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### Abstract

Restorative justice (RJ) practices have expanded significantly with the aim of improving school safety. Despite RJ's potential for transformative change, the factors driving these changes have rarely been the focus of rigorous scientific investigation. This qualitative study applies a system change framework to examine how organizational system structures (i.e., resources, beliefs, policies, decision-making, and power) affect RJ implementation. This study leverages an experimental design to understand how enhancing staff capacity to implement RJ programming can promote system change. Findings highlight the influence of material resources, social relationships, beliefs about teaching and discipline, and decision-making by principals on the implementation of RJ practices. Findings also underscore the importance of developing RJ staff capacity to create a resource-rich environment that promotes implementation and drives system changes.

*Key Words:* School, Restorative, Justice, Implementation, System, Transform

### Restorative Justice and School-wide Transformation: Identifying Drivers of Implementation and System Change

Restorative justice practices within schools have expanded significantly across the United States, with the goals of reducing school violence and conflict, improving school climate, and providing an alternative to exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions; Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative justice (“RJ”) practices, rooted in indigenous traditions, are an approach to resolving conflict that emphasizes dialogue, repairing relationships, and accountability (Braithwaite, 1989; Wachtel, 2013). A central principle underlying RJ practices is the notion that people are interconnected in a web of relationships and these ties become strained when harm occurs. Not only are victims affected, but others in the community are also impacted. Thus, RJ practices seek to build community and repair relationships (Augustine et al., 2018; Strang, 2001).

School-based RJ practitioners follow the principles of restorative justice and aim to handle conflict with a non-punitive approach. They generally employ a comprehensive menu of practices, that include affective statements, restorative and community-building circles, informal one-on-one chats, mediations, and harm circles (Wachtel, 2013). These RJ practices are flexible, and practitioners adjust them according to specific situations (Sandwick, Hahn, & Ayoub, 2019). However, to build community and repair harm, practitioners commonly use two approaches: relationship-building circles and harm circles (also referred to as community-building and response circles). The purpose of relationship-building circles is to build and sustain positive relationships across the school community. When behaviors that threaten those relationships emerge (e.g., fights), RJ practitioners utilize harm circles or mediation to address the harm.

In principle, school-based RJ moves beyond individual and programmatic practices to involve the whole school community, contributing to school-wide culture change. However, in some instances, restorative practices have been used as a supplementary or alternative

disciplinary approach—the full range of RJ practices that include preventive and intervention strategies and can reach a broader cross-section of students are not always incorporated (Sandwick et al., 2019).

### **Whole-school RJ Implementation**

There is increased recognition that restorative justice implementation should aim toward a transformation in school culture. Indeed, scholars and practitioners have advocated for a whole-school approach and a comprehensive menu of strategies, given growing evidence that these strategies are more effective than incident-driven approaches relying on a single restorative practice (González, Sattler, & Buth, 2019; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Sandwick et al., 2019). Since these transformative efforts encompass changes across multiple dimensions within the school milieu, they are often met with implementation challenges including limited time and resources, long-standing disciplinary policies and practices, and ideologies and beliefs about punishment that preserve the status quo (Anfara et al., 2013; Fronius et al., 2019; Gregory & Evans, 2020; Guckenburg et al., 2016; McCluskey et al., 2011). In short, practitioners can be overwhelmed by the complex effort required within school-change efforts. In fact, experts suggest that transformative change can take up to five years (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).

### **System Change**

Despite RJ's aspiration for transformative school change, research on RJ implementation in schools has not been guided by systems frameworks and has rarely been the focus of a rigorous scientific investigation. Toward this end, systems frameworks can help to advance our understanding of transformative change processes in two overarching ways. First, systems frameworks can identify specific organizational structures that need to be targeted. School-based interventions take place within organizational structures, which can have implications for the

sustainability of RJ interventions (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Drawing on the work of Foster-Fishman and colleagues (2007), organizational systems consist of four parts: (1) resources (e.g., staffing), (2) decision-making and power (3) normative beliefs and ideologies, and (4) policies. These areas are similar to those identified by other system change scholars and frameworks (e.g., Parsons, 1997; Tushman & Romnelli, 1985) and can clarify system structures that can be altered to transform schools into becoming more restorative. Second, system frameworks hold that organizational systems consist of interconnected parts such that changes in one part of the system can catalyze changes in other organizational structures (Burden, 2018; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). Thus, systems are best understood by the interconnections between these parts—yielding a more holistic understanding of how they operate and can be changed. Understanding these interconnections can enable change agents to identify levers of change that drive organizational transformation (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).

