

**“Real Meaningful Change Comes from Building Relationships”: School  
Counselor’s Experiences Implementing Restorative Practices**

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### **Abstract**

To better understand school counselors' experiences related to implementing restorative practices (RP) in schools, the authors conducted a qualitative study with eight practicing school counselors working in schools that were in the early phases of implementation. Four major themes emerged from the Consensual Qualitative Research methodological analysis of the data: enthusiasm and optimism for a relational approach to education; goodness-of-fit between school counselor identity and the RP way of being; potential for advancing equity; and challenges. Drawing from these themes, this article presents implications for school counseling training, practice, and research.

*Keywords:* School Counseling, Restorative Practices, Restorative Justice, Social Justice

## **“Real Meaningful Change Comes from Building Relationships”: School Counselor’s Experiences Implementing Restorative Practices**

Increasingly, schools across the country are implementing Restorative Practices (RP) as a comprehensive, school-wide, Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2020). For many, the impetus for implementation is the need to interrupt exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately target students of color (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017), students with disabilities (Moore, 2021), and under-resourced students (Mittleman, 2018). That is to say, structural racism, ableism, and classism are potent forces within U.S. schools, therefore, an emancipatory paradigm shift is needed (Gorski, 2017; McLaren, 2015). It is not surprising that school counselors are taking a lead in this effort given that as a profession, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) and the extant school counseling literature has demonstrated a commitment to interrupting systemic impediments to student success (ASCA, 2012; Mason, Robertson, Gay, Clarke, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2021; Smith et al., 2017). To date, RP holds promise to offer a path towards greater equity within schools (Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017).

RP is not a curriculum. It is not the latest pedagogical fad, model, or initiative. It is a paradigm shift grounded in an ancient way of knowing and being stemming from cultures indigenous to North America, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa that premise community building, belonging, trust, and the addressing of harm through relational understanding and accountability (Zehr, 2015). More specifically, RP comprises an array of tools that school staff, faculty, and students use to “provide meaningful opportunities for social engagement that foster empathy and mutual responsibility for

the well-being of individuals and the community” (Kidde, 2017, p. 4).

Skills and practices that are integral to successful implementation of RP in schools consist of affective statements and check-ins, restorative questions, small impromptu conferences, proactive circles, responsive circles, restorative conferences, fair and transparent processes, and reintegrative management of shame: all occurring at the student, staff, and family level (for a detailed explanation of these skills and practices see Thornsborne & Blood, 2013). School counselors are ideally situated to promote and implement RP in schools as they are extensively trained in the skill sets, competencies, and dispositions that are at the heart of RP. In addition to being promoted as a school-wide mechanism to interrupt exclusionary discipline disparities for students from traditionally marginalized groups, restorative practices are increasingly being conceptualized as an effective strategy to improve teacher-student relationships (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016), engage and teach social-emotional skills (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Drewery, 2016), prevent bullying and peer aggression (Bonell et al., 2018), and reduce the number of days students spend in out-of-school suspensions (Augustine et al., 2018) Given the centrality of social-emotional learning (SEL) to the ethos of professional school counseling (Bowers, Lemberger-Truelove & Brigman, 2017; Van Velsor, 2009), the scope of practice for professional school counselors is a hand-in-glove fit with RP.

The literature on RP, while nascent, is encouraging. Schools that practice RP with fidelity experience a 44% to 87% reduction in out-of-school suspensions (Kline, 2016; González, 2012). In a 2014 study, hierarchical linear modeling and regression analyses suggested that black and brown students have more positive relationships

with high RP implementing teachers compared with low implementing teachers, and perceived the former as more respectful and as issuing fewer exclusionary discipline referrals compared to the latter (Gregory et al., 2016). A recent two-year randomized controlled trial study to evaluate the effectiveness of RP implementation within the Pittsburgh school district (N=25,000) found improvement in school climate and reduction in suspension rates, including diminishment of inequitable suspension rates for students of color and low-income students (Augustine et al., 2018). Concordantly, another recent study examining the discipline records of a large, urban school district (N=9,039) found that student participation in restorative interventions substantially reduced the odds that individual students received out-of-school suspensions (OSS) (Gregory, Huang, Anyon, Greer, & Downing, 2018). When considering RP's impact on the disruption of inequitable structures of exclusionary discipline, these findings must be viewed cautiously, as Gregory and colleagues' data suggested that participation in RP was only marginally associated with a reduction of OSS disparities of black students relative to their white peers. Thus, more outcome and implementation research must prioritize the structural facilitators that support school wide RP in addressing systemic inequities. Within the school counseling literature, there is a significant empirical gap regarding the efficacy of RP to promote equity in schools and more specifically, regarding school counselors' role in implementing RP. This study hopes to take a first step towards filling that gap.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school counselors in schools that are implementing RP. Given this is an inductive approach to research,

