Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017).[1] Increasingly, RJ is being adopted as official policy of school districts, with notable examples in Denver, Oakland, and now New York City (NYC)—where the school system recently announced an initiative to expand RJ to all middle and high schools, alongside a broader package of proposed discipline reforms (NYC DOE, 2019). Such top-down mandates are important, but insufficient, for bringing about the dramatic shift in institutional culture that RJ demands (Deal & Peterson, 2016; Morrison, Blood & Thorsborne, 2005). Fighting the momentum of decades of punitive discipline and educational inequality, school communities and policymakers are eager for support in shifting to a more restorative and equitable approach. At the same time, some worry that 'scaling up' RJ could lead to its co-optation or distortion, with superficial versions of RJ practices used for punitive ends (Meiners, 2016). In this context, we seek to offer guidance based on findings of case studies of five NYC schools already addressing on-the-ground challenges of building schoolwide RJ cultures.

We begin by providing the research and policy context of the growth of RJ in schools, nationally and within NYC. We then describe our multiple case study methods and the five case schools. Turning to findings, we provide a portrait of what RJ efforts looked like in these schools, including key practices, processes, and resources used; describe how school stakeholders perceived these approaches; and offer six overarching lessons which illuminate both critical challenges and practical strategies for school communities seeking to build schoolwide RJ cultures. We conclude with a discussion of the implications for school-level practice, policy, and research.

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[1] In 2014, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education under the Obama administration issued joint guidance calling for schools to decrease suspensions, address discipline disparities by race and disability, and implement more positive discipline responses, like RJ. This guidance was rescinded in 2018 amidst contentious debate, following the final report of a Federal Commission on School Safety convened by the Trump administration after the Parkland, Florida school shooting (Vara-Orta, 2018).

A Crisis of School Discipline

School suspension is a common experience in the US. For instance, drawing on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Shollenberger (2015) found that more than one-third of surveyed youth were suspended at least once between kindergarten and 12th grade. The everyday nature of suspension is alarming, particularly given that substantial research has documented many detrimental impacts for suspended students and evidence that suspension fuels the "school-to-prison pipeline." Multiple national and local studies have found that school suspension is associated with worse academic outcomes, increased likelihood of dropout, and higher rates of future justice system involvement (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015; Chu & Ready, 2018; Fabelo et al., 2011; Hwang, 2018; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Noguera, 2003; Shollenberger, 2015; Skiba, Michael, Nardo & Peterson, 2002). Yet, evidence has shown that these policies do not improve school safety, deter misbehavior, or improve the learning environment for other students (APA, 2009; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2018; Losen, 2015).

Furthermore, the consequences of suspension are borne disproportionally by certain groups of students, who studies have shown are more likely to be suspended than their peers: black, Latinx, and Native American students, LGBTQ+ students, male students, students with disabilities, and English language learners (Fronius et al., 2019; Losen & Gillepsie, 2012; Schiff, 2013; Skiba, Mediratta & Rausch, 2016; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Intersectional analyses of these disparities have revealed important interactions across identity categories, such as race and gender. For instance, national research has found that black boys are slightly more than three times as likely as white boys to be suspended, and nearly twice as likely as black girls. This analysis found that black girls are subject to even greater disparity, however, as they are *six times* more likely than white girls to be suspended (Losen, 2015); thus, an intersectional approach is necessary for understanding the unique ways that black girls experience the school-to-prison pipeline (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2014; Morris, 2012). Critically, studies have shown that racial disparities in suspension cannot be explained by behavior differences across racial groups (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Shollenberger, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002). And, some research has found that black youth are also more likely than their peers to be disciplined for minor or more subjective infractions, lending support to claims of ingrained racial bias in disciplinary responses (Freedberg & Chavez, 2012; Pownall, 2013). Finally, racial disparities have proven stubbornly persistent, even as overall rates of suspension decline (U.S. GAO, 2018).

Restorative Justice Practice and Research in Schools

In an effort to mitigate the negative impacts of suspension and address attendant disparities, school communities are increasingly turning to RJ for its emphasis on repairing harm, addressing underlying causes of conflict, and prioritizing relationship-building. To this end, school-based RJ practitioners draw on a range of practices including various forms of talking circles (e.g., for building community, addressing harm, providing support, facilitating reentry); mediation; informal one-on-one conversations; social-emotional learning; mental health support; and more. Often, multiple strategies are used in combination, adapting to the needs of a given situation (González, 2015b; Morrison et al., 2005). For example, a peer-led mediation may be held alongside a larger, staff-facilitated harm circle, followed by a reentry circle as students return to the classroom, and ongoing student counseling, if appropriate. There may also be continuing efforts—like community-building circles and de-escalation training—geared toward strengthening the school community, rather than tied to a specific incident. Such flexible schoolwide approaches to RJ are perceived as more effective than incident-driven models, better engaging students and staff and aiding in the transformation of the school community (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; González, 2015b; Morrison, 2007; Morrison et al.,

2005; Wachtel & Mirsky, 2008). Throughout this paper, we refer to RJ as a *general framework* for responding to school-based conflict; we use "RJ practices" or "restorative practices" to refer to specific *practices* or *processes* used to achieve the goals of RJ, like circles or mediations; and, "RJ response" describes an *action or series of actions taken to address a given conflict or issue* within an RJ framework, which may include multiple restorative practices or related supports.[2]

While limited in number, a few comprehensive evaluations—including a recent randomized control trial in Pittsburgh—have found that schools engaged in RJ experienced decreases in behavioral incidents and use of suspensions; these studies have also found some reductions in racial disparities in school disciplinary responses, though the evidence is mixed (Anyon et al., 2016; Augustine et al., 2018; Davison, Penner & Penner, 2019; González, 2015b; Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Preety, 2014; Simson, 2012). Additionally, qualitative research has found that RJ contributes to meaningful changes in both school culture and disciplinary responses; fosters communication and accountability; and promotes empathy, social-emotional learning, and conflict resolution (González, 2015b; González, Sattler, & Buth, 2019; Jain et al., 2014; Vaandering, 2014; Wadhwa, 2016). On the other hand, the recent randomized control trial also found some negative results as academic outcomes worsened in middle schools, where suspension rates did not decline (Augustine et al., 2018). The researchers highlighted, however, that a two-year study may have been insufficient to see the full effects of RJ. Additionally, the flexible, schoolwide approach to RJ is inherently complex for educators to implement and researchers to evaluate, as the specific structures and scope are tailored to a given school community (Fronius et al., 2019; Schiff, 2013; Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). There has been increasing documentation of the range of practices used, but less is understood about how RJ takes hold as a shift in school culture—and the challenges and promising practices that can guide future practice and research.

Expanding Restorative Justice and Addressing Racial Disparities in New York City

New York City (NYC) is home to the largest school system in the country, with more than 1.1 million students in over 1,800 schools. While an anomaly in its size, NYC is representative of the broader national trends in school discipline that have unfolded over the past few decades. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of suspensions in NYC public schools more than doubled—from 29,000 to almost 70,000 (Pownall, 2013). During this time, the presence of police and metal detectors in NYC schools also increased substantially. In 1998, responsibility for managing security of NYC public schools was transferred from the NYC Department of Education (NYC DOE) to the New York Police Department (NYPD), which began stationing school safety agents in schools—unarmed, but uniformed police employees (often referred to as school resource officers in other jurisdictions). Two decades later, there are more school safety agents in NYC public schools than there are full-time guidance counselors and social workers combined (CPD & UYC, 2017).

Such policies have long been contested by communities, activists, and academics; in recent years, NYC leadership has begun to heed calls for reform. In 2015, the mayor's office and the NYC DOE declared a citywide goal of decreasing suspensions, reducing racial disparities, and increasing use of restorative practices, with an emphasis on increased training for school personnel (NYC

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[2] There is some debate in the field regarding terminology, particularly regarding the use of *restorative justice* versus *restorative practices*. For instance, McCold and Wachtel (2003) refer to restorative practices as the broader approach, and restorative justice as a subset of restorative practices. Additionally, some in school settings prefer restorative practices on the premise that "restorative justice" is linked too strongly with the criminal justice system. In other literature, these terms are used interchangeably (see Fronius et al., 2019; González, 2015b). Our terminology is guided by the language used by our study interviewees, who tended to speak about their approach to discipline as "restorative justice."