**Resources and staffing capacity.** Previous studies examining the implementation of RJ practices in school settings have identified limited staffing capacity as a barrier to RJ implementation. School-based RJ models often rely on school employees to lead implementation efforts, but they must divide their time between programming and school responsibilities (Augustine et al., 2018; Guckenburg et al., 2016). Such staffing barriers can result in piecemeal implementation. Restorative justice coordinators (hereafter referred to as coordinators)—whose role is to serve as the school-based RJ lead—must navigate their schedules as well as those of students and staff (Guckenburg et al., 2015) resulting in limited time to directly engage students and staff in restorative practices (e.g., mediations, circles). Under such constraints, RJ practices may be less likely to shift systems—that is, to permeate the broader school culture. In contrast, investments in RJ staff capacity (e.g., hiring a team of fully employed RJ coordinators) may help

to drive school-wide change as these staff can implement core program components, such as training and coaching, that are needed to promote staff buy-in (Lieberman and Katz (2017).

**Decision-making and power.** Decision-making and power recognizes that certain individuals influence organizational priorities, how resources are distributed, and how activities are implemented (Foster-fishman et al, 20

07). Within the school context, this often includes school administrators, but other stakeholders can also be influential (e.g., staff, parents; Forman et al., 2009). This is consistent with the broader implementation research literature that has identified organizational leadership and stakeholder engagement as an integral step toward implementation and organizational change (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Prior research has documented the key role of school leaders in implementing school-based interventions, and restorative justice specifically (e.g., Marrs & Little, 2014; Sandwick et al., 2019). For example, principals' championing of program goals, engagement and affective support and management skills have been identified as facilitators to school-based interventions (Forman, et al, 2009; Mars & Little, 2014; Verberg & Gamm, 2003). Moreover, a recent case study examining the implementation of RJ practices suggests that school leaders play a critical role by modeling expected behavior (Sandwick et al., 2019).

**Beliefs.** Underlying beliefs, values, and ideologies held by school stakeholders can play a role in how new initiatives are adopted and implemented (e.g., Foster-fishman et al, 2007; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). That is, individuals' cognitive schemas can influence how initiatives are understood and interpreted, which in turn influences how they are adopted (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002). In fact, some contend that transformative change only occurs when a system's deep structures, such as underlying ideologies that guide daily behaviors and practices, are addressed (Foster-fishman et al, 2007). Indeed, restorative justice practices, and

school-based interventions more broadly, are often met with staff resistance, and underlying beliefs and ideologies may contribute to this resistance. For example, school staff may hold underlying beliefs and assumptions about authority and punishment that may conflict with less hierarchical orientations brought forth through restorative practices (Sandwick et al., 2019).

**Policies.** Finally, policies can serve as regulatory mechanisms of change by guiding expectations and procedures (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). Previous reviews of the implementation literature have pointed to the important role of policies, sometimes referred to as the external or political context (Durlak & Dupre, 2008). Schools are often constrained by competing policies (Moore, Murphy, Tapper, & Moore, 2010). For example, federal policies, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, challenged the implementation of school-based programs as it led schools to be more academically focused to the exclusion of social-emotional health (Forman et al., 2009). Similarly, decades of school and district policies supporting the use of exclusionary practices may compete with less punitive approaches to discipline brought forth within RJ practices (Sandwick et al., 2019). Within the school setting, policies can also include codifying procedures, which can be helpful in offering clarity about staff roles and standardizing programmatic procedures (Locke et al., 2015; Marrs & Little, 2014).

### **Current Study**

The current study leveraged an experimental design to understand how restorative justice can lead to system change *through* the implementation of enhanced RJ staff capacity. Using a system change framework, this qualitative study aimed to answer two research questions:

- Research Question 1: How do system structures (i.e., resources, decision-making and power, beliefs, policies) affect RJ implementation?

- Research Question 2: What is the contribution of RJ staffing capacity in bringing forth system-wide change? This question examines thematic differences between treatment and control schools to elucidate how staffing capacity can drive system-level changes.

## Methods

### Participating Schools

This research was conducted in ten public high schools (5 treatment and 5 control schools) in one New York City school district, between 2017 and 2020. In 2015, the NYC Department of Education declared a citywide goal of decreasing suspensions and increasing the use of restorative practices. This initiative targeted school districts characterized by high levels of violence and school suspensions. As the largest school system in the country, the city is divided into 32 districts. All ten schools in this study were in the same district. On average, treatment schools had more students ( $\bar{x}=346$ ;  $\bar{x}=283$ ). However, proportions were similar in terms of the of black students (85% v. 84%), students living in poverty (79% v. 75%), ELL students (7% v. 5%), and students with disabilities (20% v. 23%).

### Participants

A total of 124 staff interviews were conducted with 114 interviews ultimately included in the analysis for reasons of data quality. The average number of years working within the school was slightly higher among control group ( $\bar{x}=5.6$ ) participants as compared to participants in the treatment group ( $\bar{x}=4.4$ ). Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. We intentionally recruited a broader cross-section of staff within the treatment schools, many of whom were not directly involved with RJ practices. Thus, the lower proportion of staff in the treatment group who participated in circles reflects this broader sampling and is not a reflection of how RJ practices were implemented.

## Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both the NYC Department of Education and the Center for Court Innovation (The Center). This study was part of a larger cluster randomized controlled trial examining the impact of restorative justice practices. In the larger study, ten high schools from the district were eligible for randomization; other high schools were not eligible because they were involved in other initiatives or had longer-standing restorative justice practices. The ten schools were randomly assigned to either the treatment or the control group. The five treatment high schools received on-site restorative justice coordinators, who were employed full time, to lead school-wide RJ implementation.

All ten schools in this study participated in the broader district-wide initiative to use RJ practices to reduce school suspensions. To address the significant number of suspensions in District 18, in the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year the NYC Mayor's office and the Department of Education launched a restorative justice initiative targeting the district. The DOE provided schools in the district with restorative justice training and support through an external organization and hired a district-wide RJ coordinator to oversee these efforts. Ultimately, all schools in District 18 were a part of this initiative. Principals were required to send at least five school staff, including themselves, for basic RJ summer training. Schools then implemented different variations of RJ programming, typically at the discretion of the school principal.

**Restorative justice implementation in treatment schools.** During the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, The Center implemented a restorative justice intervention across the five treatment high schools. These schools already had access to training and some coaching as part of the DOE's broader RJ initiative, but also received additional RJ staffing support—one full-time restorative justice coordinator per school and three additional coordinators who rotated

across the five schools. The coordinators' professional credentials ranged from baccalaureate to graduate-level degrees, and they all received an intense initial training covering a range of topics (e.g., RJ basics, peacemaking, trauma, storytelling, mandated reporting). The training also included national experts in restorative justice practices and indigenous practitioners. The coordinators also received continuous professional development support and coaching from their program supervisors throughout the project. The coordinators did not have additional school responsibilities and led RJ programming, which consisted of two components: relationship-building circles and harm circles. Coordinators were integrated as part of the standard course schedule (e.g., advisory) and focused on building relationships through dialogue and activities. A curriculum developed by the Center's RJ team was used during these circles, although impromptu topics were also integrated based on student interest. Harm circles convened students in response to conflict. The coordinators also conducted training and provided individualized coaching to school staff.

### **Data collection**

Staff interviews for the treatment and control conditions were conducted during the 2018-19 school year. We asked school principals to identify key staff engaged in RJ practices. We then recruited staff from this list. We used convenience sampling for outreach to additional school staff beyond these initial contacts.

### **Measures**

We utilized a semi-structured interview instrument consisting of 19 open-ended questions and follow-up prompts as needed. The instrument covered the following areas: challenges, implementation, buy-in, training and competencies, resources and policies supporting RJ,

perceived outcomes, and recommendations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and lasted about 30 minutes on average.

### **Analysis**

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. For parent coding, the main thematic categories, we used deductive coding strategies based on a modified version of Foster-Fishman and colleagues' (2007) transformative system change framework. Specifically, the data were coded into the framework's four system parts, namely system (1) resources, (2) decision-making and power, (3) beliefs and ideologies, and (4) policies and procedures (see table 2 for code descriptions).

Transcripts were independently analyzed by two members of the research team to identify relevant text corresponding to the four parent codes. After independently reviewing each transcript, the research team convened to discuss the coding. Any discrepancies were resolved by consensus. Also, a fifth parent code, student context, was generated based on our review of the data, which reflected statements about student characteristics (i.e., student adversity; students with disabilities) that challenged RJ programming. Final excerpts and corresponding codes were applied using Dedoose data analysis software.

The second coding phase involved child coding, in which the team developed subcategories within each parent code. All excerpts within each parent code were exported from Dedoose and independently reviewed by two members of the research team using inductive coding procedures outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). The excerpts were independently coded by two members of the research team and inter-rater reliability was established, which ranged from .83 to 1.0 (see Table 2). To answer the second research question, we then compared parent and child codes across the two study conditions. That is, once all

coding was completed, the data were split according to the study conditions, and parent and child codes were compared. We did not code the data separately across the two study conditions given that we initially used a deductive analytic approach with predetermined parent codes that were based on the system-change framework.

**Evaluation of research.** The credibility of research findings and interpretations is a criterion used to evaluate the quality of a qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Credibility, which refers to whether the findings reflect participants' experiences, was assessed using member checking and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Member checking involved sharing findings with seven study participants and three individuals with extensive experience leading restorative justice programs who were not participants of the study. Triangulation included cross-checking data with other data sources used in the larger study (e.g., focus groups, surveys), which confirmed the constructs that emerged from the staff interviews or provided additional nuance.

## Results

Results are presented following our two research questions. First, we review how system structures affect RJ implementation. Second, thematic differences between treatment and control schools are presented to elucidate how enhanced staff capacity can drive system-level changes.