i.e., rather than testing a theory we are interested in generating a theory, qualitative research methodology was needed. The specific qualitative methodology we chose was Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), developed by Anita Hill and colleagues (Hill & Knox, 2021; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Grounded in a blend of post-positivist and constructivist epistemology, CQR incorporates aspects of both grounded theory and phenomenology (Hays & Wood, 2011). While the procedures within classical qualitative research traditions can be experienced as vague and difficult to comprehend, the procedures for data analysis within CQR are very accessible and circumscribed (Hill & Knox, 2021; Hill et al., 2005). Therefore, it was determined by the first author that this rigorous and well-published methodology would be ideal for a research team comprised of master's level counseling students with no prior training or experience in qualitative research.

### **Participants**

Participants were eight professional school counselors in a small, predominantly white, Northeastern state. Theoretical and snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997) were employed to locate school counselors (N=8) whose schools are in years one to three of RP implementation. Two participants work in K-5 elementary schools, one in a K-8 school, one in a 6-8 middle school, and four in 9-12 high schools. Six participants work in extremely, predominantly white schools where less than 5% of the population of students identify as students of color. Two participants work in a community that has seen a steep rise in the numbers of families of color moving to the community over the past 15 years, where now over 14% of students in the district identify as students of

color. All eight participants identify as white, with seven participants identifying as cis-gender women and one identifying as a cis-gender man.

### **Researchers**

The research team consisted of one counselor education faculty member and eight master's students in counseling. The faculty member identifies as a white, heterosexual, cisgender, salary-class male with a learning disability in his mid-forties. All eight graduate students identify as white, with ages ranging from mid 20's to mid 40's. All members of the team are invested in disrupting inequitable structures within schools. In addition to completing a research methods course taught by the faculty member, the team of graduate students participated in CQR training workshops utilizing the primary CQR literature (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). Team members were guided through each step of the research process including: design, qualitative interview techniques, interview transcription, data analysis, and the drafting of the article.

Drawing from the emerging literature on RP, the team drafted the interview protocol together. The graduate students then conducted all of the interviews. Transcriptions were either completed by the graduate students or by a paid transcription service. For the first round of data analysis, the graduate students formed the initial analysis teams and the faculty member served as the primary auditor in order to arrive at initial domains. For the second round of analysis, three graduate students served on the team that strove to extract the core ideas from the domains, with the faculty member serving as the final auditor and providing cross-analysis.

## **Researcher Subjectivities and Expectations**

Congruent with constructivism, this study treats both the informants and the authors as participants. Reflexivity—sensitivity to the manner in which the researchers and the process have shaped the collected data and analysis (Mays & Pope, 2000)—is an acknowledged component of this study. In short, interrogating their biases was crucial to this work. Prior to conducting interviews, the research team discussed the constructivist assumptions of qualitative research (Hays & Wood, 2011) and the notion that researcher subjectivities are inherent within any study. During early meetings, researchers discussed their expectations that school counselors would likely be attracted to RP given the goodness-of-fit between RP tenets and the role and skill sets of professional school counselors. Some members were concerned that their own enthusiasm for RP would seep into the interview, potentially influencing the participant. After sharing biases and presumptions, the team discussed the need to be mindful of our subjectivities, strategies for bracketing our biases, and how to best integrate our subjectivities into the analysis.

