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Restorative [In] Justice: Why Schools Struggle to Implement Restorative Justice for Black Girls

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Abstract

As the nation reckons with the role that the over-expansion of zero-tolerance discipline policies has played in the disproportionate disciplining of Black girls and Black children as a whole, restorative justice (RJ) has taken center stage in the quest for change. This paper explores the tensions that arise when moving from restorative justice theory to practice. Drawing upon data from a critical ethnographic study, and employing intersectionality as a theoretical frame, this paper explores how one school struggled to implement a genuinely restorative model for Black girls based on their inability to engage, with fidelity, the foundational principles of restorative justice. Without a firm grasp of and commitment to the core principles of RJ, the restorative process in this school was co-opted such that it reproduced the inequities it was hoping to disrupt and functioned as zero-tolerance discipline by another name.

Keywords: restorative justice, Black girls, school discipline

Introduction

For two years, I served as the co-director of a school-based restorative justice center at James High School (JHS) located in southeast Michigan. Affectionately known as the RC, the center's goal was to disrupt exclusionary disciplinary practices by building healthy relationships, developing skills for effective communication, and engaging in peaceful conflict resolution. Ideally, when conflict occurred, our restorative process would focus on surfacing the root issues, addressing harm, and creating agreements for moving forward so that suspensions or expulsions were unnecessary. Yet, we did not live in the ideal. Most often, the restorative process was distorted and played out like the following situation between Candace, a 10th-grade Black girl and her white math teacher, Mr. Clark. In this situation, Candace received a two-day suspension based on a disciplinary referral that read: "Candace was instructed to focus on classwork but refused by arguing and cursing, and generally just being disrespectful."

That was it. That was all of the information Mr. Clark provided. The reader of disciplinary referral was expected to believe four things about Candace. First, she was either incapable of being attentive to her coursework or simply lacked the desire to do so. Second, she was defensive and confrontational when approached about her demeanor. Third, she engaged her teacher in this manner out of an intentional desire to be impolite and rude. And fourth, she acted this way without any *reasonable* stimuli because all she had been instructed to do was focus on her classwork. All of these characterizations positioned Candace as *the* problem. I talked to Candace in the RC about what happened. She shared that during class, she expressed frustrations to her peer, Dominique, over not receiving full points on most of her assignments. Unexpectedly, Mr. Clark approached her and stated that he "did not like the way that she was talking to him." She responded that she was "talking to Dominique, and not him" and that she did not "see a problem." She attempted to end the conversation but Mr. Clark, continued to "press her…with an attitude". She returned his energy and responded to him that he was "not her father". At this point, Mr. Clark advised her to stop before he wrote her up. She remembered her anger rising at being unfairly threatened. She expressed

that he could not write her up because she "did not do anything wrong." The longer she processed this situation with me, the angrier she became because she *knew* she was going to be suspended based on his inaccurate documentation of the incident. As tears flowed down her face, she stated:

> I can't win when I'm at home. I can't win when I'm suspended over something that should have been avoided…I'm the only one who's getting sent home and robbed of my education. He's not getting robbed of his paycheck...Everything is about the teachers winning. Every time someone gets a chance, every time someone gets into with a teacher they write a referral and you don't even know you have one…I should have the opportunity for fairness, I don't even see the opportunity…I don't see the opportunity. As she repeated the last phrase, she stared at me with a look that dared me to disagree.

I opened with this vignette and shared it at length because it vividly demonstrates the heart of this paper's inquiry. This interaction was characterized by misunderstanding, feelings of disrespect (on both sides), perceptions of discrimination, and misuse of power. Without the opening framework about the RC and JHS' expressed commitment to restorative justice (RJ), this interaction between Candace and Mr. Clark would appear to be your regular, run-of-the-mill disciplinary process for Black girls where a white teacher perceives them to be disengaged and disrespectful and they see their self-advocacy as being wrongly problematized. In maintaining the traditional power structures in schools that privilege adult voices over and above youth, Mr. Clark's characterization of Candace as an unengaged, confrontational, unproductive member of the class community was used to justify her exclusion from the classroom for that day and the next two. Candace's perspectives, feelings, and experience of the situation held no legitimacy and did not matter to the disciplinary decision. *How is an interaction like this possible in a school committed to restorative justice?*

This paper will explore the tensions that arise when moving from restorative justice theory to practice in school by examining how and why JHS struggled to implement a genuinely restorative model for Black girls. I argue that the root of JHS' struggles could be traced to their inability to engage, with fidelity, the foundational principles of restorative justice. They were unable to address legacies of racial mistrust, did not adopt notions of respect as reciprocal and nonjudgemental, and were relationally negligent. Without a firm grasp of and commitment to the core principles of RJ, the teachers within JHS were selectively sampling pieces of a restorative model that would never add up to the whole. As the opening vignette from Candace demonstrates, what resulted was a co-opted restorative process that was traditional school discipline by another name.