### How System Structures Affect RJ Implementation

**Resources.** Systems rely on material resources (e.g., funding, staffing), competencies, and social relationships. These components are integral to system change efforts and play a role in how interventions are implemented.

**Material resources.** Participants often described their schools as having limited staff capacity and time (“we have one dean and 500 kids...”). For example, staff balanced school responsibilities (e.g., teaching, meetings, caseloads) and time-consuming disciplinary problems.

RJ became less of a priority under these demands. However, schools benefited from having RJ coordinators who served as additional “manpower” and who coached teachers on RJ practices and handled student challenges (e.g., discipline, crises). One school social worker stated,

I am a mandated counselor, I have appointments and I have kids I have to see legally, I don't always have office hours to let people just cry or be mad... Since restorative justice has been here, [students] feel more comfortable going there.

However, staff advised that school staff can over-rely on the coordinators—ultimately limiting coordinators' capacity to implement RJ practices. As one teacher noted, “Everything gets put into RJ and then they become overloaded, and they do not have enough time to resolve [issues]...” Time constraints led coordinators to adapt the program model by relying on time-efficient strategies, such as mediations instead of harm circles, which require preparation.

**Competencies.** System change relies on human capital such as competencies, skills, and knowledge. Staff members within organizations may not have the competencies that can support new change efforts, and therefore, may need training. Participants described skills that are essential to successfully implement RJ practices such as intra-personal (e.g., mindfulness), interpersonal (e.g., being relatable, empathetic), and group facilitation skills. However, these skills were described as at odds with teachers' professional training. Teachers were reportedly accustomed to structured and didactic pedagogical approaches and were less prepared for the fluid interactions that emerge in RJ circles. Many teachers preferred a scripted curriculum when facilitating circles; one teacher noted, “When a teacher doesn't have those documents [a curriculum], they feel kind of lost and confused.” Despite these challenges, teachers noted effective training strategies that helped them learn how to engage in RJ practices. These

strategies included traditional presentations, experiential strategies in which staff participated in circles, modeling, coaching, and the opportunity to practice.

***Social relationships.*** Social relationships in this study refer to the nature of social interconnections between stakeholders, which can facilitate the sharing of information and skills. School staff were often limited in their ability to interact with others across the school due to work-related demands. In comparison, RJ coordinators were very accessible and intentional, allowing them to slowly develop relationships. For example, they interacted informally with students throughout the school day such as in the hallways, cafeteria, and in the “RJ room.” More formally, they interacted with students through extra-curricular activities and core program activities (e.g., circles). They frequently met with staff to discuss specific students or provide RJ support. In some instances, school spaces were re-invented to foster relationships. New clubs were created, teachers held lunchtime open-door policies, and in some schools, coordinators allowed students to sign out games to play during lunch periods and led school-wide events. Relationships were established that allowed RJ resources and practices (e.g., RJ skills, knowledge of students, training, mediations) to be diffused throughout the schools. In fact, some participants described these relationships as a resource or as “currency” that increased RJ buy-in. As a result of strengthened relationships, students and staff were more amenable to participating in harm circles or training. These relationships also enabled coordinators and some teachers to obtain “inside information” about escalating student tensions (e.g., social media rumors, “beef”).

Although coordinators developed strong relationships throughout the schools, some teachers were frustrated when they were excluded from the student disciplinary process—even when they were directly involved in the incident. That is, disciplinary problems were sometimes referred to RJ coordinators at the exclusion of teachers—compartmentalizing disciplinary

responses. However, it is unclear if this pattern was specific to the coordinators or simply reflects the nature of communication in schools such that the coordinators were absorbed into this dynamic. Nevertheless, participants expressed frustration about the lack of communication and transparency with the school disciplinary process, as one teacher explained, “The teacher almost gets cut out of [the disciplinary process, and the handling of the incident] disappears into that world....” Being excluded from disciplinary information led some teachers to view RJ practices as “soft,” as they were unable to witness how RJ practices held students accountable.

**Decision-making and power.** Organizational systems also consist of decision-making processes and power, such that certain individuals have decision-making authority and can control the configuration of resources. Three subthemes emerged: DOE directives, shared decision-making and power, and administrative support. Participants discussed the top-down process by which RJ was rolled out by the DOE through directives, which reportedly allowed for little input from schools and challenged staff buy-in and support for RJ practices. Conversely, participants argued that there would be less resistance if staff input were solicited within the decision-making process. Participants also viewed administrative support as critical to RJ implementation. Principals were described as the main decision-making authority over school resources, logistics, and operations. Principals designated office and classroom space for RJ purposes, arranged time for school-based training, assigned staff to RJ-related roles and external training, and allowed relationship-building circles to be integrated into the course schedule. Many school staff viewed principals’ decisions concerning resource allocation as a barometer of their endorsement of RJ practices.