## **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was developed from the emerging literature on RP, the faculty member's experience conducting action research in schools that are implementing RP, as well as the graduate students' internship experience in schools that utilize RP. The interview consisted of nine open-ended questions that were designed to initiate the conversation within the school counseling literature on school counselor's experience of RP implementation and practice. Topics addressed within the interview protocol were: (a) the relationship between the professional role of the school



counselor and the aims of RP, (b) the participants' involvement in the planning and implementation of RP, (c) successes and challenges in the implementation process, (d) how RP is impacting students from traditionally marginalized groups--students of color, students with disabilities, LGBTQ-identified students, or students from poor and working class families, (e) the effect of RP on school climate, and (f) the effect of RP on the achievement gap.

### **Procedures for Data Analysis**

Consistent with CQR data analysis procedures, the first step of data analysis within CQR methodology entails individuals or small teams of researchers independently organizing or coding the data into domains (Hill & Knox, 2020). Then, in the spirit of attending to guiding principle of CQR--consensus building—the team then met and engaged in a thorough and rigorous discussion to ensure consistency in this first phase of analysis. The second step within CQR is to render the domains into Core Ideas, that is, “to capture the essence of what was said in fewer words with greater clarity” (Hill et al., 2005, p. 200). As with the first step, the second step of establishing core ideas entailed team members engaging in discussion and refinement until we reached consensus. The third and final step of analysis entails employment of a cross-analysis of the core ideas in order to land on thematic categories that reflect common themes across participants (Hill & Knox, 2020). The five concluding themes that resulted from the CQR protocol are presented and discussed below.

### **Results**

Four themes emerged from the data analysis: enthusiasm and optimism for a relational approach to education; goodness-of-fit between school counselor identity and

the RP way of being; potential for advancing equity; and challenges. We will now briefly unpack each theme with illustrative quotes and/or core ideas that best represent the theme.

### **Enthusiasm and Optimism for a Relational Approach to Education**

One theme that emerged in our analysis was enthusiasm and optimism about the way that RP brings a relational approach to education. That is to say, 7 of our 8 interviewees expressed a great deal of positivity towards shifting away from a punitive behavioral approach and towards a more relational approach. The participants' schools are at different stages of implementing RP, therefore, some participants spoke of hope for future changes in school culture based on the tenets of RP, while others spoke to the changes they have already witnessed. In the words of participant #1, "...I always thought there was another way, but being in a state where there was no RP, there wasn't a way. So, I think it's great, I think this is...ground breaking." Participant #7 shared similar enthusiasm, "I'm really thrilled, again, about learning more about the practice," while participant #5 stated, "I really like it...it's all about building relationships."

Additionally, many of the participants shared optimism about how RP will positively impact relationships between staff and students. In the words of participant #1, "With RP, it will help students know more about teachers, and teachers know more about students... I think with RP we start bridging that gap. Bridging that gap will help a lot." Participant #4 expressed, "restorative practices are pretty much helping educators learn how to work with students, and [learn] how students need to have a partnership with adults in the building to figure out how they can work their best, and for everyone to serve their best." These two participants shared the belief that there is mutual benefit in improving student-staff communication and

relationships. Participant #3 summarized that, “[the staff gets] to know the students in a different way, [and they get to know you in a different way]...and it’s really good.”

Participants shared similar visions for the way that RP can help positively impact relationships between student peers. Participant #3 attributed RP to helping students “acknowledge where other people are coming from.” Participant #8 shared that, “[the staff are] seeing more kids in the group get connected to each other now...[without circles] they wouldn’t know about each other or make those connections,” with participant #2 echoing, “[Within Tier 1 work] there’ll be community and really helping kids to practice with listening and developing understanding and empathy. So that’s exciting.” Participant #5 built upon this theme of connectedness in stating that RP “builds the relationships between the kids, how they get to know each other better, and can relate to each other better.” These school counselors also credit RP with changes in relationship dynamics and community, and they spoke optimistically about the ways that further implementation may promote growth. Participant #7 captured this hope and the belief behind it, saying:

I believe that...punishment is not the answer to change behavior...[but] real meaningful change comes from relationships and creating an environment that allows kids to make mistakes...learning from those mistakes and hopefully moving forward in a supportive community and...it is refreshing to see.

