What Further Research is Needed on Restorative Justice in Schools?

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

WestEd was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to conduct preliminary research to describe current practices, successes, and challenges related to implementing restorative justice (RJ) as an alternative to traditional responses to student misbehavior in K–12 schools in the United States. Broadly speaking, RJ is a non-punitive disciplinary method that focuses on restoring relationships, and all parties involved in the conflict are included in the restorative process. For purposes of this report, the authors have included the terms "restorative practices" and "restorative approaches" in this definition.

The research for this report includes the following:

- a comprehensive literature review,
- interviews with nationally recognized experts on RJ,
- interviews with practitioners of RJ in education settings, and
- an online survey to identify current themes and issues about RJ as implemented in U.S. schools.

During the interviews, experts were asked to share their suggestions about future research needs that would advance understanding of RJ in schools. This question was also posed during a focus group conducted with 15 experts and practitioners of RJ in schools at the Restorative Justice, Responsive Regulation & Complex Problems conference in Burlington, Vermont in July 2014. Some of these interviewees and focus group participants were involved in training school staff or providing consultation to help schools implement RJ programs. This brief summarizes the responses received from 43 experts who were interviewed between January and October 2014, and the responses of focus group participants. The interviewees and focus group participants included a mix of

academicians, researchers, and RJ leaders from government or nonprofit organizations. The list of experts interviewed can be found in appendix A.

During the interviews and the focus group, experts expressed their enthusiasm for this study, and they advocated for additional research and evaluation projects. Experts also expressed some reservations about RJ research, chiefly:

- There is neither a clear definition nor a widely accepted model of RJ.
- Because most implementation of RJ is "weak," funding should first be focused on stronger implementation and then on research.
- Researchers need to understand and be trained in RJ before going into a school to study it.

Each expert offered at least one suggestion for future research, and some offered multiple suggestions. These suggestions are synthesized into the following categories, although we note many could reasonably fit into multiple categories.

Research Areas

Implementation Readiness

Several experts underscored the importance of viewing implementation of RJ in schools as a process that can take considerable time. Proper implementation requires that those responsible for implementation have a clear understanding of the school climate and of the nature, extent, and source of the issues that the school has to contend with before implementing RJ. If a whole-school model is desired, experts encourage implementing RJ with all adults in the school first (teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria staff, administrators, specialists) before implementing RJ with students. They also note that RJ is most successfully implemented when everyone (students, school employees, parents and guardians, and community members) embrace it. The following research questions were posed in regard to implementation readiness:

- What structures, staff, and commitment level are needed for a district/school to take on implementation of RJ?
- What strategies have been successful in building buy-in of school and community stakeholders for RJ implementation in schools?
- What actions does a school or district need to take to make the shift from using a traditional punitive approach for student discipline to adopting a RJ approach?

Whole-School versus Stand-Alone Models

Nearly all respondents identified the need for a "working definition" of RJ that school communities can embrace. The definitional challenge stems, in part, from the varied backgrounds and diverse experiences of the respondents (and other experts in the U.S. and abroad) endeavoring to bring RJ to the school setting. Experts and practitioners in the field hold two overarching perspectives about what RJ is. One perspective describes RJ as a philosophy, as a "way of being," or as an evolving attitude or approach. Respondents with this view consider it essential that RJ be a whole-school, or even whole-community, approach to culture and climate, including how to handle student offenses. The other perspective views RJ in schools as fundamentally a skill-based exercise — something that school staff can learn to use with proper training and oversight, and that they might use as a stand-alone strategy to address student misbehavior. Although respondents who hold this perspective are not against whole-system approaches, they are generally fine with RJ being an "add-on" program focused on individual disciplinary actions. Regardless of which approach is adopted, research is needed to identify critical aspects of programs that must be included for RJ to be effective. Respondents identified a number of research questions to address these issues:

- What are the key elements of RJ that need to be implemented for the program to be successful?
- What is the evidence of outcomes from implementation of a whole-school approach to RJ?
- What is the evidence of outcomes from implementation of stand-alone RJ strategies in schools?
- How do student outcomes differ in schools implementing a whole-school model versus schools implementing a stand-alone model, and how do these outcomes vary across types of offenses and alternative discipline measures?
- How is overall school culture associated with implementation fidelity and program outcomes? Which processes/practices are most crucial in addressing staff culture?

Implementation and Effectiveness

Funding has recently been allocated for several randomized controlled trials of RJ programs in schools, including a field trial launched by the RAND Corporation, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development, to study RJ in Maine middle schools, and two awards in 2014 by the National Institute of Justice, under its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, for similar studies in other jurisdictions. More rigorous evidence of impact of RJ in schools is forthcoming, yet much about RJ in schools still needs to be examined, researched, or evaluated. Interviewed experts strongly

encouraged rigorous research on the implementation and effectiveness of RJ in schools. For example, they identified the following research questions:

On implementation:

- How are the levels of staff engagement and commitment (e.g., number of staff trained and intensity of training) associated with outcomes for RJ in schools?
- To what extent, if any, has an RJ curriculum been developed and implemented? What evaluation of the curriculum has been conducted?
- To what extent are parents and guardians aware of and/or involved in the implementation of RJ? In what ways does parent/guardian involvement affect implementation?
- What leadership traits of school, district, and community stakeholders result in high-fidelity implementation of RJ?
- How is RJ implemented in schools serving diverse populations, such as children with special needs? How do results vary by student subgroups?
- What ongoing supports (for staff, students, administration, and the community) are associated with successful implementation and sustainability?

