

# What makes restorative justice equitable? “It’s a practice, not a program.”

Hilary Lustick and Abeer Hakouz

*School of Education, University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, Massachusetts, USA*

Allison Ward-Seidel

*University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, and*

Larissa Gaias

*University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, Massachusetts, USA*

403

Received 18 June 2023  
Revised 30 October 2023  
12 December 2023  
11 March 2024  
18 March 2024  
13 April 2024  
18 April 2024  
Accepted 18 April 2024

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study facilitated restorative coordinators in co-constructing and proposing solutions to common problems in RJ implementation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study used grounded theory to examine barriers to equitable restorative justice (RJ) implementation in the US. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with restorative coordinators, we used a combination of inductive and deductive coding consistent with the grounded theory approach.

**Findings** – Coordinators distinguished between RJ as a top-down, isolated “program” versus RJ as a collaborative “practice” among all stakeholders. Only the latter was equitable, in their view, and required a consistent principal commitment to building and maintaining an inclusive school culture. Participants recommended that teacher and principal preparation provide opportunities to cultivate critical consciousness and participate in RJ practices.

**Originality/value** – Existing research on discipline reform tends to focus on outcomes, such as suspension rates. Instead, participants focused on the reform process, viewing equitable RJ as an ongoing “practice” to improve school culture. Our findings also open new discussions about leadership preparation content and pedagogy: participants called for preparation programs to cultivate critical consciousness and facility with RJ. Lastly, the study’s recruitment and focus group design raise important considerations for future RJ research.

**Keywords** Restorative justice, School discipline, Qualitative research, Leadership preparation, Social justice

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

US districts are rapidly adopting restorative justice (RJ) to close discipline gaps (Gonzalez *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, RJ is associated with reductions in suspension (Davison *et al.*, 2022) and show promise for narrowing racial discipline gaps in some cases (Mansfield *et al.*, 2018). Yet in multiple randomized, district-level studies, discipline gaps persist along race and gender lines (Gregory and Clawson, 2016; Hashim *et al.*, 2018; Payne and Welch, 2018). Rather than limit ourselves to comparing disciplinary outcomes in schools with RJ to schools without, researchers must investigate what mechanisms ensure equitable, sustainable RJ.

The current study asks how US-based restorative coordinators understand the relationship between restorative justice and school equity. We define “restorative coordinators” as personnel

© Hilary Lustick, Abeer Hakouz, Allison Ward-Seidel and Larissa Gaias. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

The authors wish to acknowledge Drs Julia Mahfouz, Sondra Stegenga and Rachel Garver for their advice on various drafts of this manuscript. The authors also want to recognize Xiaoye Yang and Gilmarie Vongphakdy for their graduate research assistance.

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.



Journal of Educational  
Administration  
Vol. 62 No. 4, 2024  
pp. 403-416  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
0957-8234  
DOI 10.1108/JEA-05-2023-0122

who oversee RJ implementation in one school, multiple schools, or a district (Smidian, 2017). We utilize a grounded theory approach (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and frame our research through the lens of “culturally responsive restorative justice” (Lustick, 2016). School-based approaches to RJ imply a commitment to equity without explaining how RJ practices help schools resist oppression (Vaandering, 2013). Each tier of culturally responsive RJ, from community-building to conflict resolution, explicitly connects interpersonal relationships to resisting oppression.

### Literature review

Restorative justice is a philosophy rooted in native African, New Zealand and North American traditions (New Zealand Ministry of Justice, 2019). RJ reframes conflict as harm repair rather than punishment for misbehavior (Zehr, 2015). In schools, restorative practices like circles, mediations and conferences allow schools to support prosocial development without relying on punitive discipline like suspension (Blood and Thorsburne, 2005). Vaandering (2013) characterize school-based RJ as a way of working with students rather than holding authority over them. This contrasts with traditional classroom management, which Vaandering (2013) define as “doing to” students.

#### *RJ in the US context*

In the US, practitioners and scholars advocate for RJ as a project for reducing discipline gaps (Anfinson *et al.*, 2010; Browne-Dianis, 2011; Kim *et al.*, 2012). RJ correlates with a reduction in suspension, but its potential to narrow discipline gaps is unclear. Evidence in its favor include small case studies, like Mansfield *et al.*'s (2018) study of a Virginia school district, in which RJ narrowed gender, race and ability-based discipline gaps. Similarly, Gregory *et al.*'s (2015) survey of 29 high schools found that Black and Latinx students whose teachers used RJ felt more respected at school.

Yet these cases are exceptions. Anyon *et al.*'s (2016) study of 189 Denver public schools found that suspension rates decreased with RJ implementation, but racial discipline gaps persisted. Likewise, discipline gaps for both race and gender persisted in Gregory *et al.*'s (2022) year-long randomized trial with eighteen urban schools in one city in the Northeastern US. Studies of RJ implementation in Los Angeles (Hashim *et al.*, 2018) and Oakland (Robert and Okilwa, 2022) did not alter the preexisting White and African American student discipline gaps in those cities. Davison *et al.*'s (2022) study of a US West Coast school district revealed that restorative practice implementation correlated with reduced suspension rates for every racial group except Black students (Davison *et al.*, 2022, p. 695). Payne and Welch (2015, 2018) even detected racial disproportionality in RJ implementation: schools were less likely to use RJ with students who were Black, Latinx or classified as “economically disadvantaged” (Payne and Welch, 2018, p. 234). In study after study, RJ correlates with a reduction in suspension overall but does not close discipline gaps. Students of color, particularly Black and male students, are disciplined more harshly and frequently than White students, even when RJ is available.