### **RP fits Hand-in-Glove with School Counseling**

Another theme to emerge was how naturally RP fits with the skills and competencies school counselors already bring to their work. Seven participants spoke to how RP is not necessarily a new or additional contrivance to add to their plate, but rather a compliment and aid to deepening the work they are already doing. For

example, participant # 1 stated, “school counseling and restorative practice don't have to be two different entities - it should be one entity.” Two sub themes emerged: the school counselor’s role in fostering a positive school climate and the utilization of counselor skill sets.

### **School counselor’s role in fostering a positive school climate.**

Participants connected the role they play as school counselors in fostering a positive school climate and how RP is a great tool for doing this given RP strengths in building connections and promoting inclusivity. Participant #6 said, “in terms of who a school counselor is, it’s my goal to make sure that kids are connected in some positive way, to at least one adult in this school and to some peers.” Participant #2 drew a link between RP and the school counselor’s role in developing social-emotional well-being:

I see my work as a school counselor is to help meet kids’ social and emotional needs so they can be available for the academics. I think that really, ultimately, RP is [about helping] to meet social and emotional needs and build capacity around social and emotional skills, so that kids can be successful with academics. I feel like it’s really supportive of our role as school counselors.

Lastly, participant # 7 connected the school counselor’s role in repairing relational harm within the school community to RP:

So you know in that one role of the school counselor, I think it (RP) fits really nicely in terms of community building and the skills to be able to repair mistakes and to be able to have that safety of saying ‘yup I can still be accepted by my community even though I’ve made this mistake and still continue to learn.’ I think it fits beautifully with the work I try to do as a school counselor and I think

professionally school counselors should be focusing on that school climate and that sense of community.

### **Utilization of counselor skills sets**

RP draws upon skills in which counselors are highly trained. In the words of participant # 4, "I think the piece of [RP] is kind of how you counsel students on a daily basis. And so if you are teaching coping strategies and working on dialogue then you are, kind of, inherently doing [RP]." While participant # 5 offered, "I'm non-judgmental, and that's a lot of what RP is. A lot of things you're doing in RP is what a counselor is already doing. Even the questions you ask." Group facilitation is another skill that many participants discussed as being a natural link with RP. Participant #3 expressed, "I've facilitated things for years. Most school counselors already have facilitation skills, you know this is just another venue. I kind of like it." Underscoring this same point, participant #1 stated:

To be able to facilitate groups, to be able to make connections...to be able to help other members understand what someone is trying to state or share, helping them make connections...you know all of that is really important from a school counseling perspective.

### **Potential for Advancing Equity**

The third theme is the potential of RP to advance equity. Given that the aim of RP implementation for many schools is to dismantle the punitive system that disproportionately affects students with disabilities, black and brown students, and students living in poverty (Carter et al., 2017; Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014), exploring our participants' perceptions of RP implementation on equity issues

within their schools is a distinct aim of this study. Seven participants spoke to this theme. Their data was best organized within two sub-themes: (a) fostering equity through relational space for understanding, and (b) creating equity through extinction of suspensions.

### **Fostering equity through relational space for understanding.**

Participants suggested that community building circles hold the potential for advancing equity by fostering understanding between students who occupy unequal social locations. The talking piece itself is a tool for equity in that it hews out space in a classroom for the voices of students from historically marginalized identities whose experiences have traditionally been ignored, minimized, or suppressed. Participant #5 spoke to this in reference to lower-income students, “. . . it gives them a voice, maybe a little more than they have elsewhere [. . .] because sometimes they get overshadowed.” As another example, participant #2 echoed this theme regarding English Language learners specifically, “circles give everybody space in the classroom, space that’s held for them.”

The circle process opens up a safe space for students to explore social power and privilege that is connected to the various identities in the room, inviting students with traditionally marginalized identities to add their experiences of disenfranchisement to the dialogue, while also providing a structure for students with privileged identities to listen and receive stories that may be unknown to them. For example, participant #8 shared “there are not many students of color in our school [. . .] and a lot of privileged white kids” and following the 2017 white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, VA, circles allowed white students a space to “get out of their comfort zones and recognize their

privilege” while “embracing students of color” and their experience of the rally.

