
Restorative Practices for Empowerment: A Social Work Lens

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Studies demonstrate that preventive practices, including restorative practices and social and emotional learning, reduce the need for suspension. However, emerging findings suggest that preventive practices perpetuate the same rates of racial disproportionality in suspension as traditional disciplinary codes; evidence of persistent racial disproportionality appears in research on restorative practices. The purpose of this study was to examine, through interviews with teachers and students, the successes and challenges of implementing community-building circles with attention to equity and inclusion. Authors found that both teachers and students experience these practices as transformative when enough trust is established to share openly; however, more training is necessary for this to be consistent across schools and classrooms. Considering the lack of discussion of implicit bias and cultural responsiveness embedded in the restorative practice trainings these teachers received, authors argue that social work professionals and concepts—namely, empowerment theory—can support teacher training and implementation of community-building circles.

KEY WORDS: *culturally responsive education; positive discipline; restorative practices; social and emotional learning; urban education*

The 21st century has ushered a policy shift from zero tolerance policies toward improving school climate through preventive measures (U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Way, Reddy, & Rhodes, 2007). Studies demonstrate that preventive practices, including restorative practices and social and emotional learning (SEL), reduce the need for responsive discipline, including punitive practices like classroom removal and suspension (Chin, Dowdy, Jimerson, & Rime, 2012). Preventive practices do, indeed, correlate with a decrease in overall school suspension. However, emerging findings suggest that they perpetuate the same rates of racial disproportionality in suspension as traditional disciplinary codes; evidence of persistent racial disproportionality appears in research on restorative practices (Anyon et al., 2016; Payne & Welch, 2015), positive behavioral interventions and supports (Vincent & Tobin, 2011; Vincent, Tobin, Hawken, & Frank, 2012), and SEL (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

A recent yearlong ethnographic multicase study (Lustick, 2017) of three urban public schools, all of which employed majority white staff and enrolled majority black and Latinx students, identified inconsistencies in terms of how restorative practices were implemented and experienced.

Although the larger study focused on both preventive and responsive restorative practices, this article explores data on one particular type of preventive practice called community-building circles. The purpose of this study is to examine, through interviews with teachers and students, the successes and challenges of implementing community-building circles with attention to equity and inclusion. We find that both teachers and students experience these practices as transformative when enough trust is established to share openly; however, more training is necessary for this to be consistent across schools and classrooms. Considering the lack of discussion of implicit bias and cultural responsiveness embedded in the restorative practice trainings these teachers received, we argue how social work professionals and concepts—namely, empowerment theory—can support teacher training and implementation of community-building circles.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: RESTORATIVE PRACTICE AS “UNIQUE SHARED EXPERIENCE”

Restorative practice is the school-based version of restorative justice, an alternative to the Western criminal justice system that emphasizes healing harm rather than punishing misbehavior (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Vaandering (2014) divided re-

storative practices into preventive practices administered to all students, and responsive practices administered to address conflict or disruptive behavior. Vaandering explained that when preventive practices fail to establish community, responsive practices will be less effective, and punitive discipline will continue to seem the only recourse for redirecting student misconduct. This logic is consistent with school social work values ([National Association of Social Workers \[NASW\], 2012](#); [Talebrea-May, 2017](#)). School social workers are trained to establish trust and community through group work and often possess tools for establishing explicitly antiracist and culturally responsive environments ([Kononovitch, 2018](#)). However, research is scant on the specific role that social workers can play in restorative practice implementation ([Lindsay & White, 2018](#)). Instead, their role and knowledge are often allocated to the “responsive” side, as social workers and counselors are not often fully integrated into school culture ([Robertson, McBride, Chung, Williams, & May, 2015](#)).

We therefore conceive of restorative practice through an interdisciplinary frame that brings together notions of community building in both educational and social work approaches with groups. A social work approach with groups helps develop community through shared experiences, which can be structured, consistent experiential opportunities to engage in individual and group challenges and feel supported by others in meeting those challenges ([Norton & Tucker, 2010](#)). In culturally diverse contexts, the unique community that teachers build must be responsive to and reflective of the diverse beliefs, experiences, and customs of student participants. This means building positive relationships with students ([Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010](#)) and incorporating students’ cultures into lessons and routines. [Gregory et al. \(2010\)](#) have also identified the need for explicit antibias work, which has been found to promote positive youth identity and critical consciousness ([Slaten, Rivera, Shemwell, & Elison, 2016](#)).