DOE, 2015). And the shift has been dramatic: as of the 2016-2017 school year, there were 35,234 suspensions in NYC public schools, a 49% decrease from the 69,643 suspensions in 2012-2013, when suspensions began to steadily decline (Hassoun Ayoub, 2013; NYC DOE, 2017; NYC School-Justice Partnership Task Force, 2013). More recently, with sustained pressure from advocates, the NYC DOE announced a more ambitious set of reforms: capping the length of suspensions at 20 days (previously 180), revising the disciplinary code, a revised agreement with the NYPD regarding school safety agents, and a plan to expand socio-emotional learning for all elementary schools and expand RJ for all middle and high schools (NYC DOE, 2019).

NYC's announcement marks the nation's largest rollout of RJ in schools. In a school system of this size, there is considerable variation in school capacity—and willingness—to genuinely embrace RJ. While some NYC schools have been using RJ or related approaches since their inception, many schools may be considering adopting RJ for the first time, uncertain of how to begin. With more and more district leaders and policymakers calling for RJ in schools, it is critical that educators receive substantive guidance and adequate support (e.g., funding, training) to make this shift. At this important juncture for school discipline in NYC and the nation, this study builds on existing research to identify "what works" for building schoolwide RJ cultures, addressing the following questions: 1) What practices, processes, and resources are being used to foster schoolwide RJ practices and cultures? What are common approaches and notable differences? (Q1); 2) How do school staff, students, and their families perceive these approaches, especially in relation to school safety, discipline, and culture? (Q2); 3) What challenges are schools facing in developing schoolwide RJ? (Q3); and, 4) What are key strategies for implementation and addressing these challenges? (Q4)

Methodology

Given the critical importance of understanding RJ implementation within the school context, we adopted a multiple case studies approach (Yin, 2003) to better document what holistic, schoolwide RJ looks like "on the ground" and to identify implementation lessons. Conducting in-depth case studies of five NYC schools engaged in RJ, we documented the specific practices used, strengths and challenges of implementation, and perceived individual and school-level impacts—and identified key lessons by comparing and contrasting cases. Specifically, we conducted interviews and focus groups with key school stakeholders, as well as semi-structured observations at each of the schools; the findings in this paper focus on data from the interviews and focus groups.[3]

Case Selection

The study was designed to include five case studies at public middle and high schools in NYC engaged in RJ and related practices. Schools were eligible if they met the following criteria: a) serving grades 6-12; b) a student body representative of those disparately impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline (e.g., black or Latinx, have disabilities, eligible for free lunch); c) known for taking an RJ approach or related positive approaches to discipline; and, d) limited or substantially decreased use of suspension; and, e) principals amenable to study participation, per NYC DOE guidelines. To understand RJ in a range of contexts, the research team also sought diversity across cases with

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[3] The case studies were one part of a larger Center for Court Innovation study about the school-to-prison-pipeline in NYC, which also included: a multi-level analysis of linked administrative data from the NYC DOE and the NYC courts system, examining individual, school, and neighborhood factors influencing disciplinary responses; and, a survey of NYC middle and high school principals about perceptions of school safety and discipline (see Hassoun Ayoub et al., 2019). Approval for the case studies was received from the Center for Court Innovation's IRB and the NYC DOE IRB prior to fieldwork.

respect to grade level, location within NYC, year of RJ implementation, and notable school features, such as a targeted curriculum or unique student populations (like transfer students, or English Language Learners).

Eligible schools were identified based upon a review of publicly available data (e.g., census tract data, state school data on academics and discipline); preliminary data about RJ use from our broader study's survey of NYC principals; and recommendations from an advisory board, including representatives of NYC DOE, NYPD School Safety Division, education advocacy organizations, and education researchers familiar with the NYC context. These recommendations were critical as there is no central database that identifies schools as using restorative or other positive discipline practices. While there are about 850 middle and high schools in NYC, relatively few were known to be engaged in RJ approaches or related practices at the time of fieldwork in the 2016-2017 school year. We created a final list of 11 potential schools that met the criteria and maximized diversity with respect to grades, location, and special features. We then systematically reached out to principals at potential schools for relationship building and recruitment. One principal declined to participate. Once five schools agreed to participate, the remaining schools on the list were not contacted.

The five participating NYC public schools included one transfer high school (School 1); two high schools (Schools 2 and 3); one joint middle school and high school (School 4); and one middle school (School 5).[4] Table 1 presents key school characteristics, including demographics and other key features. These schools represented a range of grades, locations within NYC, unique student populations, and phase of RJ implementation. Notably, although School 5 was only in its first year of implementing a formal RJ initiative it was identified as an important school to study due to its reputation for strong community building and culturally-relevant approaches, described in detail in the findings. Finally, all five schools were relatively small and four were co-located with other schools in large "campus" buildings—an increasingly common situation following NYC's "small schools" movements (Schwartz, Stiefel & Wiswall, 2016).[5]

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[4] Research has shown that suspension rates are highest in middle school, but early high school is a pivotal period for suspension and dropout; thus, both middle and high schools are included in this study (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Marchbanks et al., 2015). Transfer schools typically serve students up to 21 years of age who have had a disruption in their schooling or are behind in credits.

[5] The principal who declined to participate led a standalone school serving a much larger student body than the participating schools.

Table 1
Demographics and Key Features of Case Study Schools

	Demographics	Key Features

School 1	• 492 students
	• 47% female; 53% male
	• 73% Latinx; 23% Black
	• 92% poverty
	• 33% special education
	• 9% English Language Learners (ELLs)
		• Grades 9-12
		• Transfer school
		• Standalone school
		• No metal detectors
		• Year 5 of RJ, mediations since 1970s
		• Consistently low suspension rates:
		   • 0% in 2010-11
		   • 0% in 2014-15

School 2	• 285 students
	• 66% Latinx; 33% Black
	• 58% female; 42% male
	• 74% poverty
	• 24% special education
	• 25% ELLs
		• Grades 9-12
		• Extensive arts curricula
		• Community school
		• Shared campus with 5 schools
		• Metal detectors
		• Year 5 of RJ
		• Large decrease in suspension rates:
		   • 19% in 2010-11
		   • 1% in 2014-15

School 3	• 445 students
	• 46% female; 54% male
	• 58% Latinx; 30% Black
	• 79% poverty
	• 22% special education
	• 8% ELLs
		• Grades 9-12
		• Inquiry-based learning
		• Shared campus with 5 schools
		• Metal detectors
		• Year 3 of RJ
		• Consistently low suspension rates:
		   • 0% in 2011-2012 (founding year)
		   • 1% in 2014-15

School 4	• 566 students
	• 62% female; 38% male
	• 70% Black; 26% Latinx
	• 81% poverty
	• 20% special education
	• 2% ELLs
		• Grades 6-12
		• Strong writing curricula
		• Community school
		• Shared campus with 2 schools
		• No metal detectors
		• Year 2 of RJ
		• Large decrease in suspension rates:
		   • 21% in 2010-11
		   • 4% in 2014-15

School 5	• 264 students
	• 49% female; 51% male
	• 66% Black; 30% Latinx
	• 84% poverty
	• 25% special education
	• 1.5% ELLs
		• Grades 6-8
		• Hip-hop pedagogy/STEAM focus
		• Shared campus with 2 schools
		• No metal detectors
		• Year 1 of RJ, mediations since 2009
		• Large decrease in suspension rates:
		   • 34% in 2010-11
		   • 2% in 2014-15

Note: Year of RJ refers to how long a school had been developing RJ at the time of fieldwork, based on interviewee reports. Suspension rate was calculated as the number of annual suspensions per number of enrolled students in a given school; it does not account for repeated suspensions of the same student.

Interviews and Focus Groups

In each school site, we conducted interviews and focus groups with: a) key school staff involved with RJ and school discipline; b) students; c) parents or guardians; and d) school safety agents (SSAs). Generally, staff and SSAs participated in individual interviews, while students and parents participated in focus groups, with a few cases of crossover due to preference and/or language needs. Semi-structured protocols varied slightly by stakeholder group, but all included questions about: perceived school safety; school responses to conflicts and student issues; available school resources; and strengths, challenges, and recommendations for the school.

Across the five schools, we spoke to a total of 109 interviewees in individual interviews or focus groups, including 32 school staff, 44 students, 23 parents, and 10 SSAs. Samples at each school ranged from 19 to 26 people; Table 2 provides sample details by school. Given this study's aim of documenting RJ practices and processes, perceptions of these approaches, and implementation lessons, we purposively sampled school community members most familiar with the school's disciplinary and community building approaches. As such, we recruited school staff identified as key decision makers or facilitators of discipline and RJ, student support services, or school culture efforts. Recruitment was conducted in person at school events, in staff meetings, and on a one-to-one basis throughout fieldwork. Our sample of staff interviewees included principals, RJ coordinators, social workers, guidance counselors, deans, parent coordinators, key teachers, gay-straight alliance advisors, and so on. SSA interviewees were mostly supervisors or those reported to have strong rapport with students.