Additionally, the talking circle provides a structure for counselors and teachers to process the hierarchy and lack of understanding between privileged teachers and marginalized students. Underscoring this point, participant #6 spoke about having “. . . a kid who socioeconomically, I mean . . . I don’t even know what his life is like” and the “amazing” power of talking circles to open up the counselor’s understanding of this student’s lived experience of poverty. Regarding the gulf of misunderstanding that can exist between white educators and students of color, participant #1 voiced that RP offers spaces where, “Students [of color] can talk about [their experiences of racism], and they have a voice, they now have voices. And now they can hear what the [white] teacher says and the [white] teacher can also understand where they were coming from. Sometimes, [white] teachers don’t understand that . . .”

### **Creating equity through extinction of suspensions.**

Participants spoke to the potential of RP to advance equity by disrupting the propensity for, and frequency of, suspensions. By shifting from a punitive discipline system to a relationally-informed system of community engagement, students are given a voice in the consequences of their behavior and provided with opportunity to remain in school and thus prevent expulsion. In the words of participant #2,

It’s not about removing the child from the situation, it’s about really bringing the child *in*, and bringing *everybody* that was harmed, and that was impacted, *in*. And that *can* be a shift for people who have a tendency to want that child to be removed and fixed before they’re brought back, right?”

Restorative conferences are often the tool that is employed when a student has

caused harm in school. These conferences provide a supportive environment for students who cause harm to share their story, take responsibility, make amends, learn from their mistake, and repair relationships. Participant #5 juxtaposed the harmful effects of suspensions against the productivity of restorative conferences, “I see [conferences] as a more productive use of time than ‘Hey, let’s just suspend a kid again.’” Furthermore, when relational harm occurs, the health and safety needs of the student receive greater emphasis and attention. For example, participant #1 noted that students who misbehave or cause harm feel safer having a restorative “support center” to go to rather than returning home to various psychosocial stressors: “Right now it’s giving them a sense of safety. They have a place to go.”

### **Challenges**

Lastly, the theme of challenges to implementation emerged from these data. This theme is comprised of four sub-themes: time constraints, resistance from staff and administration, friction in shifting from a punitive to a restorative model, and lack of implementation fidelity.

#### **Time constraints.**

All participants discussed the challenge of finding the time necessary to prepare for and conduct a circle, especially responsive restorative conferences. Participant #3 discussed both the preparation and the difficulty of fitting RP into an already full school day, “One challenge is that it takes a lot of time to do a circle and to do it right, [. . .] if you want to do it well, it takes a lot of time. That’s the big drawback is the time . . .” Additionally, participants described challenges in convincing fellow school staff and parents/guardians that the time spent incorporating RP into the school day is a worthy



investment. As RP implementation is an iterative and evolving process, its impacts are not always seen immediately. As noted by participant #5, “Parents, the community. Parents, teachers—again, parents are the same way. They want it (behaviors) to change immediately.”

### **Resistance from staff and administration**

All participants discussed the difficulties in getting school staff to buy into RP. In the words of participant #1, “The overwhelming part was just getting the buy in and letting the teachers and staff understand what it actually was.” In many of the participants’ schools only a few teachers and/or school administrators are trained in RP and this may be causing a lack of interest and/or understanding of the process of RP. Effective implementation of RP also requires school staff to be open and emotionally available with students. Participant #4 described how staff occupy different levels of this emotional readiness:

Some people are comfortable, and some people are not. [ . . . ] I think it’s deeper work and so because it’s deeper work, we have to let people honor where they’re at or in order to [ . . . ] increase their comfort level. Once they become more comfortable then they become more confident.

Participants also discussed the importance of incorporating RP at the staff level first before school wide implementation occurs. Participant #2 noted that RP can be an effective tool to repair disfunction at the staff level, and that it is critical to address these issues first so effective and authentic school wide implementation can occur, stating, “If you’re not willing to do that with us as adults, then how can you expect us to do it with kids?” Participants also noted lack of support from administration as an additional challenge to RP implementation. As participant #7 states, “We didn’t have buy-in from

our administrators and we ended up just being pushed off the agenda through the rest of the school year.”