A subset of qualitative case studies suggest RJ increases equity when staff use it explicitly to confront bias and institutional oppression. For example, Wadhwa's (2016) qualitative case study of a high school revealed that RJ created opportunities for students and teachers to see how their interpersonal conflicts were linked to the pressures of operating in an underfunded, chaotic school system. Still, in Lustick's multiple case studies of RJ implementation (2017, 2022) and Lustick *et al.* (2023) teachers and leaders commit to equity in theory but revert to a punitive mindset in challenging “disciplinary moments” (Vavrus and Cole, 2002, p. 89).

#### *Gaps in the literature: restorative coordinators' perspectives*

We need more research on why staff commit to RJ at the community-building stage but not in the disciplinary moment. Existing studies have identified leaders' consistent commitment

(or “buy-in”) as a crucial factor in RJ implementation, particularly in terms of reducing punitive discipline (Lustick, 2017; Cama, 2019; Hall *et al.*, 2021; Reimer, 2011). Reimer (2011) noted that principals in an Ontario school maintained punitive structures that contradicted the restorative philosophy. Cama (2019) found that administrators “implemented RJ procedurally and technically rather than one rooted in the theory and philosophical tenets of RJ” (Cama, 2019, p. 1). Vaandering’s (2014) study of a secondary and elementary school surfaced that both teachers and leaders tended toward a more authoritarian style, even in the context of a restorative circle.

Restorative coordinators hold unique insights on barriers to equitable RJ implementation, as they are responsible for providing training, as well as for facilitating restorative dialogue among students and between students and staff (Smidian, 2017). Their position makes them privy to the ways traditional patterns of inequality play out within the RJ process and discipline overall (Lustick, 2017). Yet, little research exists on these coordinators’ perspectives across contexts. In our study, we address these gaps by focusing exclusively on the perspectives of restorative coordinators to co-construct a shared understanding of the relationship between RJ and equity (Lahman *et al.*, 2011; Rodriguez *et al.*, 2011).

### **Conceptual framework: culturally responsive restorative justice**

We frame our inquiry using the three tiers of RJ (Chu-Sherrif, 2023; Morrison, 2005). This model correlates with the “multi-tiered systems of support,” a preventative model for discipline and special education (Adamson *et al.*, 2019, p. 62). Tier 1 practices foster community with all students and staff. Tier 2 practices address conflict using circles and other structured dialogue. Tier 3 practices reintegrate students after a long absence, including suspension.

Despite inconclusive research on RJ and discipline gaps, this model does not explicitly state how RJ increases equity. Some scholars have tried to integrate anti-oppression language explicitly into various school-based models. For example, Wadhwa (2016) frames RJ as a unique opportunity to confront oppression at the interpersonal, ideological, institutional and internalized levels, but still lacks specificity in terms of how restorative justice confronts oppression at each tier.

Lustick (2016) applied critical restorative justice to each tier of Morrison’s (2005) three-tiered model to propose a framework for “culturally responsive restorative justice.” In this version of the model, Tier 1 practices are opportunities to build a critically conscious school community; Tier 2 practices are opportunities to reduce discipline gaps and resist the systemic harm of over-suspension; and Tier 3 practices are opportunities to reintegrate students into this critically conscious school community. This model allows us to sort participants’ responses by tier, determining how consistently they connect RJ to equity.

### **Methods**

Creswell and Poth (2018) define grounded theory methodology as engaging “multiple individuals who have responded to an action or participated in a process” to share their experience of a “central phenomenon” (p. 150). They recommend interviews and focus groups as chief data sources, and recommend approximately 20–30 participants. Hall (2020) describes “Culturally responsive focus groups” an interview approach consistent with grounded theory. Culturally responsive focus groups, she argues, go beyond simply asking participants to deliver information. Instead, this approach facilitates participants in co-constructing firsthand knowledge of a problem. In this study, the problem under study was barriers to equitable RJ implementation. Interviews and focus groups allowed us to develop a grounded theory of how participants understood these barriers and their solutions.

*Recruitment*

There is no resource for tracking the population of restorative coordinators in the US. Using a tool for educational research called The Generalizer ([www.generalizer.com](http://www.generalizer.com)), we randomly selected 200 schools, proportionately distributed in terms of urbanicity, socioeconomic level and racial composition. We asked to be connected to these schools' restorative coordinators if they had one. Next, we recruited through our professional networks and several RJ educator listservs. Third, we requested that those we contacted forward our recruitment message to their networks. Respondents completed a survey regarding their demographics and jobs. So long as their job matched our definition of a restorative coordinator, we invited them to join an interview, and interview participants were then invited to join a focus group. 14 participants indicated that they learned about the study from the research team, 13 from an RJ organization, 12 from a list serv, and 12 from a colleague and 4 from social media. Each stage of this research – the survey, the interview and the focus group – was compensated with a Visa gift card. 24 Restorative coordinators from public schools or districts participated in the interviews, and 15 of these went on to participate in a focus group.

*Data collection*

Our data collection occurred in two phases. In Phase I, we interviewed restorative coordinators about their roles, restorative justice implementation and perceived barriers to equity. Interview findings are detailed in a separate paper, also in progress. This paper reports on Phase II, in which we convened culturally responsive focus groups to co-construct knowledge about the root causes of barriers to equitable RJ implementation, how to solve them and what this means for educator preparation.

The researchers coded the interview data for barriers our participants identified to equitable restorative justice implementation. We then engaged in a collaborative process to consolidate the codes we identified into a list of overarching codes. The overarching codes were Lack of Time, Discrimination, Inconsistency, Lack of Communication and Lack of Buy-In. Lack of Buy-In was our most prominent code, with particular emphasis on teacher and administrator buy-in.

