Completing the Circle: Linkages Between Restorative Practices, Socio-Emotional Well-Being, and Racial Justice in Schools

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Abstract

Mounting evidence demonstrates that exclusionary discipline practices like suspensions and expulsions have long-term negative socio-emotional, behavioral, and academic consequences for the students who experience them, with evidence of spill-over effects for nonexcluded students. Restorative practice has emerged as a promising alternative to punitive discipline approaches, yet evidence is mixed on whether it can improve academic outcomes or curb racial disparities in school discipline. In a new conceptual model, we argue that the full potential of restorative practice can only be reached when it is (a) operationalized more directly within a socio-emotional framework; (b) responsive to more significant mental health needs; and (c) informed by a multifaceted understanding of how racism contributes to discipline disparities, both directly through interpersonal biases and indirectly through structural oppression. A revised conceptual model based on evidence from the broader literature, original data analyses, and pilot intervention results is advanced.

Keywords

restorative practice, school discipline, school climate, school adjustment, mental health, achievement, race, equity

The use of exclusionary discipline practices like out-of-school suspensions has risen dramatically in American schools over the last four decades (Losen et al., 2015). These rising rates are concerning, as a large body of evidence has demonstrated that exclusionary discipline is not only ineffective at curbing unwanted behavior but also contributes to negative student outcomes, such as academic failure, dropping out, increased antisocial behaviors, and increased juvenile justice system contact (Amemiya et al., 2020; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Emerging studies also suggest that suspensions may hold negative spillover effects for all students, beyond those directly receiving the punishments (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Perry & Morris, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2022). Long-standing racial inequities in school discipline are equally concerning, whereby Black and Latinx students disproportionately experience more frequent and harsher exclusionary punishment, even when compared with students with otherwise similar behavioral and socioeconomic backgrounds (Morris & Perry, 2016; Shi & Zhu, 2021; Skiba et al., 2011). Nationally, the suspension rate for Black students is more than four times that of White students (Losen & Martinez, 2020).

Compounding these adverse and inequitable effects of exclusionary discipline is its overuse with special education students, particularly those with designations of emotional or behavioral disorders (Chu & Ready, 2018). For these students, exclusionary discipline experiences are likely to exacerbate mental or behavioral health challenges they may already be facing (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Yet paradoxically, schools play a pivotal role in most children's access to mental health support provisions, especially for students of color. Schools are the most likely place for a child in the United States to receive mental health services, with estimates suggesting that as many as 70% to 80% of children access such services through the education sector (Burns et al., 1995; Farmer et al., 2003; Kataoka et al., 2002; Langley et al., 2010). More generally, as a key microsystem in a child's social ecology, school-based experiences hold a major influence over their mental health and overall well-being.

For students of color in particular, the intersection of schooling experiences and socio-emotional well-being holds ecologically distinct dynamics. A large body of

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scholarship has captured the ways in which oppressed groups like Black and Latinx students are adversely affected by discrimination in schools, including in school discipline, with consequences for their mental health and academic success (Anderson et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2000; Huguley et al., 2021; Sehgal et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2003). Concurrently and historically, these groups have also faced structural oppression that has disproportionately exposed them to adverse environmental factors outside of school, such as concentrated poverty, overpolicing, and family disruption (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2014; Davis, 2015; Katznelson, 2006). These structural factors can also have negative mental health and academic consequences, and approaches to school climate and discipline must seek to repair rather than exacerbate the effects of multiple forms of oppression.

Restorative practice is often seen as a more promising approach to school discipline and climate, but current models can overlook explicit attention to psychological well-being as either a mediator of behavioral outcomes or as an explicit outcome of interest. Meanwhile, students with mental health challenges are often targeted for punitive discipline in schools, but their tertiary intervention needs are also frequently overlooked by restorative theories of school climate transformation. In response to these gaps, below we provide a framework for overlaying restorative practice with the socio-emotional, mental health, and racial justice structures that can facilitate its equitable success in school settings. First, we provide some background on exclusionary discipline usage and its documented adverse effects on all students. Next, we discuss the potential of restorative practice as an alternative approach, including the degree to which it has demonstrated impact on disciplinary outcomes, academic progress, and reduced racial disparities. Following, we present conceptions of how socio-emotional well-being, mental health supports, and racial justice considerations can inform a more robust approach to restorative justice, using evidence from our own practice and research. Finally, we advance a more comprehensive model for restorative justice implementation and impact.

Exclusionary Discipline and Student Outcomes

When schools are perceived to have behavioral climate problems, punitive reform efforts often employ a deceptive but alluring logic. The pervading thought is that poor behavioral climates can be addressed through lowering tolerance for undesired behaviors, and in the process increasing punitive responses to students exhibiting said behaviors. The belief is such that by intensifying the response to undesired actions, problems will be resolved by (a) dissuading offenders from repeating their offense, (b) dissuading would-be offenders from engaging in those unwanted behaviors, and

(c) removing distracting students from classrooms and schools, such that learning is enhanced for the remaining students. This logic is aided by the fact that on the surface, the proportion of all students that actually receive suspensions is relatively small. Nationally, only about 5% of public school students receive any suspensions in a given year, and only approximately 14% have ever been suspended (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Ryberg et al., 2021). It might seem, then, that by responding vigilantly to perceived behavioral problems with this small proportion of students, the remaining 95% of students will benefit in ways that will yield overall achievement gains for schools and districts.

This logic, however, is not supported by research. More commonly, increases in suspension and expulsion rates at the school level are in fact associated with corresponding losses in overall academic proficiency (Huguley et al., in press; Perry & Morris, 2014; Sorensen et al., 2022). These overall declines make sense, given what is known about how suspensions function at the individual student level. For suspended students, those experiences are associated with negative outcomes in multiple developmental domains, including negative self-perceptions, diminished academic performance, increased antisocial behaviors, and increased juvenile justice involvement (DeRidder, 1990; Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019; Morris & Perry, 2016; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Moreover, even among nonsuspended students, there is evidence of adverse spillover effects, particularly in the areas of math and English language arts test scores (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). Increases in exclusionary practices have been said to adversely affect school-wide achievement by diminishing students' perceptions of school climate, teacher trust, and perspectives of fairness, which in turn collectively serve to reduce student engagement, and ultimately academic success (Amemiya et al., 2020; Del Toro & Wang, 2021). An overreliance on exclusionary approaches in schools also may also hold economic costs for the larger community. Because of linkages between suspensions and dropout rates, it has been demonstrated that increased suspension rates are associated with communal economic losses due to long-term effects on students' tax and consumer revenue generation, as well as increased social costs over the students' lifetime (Belfield, 2014; Rumberger & Losen, 2016). For all these reasons, exclusionary discipline is inadequate and harmful to all students as a common behavioral management strategy in schools.