### **Lack of fidelity**

Several participants discussed how they struggle with the inconsistent implementation of RP and the lack of fidelity to the process at their schools. They explained how this is often due to a dearth of funding, which limits training to only a few staff members. Without comprehensive staff training, participants noted a lack of understanding and interest in RP, as well as an inability to model and reliably practice the tenets of RP. Participant #4 expands on this by stating:

So, your training is really authentic. Then, you go back to school or wherever you work and some people buy-in because they know it's the right thing to do. Some people buy-in because they say they have to do it and then some people won't buy-in, so you have to deal with the 20% that won't. So, how do you put something in with integrity and fidelity when there is a piece of it that's not authentic.

Participants expressed concern that poor fidelity leads to a lack of observable impact, which then causes the larger school community to question RP's effectiveness.

### **Discussion**

Within this study we sought to explore the experiences of school counselors early in the implementation of RP within their schools. The findings of this qualitative study present themes that may be useful for school counselors who intend to implement RP within their schools. Decades ago, the progenitors of the counseling field posited that “It's the relationship that heals” (Yalom, 1989, p. 12). It is therefore unremarkable that school counselors would enthusiastically embrace a deeply relational approach to

constructing school culture, procedures, and policies that rely on connectedness, empathy, understanding, and repair. Given the concordant relationship between the heart of the school counselor identity and the principles of RP, it is also not surprising that most of the participants reported an alignment between their professional identity, role, and skills with both the philosophical assumptions and tools of RP. Also, being positioned as leaders in the school, with strong collaborative relationships with teachers and members of various leadership teams, school counselors are well positioned to hold a leadership role in RP implementation. To this point, participant #2 offered, “I think our role is pretty integral in our training to then be able to help the other educators in the building learn how to implement the skill set.”

Regarding equity issues, for too many students from traditionally marginalized and under-represented groups, U.S. schools are sites of multiple forms of oppression. Scholars have identified implicit bias (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016; Johnson, 2018), racist and ableist microaggressions (Johnston-Goodstar & Velure-Roholt, 2017), colorblind racism, and severe ableism-fueled bullying (Pinquart, 2017) to be far too common in schools. Entrenched structural racism and ableism as evidenced by achievement gaps (Rothstein, 2015), school climate gaps (Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015), and disparities in discipline (Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, & Belway, 2015) persist. A new liberatory paradigm of education is sorely needed so that schools can become sites of reconciliation and repair for marginalized groups rather than sites of hegemony, harm, and inequity. Illustrated by these data from school counselors in this study, RP is perceived as being a useful tool for such work, albeit indirectly. That is to say, the participants in this study underscored RP’s passive power

to foster social justice—the allowance of space for *all* student voices, including those of marginalized students, and the suppression of suspensions and expulsions for *all* students, including those students historically targeted for punitive discipline.

At the same time, there was a conspicuous absence of critical consciousness, or conscientização' (Freire, 1993) within these data. Critical consciousness captures the competency to both think and speak critically about inequitable social conditions (critical reflection) and subsequently take action to change them (Shin, Smith, Lu, Welch, Sharma, Vernay, & Yee, 2018). Critically conscious folk utilize language that overtly and directly names oppression, e.g. structural racism, microaggressions, implicit bias, assimilation, white fragility, etc. (Deimer, McWhirter, Ozer & Rapa, 2015; Jemal, 2017). If one were to interview a sample of highly critically conscious school counselors on the topic of RP's utility in interrupting exclusionary discipline systems and to redress the harm experienced by of students from marginalized groups within schools, one would expect participants to utilize language that more acutely names oppression. While participants within this sample hinted at structural oppression, e.g. naming the minimizing of black and brown student voices in their schools, and the privilege of white students, their language choices failed to name and articulate oppressive structures, and how to interrupt such structures, in a substantive way. As we will speak to further within the implications section of the manuscript, the absence of critical consciousness within these data suggests that a more liberatory, anti-oppressive way to wield RP may be needed (Schiff, 2018).

Finally, school counselors in our sample candidly expressed challenges that accompany RP implementation: time constraints along with time bound expectations,

resistance from school staff and administration, and lack of implementation fidelity. Two case studies of RP implementation within schools have highlighted similar challenges and tensions. A recent mixed-methods bounded single case study also found implementation struggles related to time: “I have tried circles in my space, but find it difficult to lead them in such a short amount of time” (Garnett et. al, 2019). While a case study of three Scottish schools found analogous struggles related to moving away from a punitive mindset: “There was some resistance in the wider staff group where RP were seen as challenging the disciplinary standards in the school” (Kane et al., 2009). Given that implementation of school-wide restorative practices requires a radical cultural shift away from punitive discipline models and towards relational (Drewery, 2016), tensions are likely to emerge amongst staff that have internalized punitive, authoritarian values, and frameworks to control and reduce “problem” behavior among students in school.

