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## Using Restorative Practices to Reduce Racially Disproportionate School Suspensions: The Barriers School Leaders Should Consider During the First Year of Implementation

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## Using Restorative Practices to Reduce Racially Disproportionate School Suspensions: The Barriers School Leaders Should Consider During the First Year of Implementation

*Andrea A. Joseph, Rebecca Hnilica, & Mary Hansen*

### **Abstract**

This case-study investigates the educator and school-level factors that maintained discipline disparities in a school implementing restorative practices. Using ecological systems theory and critical race theory, we ask, how does Meadowbrook High School use restorative practices to address discipline? Also, what factors influence the way restorative practices were implemented? Data were derived from observations, interviews, suspension data, and artifacts at an urban public high school in Pennsylvania. Findings suggest that there was a pervasive punitive discipline ethos, that a chaotic discipline system created a pipeline to suspension, and discipline inequities maintained the discipline gap. Ultimately, we describe how punitive policies disrupted the core relationship development tenets of restorative practices and sustained racially disproportional suspensions. We suggest that school leaders must reject color-blind discipline practices and instead engage in culturally responsive leadership. School leadership plays a vital role in the success of restorative practices. However, the transformative elements of restorative practices cannot be realized when punitive and inequitable practices persist.

*Keywords:* Suspension, disproportionality, discipline gap, restorative practice, punitive, policies

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### Introduction

Restorative practices in schools have been introduced to improve school climate and mitigate the problem of high and disproportional school suspensions (Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz 2016; Lewis, 2009; Welsh & Little, 2018). With central features of relationship building and increasing mutual understanding, schools have also employed restorative practices to disrupt the structural and interpersonal factors that lead to the school-to-prison pipeline and other exclusionary discipline practices along the lines of race, ability and economic status. Effective at reducing the number of suspensions, restorative practices in schools have not been able to consistently reduce discipline disproportionality (Gregory et al., 2014; Skiba, 2015; Simson, 2012). Guided by ecological systems theory and critical race theory, we propose that practice and policy barriers limit the potential and success of restorative practices and therefore maintain discipline disparities. In this study, we asked, (1) how does ‘Meadowbrook High School’ use restorative practices to address discipline and (2) what factors influence the way restorative practices were implemented? Using mixed-methods, we identified barriers to implementation which include punitive discipline dispositions, the parallel and conflicting practices of punitive and restorative practices, and implementation inconsistencies which facilitate discipline inequity. School leaders interested in avoiding barriers during early implementation should consider the potential for these barriers in their school to evade poor fidelity and inequitable practices.

### Background

Exclusionary punitive disciplinary practices, like detention and suspension, have come under scrutiny as research shows exclusionary practices lead to poor academic performance, drop-out, and juvenile justice involvement (Edelman, Beck, & Smith, 1975; Mendez, 2003; Skiba, 2015). Additionally, students from low-income backgrounds (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), students with special education needs (Brobbe, 2018; Losen, Hodson, & Martinez, 2014) and students of color (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008) have been disproportionately excluded for subjective behaviors (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Hanson, 2005; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). These trends have created significant academic, socio-emotional, and life-course outcomes for students which have garnered a call for change.

In response to the nation-wide increase in school suspensions and disproportionate discipline practices, federal and state level initiatives supported the use of comprehensive and multi-tiered school-wide intervention initiatives (USDOE, 2014). These have included school-wide behavioral intervention supports (SWP-BIS) and restorative justice practices (USDOE, 2014). While often race-neutral, studies suggest that these school-wide interventions can address issues of inequality and are designed to respond to school-level or individualized student needs (Skiba,

2015; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Department of Education and Department of Justice have since provided funding to improve school climate through ‘tiered supports’ such as restorative practices (DOE, 2014, p.5); however, the extent to which schools implement these interventions equitably and with fidelity is less known.

This study examined how restorative practices were implemented at a case-study high school by investigating the impact of individual and school-level factors on school discipline within the first year of restorative practices implementation at a high school. Using mixed-methods, data include interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, school artifacts, and suspension data. Findings support that school leaders should (1) avoid the parallel implementation of punitive practice alongside restorative practices, (2) examine policies that can create discipline inconsistency in discipline practices, and (3) address the way these inconsistencies can lead to racialized discipline outcomes. We present the literature on school suspension disproportionality and the history and current use of restorative practices in schools. Subsequently, we describe considerations for school leaders with regards to discipline practices and intervention implementation. Next, we couch the extant literature on disproportionality and restorative practices outcomes in ecological systems theory and critical race theory and discuss our use of mixed-methods to understand individual and systems level contributors to discipline disparities. Finally, we provide our findings summed into three themes and conclude with a discussion of these findings within a school leadership context.

### Literature Review

Restorative practices derive from restorative justice which has been linked to indigenous groups such as the Maori tribes of New Zealand or more generally native communities of the South Pacific and the Americas (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburger, Hurler, Petrosino, 2016; Gumz & Grant, 2009). These practices have since been adapted to respond to offender and victim dynamics in various criminal justice systems (Gums & Grant, 2009), to remediate disruptive behavior issues in schools, and/or put practices into motion that can help reduce inequitable discipline practices. Our review of the literature describes the facilitation of restorative practices in its past and its present school context to examine how it both influences school practices and has been stymied by contrasting policies and practices. To counter on-going inequitable and punitive discipline policies and practices that hinder restorative practices, we outline recommendations in the literature for principal supervision and culturally responsive school leadership.