METHOD

The current study collected and compared qualitative data from interviews with faculty and staff at three small public schools in the same urban district, all of comparable size (one additional

commonality across all three schools was that they are small schools—meaning they were created by carving large comprehensive high schools into smaller learning communities in the early 2000s), similar demography, and equivalently rates (exact rates were not available, because the actual suspension rate for each school was redacted, which means it is likely in the single digits; in accordance with student privacy laws, the city comptroller redacts school data that is low enough for a reader to identify individual students using demographics). See [Table 1](#) for detailed demographic information. In addition to demographic and discipline considerations, schools were also selected based on their fidelity to the restorative practice model. Specifically, all school staff had undergone some form of training in restorative practices for at least one year prior to the start of the study, including community-building circle facilitation. The principal examined their training materials and confirmed that cultural responsiveness and diversity were only marginal components in these trainings, whereas implicit bias was not a topic at all.

Sample

The current study relied on data from observations and interviews pertaining to community-building circles. These circles primarily occurred in “advisory,” a class-like homeroom where students have time for social and emotional skill-building and check-ins with a teacher who serves as a general academic and personal coach. In advisory, time was made for sharing in a circle.

In all three schools, students were majority non-white and from low-income families, whereas teaching staff were majority white and middle class. Although this lack of student diversity did not allow us to compare discipline for white students with discipline for students of color, it did allow us to examine the unit of analysis relevant to our objective. Through observations and interviews, we intended to learn how restorative practices played out in scenarios where white teachers were working with racially and ethnically diverse students. In accordance with university and school district institutional review board requirements, interview participants completed consent forms and were told that their participation was voluntary. The names used in this study are aliases used to protect confidentiality.

Table 1: Student Demographic Breakdown of School Sites

School Alias	Total Enrollment	Asian (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Hispanic (%)	Other (%)	Free or Reduced-Price Lunch (%)
Plainview Secondary School	550	0.8	39.1	1.8	57.5	0.8	84.9
Bridgeport Middle School	350	37.5	16.9	15.1	28.0	2.5	67.1
Riveredge High School	260	1.6	44.7	6.7	46.0	1.0	67.5

Notes: Data taken from New York City school demographic data. (New York City Department of Education. [2015]. NYC data. Retrieved from <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/data/default.htm>.) Numbers have been slightly obscured to preserve anonymity, and all school names are pseudonyms. This table also appears in a forthcoming article derived from the same data. [Lustick, H. (2017). "Restorative justice" or restoring order? Restorative school discipline practices in urban public schools. *Urban Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0042085917741725.]

Data Collection

One member of the research team, an educator who has experience as a restorative practices trainer and New York City school teacher, collected the data. Over the course of roughly 300 hours per school, data were collected through observations of both preventive and responsive restorative practices; analysis of school policy documents relevant to discipline; and semistructured interviews with students, teachers, and principals at each school. Informal behavioral management was also observed in classrooms and offices, and also in common areas like vestibules, hallways, and stairwells. Initial analysis of the data led to the need to bring in the perspective of mental health professionals on restorative practices in schools (that is, school social workers), and so additional authors include a social work scholar, a school counseling scholar, and a scholar in human development. The makeup of our research team, thus, reflects the trajectory of the research.

Race, Ethnicity, and Other Identity Markers

Interviewees were asked, but not required, to provide their racial or ethnic identification, gender identification, age, and educational background. The participants were not asked to explicitly connect their identities to their experiences with restorative practices. We include what they chose to share, both in terms of identity markers and how they make sense of their experiences (whether or not this relates to their identities). Note that in the data we collected, race was not identified as a critical part of teacher's process. It may be important in future research to acknowledge and solicit more direct information about race within the restorative context.