*Focus groups*

We used three culturally responsive focus group activities (Hall, 2020) to facilitate coordinators in co-constructing knowledge about RJ and equity. These activities were a scenario incorporating common barriers, a brainstorming activity using Jamboard and an open discussion.

*Scenario using common barriers.* Interview participants emphasized how little leaders seemed to know about RJ, and that this limited their ability to effectively address five specific barriers. We developed a scenario to introduce these barriers in a context that was universal across our interviews (Barbour, 2018). To maximize engagement in a virtual setting (Hall, 2020) we shared the scenario with participants via Google Document during the focus group.

To summarize our scenario: Francis, a Black, gay teacher in his 20th year, and Colleen, a White, straight teacher in her 5th year, work together at a high school in a large urban district. Their principal retires suddenly, leaving a vacancy that the superintendent must quickly fill. Francis applies, emphasizing a commitment to RJ. Francis does not know much about RJ, but he knows it will win over the superintendent, who is feeling the pressure of a federal lawsuit to close discipline gaps.

This same year, Colleen gets promoted to a district-level position, as a restorative coordinator for multiple schools, including the one where she worked and where Francis is now principal. Francis asks Colleen what barriers she has experienced to providing restorative justice to close discipline gaps. Colleen shares the five barriers we identified in our

interviews, Francis asks where he should start. Ending the scenario here led naturally into the next activity: a discussion about barriers and solutions.

*Virtual brainstorming session to expand on barriers.* After presenting the scenario and barriers, we used a virtual brainstorming session on Jamboard (Hennick, 2014). Participants placed virtual sticky notes answering the following questions: Why did you prioritize this barrier? What solutions do you recommend? Who is responsible for implementing these solutions? What pushback might you expect? Participants could view, cosign and respond to each other's virtual sticky notes.

*Open discussion.* We next opened a general discussion. First, we asked participants to reflect on the sticky notes, and share which barrier (if any) they saw as most fundamental to equitable RJ implementation. We then asked what restorative coordinators need to address these barriers, and what this meant for teacher and leadership preparation.

### Data analysis

We engaged in three rounds of coding, starting with a round of open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Hall, 2020). In the first round, we noted a consistent dichotomy: RJ as a *collaborative practice* versus RJ as a *program, isolated from the rest of the school*. Versus coding (Saldana, 2021) underscores the comparisons or tension between two concepts in the data. We used versus coding to capture how participants distinguished between RJ as a practice and RJ as a program. Thirdly, we sorted our data by Tier, noting to what extent participants referred to equity at each tier (Lustick, 2016).

### Findings

Participants conceptualized equitable RJ as an ongoing *practice* and differentiated this from RJ as a *program*. This dichotomy between practice and program was consistent across focus groups. Participants conceptualized RJ practice as a principal-led, ongoing process of training, reflection and collaboration. They conceptualized “collaboration” as partnering with staff, students and families to strengthen school culture. By contrast, participants conceptualized an “RJ program” as a top-down initiative. When RJ was implemented as a program, coordinators felt siloed in their roles and as though RJ itself was isolated from the rest of school life.

#### *RJ as a practice: principal-led, teacher-honed*

Participants described RJ practice as principal-led, not mandated. Second, they described RJ practice as a collaboration among staff: it ideally began at the preservice stage and continued through peer-to-peer in-service training and ongoing reflection. Third, they described RJ practice as collaborative among staff, youth and communities.

*Principal-led.* Participants believed implementation is strongest when it is a collaboration among staff; students; families; and the community. However, they believed principals needed to explicate that RJ is the way forward. They delineated the mindset they want their staff to carry and set a long-term plan for whole-school RJ implementation. The task for school-level staff, they said, was to figure out how to enact this mindset and flesh out a plan that incorporates staff ideas and resonates with staff values. Mandy explained that this is not the same thing as forced compliance, because principals should be engaging staff in co-constructing RJ. She compared this to building a plane while flying it:

I feel like not giving any schools the choice of being on board had you know I mean we had to build a system in the air, build that plane in the air, but we're doing it and we're starting to attack some of these problems.

Beth, who identified as both a restorative coordinator and a school leader, acknowledged, “I do have that position, the power that I can say, like you’re doing this,” but as Joanne noted, “You can mandate it until your face turns blue,” and the school culture would not change. “It’s the follow up to make sure that they’re actually doing it well” that matters, said Beth. That follow-up must combine leaders’ initiative with space for teachers to establish a new school culture.

Building this culture was inextricably linked to long-term planning. According to the RJ coordinators, principals, especially, needed to be ready to “build the plane as its flying.” As implementation progressed, staff would “see the goodness” of RJ for themselves, and roll it out in their classrooms. Miles put it even more bluntly:

The principal is the most visible person in the school . . . what principals often overlook is that soft power of influence by showing you’ve got some skin in the game and like show up for the talking circles.

Principals demonstrated that they have “skin in the game” through promoting RJ as the “story of who we are” and participating personally in RJ practices. Jessica’s idea of “long-term planning” was continuity: principals must ensure staff are connected to the broader history and community of people who have used and are using RJ. “I want people to understand the length and breadth of RJ and the history of it,” she said, “and where it’s happening in my community, in your neighborhood, at that office down the block, around the world, so people get this broader perspective about the work that’s been done and being done beyond schools.” Beth called this being “intentional.” Long-term planning may be helpful for any reform, but for our participants, long-term commitment to RJ started with a principal-led, staff-wide commitment to cultural change.