Moreover, from an equity perspective, the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices may be afflicting the most vulnerable youth populations with an alarming double jeopardy. On one hand, students that are Black, Latinx, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer- (LGBTQ) identifying, economically disadvantaged, and special education-qualified all tend to face higher than average rates of exclusionary discipline—especially for students at the

intersections of these identities and experiences (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen & Martinez, 2020). Yet additional concerns arise given that (a) many of these same groups may be more adversely affected by these experiences than are nonminoritized students, and (b) these experiences can also result in placing struggling youth back in environments that originally contributed to any antisocial behaviors (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003, 2013). The end result is that students from vulnerable populations may face compounded impacts of exclusionary discipline, as a function of being both the most frequently targeted and the most adversely affected by its use.

An irony here is that in our team's experience collaborating with school faculties, teachers and school leaders often acknowledge that suspensions are ineffective as a common practice. They understand that exclusion may provide a temporary respite from perceived unwanted behaviors, but it does little for addressing underlying causes of conflict or behavioral challenges (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003, 2013). Conversely, teachers and school leaders are often open to alternative approaches, but believe they also can be stressful when not accompanied by the training and personnel resources necessary to engage students more responsively. Moreover, beyond the resources necessary for common discipline reform, economically challenged schools serving Black and Latinx students are drastically underresourced in terms of students' mental health supports, with the nation's largest teachers' union noting this gap to be the top unmet priority in school settings nationwide (American Federation of Teachers, 2017). Given the problems associated with both the common use of exclusionary discipline and under-supported reform efforts, the most effective discipline reform strategy requires a solution that is simultaneously attentive to sustainable responsive approaches, racial and social equity, and students' mental health.

The Great Hope: Restorative Practice and School Discipline Reform

Modern educational reform efforts have consistently sought viable alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline and its adverse effects (Morgan et al., 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Restorative practice has emerged as a popular option, with its dual foci on (a) proactive community building to lay a groundwork of relational capital in the school; and then (b) using a relational approach to conflict resolution, rather than relying on the false hope of exclusion. Restorative practice originated within the cultural activities of First Nation groups in Oceania, North America, and other global regions, and in recent decades it has been adapted to institutional contexts in the United States: first in criminal justice settings and then in school settings (Fronius et al., 2019). As an approach in institutional contexts,

restorative practice typically starts with a focus on building or recognizing community through establishing relational norms and engaging in community-building activities. In turn, when conflict or behavioral challenges arise, the relational capital is then leveraged to facilitate empathetic responses designed to restore harm that may have been caused (Davis, 2014; Fronius et al., 2019; Winn, 2018). Within the context of school discipline specifically, a restorative approach aims to first build school community across and between students and teachers through structured activities like *community circles*, which are regularly held discussions and personal sharing sessions in classrooms that build relationships and help process community events. Other community-building activities include school-wide shows, learning demonstrations, and competitions, as well as various efforts of youth leaders within schools (Huguley et al., 2020; Wadhwa, 2016). When problems inevitably arise, tools like *healing circles* are used where the parties in conflict, concerned but noninvolved peers, and caring adults work together to find a solution that is more reparative rather than punitive.

Restorative practice implementation typically involves in-depth training of teachers and school staff around leading community circles, holding restorative one-on-one conferences with students, and mediating conflicts by leveraging relational capital (Augustine et al., 2018; Huguley et al., 2020). The degree of professional development for these practices ranges from intensive trainings to start the year, to in-house personnel leading the work and providing ongoing supports, with teachers commonly noting that the latter is necessary for effective and sustainable implementation (Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014). Often times, the implementation of restorative approaches is coupled with explicit policy commitments to reduce suspension rates, or an actual ban on suspension use altogether in lower grade levels and/or for lower-level offenses (Hashim et al., 2018; Lindstrom, 2017).

Effects on Disciplinary Outcomes

Studies of restorative practice implementation have generally shown the approach to curb overall suspension and expulsion usage in schools (for a review see Fronius et al., 2019). For example, in the largest randomized trial on restorative practice conducted to date, Augustine et al. (2018) found that across 22 treatment schools, utilizing restorative practice accelerated the district's already declining suspension rates. Treatment schools experienced a 36% reduction in days lost to suspension over 2 years, as compared with an 18% decline in the control schools. Some other nonexperimental design studies have reported even more substantial suspension rate reductions, including declines as steep as between 77% and 87% (Armour, 2013;

Davis, 2014; Fronius et al., 2019). In our own work, we have directly observed suspension reductions in the range of 20 to 30% over a 1-to-2-year period after the start of restorative programming.

Effects on Academic Outcomes

Despite consistent success with disciplinary outcomes, restorative practice efforts have not as consistently translated into academic gains across studies. Although some nonexperimental examinations have reported academic successes (Huguley et al., 2020; Jain et al., 2014), Augustine et al.'s (2018) large-scale randomized trial found no associations with academic performance overall, while also finding academic declines at the middle school level specifically. Other studies have reported null findings for academic effects (Fronius et al., 2019; Lewis, 2009), which researchers and practitioners often attribute to issues of fidelity of implementation. Common fidelity challenges for restorative practice include a lack of expert human resources, inadequate training, and a lack of customizations across sites (Adams, 2017; Augustine et al., 2018). Discrepancies between discipline and academic outcome effects have contributed to a perception that underresourced exclusionary discipline reductions simply ask school personnel to raise tolerance for student misbehavior without providing adequate and sustainable supports (Eden, 2017; Griffith & Tyner, 2019). However, this perspective must be weighed against the well-documented harms associated with exclusionary practice use, as well as unjust root causes of perceived and actual behavioral challenges. As such, if restorative practice is to consistently achieve its academic outcome aims, the field urgently needs to crystalize the core components of effective restorative practice, and then build the necessary enhancements into existing theory-of-change models.

Effects on Equity Outcomes

A review of studies of how restorative practice might promote discipline equity suggests that to do so, those efforts must explicitly incorporate equity-oriented content into their training programs. Where racial justice-oriented components have been incorporated or brought alongside restorative practice implementation, researchers have been able to document associations between restorative practice use and reductions in racial discipline gaps (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2016; Jain et al., 2014). Conversely, programs that utilize restorative approaches with less attention to racial justice have often not shown equity impacts (Anyon et al., 2014, 2016; Gregory et al., 2018). However, it is important to note that overall, few extant studies actually examine the effects on discipline equity, and currently no studies that we know of have specifically examined restorative justice impacts on racial disparities in academic achievement.