Table 2
Interviewee Samples by School

School	Staff	Students	Parents	SSAs	Total
School 1	7	8	2	3	20
School 2	7	8	9	2	26
School 3	6	9	2	2	19
School 4	8	10	4	2	24
School 5	4	9	6	1	20
All Schools	32	44	23	10	109

Note. Parent interviewees include some grandparents who play a central role in raising students at the school. All schools had one student focus group, except School 4, which had two: one each for middle school and high school.

Students and parents were recruited to include those with a range of RJ and discipline experiences. Recruitment was conducted by researcher outreach during designated non-instructional periods for students (e.g., advisory) and at school events, such as parent-teacher association (PTA) meetings, "Back to School" nights, and an English as a Second Language class for parents. Additional student and parent recruitment was conducted with assistance from key contacts at each school, such as RJ staff and parent coordinators, to whom we stressed the importance of hearing

from a range of students and parents who had experienced RJ in different ways.[6] Student focus group participants included student leaders (e.g., peer mediators, peer mentors) as well as those who had been through discipline and RJ processes as participants—with some students belonging to both categories. With parent engagement cited as a challenge at all schools, parent interviewees included a larger share of parents and guardians who were relatively active in the school community than might be typical (e.g., PTA members, parents who attend school programming); still, these interviewees had diverse experiences with safety, discipline, and RJ, including parents whose children had participated in RJ responses or been suspended, as well as parents of children who struggled with bullying or mental health issues.

Analysis

Interview and focus group data from the five schools were analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).[7] This approach was chosen for its flexibility—adapting Braun and Clarke's guidelines for within and between case analysis[8]—and its utility for applied research, yielding themes that are "digestible" for policymakers and practitioners. In a first phase of *within-case* analysis, the data for each school were analyzed one case at a time by two researchers: one researcher led the analysis for three schools and the other led the analysis for two schools. During this process, interview and focus group data were initially read and re-read, and initial codes were applied to the data using a qualitative software program, Dedoose. This coding included both deductive codes, based on research questions (e.g., key processes and resources), and inductive codes researchers created based on participant responses (e.g., student leadership, feeling of family). These codes were then collated into preliminary *within-case* themes, which were then reviewed against the coded extracts and revised accordingly to ensure fit. The themes and coded extracts were organized into interim analytic memos for each case, detailing the school's RJ practices and resources, other notable elements of the school culture, perceptions of school climate, safety, and RJ approaches, key challenges and recommendations. These memos also began the process of organizing and defining themes and sub-themes. At this stage, follow-up interviews were conducted with key staff from each site to address emergent questions about that school's RJ processes and resources.

Beginning *between-case* analysis, a thematic 'map' was created by collating the *within-case* themes and subthemes from across the five cases, beginning to compare and contrast cases. During this process, similar themes that arose in multiple cases were clarified, collapsed, and standardized as appropriate, or refined as subthemes under a larger theme (e.g., to highlight nuanced representations of a larger theme); key differences and outliers amongst cases were also identified. The interview and focus group data were then re-reviewed and revised according to the full set of themes represented by the thematic map, with additional coding completed as relevant (e.g., data from one case would be coded in accordance with inductive codes based on another case). Drawing on and revising the interim within-case analytic memos, the full set of themes and subthemes were then defined and named, with key data extracts identified as illustrative examples ('exemplars') or counter-examples.

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[6] As per NYC DOE policy, recruitment of school staff, students, and parents for participation in research studies in NYC schools may only occur in settings agreed upon by the principal of participating schools.
[7] Interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, except for in four interviews in which the participants requested that they not be audio recorded; in these cases, the interviewer took notes by hand.
[8] Braun and Clarke's six steps are intended to be flexible, not strictly linear guidelines to be adapted to a particular study and its research questions. They include: 1) familiarizing yourself with your data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing themes; 5) defining and naming themes; 6) producing the report. In our study, the within case-analysis maps onto steps 1 through 4 and the between case analysis maps onto steps 4 through 6.

During this process, case similarities and differences were further delineated and the thematic map was reorganized and revised to better represent relationships among the themes and subthemes. Preliminary findings were presented to key staff—including many interviewees—at each school site to elicit feedback; limited revisions were made based on feedback during these presentations.

Findings

This section presents a context-rich picture of what RJ looked like "on the ground" in a diverse set of NYC public schools, with findings presented in three parts. First, we describe the practices, processes, and resources used to build RJ in the study schools, lifting up common approaches and key differences (Q1). Then, we provide an overview of how members of the school communities perceived their school's RJ approaches (Q2). The third section lays out six cross-cutting lessons which integrate findings about implementation challenges (Q3) and strategies for fostering restorative school cultures (Q4). The first two sections are intended to provide a portrait of RJ in the case study schools, while the final section aims to provide guidance—critical considerations and concrete strategies—to school communities and policymakers interested in expanding the presence of RJ in schools.

RJ "On the Ground": A Landscape of Practice and Resources across Five NYC Schools

Each of the study schools reported using a wide variety of practices and resources to build relationships and respond restoratively to school-based conflict and student needs, consistent with previous RJ implementation literature (González, 2015b; Wachtel & Mirsky, 2008). A range of approaches were documented across the five schools, including one-on-one student check-ins or restorative conversations; mediation; mentoring; varied community-building strategies; multiple forms of talking circles (e.g., community building, harm, support, reentry, etc.); and ongoing counseling, among others.

In each school, staff interviewees underscored the importance of taking a multifaceted and flexible approach to RJ; staff reported that various practices were often used in tandem, tailored to address the specifics of a given incident. To provide an example, if two students had a classroom-based fight, it could catalyze multiple processes: one-on-one restorative conversations with each student; parent phone calls; a harm circle with a staff facilitator, the two students, each of their advisors, advocates chosen by each student (e.g., a friend, a counselor)—and, maybe, their parents; student counseling referrals as needed; and, a reentry circle with their teacher and classmates when the involved students returned to class. Within this individualized approach, multiple people could lead distinct components of a larger RJ response, as deemed appropriate based on their training, availability, and preexisting relationships. In this vein, staff people described RJ as a "living organism" (Staff, School 5) and "not a one size fits all [*sic*]" (Staff, School 4), suggesting that the specific practices outlined here should not be interpreted as proscriptive, but as possibilities. Finally, staff interviewees from each site reported that their schools took a holistic approach to RJ, with community building and wrap-around social supports for students perceived as integral to any efforts to prevent and resolve conflict (described in more detail in Lessons 1 and 2).

Table 3 provides an overview of key practices and the extent to which they were integrated in a given school's culture and RJ responses—designated as Low, Medium, or High based on qualitative analysis of interviewee reports. "Low" integration indicates infrequent use, either on an ad hoc basis or in isolation by a single staff member. For instance, School 5 had "Low" integration of community-building circles, reportedly only used routinely by one staff person. "Medium" integration strategies had a sustained but secondary presence, used for a certain subset of incidents or as a supportive strategy; School 3 had "Medium" integration of harm circles, which were reported

to be used regularly, but typically only for conflicts among more than two people. "High" integration strategies were deeply ingrained, either as routine aspects of school culture or as central components of most responses to conflict and other school issues; all five schools had "High" integration of one-on-one check-ins, described as a core strategy used constantly for conflict prevention and de-escalation by a wide variety of staff. (Given the emphasis on tailoring RJ approaches to a school context and the particulars of each incident, it is not inherently more desirable to have "High" integration for all strategies.)