*Enacted collaboratively with staff.* Participants recommended that staff have opportunities to build their RJ practice together. This could be accomplished through preservice training; peer-to-peer staff training within schools; modeling; and opportunities for ongoing, collaborative reflection. Eight of our fifteen focus group participants referenced the need for university classes to utilize restorative circles themselves. Sondra, a restorative coordinator and middle school teacher, recalled, “I saw a huge difference between folks that came in having already had exposure to restorative practices.” Circles could be used to teach content to preservice principals. In this process, circles could also provide the opportunity to practice being vulnerable and working together for a common cause. Cassie especially emphasized that preservice administrators needed to practice these skills in a restorative circle.

I want leaders to have been in spaces where they are expected to be emotionally vulnerable. So they can go in front of a room and say I’m heartbroken. This is so hard. I didn’t sleep last night. Like, an expectation for vulnerability. And I think that circles do that you know. I think that pre-service school leaders should have been in circles, like a lot of circles and access to ongoing circles. And undoing racism.

“Undoing racism” refers to a specific antiracist training by that same name ([People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, 2024](#)). It may seem tangential that Cassie brought it up here. However, this was part of a consistent pattern: participants would refer to antiracism as a sidebar to collectivist practice. Miles, a restorative coordinator based at a nonprofit, characterized RJ as a “three-legged stool” comprising “trauma-informed pedagogy, critical race theory, and cultural competency, so if we don’t have those supporting our efforts we’re going to get misguided and miss the mark potentially cause more harm.” However, most participants did not explicitly link RJ to antiracism or other forms of equity.

*Peer-to-peer staff training.* Once in their jobs, participants recommended teachers be responsible for training each other. Cassie claimed that “Collectivism was the fundamental

restorative idea,” in which restorative coordinators work on a “team,” rather than individually. Cassie provided an example of a school where teachers who had attended RJ training were responsible for training their colleagues. The power of this model was that teachers had to collaborate with each other and make the practice their own.

It was so powerful and impactful because it was coming from their peers . . . it wasn't some . . . young Colleen [referencing the RJ coordinator from our scenario] from another community coming in, it was somebody that they knew. I think that that makes a tremendous difference.

Here, Cassie used Colleen, the coordinator in our scenario, as a euphemism for “outsider.” Instead of hiring an “outsider,” she promoted collective implementation: small groups of teachers learning restorative practices themselves, understanding the reasoning behind it and then pitching it to colleagues.

Patrice, a restorative coach, preferred to train teachers by “co-leading and then having her do the circle herself and me, being in it, and then coaching basically until she [the teacher] was really comfortable and doing a good job.” Olive, also a coach, similarly “cofacilitated” trainings so that she and the teacher were working together, and the teacher could integrate RJ with “what they already know.”

Participants described how modeling can be a powerful way to train staff (including principals). Sondra, a restorative coordinator at a middle school, described how she modeled the restorative approach with her principal.

[When] I would see my principal causing harm, I would intervene and engage her around it. So, like knock on her door when she was screaming at kids and go in and say, “I'm concerned, I hear yelling. What support is needed?” And then, to try and talk to her about her motivations in using exclusionary forms of discipline and advocating for alternatives.

Here, Sondra demonstrated the collectivist approach to modeling. She modeled both a restorative approach to the situation (asking about non-punitive alternatives) and the restorative mentality of understanding and filling needs. It is also worth noting that, while this coordinator was specifically addressing “biased” principal behavior, she did not explicitly address this concern with the principal at the moment. Instead, she asked what was needed, and how she could provide support. Participants named “modeling” as the preferred form of professional development for RJ.

*Ongoing, collaborative reflection.* In addition to preservice training, in-service training and direct modeling, participants recommended that educators reinforce RJ through ongoing reflection with professional peers. They referred to these as “cohorts,” “professional learning communities,” or otherwise informal, ongoing groups where teachers could continuously reflect on their RJ practice while experiencing RJ themselves. Within these cohorts, they recommended teachers train each other in RJ. They named modeling as a powerful tool for ongoing support: principals need to continually model RJ for their teachers, and teachers need to continually model it for their students. Kristy's district convened restorative coordinators from seven schools on a regular basis. Jessica, a restorative coach, believed organizing such cohorts is the district's responsibility, but that they should be optional; this is what allows them to be authentic and powerful for those who attend. Kristy agreed, explaining that the crucial learning teachers do is actually in their own circles. “You put [the discussion] in a circle format,” she said, “That's training because people are going to be sharing best practices and lessons learned.” She recalled one principal who she saw “do a 180” between the first and second days of RJ training. He attributed his rapid shift to the experience of talking authentically with his peers. Reflecting in a restorative circle reinforces the value of collectivist problem-solving that RJ can offer. Teachers experienced these circles as a “stress-reliever,” and an “opportunity to be your authentic self.” Meanwhile, “a byproduct” was that “you learn how to lead a circle.”

If the district does not provide, there are advantages to self-made cohorts. Shelly connected with a prison abolition organization in her community that held regular RJ circles. She eventually formed a bridge between this organization and the school, providing opportunities for her students to see how RJ can play a role in reforming the prison system. Shelly still believed districts should facilitate cohorts for their teachers, but she acknowledged the unique partnership that formed in her case. Cohorts, whatever their origin, were opportunities for staff to model restorative presence for each other.

*Partnering with youth and communities.* Participants conceptualized collaboration with youth in terms of setting shared norms and working together toward shared political goals. Patrice described an example of collaborative rule formation among staff and students:

We came up with this school-wide document, where we said specifically what [respect] looks like and then they had like a constitutional ratification, and everybody was really into it. That was a good process for administrators, but everybody was on board.

While Patrice described this process as a collaboration among teachers, it was ultimately a win for the administration. It was an opportunity for stakeholders to decide collectively what they wanted their school culture to be.

