
Restorative Practice: History, Successes, Challenges & Recommendations

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Written by Valerie L. Marsh

June 2017

Restorative Practice (RP) is an increasingly acknowledged and employed approach to school discipline, behavior, and relationships. Operating with an underlying thesis that “human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* or *for* them” (Payne & Welch, 2017, p. 3), RP lies at the intersection of criminal justice, school culture, and professional development. Each of these fields has played a role in the rise of RP as a viable alternative to punitive measures to address student misbehavior and school culture. Today, the RP conversation is also reaching mainstream media (Stern, 2016; Dawson, 2017; Winter, 2016), indicating a societal openness to such alternative forms of school discipline. This brief takes these multiple perspectives into account as it provides a research review. It is organized into five sections: the first two focus on punitive discipline, providing 1) a history of the practice, and 2) documentation of its disadvantages; the third 3) introduces the RP approach; followed by 4) a review of research on RP, including implementation, successes, and challenges; and lastly 5) a summary conclusion.

Punitive Discipline: A Brief History

According to criminal law and restorative justice scholar, Thalia González (2012), we must first understand the parameters and consequences of society’s predominate system of punitive justice in order to understand a philosophy of restorative justice; therefore, this section provides a brief history on punitive discipline in schools.

Since the 1980’s, school disciplinary policies have been increasingly characterized by a zero tolerance approach and punitive measures, mirroring the criminal justice system’s historic treatment of offenders. This trend began in tandem with federal drug policy during the Reagan administration and then expanded to other areas of public concern – school safety and violence prevention. Two notable events during the 1990’s – President Clinton’s signing of the Gun Free Schools Act in 1994 (Scott, Moses, Finnegan, Trujillo, & Jackson, 2017; Skiba, 2000) and the Columbine High School mass shooting in 1999 – fueled the instantiation of zero tolerance in schools, catalyzing its national expansion (Stern, 2016; Winter, 2016). During this time, the scope of punishable offenses for drug and violence violations widened, severity of punishments intensified, and the number of students receiving these punishments rose (Fabelo et al., 2011). Also known as “exclusionary discipline” for its function of separating offending students from the rest of the school community (Payne & Welch, 2017), this system encourages mandatory penalties – such as suspension, expulsion, and referral to law enforcement – for breaking school rules. The rates of these punishments have become “remarkably high” (Payne & Welch, 2017, p. 1), with 3.5 million students suspended in school; 3.45 million suspended out of school, and 130,000 expelled during the 2011-12 school year (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014) out of the 49 million students enrolled in U.S. schools. Other indicators of the rise

in punitive discipline include the growing prevalence of surveillance in the forms of cameras, metal detectors, drug-sniffing dogs, security oriented School Resource Officers, and police on school grounds (Kupchik & Monahan, 2006; Payne & Welch, 2015; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001; Simon, 2007). These tactics are emblematic of a community that treats its members as criminals.

Disadvantages of Punitive Discipline

The prevalence of zero tolerance in schools has raised concern among educators, scholars from a variety of fields, and policymakers, contributing to a substantial body of research that both questions and refutes punitive discipline's effectiveness. There are a host of problems associated with the punitive approach. For example, students who receive exclusionary discipline suffer from lower academic performance, disengagement from school, higher dropout rates, grade retention, lower graduation rates, absenteeism, and decreased likelihood to enter postsecondary education (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2012); they are also more likely to engage in risky and delinquent behaviors as well as juvenile crime (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Hemphill et al., 2012; Schiraldi & Zeidenberg, 2001). Furthermore, exclusionary discipline presents a social justice problem, as it disproportionately affects students with disabilities, English language learners, as well as Black, Latinex, and Native American students, who are more likely than their white and Asian counterparts to be suspended and expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Scott et al., 2017; Figure 1) and less likely to receive milder punishments (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