Table 3
Key Restorative Justice Practices by School and Level of Integration, Based on Interviewee Reports

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Community-building circles used to develop relationships and build comfort with circles process.	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
Restorative conversations, or one-on-one check-ins about emerging issues, or to prepare for RJ processes.	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Staff-led mediations led by trained staff as a neutral third party to address conflict between two parties, usually students.	HIGH	MEDIUM	HIGH	MEDIUM	HIGH
Harm and support circles led by trained staff to address conflict or other issues (e.g., attendance). Usually includes a facilitator, impacted parties, and key support people.	MEDIUM	HIGH	MEDIUM	HIGH	NONE
Counseling for individuals and groups, as mandated by Individualized Education Plans or by referral or request.	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Staff-student mentorship through formal programs, including advisory.	MEDIUM	HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
Reentry processes to support returning students following a suspension or classroom removal.	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM
Student leadership in RJ and school culture as in student-led circles, peer mediation, peer mentoring, LGBTQ+ student groups, etc.	LOW	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM

Note. Level of Integration Key is as follows:
   NONE: no reported presence in the school
   LOW: limited presence (e.g., used on an infrequent, ad hoc basis or in isolation by a single staff member)
   MEDIUM: a sustained but secondary presence (e.g., for a subset of incidents, supporting but not central to RJ)
   HIGH: deeply ingrained in school culture and/or central presence in most responses to conflict and other issues

While a flexible and holistic approach was reported by staff interviewees across cases, Table 3 highlights that there was some variation in the practices used and prioritized by each school. A number of practices were used regularly by all five schools, such as one-on-one student check-ins, staff-led mediation, and counselingc. In some cases, schools used the same set of strategies, but with varying emphasis. For instance, although Schools 1 through 4 all used a combination of circles and staff-led mediation for addressing conflict, Schools 2 and 4 relied more on circles and Schools 1 and 3 placed greater emphasis on mediation. On the other hand, School 5 was not using harm or support circles at the time of data collection, as staff had only been trained in these approaches a few months prior; instead, they relied primarily on staff-led mediation and they were in the midst of introducing peer mediation. School 5 was an outlier in other ways as well, as the only school that did not have an advisory period and was not regularly using community-building circles. At the same time, of the five sites, School 5 had the most frequent community-wide events (weekly assemblies for the full school, with parents invited), the most developed culturally-relevant curriculum ("hip hop pedagogy"), and a more demographically representative staff—all of which were described as key strategies for building relationships with students and their families (see Lesson 5 for detail).

There was also considerable variation across schools with respect to student leadership in RJ. Schools 2, 3, and 4 had particularly robust models, with multiple forms of student leadership in RJ at each school. While the exact models varied, each school had students who led community-building circles for classes or community-wide events, class-based opportunities for learning about RJ or related practices, peer mentorship programs, and active LGBTQ+ student groups. With their peer mediation programs, Schools 3 and 5 were the only sites that had structured initiatives for youth to lead conflict resolution processes. School 1, the transfer high school, was an outlier with no formal student leadership roles in RJ. A School 1 staff person described student leadership as especially challenging for transfer schools, with a more transient student body and many students who have significant responsibilities outside of school, like child rearing, pending court cases, housing instability, and so on. At the same time, some School 1 staff pointed to the maturity of their unique student body as a strength. Lesson 6 describes student leadership in more detail.

Despite such variation, there were important patterns across schools with respect to implementation and resources. Most RJ processes were led by staff—typically RJ coordinators, social workers, counselors, or administrators. There was increasing reliance, however, on student leadership in RJ and related processes in all cases except School 1. Some RJ-related activities were part of a formal schedule, such as community-building circles during specific class periods or designated time for circle planning during weekly staff meetings. Much of this work, however, was informal and impromptu, like the restorative conversations that took place in hallways between classes. Critically, all schools partnered with community-based organizations (CBO) to support RJ either directly or indirectly. For instance, School 4 had an RJ specialist employed by a CBO; Schools 3 and 5 were implementing peer mediation with the support of external partners (one CBO and one government agency); and, all of the schools had CBO staff providing additional counseling capacity. Notably, some of these CBO partnerships were supported by inclusion in special initiatives, like the community schools program (Schools 2 and 4) and a "turn-around" program (School 2). Table 4 provides an overview of key resources and their integration by school (Low, Medium, High, as described above); Lessons 4 and 5 offer more detail on infrastructure and resources.

Table 4
Key Restorative Justice Resources by School and Level of Integration, Based on Interviewee Reports

Strategy	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Designated RJ staff roles and staff teams led RJ processes and support other staff.	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
CBO partnerships support RJ, counseling, extracurriculars, and other student supports.	MEDIUM	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	MEDIUM
Internal and external staff training on RJ (e.g., circles training; ongoing coaching).	MEDIUM	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	LOW
Counseling staff via DOE and non-profits provided services to students.	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH
Dedicated RJ rooms and time (e.g., team meetings, designated prep or class time).	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	HIGH	LOW

Note. Level of Integration Key:
    LOW: limited presence (e.g., used on an infrequent, ad hoc basis or in isolation by a single staff member)
    MEDIUM: a sustained but secondary presence (e.g., for a subset of incidents, supporting but not central to RJ)
    HIGH: deeply ingrained in school culture and/or central presence in most responses to conflict and other issues

Stakeholder Perceptions of Restorative Justice in their Schools

In addition to documenting the mechanics of what schools were doing to develop schoolwide RJ, we sought to understand how staff, students, and their families perceived these RJ approaches—particularly with respect to school safety, discipline and culture. The vast majority of staff, student, and parent interviewees broadly endorsed RJ as a preferred approach to school discipline and conflict, perceiving it as more effective than punishment-based models and reporting that it had positively impacted their school communities. Interviewees reported perceived decreases in suspension and increases in attendance, as well as a number of more qualitative outcomes. A wide range of benefits were cited by various interviewees, including that RJ facilitated conflict resolution and de-escalation; addressed root causes of conflict better than more punitive disciplinary responses; facilitated a process of learning from mistakes for students *and* staff; minimized future harm; limited collateral consequences of disciplinary responses; and fostered empathy, relationships, and accountability throughout the school community. For example, two staff people pointed to how developing empathy, identifying root causes of conflict, and de-escalation were all connected:

> Just understanding that if the kid has their head down or is late to school, it doesn't mean that they're being disrespectful to you, or are bored by you, or don't like you. It just means they may have stuff going on. That awareness alone impacts how you respond to that child. (Staff, School 5)

> When a student is acting up in class, it's usually there's something underlying. Either the student doesn't understand the work. There's something going on at home. The teacher may have said something to offend the student unknowingly…there's a million reasons… sometimes teachers will say, "Well so and so isn't doing the work.

So and so did this. So and so came in and cursed." I'm like, okay, let's find out why. The goal of that circle is usually to get the child to be able to say this is what is or is not happening for me. Have the adult hear that and say, okay, well what can we do differently to get you to perform better in class? (Staff, School 2)

Both interviewees described how having staff reflect upon students' emotional lives in and out of school helped interrupt detrimental cycles of staff-student interaction and, in turn, avoid escalation.

Staff, students, and parents described these benefits of RJ as enhancing physical and emotional safety—which are seen as mutually reinforcing. A School 2 staff member explained:

Do we never have any incidents? No. I'm dealing with teenagers…Things happen. I think we're a really safe community…I don't just think about safe in terms of free from violence. I think about safety in terms of being able to express yourself, who you are…I think we have a space where, yes, students sometimes get in conflict, but students also know…this is a place where it can be resolved. (Staff, School 2)

Like many interviewees across study schools, this interviewee suggested that safety is not a complete absence of conflict; rather, it is a feeling of comfort that conflict can be handled when it arises.

There were a small minority of interviewees across schools, however, who expressed personal concern that RJ could be having a negative impact on their schools. For instance, SSAs in two sites suggested that school efforts to handle discipline issues without suspension or SSA engagement resulted in escalation and safety issues. More interviewees, however, reported that they knew of others in their school—some staff, SSAs, parents—who did not believe that RJ responses were effective or appropriate for handling school issues (see Lesson 3 for more detail). In a different strand of critique, one School 4 staff person expressed concern that RJ had shifted so much focus to addressing the root causes of harm-causing behavior and, by extension, the person who caused the harm, that "I think sometimes we don't even pay too much attention to the person who was actually bullied, just making sure their needs are met too." Participants' rather limited critique of RJ must be interpreted cautiously, however; given purposive sampling for those most knowledgeable about school discipline and culture, it is likely that those most resistant to RJ did not participate. While these findings cannot be generalized to the entire school community, they still provide valuable insight on how critically engaged community members understand the role of RJ in their schools.

Overcoming Obstacles, Building RJ Cultures: Lessons from Five NYC Schools

While most interviewees supported RJ as a general approach, they also highlighted a range of concerns and obstacles to building restorative schools. Such barriers ranged from logistical challenges—like technology incompatibility—to the philosophical, with debates over what it means to hold someone accountable for harming others. These challenges were experienced on multiple levels: individual (e.g., mental illness), interpersonal (e.g., do we trust each other?), institutional (e.g., how do overburdened teachers take on even more work?), ideological (e.g., how does RJ contend with structural racism?). Addressing our third and fourth research questions, this section weaves together findings from our analysis about interviewee concerns, reported challenges, and specific approaches to address challenges and build robust schoolwide RJ. We present these themes as overarching lessons in six areas—community building, school hierarchy, fostering buy-in, institutionalization, diversity and marginalization, and student leadership—accompanied by practical strategies for how school communities can move forward.