Jay described a similar activity at the classroom level:

We have [students] brainstorm what a power-sharing classroom looks like, and so they co-create the ground rules for the classroom of what do they need from adults in the space. Not everybody has the same needs. The golden rule doesn't really work for everybody.

Jay referred to this as a process of “unschooling” for both students and adults, reimagining “rules” as a way to meet everyone’s needs rather than a way to control behavior.

Participants extended their collectivist commitment beyond the school, sharing examples of ways RJ could or had helped them fight issues they and their students cared about. Mandy suggested that a restorative practice could enable students and staff to collectively fight back against high-stakes testing regulations. April described a student-led appeal to their School Board about a change to the dress code, which they identified as racist and sexist.

Participants emphasized how staff could model restorative practices for their students by engaging authentically and vulnerably. Karen, a districtwide coordinator in a large urban district, noted:

I think when students see us like sharing you know when we're sharing a part of ourselves that gives the kids buy-in around trust and relationship building . . . I wish you know leaders might think about that also.

Karen observed that students are more likely to trust the restorative process when they see educators engaging. She paralleled this with the influence leaders can have on their staff when they participate as well. Participants demonstrated a power-sharing approach to modeling: what it looks like to use one’s power to meet needs, rather than exert control. Participants believed this collectivist approach to modeling was crucial for building restorative practice. “It’s a practice, not a program,” Karen concluded. “Leaders need to understand that it takes time.” By contrast, they described “RJ programs” as siloed, short-lived and unsustainable.

#### *RJ as a “program”: siloing of coordinators, their work and RJ itself*

Participants used the term “program” to refer to RJ implementation that is siloed from the rest of school life. Participants expressed RJ siloing in three main ways: siloing in terms of their job responsibilities, siloing in terms of programming and siloing in terms of resources.

*Siloed in roles.* Even if administrators were supportive in theory, participants explained, they may not connect it to existing structures in the school. Just because a principal hired and paid a restorative coordinator did not mean they understood how to support sustainable implementation. They described an RJ effort that was rushed, underfunded, or was so concentrated in one person's role that it was not sustainable. One participant described Tier 2 RJ practices at their school as "scolding circles," where the administration was yelling at students until one young woman's grandmother stepped in and told the student who had attacked her granddaughter that "we" (the community; perhaps implying the Black community, as they were both Black) "need her." Another lamented that Tier 2 practices often were not taught at all; training would stop after Tier 1 so that staff knew how to run a community building circle but not how to resolve conflict. Equity was not explicitly discussed in either of these cases, and there was no other mention of Tier 2 or Tier 3 practices throughout the focus groups. Instead, equity efforts were connected to traditional discipline: participants recommended disaggregating disciplinary data by race and confronting principals who they believed were actively causing harm.

Participants referred to this kind of implementation as "implementation via email" or "professional development where they tell us what to do, but they aren't doing it themselves," implying that there was no opportunity for teachers to practice the power-sharing and relationship-building central to RJ. This was especially problematic if principal turnover was high. "[If] you're not starting from the beginning," Jessica explains, "you're [not] constantly building and sustainability. So, if this admin leaves if this team member leaves if this classroom teacher who's the one of three doing it in the old building, how are we going to sustain the work?" Top-down RJ was rushed, insufficient and ultimately unsustainable.

April noted that "pushing" RJ on staff can result in the misconception that it is "just for discipline" and not a means of proactively improving school culture: "The response I've gotten," she shared, "is that it's just a discipline issue or punishment area and doesn't connect everywhere else." This perception that RJ is a substitute for "real consequences" is difficult to combat once it has taken hold. "If they don't want to do it," Joanne noted, "it's going to fail and then they're going to blame you [the leader], or the facilitator, for their failure." Rushed implementation skipped collective commitment and understanding, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure and unsustainability.

*Siloed within school and district functioning.* RJ practice was, most fundamentally, an initiative to support school culture, which meant it was relevant to all functions of the school: academics, student support and overall school governance. One could make the case for funding RJ as an initiative for curriculum, counseling, or discipline reform. Yet participants who worked at the district level tended to be funded through a DEI office, rather than an office related to discipline, student development, counseling, or curriculum.

In addition to feeling siloed from other programming, restorative coordinators were at the mercy of their principals to actually ensure their work was related to RJ. One coordinator had been assigned to "organize the books in the library." Another was appalled that, in interviewing for the position, she was not asked about her skills with RJ at all; the position was technically an "equity" position, and her interviewer did not seem familiar with what RJ meant. Claudia, an elementary school restorative coordinator, believed her principal supported her work in theory, but said the principal "doesn't understand what she's paying for, so she'll say fix this with a circle." The principal's expectation that a coordinator could effect change through one circle is unrealistic. It suggests a superficial understanding of RJ, as though it were a targeted intervention for certain students as opposed to schoolwide reform. Cassie explained that restorative coordinators need to be part of a team or even a "system" that can function even if a specific person left their post. RJ required collectivism at all levels of the school system. Instead, districts tended to appoint an individual as a political nod to discipline reform that was not sustainably integrated into the workings of the school.

Furthermore, we collected our data in the summer of 2022, a year and a half into COVID. Given the unprecedented rates of teacher and leader resignation during this time, Olive noted a kind of “chicken and egg” pattern between turnover and siloed RJ implementation.

There’s not the kinds of resources for anyone to actually create something . . . [One principal] might be super excited about doing RJ and you’re only there for six months . . . [the next principal] might be like well that’s stupid . . . It’s hard to create a system when that’s what you’re working against.

RJ practice required a well-rooted system that could withstand turnover, but paradoxically, turnover prevented that practice from taking root.