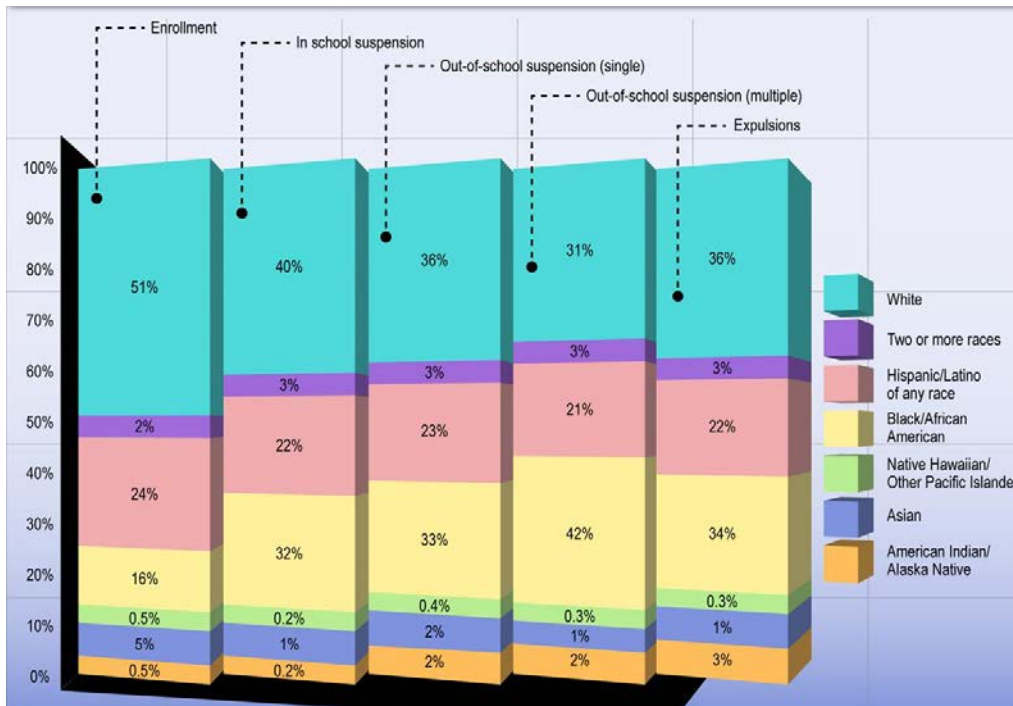


Figure 1: Students receiving suspensions and expulsions, by race and ethnicity. This figure illustrates a variety of punitive disciplinary measures received by students according to their race and ethnicity. Reprinted from: U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-12.

The overrepresentation of students of color has come to be known as the “racial discipline gap” (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016a; Gregory, et al., 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008), feeding the “school-to-prison pipeline,” which disproportionately channels minorities from school to prison (Alexander, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Guckenberg, Hurley, Persson, Fronius, & Petrosino, 2015). Racial disparity between minority students and white students with regard to receiving punitive discipline spreads into schools more generally, in that the harshest punitive discipline policies are most prevalent in schools with higher Black populations, thus shaping the culture of the entire school (Scott et al., 2017; Welch & Payne, 2010).

In the fields of medicine and psychology, there is also critique, question, and refute as to the effectiveness of exclusionary techniques to transform behavior (American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013). In the law field, the American Bar Association (2001) publicly issued a statement of its opposition to and caution of the use of school-based zero tolerance policies. Not only does exclusionary discipline harm individuals, but communities as well. According to criminologists, Braithwaite and Drahos (2002), “It’s hard to think of any policy better calculated to increase crime than automatic expulsion from school” (p. 269). Moreover, a recent National Education Policy Center report (Scott et al., 2017) states that the “overlapping and intersecting social policies in the context of housing, labor, policing, and education leave many communities of color in segregated cities and suburbs isolated from social and educational opportunity more broadly” (p. 6). Thus, rather than making communities inside and outside school safer, there exists a growing consensus among educators, criminologists, and medical professionals that punitive discipline in fact increases the misbehaviors and violence that zero tolerance policies were intended to curb.