Rooted in indigenous practices, restorative practices were used to respond to wrongdoing between one party to another (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014; Wearmouth, et al., 2007) and focused on the problem versus centering blame on the individual (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003). Unlike Western discipline practices that center retribution and punishment (Mul-

ligan, 2009), restorative practices foster relationship development and restoration through mediation, respect, and the repairing harm (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014; Wearmouth, Mckinney, and Glynn, 2007). Practices focused on relational interactions such as greetings, group rules, dialogue, and included multiple perspectives (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2005; Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003). Practices to address the harm experienced also included an assessment of when and how it took place, how many people were impacted, developing collective steps to heal from the harm, and reflecting on the collective process (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2003). Attributes of restorative justice were first applied in legal systems within Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, South Africa, countries throughout Western Europe, and the United States (Gums & Grant, 2009; Burkemper, Balsam, & Yeh, 2007).

Most recently, restorative practices have been transformed into school-based multi-tiered interventions that provide alternatives to punitive practices such as suspensions and zero-tolerance policies (Teasley, 2014). As a multi-tiered intervention, the relationship development capacities of restorative practices can include affective language, mediation through conferences with educators and parents, and community building circle conversations in the classroom (Costello, Wachtel, Wachtel, 2009). When implemented comprehensively, restorative practices have many benefits including improved climate and safety, increased school connectedness, the development of conflict resolution skills, improved academic performance and social emotional learning (González, Sattler, & Buth, 2018). These benefits have led schools to utilize restorative practices to improve student-teacher relationships and increase mutual understanding which can work together to reduce disparate discipline outcomes (Welsh & Little, 2018; Gregory, Clawson, Davis and Gerewitz 2016; Lewis, 2009).

### ***Restorative Practice and School Suspensions***

The psycho-social and improved school climate benefits have led many schools to utilize restorative practices as a means to significantly reduce overall school suspensions (Welsh & Little, 2018; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz 2016; Lewis, 2009). In one urban school setting, administrators and teachers reported that restorative practices improved student attitudes, analytic skills, ability to apologize, and created a stronger academic culture versus an environment of punishment (Lewis, 2009). These improvements were also associated with a significant decline in violent acts (Lewis, 2009). Similar psycho-social affects were found within a school using the IIRP's Safer Saner Schools® restorative practices model. Student survey results across 29 high school classrooms revealed that the use of restorative practices were associated with positive teacher-student relationships and a reduction in discipline referrals compared to teachers not using restorative practices (Gregory, Clawson, Davis & Gerewitz, 2016).

At the district level, a randomized control trial displayed reduction of overall and racially disproportional school suspensions for elementary school students (Augustine et al., 2018). Despite indication that restorative practices can reduce disproportionality, this has remained largely inconsistent across studies or has been associated with negative academic outcomes (Augustine et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018; Lustick, 2017; Anyon et al. 2016; Achilles et al., 2007). In a large urban district that adopted restorative alternatives to suspension, students who received the alternative in one term were less likely to receive a referral in the subsequent term (Anyon, et al., 2016). While this finding was present among all students across race, Black students remain disproportionately suspended (Anyon et al., 2016). Likewise, schools in Los Angeles implementing restorative justice had a significant drop in suspension rates, but racial disparities persisted (Hashim et al., 2018). One possible cause for these persistent disparities is the use of ahistorical and colorblind intervention to approach a racialized issue. Lustick (2017) argues that the same misunderstandings that exist with traditional forms of discipline carry-over through new interventions making anti-racist and cross-cultural tools all the more relevant to address racial disproportionality. Therefore, administrators implementing discipline related interventions should engage with and support teachers with opportunities for anti-bias and culturally responsive training that can enhance reflexivity, awareness and the development of culturally responsiveness practices.

### ***School Leadership and Restorative Practices***

School leaders are central in upholding social justice philosophies (Berkovich, 2014) and should provide relevant training and interventions that respond to inequities within their school (Dantley & Tillman, 2006). Theoharis (2007) defines social justice in school leadership suggesting that leaders should attend to inequities across “race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalized conditions” (p. 221). Pursuant to this definition, administrators must embrace an equity framework for discipline (DeMatthews, 2016) and consider the role of educator racial and discipline dispositions, education policy, and overall school climate.

The non-hierarchical relationship and community building capacities of restorative justice allow school leaders to use restorative practices as an initiative of social justice. However, failure to identify entrenched barriers such as colorblind beliefs, punitive practices, and zero-tolerance policies contradict the relationship building philosophies of restorative justice (Buckmaster, 2016) and instead maintain a neoliberal and retributive discipline status quo. Ispa-Landa (2017) explains that punitive discipline practices, racial bias and limited classroom management skills can contribute to racial discipline disparities even in schools using discipline reform interventions. Therefore, administrators seeking to reduce discipline disparities must provide transformative and culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL).

CRSL pertains to the environment and curricula that correspond to the academic, cultural, and socio-emotional needs of students (Khalifa, Gooden & Davis, 2016). Therefore, school leaders should critique beliefs and practices that subjugate students of color and instead “identify, protect, institutionalize, and celebrate their cultural practices” (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016, p.1278). Furthermore, school leadership is central in all school reform efforts and is needed to improve buy-in and encourage adherence to an intervention (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In a study examining the salience of school leadership on restorative practices, results suggest that a principal’s supervision was the only significant predictor of a teacher’s engagement with the intervention (Payne and Welch, 2013). Therefore, both principal supervision and culturally responsive school leadership are essential for the successful implementation of a social justice pursuit of restorative practices. To frame the various policy, educator and student-level factors that influence the implementation of restorative practices, this study uses ecological systems theory and critical race theory to make sense of discipline outcomes at a case-study high school.