In sum, restorative practice has been seen as a promising alternative to exclusion as a common disciplinary approach, and its utilization has shown the capacity to reduce the use of harmful exclusionary methods. Yet success has largely been limited to disciplinary outcomes, with only scant evidence of impacts on academic achievement. This lack of academic impact has raised concerns about inadequate supports for restorative practice implementation, which in turn impede the actual school climate change efforts that mediate achievement effects. A similar concern lies in schools' abilities to respond to mental health concerns among students, the number one priority in terms of support adequacy among teachers nationwide. Furthermore, where limited attention is paid to equity, restorative practice has fallen short of mitigating racially disparate exclusionary school discipline. Given these limitations and critiques, many restorative practice theories of change need important clarifications and enhancements. Such enhancements must capture the pathways by which restorative practice contributes to sustainable and equitable school transformation, not only for behavioral outcomes but also for the academic outcomes that drive school accountability, reputation, and the future success of youth.

Effective Restorative Practice: Core Elements

In response to the need for clarity around what makes for more deeply effective and sustainable school discipline reform, our integrated team of researchers, educators, psychologists, and social workers has been collaborating on applied research and intervention studies related to restorative practice and school climate transformation. Through these efforts we have come to believe that an effective restorative practice theory of change requires increased attention to three domains that collectively are not standard components of current models: (a) distinguishing between the necessary but insufficient surface-level policy changes, like suspension bans, and the deeper, socio-emotional targets that link restorative practice to school cultural shifts; (b) the incorporation of tertiary-level interventions that address mental health challenges experienced by a smaller but substantial number of students; and (c) grounding all restorative work in racial equity understandings that address not only interpersonal racism and within-school racial climate but also the sometimes indirect effects of structural racism on students' overall well-being and educational opportunities. These factors are taken up individually in the sections below.

Attention to Socio-Emotional Mediators

When a school or district's commitment to restorative practice is more rhetorical than cultural, a common pattern is a
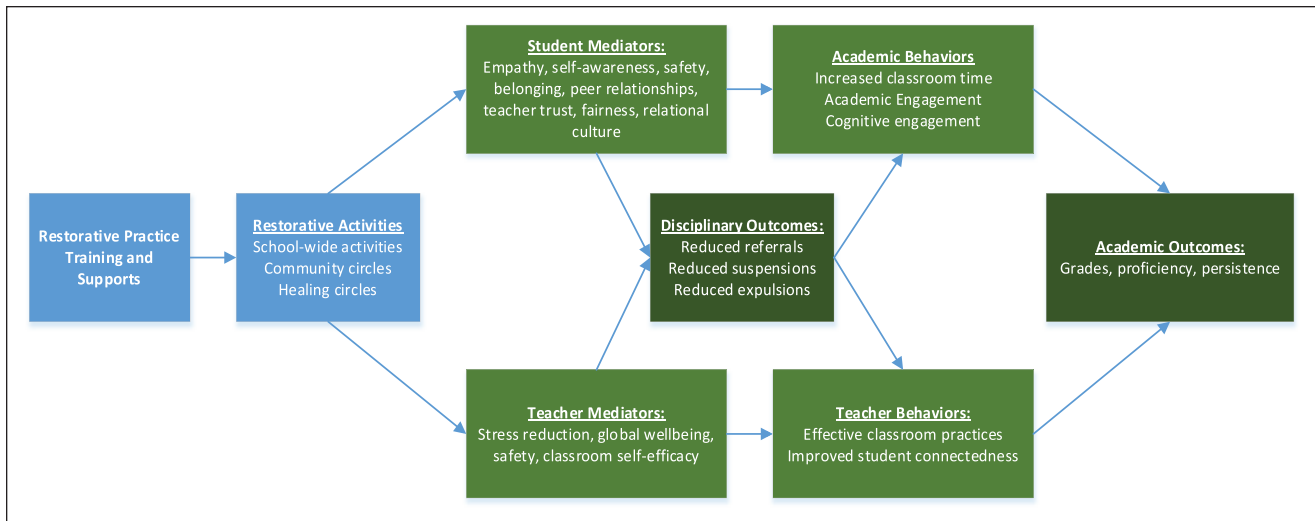
Figure 1. Hypothesized mediation model for how restorative practice improves student achievement.

reduction in suspension and expulsion rates without corresponding changes in actual, on-the-ground experiences of students and teachers. These discipline effects in the absence of cultural shifts may signify a breakdown in the theory of change. Specifically, there may be a lack of attention to the socio-emotional levers that facilitate school climate transformation, and that without which, attempts at restorative programming can go through the motions without actually affecting the school's relational climate. Such socio-emotional indicators exist at both the student and teacher levels. At the student level, exposure to restorative methods should facilitate student development in empathy, self-awareness, emotional safety, school belonging, positive peer relationships, trust for teachers, and improved perceptions of disciplinary fairness (Brand et al., 2003; Hanson & Voight, 2014; Hoy & Sabo, 1998; Wang & Degol, 2016; Wang, Degol, et al., 2020; Yeager et al., 2017). These socio-emotional mediators are well tied to improvement in academic engagement and motivation, which, in turn, improve academic performance. Important teacher-level socio-emotional mediators in the restorative process include teacher stress reduction, global well-being, perceptions of safety, job satisfaction, and classroom self-efficacy (Parr et al., 2021; Tom, 2012; Wang, Degol, et al., 2020). For teachers, these socio-emotional indicators lead to improvements in classroom instruction and student connectedness competencies in ways that make additional contributions to student achievement gains.

Figure 1 captures the process by which restorative practice directly contributes to socio-emotional well-being at both the student and teacher levels. Specifically, well-supported restorative practice efforts lead to improved student and teacher socio-emotional mediators, factors that in turn simultaneously contribute directly to improved student academic engagement and teacher competencies, which themselves then contribute directly to student academic gains.

Meanwhile, socio-emotional mediators also directly contribute to improved disciplinary outcomes, thereby reinforcing the academic engagement and teacher competencies that support improved student performance. Also, because of connections to actual time spent in class, properly supported restorative practice approaches can and should be used in tandem with disciplinary policy reforms that reduce or ban the use of exclusionary practices. This combined approach leverages increased learning opportunities and harm reduction to advance students' socio-emotional and academic progress.