On effectiveness:

- What are the long- and short-term impacts of RJ implementation on discipline approaches and behavioral outcomes in schools?
- What are the student attitudinal outcomes associated with participation in specific RJ practices (e.g., restorative circles, conferencing)?
- What is the impact of RJ on teachers? How do teachers feel about implementing RJ? Does it increase their connection with students?
- What is the impact of RJ when used to handle school staff-to-staff conflict and offenses?
- Is there a relationship between RJ and improved academic performance and test scores?
- How does RJ impact school climate and social and emotional well-being of students and teachers? How is this associated with student performance?
- What is the impact of RJ on overall school culture?

Impacts on Racial and Ethnic Minorities and Students with Disabilities

Much has been written and discussed about racial disparities in schools and the resulting school-to-prison pipeline. Some interviewed experts strongly emphasized that the fundamental purpose of implementing RJ in schools is to address racial disparities. We also heard that RJ in schools is about much more than lowering suspension/expulsion rates. Several experts encouraged an investigation of whether RJ in schools is more

effective in reducing the disproportionate use of exclusionary punishments along racial, ethnic, or disability lines than programs such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). In addition, there is a question of how well RJ can be integrated with these programs to promote greater success. Further research is needed to answer questions such as:

- When implemented with high fidelity, does RJ impact racial disproportionality in discipline?
- What principles or components of RJ must be included for it to successfully address racial disparities?
- What is the impact of RJ on disproportionality in exclusionary discipline, compared with impacts of PBIS, SEL, MTSS, or other interventions? In what ways are these interventions being implemented coherently, and how does this approach impact results?
- To what extent and in what ways does implementation of RJ impact marginalized populations in schools?

Leadership/Training

Interviewed experts agreed that there are several essential ingredients for implementing RJ in schools. The first is strong leadership endorsing, and advocating for, a change in the school's approach to discipline and culture. Another is training for school staff. We heard from several experts that a school principal who is committed to RJ and to creating a restorative environment in the school is essential for implementation to be successful. Research that examines the type of leadership characteristics that best facilitate RJ implementation is needed. Research questions include:

- What role do school leaders play in the effectiveness of RJ practices?
- What training models are successful in supporting leadership development for RJ implementation in schools?
- What is the impact of strong leadership on sustainability of RJ?

RJ training for teachers and other school staff is another element about which many experts had strong opinions (and provided examples of). More research is needed to document what training and ongoing support for teachers and other school staff results in the most effective implementation of RJ. Some research questions to address training needs for school staff include:

- What RJ training models for school staff exist? What training models are successful, and why? What ongoing support provided to school staff is most effective?

- What components of RJ training are associated with high-quality implementation? What components of RJ training lead to implementation processes with strong adherence to RJ principles?
- To what extent and in what ways are pre-service teachers being educated about RJ in schools?

Data and Measurement

Many interviewees indicated that there is a critical need for good data to inform RJ efforts. Currently, many district and school data systems do not track RJ efforts or what the outcomes are for students exposed to an RJ process.

Experts also agreed that more research is needed on the measurement of RJ in schools. Overall, experts knew of very few instruments designed to measure RJ, and often they created their own instruments for the purpose of research and practice. These types of instruments included fidelity instruments specific to the model of RJ being implemented, as well as the RP-Observe observation tool[1] that Rutgers University developed to measure RJ in schools. Some experts noted that measuring RJ is challenging because RJ is about the overall school environment, communication, and a "way of being." However, many recognize that learning about the impact of RJ requires sound measurement. Others have approached the measurement of RJ by measuring changes in school climate and relationships among students and staff in schools. Interviewees agreed that there should be a resource that would compile and disseminate existing evaluation tools, instruments, and findings to benefit and advance the field. Research questions include:

- What data are currently collected by schools and districts implementing RJ? How are the data used and made available to constituents (students, teachers, parents and guardians, community members, police, etc.)?
- What further data should be collected by schools implementing RJ?
- Are there schools/districts where students have been tracked long enough to measure the impact of RJ on the school-to-prison pipeline?
- Is there an objective standard, a quantitative metric, which can measure and evaluate RJ practices? Many schools say they are practicing RJ, but is it being implemented well or with integrity and fidelity to the philosophy?

Sustainability

Even though RJ has been implemented in many schools for several years, what makes a program replicable or sustainable is not clear. Experts raised questions around the attitudinal, behavioral, and cultural changes, among staff and other members of the

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[1] Gregory, A., Gerewitz, J., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Korth, J. (2014). RP-Observe manual. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.

school community that are necessary to sustain programming. The interviewed experts have suggested questions that could lead researchers to discover what needs to be in place for RJ to be replicated and sustained:

- Are there any implemented RJ models that have expanded and grown over time beyond single schools or districts, and what are the factors associated with growth in these models?
- What models show promise for sustainability? What components of those models are critical to sustainability?
- What are the costs and benefits of RJ in schools, and how do these impact implementation and, ultimately, sustainability?

Conclusion

In the context of a larger set of questions for experts and practitioners interviewed in this study, we asked a specific question about what future research they wish to see funded. Nearly all of these interview participants were in support of more research and evaluation projects focused on RJ in schools. Most wanted rigorous formative studies to refine the framework and document the outcomes of RJ in schools. This brief provides a starter set of research questions that can be considered by foundations, the federal government, and the research community to begin building a strong body of empirical evidence about RJ in schools.

Appendix A

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