Lesson 1. Centering community building. Interviewees across study schools described community building as the foundation of RJ, highlighting its relational nature: "Restorative justice is

not just a series of practices, it's not just a program, it's about the people" (Staff, School 5). Participants described RJ as requiring extensive trust, vulnerability, and even discomfort which could put relationships to the test. Some student and staff interviewees described anxiety about opening up to others in the school community, including concerns about sincerity, respect, and commitment of both students and staff; Lesson 5 highlights added challenges of relationship building across lines of race and class. At the same time, interviewees described restorative practices (e.g., community-building circles) as tools that aided the development of stronger and more empathic relationships, creating a structure for community members to be heard and to hear others.

And, indeed, the majority of interviewees described school relationships as robust, imbued with great trust, belonging, and mutual responsibility. Multiple interviewees described their schools as "families," and suggested that this bond directly informed the school's commitment to RJ. One interviewee explained: "You don't suspend your child, right? …some of them are going to drive us up the frikking wall, but they're ours" (Staff, School 3). Participants across sites expressed the sentiment that their school communities were inextricably bound together, like families—and thus obligated to work through difficult issues. Interviewees described strategies used to cultivate strong community ties across three domains: staff-student relationships, staff community, and family engagement.

Staff-student relationships in and beyond the classroom. Across schools, staff, students, parents, and most SSAs described school staff, including principals, as supportive, trustworthy, accessible, attentive, and dedicated. Students were generally reported to have *at least* one close staff relationship, and often multiple. For Schools 1 through 4, a key strategy for student-teacher relationship building was the advisory period, during which students could receive support from a teacher on a range of topics, including study skills, course planning, college preparation, socioemotional skills, and current events. Compared to traditional academic courses, this routine but flexible space allowed for more informal staff-student contact and created opportunities to engage about personal and contemporary social issues. Similarly, one-on-one student-staff mentoring was viewed as important. While advisory was one means to cultivate such relationships, Schools 3 and 4 had other formal staff mentorship programs as well. And interviewees across all schools described informal mentoring by a range of staff: teachers, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors, social workers, and even some principals and SSAs. In this vein, interviewees reported extensive staff-student communication outside of class via texting, hallway talks, schoolwide events, and clubs.

While time intensive at the outset, cultivating staff-student relationships was perceived as a means to facilitate conflict resolution and prevention; trust and familiarity made it easier for staff to detect arising issues and for students to proactively seek help. One student described how such relationships aided de-escalation: "Most likely when you're in a mad mood, a teacher or staff will recognize you and they will ask you what's going [on]…when there's a problem, teachers immediately know, maybe they're magic or something… there hasn't been a physical argument just yet" (Student, School 2). Of course, this de-escalation was not "magic," but the result of careful and conscientious relationship development.

Staff community and leadership support. Most staff interviewees described feeling broad support from leadership and colleagues in their efforts to develop RJ. They reported formal aid— staffing, scheduling, professional development—alongside informal guidance and moral support from principals and coworkers. Such comprehensive support was portrayed as unique in the broader landscape of NYC schools, but essential for RJ. One staff person explained:

> Staff members [at other schools] are getting a lot of resistance and pushback from
> their principals…I can't imagine having to do my job without the support. I get tons

and tons of support from the staff, up from the principal all the way through. (Staff, School 4)

Staff interviewees explained that the emotional toll of RJ necessitated rich relational support between staff. It was seen as especially critical, however, to have a principal who explicitly supported RJ in words and deeds; in addition to adequately resourcing RJ, multiple study principals were directly engaged, coaching staff in RJ approaches, or even running circles or mediations themselves.

On the other hand, insufficient administrative support could seriously hinder the development of schoolwide RJ. In School 5, a staff interviewee who was spearheading new RJ initiatives explained how a lack of explicit prioritization of RJ by the principal limited overall staff buy-in: "People are going to think the things that [the principal]'s involved in and is vocal about are the most important…[we need] more of a, again, sustained effort, directive on [the principal's] part that a team needs to be looking at this. It can't just all fall on me" (Staff, School 5). Without such a "directive," this staff person felt that their RJ efforts were disjointed from the broader staff culture. The principal corroborated this view; while self-professing a restorative ethos to discipline and culture, the principal recognized that they could provide more direct support of RJ initiatives and encourage other staff to do the same. Notably, School 5 was the only school that did not have an ongoing staff team leading RJ work, nor designated RJ space or meetings—two key strategies for institutionalization described in Lesson 4.

Family engagement. Staff from every school reported substantial efforts to engage students' families, but family involvement with RJ specifically and in the schools generally remained a significant challenge. Staff and family interviewees reported a number of systemic barriers to family participation, including parents' demanding schedules (e.g., non-standard hours, multiple jobs, caretaking responsibilities); anxiety about immigration status; language barriers; and other forms of instability, such as precarious housing. A few staff and parent interviewees also suggested that race and class differences between staff and parents might have impeded parent engagement to a certain extent (see Lesson 5 for more detail).

While family engagement was an ongoing issue, staff and parent interviewees reported that staff were making substantial efforts to build these relationships and mitigate barriers. The schools provided considerable parent programming (e.g. fitness, English classes, financial planning) and hosted celebratory events like family dinners. Such events were designed to foster family engagement outside of parent-teacher conferences and disciplinary events. Most of the schools had active parent coordinators who conducted regular parent outreach and collaborated with PTAs on programming. More informally, staff were generally described as being extremely accessible to families. As one parent from School 4 explained, "We have access to each and every staff in this school at any given time, including [SSAs]…If you want to build a relationship here with the staff, you can." Similarly, interviewees across schools reported that staff regularly contacted parents (for good news, not just bad) and made them feel welcome in the school building.

Lesson 2. Undoing the hierarchies of school, enhancing equity. Across schools, interviewees reported some resistance to using RJ for addressing conflict between students and staff. In asking adults to reflect upon their role in a given conflict—and perhaps their mistakes—RJ could be seen as a threat to the traditional authority of educators. As one staff person explained, "Teachers sometimes come to the profession like, 'No. My way. I'm the adult. Students need to respect me'" (Staff, School 2). A few interviewees suggested that even people who were deeply invested in RJ might find that the emotional strain of an acute incident could spark "a struggle of our knee-jerk reaction" (Staff, School 3), tempting them to revert to ingrained habits of power and punishment,

A number of students explicitly named a desire for more egalitarian interactions with staff, however, indicating that they wanted adults to "listen more" and "show more respect." One student explained that the failure to do so was counterproductive:

> When you don't listen to us and you just say "No you're lying! Why'd you do that?!"…when you just automatically write us up, it gets us discouraged…that's where attitudes in class come. That's where things that [teachers] don't like come from. (Student, School 4)

Contrary to fears that RJ might diminish educator authority, this feedback suggests that greater staff respect for student views could *increase* student cooperation. Yet, study schools struggled with getting staff to relinquish sufficient control to engage fully in RJ. There were two promising strategies, however, to help staff "deprogram…from that frame of mind" (Staff, School 1): creating space for staff reflection and growth, and modeling more equitable relationships between leadership and staff.

Adult self-reflection. One promising strategy for shifting traditional school hierarchies was explicitly calling on adults and students to adhere to the same core values of RJ: perspective taking, active listening, learning from mistakes, and taking responsibility for one's actions, among others. One staff interviewee from School 1 explained, "We're hypocrites if we don't." This was a philosophical commitment, but it was also implemented quite practically, as some study schools asked staff to engage in many of the same activities and processes expected of students. For instance, one school held all staff meetings in circle; in another school, staff completed advisory exercises themselves before they rolled them out to students (e.g., socioemotional learning activities).

Staff interviewees especially underscored the importance of establishing a culture of introspection and growth among adults. One staff person explained how deep personal reflection laid a foundation for improving interactions with students and reducing conflict:

> Why did that [interaction with a student] bother me so much, what is it about me and my upbringing and my past, what underlying assumptions am I bringing to the work? I think it's that self-awareness quest, that journey where you reveal your own biases and your own assumptions and your own competing sort of emotional stuff going on. (Staff, School 5)

One strategy to encourage self-reflection was seen in School 1's "reality pedagogy working group," which was a designated forum for staff to examine the implications of having a largely white and/or middle-class staff teaching mostly students of color from poor and working-class backgrounds.

