

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