Restorative practice design and assessment efforts must make it a priority to target and track these key student and teacher-level mediators. Otherwise, the efforts may lack the precision and accountability necessary to generate the desired effects on student academic success. Furthermore, when restorative practice efforts are in name only, and reduce exclusionary discipline without addressing the full network of pathways, over time they can wear down teachers' morale in ways that are unsustainable. Finally, given the renewed policy interest in socio-emotional learning, particularly in the wake of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), restorative practice activities that explicitly target these mediators can reap the additional benefit of holding enhanced value to educational policy reform opportunities.

The Just Discipline model. In our own work developing and implementing restorative practice programing, we utilize two conceptual frameworks for connecting discipline reform, socio-emotional well-being, and academic success: legal socialization theory and relational-cultural theory. *Legal socialization theory* suggests that children's experiences with perceived just or unjust treatment by adult authority figures influence their trust and engagement with

those adults (Amemiya et al., 2020; Fagan & Tyler, 2005). As a consequence in schools, when youth perceive adults to treat students unfairly or overly harshly, this treatment can, in turn, reduce engagement across all students, not just students receiving punishment. In accordance with legal socialization theory, restorative practice activities strengthen relationships, perceptions of fairness, and empathy among all parties, all while reducing harsh discipline. As such, their use can yield increased student engagement and teacher effectiveness in ways that cultivate academic gains over time. Meanwhile, *relational-cultural theory* sits at the heart of restorative practice through its centering of connection and relational interactions as both a primary source and a vital outcome for optimal human development (Comstock et al., 2008). It purposefully identifies relational attributes—rather than western individualism ideals—as strengths that should be nurtured, particularly across cultures. By centering relationships as a fundamental value, restorative practice can catalyze empathy, communication, and belonging among students and teachers alike in ways that reduce conflict and misunderstandings on the front end. Then, when responding to conflict or harm, an established relational culture serves as the foundation from which to engage in more restorative and less punitive interventions.

The Just Discipline model incorporates these theoretical underpinnings into a school-wide framework for transformational discipline and climate reform. In 2017, the program was launched in a Title I urban public elementary school serving students who were 75% economically disadvantaged, 82% students of color, and 31% eligible for special education services. It has since expanded to partnerships across 5 schools, with an additional 12 school sites set to open in 2022 to 2023. The design includes eight hierarchical programmatic priorities that operate across cultural and structural domains (Figure 2; see also Huguley et al., 2020). School-wide cultural elements of buy-in and a relational climate focus are foundational to the model and are grounded in relational-cultural theory's emphasis on empathy, belonging, and cross-cultural understandings. Structural elements of less punitive discipline policies, adequate staffing, and mental health supports reflect justice and fairness principles from legal socialization theory, and collectively generate the capacity necessary for improving student trust, teacher stress reduction, improved safety, and overall relational culture building.

Among its layered programmatic components, what is particularly essential to the Just Discipline model is the presence of a full-time restorative practitioner in each school community, an approach with a long-standing history in the Oakland (CA) Unified School District (Jain et al., 2014). Having a full-time restorative practice coordinator directly responds to the human resource shortcomings that prior research has repeatedly cautioned against (Adams, 2017; Augustine et al., 2018; Guckenburg et al., 2016;
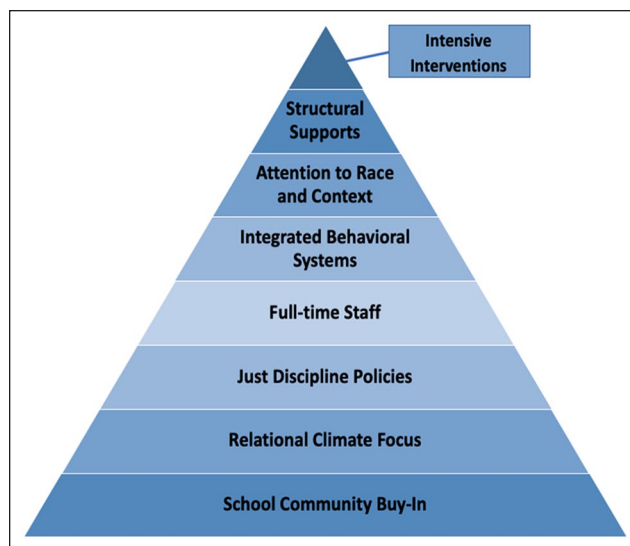
Figure 2. Integrated components of the Just Discipline model.
Note. From Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh: Local Challenges and Promising Solutions (Figure 5, p. 23), by J. P. Huguley, M-T. Wang, K. Monahan, G. Keane, and A. J. Koury, 2018, Center on Race and Social Problems, University of Pittsburgh. Used with permission.

Huguley et al., 2020; McMorris et al., 2013). Just as important is the work of student leaders, adapted from an approach detailed by Wadhwa (2016), who are trained in restorative practice and conduct many of the community-building and conflict resolution activities in the school. These student leaders exponentially multiply the restorative human resources within the community, with skills to implement the model and advance socio-emotional targets. Moreover, these students are at the heart of the schools' cultural and social fabric, and as such have unmatched potential for empathy for their peers and influence on school climate and conflict interruption. The combination of these two human resource elements makes for a very powerful level of restorative capacity in schools, and for wide and deep attention to the socio-emotional targets that are necessary for distal effects on engagement and academic outcomes.

The results of these program integrations within the Just Discipline framework have been encouraging. Over a 2-year implementation period at a pilot site prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pilot school experienced significant improvements in school climate, disciplinary, and academic targets. School climate improvements include statistically significant increases in student perceptions of school safety, school belonging, perceived inclusion in decision-making, and teachers' belief in them as learners. Disciplinary outcome improvements include a 22% drop in total suspensions, a 28% decrease in the number of individual students suspended, and a 30% drop in total office referrals. Over this time, the school also experienced 2 consecutive years of academic gains in English language arts, mathematics, and science, with the former two reversing

negative trends from prior years. Year 3 presented the Just Discipline team with a unique set of challenges, as the host school was reconstituted from Grades 4–6 to Grades 6–8. Along with that reconstitution came a new principal, and more than two thirds new teaching staff. Despite these contextual shifts (including a mid-year principal turnover), the reconfigured school still saw reduced suspensions and referrals when compared with the same grade levels in the year prior. This year the program expanded to a total of five school sites, and we are again seeing consistent suspension and referral rate declines across school sites.[1] These results are particularly encouraging given that many schools across the country report facing increased school violence and behavioral challenges associated with COVID-19 stressors (Meckler & Strauss, 2021; Sawchuk, 2021).