Literature Review

Zero Tolerance Discipline

RJ practices, like those hoped for at JHS, emerged in response to the carceral disciplinary environment birthed by zero-tolerance policies of the 1990s. Amid rising fears that our schools were succumbing to escalating violence and drug use that was plaguing communities, there was a push for "no tolerance" of weapons and violence on school grounds (Hines-Datiri & Carter-Andrews, 2020; Morris, 2016). Using the criminal justice system as the blueprint, the new *zero-tolerance* policies aimed to deter violence using highly punitive punishments (Suvall, 2009). While in the criminal justice system, this looked like mandatory minimums—lengthy prison sentences for low-level drug offenses—within schools, these "minimums" were automatic suspensions and expulsions when

students engaged in punishable misconduct. Initially, these policies were narrowly focused and only intended to address weapons on school grounds. However, they quickly expanded beyond the realm of egregious violence to include other forms of misconduct, including bullying, threatening, use of profanity, and possession of alcohol or tobacco (Suvall, 2009). These policies also expanded to elevate mundane adolescent behavior into more serious displays of misconduct. More subjective forms of misconduct—disrespect, defiance, disruption, violation of the dress code, tardiness—were processed according to zero-tolerance disciplinary logic. This expansion laid the groundwork for the widespread disenfranchisement of Black students by creating a cohesive set of procedures and policies that placed Black students at an increased risk of being pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system, otherwise referred to as the school-to-prison nexus (Hines-Datiri & Carter-Andrews, 2020, Morris, 2012, 2022). For Black girls specifically, this has meant that though they only make up 15% of the school population, they comprise 45% of all out-of-school suspensions, 33% of all in-school suspensions, and 43% of all expulsions for subjective infractions such as defiance, disrespect, and disruption (US Office of Civil Rights, 2020). They are overrepresented along these measures and have been since data on these metrics began to be collected in 2011. This high level of interaction with zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices negatively affects Black girls' health within every domain—mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical (Coker & Gonzalez, 2022; Hines-Datiri & Carter-Andrews, 2020).

Restorative Justice Theory and Practice in Schools

As the nation reckons with the role that the over-expansion of zero-tolerance discipline policies has played in the disproportionate disciplining of Black girls, and Black children as a whole, restorative justice has taken center stage in the quest for change. RJ is rooted in the principles of indigenous and African-centered justice systems that offer a paradigm shift from justice rooted in punishment that harms to justice that heals (Davis, 2019). When adopted by schools, Evans and Vaandering (2022) write that RJ is fundamentally concerned with creating just and equitable learning environments, as evidenced by the presence of spaces where everyone gets what they need and is respected for their inherent worth and dignity. It is also concerned with nurturing healthy relationships. This occurs by working to meet individual and collective needs by supporting connections among all people characterized by respectful communication and shared power. Finally, RJ in schools is focused on repairing harm and transforming conflict. Rather than defaulting to immediately punishing students through exclusion, in RJ, the response to conflict includes collaborative approaches that validate everyone's experiences and needs. RJ school programs often incorporate informal classroom practices, circle processes, restorative conferences, peer conferences, and peer mediation as alternatives to punitive, exclusionary discipline practices (Milner et al., 2018, Payne & Welch, 2018).

As RJ has increasingly become positioned as the gold standard for school communities wanting to reduce disparities in their discipline practices, whether in service of intervening on the school-to-prison-nexus or not, scholars have sought to understand the intricacies of translating RJ from theory into practice. Studies have shown that implementing RJ in schools has had positive impacts on school communities in terms of reducing the number of exclusionary discipline referrals for some (Davis et al., 2022; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Jain et al., 2014), improving relationships among students, teachers, and peers (Agudelo, et al., 2021; Gregory et al. 2018; Milner et al., 2018; Winn, 2018), and positively impacting students' mental health and well-being (Norris, 2019).

And yet, there is evidence that suggests serious challenges school communities face when implementing RJ. For example, in Michigan, where JHS was located, more schools are reporting that they are adopting restorative practices as a result of a 2017 statute that requires school boards to "consider using restorative practices as an alternative or in addition to suspension or expulsion" (Molloy et al., 2024) And yet, the U.S. Department of Education reports that Black girls across the state are still more than eight times more likely than white girls to be arrested and otherwise subjected to exclusionary discipline practices. While this overrepresentation is undoubtedly related to the wording of the statute—the omission of "justice" and the option to add restorative practices without removing exclusionary discipline (Winn, 2018)—it nevertheless represents a unique paradox. An increase in the use of RJ should result in disruptions to the school-to-prison nexus for Black girls across the state, yet it is not. Scholars have noticed this paradox and argue that an underlying factor is that schools struggle to engage the philosophical foundations of RJ that situate racial justice as central. For example, in reviewing scholarship focused on RJ in schools, Schiff (2018) found that it has the greatest chances for success when it was a part of a movement dedicated to confronting structures that normalize social, political, racial, and other injustice. Vaandering (2014) conducted a study on educators' experiences implementing RJ across different schooling contexts. Based on her observations, she argued that policy-makers and educators too often attempt to insert RJ into existing structures without paying enough attention to the structural and institutional influences poised to transform RJ into another mechanism to control behavior and reproduce existing inequalities. Evans and Vaandering (2022) noted that the expansion of RJ in schools has not yet been met with an expansion of intentionality in creating equitable spaces where race and culture are authentically engaged. This paper adds to this scholarship by exploring how JHS's inability to engage RJ's philosophical foundations undermined its implementation of the RJ program. It extends the literature, given its focus on Black girls specifically. In a systematic review of secondary school-based RJ research, Coker & Gonzalez (2022) reveal few studies specifically examined the experiences and perceptions of girls of color. As Black girls represent the student population for whom discipline disparities are growing the most (US Government Accountability Office, 2024), it is them who stand to gain the most from the implementation of RJ programs aimed at reducing, or eliminating entirely, the fallout from zero-tolerance policies. This study will add to this nascent body of research by bringing Black girls' experiences to the fore and tackling the paradox of how schools can employ RJ programs and recreate, rather than disrupt, patterns of exclusionary discipline.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This study employs intersectionality as a critical lens (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality acknowledges that racism is deeply embedded in our social structures and institutions and that it intersects with other forms of oppression. These systems of oppression are interdependent and work together to reproduce the social advantage and disadvantages sustained within the social hierarchy. Rather than experience oppression in silos, Black folk who also belong to other marginalized groups experience discrimination from these systems in overlapping and interconnected ways. Black girls are positioned to experience discrimination that is an interplay of racism, sexism, and classism. This study engages intersectionality by examining how even seemingly productive paradigms, such as RJ, can be sites where racism combines with sexism and contributes to Black girls' marginality in school.

