DIMINISHING THE DISCIPLINE GAP: RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS A
PROMISING ALTERNATIVE IN ONE URBAN SCHOOL

Thesis
Submitted to
The School of Education and Health Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of
Educational Specialist in School Psychology

By
Polly K. Long
Dayton, Ohio
August, 2015
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PROMISING ALTERNATIVE IN ONE URBAN SCHOOL

Name: Long, Polly K.

APPROVED BY:

__________________________
Susan Davies, Ed.D.
Advisory Committee Chair
Associate Professor
Department of Counselor Education
& Human Services

__________________________
Elana Bernstein, Ph.D.
Committee Member
Clinical Faculty
Department of Counselor Education &
Human Services

__________________________
Jamie Longazel, Ph.D.
Committee Member
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology, Anthropology,
& Social Work
ABSTRACT

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Name: Long, Polly K.
University of Dayton

Advisor: Dr. Susan Davies

Across the nation, the education system is responding to student misbehavior with zero tolerance policies that parallel the punitive practices found in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Zero tolerance policies have contributed to the “discipline gap,” wherein schools punish racial and ethnic minorities more often and more severely than they punish whites. One alternative to punitive punishment is restorative justice, which aims to foster respect, responsibility, and empathy in members of school communities. This project evaluates the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates in an urban school district. It also serves as one of the few studies that evaluate the effect of restorative practices on the discipline gap. The results validate previous research findings, as restorative justice is related to reductions in out-of-school suspension rates. Further, the results reveal a promising alternative to the punitive
practices that plague the education system, as restorative justice is related to reductions in the size of the discipline gap.
“For with each dawn, she found new hope that someday, her dreams of happiness would come true.” – Cinderella

Dedicated to my father for making the dreams I never knew I had come true.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my chair and committee members for the following; Susan Davies, Ed.D., for cultivating my interest in school psychology; Elana Bernstein, Ph.D., for strengthening my abilities as a writer; and Jamie Longazel, Ph.D., for revealing to me the big picture. Further, I would like to acknowledge Julie Mcglaun for bringing about and fostering my interest in restorative justice, as well as teaching me to be more than just a researcher- but a practitioner.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Schools in the United States have grown increasingly reliant on the punitive, zero tolerance policy of out-of-school suspension for both major and minor disciplinary infractions, despite thirty years of data refuting the efficacy of this policy (American Psychological Association (APA), 2008; Arcia, 2006; Atkins et. al., 2002; Kupchik, 2010; National Association of School Psychologist (NASP), 2012). Research has shown that out-of-school suspension decreases students’ self-esteem, academic achievement, and attendance; at the same time, it increases students’ problem behaviors, depression, and drug addiction (American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 2003; APA, 2008; NASP, 2012; Quin & Hemphill, 2014). Moreover, school safety is not enhanced by the use of this policy; instead, it adversely affects school climate (Kupckik, 2010; Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2013). In fact, scholars have pointed to how this policy fosters a “schoolhouse to jailhouse” pathway-- whereby a student who is suspended is more likely to follow a future trajectory of criminal activity (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Schiff, 2013). Likewise, scholars have also pointed to how this policy creates and sustains the discipline gap—whereby students of color are disciplined more often and more severely than are white students for similar disciplinary infractions (Advancemen
Recently, there has been a public outcry and expert recommendations for an evidence-based alternative to punitive punishment - restorative justice (Casella 2003; Cavanagh, 2009; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Morrison, 2005; Morrison, Thorsborne, & Blood, 2005; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). Restorative justice is centered on promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships. Both nationally and internationally school districts have demonstrated positive results from incorporating restorative justice, including, but not limited to: reductions in suspensions and expulsions; reductions in the overall number and intensity of disciplinary referrals, violent acts, police tickets, and bullying incidents; and decreases in overall school violence and increases in overall school safety (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Morrison, et. al., 2005).

The present program evaluation was conducted in a racially diverse, urban school where 100% of the preschool through eighth grade student population was economically disadvantaged. Consistent with prior research, the study found that restorative justice was related to reductions in out-of-school suspension rates. What this study considers that a lot of prior research has not (Cabanagh, 2009; Gregory, et. al., 2014; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; The Civil Rights Project, 2013), however, is the extent to which the implementation of restorative justice reduced the discipline gap. The study found that the majority-minority discipline gap was reduced after restorative justice implementation,
suggesting that restorative justice may hold promise not just for improving school climate, but also for reducing racial disparities in educational institutions.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will provide a historical context for zero tolerance--the most widely accepted punitive discipline practice across the nation. The impact of zero tolerance on students, schools, and society will be addressed, followed by a discussion of the discipline gap. Thereafter, readers will learn an alternative approach to school discipline, restorative justice. A detailed evaluation of the significance of restorative justice in school communities will follow, as well as an examination of its potential effect on the discipline gap. The combination of these topics will set the stage for the current research study.

The Roots of Punitive Discipline

In recent decades, social, economic, and political forces have brought about what sociologist David Garland (2001) refers to as a “culture of control.” The U.S. public has exhibited an emotional investment in crime characterized by feelings of fascination, fear, anger, and resentment. Manifestations of this culture of control include the increased rates of punitive laws, policing, and surveillance, as well as the decreased rates of rehabilitative programs and restorative ideals. However, the most obvious manifestation of a culture of control today is mass incarceration, which refers to the comparatively and historically high rate of imprisonment that has taken place in the United States since the
mid-1970s\(^1\) (Garland, 2001).

