

What Makes Restorative Justice Circles Successful?

What is the study about?

Teachers, students, and school staff reported on what makes a restorative justice and community-building intervention successful. The purpose was to better understand why restorative justice interventions to prevent suspensions often fail to reduce existing racial disparities and how to address the problem.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICE:

A universal prevention strategy to address conflict and misconduct and promote social emotional health. The emphasis is on healing harm done instead of punishment. In Community Building Circles led by teachers, groups of students develop a sense of community.

What did they find?

Setting and Sample

- Three secondary schools with 260 to 550 students. Teachers were primarily White.
- Students in two schools were primarily Black and Latino; students in the third school were primarily Black and Asian; Most students were in free lunch program

Teachers and students found some benefits of Community-Building Circles. For example:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers found the circles helped build trust and sharing among students. • Teachers and students became more comfortable discussing difficult topics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students reported feeling able to share, and learning strategies to control their emotions • Participants gained understanding of each other's experiences |
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Issues and barriers to effects of Restorative Justice on Disparities in Suspensions

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher-student relationships were key to success of restorative community-building. • Participants can feel discomfort and vulnerability during Circles; these feelings need to be managed • Teachers needed ongoing supports for conducting the circles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers need training in leading the groups, identifying their own biases, and being responsive to culture, and trauma. • Teaching schedules and demands constrained teachers' implementation of the circles • Some participants may not engage authentically |
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What can social workers do?

- With their specialized training, social workers can work with teachers co-lead discussions in the Circles to promote their success.
- Social workers can bring skills and knowledge to help Circles be antiracist, culturally appropriate, and trauma-informed.
- Social workers can talk to teachers and principals about the conditions needed for school-based restorative practices to be successful.
- Social workers can demonstrate the community-circles model within small group classroom settings.

Lustick, H. Norton, C., Lopez, S.R., & Greene-Rooks, J.H. (2020). Restorative practices for empowerment: A social work lens. *Children & Schools*, 42(2), 89-97. doi: 10.1093/cs/cdaa006

How was the study done?

Interviews with students, teachers, and principals and observations. Qualitative analyses.