To operationalize these commitments, I utilized a critical ethnographic approach (Madison, 2005). While traditional ethnography focuses on examining the current state of what is, critical ethnography explicitly aims to go "beneath surface appearances, disrupt the status quo, and unsettle both

neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). This approach was ideal for exploring how an RJ program ostensibly grounded by anti-racist, justice-oriented commitments could recreate rather than disrupt discipline inequities for Black girls. Combined, this theoretical framework and methodological orientation enabled me to center Black girls within this research and unearth mechanisms of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 2018) and injustices that limit their ability to experience freedom from oppression.

Data Collection & Analysis

This paper is based on a 2-year critical ethnographic study focused on examining the impact of schools and schooling on Black girls' identity formation. The study included the following methods of data collection: (a) participant and non-participant observation, (b) formal semi-structured individual interviews with Black girls and adult school personnel, and (c) informal conversations. During the period of study, I was the co-director of the restorative center and played an active role in the day-to-day activities at the school, which I systematically documented. The resulting data set included: (a) 100+ field notes from participant and non-participant observations that detailed interactions between school officials and Black girls within and across various school spaces, (b) detailed descriptions of restorative sessions, (c) interview transcripts from 18 school officials with accompanying reflective memos, and (d) school artifacts that constituted the print culture of the school.

Data analysis was ongoing and cumulative throughout the ethnography. Initially, I open-coded the data to re-introduce myself to JHS and my time in the field (Emerson et.al, 2011) Through this process, I regularly asked questions of the fieldnotes, conversations, and interviews to understand what Black girls viewed as significant in forming their identities. It is important to note here that though the girls were adolescents, I use the term girl because that is how they referred to themselves. The open-coding and question-asking sessions revealed the significance of discipline and RJ-related interactions in their meaning-making. I pursued this theme by creating several meta-matrixes that captured all data related to Black girls' interactions with the RC specifically and discipline policies more generally and engaged in focused coding of this sub-set of data. During this phase, I explored relationships among the coded data to develop theoretical connections and created integrative memos (Emerson et.al, 2011). To create robust assertions about the relationships I observed, I searched through the entirety of the dataset for affirmative instances and disconfirming cases. When warranted, my interpretations were nuanced to capture the breadth of data better.

Findings

The opening vignette featuring Candace demonstrated that despite a commitment to restorative justice, JHS still struggled to dismantle the practices that were the hallmarks of zero-tolerance discipline policies. In the sections that follow, I will argue that JHS' RJ program struggled to disrupt the existing disciplinary conditions for Black girls given (a) an inability to address legacies of racial mistrust, (b) a failure to adopt notions of respect as reciprocal and nonjudgemental, (c) and engaging in relational negligence. Although each struggle will be discussed separately, in reality, they were often experienced simultaneously.

Inability to address legacies of racial mistrust

One thing became immediately apparent in reflecting on my time leading the RC, re-engaging Black girls' disciplinary experiences, and reviewing the teacher interviews. There was a palpable presence of racial mistrust at JHS. Trust—the confidence that someone will act in a supportive, dependable, and consistent way—plays a critical role in the practice and effectiveness of restorative justice. It is the foundation upon which honest communication, expectations of respect, and relational ways of being are built (Evans & Vaandering, 2022). At the time of study, JHS had an estimated 300 students enrolled. Of those 300, 60% were Black (~25% female, ~35% male), 29% white, <1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 7% Hispanic, and 3% two or more races. Although most of the school was Black, there was not a single Black full-time teacher in the building; the entire full-time teaching staff was white except for one long-term substitute teacher. The support staff (i.e., counselor, social worker, etc.) was slightly more diverse, with two Black full-time staff members out of the seven. Nearly every teacher I interviewed at JHS spoke about struggling to build trust within their interactions with Black girls because of misconceptions related to their whiteness. When asked what challenges she faced in working with Black girls, Ms. Kemp maintained that Black girls' assumption that she would not understand their lives because of their racial differences was a significant hurdle. She stated:

> I mean, I don't have the same experiences that they have. So I wonder if sometimes they, "Oh, Ms. Kemp just does not get it." Like she's – you know? And I'm sure that's a thing, just because I don't understand all of the situations that they're experiencing. I understand a lot, like some of [what they are experiencing]. But oftentimes, I mean, I can be, like I come from a place where all of this drama, like that you get yourself involved with, you just need to like get it out of your head and you need to focus on this.