### **Limitations**

CQR is an inductive research modality whose goal is to expand the scholarly discussion, not to test inferences. Establishing generalizability in a statistical sense is neither the goal nor the aim of qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). Readers would be remiss to generalize the stories of these eight school counselors to all school counselors in schools that are implementing RP. However, the rich quotations will allow practicing school counselors to determine the transferability of these data to their own experiences, while fostering a more complex discussion of what it may mean for some school counselors to implement RP within their schools. Also, all of the participants within our sample are engaged in years one, two or three of RP implementation. Therefore, any insights garnered from this study should only be brought to bear on early

implementation, while strong claims about the lasting and transformative power of RP awaits further research. Indeed, much more research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed to substantively add to our understanding of how school counselors can participate in effectively implementing RP within schools.

### **Implications**

A recent national survey suggests that up to half of U.S. schools are embracing RP (González, 2016), primarily because of RP's potential to ameliorate the well-evidenced disproportionality and inequitable rates of punitive discipline measures for students of color, students with disabilities, and students living in poverty (Gregory et al., 2016). The buzz around RP potential for interrupting systemic inequity is so great, that it has even been framed as a critical race response to inequitable suspension rates (Wadhwa, 2010). For this reason, our emphasis for the implications of this study will address RP's emancipatory potential only if it is implemented with a high degree of critical consciousness (CC).

CC begins with the assumption that members of both dominant, privileged social groups, as well as members of nondominant, marginalized groups, are socialized to feel comfortable in relations of domination and subordination rather than in equity (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). In other words, well-intentioned, beneficent, white, non-disabled educators and students are acculturated to remain complacent in maintaining racist and ableist structures within schools. While RP implementation may allow for the elevation of student voice and the diminishment of suspensions across the board, critical theory would suggest that such a passive approach to equity work will not

give educators and students the tools they need to unlearn structural ableism and racism.

In support of this contention, we note recent scholarship that suggests that full participation in RP circles is likely to be influenced by significant ability-related issues including verbal skills, language proficiency, and developmental functioning (Ogilvie & Fuller, 2017; Moore, 2021). Additionally, emerging research has found that student and school racial/ethnic composition impacts RP implementation and effectiveness (Payne & Welch, 2017, 2015; Gregory et al., 2018), along with a study that found that English language learners in a large urban school district had lower odds of participating in restorative interventions (Anyon et al., 2014). Regarding socio-economic implications, a recent study that explored middle and working class families in England as they engaged in restorative conferences found that the verbal communication style used to deliver RP was inherently middle class, raising concerns about equitable engagement in RP circles for students of a lower socio-economic status (Willis, 2018). Finally, it bears repeating that Gregory et al. (2018) found that RP implementation was only marginally associated with a reduction of OSS disparities of black students relative to their white peers.

Critical consciousness suggests that effective, emancipatory work entails the active learning by the oppressed and oppressor groups to critically identify the social norms baked into school systems that diminish some and privilege others. Effective, critical equity work requires all stakeholders in schools to pinpoint, analyze, and classify the historic and contemporary unjust social structures that inform and propagate the academic achievement gap, school climate gap, and systemic disparities in

exclusionary discipline (Johnson, 2018), and then take up the advocacy work necessary to readdress them. For educators, this will require concrete activism steps that may encompass, but should not be limited to the following:

- Advocating with school leadership to conduct annual equity audits (Green, 2017)
- Advocating with school boards and curriculum committees to transform curriculum to reflect social justice education (Gorski & Parekh, 2020; Watson, Magoplan, & Au, 2018)
- Advocating for PD opportunities to allow teachers and staff to develop the skills and competencies to practice abolitionist teaching (Love, 2020)
- Offering affinity space for students and parents from marginalized groups (Latunde, 2018)
- Tailoring expectations and approaches to parent engagement to specifically meet the needs of BIPOC parents (Marchand, Vassar, Diemer, & Rowley, 2019).
- Infuse the measurement of teacher and staff critical consciousness into RP implementation surveys and tools (Rapa, Bolding, & Jamil, 2020; Shin et al., 2018).

