



Staff and students in the New York City Public Schools conduct a restorative circle with support from Morningside Center.

A PROMISING PATH TOWARD EQUITY

RESTORATIVE CIRCLES DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS, BUILD COMMUNITY, AND BRIDGE DIFFERENCES

BY TALA MANASSAH, TOM RODERICK, AND ANNE GREGORY

Racial inequity is a pernicious problem in American schools. Among its many manifestations are discrepancies in school discipline. Study after study has shown that black students are two to three times more likely than their peers to be suspended and expelled, even for

similar infractions (Fabelo et al., 2011; Losen & Martinez, 2013).

New evidence suggests that this pattern directly contributes to the racial achievement gap, and in the long term it is related to school dropout and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system (Morris & Perry, 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

In 2014, federal and state agencies recommended that schools reduce reliance on suspensions in favor of alternative practices. School and district leaders are increasingly seeking such alternative tools and strategies, but these resources are not yet widely available or used.

At Morningside Center for

Teaching Social Responsibility in New York City, we have a longstanding commitment to improving educational equity by supporting schools in implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practice approaches. In 2016, we received a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to help schools weave together these three threads of equity, SEL, and restorative practices so that schools approach discipline differently and more students thrive.

As we build capacity for this work in more than a dozen schools in New York City, we think of integrating the three strands like building a house: You need SEL skills as the foundation to build meaningful relationships. Restorative practices, and circles especially, offer a powerful container in which to practice the skills and build a powerful sense of community.

When you add brave conversations about race among members of the school community, leading to putting systems and structures in place that elevate the worth and dignity of every student, the three parts become a full house: a more equitable school. Our approach has been inspired and influenced by Glenn Singleton, Zaretta Hammond, Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and James Baldwin, among others.

At the heart of this i3 project are tools we are developing for professional learning for principals, teachers, and support staff to lead with SEL,

implement restorative practices, and move toward equity. We will develop these tools initially for the schools in our project but they will ultimately be disseminated publicly and widely.

We believe that the concrete guidance offered by implementation manuals, coaching rubrics, and other tools are essential for building both understanding and skills. Most teacher education and school leadership programs do not provide meaningful training in SEL or restorative practices.

Moreover, these approaches run counter to what most adults have been exposed to in our own lives — that is, traditional punitive methods of discipline. Implementing restorative practices and SEL effectively requires a mindset shift and often a new skill set.

INTEGRATING SEL AND RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices and SEL each show promise in addressing the enormous challenges related to school discipline and academic underperformance in high-needs schools. However, neither approach by itself has been shown to reliably overcome these challenges or close the wide discipline gap between black students and their peers.

SEL and restorative practices have some related goals, but historically, they have been implemented separately. The two approaches come out of different traditions. Until recently, SEL has come from an equity-neutral background,

WHAT ARE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?

Restorative practices differ from traditional school discipline:

They focus on strengthening relationships, collaborative problem solving, and giving voice to the person harmed and the person causing the harm. Restorative practices in schools arose from the restorative justice movement in which victims, offenders, and others involved meet to resolve conflict and repair relationships.

While many restorative practices programs focus primarily on changing the way adults address discipline problems when they occur, some also aim to prevent conflicts from happening in the first place by fostering trust and a sense of community among students and adults through strategies such as classroom circles. Circles are a particularly powerful strategy for addressing the developmental needs of adolescents because they offer deep opportunities for cultivating a sense of belonging and for self-expression.

whereas restorative practice, which grows out of criminal justice reform, is fundamentally concerned with the school systems and structures that disadvantage students of color and other students from oppressed groups.

In recent decades, SEL has grown in popularity but has largely been siloed from social justice. A major reason is that schools have found it easier to offer lessons that help children behave better than to rethink their entire system of discipline and reeducate professionals to focus on restoring community.

At Morningside Center, however, we have always believed that building SEL must include a focus on seizing teachable moments to build and restore community and to rethink discipline, and that schools must be a model of the world we wish to see and not merely a replication of the world as it currently exists. Our i3 project builds on a long history of integrating these pieces in elementary, middle, and high schools.

BUILDING CAPACITY

Our project has four main components that work together to build capacity for SEL and restorative practices throughout schools' different levels and community members' varying roles.

Build principals' capacity to lead with emotional intelligence and move toward greater racial equity. Principals are, of course, key to facilitating a mindset shift in their schools. To make this shift themselves and broaden it to the community, they need support.

Throughout the year, principals engage in 10 to 12 coaching sessions with retired principals who are experienced coaches. The coaches help principals with everything from how to schedule and develop an advisory period to how to present the project to their faculty. As we develop the coaching model, we are using an iterative process to construct tools that

Experiencing five circles over five days is transformative for many.

will guide former school leaders in this coaching capacity.

We also partner with principals to form a leadership team of diverse staff, including people who do not initially buy in to the idea of SEL and restorative practices or who may be attached to more traditional modes of discipline. They serve as a core group who work through issues to rethink discipline practices and policies and engage in brave conversations about race.

The leadership team works with the principal and our staff developers to roll out the initiative in the school community with administrators, instructional staff, support staff, families, and students, building buy-in and capacity. Building the capacity of the leadership team itself is also a key investment toward sustainability.

By building distributed expertise and shared leadership around these issues, adults in schools become better equipped to advocate and lead with an equity lens. To make a culture shift, everyone in the community must be involved. That includes staff like cafeteria workers, paraprofessionals, and aides who interact with students directly and frequently but are often left out of professional learning.