Punishments emerging from the culture of control purport to be class and race neutral; although the reality is that these ideological shifts have disproportionately affected poor people of color. Indeed, as Alexander (2007) has said, mass incarceration stimulates a racial caste system whereby minorities are situated below the majority.\(^2\) In the U.S. one out of fifteen African American males and one out of thirty-six Hispanic males over the age of eighteen are incarcerated, while one out of one hundred and six White males over the age of eighteen are incarcerated (Austin, et. al., 2007). Further, 58% of the prison population is African American and Hispanic, however less than 25% of the population is African American and Hispanic.\(^3\)

Manifestations of this culture of control in the education system include the increased use of security cameras, metal detectors, police officers, canine units, and SWAT teams in schools (Austin, et. al., 2007; Finn & Servoss, 2013; Kupchik, 2010). Moreover, the media’s ever-increasing coverage of school violence serves as another affirmation of this culture of control in schools (Kupchik, 2010). For example, national

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\(^1\) The 700% increase in imprisonment since 1970 has led to an imprisonment rate of 715 inmates per 100,000 persons in the U.S.; thus, the increase in imprisonment outpaces population growth and has occurred despite crime rates in major U.S. cities declining since 1990 (Harrison & Karberg, 2004; Brown, 2007).

\(^2\) In 2003, 12% of the nation’s prisoners ages 20-30 identified themselves as African American, and 1.6% of the nations prisoners ages 20-30 identified themselves as White (Harrison & Karberg, 2004).

\(^3\) A report entitled *Unlocking America* (2007) explained the size of this disparity by suggesting that the U.S. prison population would drop by 50% if minorities were incarcerated at the same rate as non-minorities.
media coverage of education is increasingly reporting on crime-related or episodic events rather than educational policy or school reform (West, Whitehurst, & Dionne, 2010). This is despite the fact that recent research shows that schools are one of the safest places for children to be and that school violence has been on the decline for three decades (School Crime and Violence Statistics, 2010). What’s more, the punitive discipline practices found in the juvenile and criminal justice systems that were brought about in part by this culture of control can to be found in the education system.

**The Impact of Punitive Discipline**

Punitive discipline practices that aim to punish students for misbehavior currently permeate American classrooms (NASP, 2012). These policies are often referred to as “zero tolerance policies.” Zero tolerance policies are the most widely implemented punitive discipline model across the nation with nearly 95% of school districts utilizing such policies in 2003 and 97% of middle and high schools utilizing such policies in 2011 (NASP, 2012). Schools utilizing zero tolerance policies typically have predetermined consequences for student behavioral infractions; each time a student receives a behavioral infraction, the school responds with the mandated consequence outlined in their zero tolerance policy.

The most common mandated consequence outlined in zero tolerance policies is out-of-school suspension (Advancement Project, 2005; Brownstein, 2010; Sundius & Farneth, 2008). Out-of-school suspension rates have increased nationwide despite school violence remaining relatively stable over the past 30 years (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Research suggests that this discrepancy is a result of increases in the
number of suspensions administered for minor disciplinary infractions such as arriving late to class or demonstrating off-task behavior (Brownstein, 2010).

Despite more than 20 years of implementation, there is minimal data supporting the use of punitive discipline policies. In fact, punitive discipline practices fail to reduce disciplinary infractions and fail to increase school safety (APA, 2008; NASP, 2012; Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2013). Most research points to the detriments such policies have on students, schools, and society (APA, 2008; NASP, 2012).

Suspended students respond to suspension by feeling stigmatized by school staff and parents, viewing school staff with suspicion and resentment, acting withdrawn, feeling powerless and helpless, and reductions in self-esteem (Quin & Hemphill, 2014). Moreover, suspension in the early years of school is the strongest predictor for suspension in the latter years of a student’s schooling (Christle, et. al., 2005). Further, suspended students are more likely to experience future behavior problems than non-suspended students and are less likely than non-suspended students to obtain the necessary school services to remediate behavior problems (AAP, 2003). The likelihood of future behavior problems combined with a lack of resources to address these problems is exacerbated by the fact that suspended students display higher rates of drug addiction, depression, and home life stresses than non-suspended students (AAP, 2003).

Removal from school through out-of-school suspensions increases a student’s likelihood of engaging in or becoming victim to violent crimes. For example, school-aged youth are twice as likely to experience rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault outside of school as they are inside of school (Sundius & Farneth, 2008). The
potential to engage in or become victim to violent crimes is especially concerning for suspended students who are least likely to be supervised at home (Quin & Hemphill 2014).

Additionally, educational research has shown academic engagement is the strongest predictor of academic achievement (Bono, 2011). Zero tolerance policies decrease opportunities for academic engagement thus adversely affecting students’ academic achievement (Sundius & Farneth, 2008; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). Arcia (2006) noted that students’ academic achievement decreases as the number of days of suspension increases. This is concerning because more than three million K-12 students received an out-of-school suspension for one day or more during the 2010-11 school year (Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

Lowered academic achievement proves detrimental to schools as well. Schools are evaluated on their students’ level of academic achievement. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which is the largest congressionally mandated assessment of American students, evaluates schools on their students’ academic achievement in various subjects. The American Psychological Association (2008) found that a school’s NAEP ranking relates negatively to a school’s state suspension ranking. In other words, across the nation, schools with higher levels of suspension rates show lower levels of academic achievement. Most importantly, although supporters of school discipline claim it is used to maintain order and safety within a school community, Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson (2013) noted that school
communities utilizing zero tolerance policies do not increase school safety and create poor school climates.

Cost is also an issue, as school districts utilizing zero tolerance policies are failing to use their resources effectively (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). An example of this comes from a study by the Council of State Governments (2011) in Texas who estimated the cost of suspension and expulsion for taxpayers. Their study revealed that in one year, 11.3 million dollars were spent on school discipline, which excludes the additional 20.3 million dollars spent on security and monitoring. This failure to make use of financial resources is worsened when considering the strict, shrinking budget many school districts are experiencing.