To be sure, these results on key intermediate and distal outcomes are indeed promising, but preliminary. Much more rigorous testing across multiple sites is needed to adequately assess the impact of this model, and such research is currently underway through support from the Institute of Educational Science's Transformative Research program. The resultant study will be the first cluster-randomized trial of a restorative practice model that utilizes a full-time school-based restorative practitioner, among other enhancements. Also, to our knowledge, this study includes the first-ever cost–benefit analysis of restorative practice implementation, which will help the field to understand the implications of robust restorative practice investments on the economic outcomes of the local region.

Intensive Mental Health Supports

Another consistent shortcoming of restorative practice models is their tendency to focus on primary prevention and secondary intervention approaches without accounting for the necessary role of tertiary, intensive mental health supports in school climate transformation. Specifically, and understandably, restorative practice models typically concentrate disciplinary reform efforts on (a) primary prevention—preventing discipline and climate problems through proactive strategies like community and relationship-building; and (b) secondary interventions—responses to behavioral or relational challenges that are either low to moderate in severity level, or that are infrequent problems for the students or teachers involved (Nakkula et al., 1996). To be sure, these efforts can be effective at building capacity for most of the mediating socio-emotional targets described above and will serve the vast majority of students well. However, our work with teachers has demonstrated to us that effective socio-emotional work in schools means also fully supporting students with significant unmet mental health needs. Such needs are in fact a pressing problem for a substantial number of U.S. youth, with upward of 20% of children in the United States managing a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (Freeman & Kendziora,

2017). Meanwhile, mental health challenges are on the rise for Black students specifically. Cases of major depression among Black adolescents rose by 16% between 2014 and 2018, while between 2001 and 2017, suicide attempts among Black female and male youth increased by 182% and 60%, respectively (Price & Khubchandani, 2019; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). Schools are the most common source of mental health treatment for children in the United States. Between 70% and 80% of all mental health services for children originate through school-based access mechanisms, and these proportions are even higher for students of color (Kataoka et al., 2002; Lipari et al., 2013). Also, federal education policies like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and the more recent COVID-19 American Rescue Plan have encouraged public schools to support the mental health challenges their students face (U.S. Department of Education, 2022).

Despite federal these policy inclusions, capacity issues still limit their availability and impact. For example, national student-to-provider ratio recommendations for school-based therapeutic workers are 250-to-1 for both school social workers and school counselors, yet 90% of all public school students in the United States are in schools that do not meet these standards (Whitaker et al., 2019). For school social workers specifically, less than half of any U.S. public schools have a social worker at all, and among those that do, the average student-to-social worker ratio is nearly three times the recommended threshold, at approximately 730-to-1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Gaps in mental health provisions in schools are especially concerning for Black and Latinx youth, given that as noted previously, they are more likely to have mental health services originate in schools than are their White counterparts. This shortfall in school-based supports thus likely contributes to overall racial treatment disparities for mental health needs among youth, whereby since 2013, Black children have had lower treatment rates than their White counterparts for all mental health problems (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, n.d.).

The scarcity of adequate mental health support services holds substantial importance for school discipline and climate outcomes. First, exclusionary discipline, in general, tends to be doled out in higher proportions to students with disabilities and/or special needs, many of whom have mental health-related diagnoses such as emotional disturbance or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). Second, the scarcity of adequate mental health supports increases the likelihood of punitive responses to issues of socio-emotional well-being, while paradoxically, exclusionary discipline likely exacerbates any existing mental or behavioral health challenges these students are facing (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003, 2013) Moreover, teachers' own mental health needs are also

vicariously affected by unmet student needs. A recent survey from the American Federation of Teachers (2017) suggests that 61% of teachers and school staff report being chronically stressed, that 58% reported that their own mental health was "not good," and that issues of unmet student mental health needs were one of the consistent contributing factors. As one respondent noted, "What my school really needs is more social and emotional support for students (more counselors, social workers, etc.). We have students who have experienced trauma, and we struggle with behavior because of it; it causes a lot of stress for everyone," (p. 8).

A schools' ability to respond to students' tertiary mental health needs with supportive rather than punitive approaches can mean the difference between enhancing and inhibiting the school's community fabric. Embedding the implementation of mental health interventions within the restorative model can serve to enhance school-wide socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes. An adequate approach to restorative practice must either directly respond to mental health needs of students, or work in partnership with a strong system of existing mental health provisions in school settings where available.

Race, Mental Health, and School Discipline

It is important to be clear that the vast majority of students of Black and Latinx students are succeeding in U.S. public schools. Black and Latinx high school graduation rates are 80% and 82%, respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), and even as it pertains to school discipline, as many as 87% of Black students and 96% of Latinx students do not receive school suspensions in a given year (Losen & Martinez, 2020). That said, these and other success indicators are quite remarkable in light of the racial stress and trauma that Black and Latinx students face in U.S. society, in both interpersonal and structural domains. Interpersonally, much research has demonstrated that Black and Latinx students face distress-inducing discrimination both inside and outside of schools, and that these experiences have adverse academic and psychological consequences (Anderson et al., 2019; Fisher et al., 2000; Sehgal et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2003; Wang & Huguley, 2012). At the same time, structurally oppressive phenomena like economic subordination, overpolicing, and family disruption unduly threaten Black and Latinx students' mental health and academic achievement (Alvarez, 2020). Below we discuss the consequences of racialized structural and interpersonal phenomena for student outcomes, as well as their implications for school-based mental health treatment, discipline, and restorative practice programming.

Structural racism. The footprint of structural racism is perhaps best illustrated in the alarming wealth disparities in the United States. Although racial income gaps of approximately 40% total wages are often cited as problematic, total family asset gaps dwarf income inequality, with disparity rates as large as 8 to 1 when comparing Black and White households (Bhutta et al., 2020). To be sure, these gaps in wealth are rooted in intentional, systemic, and intergenerational oppression in nearly all economic areas of U.S. life. Racialized economic policy structures have existed well into the 20th and 21st centuries and include but are not limited to residential segregation; the obstruction of home ownership; inequitable access to federal economic benefits (e.g., New Deal, G.I. Bill); denial of voting rights and their political protections; employment discrimination; organized labor exclusions; and racialized predatory lending practices (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2014; Davis, 2015; Katznelson, 2006). Structural racism in these and other domains has left Black and Latinx children significantly overrepresented in poverty; rates among these groups are 19% and 16% respectively, as compared with only 7% for White youth (Fry et al., 2021). These racialized structural stressors can increase exposures to traumatic stimuli and their associations with academic and mental health outcomes, while simultaneously creating systemic barriers to mental health treatment for youth of color, by ways of segregation and economic subordination (Alegría et al., 2015).