Staff voice and leadership listening. Similarly, it was seen as important that school leaders worked to transform workplace power dynamics with their staff, making room for staff perspectives to be heard. Rather than simply asking teachers to listen to student voices, some administrators modeled this behavior by listening to staff. For instance, one principal held a town hall meeting to give staff room to voice discontent when many disagreed with how a particular incident was handled, as they noted, "people need to feel heard, especially when [they are] most frustrated." This strategy may be particularly important in schools with less staff buy-in at the outset. More broadly, leadership support of staff was seen as elemental in building a more restorative culture schoolwide: "If staff ain't well, your clientele isn't well" (Staff, School 1). By engaging staff more equitably, these leaders also laid the groundwork for more equitable staff-student relationships.

Lesson 3. Moving beyond the punishment paradigm. Interviewees reported that some in their school communities considered RJ to be "soft," "coddling," or "enabling," and felt that RJ

failed to make students face consequences for their actions. Only a few interviewees self-reported such criticism; more commonly this was reported as a perceived concern of others, including some teachers who were less involved in RJ, and *primarily* attributed to SSAs and parents.[9] For instance, one SSA reflected upon when the school used RJ to address an experience they had with a student:

> I'm like, "Listen, this [student's physical behavior directed at me] is a serious offense. This can't be done." It's like let's make light of the situation…Nothing was done with the student…It was the excuse of "Well, you know restorative justice." I said, "Restorative justice is not used in that way. He needs to know what [he] did was wrong." Sometimes we do them a disservice and shielding them from the real world…not letting him know when he goes outside and he does that to a police officer, it might not be the same outcome. (SSA)

This SSA's comments echo concerns expressed by skeptics of RJ more broadly, including some of the other staff and parent interviewees: that RJ is too soft ("make light"), results in no consequences ("nothing was done"), does not change behavior, and does not prepare students for the harsh reality beyond the school building ("shielding them"). Interviewees suggested that this mistrust about RJ's capacity to hold actors responsible for their actions could be exacerbated by the relatively slow timeline of many RJ responses, questions about the appropriateness of second (and third and fourth) chances, and disagreement about whether punishment is itself a form of accountability. Some participants also described RJ critics within their school communities as wanting students to be suspended more often; yet, most of the study schools were struggling with determining the role of suspension, if any, in their schools. Based on interviewee experiences, two important strategies were identified for contending with such skepticism: first-hand exposure to RJ practices and enhanced communication about RJ responses in the school.

> ***Seeing is believing.*** Across study schools, participants emphasized that firsthand experience of restorative practices was pivotal in building understanding and endorsement of RJ in the school community. One staff person described this transformative experience:

> I remember our first circle [in a staff meeting]…That was really intense, actually. Really emotional. I think by that point everybody was on board with it. We felt this is actually a useful way even adult to adult. Even to engage each other in a way that's more constructive. (Staff, School 2)

Interviewees described how participating in circles or other RJ processes enhanced understanding of the intensive labor involved, and strengthened trust that RJ could improve relationships and reduce conflict. This view was reported by varied interviewees—teachers, students, parents, and even SSAs—including some who relayed that they had been skeptical of RJ approaches until experiencing an RJ practice firsthand.

> ***Communicating accountability.*** Interviewees generally reported frequent communication amongst key RJ staff, but a need to enhance communication between RJ staff and the broader school community. This was seen as key barrier to building trust in RJ because if there was insufficient follow-up about RJ responses—with students who witnessed an incident, or a referring

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[9] Some staff and family interviewees across schools expressed assumptions that parents generally used more punitive discipline at home and that RJ thus represented a 'culture clash'; given that this was primarily reported as a perceived sentiment of others, however, it is unclear if this was an accurate representation of parents in these school communities, or if this assumption might have been at least partially informed by race- or class-based stereotyping (see Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

staff member—it could diminish confidence that a situation was being addressed in good faith. Thus, improving communication could be a simple way to enhance confidence in RJ's integrity and foster buy-in. One staff person underscored how merely sharing information about the RJ work that was happening might be sufficient to increase trust in the process:

> People want to know that something's going to be addressed…When the teachers know what's happening, they feel better…I myself had an issue with a physical altercation in my class last year and I had no idea what they were doing to handle it. I was getting furious and then [once I learned what the RJ staff had been doing] I told them, I was like, "You did so much. I wish I had known this." (Staff, School 3)

This staff person illuminated a need to report on RJ work generally ("When then teachers know what's happening, they feel better") *and* specifically with those impacted by a given incident ("I had no idea what they were doing to handle it. I was getting furious"). Thus, broad information sharing could support a school-wide public relations campaign for RJ. But most critically, following up with impacted community members should be central to RJ accountability processes as a basic act of care and respect for those harmed. One practical barrier to such follow-up raised by multiple staff, however, was that school data systems were designed to record *punitive* disciplinary events, and required updating to better document multi-faceted RJ responses.

Lesson 4. Institutionalization via infrastructure and integration. With its emphasis on fostering empathy and addressing root causes of conflict, interviewees highlighted that RJ asks a great deal from already overtaxed educators. They explained that RJ required tiring emotional labor to build relationships and detect emerging student issues; substantial time to "cool down" or to conduct sometimes lengthy or multiple circles; and extensive non-academic supports, like counseling and mentoring. Staff reported that some may be hesitant to take on any additional responsibilities because they already felt the strain of insufficient time, energy, and resources to carry out their official duties. Compared to traditional punitive measures, RJ could feel burdensome—and there was no guarantee that the underlying issue would be resolved by the end of a given RJ response. In this context, staff described the allure of suspending students: "It is so much easier to suspend students in response to problematic behavior. It takes much less time" (Staff, School 4) and, "It does not work but it's quick" (Staff, School 2).

Many of these issues were entrenched, extending well-beyond these school communities—the result of increased privatization and under-resourcing of schools, high-stakes testing pressures, and devaluing of educators. Their RJ efforts were not immune to such challenges. But even amidst these hostile conditions, study schools were facilitating the institutionalization of RJ via key infrastructure (staffing, scheduling, space) and the integration of RJ into daily school life. This was described as a question of logistics, but also of values:

> If you designate the space, that means you value the initiative…if a principal of any school really cares about doing it…they need to also have things set up to really facilitate that happening. Not just say, 'Let's do circles' and not have the proper set up. (Staff, School 2)

This staff person highlighted how resource allocation and other administrator choices provided instrumental support, but also critical *emotional* support by signaling commitment to building an RJ culture. At the same time, imposing new structures and processes could be met with resistance; in School 5, for example, one staff person and the principal pointed to a lack of meeting culture as a barrier to engaging staff in new RJ efforts. As the principal explained, most staff "preferred things to

happen organically so [new] suggestions to formalize more practices and standards were getting pushback."

Another issue that arose at the nexus of values and logistics was the contested place of SSAs in schools. Some interviewees described an underlying institutional conflict between NYPD-employed SSAs and school personnel, citing divergent mandates, training, and authority. One staff person provided an example of how this culture clash could unfold, relaying a conflict with an SSA about how to handle a situation with a student:

> I said [to the SSA], 'You know what, please move away. I have it'…He didn't, and I asked him, I said, 'Why didn't you move away?' He said, 'Well, I'm taught not to leave a situation that I consider unsafe.' I said, 'I know but I was telling you that I had the student.' He was like, 'But the student was still yelling.' It's a very interesting line when you're dealing with agents who are trained in a very specific way. (Staff)[10]

Here, the staff person suggested that the SSA's presence—and the SSA's specific notion of safety (e.g., yelling signals a lack of safety)—impeded de-escalation. Other staff interviewees raised related concerns, such as the detrimental impact of having uniformed SSAs employed by the NYPD in the school building when many students have had traumatic experiences with police outside of school.

The exact methods of institutionalization varied across schools, but there were a few shared strategies: creating RJ staff teams; designating time and space for RJ; and integrating RJ throughout school life. While additional funding could radically expand the potential of such strategies, there were iterations of each strategy that required minimal additional resources.

