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Rethinking Responses to Youth Rebellion: Recent Growth and Development of Restorative Practices in Schools

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Abstract

Adolescence has historically been framed as a time of rebellion and protest, with traditional responses in school applying punitive frameworks. In this article, we review recent psychological work on the restorative practices movement in schools as an alternative to how to respond to young people. This changing framework has implications for their development processes and can reframe some forms of rebellion as productive. We first more fully define what restorative justice entails and theoretical

developments in this area. We then move to outlining interventions, programs, and associated outcomes. Finally, we end with future directions and research opportunities for psychologists.

Introduction

Traditionally, school systems have employed repressive, retributive systems in handling student behavior: reasserting adult authority and social hierarchies, meting out punitive consequences, increasing surveillance, and employing zero-tolerance policies [1,2,3•]. Yet, both theoretically and empirically, these reactions to young people have a host of negative implications and feed into social inequities as students from marginalized backgrounds are disproportionately targeted [4,5,6•,7]. When young people rebel or push back on expectations of conformity and assimilation—a developmentally appropriate response to unjust and unequal systems—they are criminalized and further marginalized [8]. These discrepancies feed into achievement gaps and broader inequalities through psychological mediators such as perceptions of school equity, school belonging, and classroom behaviors [9].

Partly in response to these concerns, there has been a growing movement in educational settings to incorporate restorative practices: re-orientating toward participatory decision-making, focusing on building relationships, and reconceptualizing discipline to address and repair (rather than punish) the harm caused [10]. Restorative practices have been propelled by local administrators, parents, and young people themselves. Since 2000, they have been implemented in schools across more than 25 of the United States and numerous institutions in Europe, Oceania, and Asia [11•,12,13,14,15••,16]. In some instances, these movements have emerged from young people's own rejection of systems that perpetuate inequality and injustice [17]. They have also been proposed to be promising approaches for preventing youth radicalization and engagement in violence [18,19•].

Psychologists have increasingly been engaged in promoting restorative practices inside and outside of schools [3•,20,21,22••]. This work builds on decades of research internationally, particularly in Australia and Scotland, demonstrating that among other psychosocial benefits, participants in restorative justice have positive experiences, feel safer in schools [23], experience increased school connectedness, and have lower rates of suspensions and expulsions [2,16]. Psychologists have contributed to theoretical development, evaluating implementation, building understandings of challenges (e.g. lack of training or adult attitudes [24,25]), and measuring impacts.

Restorative Practices in Schools

Broadly, restorative practices in schools have traditionally entailed a reorientation of relations among students, between students and adults, and among adults [22••,26,27•]. Harm between community members is prevented and addressed through emphasizing interconnectedness, relationships, inclusion, dialogue, and repair [3,28]. As applied in schools, it can involve multiple elements and processes: regular community-building circles to establish trust and collective bonds; reactive circles that bring together the community to discuss harms; and restorative conferences to address serious incidents or patterns of harm [29•]. While much of the current literature does not delve into psychological issues, a restorative approach to harm in schools inherently encompasses developmental processes such as youths' understanding harm in relation to human nature, why and how harm is done, how justice is best achieved, and the possibility of reconciliation [30].

Psychology and Theoretical Development

Restorative justice has been a part of indigenous cultures and some school settings for decades [31]. More recently, there has been further theoretical development from a psychological lens [32••]. The agency and voice of students in restorative approaches is argued to bolster perceptions of justice and fairness in schools [22••,26,27•], which in turn contributes to student well-being and engagement [3•,33••]. Paired with accountability and inclusiveness, these outcomes may then promote the development of emotional competence, interpersonal skills, and belonging [34]. A positive feedback loop is created as peer-to-peer and student-to-adult relationships become stronger, which further motivates engagement and improves school climate [33••]. Multiple psychological theories have been used to bolster this framework: Glasser's choice theory [35], as restorative justice taps into the human need to belong through a focus on relationships and interconnectedness [36]; and affective script psychology, due to the structured space for recognizing and expressing emotion, a motivator of thought, perception, and behavior [37].

Ortega and colleagues [38] have proposed a theoretical model linking environmental and personal factors to the psychological processes underlying teachers and administrators' perceptions of, and commitment to, implementing restorative practices. Their framework involves a feedback loop linking context to psychological engagement and then back to context: neighborhood and school climate can support or inhibit internal motivation to buy into restorative practices; the perceptions of these environments then affect adults' consistency, commitment, and implementation; finally, these orientations contribute to a school climate that is either more or less conducive to this alternative approach to handling relations.

Scholars increasingly assert that restorative justice cannot simply be seen as a set of tools or strategies to implement, but rather a cultural shift across a school [39•,40]. Thus, a whole-school approach prioritizes involving all actors and their relationships, including among teachers and administrators. Shifting the broader culture of an institution involves addressing individual motivation, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as social interaction, curriculum, pedagogical practices, neighborhood contexts (i.e., norms and values) and educational systems (e.g., the focus on high stakes testing [41,42]). The emphasis on whole-school implementation has been bolstered by longitudinal research demonstrating how such an approach can shift institutional climate and filter through relationships to promote individuals' senses of belonging and decrease incidents of harm in schools [22••,43••].