In addition to negatively impacting students, schools, and society, punitive discipline practices push students out of the education system and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Scholars have referred to the notion that suspended students are more likely to end up in the criminal justice system as the “schoolhouse to jailhouse pathway” (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Brownstein, 2010; Schiff, 2013). Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2005) found that the majority of court-involved youth have experienced suspension, 50% of whom were suspended more than once. Furthermore, the continual use of zero tolerance policies across the nation creates and sustains the “schoolhouse to jailhouse” pathway while simultaneously widening the discipline gap (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Schiff, 2013; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013).
The Discipline Gap

Punitive discipline practices affect students from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and students in urban, suburban, and rural school districts; however, punitive discipline practices most strongly affect racial and ethnic minorities who are punished more often and more severely than their non-minority counterparts (Brownstein, 2010; Cavanagh, 2009; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Solari & Balshaw, 2007; Sundius & Farneth, 2008; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013).

The discipline gap is a term used to explain the issue of students of color who are disciplined more often and more severely than are white students for similar disciplinary infractions. For example, one study revealed that African American students were 250% more likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-minority counterparts if their school’s principal identified himself or herself as white (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). These discrepancies have been documented at national, state, and school level research for over thirty years (APA, 2008; Advancement Project & The Civil Rights Project, 2000; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Solari & Balshaw, 2007).

This phenomenon exists despite the fact students of color do not exhibit higher rates of misbehavior than white students (Skiba et al., 2011). Disparities in school discipline are found for students living in poverty; however, racial disparities continue to exist even when socioeconomic status is accounted for (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Additionally, racial disparities in school discipline continue to exist in populations with low numbers of minority youth and populations with low suspension rates.
An Alternative: Restorative Justice

Given the adverse effects of zero tolerance, many school districts and state and congressional leaders have shifted their attention to restorative justice, an evidenced-based alternative to punitive punishment (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Brownstein, 2010; Cavanagh, 2009; Casella 2003; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). Restorative justice is centered on principles of promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships. It grew out of communities' dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to justice that calls for individuals to be punished for violating the law. A violation of the law or state is termed “wrongdoing.” Restorative justice challenges traditional justice by denoting that wrongdoing is more than a violation of the law; wrongdoing is any act that harms people and relationships. Further, restorative justice expects individuals who engage in wrongdoing to understand the impact of their actions and repair the harm done by their actions. This, in turn, the philosophy asserts, prevents the reoccurrence of wrongdoing.

By the 1970’s restorative justice was used across the criminal and juvenile justice system in the United States (Zehr, 2002). By the 1990’s, restorative justice was being used in public and private education settings in the United States (Morrison, 2001). Since then, restorative justice has been applied in various settings, including criminal and juvenile justice system, public and private education settings, workforce, and community processes (Zehr, 2002). Restorative justice is applicable in multiple environments because it is not a discipline program or educational curriculum; rather, it is a philosophy.
Restorative principles and practices allow for the application of restorative justice in various environments.

**Restorative principles.** Schools seeking to practice restorative justice begin by identifying restorative principles. Restorative principles are founded upon the restorative justice philosophy and can be tailored to the environment in which they are applied. For example, a school community seeking to practice restorative justice will first identify its unique culture and individual needs in order to identify its restorative practices. Restorative practices vary slightly in each school community; however, Amstutz and Mullet (2005) identified the following seven restorative principles that are consistent in all school communities utilizing a restorative justice philosophy:

1. School communities collectively identify values and beliefs, while providing a safe place that promotes meaningful, inclusive, collaborative relationships between students, parents, teachers, and administrators even when wrongdoing occurs.

2. School policies reflect the values and beliefs identified by community members. These policies address the underlying cause of wrongdoing in a manner that strengthens relationships.

3. Wrongdoing not only breaks the rules, but also harms people and relationships. Thus, the person(s) harmed, person(s) doing the harm, and surrounding community, to the extent possible, is obligated to collectively find solutions to wrongdoing, which allows for incidents of wrongdoing to be transformed into teachable moments.
4. The safety of the person(s) harmed is the school community’s number one priority. The school community’s number two priority is to listen to the person(s) harmed to properly identify the damage done and solution to wrongdoing.

5. Human needs such as freedom, power, belonging, and fun must be satisfied. When these are not satisfied they are often at the root of misbehavior.

6. Community members, specifically students, change and grow through teachable moments because they find new ways of identifying and meeting their needs and the needs of others. This change and growth requires listening, reflecting, trust, accountability, and inclusive problem solving.

7. Community members, specifically students, learn responsibility when they understand the impact of their wrongdoing and the need to repair the damage caused by their wrongdoing. This can be accomplished when students are cooperative and responsible for identifying restorative consequences for their wrongdoing.

**Restorative practices.** Complementing restorative principles are restorative practices: tangible exercises founded on restorative principles and also tailored to the setting in which they are applied (i.e., urban, suburban, rural schools). Restorative practices foster restorative justice when they are habitually utilized in school communities, and they are most effective when implemented within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS; Morrison, 2005).
Tier one of the restorative justice pyramid serves 100% of the student population and is called *School-Wide Prevention Practices* (Morrison, 2005). Tier one aims to prevent problems by encouraging administrators, teachers, and students to develop healthy relationships, identify common values and guidelines, develop social-emotional understanding and skills, and strengthen their sense of belonging and ownership.

Tier one involves three restorative practices: (a) relational practices, (b) circles, and (c) routines. Relational practices provide students and teachers with an opportunity to understand how individuals in classrooms and schools relate to one another. Circles facilitate student and teacher connectivity. Routines allow for the creation of classroom values and promote discussion of them.

Tier two of the restorative justice pyramid serves 10-15% of the student population and is called *Managing Difficulties* (Morrison, 2005). Students in tier two have engaged in inappropriate behavior that has earned them a disciplinary infraction. For example, a student may have talked back to a teacher, threw something in the lunchroom, bullied a peer, broke the dress code, etc. Tier two aims to manage conflict by encouraging administrators, teachers, and students to resolve differences, build social-emotional capacity, and meet one another’s needs.

Tier two employs five restorative practices: (a) problem-solving circles, (b) restorative conversation, (c) hallway conferences, (d) restorative conference, and (e) peer mediation. Problem-solving circles provide classroom space for conflict resolution. Restorative conversations use restorative dialogue to repair or prevent harm. Hallway conferences are brief conversations that identify people affected and steps to prevent
further harm. Restorative conferences enable individuals to resolve differences through empathy by meeting formally to prevent or correct harm. Peer mediation requires peer mediators to help solve conflicts to prevent additional harm.