In her response, Ms. Kemp wasn't able to explicitly name her whiteness, which foreshadowed the level of "not getting it" that was to come. In discussing the girls' perceptions, she confirmed their suspicions. After admitting her lack of familiarity with their "situations," a code word for challenges related to their racial and class identities, she did not appear willing to try to understand them either. Instead, she stated that they needed to just "get it out of [their] head" and "focus" on what was going on in the classroom. Brushing aside their very real and very meaningful experiences as made-up drama and blatantly refusing to engage them in the "situations" they were navigating meant that she would remain ignorant about their experiences. She would never "get it" unless she intentionally decided to want to get it. Rightfully so, this ignorance would not lead girls to believe that she was likely to be a supportive adult for them.

Unlike Ms. Kemp, when asked the same question, Mrs. Mahoney could explicitly name her whiteness as a barrier. She stated in her interview:

> I think, in general, maybe more than I realize, there might be a,"Dang, another white teacher!" [Laughter] I could see that from their perspective, where they'd be like, "Well, there's just—you know, just another White lady in the line of all the other White ladies that I've talked to—taught me." And I can see where that would be a division [between the Black girls and the teachers] because they [don't] have a role model of somebody that might understand where they're coming from...But so—I do feel bad for the kids that there's not that connection for them. They should have a better connection like that.

Mrs. Mahoney perceived that Black girls viewed her as another white teacher in a long line of white teachers from their past who were unable to connect with them because they did not possess a deep understanding of their lives. She believed that, generally speaking, this perception led to division between the teachers and Black girls at JHS. Interestingly, Mrs. Mahoney maintained that she felt "bad" because the Black girls did not have same-race role models but did not articulate any efforts she, or other teachers, made to challenge these negative assumptions of their ability to understand and connect. Though she acknowledged they deserved better than what she was providing, she stopped short of interrogating the significance of their histories of interactions with white teachers so that she could explicitly address them and *actually* be better. A belief that racial matching was the only way that Black girls would experience the "better connection" with teachers that they deserved suggested that she had constructed a relationship ceiling whereby her engagement with Black girls would never reach that of white girls who shared her background and automatically positioned to have a better connection with her. Like Ms. Kemp, there was an apathy that Mrs. Mahoney embodied that enabled her to ignore the need to develop an awareness of the lives and realities of Black girls so that she could grow the necessary capacities to effectively build the trust that was lacking within their cross-racial relationship.

Similarly, Mr. Bryant named his whiteness as a formidable challenge in trying to develop trust with Black girls. He stated:

> I mean I was in the other class next door...but we were talking and a Black female student said that she was brought up to just think that all white people were the devil. And you've got kids who [believe that] that [white people] will trick you in a turn, they can't be trusted, and so, she's one of, I'm sure, at least a few people…So I guess I was not expecting that when I started teaching. I was not expecting this, being treated like I'm some cop out to get them. I was not expecting that, and I get that feeling a lot like they think I'm just someone trying to jam them up. I've found myself saying that on more than one occasion. I don't get up in the morning and put on a uniform trying to write people tickets. I get up in the morning to try and make you better in life and help you be successful...But they just think I'm here to jam them up.

Mr. Bryant felt that the Black girls in JHS prejudged his intentions as a white man. Rather than believing that he was trying to support them to be successful, he believed they viewed him as embodying the trickster nature of the devil and the predatory nature of the police. Though Mr. Bryant didn't expect it, I wonder, why not? What would compel Black girls to categorize white teachers differently than other white people in their lives if they experience them similarly? Particularly so when schools increasingly mimic the criminal justice system and subject students to conditions where they are subjected to heavy surveillance and harsh punitive practices at the hands of predominantly white adults (Smith, 2016; Wun, 2016)? Much like Ms. Kemp and Mrs. Mahoney, Mr. Bryant resigned himself to these presumptions rather than critically reflecting on why the histories of Black terror by white adults in positions of power matter to teaching relationships and undoubtedly inform their reticence to enter into trusting relationships. Like the others, he did not seem poised to engage Black girls in ways that would develop trust between them. Instead, the responsibility fell onto Black girls to believe, through no intentional engagement on his part, that he was who he said he was and that his intentions were pure.

Conversations I had, as well as interactions I observed with Black girls, confirmed a mutual feeling of mistrust between themselves and their teachers. Consider this following interaction between a group of 10th-grade Black girls and their teacher, Ms. Simpson after the whole group had been kicked out of class to the RC for inappropriate cell phone use.

> Jana: (to Ms. Simpson) You see us doing good, getting our work done and there is Marvin on the phone and you don't say nothing to him.
>
> Candace: They don't want us to do better
>
> Anastasia: Sho don't
>
> Jana: You want us to be in the same class again, but no, I'm getting my credit and getting out.
>
> Simpson: This conversation should be held when you are not so angry (begins walking out of the RC)
>
> Jana: I'm not angry
>
> Anastasia: They act like…ooo (sucks in air) they don't like Black people. They don't like Black girls… because we can wear weave
>
> Candace: They wore them before us! But now they are mad because Black girls do it better!

After being kicked out of class for using her phone, Jana tried to express to her teacher how other students were treated differently. All three of the girls were adamant that, at its core, it was due to her, as a white teacher, not wanting them to experience success. At the mere mention of race being the motivating factor in how she treated them, Mrs. Simpson promptly deflected by using stereotypes of Black girls as irrationally angry to delegitimize their conclusions. She physically could not be in the same room where Black girls had named her whiteness as a motivating factor in her disciplinary decisions. In a dashing show of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2016), Mrs. Simpson simply shut down the conversation with them rather than engage the girls' perspectives and actively chose to disengage. Her mischaracterization of their advocacy as anger, withdrawal from the conversation, and her writing them up in the first place all signaled to them that Ms. Simpson, as a representative for the other teachers in the school, simply did not like Black people or Black girls. On the surface, the reason being that they wore weaves better may seem trivial. However, Candace's comments make clear that it was indeed about the fact that she perceived white people to feel a type of way when Black people, in this case specifically Black girls, achieved excellence in a presumably white domain. Overall, the girls did not trust that their white teachers were invested in their achieving success and were envious of them when they did.