Co-power and equip educators who work directly with students to teach our curricula. We engage educators in 25 hours of professional learning on restorative practices, SEL, and racial inequity and injustice to all teachers in the participating schools. As part of this learning, they participate in restorative circles over the course of five days so that they have firsthand experience with the structure

of the circles and the power they have to develop relationships, build community, and bridge differences.

For many teachers, this kind of dialogue is new and uncomfortable. Experiencing five circles over five days is transformative for many of them. About half of the 25 hours of professional learning is dedicated to examining equity issues. We discuss the fact that we are all part of a system that is hurting our children and that it is not about blame but about working together to figure out a better way. After the initial training, curriculum implementers receive push-in and pull-out coaching that is tailored to individual needs.

Help school leaders and staff implement restorative interventions effectively. Even when we lay the groundwork for community building and preventing incidents, we are all human and inevitably make mistakes.

Our staff works to ensure that there are people in the schools equipped to ensure that the school remains safe for everyone and respond to incidents in a way that is consistent with SEL and restorative practices. This requires a particular mindset and skill set, so we provide training and assistance to deans, assistant principals, restorative practices coordinators, and others involved in school discipline.

Create opportunities for student and parent leadership around school climate and culture. Whether through student-led circles or parent association meetings that are held using a circle format, parents and students can and must be leaders and partners in driving this work forward.

IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS

At every stage of this project, we are thinking about making our work scalable and replicable. With every strategy and tool, we ask ourselves, "How would this work in a district that is not as ready as those in our study?"

What if the initiative is coming down from the superintendent and many staff are not yet bought in?” These kinds of questions will be addressed in our tool kits and resources.

One of our primary products will be a whole-school racial equity implementation manual that incorporates restorative practices and SEL. We are also developing video resources including models of effective restorative circles.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

As of summer 2018, we have completed 75% of the first phase of the project, in which we piloted our approach and began developing key resources in three New York City public schools — one each at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. We are committed to an iterative development and improvement process, and through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, we have learned important lessons, including the following:

Schools have the capacity to start brave conversations about race right from the get-go if we set up a structure that makes people feel safe and opens new frontiers for dialogue. Skilled facilitation and deliberate tools are key.

For example, we have been able to address teacher concerns that the approach is too soft or unstructured by sharing a sample discipline ladder that spells out what will happen when students commit specific kinds of infractions. We can then work with principals to tailor this to their schools. As a result of this kind of support, we have not experienced any extreme resistance to conversations about racial equity.

It is essential for school teams to collect and use data to inform their decision-making. Even thoughtful and enlightened adults can fail to see patterns cropping up in their schools that should be addressed.

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We saw a compelling example of this at the middle school involved in our pilot. At this school, the student body is almost 100% black, as are the vast majority of staff. The principal and the three deans, all black men, are well aware that their female students have a higher incidence of behavioral issues than male students. Yet when they examined their discipline data, they discovered they were doling out more frequent and harsh punishments to boys. It was a light bulb moment for the school leaders, who realized that they have more work to do, despite having a strong racial consciousness.

An effort to transform school culture and structures must tackle both the big-issue conversations and the daily practicalities of running a school and educating students.

The mind-changing dialogues about emotional intelligence and implicit bias cannot happen without school leaders and staff grasping the nuts-and-bolts aspects like when to schedule an advisory and who will lead it.

Lasting change is possible only if capacity is built at the school level. In the onslaught of daily responsibilities, school leaders were understandably ready to rely on our staff developers for leading the racial equity work and communicating the importance of the initiative.

But such an approach would not

build principals' ability to develop the skills they need to lead and sustain the work for the long term, after our staff developers have left. Similarly, when staff developers were asked to deal with student crises, they lost valuable time coaching teachers and building their ongoing capacity.

Any model that is intended to be scalable must take into account the high levels of turnover that are common at many schools, especially schools with the most vulnerable students. It is essential that the model have a bidirectional approach to building support and capacity from the bottom up and the top down, simultaneously and continuously. This underscores the importance of having a diverse and widely representative leadership team.

NEXT STEPS

In fall 2019, we will kick off a randomized controlled trial with 18 schools in the Queens and Brooklyn sections of New York City to examine the effectiveness of our tools, professional learning supports, and overall approach to integrating restorative practices and SEL from an equity perspective.

We will track 12 indicators of how well schools implement restorative practices, using a tool being developed. We are interested in tracking specific and concrete ways school leaders can support restorative practices, including: designating a space in the building for restorative practices interventions; making time in the curriculum and schedule for SEL skill-building efforts; and limiting the ratio of students to advisors in advisory periods.

We hope that the resources we are developing will ultimately help educators in the field move forward on achieving racial equity using SEL and restorative practices, but there are important steps schools can and should

take in the meantime.

One is revisiting existing discipline policies and assessing whether they are oriented toward fairness and student growth, rather than just punishment. An environmental scan of the school can also be valuable, particularly for helping understand the relationships and resources that exist.

For example, which groups of students, parents, and staff have more access to supports and supportive relationships? Which groups have less access? What activities are in place that are intentionally oriented toward community-building and positive relationships?

Our belief is that educators enter the profession to improve the world. We can and must be the ones to lead this work. If we each start where we are and engage in a conscious and collective effort toward fostering more equitable

schools, we can make tremendous strides toward building schools that align with our original intentions and are safe, productive, and joyful for all children.

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