Data Analysis

In analyzing our data, we sought to go beyond the "what" of restorative practices, to the "how": how teachers and students related socially, emotionally, and culturally, as they forged a community together. Data were analyzed through an iterative process of deductive coding, inductive coding, analytic memo writing, and literature-based reflection. Observation notes and interviews were coded using the online software program Dedoose. The initial deductive codes were designed based on a combination of the objective and the literature on SEL. Subsequent inductive codes were added to accommodate pieces of data that did not fit into the existing codes but seemed relevant to community-building circles. Two of the four authors coded all transcripts, then discussed any ambiguities they encountered. Independently, all researchers read through the codes and took note of patterns. In addition, all researchers noted what subcodes these patterns might be broken down into and what overall themes the identified patterns seemed to echo. We then grouped these themes into two overarching findings: (1) teachers perceived benefits of using community-building circles and (2) teachers and students experienced discomfort with community-building circles.

FINDINGS

Our overarching finding was that the nature of restorative practice implementation depended on teachers' and students' relationships with each other, the teachers' familiarity with how to implement such practices, and the level of support they received in doing so. Our findings also revealed gaps in teachers' ability to fully implement community-building circles, given limitations in

their training and constraints in their roles as teachers. Participants did not reference their race, ethnicity, or gender identity when discussing their successes and struggles with community-building circles, and there did not seem to be a consistent correlation between teachers' racial similarity to students and their reported experience of restorative practices.

Recognizing the complexities of analyzing teacher-student relationships in terms of race and ethnicity (Dickar, 2008; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2012; Warikoo, 2004; Weinar, 2016), we recommend further research on the relationship between teachers' ethnicity and circle implementation. In this section, however, we focus on concrete suggestions for how teachers can prepare, emotionally and pedagogically, to facilitate circles that empower and engage their students.

Teachers Perceived Benefits of Community-Building Circles

Although they are not familiar with the language of social work or counseling groups, teachers essentially described community-building circles as unique experiences: an opportunity for participants to learn about each other and, through that shared learning, build trust and the capacity for growth. Andie, a white female teacher in her first year of teaching at the school (and second year teaching overall), abandoned the circle protocol guide that her principal gave her after feeling like the prompts and activities did not carry much meaning for her students. This led to some surprising scenarios. She described an incident in which three students in her advisory, all trained in peer mediation, led an impromptu mediation during a Tier 1 practice:

It wasn't good still because the students were so emotional, they were talking over each other . . . but I was so impressed that after . . . two weeks of peer mediation training they were already using that [reconciliatory] language and recognizing that this was a situation where they might use it.

Despite the mild chaos in the room, Andie observed that students were making meaning of a conflict and working together toward a solution. She saw the circle as positive overall, as it resulted in a shared learning experience.

Middle school teachers at Plainview and Bridgeport (the two schools that enrolled sixth through eighth grades) used the community-building circle protocol to teach emotional self-regulation, a social-emotional skill identified by the *Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (2017) standards. For example, in one observation of a sixth-grade advisory, a teacher refused to excuse a recalcitrant student from participating in a circle activity in which members were rating their mood on a scale from 1 to 5, and then providing a reason. "You can put up a 4 if you're angry," the teacher said, "but we have to hear your voice." The student responded, "I'm mad at [a classmate]." Here, the teacher used the circle structure as an opportunity for a social and emotional teachable moment: Feelings are OK, as long as they are appropriately expressed.

Students who had been effectively engaged in restorative practices reported the ability to share without inhibition. Phillip, a black male eighth-grader at Bridgeport, mentioned using self-talk to manage difficult emotions during a moment of conflict. He defined *self-talk* as "when you think in your head . . . about ways that you can stop being angry and not take violent actions, talk about the good things and the bad things, and then you can calm yourself down also." For these students and teachers, community-building circle practices were an opportunity to teach, learn, and practice openness to different points of view.

Mary, a black Riveredge teacher who was among the school's founding faculty, explained that community-building practices depend on students' accountability to the process, which in turn depends on the teachers' ability to "bring kids emotionally into" the group. Students needed a space in which to discuss issues facing all students, such as the pressures of school, work, relationships, and family. Addie, a young woman in Mary's advisory, testified to her teacher's talent for helping students be vulnerable in advisory. "If you're not the type of person that likes to fit in, if you have your crew there already, you can have a group of people there that you can actually talk to, you can start there and then expand."