Only as educators' and students' understanding of structural inequities expand and deepen, will they be empowered to challenge those inequities, and to construct a more equitable society (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016).

Finally, consistent with other empirical examinations of RP implementation (Garnett et al., 2019; Gregory, Ward-Seidel & Carter, 2020; Kervick, Moore, Ballysingh,



Garnett & Smith, 2019), our study found that attitudinal and resource constraints significantly impede RP implementation. School counselors who wish to join the RP revolution should be prepared for such barriers. As stated by Garnett et al (2019),

“As with any school reform change initiative, implementing school-wide RP should be an intentional and gradual process in which all stakeholders, including classroom teachers, are formally engaged to assess need, buy-in, and implementation readiness” (p. 3). School counselors who are leading RP implementation would benefit from fully examining the RP implementation resources and literature that integrate principles and models of the science of organizational change such as Kervick, Moore, Ballysingh, Garnett & Smith (2019), Scaccia et al., (2015), and Thorsborne & Blood (2013).

While this literature is beyond the scope of this article, we conclude this implications section with the work of leading RP researcher, Anne Gregory. Gregory and colleagues have determined eight indicators of infrastructure and capacity building RP implementation readiness that will likely lead to implementation success (Gregory, Ward-Seidel, & Carter, 2020; see Figure 1) and will also find implementation errors that will likely result in unsuccessful outcomes (Gregory & Evans, 2020; see Figure 2).

### **Conclusion**

When an emphasis on community, trust, and connectedness is woven into school culture through RP, the ground is fertile for specific, acute anti-racism and anti-ableism school-wide restructuring and liberation efforts. We submit that if RP were to be infused with critical consciousness, schools could transform into sites of reconciliation, liberation, and empowerment. Without critical consciousness, “restorative

[practices] in schools are likely to become another well-intended, incremental liberal intervention destined to maintain the legacy of institutional racial [and ability] bias” (Schiff, 2018, p. 134). Much more research regarding the potential of *critical* implementation of RP in schools is needed.

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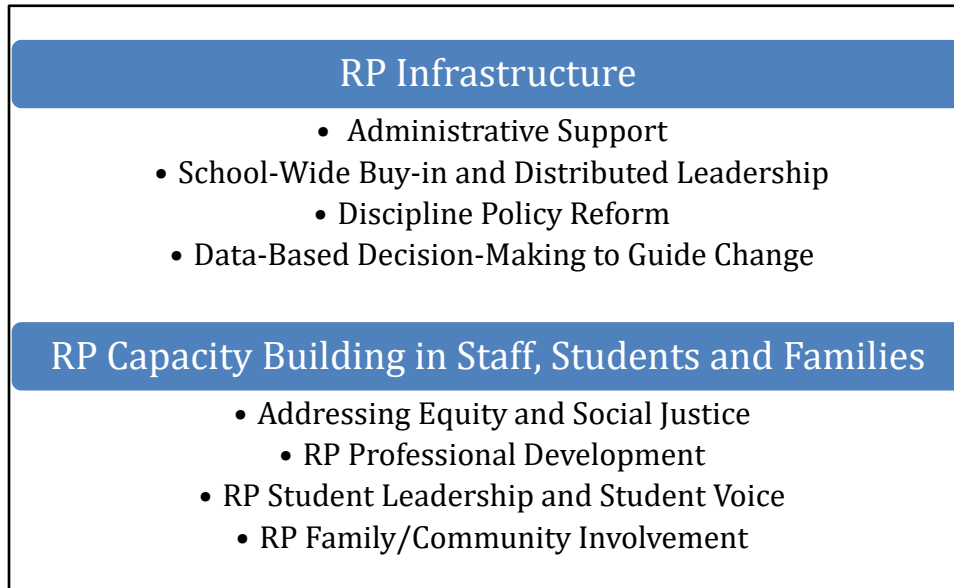
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## Appendix

**Figure 1.**

*Indicators of RP Implementation Readiness*



**Figure 2***Implementation Errors*