Although schools are potential sources of mental health and socio-emotional supports for students, they are also not immune to the effects of racialized structural oppression. Schools serving predominantly Black and Latinx children tend to have fewer resources overall (Baker et al., 2020; EdBuild, 2019), including in many cases having fewer counselors and psychologists per student while also having higher levels of police presence (Barnum, 2017; Blad & Harwin, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Whitaker et al., 2019). At the same time, these schools are often the very sites where exclusionary discipline rates can be notably higher in comparison to their counterparts serving a majority of White students (Huguley et al., 2018; Huguley et al., in press; Skiba et al., 2014). Consequently, many Black and Latinx victims of intergenerational structural oppression face a double jeopardy in schools, whereby socio-emotional and mental health challenges created by unjust structural factors are then compounded by the preponderance of harmful, punitive, and even criminalizing responses to their mental health needs.

Interpersonal discrimination. The deleterious effects of racialized economic oppression co-occur with implicit and explicit interpersonal discrimination experiences that deliver their own adverse impacts. Powerful and often dangerous examples of discrimination faced by Black and Latinx youth across contexts include unmerited law-enforcement aggression, distrust in public spaces, social exclusions, adultification, criminalized perceptions, and pervasive media stereotypes. In the school context specifically, interpersonal discrimination experiences can include being unfairly disciplined and even arrested in schools

(Barnes & Motz, 2018; Blad & Harwin, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Shirrell et al., 2021). Moreover, not only is there a 4-to-1 disparity in out of school suspensions between Black and White students, but both Black and Latinx students are more likely than Whites to receive exclusionary consequences for the same or similar behaviors as their White counterparts (Skiba et al., 2011). Gilliam et al. (2016) also demonstrated through experimental design that when asked to monitor preschool classroom videos for problem behaviors, teachers disproportionately tracked Black boys visually, even though no infractions actually occurred in the films. Potential interpersonal biases are also illustrated by the fact that school discipline disparities are largest in subjective categories, such as "insubordination" or "defiance," rather than more objective offenses like drugs or weapon possession (Carter et al., 2014; Girvan et al., 2017). Beyond disciplinary outcomes, interpersonal biases from school personnel also take many other forms, including lower teacher expectations, limited access to rigorous courses, and racial microaggression experiences (Diamond & Huguley, 2011; Huguley et al., 2021; Vera Sanchez & Adams, 2011). These types of interpersonal racism experiences are consequential, as research demonstrates links between Black and Latinx youth experiences with discrimination and specific mental health and academic challenges, including depression, anxiety, negative self-perceptions, academic engagement, and academic performance (Anderson et al., 2019; English et al., 2014; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007; Wang & Huguley, 2012).

Interpersonal racial bias may also manifest itself in the ways in which youths' mental health challenges get characterized in schools. For example, Black students with disability diagnoses are more likely than their White counterparts to be responded to with exclusionary discipline as opposed to increased support (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). Indeed, our own examination of state-level data in Pennsylvania has shown contrasting racial trends, whereby having higher proportions of special education students is associated with increased suspension rates in schools with more Black students, but decreased suspension rates in schools with more White youth (Huguley et al., in press). Ultimately, the consequences for students of color in need of acute services can be severe. For youth of color who are perceived to exhibit behavioral challenges, they are often seen as "disruptive" or "aggressive" rather than in need of mental health supports. This perception can result in punitive and criminalizing disciplinary responses to what may actually be racial bias and/or unmet mental health needs. Given that 45% to 70% of youth entering criminal justice facilities meet diagnostic criteria for a mental health disorder (Zajac et al., 2015), schools must be places where these needs are met and not exacerbated.

In sum, the vast majority of Black and Latinx youth are thriving in schools and in life. And given the oppressive socio-historical context of Black and Latinx youth development, the resilience of these children and families is quite remarkable. Nevertheless, structural and interpersonal issues of racial subordination and discrimination pose distinct threats to their socio-emotional well-being and academic success. Black and Latinx youth are simultaneously exposed to (a) deeply disparate, adverse material conditions and diminished access to mental health supports; (b) interpersonal discrimination that compounds structural mental health and academic threats; and (c) being seen as problems rather than oppressed victims who should be punished rather than supported. The cycle in which these forces are enacted upon Black and Latinx youth is illustrated in Figure 3, whereby historical and intergenerational oppression contributes to a recursive cycle of economic, interpersonal, and implicit racial phenomena that then replicate long-standing subordinated conditions.

Restorative Practice Integration

We believe schools can be disruptive to these cycles of oppression. Currently, our team is undertaking efforts at integrating the socio-emotional well-being targets, mental health supports, and racial justice considerations described above into a comprehensive restorative practice framework. This *integrated system for restorative change* first recognizes that socio-emotional constructs are the vehicles by which restorative activities create powerful and sustainable whole-school cultural shifts. As such, these components need to be explicitly incorporated into design and evaluation efforts for restorative programming. In our own work, we are engaged in a full socio-emotional inventory and overlay for our restorative activities, and are building the relevant concepts into our future training and assessment processes.