### **Theory**

Ecological systems theory (EST) and critical race theory (CRT) are used as analytic frameworks in this study to examine the impact of micro and macro influences as well as social constructions of race on a school’s discipline practices. EST is used to understand how student behavior, teacher discipline practices, policy and restorative practices interact and influence school discipline outcomes. We also use CRT to contextualize discipline trends and restorative practices by framing how discipline outcomes become racialized. Together both theories are used to frame our examination of one school’s use of restorative practices to uphold more equitable discipline practices.

**Ecological Systems Theory.** Ecological systems theory describes schools as open social systems influenced by larger social, economic, and political spheres (Greene, 2008; Rothery, 2008). EST is also used to frame the external influences on the behaviors of people within an organization (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rothery, 2008; Siporin, 1980). Applied to school discipline trends, we use EST to focus on individual practices (micro), discipline policies (macro) and/or situate how both interact to influence behaviors that lead to inequitable discipline outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rothery, 2008). EST derives from general systems theory and positions that schools are a type of organization guided by specific rules of order; yet, the school space is also influenced by seemingly unpredictable individual interactions (Greene, 2008; Siporin, 1980). Specifically, students and educators create the school context as much and the school context simultaneously influences them (Rothery, 2008). However, power relations (i.e., Teacher-to-student) also influence individual behaviors and equally influence the school discipline

environment and subsequent discipline trends (Bourdieu, 1984; Garrett, 2007; Houston, 2002).

As employees of an open social system, school leaders contend with external policy demands and community expectations that influence their decision making (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Greene, 2008; Rothery, 2008). Ball (2003) presents that the pressures from policy requirements are on-going and form a state of ‘calculation’ within schools (p. 215). Such calculability is exemplified in research that details how high-stakes testing in schools significantly predicts the suspension of academically underperforming students (Figlio, 2012). While high-stakes testing associated with the *No Child Left Behind Act* were intended to create school accountability and improved academic outcomes, policy pressures contributed to the ‘test, punish, and push out’ phenomenon in these schools (American Civil Liberties Union of Florida et al., 2011). Attempts to introduce new school-wide interventions such as restorative practices must also account for the pressures and demands associated with existing policies. If schools engage in restorative practices but do not remove or reconfigure the disciplinary policies and practices that compete with it, the chances for successful implementation are diminish. Consequently, marginalized students will remain disproportionately disciplined which will counter an administrator’s aim to model social justice leadership.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT).** Critical race scholars describe the persistence of racism and how it permeates systems and policies in normative ways (Gillborn, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT espouses but is not limited to six core tenets which include: (1) racism as endemic, (2) race as a social construct—society’s development of racial categories and the normalization of racial privileges and oppression, (3) interest convergence—how oppressed groups experience justice or more equitable practices when it also benefits the dominant group, (4) differential racialization—that the construction of one’s racial group changes based on the needs of the dominant group (i.e., Irish ethnic incorporation into White racial identity), (5) intersectionality—the way identities intersect and interact to create nested layers of oppression, and (6) the counter-story—a means to center the experiential knowledge of people of color in order to disrupt the narratives intended to malign them (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Freeman, 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989).

Together, these CRT tenets have been used to underscore the importance of a theoretical space to disrupt the often illusive influence of hegemonic whiteness on disparate education outcomes (Kyeré, Joseph, & Wei, 2018). Drawing on these tenets, CRT scholars also employ the concepts of whiteness as property and the critique of liberalism. We apply the tenet whiteness as property to theorize how racially disproportional discipline is a product of the way students of color are viewed through a Eurocentric cultural capital lens. We also use the critique of liberalism to extrapolate the way neutrality in policy is upheld as a success standard



that covertly empowers colorblind practices that continue to marginalize students of color (Cook, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995). Therefore, whiteness as property is used to outline how White cultural capital becomes a benchmark that safeguards some White students from assumed misbehavior while demonizing students of color who do not exhibit it (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004; Harris, 1993).

In schools, this safeguarding has been represented in racialized academic tracking (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) and tests normed on White middle-class populations; together, these concepts reflect the “whiteness of evaluation paradigms” (Moore, 2005, pp. 172-173). Similarly, whiteness as property can protect White students from the “disciplinary gaze” (Raible & Irizarry, 2010, p.1197). The disciplinary gaze refers to the default surveillance of Black and Brown students whose behaviors may not reflect White middle-class norms. Therefore, discipline studies controlling for income show that Black students remain disproportionately suspended compared to their White counterparts (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Wallace et al., 2008). Other studies also detail that students of color are more likely to be suspended for behaviors their White peers received lesser sanctions (Skiba, Shure & Williams, 2011; Figlio, 2006). As such, we use the tenet whiteness as property to make sense of the way discipline disparities can prevail even within a school applying restorative practices.

In all, discipline practices and intervention implementation do not occur in neutral environments. Instead, embedded racialized assumptions are intertwined in policies and discipline dispositions which influence policy and intervention enactment and negates a social justice framework. To adequately examine the impact of restorative practices on discipline disparities, theories that capture system-level and interpersonal level influences are necessary.