Tier three of the restorative justice pyramid serves 5-10% of the student population and is called Intense Intervention (Morrison, 2005). Students served at tier three have committed a major disciplinary infraction. For example, they may have assaulted another student or teacher, brought drugs or weapons to school, or consistently bullied another student. Tier three aims to intervene by encouraging administrators, teachers, and students and focus on accountability, rebuilding relationships, and reintegration.

Tier three employs three restorative practices: (a) intervention circles, (b) peer juries, and (c) restorative conferencing. Intervention circles provide classroom space to resolve conflict at the intense intervention level. Peer juries designate youth to positions such as judge, jury, prosecutor, and defense attorney to solve conflicts that arise. Restorative conferences, once again, repair harm through empathy within a formal meeting environment.

**Restorative outcomes.** Schools across the United States have demonstrated positive results from incorporating restorative justice (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2009). Positive results are most apparent in school district’s discipline data. For example, before the implementation of restorative justice, the suspension and expulsion rate at Cole Middle School, an urban school in Oakland, CA, was higher than the district average. After implementation of restorative justice, Cole
Middle School decreased suspensions by 87% and expulsions by 100%, which yielded a suspension and expulsion rate even lower than the district average (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). Chicago Public Schools reportedly reduced more than 1,000 suspension days by implementing restorative justice (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). The International Institute for Restorative Practices (2009) has further voiced the efficacy of restorative justice in urban schools by stating:

West Philadelphia High School, widely known as one of Philadelphia’s most dangerous and high-risk schools, on the state’s “Persistently Dangerous Schools” list for six years running, is seeing positive results with restorative practices less than one school year into implementation (p. 6).

Restorative justice is not limited to urban schools, as it has proved equally effective in suburban and rural schools. For example, the Minnesota Department of Education, which primarily serves suburban and rural districts, went from having 11 restorative schools in 2003 to 250 restorative schools by 2011; that is, the state came to value the impact restorative justice has on disciplinary data and thus expanded restorative practices into the vast majority of their schools.

In addition to reductions in suspension and expulsion, urban, suburban, and rural restorative schools have reported reductions in the overall number and intensity of disciplinary referrals, violent acts, police tickets, and bullying incidents (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Mirsky, 2003). Examples of disciplinary referrals impacted by restorative practices include cafeteria violations, detentions, thefts, and classroom disruptions (Mirsky, 2003). Some school communities in Colorado have even noted decreased use of drugs and
alcohol among their student populations due to implementation of restorative justice (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Riestenberg, 2007).

Given the examples above, it is not surprising that many school communities using restorative justice report a decrease in overall school violence and an increase in overall school safety and climate (IIRP, 2009). Moreover, research across school communities, the juvenile justice system, and the criminal justice system has demonstrated that restorative justice can effectively reduce recidivism rates and disrupt the “schoolhouse to jailhouse” pathway (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Brownstein, 2010; Schiff, 2013).

Positive outcomes are also apparent in academic and attendance data. Schools report an increase in students’ academic achievement and standardized test scores after implementation of restorative justice (Kidde & Alfred, 2011). Likewise, school attendance data increases after implementation of restorative justice. In fact, attendance rates have either remained stable or continually increased each year after initial restorative justice implementation (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). Moreover, research in urban, suburban, and rural school districts has compared schools with restorative justice to schools without restorative justice. This research has shown that schools utilizing restorative justice demonstrate higher levels of academic achievement, standardized test scores, and attendance than schools without restorative justice (Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010).

Restorative justice can promote positive relationships in school communities (Arnott, 2007; Porter, 2007). Specifically, it can increase students’ ability to prompt and
engage in meaningful communication. The increase in meaningful communication among students is also visible among parents, teachers, administrators, and community members. Teachers and administrators have noted an improvement in their relationships with students and with one another as a direct result of using restorative practices (Kidde & Alfred, 2011).

The positive results of restorative justice in school communities have led policymakers to introduce federal legislation that enables funding for restorative justice, such as the Restorative Justice in Schools Act of 2013 and the Successful, Safe, And Healthy Students Act of 2013. The goal of the Restorative Justice in Schools Act of 2013 is to promote the positive results of restorative justice and reduce the total time lost to school discipline annually in school communities. This involves training teachers and counselors in restorative justice and conflict resolution, which can be funded by making use of the funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The goal of the Successful, Safe, And Healthy Students Act of 2013 is to encourage school communities to implement positive, preventive approaches to school discipline. This can be accomplished because the Successful, Safe, And Healthy Students Act of 2013 would provide funding and technical assistance to school communities seeking to employ restorative justice and/or school wide positive behavior supports as new approaches to school discipline. In short, school communities using restorative justice yield many positive results, the most prominent of which is reductions in the number of suspensions and expulsions (IIRP, 2009; Mirsky, 2003).
Restorative justice and the discipline gap. Scholars have suggested a qualitative relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap. For instance, Cabanagh (2009) suggested a relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap by comparing literature on both subjects. He found that school communities have narrowed the discipline gap through the following actions: promoting healthy, caring, respectful relationships between administrators, teachers, and students; assisting teachers and students with nonviolently responding to problems and collaboratively solving problems; and viewing wrongdoing as an opportunity for learning, building trust, and repairing harm. These actions, that reportedly decrease the discipline gap, are similar to those actions taken by school communities implementing restorative justice (Cabanagh, 2009).