While Mr. Bryant specifically lamented the fact that he did not come to school every day to "jam" the girls up, many girls *did* believe the teachers were out to get them specifically. For example, one day during transition time, I ran into Kay in the hallway on her way to the RC. When I got within earshot, she said loudly, "I hate white teachers". When I inquired what was happening, she showed me a referral that marked her as insubordinate. She shared that it was because she was in the hallway using her phone and refused to give it up when asked. She asked me a rhetorical question about

whether the principal said they could use their phones during the passing period. I answered yes, and she immediately said, "Exactly". The matter-of-fact tone that accompanied this statement conveyed her confusion about why she was being held to a different standard. It appeared to her to be the doings of the white teachers in the school. As both teacher and student comments reveal, across JHS, there was a lack of trust between them that was directly related to their racial differences. This mistrust significantly compromised the potential for strong relationships to develop.

Failure to adopt notions of respect as reciprocal and nonjudgemental

In addition to trust, respect is foundational to any restorative justice model in or out of schools. Within an RJ paradigm, respect signals the presence of high regard for all members of the community and acknowledgment of each other's inherent worth and dignity. Evans and Vaandering (2022) define respect as accepting people for who they are and not measuring them—judging them against expectations of who you think they should be to mold them into the version of themselves that makes your life easier or fits your needs. For Black girls specifically, resisting the inclination to measure would look like recognizing, challenging, and working intentionally to dismantle stereotypes about them that villainize, pathologize, and plain old lie about who they are and what they are about.

It was acutely evident that the teaching staff in JHS did not embody this kind of respect for Black girls. Given their feelings that their whiteness made it difficult for Black girls to develop trust in them, you can imagine that they may have chosen a course of action where they worked intentionally to demonstrate an ability to hold Black girls' feelings, ways of life, and traditions, in high regard, *especially* as white teachers. However, the teachers at JHS chose a different route. Unable to see and honor Black girls without judgment, the teachers' use of the RC demonstrated their hyper-focus on fixing them through school discipline.

To situate the teachers' use of the RC, we must first understand how they imagined Black girls in the school more broadly. When asked to speak about challenges, Mrs. Fitzgerald, stated the following

> Challenges that they face at this school are knowing and honoring and respecting what acceptable behavior looks like in a professional environment. I don't think they know about you know kind of code switching or a behavior or language…You know respecting the space, respecting the environment in such a way that - I think it has a lot to do with control. That they're trying to get some control over something that maybe they don't have control over. So they're trying to control their environment here. I don't know. Just guesses.

In answering the question about what challenges Black girls face, Mrs. Fitzgerald's answer could be boiled down to one word: themselves. She believed that the girls did not know how to "honor" the behavioral norms of the "professional" school environment due to a lack of code-switching in their behavior and language. Her comments implied that the girls' ways of being outside school were incompatible with the "professionalism" school spaces required simply because they refused to accept a position characterized by limited power and control. She believed that they were intentionally engaging in ways they knew would disrupt the "appropriate" power structure of the school. This perception of Black girls as striving for control that does not belong to them is analogous to decades-old derogatory racial tropes about Black women that have suggested their excessive thirst for control is the cause of the demise of the Black family and their individual oppression (West, 1995).

Mrs. Mann similarly suggested that Black girls' aimed for control that did not belong to them. When I asked her about the challenges Black girls faced, she responded:

> Sometimes their self-advocacy, it's too much for me. Like, sometimes they – especially the ones that want to get really good grades, um, want to do it without, like, okay, demand too much from me to be re-grading assignments or grading assignments that were late.

Mrs. Mann appeared overwhelmed by Black girls' ability to advocate for themselves. At an earlier point in her interview, Mrs. Mann situated self-advocacy as a strength. Interestingly, here, she converted this strength into a negative quality. Rather than view the girl's attempts to secure the opportunities and resources necessary for success in a positive light, she positioned it as becoming a nuisance of sorts when it resulted in requests for information related to assignments and grading. Though, to some extent, her comments evidenced a belief that some Black girls desired to do well in school, what good would their desire be if situated within a classroom context where it was perceived as overly controlling behavior?

In a departure from Mrs. Mann and Mrs. Fitzgerald, when I asked Mrs. Taylor to speak about the biggest challenges for Black girls, she immediately noted it was school drama. She stated,

> Way too much girl and guy drama. Way too much. If we only had that magic touch to get them to focus on their academics and their education and not the my guy's looking at this girl and this girl's looking at that guy, because the bottom line is they all have to be responsible for themselves in their life and… No one's gonna take care of you. You have to take care of yourself. What does that look like intellectually? What does that look like for your future career? And they're just so into the, "Oh, my boo's gonna take care of me." [Laughs]

She suggested that Black girls were singularly focused on dating relationships in school. In her estimation, they did not put the girl/guy drama aside to prioritize their education because they believed they would eventually end up in a relationship where their significant other took care of them. Thus, rather than invest in building "responsibility" for their own lives, they invested in their relationships with significant others out of a misguided belief that these relationships would do them more good than their education would in the long run. The belief that Black girls were not academically ambitious goes against what we have heard from the girls whose stories have been shared in this paper thus far. Her perceptions of their academic and romantic aspirations suggest that Mrs. Taylor was making sense of Black girls at JHS by relying heavily on the stereotypes of Black women as a "gold digger"— a woman whose primary ambition in life was to secure a partner to take care of her (Ross & Coleman, 2011; Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

Mr. Richards acknowledged the ways stereotypes infiltrated the thinking of staff at JHS most clearly. He shared:

> But—so I think I do, initially, the same way that, you know, being humans and categorizing things and therefore people, I think in the same way that some African- American females get categorized by people as, you know, there's preconceived notions there somewhere...So I think initially, that causes—that might cause some tension here and there or some issues or whatever.