Second, needs for mental health support provisions are at crisis levels in many urban schools serving students of color. From a restorative perspective, these provisions should include several key components of particular interest to racially oppressed groups. One key feature must be trauma-responsive programming that specifically targets the unique socio-historical positioning of Black and Latinx students. Such trauma programming should include psychoeducational components that help Black and Latinx students attribute the source of any self-perceived challenges with emotional regulation, externalizing behaviors, or internalizing behaviors to ecological conditions outside of themselves, and not to their own personal capacities. Doing so will give these students a better chance at resilience by reinforcing their full humanity and potential. Trauma-responsive programming in underresourced urban school settings must also contend with the fact that many trauma approaches
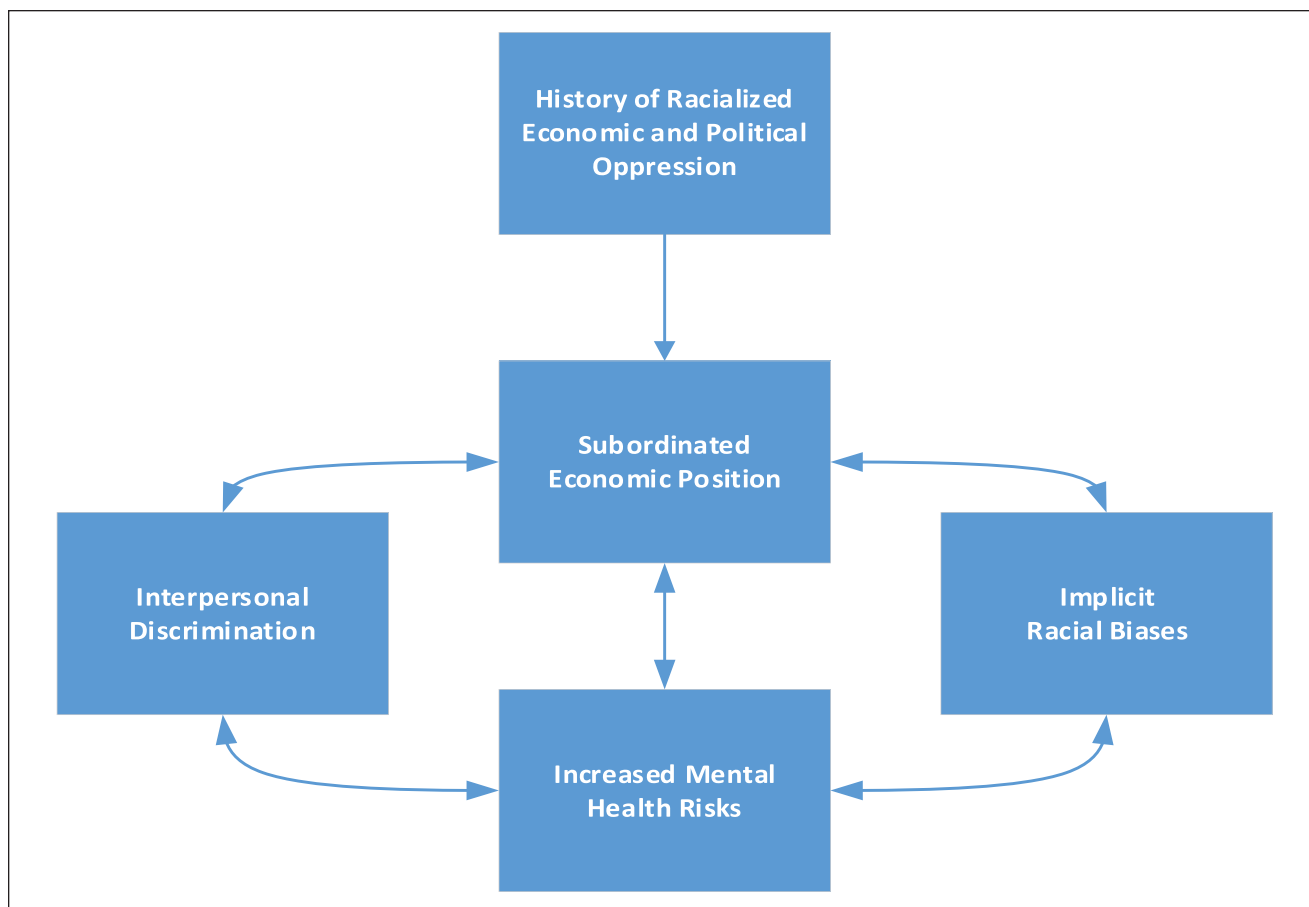
Figure 3. Recursive model of the interplay between structural racism, interpersonal racism, and mental health threats facing Black and Latinx youth.

assume the adverse stimuli to be in the past, and not ongoing. Yet for Black and Latinx youth in severely oppressed ecological contexts, these stimuli may be continually present, and as such, require attention to ongoing coping skills rather than an exclusive focus on recovery. Helping youth cope with ongoing environmental challenges can also be connected positively to racial histories of overcoming and empowerment. These histories are already utilized effectively by Black parents in home settings to enhance their children's psychological resilience when facing racially oppressive school and community contexts (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2020; Kyere & Huguley, 2020; Wang, Henry, et al., 2020). Finally, trauma supports in school settings should also focus on establishing strong and meaningful relationships with school staff, which can have implications for ameliorating trauma symptoms and increasing socio-emotional functioning (Van Der Kolk, 2015). Full-time restorative practitioners in schools can play a role in these trauma support efforts in ways that reinforce this relational component. Collectively, these acute

trauma supports will complement the overall restorative model in aiding student introspection, coping, belonging, and engagement.

Mental health literacy should also be incorporated as an intervention approach at the primary and secondary levels. Both students and teachers can be readily taught mental health literacy principles, and then use them to increase the likelihood that they or their peers will be referred to services as needed. Subsequently, students will be less susceptible to stigma around seeking support, a factor that contributes to racialized mental health disparities (Alvidrez et al., 2008, 2010; Jorm, 2012; Lindsey et al., 2010; Nadeem et al., 2007). School-based mental health literacy interventions have, in fact, been shown to improve knowledge of mental health issues, promote positive mental health help-seeking attitudes and behaviors, and decrease stigma toward mental disorders and those who live with them (Hart et al., 2016, 2018, 2019; Kutcher & Wei, 2013; Watson et al., 2004). In a restorative framework, practitioners and student leaders can be readily trained in mental health literacy in ways that will
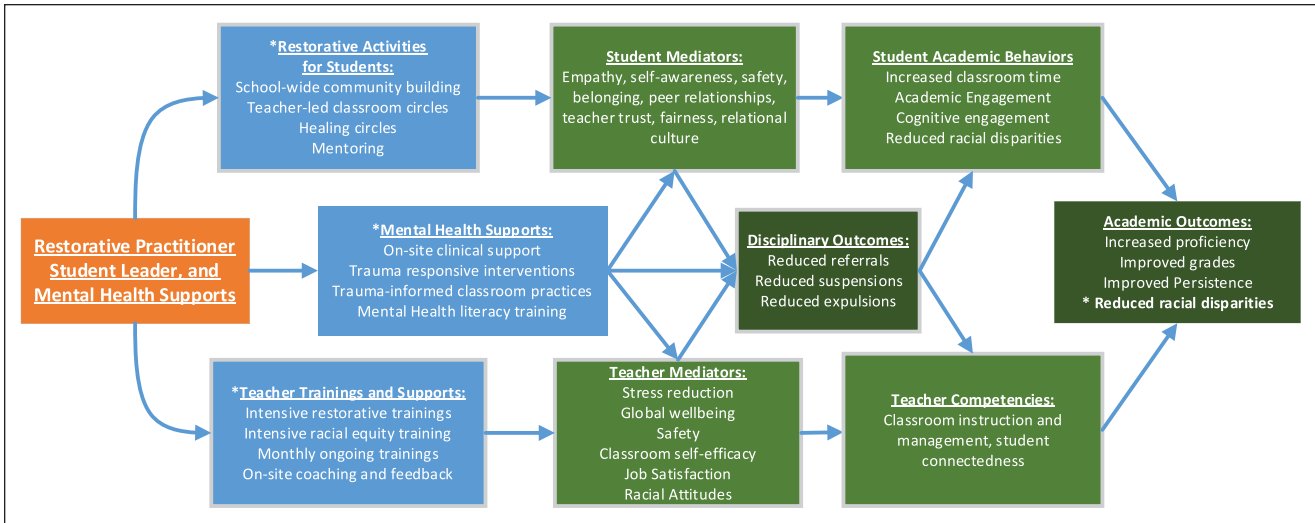
Figure 4. Conceptual model for an integrated system for restorative change.

help to both head off potential conflicts and mitigate existing ones through improved empathy and help-seeking norms.