Restorative Practice: An Alternative Approach

Rather than punishment, which often leads to anger, shame, and ostracism, RP is focused on repair and reconciliation. The practice began emerging in the contemporary mainstream in the 1970’s and has since been used as a compliment and sometimes an alternative to punitive measures for resolving conflict, starting in the criminal justice system (Payne & Welch, 2017). The use and success of RP in educational settings began in Australia, where it was first implemented in schools in the 1990’s (Blood & Thorsborne, 2005; Queensland Education Department, 1996). Since then, RP has spread to other countries, including the U.S.

The principles of RP find their roots in indigenous communities and religious traditions (Gregory et al., 2016a; Zehr, 2015) where the concept of justice relies on an assumption that everyone in a community is relationally connected to one another and to their community. Therefore, when a wrong has occurred, “it represents a wound in the community, a tear in the web of relationships (Zehr, 2015, p. 29),” which requires repair. An equitable, social justice discipline reform (Gregory et al., 2016a; Wachtel, 2013) RP holds accountable everyone involved in a relationship – offenders, victims, and community members. Unlike exclusionary discipline, which separates victims and offenders, RP techniques are designed to bring these stakeholders together where they can take turns speaking in a safe listening space. Using both proactive and interventional strategies, students, teachers, and anyone else in the school community (social workers, staff, administrators, parents, school safety officers, etc.) meet in various formats, such as restorative

circles, community building circles, restorative conversations, and peer mediation (Cavanaugh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014; Gregory, Soffer, Gaines, Hurley, & Karikhalli, 2016b; Payne & Welch, 2017). In interventional situations, participants are guided by the following questions: *What happened? Who was harmed? What would help to repair the harm?* (Stern, 2016), which steers the conversation away from retribution and toward reintegrating wrongdoers back into the community, particularly beneficial in school settings where members of the community will be seeing each other repeatedly and often following a conflict (González, 2012). Similar to punitive discipline, RP philosophy and practices can lead to community transformation (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006) over time, but deepened relationships and community, rather than crime and isolation characterize the transformed culture.

Restorative Practice Research Findings

Literature about RP in schools is organized into three general categories: 1) exploratory studies that describe RP **implementation**, 2) research documenting RP **success**, and 3) literature that identifies **challenges** to and **recommendations** for successful RP.

Implementation

A relatively new field of study, RP literature includes academic studies, practical guides, and research reports that are often characterized by an exploratory approach (Gardella, 2015; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Sherman, 2003). This work helps define RP and **describes** what it looks like in school settings. According to these studies, the **qualities that facilitate successful RP implementation**, include:

- Visionary, focused leadership (Guckenberger et al., 2015; Stinchcomb et al., 2006)
- Ongoing training (Stinchcomb et al., 2006)
- Adequate time (Cavanaugh et al., 2014)

A combination of these qualities can lead to school-wide familiarity, consistency, and a holistic approach that “reinforce[s] RP principles and improve[s] staff cohesion” (Stinchcomb et al., 2006, p. 140). These qualities will be further explored in Challenges and Recommendations later in this section.

Successes

The effectiveness of RP is most often measured by quantitative studies that document its repeated **success in reducing the severity and frequency of school violations** (Bazemore & Schiff, 2010; González, 2012; Guckenberger et al., 2015; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2003; Schiff, 2013; Stinchcomb et al., 2006; Wachtel, 2001). To that end, RP has been found to be an effective means of **narrowing the discipline gap** that disproportionately punishes students of color (Gregory et al., 2016a; Gregory et al., 2010; Schiff, 2013), thus disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. However, since RP is more than a discipline reform, but an approach to **transforming school culture** (Cavanaugh, 2014; Gregory et al., 2016a; Payne & Welch, 2017), studies that include qualitative methods are particularly helpful in learning about how RP affects relationships. These studies show that **students prefer RP** to traditional punitive measures (Drewery, 2004; Fields, 2003; Gregory et al., 2016a; O’Dea & Loewen, 1999) and that RP has a

large **positive impact on the entire school culture**. With RP practices in place, **students gain a voice** in their communities and teachers experience less stress (Guckenberg et al., 2015).

Challenges & Recommendations

Obstacles to effective RP implementation are numerous, but scholars offer guidance for mediating these challenges. Below, challenges and recommendations are grouped together, starting with each challenge.