*Insufficient time and money: another form of siloing.* In describing “RJ as a practice,” participants described how RJ practice requires a long-term implementation plan. By contrast, short-term implementation is allotted insufficient time, and coordinators are constantly in competition with other priorities. This contributed to feeling siloed in their jobs. For example, Jay described his position as trying to “jam [RJ] into some sort of programming and figure out how to fit it in such a way that it doesn’t take away from some sort of other curriculum or time.” Kristy pointed out that holding training on weeknights and weekends, rather than regular, paid work hours, was a “band-aid solution.” From her observation, these trainings were less likely to draw “lifers:” veteran staff whose buy-in might help swing school culture, but who were not motivated to seek a new way of teaching. We might even see these kinds of scheduling choices as a kind of siloing. They separated RJ implementation from the core of school life, in both time, space and participation.

## Discussion

Our conceptual framework, the three-tiered model of RJ (Chu-Sherrif, 2023), allows us to sort our data based on tier. According to this model, educators can use RJ to increase equity at both preventative (Tier 1) and disciplinary (Tiers 2 and 3) levels. Yet our participants spoke much more in-depth about Tier 1 RJ practices – practices for building relationships and community – than Tiers 2 or 3, which are for managing disciplinary incidents. In fact, Tiers 2 and 3 were barely discussed. To the extent that they were mentioned, they were about power-sharing rather than confronting discrimination. When they did discuss race explicitly, it was not in the context of RJ practices; it was about disaggregating data or interrupting discriminatory discipline practices against specific students. They were able to think about Tier 1 practices – such as community-building and norm-setting – as specific means of improving school culture. When it came to Tiers 2 and 3, they were less likely to connect equity to specific practices. The current literature on educators and discipline gaps presents two possible explanations for why our participants only connected RJ and equity at the Tier 1 level: Race-evasion (Irby, 2018) and lack of familiarity with what RJ looks like at higher tiers (Reimer, 2011; Vaandering, 2014).

### *Omission of tiers 2 and 3 as race-evasion*

Confronting racial disproportionality in discipline requires educators to examine the “disciplinary moment” in its sociocultural context (Vavrus and Cole, 2002, p. 89). Irby (2018) found that, even confronted with racially disparate discipline data, teachers avoided discussing race and instead found other reasons – such as differences in student behavior or faults in their administration – for these differences. One could argue that our findings are an example of this avoidant pattern. Our participants, all restorative coordinators, were a mix of current teachers, administrators, social workers and educational consultants. In focus groups, they identified leaders’ and teachers’ mentalities (“buy-in”) as a root lever of change for ensuring collectivist, sustainable, equitable RJ implementation. They wanted principals to lead the charge for RJ, and require it among their staff, even though they recognized that any

truly collaborative approach would require teachers to have a choice as to whether they participated. We can see this emphasis on leaders and teachers, and those who prepare them, as a means of assigning responsibility to individuals rather than systems. In this way, our findings echo Irby's (2018).

### *Omission of tiers 2 and 3 as lack of familiarity*

Laying individual blame, however, was not exactly the spirit of our participants' critique. The dichotomy participants drew – between RJ as a practice and RJ as a program – was ultimately structural, even if they suggested that individuals had the power to resist it and build a more collectivist culture within their schools. They also acknowledged institutional and systemic oppression, and they characterized principals and teachers as having to resist this oppression. The training they wanted educators to arrive with was to resist structural inequality, which is consistent with existing literature on transformational school leadership and discipline reform (Bornstein, 2018).

Perhaps Restorative coordinators lack exposure to what RJ circles look like because they tend to be siloed into Tier 1 settings. This would be consistent with participants' observations that schools would only send their teachers to one training, and the first RJ training is usually about Tier 1 practices only. Another possibility is that Tier 2 practices are harder to implement than Tier 1 practices, because, as previous studies found (Reimer, 2011; Vaandering, 2014) the punitive imperative overrides the aspiration to be restorative. Coordinators may not have had strong examples of how Tier 2 RJ looks, because it simply is not happening in their places of work, let alone happening with a sociocultural lens (Vavrus and Cole, 2002).

### **Limitations and implications**

Our sampling was limited by the lack of public information on restorative coordinators across US schools. We had to rely on a combination of random, convenience and snowball sampling. Future research might explore other means of systematically recruiting restorative coordinators across contexts.

Focus groups proved useful for identifying shared experiences and perspectives among coordinators. Future research might convene similar focus groups to examine Tier 2 practices specifically: how often do they occur in schools utilizing Tier 1 practices, and what barriers interfere? Even though coordinators are not technically administrators, this research can inform leaders' decisions, as well as leadership preparation.

The social justice leadership curriculum already includes readings on the schools-to-prison pipeline and the issues with punitive discipline. Capper *et al.*'s (2006) social justice leadership framework distinguishes between the knowledge and skills leaders need to both acknowledge inequality and confront it effectively. Our findings suggest that knowledge about discipline reform may not be effective if leaders are not comfortable with the vulnerability, active listening and critical self-reflection necessary to maintain a restorative approach in the disciplinary moment. Preservice educators who graduate having mastered these skills will be best prepared to model them for their staff and students.

Further research can pilot RJ in leadership preparation programs and identify best practices for cultivating the necessary knowledge and skills to negotiate equitable discipline in schools. To ground this curriculum, leadership professors may find it useful to present students with a critical model of RJ (e.g. Lustick, 2016; Wadhwa, 2016) and talk to students about what it would look like to frame their discipline policy as a means of actively resisting institutional and interpersonal oppression. As they fan out into their places of employment, these principals can stay connected through informal cohorts, and continue the collectivist struggle to do RJ with, not for, their staff and students.