Racial considerations in disciplinary approaches should also be explicitly integrated into restorative practice efforts. First, teacher professional development must include attention to not only interpersonal discrimination—a common topic in equity-focused professional development—but must also provide substantial content on histories of racial oppression, particularly in postslavery and modern eras. Often times, diversity trainings provide only vague senses of racial injustice history, with little detail of events of the 20th and 21st centuries. Yet, it is this knowledge of more contemporary phenomena that can ward off culturally racist beliefs that see oppression as no longer relevant and locate the sources of racial inequality within the culture or behaviors of the victims themselves (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Kendi, 2019). By providing information on racist economic policies in the 20th and 21st centuries, such as those within the New Deal, GI Bill, or Federal Housing Authority benefits, educators can reach a truer sense of how current racialized economic disparities are a function of fairly recent and contemporary social policy. Ultimately, this knowledge can enhance educators' beliefs in their Black and Brown children's innate capacities while simultaneously strengthening commitments to social justice. These same truths can invigorate restorative practice efforts by centering restoration in schools within the broader concept of restoration in society. These trainings can also directly affect behavioral approaches on two levels: (a) by reducing the interpersonal biases that can unfairly inform split-second decisions in how an adult may respond to a student in a given moment; and (b) by generating increasing understanding of how perceived behavioral issues may originate with intentional,

racialized oppression that has harmed Black and Latinx students directly and indirectly.

Looking Forward: A Comprehensive Theory of Change for Restorative Practice

To more consistently reach the impacts on equity and academic outcomes that are often touted by restorative practice proponents, a more comprehensive model must be applied that incorporates the three aforementioned core factors: (a) directly infusing socio-emotional well-being outcomes as intermediate targets and assessment indicators; (b) adequately accounting for and supporting intensive mental health challenges as part of a restorative approach; and (c) including considerations of both interpersonal and modern structural racism in trainings and program elements. These additional inclusions should also be implemented within models that adequately staff their programs with full-time restorative practitioners in schools, and with the inclusion of student leaders that multiply the restorative resources in the school community. Figure 4 incorporates all of these components into an *integrated system for restorative change*.

This integrated system holds several advantages over the less developed restorative model captured in Figure 1. The addition of the restorative practitioner and student leaders provide capacity to enhance approaches to teacher training and supports, as well as to deliver more intensive restorative activities for students. For teachers, having a restorative practitioner in the building means meeting the often-stated demand for ongoing in-house training and coaching. For students, the typically limited capacity of

school staff to organize community and relationship-building activities is now supplemented with a group of 20 to 40 student leaders to develop and advance the work. These additional human resources make key student provisions like mentoring and a robust system of healing circles possible, where they otherwise would be subject to triaged resources.

An integrated restorative system also considers the additional capacity of proportionally adequate mental health supports in the form of on-site clinically trained staff members (e.g., mental health-trained social workers and other mental health counselors, as distinct from academic counselors). The presence of clinicians at their proper ratios (at least 1 for every 250 students enrolled) assures the necessary capacity for Tier 3 intensive interventions that are typically under-provided on site in schools, especially schools serving historically oppressed populations. Key resources needed from these staff include trauma-responsive offerings that both directly support students with acute traumatic needs, while still also incorporating trauma-informed practices into the teacher and staff trainings for work at primary and secondary intervention levels. Critically, such programs must also be attentive to the coping needs students have when traumatic stimuli are ongoing and not behind them. The Just Discipline Project recently designed such a trauma-responsive intensive intervention that is grafted to our restorative practice framework. Also important to these offerings are efforts to promote mental health literacy among secondary school teachers, students, and staff. As discussed earlier, mental health literacy interventions will seek to increase knowledge about mental disorders and treatments, decrease stigmatizing beliefs and attitudes concerning mental disorders, and promote mental health help-seeking attitudes and behaviors. In turn, these interventions can increase the likelihood that students in need of mental health supports will be identified and will matriculate into actual support services.

Another essential provision under the integrated system is the attention to racial equity in discipline and socio-emotional well-being within the programmatic framework. Trainings on interpersonal racism can help reduce issues of disciplinary injustice, low expectations, and truncated academic opportunities for students of color. Trainings on structural racism that directly link racial disparities in society to intentional and modern racist policies will improve attribution mechanisms among teachers, such that they locate problem behaviors, traumas, and ultimately the most critical points of intervention outside of the child and within unjust mechanisms of institutions and society at large. In the school context specifically, this reattribution will increase teachers' understandings of the need for supportive and coping responses to harm rather than punitive discipline. Collectively, these additional supports will assure that the full range of students can experience restorative

practice efforts in ways that will promote their socio-emotional health, cultivate their connectedness and belonging, and allow for deeper academic engagement. In turn, these mediating factors can generate the equitable achievement gains that have been the hope for many restorative practice programs.

Conclusion

Exclusionary discipline strategies have consistently demonstrated harmful effects for students receiving these consequences, with evidence of adverse school-wide spillover effects as well. Such approaches are also riddled with racial disparities and other inequities, thereby contributing to systemic inequality in educational settings and beyond. Restorative practice has been seen as a high potential alternative to punitive discipline, and has generally delivered on the promise of reducing the use of harmful exclusionary practices in schools. Building on these discipline impacts, the integrated system for restorative change presented here overlays traditional theories of restoration with necessary attention to socio-emotional mediators, intensive mental health supports, and racial justice at interpersonal and structural levels. This comprehensive model is currently undergoing a rigorous implementation study, with efficacy assessments and cost–benefit analytics occurring in the next phase of the work. It is our hope that through these inquiries and a continuous improvement approach, a well-evidenced, robust model of restorative practice will more consistently complete a proverbial circle—by steadily connecting restorative approaches to equitable academic success for all students.

Note

1. Discipline data findings here reflect the comparisons of the periods between August and February 2019 to 2020 versus the same period in 2020 to 2022. Owing to COVID-19

disruptions, no reliable or comparable discipline, school climate, or academic data are available between March 2020 and July 2021.

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