Empirical Research

The research on whole-school implementation of restorative practices is one part of an expanding literature investigating interventions and programs in schools [2]. The gap between research and practice, however, poses considerable challenges. Theoretically, restorative practices hold much potential for changing the experiences and trajectories of students, but implementing it effectively can be complex [2,44]. Furthermore, both research and implementation are deeply, inherently linked to context. Schools are shaped by community dynamics, interpersonal relations, broader systems, and the lives and experiences of individuals within them [45]. Therefore, studying restorative practices and applying insights to school settings requires careful attention to the environment, people, culture, and history of the specific community [46,47].

Still, recent research provides a number of broad and valuable takeaways. First, educators' beliefs and attitudes matter. Some teachers and administrators struggle to view restorative approaches as effective [48] or have deeply engrained beliefs about discipline and student/adult relationships based on their own experiences and cultural contexts [25,49]. Educators' orientations and attitudes have also been linked to how students themselves experience and respond to restorative justice in their schools [27•].

Second, restorative practices may positively influence how both adults and students experience their schools and the social climates within them. There is mounting evidence that when these approaches are effectively implemented, relationships in a school become stronger [50]. Teachers feel more connected to students, while students also note closer bonds with others [2,38,51•,52,53]. One proposed underlying mechanism is restorative practices bolster mutual feelings of respect and trust [27•,54]. For students, these experiences of others can promote a sense of belonging and a belief that adults' treatment and discipline of students is more just, even when gaps in discipline are not changed [52,55,56••]. Implementation of restorative practice also bolsters teachers' and students' perceptions of school safety [2,3•,51•].

Third, there is some indication restorative practices may influence students' orientations and conceptions of self, though less research has focused specifically on their experiences. One recent study found students with greater exposure to restorative practices in school reported expecting to go further in their studies, while another found greater social emotional competencies and social skills [43••,57]. Adolescent students may also feel more confident in handling interpersonal conflict, though this evidence is mixed [27•].

Fourth, recent research has bolstered theoretical claims restorative practices lead to behavioral changes in students. Importantly, much of this work focuses on lowered suspensions, expulsions, and behavioral incidents, which are also influenced by the orientations and actions of adults [3•,22••,43••]. Still, some recent studies have found fewer disciplinary events [57], reductions in bullying [43••], and a decreased need for intervention in interpersonal conflict [27•,49]. A recent random control trial conducted over two years, however, did not find fewer suspensions or incidents of violence in schools implementing restorative practices [51•].

This literature also points toward factors in implementation and school conditions that may bolster efficacy [58]. Restorative practices should be integrated into a school as a long-term and continual process, rather than simply a tool kit [49]. Not only are there deep attitudinal shifts that must take place among students and teachers, but there are also barriers in the school systems themselves. These challenges include political pressures and expectations of merely employing curriculum and strategies based on restorative approaches instead of building relationships and changing cultures [1,25,59]. Additionally, students must be psychologically connected to the process: feeling they have voice and agency in their school and the restorative practices themselves. Engaging students entails not only making sure they are genuinely being listened to by peers and adults during circles, but also facilitating their ownership and leadership in these settings [17,54].

Future Directions

Further research and theoretical development with social and cultural lenses could support efforts to more widely and effectively implement restorative practices. First, much of the current literature has not been subject to preregistration, randomization, or rigorous multi-method design [2,43**,54]. One recent extensive study employed a random control trial and found results in line with much of the other research [51*], but further development and iterative research designs would help bolster understandings of within-school changes and broader implications [60].

Second, student voice—particularly through qualitative methods—is seldom examined in the research [56**]. It is crucial to take into account how young people of different ages and with different life histories make meaning of their experiences in school, as well as links with their social, cognitive, and neurological development [61]. The current literature on restorative practices in schools generally indicates student approval is correlated with feeling ownership and being listened to [2]. A next step would be further research to explore young people's shifting beliefs, understandings, motivations, and emotions within their dynamic, lived experiences of restorative practices [47]. Contextualized study could also address a concern with the flexibility and variance in implementation of restorative practices [33**].

Relatedly, beyond the current focus on engagement and motivation, applying psychological scholarship on development—in addition to education and instructional perspectives—to restorative practices in school is critical for deeper understandings. Moral development can offer much insight into how teachers and students understand and judge harm [62], make attributions about themselves and others as imperfect but nonetheless moral people [63], and envision possibilities for redemption and repair; all of which are critical to understanding the experience and engagement with restorative practices. For example, recent research on youth perceptions of justice could be harnessed to better understand students' experiences. One study found adolescents who were more likely to attribute internal causes for crime were more likely to advocate for harsher punishments [64], while another found greater perspective taking was connected to less support for punitive responses [65]. Taken together, these findings may point toward not simply of implementing restorative practices in schools, but also integrating them with interventions that target empathy and perspective-taking and support students in exploring notions of accountability, justice, blame, forgiveness, and reconciliation in the aftermath of harm. Broadly, future research on restorative practices in schools could employ developmental and moral frameworks to better understand underlying processes and the psychological and cultural influences across societal contexts [66]. This would also help address the limitation of much of the emerging literature that is solely focused on the United States.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a prime time in the life course for rebellion and questioning of social norms and practices as young people become increasingly aware of injustices and critical of structures that constrain their sense of choice and freedom [64]. Restorative practices are a burgeoning movement in schools partly in response to inequality and inequities in the school system and discipline practices. In some cases, they have been driven by youth activists in order to push back and reject current ways of operating [17]. In others, they have become an effective way to channel youths' agentic capacities into

prosocial action and protest, rather than violence or civic disengagement [3•,18]. Therefore, developing cultures that are restorative and focused on community-building could be one approach to harnessing youth resistance and their developing sense of autonomy and agency into transformative action.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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