Dr. Anne Gregory of Rutgers University is one of the few researchers who have demonstrated a relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap. Her 2014 study analyzed student surveys from high school classrooms at two urban high schools with a total enrollment of approximately 5,000 students. Results showed that classrooms where teachers implemented restorative practices more tended to have narrow discipline gaps – that is Latino and African-American versus White students – compared to teachers who implemented restorative practices less (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2014). Despite her research, few scholars have yet to demonstrate a quantitative relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap. This gap in the literature served as the foundation for which the present study was built upon.
Restorative Justice in an Urban School District

Ruby PreK-8 (a pseudonym used to protect confidentiality) is one of thirty-two schools in DayTime School District (a pseudonym used to protect confidentiality). DayTime School District is located in a mid-size city in the Midwestern region of the United States with a total population of 141,527 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In the years leading up to 2011, Ruby PreK-8 documented an overwhelming number of office discipline referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions, which left members of the school community questioning their school’s punitive discipline policy. By 2012, the administration responded to students, parents, staff, and surrounding community members’ concerns by implementing restorative justice.

The first step in restorative justice implementation for Ruby PreK-8 was the identification of their restorative principles. Members of the Ruby PreK-8 community reflected upon their mission to, “in partnership with parents and the community, raise up and send forth self-advocating, service oriented, global citizens, who through meaningful commitments will change the world one relationship at a time.” This reflection led Ruby PreK-8 to identify with the seven restorative principles outlined by Amstutz and Mullet (2005). These seven principles set the foundation for Ruby PreK-8’s restorative practices, which continue to be implemented within a response to intervention (RTI) model (Morrison, 2005). During the first year of implementation Ruby PreK-8 implemented: (a) routines at tier one, (b) restorative conversations, restorative conferences, and peer mediation at tier two, and (c) restorative conferences at tier three. During the second year of implementation Ruby PreK-8 implemented: (a) circles and routines at tier one, (b)
circles, restorative conversations, restorative conferences, and peer mediation at tier two, and (c) circles, peer juries, and restorative conferences at tier three.

In accordance with Ohio State Law, all boards of education are required to have a zero tolerance policy. DayTime School District satisfies the provision of the law in their Policy Manual by stating that the board has zero tolerance for violent, disruptive, intimidating behavior or any other inappropriate behavior by its students. Students who fail to comply with such are subject to approved student discipline regulations. Although this policy satisfies the provision of law, administrators are encouraged to develop a comprehensive list of rules for students with corresponding discipline sanctions for violations. These rules and sanctions are to be synthesized into a Student Code of Conduct that is reviewed and revised yearly and approved by the board. The Student Code of Conduct is made available to students and parents through Student / Parent Handbooks location in, and specific to each building.

Ruby PreK-8 maintained the same Student Code of Conduct from 2011 to 2014. This code of conduct parallels the zero tolerance policy outlined by DayTime School District in their Policy Manual, and defines out-of-school suspension and expulsion as approved consequences for misbehavior. This policy, in combination with administrative judgment, determines whether or not a student is suspended or expelled. Further, Ruby PreK-8 did update their Parent / Student Handbook to include restorative justice in 2012-when restorative practices were first implemented. This updated describe the restorative practices used in Ruby PreK-8.
Program Evaluation

Researchers and policy makers continue to call for an increase in school data, as it is a crucial tool in the decision-making process at the building, district, state, and federal level (Thomas & Grimes, 2010). In the field of education, program evaluations are employed to determine if a specific set of education practices has an impact on a specific set of education outcomes (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). When researchers decide to conduct a program evaluation they must first identify their evaluation audience, including: (a) those affected by the outcome of the program evaluation, and (b) those responsible for making program related decision. In the current program evaluation, the evaluation audience consisted of students, parents, teachers, community members, eight principals, the restorative justice coordinator, school board members, and the school district superintendent.

After identifying the evaluation audience, researchers must identify their evaluation audience’s needs. The needs of the evaluation audience for the current program evaluation included determining whether Ruby PreK-8 should continue implementation of restorative justice and whether DayTime School District should expand implementation of restorative justice to additional schools. By identifying an evaluation audience and their subsequent needs, researchers can identify the type of program evaluation to be used. The present study employed a summative program evaluation, which, in the field of education, provides data on change and innovation taking place in a school to aid stakeholders in adopting a program, continuing a program, or expanding a program (ACT, 2007; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004).
The Present Study

Considerable research has established the relationship between restorative justice and suspension rates; however, there is a lack of research on the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap (Cavanagh, 2009; Gregory, et. al., 2014; Morrison, et. al., 2005; Schiff, 2013). Thus, the present program evaluation examined: (a) the relationship between restorative justice and suspension, and (b) the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap in an urban school district.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research question one. What is the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates in Ruby PreK-8 School in the DayTime School District?

Hypothesis one. It was hypothesized that the implementation of restorative justice would coincide with a decrease in the number of out-of-school suspensions at Ruby PreK-8. This hypothesis was based on literature demonstrating restorative justice as an effective and beneficial discipline policy that has been shown to reduce suspension (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

Research question two. What is the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap in Ruby PreK-8 School in the DayTime School District?

Hypothesis two. It was hypothesized that implementation of restorative justice would coincide with a decrease in the discipline gap at Ruby PreK-8. This hypothesis was based on literature suggesting the use of restorative justice at the district, state, and national level to minimize the discipline gap (Cavanagh, 2009; Gregory, et. al., 2014; Morrison, et. al., 2005; Schiff, 2013).
Research Design

To provide DayTime School District with information on the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates, as well as the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap, a summative program evaluation was completed for Ruby PreK-8. A program evaluation was chosen over an experimental design because data for the study were collected prior to the researcher’s involvement and because a control group was not feasible for the study. Moreover, a summative program evaluation was chosen to provide data in support or opposition of restorative justice that may aid stakeholders in continuing or expanding restorative practices.

The current program evaluation examined pre and post, extant discipline data from three academic years. The discipline data collected was the number of out-of-school suspensions. Out-of-school suspension was defined as temporarily removing a student from their regular education setting to another setting. This data spans three academic years (2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14), which represent Ruby PreK-8 prior to restorative justice (2011-2012), and during the first (2012-2013) and second year (2013-2014) of implementation of restorative justice.