### Methods

In this study, we investigated how one urban high school attempted to improve discipline outcomes by using the *Safer Saner Schools*® restorative practices model in the 2015-2016 academic year. The case-study high school, hereinafter referred to as Meadowbrook High School, implemented restorative practices to improve school climate and address high and racially disproportional school suspensions. The *Safer Saner Schools*® model for restorative practices is designed by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). Two fundamental guiding principles used by the IIRP are the notions of “moving beyond shame” and the *fundamental hypothesis* that restorative justice is orchestrated by strategies of supportive pressure (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2014, p. 11). By moving beyond shame, the IIRP model is created to assist individuals with admitting their wrongdoing, which consequently serves as supportive pressure to enhance mutual understanding and reduce unwanted discipline outcomes. Features of the model observed for this study include but were not

limited to teacher and student trainings, IIRP coach consultations and meetings, affective statements and questions, responsive circles, conferences and re-entry circles. Consequently, this mixed-methods case-study asks (1) how do educators at 'Meadowbrook High School' use restorative practices to address discipline and (2) what factors influence the way restorative practices are implemented? Data derive from a larger randomized control trial study of which an author from this paper was a liaison. Data for this paper include classroom observations (n=37), interviews with teachers, staff and administrators (n=11) and pre/post intervention suspension data. Further, school-based artifacts such as the student code-of-conduct handbook and classroom and hallway behavioral posters were included in analysis to support triangulation.

In order to collect contextual data and engage analysis that could lend to thick description for trustworthy results, we led with a qualitative priority (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007). This approach is used to collect nuanced data that capture the daily minutia associated with the discipline overrepresentation of students of color. We also use critical race ethnography (CRE) to center race in data collection and analysis (Duncan, 2002a; 2002b). This approach allows for a more comprehensive assessment of racialized discipline outcomes and how policy and practices influence school suspensions. As such, we recorded our perceptions of race, ethnicity and complexion in observation. We also collected participant's disclosed race and ethnicity in interviews and made observations about racial disproportionality guided by critical race theory.

**Recruitment and Sample Characteristics.** Meadowbrook High School is a large urban public school in a mid-sized northeastern state. Study recruitment began with a request for participation email sent to all teachers. This recruitment effort yielded zero responses which then lead to the use of purposive sampling. Specifically, one author was provided with a list of staff actively using restorative practices by a school leader. After sending a request for participation email to these specific staff members, 7 teachers participated in the study for classroom observation. Of these 7, two participants were lost due to attrition. Subsequently, five teachers (3 females, 2 males) were observed over a 7-month period for a total of thirty-seven classroom observations. After five months of observations, request for interview participation emails were sent to teachers, administrators, the school social worker and other staff. In total, 10 individual interviews and one focus group was conducted with 12 participants which included 6 females, 6 males, and 5 people of color.

### ***The Case-Study School***

Of students enrolled at Meadowbrook High School (n=1,518) during the 2015-2016 academic year, 373 unique student suspensions were given during the intervention year (Table 2.). Black students (n= 621) accounted for 40% of students enrolled, White students (n= 550) made up 36%, while students of other

racial and ethnic groups (n=347; i.e. Latinx, Asian, and Multi-racial; grouped for small cell size to prevent RRI inflation) accounted for 23% of students enrolled. Black students held the highest suspension risk percentages with Black males at 36%, Black females at 30%, White males at 21%, White females at 15%, other males at 25%, and other females at 13% risk for suspension (Table 2.). Pre-intervention enrollment and suspension data were compared with intervention-year enrollment and suspension data to assess differences in discipline outcomes.

### **Procedure and Analysis**

Data from classroom observations were collected through jottings which are “bits of talk and action” that were expanded into contextualized fieldnotes (Emmerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p.31). Specific attention was given to the facilitation of restorative practice circles, pre/post circle behaviors, and educator discipline enactment. As such, jottings were turned into fieldnotes that described behaviors and dialogue related to the school environment, discipline, and policy. In addition to fieldnotes, semi-structured interviews were used to gather self-reported experiences of teachers, administrators and a school social worker. Questions were open-ended and the interview remained flexible to allow for new questions that emerged based on information provided by the interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Horton, Macve, & Struyvwen, 2004). The interview protocol included 14 constructs with questions pertaining to the participant’s position, restorative practices training, restorative practices support, professional learning groups, specific restorative justice practices, buy-in, barriers and facilitators, and sustainability. Interview times ranged from 30-90 minutes and were recorded and conducted in a private space selected by the participant. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### **Analysis**

Qualitative analysis was conducted using NVIVO in which a hierarchical linear coding approach was used to develop parent and child codes (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Four rounds of coding were carried out in an iterative process between the data, literature and memo writing (Bazeley, 2013). Emergent themes indicated that (1) restorative practices ran parallel to punitive practices, (2) chaotic discipline practices created a detention to suspension pipeline, and (3) that the chaos in discipline allowed for inequitable and colorblind application of discipline practices. Steps to safeguard validity for the creation of trustworthy findings were taken at each stage of this study. Siccama and Penna (2008) recommend the following strategies to ensure validity: interview recording and verbatim transcription, following interview protocols, use of open-ended questions, and using member checks. Each of these steps were taken in addition to systematic coding procedures and data triangulation.