Staffing: Not in it alone. A central strategy for institutionalizing RJ was to create or repurpose staff roles to be focused on RJ and community building (e.g., RJ coordinators). Some schools also developed 'add-on' RJ roles, such as designating one teacher per grade as a point person for coordinating RJ responses at the grade level. Critically, however, most schools assembled formal staff *teams* to share the logistical and emotional burden of coordinating and triaging RJ efforts, rather than relying on a single person. While the composition of RJ teams varied somewhat across schools, they included RJ coordinators, deans, guidance counselors, social workers, and occasionally principals or key CBO partners. In all instances, it was seen as critical that RJ staff received institutional support so these roles were not 'RJ in name only.'

Making room for RJ. Another widespread strategy was to incorporate restorative practices into the official schedule. For instance, all study schools had one or more of the following: weekly staff meetings for RJ preparation and processes; internal and external professional development on related topics; or RJ student leadership built into classes and clubs. Relatedly, most of the schools had designated spaces for circles, mediation, restorative conversations, or relationship building. In both instances, making temporal and physical space for RJ signaled that it was school priority.

Holistic integration of RJ. Most study schools integrated circle processes into regular activities outside of disciplinary settings, to some extent. Most frequently, this occurred in advisory, but also in other classes, staff meetings, school assemblies, freshman orientation, and family events. Such integration was perceived to support relationship building, but also to increase familiarity with the listening, sharing, and vulnerability that RJ demands. As one School 2 student described, "circles also are so ingrained into [our] culture, that as soon as you get here, as a freshman that's all you do.

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[10] As a stipulation for NYPD's participation in the study, it was agreed upon that SSAs would not be linked to particular schools in reports of findings due to concerns about maintaining anonymity.

Circles, circles, circles. It's kind of like second nature to us at this point." This familiarity was thought to then facilitate RJ responses during conflict situations when emotions were heightened.

Lesson 5. Confronting adversity, engaging diversity. Staff described the struggle of serving students who were facing substantial adversity on individual, familial, and community levels. Interviewees pointed to difficulties associated with economic insecurity; structural racism and other forms of bias; unstable housing; immigration concerns; family conflict; police surveillance and violence; mental health issues; criminal justice involvement; gang affiliation; neighborhood violence, and more. And these challenges are felt acutely in NYC, home to one of the highest rates of income disparity and some of the most segregated schools in the nation. While many of these stressors originated outside of the school walls, staff and students described how they seeped into their schools, catalyzing and amplifying school-based conflict. As one SSA explained, some students have "so much anger in them they don't know what to do, how to proceed, to let it out. So when they let it out, they let it out in frustration where they come out fighting little things."

All study schools were making concerted efforts to provide holistic services to students, even while recognizing the impossibility of addressing all student needs. These efforts fell into three main domains: providing mental health and other social supports; engaging in celebratory and difficult discussions about identity; and hiring staff who were culturally representative of the student body.

Extensive social supports. The study schools provided substantial resources to mitigate external stressors and foster student engagement, including counseling, mentoring, health clinics, unique academic opportunities, college preparation, among others. The schools generally had more internal support staff (e.g., social workers, guidance counselors) than is typical in NYC, but they also relied heavily on CBOs to fill gaps. All of these resources—but especially mental health supports—were seen as helping prevent and address school-based issues, ranging from chronic absenteeism to interpersonal conflict. And still, even in these relatively better-resourced contexts, staff interviewees felt like they were underequipped to adequately address student needs—particularly given the significant adversity many of their students were facing.

Engaging diversity: Space for celebrating, and for venting. Multiple staff and student interviewees described the importance of affirming student identities (e.g., race, sexuality, country of origin) by providing space for students to explore and honor their backgrounds. Interviewees described growing efforts to celebrate student cultures, such as a school-wide "heritage day" and curricula that emphasized hip-hop, black and Latinx leaders, and/or LGBTQ+ history.

On the other hand, some staff and student interviewees suggested that identity-affirmation efforts must also include making room for students to "vent" about personal experiences of marginalization and broader dynamics of structural oppression. This was a growth area for most of the schools, but a few had made a concerted effort to address pressing social issues (e.g., police violence, immigration policy) via schoolwide circles, class discussions, the arts, and, notably, the leadership of LGBTQ+ and Black Lives Matter student groups. But staff reported that schools had limited capacity and insufficient support to facilitate such "difficult conversations":

> The day after the [2016 presidential] election I felt like, 'Oh, my God I got to support the adults and support the kids and manage my own feelings about this.'…There's a lot of conversation in the DOE right now around equity and wanting schools to tackle subjects about race. Leaders need support in doing that. (Staff, School 2)

This staff person pointed to the internal and external demands placed upon schools to engage in such discussions, without requisite professional development in anti-racist and culturally-relevant pedagogy. Yet, such training was seen as key for enhancing student engagement, hosting discussions about racism and homophobia, and encouraging staff reflection about power dynamics on an individual level (e.g., personal bias and privilege) and an institutional level (e.g., biased policies).

Culturally representative staff. Interviewees also highlighted a need to hire more staff who were culturally representative of their students—resembling them with respect to race, class, and community ties. An administrator from School 5, which had a more racially diverse staff, explained:

> I tried to hire people who were of and from the community…there's a sort of intuitive…tacit knowledge that people have, based on the communities that they were born and raised in…Shared experience that we all bring to the work. (Staff, School 5)

Interviewees widely reported the belief that students saw culturally representative staff as more relatable and trustworthy—making them better able to connect with and support students.

In School 4, a few staff and parents pointed specifically to staff demographics as a barrier to family buy-in, with a majority white staff teaching predominantly black and Latinx students, in a largely black and Latinx working-class neighborhood facing significant gentrification. One parent described some of the benefits of recent school efforts to hire more staff of color:

> When we first arrived here, [the teachers] did not look like our students; and in the past few years, you see that they've added more and more people of color, more men, which is really really important…. Most of us culturally are not raised to speak to, call adults by their first names. After hearing an explanation from a faculty member [of color] as to why they've chosen to have that type of relationship, where the children are able to call them by their first names, I understood it more. (Parent, School 4)

This parent pointed to the challenge of changing school culture generally, and particularly doing so across racial lines. The parent suggested that they felt greater willingness to move away from long-held beliefs—in this case, how one shows respect to elders—when accompanied and encouraged by a staff person who shared an aspect of their cultural identity, like race. School 5 had already identified culturally representative staffing as a strength, but interviewees from Schools 1 through 4 named this as an important area for growth, wanting to hire more teachers with race and class identities similar to those of their student bodies. Notably, however, paraprofessionals and SSAs were seen as having more in common with their students—i.e., almost exclusively people of color, more likely to be from similar neighborhoods, with children who attended similar schools.

Lesson 6. "We've got this": Student leadership in RJ. Student leadership was seen as one of the most effective ways to promote student buy-in and foster restorative processes. In many ways, RJ and student leadership were seen as a positive feedback loop, as RJ simultaneously relied upon and enhanced student voice, agency, and community investment. Key strategies identified across study schools in this realm included creating official student leadership roles in RJ, and supporting organic, emergent student leadership.

Official student roles in RJ. As described previously, all but one of the study schools had explicit student leadership roles in which students played a critical role in "staffing" RJ. For instance, Schools 2, 3, and 4 had student-led community-building circles and some peer mentorship. With respect to conflict resolution, Schools 3 and 5 had peer mediation programs, in which trained students were neutral third parties in mediating disputes among students in conflict. School 3 also

had a youth court, in which students were trained to act as judges, advocates for the harmed and responsible parties, and jury members. Incidents could be referred to the court and if all parties agreed, the court would hear the 'case' and issue sanctions intended to restore harm to individuals or the school community (e.g., community service within the school, apology letters, or sessions with a social worker).[11] A number of the student leadership efforts included class-based learning about RJ for involved students, as in RJ-focused advisories, a peer mediation class, or a leadership class. In another model, Youth Court was run as a school club during lunch period.

Interviewees largely attributed the success of student-led RJ to shared experience. As one School 5 student noted, peer mediation "makes students feel more safe because they're actually talking to somebody who understands the struggle of being a student." A staff interviewee suggested that this relatability might also increase feelings of peer accountability, enhancing the efficacy of RJ:

> I've seen, as a teacher, that the most effective moments of recognition for students
> or moments of change come when their peers are the impetus, so when your peers
> say that's not okay…Your peers I think are more motivating for you than an adult.
> (Staff, School 3)

In addition, student RJ leadership was seen as aiding broader student buy-in, via informal peer education about RJ and more widespread integration of RJ. Notably, some structured programs (e.g., RJ advisories, leadership class) actively recruited students with disciplinary records, moving beyond stereotypical notions about who could or should be student leaders. This practice was seen as directly increasing RJ's efficacy via enhanced relatability, with ripple effects for student self-esteem; as one School 4 student explained, "they see the leaders in us that we didn't see in ourselves."