Participants and Setting

Participants in this program evaluation include kindergarten through eighth grade students enrolled at Ruby PreK-8 in DayTime School District between the years of 2011-14, with a racial / ethnic demographic makeup of White (828), Black (244), Hispanic (331), and Multiracial (108). The Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian subgroups
were not included in the data analyses due to the subgroups’ small size (2). Table 1 shows participant demographic data by academic year.

Table 1

*Participant and Racial Demographic Data by Academic Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
<th>2013-14</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>272 (33%)</td>
<td>256 (31%)</td>
<td>300 (36%)</td>
<td>828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>73 (30%)</td>
<td>88 (36%)</td>
<td>83 (34%)</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>108 (33%)</td>
<td>103 (31%)</td>
<td>120 (36%)</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>41 (38%)</td>
<td>33 (31%)</td>
<td>34 (31%)</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DayTime School District is located in a mid-size city in the Midwestern region of the United States. DayTime has a total population of 141,527 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). DayTime falls behind the rest of its state in terms of higher education achievement, median income, and poverty rate. Examples of this include a median city income of $28,843 compared to the state’s median income of $48,071 and a citywide poverty rate of 33% compared to the state’s poverty rate of 15%. The racial demographics of this city also differ from those of the state as a whole and are included in Table 2. Ruby PreK-8 is one of thirty-two schools in DayTime School District. During the 2012-13 school year DayTime School District served 15,313 K-12 students and had a graduation rate of 70%.
Table 2

2012 Racial Demographics of City & State in Which Participating District is Located

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>City (%)</th>
<th>State (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian and Alaska Native</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

Extant data from the 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 academic school years were retrieved from DayTime’s disciplinary referral system for Ruby PreK-8. Specifically, information on out-of-school suspensions and student demographics were gathered. DayTime’s disciplinary referral system defines out-of-school suspension as any temporary removal of a student from their regular classroom that no longer places the student under the supervision of school personnel. Out-of-school suspension is recorded on a monthly basis and includes repeat suspensions, but does not include length of suspensions. Additionally, DayTime’s disciplinary referral system for Ruby PreK-8 provides information on the demographic makeup of those students suspended, as well as students enrolled. DayTime’s disciplinary referral system maintains participant information confidentiality.
Procedures

Prior to data collection, the researcher gained approval from the University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as DayTime School District’s IRB. The researcher then contacted the Department of Assessment and Accountability at DayTime school district to schedule a phone conference with their Executive Director. During the phone conference, the researcher informed the Executive Director of IRB approval for data collection; in response, the Executive Director scheduled an in-person meeting with the researcher.

Data collection. The researcher met with the Executive Director at the Department of Assessment and Accountability for DayTime School to collect extant data from the 2011-12, 2012-13, and 2013-14 academic school years for Ruby PreK-8. Data collected for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 academic school years were reported to the State Department of Education through the Education Management Information System prior to data collection, while data collected for the 2013-14 academic school year was not. In an effort to comply with district rules and regulation, the Executive Director copied the necessary data into an excel file, which was then saved to the researchers private, locked flash-drive.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Data Analyses

The following methods were used to analyze the program evaluation data in order to answer each proposed research question.

Research question one. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension. Figure 1 shows the number of out-of-school suspensions across three academic years in Ruby PreK-8. Restorative justice was implemented in the second and third year, 2012 and 2013. There was a 49% reduction in the number of out-of-school suspensions from 2011 to 2012 and a 58% reduction from 2012 to 2013, despite a 12% increase in student enrollment from 2012-2013.
Table 3 shows total enrollment, number of out-of-school suspensions, and rate of out-of-school suspension across three academic years by race in Ruby PreK-8. To calculate the rate, the researcher divided the number of out-of-school suspensions per minority/majority group by the number of students enrolled in that minority/majority group per year. Thus, the rate of out-of-school suspension was comparable across minority/majority groups with different student enrollments and across three academic years. As shown in Table 3, there was a reduction in the rate of out-of-school suspensions from 2011 to 2012 and 2012 to 2013 for all minority/majority groups: the rate of out-of-school suspension for Black, Non-Hispanic students declined 17% from 2011 to 2012 and 20% from 2012 to 2013. Similarly, the rate of out-of-school suspension for White, Non-Hispanic students declined 27% from 2011 to 2012 and 15% from 2012 to 2013. Hispanic students’ rate of out-of-school suspension declined 14% from 2011 to 2012 and
from 2012 to 2013, while Multiracial students’ rate of out-of-school suspension declined 27% from 2011 to 2012 and 4% from 2012 to 2013.
Table 3

*Total Enrollment, Number of Out-of-School Suspensions, and Rate of Out-of-School Suspensions across Three Academic Years by Race in Ruby PreK-8*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2011 Enrollment</th>
<th>2011 Number</th>
<th>2011 Rate</th>
<th>2012 Enrollment</th>
<th>2012 Number</th>
<th>2012 Rate</th>
<th>2013 Enrollment</th>
<th>2013 Number</th>
<th>2013 Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>256</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further, Figure 2 shows the rate of out-of-school suspension across three academic years by race in Rubby PreK-8. As shown in Figure 2, black and white students had similar rates of out-of-school suspension in 2011. Data from 2009 and 2010 on enrollment and number and rate of out-of-school suspension by race for Ruby PreK-8 was unobtainable. However, data from 2009 and 2010 on enrollment and number of out-of-school suspension by race for DayTime School District was obtainable through the State Department of Education, Student Demographic and Discipline Report Card. Such data was combined to determine rate of out-of-school suspension for the minority and majority groups. Results are located in Table 4, which shows black and white students did not have similar rates of out-of-school suspension in DayTime School District in 2009 and 2010. This data, although not specific to Ruby PreK-8, may explain the 2011 black and white out-of-school suspension rates at Ruby PreK-8 as an anomaly. Further, throughout the 2011-12 school year, the principal of Ruby PreK-8 was in the process of planning restorative practice implementation. It is likely that this process prompted administration to be more cognizant of out-of-school suspension as well as the discipline gap.
Figure 2 - Rate of Out-of-School Suspensions Across Three Academic Years by Race
Table 4