**Beliefs.** Several themes emerged reflecting fundamental ideologies held by school staff, namely beliefs about discipline and teaching beliefs. Concerning beliefs about discipline, many

participants held a favorable view of restorative disciplinary practices because they already believed that discipline should “resolve,” “restore,” and address “root causes.” Others endorsed restorative approaches to discipline based on positive behavioral changes they had witnessed in students. One school principal stated,

There was a problem of buy-in, but now that people have seen [RJ] in action ... they're seeing it as actually making a difference in the way that students behave and it's shifting the culture of the school... a lot of people are buying-in.

However, some staff endorsed punitive approaches to discipline—sometimes in conjunction with restorative practices. Some staff believed that discipline should reinforce behavioral standards. For example, one participant noted that “severe behaviors” (e.g., fighting) warrant strong disciplinary consequences or that “certain behaviors cannot be considered for mediation.” Others viewed student problem behaviors as contagious, which was seemingly rooted in the fear of student misbehavior becoming widespread (e.g., “...kids will wreck the building,” “...the floodgates will open”). These beliefs supported punitive discipline practices that are “visible” and “send a message”—qualities that were reported missing from restorative discipline. Some staff feared that they would lose power, control, and credibility if visible and tangible forms of punishment (e.g., suspensions) were not used.

Some participants held beliefs about their professional identity that either aligned or conflicted with RJ practices. Some viewed instruction as their primary role and as “...what teaching is supposed to be.” RJ practices were viewed as outside the scope of this role. Other teachers viewed teaching holistically as spanning across academic and social-emotional dimensions. Indeed, one teacher’s holistic view of teaching was evident: “Because I know for a

fact that being a teacher is not just teaching them content. Being a teacher is being like a second mom or a second dad and listening.”

**Policies.** Few participants discussed the role of policies. Nevertheless, some regulations were identified as barriers to RJ implementation such as educational standards that set parameters on staffing and course schedules, thus limiting the flexibility with which RJ circles could be implemented. Others indicated that policies intended to protect students, such as mandated reporting and FERPA laws, raised concerns when students shared sensitive information during circles such as information about abuse. Finally, some participants indicated that DOE disciplinary policies dictated how disciplinary consequences were to be meted, whereas others viewed the DOE disciplinary policies as a guide.

**Student context.** Some participant responses did not fit into our original coding framework. These responses were related to student characteristics that were viewed as inhibiting RJ implementation, which we labeled as student context. This category generated two subthemes: *student adversity* and *student educational needs*.

Participants identified student adversities such as violence exposure, poverty, and mental health challenges. Many of these issues represent structural challenges that schools routinely struggle to tackle effectively. Participants believed that some students needed supplementary interventions, in addition to RJ practices. One teacher reflected on a specific student: “...this student has a whole host of problems, including dealing with violence in her past. If we’re hoping that RJ is going to make immediate and miraculous inroads with those types of children, it’s not going to happen.”

Additionally, students with disabilities and those in need of educational supports posed unique challenges for RJ implementation. Reportedly, some English language learners had

trouble participating in circles. Also, some students with disabilities (e.g., emotional disturbances; impulsivity) had difficulty following circle directions or spoke out of turn, thus, interrupting the circle process. Peers were sometimes insensitive, leading some special needs students to withdraw altogether. One professional support staff member reflected on this dynamic: "... the student with the accent or who has trouble speaking might pass the talking piece a lot more often because they've experienced that students are laughing when they speak ...so they just pass because maybe embarrassment...."

### **Thematic Differences Between Treatment and Control Schools**

Thematic differences and commonalities were identified between the treatment and control schools. Specifically, we compared themes across the respective system components. While the treatment schools implemented restorative justice with enhanced staffing capacity and resources, the control schools implemented restorative justice based on their Tier-1 training of five staff members and little ongoing support. The thematic differences between study conditions can shed light on processes by which enhanced RJ staff capacity can lead to school-wide change.

**Resources.** Treatment schools were described as resource-rich settings that benefited from fully employed on-site RJ coordinators, stronger social relationships, and a more comprehensive RJ training program. For example, and as described previously, coordinators across the treatment schools spent considerable time building relationships that facilitated an infrastructure for RJ programming and stakeholder buy-in. In contrast, coordinators in the control schools were often deans or administrators with additional school responsibilities and were siloed in their efforts to promote restorative practices (e.g., "I do as much as I can, but I'm just one person"; "It would be great to have one [RJ] person at each school that is designated."). Moreover, one participant reported, "Between the activities that I have to complete for the