It was not just the white teachers that held these deficit views. In an impromptu conversation with Ms. Collins, a Black support staff member, I excitedly shared some of the community-based initiatives we hoped to launch through the RC. In her response, she focused on what it might mean for me, as a Black woman, to be at the helm. She thought my leadership would be "good" because someone needed to "work with the girls and teach them how to be ladies because they surely [did not] know how." Rather than seeing value in the larger goals of the center to work toward institutional change, her hope seemed to be that the "good" work would be some sort of individual intervention to fill girls with the makings of an appropriate feminine identity that they lacked. Ms. Collins' focus was disheartening but not surprising. Schools exemplify standards of femininity that are closely aligned with white middle-classness through their behavioral expectations and constructions of the "good student." As such, Black girls are likely to find themselves in school contexts where their Black feminine identities are devalued, seen as outside of school norms, and rendered problematic (Neal-Jackson, 2018, Wun, 2016).

As these conversations demonstrate, instead of engaging respect for Black girls that challenged stereotypes about them, the teachers and staff at JHS recreated them in how they constructed Black girls' identities and capacities in the school. These deficit perceptions of Black girls' academic and social demeanors informed how the teachers used the RC. While Black girls only made up 25% of the school population, they made up over 80% of the referrals to the RC. On the referrals, the teachers most often cited Black girls for being "insubordinate" and "disrespectful." The conduct that supported these labels were minor misbehaviors, such as unsanctioned use of electronics, tardiness, and talking during the lesson. It is unimaginable to think that Black girls were the only students in the school who engaged in this kind of misbehavior during class time. The range of minor behaviors that were read as insubordinate when Black girls engaged in them and not when other students behaved similarly demonstrated the intensity with which teachers perceived Black girls through a deficit lens. This was directly related to the unique set of inadequacies teachers identified early as present within Black girls. As they were the only ones being reprimanded for these minor infractions, at least in ways that included the use of the RC/RJ practices, it reinforced notions for Black girls and others that something was wrong with them because they were consistently positioned as not correctly engaging in school. The repeated use of these subjective categories signals that a primary concern of teachers was to use the RC to compel Black girls to change in ways that would register as more compliant with their wants and desires. As defined by Evans and Vaandering (2022) earlier, this "measuring" is antithetical to authentic notions of respect in RJ.

Relationship Negligence

The failure to develop trust that could work through legacies of racial mistrust and the failure to reject racial tropes that did not respect Black girls' personhood worked together to support the final area I will discuss regarding why JHS struggled to implement an RJ program for Black girls—relationship negligence. The formation and sustenance of deep relational bonds among school community members is core to RJ practice in schools (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Strong, healthy relationships help build the desire to engage in the school community positively, making conflicts less likely to happen. Importantly, when conflicts occur, strong relationships help to support honest communication and accountability. Unfortunately, the teaching staff at JHS did not prioritize building these relationships and relied on outside individuals to mediate their relationships with Black girls. I describe this as relational negligence because they made little effort to establish connections with Black girls on their own and expected that me and Mr. Ferguson, in our capacities

RC directors, would be the ones to mediate their interactions, and ultimately relationships, with Black girls.

The relationship negligence was evident first and foremost in their use of the RC to address basic-level indiscretions, as demonstrated in the previous section. Minor misconduct, such as unsanctioned use of a cell phone, tardiness, and talking during the lesson, demonstrated the teachers' unwillingness to engage Black girls or a limited capacity to do so (at best). Because it is unimaginable that Black girls were the only students to engage in these behaviors that are typical of adolescents in high school classrooms, these very same teachers *had* developed a toolkit to support their responses to other students. It was just Black girls for whom they had no tools or for whom they perceived the tools to be insufficient. Consequently, the types of misconduct for which Black girls were being referred to the RC spotlight the overreliance on the RC because these routine areas of classroom management should not have required the level of intervention that the center provided.

Another way that teachers demonstrated relational negligence was in their treatment of Mr. Ferguson and me as though we were security guards. We were often called to classes and asked to remove girls from the learning environment without further requests or expectations of participation in a restorative process where they and the girls could better understand the root causes of the conflict. There was an out-of-sight, out-of-mind energy during these moments. Even as I navigated these requests in the moment, it was clear that removing the girls as teachers desired was recreating the exclusionary disciplinary practices we hoped to dismantle. And yet, because RJ practitioners were being called on to facilitate the removal, it fasely legitimized the action as part of a restorative process. I knew then and now that forcibly sending a student to the RC in this way was simply an in-school suspension by another name. An interaction with Ms. Simpson demonstrated how these requests for RC "security" often played out. On this particular day, Mr. Ferguson and I were returning from a classroom when Ms. Simpson stopped us in the hallway.