**References**

- Adamson, R.M., McKenna, J.W. and Mitchell, B. (2019), "Supporting all students: creating a tiered continuum of behavior support at the classroom level to enhance schoolwide multi-tiered systems of support", *Preventing School Failure*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 62-67, doi: [10.1080/1045988x.2018.1501654](https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988x.2018.1501654).
- Anfinson, A., Autumn, S., Lehr, C., Riestenberg, N. and Scullin, S. (2010), "Disproportionate minority representation in suspension and expulsion in Minnesota public schools: a report from the Minnesota department of education", *International Journal on School Disaffection*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 5-20, doi: [10.18546/ijisd.07.2.02](https://doi.org/10.18546/ijisd.07.2.02).
- Anyon, Y., Gregory, A., Stone, S., Farrar, J., Jenson, J.M., McQueen, J., Downing, B., Greer, E. and Simmons, J. (2016), "Restorative interventions and school discipline sanctions in a large urban school district", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 53 No. 6, pp. 1663-1697, doi: [10.3102/0002831216675719](https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216675719).
- Barbour, R. (2018), *Doing Focus Groups*, Sage, London.
- Blood, P. and Thorsborne, M. (2005), "The challenge of culture change: embedding restorative practice in schools", [Conference session], *Sixth International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other RJ: Building a Global Alliance for RJ and Family Empowerment*, Penrith, New South Wales.
- Bornstein, J. (2018), "Transformative leadership to confront White supremacist discipline practices during turnaround school reform", *SoJo Journal*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 5-24.
- Browne-Dianis, J. (2011), "Stepping back from zero tolerance", *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 69 No. 1, pp. 24-28.
- Cama, P.G. (2019), "Restorative injustice: a study of failed implementation of restorative practices at an urban high school", Doctoral dissertation, University of Denver, Publication No. 1545, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Capper, C.A., Theoharis, G. and Sebastian, J. (2006), "Toward a framework for preparing leaders for social justice", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 209-224, doi: [10.1108/09578230610664814](https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230610664814).
- Chu-Sherrif, C. (2023), *Tips for Implementing Restorative Circles in Your School*, Novak Education.
- Corbin, J. and Strauss, A. (2015), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th ed., Sage, London.
- Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018), *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed., Sage, London.
- Davison, M., Penner, A.M. and Penner, E.K. (2022), "Restorative for all? Racial disproportionality and school discipline under RJ", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 59 No. 4, pp. 687-718, doi: [10.3102/00028312211062613](https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211062613).
- Gonzalez, T., Etow, A. and De la Vega, C. (2019), "Health equity, school discipline reform, and RJ", *The Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics*, Vol. 47 No. 2, pp. 47-50, doi: [10.1177/1073110519857316](https://doi.org/10.1177/1073110519857316).
- Gregory, A. and Clawson, K. (2016), "The potential of restorative approaches for narrowing racial and gender discipline disparities", in Skiba, R.J., Mediratta, K. and Rausch, K. (Eds), *Inequality in School Discipline*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 153-170.
- Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A. and Gerewitz, J. (2015), "The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline", *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, Vol. 25, pp. 1-29.
- Gregory, A., Huang, F. and Ward-Seidel, A.R. (2022), "Evaluation of the whole school restorative practices project: one year impact on discipline incidents", *Journal of School Psychology*, Vol. 95, pp. 58-71, doi: [10.1016/j.jsp.2022.09.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2022.09.003).
- Hall, J.N. (2020), *Focus Groups: Culturally Responsive Approaches for Qualitative Inquiry and Program Evaluation*, Myers Education Press, Gorham, ME.