These circles were, at times, opportunities for teachers, as well as students, to learn and step outside their comfort zones. Donovan, an African American male teacher at Riveredge, described how engaging in community-building practices

with his students catalyzed personal transformation. In recalling a young man in his advisory who identified as gay, Donovan said, “I began to understand, to gain an understanding of what acceptance truly looks like, of what respect for diversity, respect for humanity truly looks like . . . and so, I’ve transformed. I’m no longer the same.” He felt that working at the school and learning about restorative justice—or, what he has come to call transformative justice—has helped him be more open to growth. He also credited the school’s core values around open-mindedness, relationships, and intellectual curiosity that have allowed him to engage in conversations about sexuality without feeling that he is compromising his own beliefs. Jared, a white male teacher at Riveredge, shared his willingness to let students take the conversation in unorthodox directions:

I try to encourage [students] to always talk to the teacher first . . . It’s a delicate boundary to walk the line on. I think that . . . it’s important that kids understand that we’re here to work with them, we’re here to help them.

These data exemplify teacher successes using community-building circles. In cases like Mary’s, the success can be attributed to teachers’ individual abilities to build relationships and community with students; in other cases, like Donovan’s, it was the remarkable individual commitment of teachers to their own growth and the growth of their students. The concept of the “unique shared learning experience” central to social work groups can be useful in capturing this approach to community-building circle facilitation that is distinctly different from the more structured, unidirectional nature of traditional teaching and learning. Without this explicit frame, teachers may feel unsupported, overwhelmed, and uncomfortable with the vulnerability required to facilitate community-building practices. The following section details examples of what these challenges feel like for both teachers and students.

Teachers’ and Students’ Discomfort with Community-Building Circles

Some students and teachers were not able to easily enact the philosophy of restorative practices, even if they understood them on an intellectual level. Discomfort with vulnerability showed up in teachers’

resistance to processing difficult topics, and sometimes they avoided these topics altogether. Observational and interview data revealed that students picked up on this resistance and as a result did not feel as comfortable in community-building circles as they wished they did.

Nancy, a Chinese American female teacher at Bridgeport, alluded to the gap between what students know and will actually share in community-building circles. She wanted to have an authentic dialogue with them about standing up to bullying in school, but she was stuck in trying to figure out how to bring this up in a lesson: “They all know intuitively the right thing to do . . . if someone’s calling you a name, ignore it, don’t engage with it. . . . But we know that’s not what they really do.”

Jared, the same teacher at Riveredge who felt comfortable allowing students to vent about their other teachers, describes discomfort with the amount of “emotional baggage” students sometimes brought to advisory. Jared highlighted several important purposes of community-building circles that seemed to conflict with each other. On the one hand, he is a mandated reporter; on the other hand, he is inviting this knowledge by encouraging honesty. Ultimately, this internal conflict caused him to release his commitment to authentic dialogue; he decided to start tailoring the questions he posed in community-building circles to prevent students sharing inappropriate information that made him uncomfortable but also had the effect of eliciting less honest life discussions.

In one observation of an advisory at Plainview, the two facilitating teachers seemed to be encountering the concerns Jared shared. The advisers were letting students choose the go-around questions. This resulted in an increasingly morbid conversation about who in one’s family one would murder if forced to choose. When the circle got to one young black woman, she shared, quietly, that she did not know how to answer the question, because she did not have any living family members. A momentary pause gripped the room; her revelation had interrupted the rhythm of preposterous answers and audacious guffaws. Finally, she passed the talking piece to the next student, who continued the pattern of outlandish answers as if it had not been interrupted. For the rest of the period, the girl stared sullenly at her desk. When the research team followed up with the adviser, Melissa, a white female teacher, about her

perceptions of this advisory, Melissa did not seem to understand the significance of the incident; she did not see the question, or the young woman's response, as cause for concern. Without training in how to perceive signs of distress, teachers like Melissa risk retraumatizing their students and creating a stigma around vulnerable sharing.