> Simpson: Can you help? I have a student who is refusing to leave the class? It's Anastasia…She's refusing to leave the class.
> Alaina: Why is she being asked to leave?
> Simpson: (pause—taken aback by my question it seems) Well, she is being very rude. Mrs. Fitzgerald told her to put her phone away several times and she refused, and then she was asked to leave and she would not. Then she started cursing under her breath, you know. You know she will deny it if you ask.

At the core of this interaction was Ms. Simpson's desire for me to force Anastasia to leave the classroom because she (and possibly Mrs. Fitzgerald) felt that Anastasia was being insubordinate and ill-mannered. Neither she nor Mrs. Fitzgerald felt they had the tools to navigate a basic situation where a student was on their phone without permission and perceived the only way forward to using their power to remove her entirely from the classroom. Her pause at my question of why Anastasia was being asked to leave in the first place signaled an assumption that when requested, students would be automatically removed because there could be no reason why such a request would be invalid. Her pause may also have been a recognition that I could see that her goal for my involvement in the situation was not to support her in building the skills and capacities necessary to achieve resolution with Anastasia, or other students for that matter, but simply to get her out of the classroom. Nothing was mentioned about Anastasia being a distraction to others, so it seems the removal had everything to do with Mrs. Simpson (and possibly Mrs. Fitzgerald) feeling personally

offended. If I extend grace to Mrs. Simpson, I can acknowledge that she knew of my relationship with Anastasia. She also knew the kinds of care and support students received in the RC and possibly wanted that for Anastasia when she was clearly upset (Davis & Neal-Jackson, 2022). However, grace aside, the point here is to notice her reliance on my existing relationship with Anastasia in order to navigate her own.

In reducing the restorative process to the removal of students from their learning environments with no opportunity to uncover the core roots of conflicts, it was apparent that teachers were not fully committing to building the kinds of relationships with Black girls that are central to RJ. Talking with them during their interviews revealed that this was because they were waiting for the relational work of navigating conflict to be done *for* them, primarily by me as a Black woman. In his interview, I asked Mr. Clark what he did when there was conflict with Black girls. His response was:

> Clark: I just send them to you.
> Alaina: Yeah. Give them to us. Give them to us (said sarcastically)
> Clark: Yeah. No. I really think you guys are doing a really [good job]

He continued to say:

> It's like if I send them to you, I know that they're gonna come back happier and more intact mentally, less angry, you know?

For Mr. Clark, when he experienced conflict with Black girls, he chose to delegate the work of navigating it to us in the RC. His praise of our work clearly signaled his lack of involvement and an awareness that he could take no credit. He fully expected *us* to engage with the girls in a way that would leave them more "intact" *absent his involvement.* He did not seem to have any idea as to what that process would be, but was nevertheless confident that we could, and would, do it. He was content to let us take on all of the work of helping the girls navigate their relationship with him while remaining ignorant himself. What he failed to see was that if the girls did in fact return to class happier, more mentally intact, and less angrier, it had nothing to do with him or an indicator of a fully restored relationship. He saw students who chose to prioritize themselves in that moment and were learning how to play the game of schooling in ways that would serve them better. It was not a reflection that all was well between them.

Mr. Chase also demonstrated an expectation that the relational work would be done for him in the RC. During his interview, he talked about the RC in the following way:

> You see that maybe sometimes, in the sense that – and I've done it too, just use it as a dumping ground like, 'Get out of the room right now, please, and go over there,' instead of, 'Do what you're supposed to do."

Much like Mr. Clark, Mr. Chase released Black girls to experience processes within the RC that he was unaware of and did not seem to care to want to learn about. The connotation of a "dumping ground" suggested he was using the RC to habitually discard or offload unwanted problems, in this case, navigating conflict with Black girls. This phrasing suggested he saw the RC as a space where we would take on his burdens and unwanted tasks. Mr. Chase and others would never develop strong relationships with Black girls if they continually expected the important relational work would be done for them. Navigating moments of conflict through the restorative process would have allowed

them to learn about Black girls' perspectives and experiences and their role within them, leaving them all with a greater understanding of one another. They were mistaken if they believed that the work of building and maintaining a relationship could be done by someone else.

In closing, Ms. Taylor astutely captured this particular challenge in JHS. She shared:

> *We need to have more conversations because in my eyes the Restorative Center was never meant as a – only the students apologize. It was meant to figure out what the problem is, everyone be honest and you both have to work. It's give and take on both parts. That's not happening."*

Indeed, teachers were not fully committed to the give and take that was required in RJ when it came to Black girls.

Discussion

Within US public schools, Black girls are increasingly experiencing higher rates of discipline (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020)). Rather than experiencing the freedom to simply walk down their school hallways immersed in a carefree conversation with friends, more and more Black girls are ending up suspended, expelled, and sent to juvenile justice facilities (Morris, 2022). Amid this reality, schools have been increasingly turning to in-school restorative justice (RJ) programs to interrupt these patterns of punitive discipline because of their focus on addressing racial injustice. Despite the promise of RJ programs, schools struggle to implement them with fidelity for Black girls. In Michigan, the increase in the use of restorative practices has not led to a decrease in the rates of suspension and expulsion for Black girls (Molloy, et al., 2024). This paper explored why one school, James High School (JHS), struggled to implement an RJ program for Black girls in particular.