leadership, plus the fact that I still teach...there's no gap for me to reach out and grab kids...." Further, treatment schools provided a range of on-site professional development training activities (e.g., coaching, modeling) aimed at building RJ competencies and allowing for more uniformity in how RJ practices were implemented. Control schools, on the other hand, primarily relied on external training, which was often challenged by staffing and scheduling constraints. For example, one school principal expressed his concerns about sending teachers to external training, "Training is available, but I don't want to send teachers during instructional time to get trained." In fact, some administrators reported that onsite training, resembling the training model within the treatment schools, would have been helpful given these constraints. As one participant noted, "We would definitely need someone to come in during our PD's, which we have twice a week." Also, staff across control schools appeared to be less knowledgeable and consistent than treatment schools in their understanding of formal RJ protocols, terminology, and rituals (e.g., talking piece). Some control group participants described their schools as having a more fluid understanding of RJ such that "[RJ] language is not used much." and that "[RJ] can take a lot of forms and can manifest in different ways." This fluid understanding may in part be due to the lack of centralized training as one control group participant stated, "[RJ] doesn't get interpreted the same way. You hear it as a group [during external trainings] and when it comes to the individual schools, you'll have ten different versions...which sometimes creates chaos in a school."

**Decision-making and power.** Participants in treatment and control schools discussed the important role of administrative support and the key role of principals as decision-makers who allocate school resources to support RJ. However, administrative support for RJ programming materialized differently across treatment and control schools. Treatment school principals

exercised decisions over a broader set of resources, activities, and logistics (e.g., classroom space, embedding RJ into the course schedule, designating professional development time). In contrast, control group participants described their principals as primarily exercising decisions over the school's rollout of RJ training, reflecting the limited scope of RJ programming in these schools. A select number of participants across both groups discussed challenges related to the top-down nature of DOE directives.

**Beliefs.** Participants in both study conditions held favorable beliefs about RJ approaches to discipline. However, the descriptions of these beliefs appear to have manifested differently, possibly reflecting differences in how RJ practices were implemented. For example, participants in the treatment group held favorable perceptions of RJ because they already endorsed RJ's underlying values, observed positive changes in students, or had participated in RJ training. While some control group participants had also endorsed RJ values, they differed from treatment group participants in their descriptions for endorsing (or not endorsing) RJ—their rationale was generally not tied to direct experiences such as practicing RJ or witnessing the benefits in students. For example, one participant indicated that teachers have not bought into RJ because “They haven't been able to see the results, they haven't participated in a circle.” Another participant reported, “I think *philosophically* the teaching staff sees the benefit.” In some instances, participants provided speculative responses about teachers' endorsement of RJ; “I have not had any conversations about that [RJ] with teachers. I guess some of them have bought into it.”

**Policies and student context.** Policies were not commonly discussed among treatment or control group participants. Thus, the data did not yield meaningful comparisons. In terms of the

parent code, student context, both groups expressed similar concerns about student adversity and educational needs.

### **Discussion**

This study examines how RJ practices are implemented in schools with high suspension rates, leveraging an experimental design to elucidate how implementing restorative justice with enhanced RJ staff capacity (in treatment schools) can promote system-wide change. Broadly, our findings suggest that treatment schools experienced system-level organizational changes, particularly in the area of resources (e.g., competencies, social relationships). Other system components, namely, power and decision-making and beliefs, were similar across the treatment and control schools. However, they manifested differently, providing some insight into possible mechanisms that drive how these components change.

**Resources.** This study highlights the importance of system resources such as investing in fully employed RJ coordinators. This investment enabled a resource-rich infrastructure consisting of a comprehensive RJ training model and strengthened social relationships that were leveraged to implement RJ practices. In turn, treatment schools were able to catalyze a stronger and more consistent understanding of RJ practices. Schools implementing RJ practices commonly rely on implementation by existing school employees, who are challenged by time constraints. Our findings underscore how investment in dedicated staff can strengthen the infrastructure needed to support RJ practices and systems change.

The need to develop staff competencies to promote RJ practices has been raised in previous work (Lieberman & Katz, 2017). Participants in this study described teachers' formal educational preparation as unaligned with the skills needed to "do RJ," such as inter- and intra-personal skills. This gap can foreseeably lead to compartmentalization of RJ efforts if school

staff do not view themselves as having the necessary skills to engage in RJ practices. In other words, RJ practices are likely to be viewed as activities performed by RJ coordinators only. Given the relational nature of the teaching profession, and RJ practices specifically, these findings underscore the need to enhance teachers' social-emotional competencies and may have broader implications for teacher preparation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Finally, social relationships were described as “currency” and in this study refer to the nature of social interconnections. These connections in turn facilitate school resources—such as information and knowledge—to circulate and become accessible. Schools are compartmentalized settings often characterized by little interaction between adults and limited student-teacher interaction. School-based interventions that replicate these social regularities may fail to promote transformational change (Sarason, 1996). Social capital theory suggests that resources and expertise are embedded in social networks (Burt, 2000). Coordinators spent considerable time developing relationships, in essence becoming part of teachers' social networks, or at a minimum, being accessible to teachers in need of support. It cannot be assumed that skilled RJ staff and training alone will facilitate system change. Rather, these resources are mediated through social networks that allow them to become diffused throughout the school setting (Spillane, 2001). Previous work indicates that strong social relationships make it easier to implement RJ practices and are a starting point for school change (Gregory et al., 2016; Sandwick et al., 2019). We build on these findings by suggesting that social networks are a critical part of the organizational infrastructure needed to diffuse and sustain RJ practices.