Supporting organic student leadership. Multiple schools also reported that student-initiated efforts shifted school culture. LGBTQ+ student groups in particular played a key role in creating identity-affirming spaces and propelling new norms of mutual respect (e.g., educating staff and students about hate speech). In one school, a Black Lives Matter student group staged a sit-in after feeling disregarded by staff, proffering a list of demands. In these cases, study schools were reportedly receptive of and responsive to student activism. In addition, School 2 and 4 interviewees reported that students were increasingly initiating conflict prevention and resolution: seeking staff support for themselves or others, asking to have a circle, or even leading informal and impromptu peer mediations. One School 4 student explained: "a lot of things that would normally just rush to teachers…is really not happening as often. Where it is like, boom, it got to a student and somebody is taking charge." These examples demonstrate how the combined effect of integrating RJ practices and greater student empowerment made these school communities increasingly resilient in the face of conflict.

Discussion

These five school communities were striving to build restorative cultures amidst uncertain conditions: a shifting national landscape for school discipline policy; insufficient and unstable funding for RJ staffing, training, and supportive resources; and, the seemingly intractable structural challenges facing many students in urban centers—especially low-income youth of color. This uncertainty shapes the dilemmas described in this paper, but it also underscores the necessity and promise of whole-school approaches to RJ. Our findings affirm the importance of implementing RJ

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[11] There is some debate about if youth courts qualify as an RJ practice, given that it is modeled on adversarial court procedures; this school, however, described their youth court as being in line with an RJ framework.

as a holistic framework to relationship building and conflict resolution that extends well beyond specific disciplinary incidents and is integrated into the broader workings of the school. The breadth and depth of the key implementation lessons—centering community building, reconsidering school hierarchies, crafting comprehensive notions of accountability, integrating restorative practices throughout school life, engaging with adversity and diversity, and fostering student leadership— describe a cultural shift, rather than the implementation of a contained program. While interviewees identified specific restorative practices as important, their efficacy was perceived as dependent on the broader constellation of cultural changes in the school community, consistent with the findings of other important research on RJ (Fronius et al., 2019; González, 2015b).

The findings of this study are limited in a few important ways. First, the case studies focused on a small number of NYC public schools which were actively engaged in RJ and related practices, had relatively small student bodies, and had principals who agreed to participate. Thus, the experiences of these school communities may not be generalizable to other schools in NYC or beyond—particularly larger schools and schools where the administration may be resistant or even hostile to RJ. Furthermore, these findings are based on self-report data from a subset of school staff, students, parents, and SSAs in these schools, with a focus on those most familiar with RJ and related practices. As such, their perspectives do not necessarily represent the full range of opinions of their broader school communities. At the same time, the collective experiences of these interviewees hold important lessons about the challenges of RJ implementation and strategies for overcoming them.

While this study focused on school-level approaches to RJ, there are important implications for how district leaders and policymakers can foster environments conducive to restorative school cultures. On the most basic level, top-down calls for school-based RJ cannot amount to 'unfunded mandates.' This study affirms other research findings (see Fronius et al., 2019) that schoolwide RJ is enriching but resource-intensive work, and must be adequately supported with staffing, training, and social supports; as Lesson 4 suggests, this is a practical matter but it also signals to school administrators that RJ is indeed a district priority.

Our study also underscores that truly restorative cultures must be intersectional by design, attending to how identity, power, and privilege shape staff and student lives within and beyond the school building. Interviewees described engagement with diversity and adversity as instrumental in building holistic safety and effective RJ practices, pointing specifically to culturally representative staffing; staff training in anti-racism, anti-bias, and culturally-relevant pedagogy; open discussions about racism; wrap-around social supports for students; and, student-led efforts to change norms about homophobic speech. These strategies are resonant with what Wadhwa calls *critical* restorative justice. Building on the work of others skeptical of 'repairing harm' within institutions which continue to cause systemic harm (Meiners, 2019), Wadhwa has described school-based RJ as *critical* when schools not only try to change individual student behavior, but also seek to transform policies and institutions that do harm to young people and maintain inequity—like the school-to-prison-pipeline (2016). In her account, a central component of critical RJ is staff commitment to personally engage in critical analysis of their lives in the context of structures that shape them, and to cultivate the capacity of their students to do the same—and, hopefully, inspire them to act.

These findings resonate with a broader push in the RJ field to explicitly and vigorously promote racial justice (Davis, Lyubansky, & Schiff, 2015; González, 2015a). In education, there is great urgency in such calls, with persistent and even growing racial disparities in the use of suspension, even as overall suspension rates have declined. Furthermore, some studies have documented racial disparities in *access* to school discipline reforms, finding that schools with a higher proportion of students of color are less likely to implement policies intended to decrease suspension or promote RJ (Anderson, 2018; Payne & Welch, 2018). This research underscores why it is

necessary for district leaders and education policymakers to pursue structural change alongside the vital interpersonal work underway in schools. In this vein, Gregory, Skiba, and Mediratta (2017) have argued for "culturally conscious implementation" of initiatives to reduce discipline disparities to ensure such efforts do not simply reproduce the injustices they intend to interrupt. With respect to RJ, recent scholarship supports integrating RJ approaches with principles of culturally-relevant education and explicitly linking RJ with anti-racist and anti-bias training as a matter of policy (Davis, 2019; Lustick, 2017a).

Alongside such structural analysis, school communities must also interrogate staff-student power dynamics to cultivate a more genuinely democratic RJ culture across the school hierarchy (González et al., 2019). On the one hand, this calls for enhanced student voice, agency, and leadership in RJ and beyond; on the other, it requires adult self-reflection and growth. In both instances, honesty and vulnerability must be seen as a strength, rather than a weakness—a cultural shift that must go hand-in-hand with intentional community building and interpersonal support for students and staff. As study interviewees reported that shifting staff-student power dynamics was an ongoing struggle, teacher education programs might be a strategic site of intervention to spur wide-reaching cultural change. For instance, Winn (2016) argues that a "restorative teacher education" could simultaneously dislodge punitive paradigms of discipline and build the capacity of educators to foster community and critical dialogue with students and their families. And, as two recent studies have found that black staff are heavily relied upon to do the emotional labor of both punitive and restorative school discipline (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Lustick, 2017b), such a broad intervention might have additive racial equity implications for educators; this area warrants further research.

On a more granular level, there is some evidence that RJ practices might improve student-teacher dynamics; in a recent study, Gregory and colleagues (2016) found that students felt more respected by their teachers when they perceived their teachers to be using restorative practices. In conjunction with our findings, this research highlights the mutually reinforcing nature of RJ, student-teacher relationships, and student agency. This question of navigating youth leadership and adult authority is not only playing out in these five schools, but across the country in the aftermath of the 2018 Parkland, Florida school shooting. While policymakers, educators, and law enforcement debate the merits of gun control and arming teachers, youth activists from Parkland to Chicago—where youth of color have long been organizing against gun violence and police brutality—have mobilized a nationwide student movement, demanding that young people have a say in determining equitable safety solutions within their schools and in policy.

Finally, it is critical that the impacts of school-based RJ initiatives are evaluated within this broader context. In these case studies, the perceived outcomes were substantial, reaching far beyond any particular disciplinary event: improved relationships, increased student leadership, enhanced empathy, greater feelings of physical and emotional safety, and so on. Thus, researchers and policymakers must expand beyond measures of punitive discipline (e.g., suspension numbers) and adopt a 'wide lens' of evaluation to document holistic RJ cultural shifts. Evaluation must account for the timeline of such culture change—some research suggests up to seven years (González et al., 2019), and analyze relevant funding, staffing, and political conditions. Critical participatory evaluation may be particularly well-suited for understanding RJ implementation and impact, analyzing sociohistorical contexts and centering the participation, expertise, and goals of those most impacted by school discipline policy: students, their families, and school staff (Fine, 2010). Furthermore, critical participatory action research can be a valuable tool in crafting education policy in line with a restorative ethos, as a mechanism for RJ policy and policymakers to be more accountable to the school communities that they serve (Sandwick et al., 2018).

Acknowledgements

Funding

Note

The opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this article are those of the authors and not those any of the study participants, the individuals or organizations represented on the advisory board, nor the author's past and present employers. None of these entities assumes liability for its contents or use thereof.

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