The analysis showed that the root of JHS' struggles could be traced to an inability to engage, with fidelity, the foundational principles of restorative justice. First, the white teachers minimized the legacies of racial mistrust between Black girls and white people, including teachers. Nearly all of the teachers suggested that Black girls unfairly perceived that white teachers, by virtue of their whiteness, were automatically untrustworthy. They argued this made it hard to build relationships with them. They situated their whiteness as benign and felt that when Black girls were able to look past *their own bias* and see them for who they were—good white people working in the good and noble profession of teaching in a predominantly Black school— they would offer teachers the trust that should have come automatically. The responsibility for overcoming this racial divide was squarely on the shoulders of the Black girls. But can you be a good, white person in a system that is predicated upon racism and other forms of oppression if you do not consider the ways you participate, knowingly or unknowingly in that system? If you can't acknowledge that being white in a society and school system where Black girls are routinely mistreated means your race *will* matter to the kinds of relationships you develop with them? If you can't see past your fragility to take what Black girls articulate about how they are experiencing their interactions with you as meaningful and worthy of consideration (DiAngelo, 2016)? Unfortunately, the teachers struggled to build trust with Black girls because they never saw it as their job to engage the girls in ways that would bridge the gap. Instead of addressing "the elephant in the room," the teachers ignored racial discord as much as they could and did not work intentionally to overcome it. It remained the issue that no one wanted to acknowledge or discuss, opting to ignore it, look around, over, and under it (Howard, 2021).

This would never lead to successfully implementing an RJ model poised to intervene on zero-tolerance discipline policies and practices. Winn & Winn (2021) argue that explicit and sustained focus on justice, equity, transformation, *and race consciousness* is necessary to transform discipline through restorative justice. Ignoring race and racism is akin to attempting to build a brand-new house on an old, jacked-up foundation. It is foolish to think that the new home —a system for building community and productively addressing harm—would stand tall and strong without a firm foundation. Within RJ, that foundation is a commitment to naming and dismantling the systems that continually disadvantage Black people and attempt to make their confinement inevitable (Davis, 2019). What was happening in JHS, and will happen in other schools like it, is that the willful ignorance about the relationship between race and restorative justice will lead to failure both in the criminal justice system *and* schools (Gavrielides, 2014).

Furthermore, the teachers could not engage RJ's call for respect amongst all community members. Respect should be experienced as non-hierarchical, reciprocal, and earned (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012). It does not mean deference to another individual, given their status or presumed authority. Respect is present when you can see and honor someone's inherent worth and dignity by not measuring them against your standards and judgments. For Black girls, this would have looked like challenging stereotypes that distort their identities and capacities, actively affirming their aspirations and expressions of self, building them up and not tearing them down through word and in deed, actively engaging their perspectives, concerns, and ideas, and providing space for their autonomy. Yet, the teachers in JHS appeared to be singularly focused on labeling the girls and securing compliance with their expectations over and above, engaging in ways that would demonstrate a desire to acknowledge their inherent worth and dignity. As evidenced through their use of the restorative center to police Black girls' minor indiscretions as well as their articulations of the challenges Black girls faced, it was clear that they held deficit orientations that supported their desire to focus on changing the girls to be a more quiet, more muted, more silent, more docile, more agreeable version of themselves. This demonstrates an adherence to the familiar racist tropes that position Black girls (as future Black women) as inadequately feminine, unacademic, socially incorrigible, and whose only hope is the correction that comes from institutional coercion (Wun, 2016). As with trust, respect is essential to the foundation supporting an RJ paradigm shift. While JHS, in establishing the RC, signaled its support of RJ and planted seeds from which relationships may grow, without respect—an earnest commitment to honoring one another as we are and for who we are—whatever sprouted would never flourish. Absent respect, there would be no emotional safety to support honest communication, no collaborative problem-solving, and limited desire to take accountability, all of which are essential to developing an RJ model that can intercede on the disparities Black girls are facing.

Lastly, teachers in JHS struggled to implement an RJ model because they were relationally negligent of Black girls. They situated the most critical work embedded in RJ—developing trust, communicating around root causes of conflict, and engaging in reciprocal respect—as work for someone else to do or not to be done at all. The teachers may not have known how to do this work with Black girls. Maybe they felt constrained by time. It might have been that they simply assumed that I, as a young Black woman, would do a better job. Whatever the rationale, the reality was that they relied nearly exclusively on a third party to act as a mediator of sorts. Similar to what Lustick (2021) found in her study, by relying on the strengths of my relationships with the girls (that I achieved by engaging in the very processes of building trust and earning the respect that the teachers refused to do), the teachers reduced RJ from systemic paradigm shift to a person-specific intervention. And apparently, they weren't the people who would be doing the work. This went

directly against the core principle of keeping relationships central. Within RJ, relationships and relational ways of being are non-negotiable. Without them, the restorative justice we are counting on will not amount to transforming our classrooms and schools.

Conclusion

This paper argued that without explicitly and intentionally engaging in the philosophical foundations that guide RJ practice, schools will inevitably recreate the power relationships and subsequent discipline disparities they are trying to avoid (Vaandering, 2014). Ultimately, within JHS, sampling pieces without a firm grounding in the core values left teachers without a path toward true transformation. This led to them co-opting the restorative processes to resemble traditional school discipline. This work pushes scholars and practitioners interested in school discipline to deeply consider the real-world factors that compromise the transformational potential of restorative practices. Future research should examine how schools with demographics like JHS address racial discord to implement RJ programs successfully. Additionally, this research could examine what it takes to build a community that is deeply committed to the philosophy of restorative justice and lets that philosophy guide its decision-making at every point.

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