Total Enrollment, Number of Out-of-School Suspensions, and Rate of Out-of-School Suspensions across Three Academic Years by Race in DayTime School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Enrollment 2009</th>
<th>Number 2009</th>
<th>Rate 2009</th>
<th>Enrollment 2010</th>
<th>Number 2010</th>
<th>Rate 2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9,489</td>
<td>4703</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>9,510</td>
<td>5126</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>448</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>3,516</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3,574</td>
<td>1343</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research question two. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap(s). Subgroup discipline gaps were determined by calculating the difference between the rate of out-of-school suspension for a specific minority group (Black, Non-Hispanic; Hispanic; and Multiracial) and the rate of out-of-school suspension for the majority group (White, Non-Hispanic). Table 5 shows the subgroup discipline gaps decreased each academic year after restorative implementation, with the exception of the white-black gap that increased, and the white-multiracial gap that remained constant, from 2011 to 2012.

The average discipline gap was determined by calculating the difference between the average rate of out-of-school suspension for minority groups and the rate of out-of-school suspension for the majority group. Table 6 shows the average discipline gap decreased from 10% in 2011 to 2% in 2012, and decreased yet again from 2% in 2012 to 0% in 2013.
Table 5

*Subgroups Discipline Gaps across Three Academic Years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White-Black</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Hispanic</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White-Multiracial</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

*Average Discipline Gap across Three Academic Years*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Rate</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White Rate</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Gap</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Review of Purpose and Major Findings

Increasing reports of successful restorative justice implementation across the nation gave rise to Ruby PreK-8’s decision to implement restorative practices. However, the stakeholders required data demonstrating a link between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates, as well as between restorative justice and the discipline gap, thus prompting the current program evaluation. Data from the current evaluation were consistent with existing research validating the link between restorative justice and decreases in rates of out-of-school suspension. Further, data from the current evaluation added to existing research by demonstrating a link between restorative justice and a narrowing of the discipline gap in an urban school.

Research question one. Prior to restorative justice implementation, the average suspension rate for Ruby PreK-8 was forty-six suspensions per one hundred students per year. After one year of implementation of restorative justice practices, this rate fell to twenty-four suspensions per one hundred students per year. After two years of implementation this rate fell to nine suspensions per one hundred students per year. This represents a 72 percent reduction in the suspension rate. Consequently, after two years of restorative justice implementation, the rate of out-of-school suspensions at Ruby PreK-8
was lower than DayTime School District’s average rate of out-of-school suspension, and lower than any school in the district.

These reductions are significant in isolation; however, they are even more significant when Ruby PreK-8’s Student Code of Conduct and Student / Parent Handbook are taken into consideration. That is, Ruby PreK-8 did not alter their Student Code of Conduct and in turn, the zero tolerance policy outlined by DayTime School District remained intact throughout years of data analyzed for the current study. Ruby PreK-8 did, however, add information on restorative practices to their Student / Parent Handbook prior to the start of the 2012-13 academic year.

Additionally, the reduction in suspension was visible across all racial / ethnic groups. This suggests that restorative justice implementation reduced discriminatory discipline practices at Ruby PreK-8. This serves as an important finding because changes to discipline policies that only reduce suspension for the majority may further oppress the minority.

**Research question two.** Findings indicate that Ruby PreK-8 consecutively, over a two-year period, reduced the difference between the rate of out-of-school suspension for the minority group and the rate of out-of-school suspension for the majority group. In turn, Ruby PreK-8 reduced the average discipline gap, that is the discipline gap between the minority and majority. Furthermore, it can not go unnoticed that subgroup discipline gaps, although less than 5%, do still exist. In an effort to remediate these gaps, it is recommended that restorative justice implementation at Ruby PreK-8 continue to be analyzed in the coming years, as the first two years of restorative justice implemented
offer well founded evidence that restorative practices may decrease the size of the discipline gap.

**Interpretation of Findings Relative to Hypotheses**

Although a causal relationship cannot be established given that an experimental design was not used, the size of the reduction in out-of-school suspension and the discipline gap(s) after one year of restorative justice, and the maintenance of such reductions after two years of restorative justice, provides well-founded evidence that restorative justice did have a significant impact in reducing out-of-school suspensions and the discipline gap(s). Thus, similar to past research, the results of this evaluation indicated that implementation of restorative justice will likely decrease out-of-school suspension; of even greater importance, and to add to existing research, demonstrated that implementation of restorative justice can decrease the discipline gap(s) in an urban school (Christle, et al., 2005; IIRP, 2009; Gregory et al., 2014).

**Limitations**

The current program evaluation is not without limitations. First, descriptive statistics offer the evaluation audience a glimpse of the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension and/or the discipline gap(s); however, the research design does not offer the evaluation audience information to posit a cause-effect relationship between the variables. The inability to illustrate cause-effect relationships is a common drawback of program evaluations and correlative research designs, especially in the field of education where an experimental research design is not practicable (2007; Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004). Experimental research designs are not practical
because such designs require control groups for comparison and the random selection and assignment of participants, both of which are generally not feasible in schools. The lack of random sampling strategies, in turn, limits the present study’s ability to generalize the findings to other urban schools. Furthermore, experimental research designs call for all variables to be controlled and or manipulated. Those variables unable to be controlled and/or manipulated in the present study include a change in principals between the first and second year of restorative justice implementation. After collaborating with teachers and staff, as well as viewing Ruby PreK-8’s discipline data, the new principal decided to increase the number of restorative practices utilized between the first and second year of restorative justice implementation. This increase in restorative practices serves as another variable that the researcher was unable to control and or manipulate.