Triangulation also took the form of confirming observed discipline trends through quantitative analysis. Suspension data were parsed from school attendance

data which became the basis for risk ratios calculations across race and gender. To examine the presence of disproportionality, a relative risk index was calculated across race and gender for each student group to compare suspension risk between the pre-intervention to the intervention year. This measure, used by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, identifies relative risk ratios as a valid measure of disproportionality (Tobin & Vincent, 2011). Further, a variable for unique suspensions was computed to represent the number of students who had received at least one suspension in order to control for inflation related to multiple suspensions. Smaller racial groups were combined as Roy (2012) cautions statistical interpretation of small numerators. To calculate a risk ratio for each race and gender category, risk percentages for one group was divided by the risk percentage of all other students suspended (Roy, 2012). Risk ratio's greater than 1 were used to indicate whether the specific student group was disproportionately suspended.

### **Limitations**

Findings in this study represent the first year of a three-year study on restorative practices at a case-study school. The authors recognize that change in discipline outcomes and school environment may take 3-5 years to detect. Finally, the authors had IRB approval for the parameters of this study, but did not have IRB clearance to interview students which prevented direct data collection with students about restorative practices. Nonetheless, this study adds to the literature by detailing the individual and school-level barriers school leaders must consider when implementing a new intervention.

### **Findings**

Guided by ecological systems theory and critical race theory, findings highlight how practice and policy barriers impeded on the restorative philosophies administrators attempted to implement. Themes indicate that (1) restorative practices ran parallel to punitive practices, (2) that chaotic discipline practices created a detention to suspension pipeline, and (3) that the chaos in discipline allowed for inequitable and colorblind application of discipline practices. Ultimately, this fostered the overrepresentation of students of color in detention and suspension outcomes despite the school's commitment to the creation of a more restorative school space. These findings highlight how schools are open social systems that are readily permeated by social constructions of punishment and race.

#### ***Parallel Practices:***

#### ***Navigating a Punitive Discipline Ethos Within Restorative Justice Practices***

During the first year of restorative practices implementation, administrators and educators worked together to develop alternatives to school suspensions. This

process was in-line with the district's goal of reducing school suspensions and disproportionality. Ms. Gold one of five school leaders, described the difficulty in doing this:

I just want more ideas, especially for our alternative consequences. I do believe that when a child does something they deserve a consequence—but what are some alternative ones? It doesn't always have to be suspension, but what are some things that we can do that can be more purposeful?

Likewise, Ms. Holdsmith, also a school leader, described the process of negotiating between restorative practices and punitive discipline methods saying, "I just believe that not all students should just be given a suspension, it should be just more differentiated... just like with instruction." She identified the need for student centered practices saying: "... students being able to have a voice and being heard is what's most important here." This corresponds with restorative practices which often involves meetings, circles, and conferences to discuss the impact of some behavior or event. Even when school suspensions are inevitable due to policies on fighting, re-entry circles were used to reintegrate a student back into the community post-suspension. When asked how frequently the school was using the re-entry circle for suspended students, Ms. Holdsmith answered, "Every time now." Mr. Barnes, an administrator confirmed this describing the on-going use of the re-entry process:

...when they come back, we're trying to figure out a way to work with their parent and the student to try to restore that. So, it's like adding another layer to it as opposed to just coming back and giving them a readmit.

Similarly, throughout year one of the intervention, several school leaders and educators displayed buy-in and attempted to include non-punitive alternatives. Ms. Holdsmith described student centered alternatives saying,

So, we always like to ask the students what they think they need to do to fix things or to be successful in a sense after they messed up... There's different things available, we have...dialogue(s), conferences, but I also have sort of like an essay. ... if I think they were sincere I go over that with them, and if they break their commitment then they would return to be on say our Chronic Hall Walker List.

Despite the effort to integrate non-punitive practices, her description of the Chronic Hall Walkers list provided insight to the ways restorative alternatives are paired with and exist alongside punitive practices that may hinder relationship-building. In addition to detention, students found in the hallways at inappropriate times would also be placed on the Chronic Hall-Walkers List. This list is a sheet of paper placed on several hallway walls that listed the name and grade of students that were considered chronic hall-walkers. Ms. Holdsmith explained this saying:

They are not allowed to use a bathroom pass or a hall pass to go see a teacher, counselor or whoever during class time. They were placed on that list because I

would ask teachers... So [if] we notice a kid always in the hallway we put that kid on that list. I always verify with their teachers, so maybe it's a problem with one teacher, we can solve that before it's put on that list, but if it's with all your teachers, there is a problem here, so that's how they get on the list. Like I said, they could get off with me, if they do the activity, the restorative activity.

Although the alternative activities (i.e. conversations, an essay, etc.) move towards a restorative method by encouraging non-punitive accountability (Wearmouth et al., 2007); the practice of placing student's names on a public list is a level of shaming which conflicts with restorative practices philosophies. Research indicates that restorative practices should be distanced from shame and blame and instead focus on behavioral accountability (Wearmouth et al., 2007). Yet, there was a parallel existence of restorative vs. punishment focused discipline practices within the school. This again was exemplified when the final bell rang for the start of class and a school-leader stated on the school-wide intercom, "staff, do not let any more students into your classroom. Send them to the cafeteria." I later asked Ms. Holdsmith, to describe the hall sweep process, she stated:

So, kids love to be in the halls, like if they are very late, we have hall sweeps... If they were caught in a hall-sweep they would receive a detention after school. I mean the detentions are restorative..., however; the whole part of it is to get kids in on time and to have them stay in class and not in the hallways.