- **Change takes time.** Understanding that moving to an RP approach is a long-term, incremental reform, schools must adopt a long-term plan and commitment to RP and recognize that **classrooms are a central site for change** to occur (Cavanaugh, 2014; González, 2012; Payne & Welch, 2017). Gregory and colleagues (2016b) emphasize that the reform process begins by building community, starting with adults. Schools must work to balance efforts of preventative, proactive RP practices (celebrations and relationship building) with interventional, reactive practices (resolving conflicts).
- **Resistant teachers and administrators.** Some studies found that a combination of deficit thinking and low expectations of students formed barriers preventing teachers from adopting a RP approach. Teacher perception that RP consumes too much time, thus subverting instruction, presents another barrier to RP implementation (Gregory et al., 2016a), especially when exclusionary discipline that typically removes a “problem youth” (Guckenberg et al., 2015, p. 12) from the classroom is a quicker way to handle disruptions in the short term. To contend with these barriers, scholars recommend focusing on **relationships with students as primary**; achievement cannot improve, nor can content be covered, until relationships have been established. (Cavanaugh, 2014). In fact, RP has been shown to facilitate relationship building. Gregory and colleagues (2016a) found that high RP implementing teachers were more successful than their low or non-RP implementing colleagues at forming positive relationships with a racially and ethnically diverse set of students; likewise, their students perceived these teachers as more respectful of them. To contend with teacher resistance and support a relationship-centric approach to discipline, research recommends quality initial and follow-up training in RP (Guckenberg et al., 2015). This recommendation also addresses the challenges of sustaining an RP culture (discussed later in this section).
- **Changing school culture is difficult!** Effective RP implementation requires schools to make a philosophical shift in culture (Bazemore & Schiff, 2010; Morrison, 2003; Payne & Welch, 2015; Gregory et al., 2016b). As Payne and Welch (2015) report, “restorative policies will only continue to produce positive results when restorative justice values are **adopted as a philosophy by the entire school community** rather than implemented as one practice or program in one classroom or at one level of administration” (p. 542). In schools adhering to an authoritarian, zero tolerance approach, RP struggles to take hold (McCluskey et al., 2008; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Furthermore, researchers caution that effective RP implementation cannot work as “simplified models that appear to be easier to implement or to get buy-in from school administrators who are concerned about adding more responsibilities to their already overburdened staff” (Guckenberg et al., 2015, p. 7). In fact, schools must work with agencies outside the school walls, like community policing programs, to put forth an integrated and comprehensive approach to change to “transformative and restorative justice” (Scott et al., 2017, p. 4). Finally, to

truly shift school culture, **the entire school environment must be restorative** in its approach to staff, students, and families – all members of the community.

- **Sustaining RP.** Building capacity that can withstand staff turnover and the waxing and waning of financial support from outside resources is another challenge to effective RP implementation. In that vein, school leadership needs to not only be consistent and long-term, but needs to embrace the RP model. Schools must maintain ongoing support to staff, usually in the form of training. The single workshop approach is “not enough” (Gregory et al., 2016a), but rather multiple days of initial training, followed up by periodic, supplemental training (Guckenberger et al., 2015), are necessary. And in the spirit of RP, students must be relied upon to use their voices when conflicts arise, as well as to monitor RP success in schools. According to Gregory and colleagues (2016a), “youth should be engaged in a critical examination of their school conditions and offered collaborative roles in affecting change” (p. 344).

Conclusion

The evidence is clear – RP works as a viable alternative to punitive discipline in schools. On the contrary, mounting evidence finds the punitive approach to be not only ineffective in improving discipline, but associated with a constellation of additional problems, such as social justice offenses, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline, decreased achievement, increased misbehavior, and increased likelihood that communities both inside and outside the school will suffer. RP offers something else – community, relationship, repair, decreased incidences of misbehavior, improved school culture, decreased racial discipline gap, and student agency. The road to reform is never easy, nor is effective reform ever quick; however, RP provides incentive supported by evidence that school communities can improve the experiences of all members – staff, parents, teachers, administrators, and especially students.

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