In January of 2014, the U.S. Federal Government issued new guidelines on school climate and discipline that recommend schools move away from zero tolerance policies and move towards restorative practices. The recommendations are founded on the following three guiding principles:

1. Create positive climates and focus on prevention;
2. Develop clear, appropriate, and consistent expectations and consequences to address disruptive student behaviors; and

In their 2014 resource guide entitled, Guiding Principles: A Resource Guide for Improving School Climate and Discipline, under the second principle, the U.S.
Department of Education acknowledges the use of restorative practices to help “students learn from their behaviors, grow, and succeed (p. 12).” Such recommendations by the federal government may have impacted administrator’s, such as the principal of Ruby PreK-8, opinion and or use of out-of-school suspension. However, if this proved true, only half of the second year of restorative justice implementation would have been impacted, leaving a year and a half of valid data.

Furthermore, the data were limited in that it did not allow the researcher to test the strength and direction of the relationship between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates for statistical significance. McNemar’s Test, a Chi Square Test adjusted for repeated measures, could have been used to test the strength and direction of one variable upon another for statistical significance; however, McNemar’s Test requires independent data (Pallant, 2013). Had the McNemar’s Test been completed, the researcher would have had to assume that the data was independent, thereby assuming that each out-of-school suspension represented one student. The researcher did not have access to independent data due to confidentiality rules set forth by the Office of Research and Accountability in DayTime School District. Thus, the researcher was unable to test for statistical significance.

Finally, due to the confidentiality rules set forth by the Office of Research and Accountability in DayTime School District, the researcher had to assume that the data was independent when calculating rates, which were used to compute the discipline gap(s). Studies have shown that thirty to fifty percent of suspended students are suspended a second time (Brownstein, 2010). Thus, it could be argued that some of the
out-of-school suspensions mentioned above stem from repeat offenders, which in turn would decrease the out-of-school suspension rate and result in a decrease in the discipline gap(s). Even if it were proven true that some out-of-school suspensions at Ruby PreK-8 were the result of repeat offenders, the data, with steep declines in both suspension and the discipline gap(s), would likely still result in reductions in suspensions and the discipline gap(s).

**Implications for Future Practice & Research**

Significant research, both nationally and internationally, has supported the use of restorative justice not only in the education system, but also in the juvenile justice system. However, similar research has noted that the education and juvenile justice system serve the same children and adolescents and thus can further punish and/or restore these children and adolescents based on their use of either punitive or restorative discipline. For example, a school community utilizing punitive discipline may suspend numerous students each year, thereby increasing these students’ chances of entering the juvenile justice system where those same students are then, after leaving the juvenile justice system, more likely to fail academically upon returning to school. In this way, the education and criminal justice system work together to further punish those students they serve.

Conversely, the education and criminal justice system might transform the roles of their professional staff as a means to further foster restoration not only in their individual system, but also in the greater system-- the community they serve. Educators and juvenile justice professionals who do that understand that their end goal of keeping
kids in school and out of the justice system is the same. For such goals to be met, collaborative, non-hierarchical communication must take place. Moreover, professionals both education and juvenile justice must be further educated on the research surrounding restorative practices and train staff to become restorative practitioners. These goals can be accomplished with the help of research that provides feedback on such transformations, collaborations, and extended education.

It is recommended that future research on discipline policies and practices, either punitive or restorative, discuss the impact such policies and practices have on all racial/ethnic groups to ensure such policies and practices provide equal opportunity to all members of the student population. Moreover, additional research connecting restorative practices in schools to reductions in the size of the discipline gap is needed to validate the current findings. Further studies might investigate the specific characteristics of restorative justice in schools that decreases the likelihood of discriminatory discipline practices. For example, is it an increase in teachers’ and or administrations’ cultural competence? Or could it be a decrease in students’ recidivism rates? Future research may examine which restorative practice(s) result in the most significant changes in school communities. Future research should examine the individual components (e.g. circles, peer juries) of restorative justice to provide insight into the program’s effectiveness.

Conclusion

For the past several decades, a tough on crime mentality has characterized punishment in America. This culture of control has permeated America’s schools and has given rise to punitive discipline practices in a system designed to teach. With racial
disparities in place, this too has led to a disproportionate rate of minorities punished more often and more severely than their non-minority counterparts within the education system.

The disproportionate punishing of minority students through the discipline gap is one of the many problems brought on by punitive discipline practices in school communities. Other problems with punitive discipline include: increased chances of drop-out, depression, and drug addiction among students; decreases in students’ self-esteem, attendance, and achievement; declines in school climate and school safety; and maintenance of the “schoolhouse to jailhouse” pathway (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Brownstein, 2010; Schiff, 2013; Steinberg, Allensworth, & Johnson, 2013). Despite the adverse effects on students, schools, and society, punitive punishment is still the most widely used method of discipline across the nation. However, in recent years, the public and experts alike have spoken out against such policies in an effort to foster a restorative alternative (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Brownstein, 2010; Cavanagh, 2009; Casella 2003; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013).

With the goals of promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships, restorative justice “provides high levels of both control and support to encourage appropriate behavior, and places responsibility on students themselves, using a collaborative response to wrongdoing” (Porter, 2007, p. 1). As such, restorative justice offers a constructive, human, and inclusive approach to discipline that has produced promising outcomes for school communities across the nation, such as, but not limited to: reductions in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions; improved attendance
and achievement; enhanced school climate; and disruption of the “schoolhouse to jailhouse” pathway (Advancement Project, 2005, 2010; Brownstein, 2010; Schiff, 2013; The Center for Civil Rights Remedies, 2013). Moreover, restorative justice may serve as a less discriminatory alternative to punitive discipline, by, in part, minimizing the discipline gap.

Communities across the nation must consider the deterrents of punitive discipline practices, and then contemplate the benefits of a restorative alternative. They must ask themselves if they want a culture of control that exacerbates racial inequality to continue to define America’s education system or if they want a culture of care that promotes education through inclusion and conversation. Those who choose the later must ban together in an effort to restore the nation’s school discipline practices and policies as a means to significantly improve the lives of students, schools, and society.
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