The irony of this practice is that the intentions and the outcomes were in opposition. Hall-sweeps were conducted to keep students from roaming the halls and prevent the loss of instruction time. However, the instruction to send students to the cafeteria implies that students were regularly missing class time and were readily swept into detention. Therefore, while administrators made attempts to have less punitive discipline outcomes, both administrators and educators were imbued by punitive systems of discipline. This reflects how ecological systems theory describes schools as open social systems that are permeated by economic, political and socially constructed pressures (Greene, 2008; Nicholas & Schwartz, 2004; Rothery, 2008). Acknowledging this sentiment, one teacher stated: I feel like largely what happened at Meadowbrook High School was [it was] given a couple of months and then it was kind a like okay. So, there is that. But we still need to get back to this, we need to do hall sweeps, so we need to punish these kids that are a certain way, so we'll beat them into compliance and that just doesn't work. And so, from that point of view I don't think our numbers[suspensions] have gone down or maybe they went down a little bit, but I don't know if those numbers significantly went down.

This participant's notion that punishment was an underlying feature that was temporarily delayed during the early months of implementation reaffirms the existence of parallel practices. Just as ecological systems theory describes schools as open social systems shaped by external demands, Ball (2003) also describes

that the school space is pressured by on-going policy requirements. Therefore, as teachers, staff, students and administrators negotiated the new restorative features of the disciplinary terrain, they did so understanding that punitive policies continued to shape the discipline ethos making social justice a superficial pursuit.

### ***Chaotic Discipline and the Prevailing Pipeline to Suspension***

The presence of chaos in discipline unfolded as a product of competing punitive and restorative discipline practices. The persistence of punitive practices not only competed with restorative practices but caused (1) inconsistencies and therefore inequity in discipline protocol, (2) led students to respond to restorative practices with antagonism, and (3) left teachers and students to institute their own measures of social justice in discipline. As exemplified through ecological systems theory, these chaotic discipline practices represent a cyclical response in which policies and the school environment impact educator's decision making; yet, educators' enactment of discipline policy and practice also influence the school environment. We describe this by describe the intervention implementation, discipline policy enactment, and how the two reverberated through power-relations.

At Meadowbrook High, detentions took place after school twice a week beginning at 3:00 p.m. As described by the detention hall facilitator, students usually received a detention for "not putting their phone away, getting caught in hall sweeps and if [they're] really late." As students prepared to enter the detention room, an average-sized classroom, posted on the walls were the names and grade-level of the students throughout the school who received a detention for the day. Also hanging on the wall were the detention rules and expectations posted on newsprint sized paper. The rules indicate that (1) detention starts at three o'clock and no late students will be able to serve detention, (2) electronics are not permitted, (3) an essay must be completed, (4) all students must participate in a restorative circle, and (5) violation of these rules and expectations will result in dismissal from detention and will result in a 1-day suspension. Of the 70-100 student names posted on the detention list weekly, only 15-40 students attended detention on a weekly basis. Since less than half of all students assigned afterschool detention attended, all missing students received an automatic 1-day suspension. Given the low detention attendance, restorative detention did not foster the opportunity to repair wrongs, nor was it successful in deterring future detentions. A detention hall facilitator confirmed this occurrence stating:

Our kids are not going to detention. And you can tell because the 1-day suspensions are usually if they don't go to detention. And they don't go to detention for a variety of reasons, often they have jobs after school so they can't. And so that's not working, you know, all that's doing is making them miss a day at school.

This not only reflects how classroom referrals became the gateway to suspension for some students, but how suspensions became the default for minor offenses

thus upholding parallel practices. As a result, the school's attempt to create a restorative community was readily buffered by their own zero-tolerance policies.

During the detention hall restorative circle, students were asked questions such as, "what caused you to get a detention" and "how has this detention affected you?" During these circles, the detention monitor passed the circle talking piece to each student and students expressed both indifference or immediate impact from receiving a detention. Yet, most clear was the often-antagonistic tenor of the detention circle conversations:

Black Male: Detention is relaxing and doesn't affect me.

Detention Monitor: [With a voice of exclamation] This is relaxing? Ok!

Male Student: [Huffed out loudly] "This is boring, this is stupid!"

Detention Monitor: Please respond to the question.

Male Student: Nothing.

Black Female 1: Nothing, I would be watching tv...

Detention Monitor: But now you're not.

Black Female 1: I don't care.

Black Female 2: It affects me I should not be here...

Latina 1: It affects me because I can't babysit.

White Male: This doesn't faze me [repeats three times].

The purpose of restorative detention was for students to think about and change their behaviors. Yet, the very style of this detention conflicted with the framework of restorative practices as it did not require the student to make amends with the teacher or people affected. Instead, students were sent to detention to discuss their problems with students and teachers that were not involved in the incident, and perhaps whom they didn't have a relationship with. Instead, students in the restorative detention hall often exhibited behaviors found within the *The Compass of Shame* conceptual model (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009). The model describes that shaming students typically results in one or more of the following behavioral responses: "attack other," "attack self," "avoidance," or withdrawal (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009, p. 69). The term attack is not exclusive to a physical response but also includes possible psycho-social responses. In another circle, one author observed how quickly the restorative atmosphere could dissipate when punitive policies and practices were still present. During one post-circle detention session, one author observed the consequences of a student pulling out her cell phone during detention:

Detention facilitator: You got to be kidding!