- Hall, B., Keeney, A.J., Engstrom, D.W. and Brazzel, P. (2021), "Confronting the traditional system: a qualitative study on the challenges to school based restorative practices policy implementation", *Contemporary Justice Review*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp. 361-383, doi: [10.1080/10282580.2021.1931844](https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2021.1931844).
- Hashim, A.K., Strunk, K.O. and Dhaliwal, T.K. (2018), "Justice for all? Suspension bans and restorative justice programs in the Los Angeles unified school district", *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 93 No. 2, pp. 174-189, doi: [10.1080/0161956x.2018.1435040](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956x.2018.1435040).
- Hennick, M.M. (2014), *Understanding Focus Group Discussions*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Irby, D.J. (2018), "Mo' data, mo' problems: making sense of racial discipline disparities in a large diversifying suburban high school", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 54 No. 5, pp. 693-722, doi: [10.1177/0013161x18769051](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x18769051).
- Kim, C., Losen, D.J. and Hewitt, D. (2012), *The School to Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*, New York University Press, New York.
- Lahman, M.K., Geist, M.R., Rodriguez, K.L., Graglia, P. and DeRoche, K.K. (2011), "Culturally responsive relational reflexive ethics in research: the three R's", *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 45 No. 6, pp. 1397-1414, doi: [10.1007/s11135-010-9347-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-010-9347-3).
- Lustick, H. (2016), "Making discipline relevant: toward a theory of culturally responsive schoolwide discipline", *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 681-695, doi: [10.1080/13613324.2016.1150828](https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1150828).
- Lustick, H. (2017), "'Restorative Justice' or restoring order?: restorative school discipline practices in urban public schools", *Urban Education*, Vol. 56 No. 8, pp. 1269-1296, doi: [10.1177/0042085917741725](https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917741725).
- Lustick, H. (2022), "Schoolwide critical restorative justice", *Journal of Peace Education*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 1-24, doi: [10.1080/17400201.2021.2003763](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2021.2003763).
- Lustick, H., Cho, V. and Miller, A.F. (2023), "Restorative practices in a former no excuses charter school", *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 53 No. 7, pp. 739-760, doi: [10.1177/00131245231209977](https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245231209977).
- Mansfield, K.C., Fowler, E. and Rainbolt, S. (2018), "The potential of restorative practices to ameliorate discipline gaps: the story of one high school's leadership team", *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 54 No. 2, pp. 303-323, doi: [10.1177/0013161x17751178](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x17751178).
- Morrison, B., Blood, P. and Thorsborne, M. (2005), "Practicing restorative justice in school communities: the challenge of cultural change", *Organization Review: A Global Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 4, pp. 335-357, doi: [10.1007/s11115-005-5095-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-005-5095-6).
- New Zealand Ministry of Justice (2019), *Restorative Justice: Practice Framework*, available at: <https://www.justice.govt.nz/assets/Restorative-Justice-Practice-Framework-August-2019.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2024).
- Payne, A.A. and Welch, K. (2015), "Restorative justice in schools: the influence of race on restorative discipline", *Youth and Society*, Vol. 47 No. 4, pp. 539-564, doi: [10.1177/0044118x12473125](https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118x12473125).
- Payne, A.A. and Welch, K. (2018), "The effect of school conditions on the use of restorative justice in schools", *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 224-240, doi: [10.1177/1541204016681414](https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016681414).
- People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (2024), "Undoing racism community organizing workshop", available at: <https://pisab.org/undoing-racism-community-organizing-workshop/> (accessed 18 February 2024).
- Reimer, K. (2011), "An exploration of the implementation of restorative justice in an Ontario Public School", *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, Vol. 119, pp. 1-42.
- Robert, C. and Okilwa, N.S.A. (2022), "Discipline policy reform: a review of Oakland USD following an OCR investigation", *Global Education Review*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 1-18.
- Rodriguez, K.L., Schwartz, J.L., Lahman, M.K. and Geist, M.R. (2011), "Culturally responsive focus groups: reframing the research experience to focus on participants", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 400-417, doi: [10.1177/160940691101000407](https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691101000407).

- Saldana, J. (2021), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed., Sage, London.
- Smidian, G. (2017), "Rethinking school discipline", *New York State School Boards Association*, available at: [https://www.nyssba.org/clientuploads/nyssba\\_pdf/rethinking-school-discipline-04272017.pdf](https://www.nyssba.org/clientuploads/nyssba_pdf/rethinking-school-discipline-04272017.pdf) (accessed 12 April 2024).
- Vaandering, D. (2013), "A window on relationships: reflecting critically on a current restorative justice theory", *Restorative Justice*, Vol. 1 No. 3, pp. 311-333, doi: [10.5235/20504721.1.3.311](https://doi.org/10.5235/20504721.1.3.311).
- Vaandering, D. (2014), "Implementing restorative justice practice in schools: what pedagogy reveals", *Journal of Peace Education*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 64-80, doi: [10.1080/17400201.2013.794335](https://doi.org/10.1080/17400201.2013.794335).
- Vavrus, F. and Cole, K. (2002), "I didn't do nothing: the discursive construction of school suspension", *Urban Review*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 87-111, doi: [10.1023/a:1015375215801](https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1015375215801).
- Wadhwa, A. (2016), *Restorative Justice in Urban Schools: Disrupting the School to Prison Pipeline*, Routledge, New York.
- Zehr, H. (2015), *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated*, Skyhorse Publishing Company, New York, NY.

### Further reading

- Barnum, M. (2023), *Teacher Turnover Hits New Highs Across the US*, Chalkbeat.
- Bell, J. (2013), *The Four I's of Oppression*, YouthBuild USA, Somerville, NJ.
- Chin, J.K., Dowdy, E., Jimerson, S.R. and Rime, J. (2012), "Alternatives to suspensions: rationale and recommendations", *Journal of School Violence*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 156-173, doi: [10.1080/15388220.2012.652912](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2012.652912).
- Darling-Hammond, S. (2023), "Fostering belonging, transforming schools: the impact of restorative practices", *Learning Policy Institute*. doi: [10.54300/169.703](https://doi.org/10.54300/169.703) or, available at: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/impact-restorative-practices-report> (accessed 18 May 2023).
- Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenburger, S., Hurley, N. and Petrosino, A. (2019), "RJ in U.S. schools: an updated research review", available at: <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resource-restorative-justice-in-u-s-schools-an-updated-research-review.pdf> (accessed 12 April 2023).
- Gibbs, G. (2007), *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, Sage, London.
- Gomez, J.C. and Tennial, D.M. (2021), "High school teachers' descriptions of restorative justice practices as an influence on Hispanic student behavior: a qualitative single case study", *Journal on Educational Psychology*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 28-52, doi: [10.26634/jpsy.15.2.18357](https://doi.org/10.26634/jpsy.15.2.18357).
- Greene, P. (2022), "Teacher anti-CRT bills coast to coast: a state by state guide", *Forbes*, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2022/02/16/teacher-anti-crt-bills-coast-to-coast-a-state-by-state-guide/?sh=3494045d4ff6> (accessed 16 February 2022).
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R. and Noguera, P. (2010), "The achievement gap and the discipline gap: two sides of the same coin?", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 59-68, doi: [10.3102/0013189x09357621](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x09357621).
- Winn, M.T. and Milner, R.H. (2018), *Justice on Both Sides: Transforming Education through Restorative Justice*, Harvard Education Press, Boston, MA.

### Corresponding author

Hilary Lustick can be contacted at: [hilary\\_lustick@uml.edu](mailto:hilary_lustick@uml.edu)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)