Notably, school staff became increasingly reliant on the coordinators, possibly due to the coordinators' accessibility, teacher work demands, and some teachers' difficulty in handling student crises and discipline. Relying on RJ coordinators may be beneficial to program

implementation. However, overreliance may lead to the unintended consequence of limiting RJ practices to these coordinators—in many ways replicating the compartmentalized roles that characterize school settings and inhibit systems change (Sarason, 1996).

**Decision-making and power.** Our findings are consistent with previous work documenting the key role of school leaders in implementing school-based interventions, and restorative justice specifically (e.g., Marrs & Little, 2014; Sandwick et al., 2019). Principals remained the unitary authority across treatment and control schools. In other words, *who* has the power to generate decisions did not substantively differ across study conditions. This raises considerations for the field regarding the extent to which restorative practices can be truly transformative of roles and power within school settings. Interestingly, principals in the treatment group exercised decision-making authority across a broader scope of resources, including staffing and training, perhaps a reflection that principals will continue to exercise control even as system changes occur—in this case, shifts in resources.

**Beliefs.** Studies examining RJ implementation in schools have cited the importance of staff buy-in but have rarely examined the beliefs that contribute to resistance or adoption of RJ. Beliefs about discipline, behavioral standards, professional identity, and authority play a role in staff buy-in. These findings resonate with previous work suggesting that implementation processes are mediated by cognitive processes (e.g., Cameron & Thorsborne; 2001; Spillane, 2001). Inability to address stakeholders' disparate schemas may lead to different interpretations of interventions and levels of engagement. For example, while teachers may support RJ practices, their level of engagement may still be limited if they believe that their authority, control, and identity as teachers are undermined by the vulnerability needed during harm circles. Practitioners seeking to promote school-wide change may need to respond to these existing

schemas to ensure staff buy-in. Moreover, we did not identify substantive differences in beliefs between study conditions. However, treatment school staff noted that their beliefs about discipline were informed by positive outcomes they observed in students and by attending RJ training. This departs from findings in prior work, which suggest that shifts in beliefs or philosophy are a precursor to action (Lieberman and Katz, 2017)—in this case, we find that action, or changes in student behavior resulting from RJ implementation, are one potential mechanism that drives changes in system-wide beliefs.

More broadly, teacher beliefs can serve as a focal point for practitioners. Conflicting staff beliefs about discipline and teacher roles challenge linear conceptions of organizational change. It is often assumed that staff training is an interim step in bringing schools closer to becoming restorative. While this may hold, the conflicting ideologies in this study suggest that organizational change is also dialectical (Howley & Sturges, 2018). RJ training should move beyond skill development and include process-oriented strategies such as framing and articulating existing beliefs, confrontation, consensus building, and resolution—in many ways replicating RJ’s conflict resolution strategies with school staff (Howley & Sturges, 2018).

**Student context.** Participants noted that RJ did not sufficiently address student adversities rooted outside of the school. Scholars have noted the limited ability of restorative practices to address the structural factors that underlie student contextual challenges (Sandwick et al., 2019; Song & Swearer, 2016); though RJ practices do purport to address students’ unique needs and adversities. This point also aligns with previous critiques of school reforms—schools are encapsulated social systems that can only respond to social problems as they manifest within schools (Sarason, 1996). Nevertheless, these adversities underscore the need for supplemental resources that can be responsive to student challenges (e.g., mental health), especially in under-

resourced communities. Further, circles at times did not effectively engage special need students, which raises questions about possible iatrogenic effects. Studies have not examined the impact of RJ practices on students with disabilities and our findings raise some critical considerations (Hurley, 2015). Some RJ practices may operate from an ideology of ableism. That is, all students are assumed to be equally ready and able to engage in circle discussions and activities. Without addressing this, RJ practices can foreseeably perpetuate oppressive experiences among special needs students. Addressing such biases may enable practitioners to interrogate system structures and leverage the resources to ensure equitable student experiences.