Black Female: My mom is calling to see if I am ok, she is worried about me.

Detention facilitator: Doesn't matter, you're out!

Black Female: [Hesitates to get up as though unsure. She then more assuredly gets up and walks out while saying] Well I'm not getting suspended because you guys don't have my mom's new number.

In this case, the student exhibited power over the disciplinary moment by walking out to avoid being escorted out of the building by security. She again exhibited her own power by suggesting that her mother would not know about her suspension. The detention hall monitor later explained this interaction saying,

When the calls go to the homes of students that have detention, many house numbers are out of order or are old numbers. Sometimes the kids erase the messages. So, her mother may not know if she has a detention or suspension because we don't have her number.

Moreover, the detention hall monitor explained that suspended students sometimes "sneak" back into school. When asked if teachers had a daily roster of suspended students she replied, "We don't always get it. Only if the student was suspended for a really serious issue." Not only was the school unable to inform some parents of a student's behavior and discipline, students learned to navigate the loopholes in the discipline system. Indeed, the idea that teachers received updated suspension rosters only when "a really serious issue" transpired suggests that the minor behaviors students received detention for (i.e., tardiness; use of a cell phone) and later were suspended for (i.e. due to missed detention or detention infractions) were not truly behaviors worthy of suspension and missed instruction time. Instead, these discipline tactics were meted without the ability to change behavior and were a part of a retributive and chaotic system of discipline.

The chaos and irony of a detention-to-suspension pipeline was also observed and subverted by teachers. Mr. Barron, an educator, described his commitment to restorative practices saying, "I welcome it, anything that keeps the kids out of suspensions, anything that doesn't feed the pipeline..." I asked him to provide an example of not feeding the pipeline. He stated,

Not give out detention. If I do give out detention it's just between the student and myself because if the student doesn't go to the school detention they are automatically suspended, where if they're serving detention with me it's something that we work out...

This teacher's response reflected discontentment with the current discipline practices at Meadowbrook High. His decision to not give out detention but provide his own lunch detention as a type of alternative consequence upholds social justice by challenging the punitive status quo. Despite the underlying pressures of punitive school discipline on educator decision making, this interaction delineates how some educators may choose to use their agency for equity. Specifically, it corre-

sponds with ecological systems theory which describes how educators are influenced by rules of order in schools as much as schools are influenced by educators that employ their own operation tactics (Greene, 2008; Siporin, 1980). Coupled with the dual existence of punitive and restorative practices, school leaders unable to perceive and/or respond to chaos in discipline can lose control of the school's discipline tenor, intervention fidelity, and their endeavors towards social justice leadership.

### ***Inequity and Maintaining the Discipline Gap***

Two of the underlying goals of introducing restorative practices to the school site were (1) to reduce school suspensions and (2) to reduce the disproportionate suspension of students of color. This initiative was both a matter of decreasing loss of instructional time and increasing equitable outcomes for students of color. However, the on-going punitive policies and policy loopholes sustained inequity in both overt and illusive ways. One participant, a person of color, described this by sharing how some White parents knew how to navigate the discipline system to reduce their children's suspension length. In contrast, some Black parents were not aware of such disciplinary loopholes and were unable to reduce their child's suspension. Describing this, the staff member said:

We had two boys fight here [and] they got 10 days (suspensions), but then their parents fought [it] so then they got three [days]. But their parents knew the steps to go through. They were White. We [also] had Black girls that were fighting, and they were [on the] honor roll, high honor roll and honor society students...they got 10 days (suspension). The (Black) parents didn't know what to do...

The participant's association of being White with a shorter suspension and being Black with longer suspension is indicative of the CRT tenet whiteness as capital. This is described in previous studies that indicate that students of color receive harsher punishment for behaviors also exhibited by their White peers (Anyon et al., 2014; Skiba, Shure, & Williams, 2011), and research exhibiting that normative forms of White cultural and social capital advantage White parents and students (Kyerem, Joseph, & Wei, 2018). While this account reveals the relationship between policy, practice and overt bias, this was not a persistent theme across the 37 classroom observations conducted. The explicit functioning of racial disproportionality primarily materialized during the after-school detention sessions observed. Across the 7-month period of observations, we found that Black and Brown students accounted for the vast majority of students attending restorative detention sessions. As described, students received detentions for infractions such as school or class tardiness, roaming the hallways during class time, using their cell phones, disrespect and/or disruption. These were behaviors exhibited by many students thus not exclusive to Black and Brown students. Yet, Black and Brown students accounted for the vast majority of detention goes which

corresponds with Raible and Irizarry's (2010) notion that the disciplinary gaze functions to protect White students and problematize the behaviors of students of color. Given the weekly high detention referrals, low detention attendance and the automatic 1-day suspension rule for missed detention, the authors position that the vast majority of students receiving suspensions were students of color. This supposition was revealed through the calculation of risk-ratio's – a measure of disproportionality.