These data were echoed by students and counselors. For example, Phillip acknowledged that what he shares in community-building circles is not his "true" self. He can hypothetically imagine getting to the point where he could share his real feelings in the circle, but "it has to be a circle of people who I really know and get along with, not people I know but don't really necessarily tell them things or trust them." Ruth, a counselor at Riveredge, shared how often students came to her upset by something that had surfaced in advisory and gone unprocessed. She sat in on community-building circles when she could and followed up with any students who seemed triggered by the topics of conversation. However, she lamented that there were not enough counselors to regularly provide this level of support, which ties into the need for more mental health support through counselors and social workers.

Given the lack of training and the constraints of the role of a teacher, these awkward and disjointed circles are not surprising. Teachers have the tools to open up the conversation, but perhaps need assistance to manage the conversation if and when students' trauma stories emerge. Still, students like Phillip require safe spaces to share thoughts and feelings and receive support. If school social workers and counselors were more involved in running social and emotional groups, they would have the requisite skills to both allow for deep sharing and provide relational containment and help students restore their capacities in the face of traumatic memories and stress (Saunders, 2010).

DISCUSSION

We identified two overarching findings: (1) Teachers perceived benefits of using community-building circles. (2) Teachers and students were uncomfortable with community-building circles. Our data make clear that although community-building circles can be transformative spaces for both students and teachers, they can also be spaces of marginalization and distrust. Ensuring that circles are shared unique experiences requires a level of

vulnerability from both teachers and students that is often at odds with conventional school life. Because trauma, bias, and cultural responsiveness are not embedded in restorative training, historically marginalized students were at times particularly vulnerable in these circles, and teachers felt too overwhelmed to address this. As a result, community-building circles are implemented with varying consistency at each school and do not necessarily provide opportunities for community building and shared meaning making.

Community-building circles can serve as a space for shared SEL. However, this requires integration of knowledge from both teachers and school social workers (Kononovitch, 2018). Our primary recommendation is that administrators pair teachers with counselors or social workers when conducting community-building circles. Teachers and mental health professionals, such as social workers and counselors, can work together to develop a circle practice that is explicitly antiracist, culturally responsive, and trauma informed. In addition, counseling staff can serve as an extra pair of eyes and ears for identifying individual students in need of additional support.

However, we recognize that not all schools—especially urban schools, which are more likely to be implementing restorative practices with little funding—can afford to hire enough counselors or social workers to serve all students' individual mental health needs, let alone sit in on community-building circles. We therefore also make recommendations for what is needed for in-service and preservice teacher training. These recommendations cluster around (a) explicit modeling of and instruction in social and emotional skills, (b) professional development strategies that include ongoing support for circle facilitation, (c) effective awareness of trauma and how to address it, and (d) antibias work using empowerment theory.

Social and Emotional Group Norms: Creating a Caring Community

Teachers must expertly balance the intention of the circle practice—to facilitate dialogue in a safe space—with the specific students in their classrooms. In *Journey Toward the Caring Classroom*, Frank (2013) outlined the process by which groups form safe communities with clear boundaries, identities, cultures, and goals. Central to this group identity formation is the notion of a unique shared

experience, whereby the teacher and students in a classroom build community by sharing experiences together and reflecting on them. An experience can consist simply of holding meaningful conversation, participating in team-building activities, or solving problems. However, the success of a group-building activity is not the activity itself, but how well the teacher uses it to cultivate safety, empathy, and choice among a group of students (Norton & Hsieh, 2011).

Ongoing Professional Development

The [International Institute for Restorative Practices \(2017\)](#) recommends that schools implement preventive practices for at least a year before starting responsive practices—and that, if possible, teachers implement preventive practices on their own for a year before even introducing them to students. Professional development for these practices is, in part, about teachers finding a way to adapt the model to fit their students, and before they can do so, they need time to negotiate how they will comfortably use it themselves. Otherwise, Jared's and Melissa's experiences are far too common: teachers who open a dialogue with students, only to become so uncomfortable with where it goes that they are forced to shut it down. [Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, and Pianta's \(2015\)](#) model of SEL training, in which teachers received ongoing coaching related to overall pedagogy and interpersonal interaction with students, showed significant reductions in out-of-office discipline referrals that continued even after the coaching period ended.