**Policies.** Policies were infrequently discussed. This omission possibly reflects a “blind spot” such that policies and protocols are not often addressed in the context of RJ implementation as it involves the institutionalization of RJ practices. However, disciplinary policies, mandated reporting requirements, and FERPA were viewed as setting limits on how RJ could be implemented. These areas should serve as focus areas for ongoing professional development support given that school staff are often unclear on how to simultaneously implement RJ and navigate these requirements.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, restorative justice in this study was part of a district-wide initiative. Therefore, caution should be taken in generalizing these findings to school districts in which RJ practices are not part of a broader initiative. Second, data were collected in the second year of project implementation, and additional differences may have been identified between study conditions if data were collected during later stages of implementation. Third, we used convenience sampling and participants in control schools were more likely to serve in a school leadership role. Despite these limitations, this study is

strengthened by the large sample of school staff that were interviewed, the range of data sources used to establish research credibility and the thematic comparison across study conditions.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

This study has several implications for research. Future studies should consider the use of longitudinal mixed-method designs to understand how restorative justice interventions transform school settings over time. Second, more work is needed that explores the impact of simultaneous levers of change. For example, this study focused on RJ staffing capacity as a driver of change. Future research can explore how comprehensive strategies, such as changes to staffing capacity and policies, can drive school-wide transformation.

This study also has many implications for practice. School practitioners should consider enhancing RJ staff capacity by using coordinators that are not bound to teaching responsibilities. For example, schools may consider reductions in school responsibilities, such as reducing course loads for staff who lead school-wide RJ practices or partnering with external organizations. Second, RJ coordinators should invest a considerable amount of time building relationships; laying a foundation that facilitates subsequent implementation strategies. Relationships should be developed within and across stakeholder groups (e.g., students, staff, parents). Third, training should focus on both knowledge and skill development as well as beliefs and ideologies. Training should emphasize developing teachers' intra- and interpersonal competencies as well as process-oriented strategies including opportunities for staff to articulate values and beliefs (e.g., what brought you to the teaching profession, what does successful teaching look like), and opportunities to identify conflicting staff beliefs in effort to build consensus.

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**Table 1:***Sample Characteristics Across Groups*

	N	Treatment Group <sup>1</sup> %	Control Group <sup>2</sup> %
Gender			
Female-Identifying	78	70	63
Male-Identifying	36	30	37
Race/Ethnicity			
Black	44	40	33
White	44	36	48
Latinx	14	14	7
Multi-Racial	4	3	4
Other	4	2	7
Role <sup>3</sup>			
Administrators (principal, dean)	24	17	33
Instructional Staff (teachers, special ed teachers)	65	59	52
Support Staff (social workers, counselors)	9	6	15
Paraprofessionals	7	8	0
RJ Coordinators	9	10	0
Prior Experience with Relationship-Building Circles			
Previously Participated in	79	68	74
Previously Facilitated	69	59	67

<sup>1</sup> Treatment group ( $n=87$ ); <sup>2</sup> Control group ( $n=27$ ); <sup>3</sup> Role represents participant's primary role at the school

**Table 2:**

*Summary of parent and child codes*

<b>Parent Code</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Child Code</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>Brief Child Code Description</b>
Resources	The presence or lack of resources play a role in system change efforts.	-Material resources	.88	-Program inputs such as funding, staff, materials etc.
		-Competencies	.83	-Human capital, skills and knowledge that enable promote RJ implementation; also includes methods that promote skill development such as training and coaching.
		-Social Relationships	.80	-The nature of social interconnections between stakeholders (e.g., teachers, RJ staff). Relationships contribute to how resources circulate within the system.
Decision-making & power	Power & decision-making processes can promote/inhibit implementation and system change efforts.	-DOE Directives	.96	-Top-down decision-making by the DOE concerning RJ.
		-Shared Decision-making & Power	.82	-Collaboration and the sharing of power in decision-making; enables buy-in.
		-Admin. Support	.93	-School administrators' decision over school resources to support RJ programming.
Beliefs	Stakeholder beliefs, ideologies, attitudes, and values or buy-in to RJ.	Discipline beliefs	.86	-Beliefs that support punitive discipline or that endorse alternative strategies.
		Teaching Beliefs	.86	-Perceptions and beliefs about the role of educators, what teaching should entail, and the scope of teacher responsibilities.
Policies	Laws, policies, regulations, and procedures help to (or fail to) guide or clarify expectations, institutionalize change, and guide behavior.	-Educational standards	.90	-Educational requirements (e.g., course/staffing requirements); requirements set parameters that interfere with RJ implementation such as programming.
		-Discipline policies	.83	-The role of disciplinary policies on student behavioral infractions; discipline policies sometimes viewed as a directive or merely as a guide.
		-Student protections	1.0	-Laws, policies, or regulations intended to protect students (e.g., mandated reporting, confidentiality policies, FERPA); staff are often unaware of these policies especially as students share sensitive information through RJ practices.
Student Context	Statements describe student population or subgroups	-Student Adversity	.96	-Student challenges including violence exposure, abuse, gang involvement, compromised mental health, & poverty.
		-Educational Needs	.94	-Student subgroups such as students with special needs & and English language learners, which may require RJ practices to be adapted.