During the intervention year, relative risk for suspension decreased for all students. There were 1,518 students enrolled including Black male students (n=334), Black females (n=287), White males (n=278), White females (n=272), other males (n=185) and other females (n=162) of color (i.e., Latinx, Asian, and Multi-racial). Specifically, there was a 25% relative risk of suspension for all students (see Table 2), which is a 12% reduction in suspension risk compared to the pre-intervention year (see Table 1). In the context of the school's first year of restorative practices, these suspension risk reductions appear promising and indicative of greater discipline equity. However, comparison of relative suspension risk ratios indicate that disproportionality remained nearly the same across both school years. In relation to all other suspended students, Black males were 1.7 times more likely to be suspended in the intervention year compared to their 1.6

**Table 1**  
**2014-2015 Year (Pre-Intervention Suspensions)**

	BM	BF	WM	WF	OM	OF	Total
Total Enrollment	302	267	282	311	192	161	1,515
Total Suspended	163	124	91	72	77	38	565
Risk %	53%	46%	32%	23%	40%	24%	37%
All other risk %	33%	35%	38%	41%	37%	39%	
Risk Ratio	1.6	1.3	.84	.56	1.09	.62	

**Table 2**  
**2015-2016 (Intervention-Year Suspensions)**

	BM	BF	WM	WF	OM	OF	Total
Total Enrollment	334	287	278	272	185	162	1,518
Total Suspended	119	87	59	40	47	21	373
Risk %	36%	30%	21%	15%	25%	13%	25%
All other risk %	21%	23%	25%	27%	24%	25%	
Risk Ratio	1.7	1.3	.84	.55	1.04	.52	

times likelihood of suspension during the pre-intervention year. Similarly, Black female students remained 1.3 times as likely to be suspended during both years. Other males of color also remained disproportionately suspended across both school years. In contrast, calculated risk-ratios for White males, White females and other females of color reveal underrepresentation in suspension risk.

These findings are in-line with previous research displaying the on-going presence of discipline disproportionality during the implementation of restorative practices (Anyon et al. 2016; Hashim et al., 2018; Lustick, 2017). However, this study adds to the literature by providing insight into the individual and school-level barriers that contribute to disproportional outcomes. Although explicit forms of racial bias were not witnessed during observations or expressed during interviews, the evidence for disproportional discipline surfaced in the daily practice of classroom referrals that led to after-school detentions. As evidenced in the data, these after-school detention sessions were primarily comprised of students of color who received detention for subjective and minor infractions. This reveals the colorblind and neoliberal workings of policies and practices that present as neutral in application but produce racialized outcomes because they are implemented through conscious and unconscious biases and within institutions that have unchecked systemic inequities. Thus, the relationship-focused, harm-repair elements of restorative practices were unable to compete with ongoing punitive discipline policies and practices that were disproportionately experienced by students of color.

### Discussion

In examining this case-study, barriers to optimal outcomes can be identified. These barriers can be reviewed and avoided by school leaders interested in implementing restorative practices so the full potential of restorative justice is allowed to evolve. Barriers identified in this case study include punitive discipline ethos, conflict between restorative practices and punitive methods, implementation inconsistencies, and a failure to examine racial disproportionality in detention referrals.

Restorative justice practices introduce a different way to frame student relationships and provides an alternative of handling student misbehavior that strives toward accountability, repair and harmony. This focus on relationships is a drastic shift in discipline ethos and must be addressed by school leaders well before implementation of restorative practices begins. Agreement among school leaders about purpose, implementation, and facilitation is the first step in ensuring consistent program adherence.

The reliance on punitive discipline in schools presents a barrier for restorative practice success. Often schools make attempts to implement restorative practices without eliminating punitive methods, returning to the use of suspensions for subjective and minor behavior as was observed in our case study. This reliance on punitive methods derails restorative practices by undermining the very princi-

ples of restorative justice. Punitive measures have been the standard for years in schools and the ethos of suspending students to reform behavior must be adjusted. As explained by Goings, Alexander, Davis, and Walters, “school leaders have the important task of considering school culture, district policies and politics, and student history when making decisions that could potentially remove students from school” (2018, p. 34). Restorative practices are effective and beneficial, but they must be worked in as punitive methods are pushed out. This process takes time, and constant evaluation from school leaders must be allowed for and scheduled.

Restorative practices need to be consistent school-wide, thus training of school personnel and student leaders is essential. Correcting facilitation mistakes immediately is also important to avoid lack of respect and misbehavior during restorative activities. At Meadowbrook High, we exhibited circles conducted with less commitment to the core values of restorative practices which demanded rather than facilitated participation. As such, students disengaged and showed disrespect, often leading to a suspension. The improper implementation of circle time in this case may reflect inconsistency of implementation school-wide; hence, the on-going detention referrals requesting 70-100 detentions a week.

Perhaps the most significant and complex barrier to the success of restorative practices is the failure to examine what drives racial inequity in school discipline. School leaders must be willing to begin the conversations around the topics of race and culture to have the chance to impact disparities and injustice (DeMatthews, 2016). This requires that school leaders be culturally informed and willing to confront racism within school walls (Goings, Alexander, Davis, & Walters, 2018). Applying restorative practices in schools as an attempt to narrow the discipline gap must be done intentionally with open and honest dialogue. Failure to acknowledge and discuss racial inequity leads to a haphazard introduction of change policy that can only result in the partial success of practices that have no chance of being fully realized. By recognizing these potential pitfalls, school leaders can identify best practice guidelines and commit to maintaining them. Effective leadership throughout implementation is essential for restorative practices to truly re-shape the disciplinary ideology and policies in schools. Restorative practices can be transformative, but they must be given the chance to be effective first. To do so, conscientious and social justice school leadership must pave the way.

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