Trauma Awareness and Responsiveness

Students' trauma was obvious to the observing research team and a major concern among counseling staff. Teachers were not necessarily aware of when a particular topic might trigger a particular student, or, conversely, a student would share something that might trigger discomfort in others (including the teacher). However, given that 26 percent of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four ([National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012](#)), teachers must assume that trauma exists in their classrooms and be ready and willing to respond accordingly. Mental health professionals in schools can help teachers to prepare for this inevitability.

Current efforts are underway to implement trauma-informed interventions in schools ([Mendelson, Tandon, O'Brennan, Leaf, & Ialongo, 2015](#)). We want to underscore the importance of these interventions, and coordination with teachers in general, but we specifically advocate trauma-informed approaches to discipline. As [Siegel \(2015\)](#) noted, "Traditional behavior management protocols and educational approaches, even when skillfully designed and implemented, may not work when trauma is involved" (p. 16). School social workers can provide training for teachers, increase awareness about the impact of trauma, and ensure that restorative implementation is sensitive to the needs of students who have experienced trauma.

Antibias Work through Empowerment Theory

Social workers' focus on social justice ([Turner & Maaschi, 2015](#)) could be used to inform student discipline policies and help teachers use restorative practices to interrupt racial bias through an empowerment approach. Empowerment "seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation" ([Turner & Maaschi, 2015](#), p. 152). Empowerment theory centers a "mutual relationship" between provider (in this case, teacher) and client (in this case, student), whereby each is viewed as possessing unique and knowledge and perspectives to share.

Donovan, a teacher at Riveredge, talked about the mind-opening and bias-reducing experience he had of getting to know a gay student in his advisory. Donovan used the circle process to build this mutual understanding and respect, which is an example of empowerment in action. Mutual respect and relationship building reduce bias, which in turn is key to reducing disproportionality in suspension (that is, overrepresentation of students of color) ([Gregory et al., 2010](#)). Unconscious biases can lead to microaggressions and unintended discrimination in the classroom ([Bellack, 2015](#)). Therefore, one of the ways that social workers empower marginalized students is by helping teachers recognize and address their unconscious bias in the classroom, especially as it relates to discipline procedures.


According to [Banaji and Greenwald \(2016\)](#), unconscious bias occurs when people gather stereotypes and incomplete information about social

groups that automatically and implicitly shape our thoughts and responses to others in both negative and positive ways. Social workers can facilitate teachers in surfacing and working through unconscious bias. According to Sue et al. (2007), additional goals of training like this should also include opportunities for teachers to do the following:

1. Discover ways to become aware of and reduce the impact of their own implicit biases.
2. Be exposed to experiences of microaggressions in the school community, and in doing so explore how microaggressions are the consequences of implicit bias.
3. Understand how adopting a framework of cultural humility may reduce or eliminate the incidents of microaggressions caused by implicit bias in the workplace.

Trainings that cover these topics would prepare teachers to become more reflective and multiculturally competent practitioners. This could positively affect the implementation of restorative practices in their diverse classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Although the original intent of this study was to focus on the experiences of teachers as they implement community-building circles, it became readily apparent that the real value of the data provided were the gaps in teachers' ability to fully engage in the vulnerability and mutual relationship required for these practices to yield meaningful shared experiences. These are fundamental concepts in school social work, and teachers are an integral part of implementing restorative practices in schools. The findings of this study, therefore, affirm existing research regarding the importance of school social workers in implementing SEL in schools and support NASW's recommendations to increase the presence of school social workers (Anastas & Clark, 2012; Talebreza-May, 2017). We also recommend that restorative trainings include concepts from empowerment theory and group work. Last, we recommend these trainings to be paired with more general antibias and culturally responsive pedagogy trainings, so that teachers can ensure their community-building circles—and instruction—are safe and equitable spaces for all students. 

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