

The Power to Heal: Making the Case for Using Restorative Practices with Black and Brown Girls in Schools

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Lakisha¹ was a student in my READ 180 class two years ago. Typically, READ 180 is a reading program that replaces the regular reading instruction block. However, in my school, it is a supplementary reading instruction program.

Lakisha was placed in my class, not because she was reading below grade level, but because she was having a very difficult time getting along with her classroom teacher. My principal thought that she might need a smaller and more intimate learning setting. My classes are no more than ten students on average whereas, Lakisha's homeroom class had about 22 students.

Lakisha is a bright and articulate young lady. She did well on the READ 180 assessments and well in my class overall. Lakisha and I got along very well. Many times, when Lakisha had behavior difficulties in her homeroom class, she would leave her class and come to my classroom. Her teacher welcomed her departure, which was a temporary fix for the deeper troubles that Lakisha was experiencing.

As I got to know her better, she shared her story: of being a foster child and not being able to see her parents because they were both in jail. Her father was in prison for molesting her and her mother was put in prison because she tried to kill her after she found out about the sexual abuse.

This child did receive one-on-one counseling sessions with our guidance counselor, but she needed so much more help. She also had an older sister named Shanice that I also had as a READ 180 student. Both girls had made their "rounds" around the different elementary schools in the district. When they would they had disciplinary issues in one school, they would move to another. They were known for being "loud, rowdy and sexually precocious."

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Lakisha was suspended from my school for minor infractions. Most of them were related to how she spoke back to her teachers. Her teacher, who happened to be a black woman, felt disrespected by her. Lakisha called her teacher names. She made fun of her teacher's clothing and shoes in front of the other children, causing chaos and pandemonium in the classroom. The straw that broke the camel's back was when Lakisha flung her book bag. She was angry about what the teacher had said to her. The book bag hit the teacher.

The computer teacher, who also had many disciplinary run ins with Lakisha, decided to file a complaint with the superintendent's office as well as a police report. This student was suspended from our school and placed on homebound instruction. She eventually was expelled by the school district as a result of a hearing.

By "pushing" Lakisha out, we never had the opportunity to address the root causes of her misbehavior and offer her help. Our school district code of conduct did not offer many other options for disciplining students.

Children act out for a reason.

Most times, it's a cry for help.

Healing the Pushed

This short vignette has been echoed in urban classrooms and schools around the country. There are so many Lakisha's that are being

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

“pushed out” of school due to harsh school disciplinary policies. Monique Morris, author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, chronicles the lived experiences of these black girls. She tells the stories of girls as young as six years old, like Salecia Johnson and Desre’e Watson, who were arrested for having tantrums in their classrooms.

Overall, there seems to be an accelerated rush to the harshest disciplinary choices, often bypassing intermediate interventions, such as school counseling and behavior modification plans. Instead, school administrators opt for suspensions, and in some cases, expulsions. In fact, Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled for “disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering” than their school peers of other races.²

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Schools criminalize behavior through zero-tolerance mandatory suspension and expulsion policies, employing on-campus law enforcement, and arresting students on campus.³ This criminalization of school discipline includes the direct involvement of criminal justice employees and sanctions, such as arrests and referrals, as well as the adoption and implementation of zero tolerance suspension and expulsion policies.⁴

However, suspension and expulsion as modes of punishment are not used across the

board for all populations of students. These modes of punishment are primarily used by schools with large numbers of black and brown students.

Furthermore, many public schools are adopting the language of medicine to manage misbehavior of students. For example, teachers and school administrators are more likely than any other adult outside one’s family to suggest that misbehavior may be a symptom of a medical disorder.⁵ Unlike white parents, the families of black and Hispanic children are less likely to blame their children’s behavior on medical or psychological causes.⁶

All of these factors make for an inequitable educational environment for students of color, black girls in particular. The odds are stacked against them. In disadvantaged schools, they have less resources overall. In the case of my school district, in particular, we are understaffed. We don’t have enough social workers and school counselors to keep up with needs of our students. Maybe if we had some alternatives to expulsion at my school, Lakisha would have had a chance to continue her education and receive the help and support she so desperately needed.

That is why I am exploring restorative practices: specifically, the use of circles as a disciplinary alternative and classroom management tool in my own fifth-grade classroom this school year.

Unfortunately, restorative practices are underutilized in schools where the students are predominately black and brown, despite the

²Skiba, Michael, Nardo. 2002. “The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender. Disproportionality in School Punishment.” *The Urban Review* 34(4): 317-342.

³ Hirschfield, Paul J. 2008. “Preparing for Prison? The Criminalization of School Discipline in the USA.” *Theoretical Criminology* 12(1):79–101.

⁴ Ibid., 2008.

⁵ Hinshaw, S. P., & Scheffer, R. M. 2014. *The ADHD Explosion: Myths, Medication, Money, and Today’s Push for Performance*. New York: Oxford University Press. See more at <http://psychology.berkeley.edu/people/stephen-hinshaw#sthash.OQ9HGNFe.dpuf>.

⁶ Miller, Torri W., Joel T. Nigg, and Robin L. Miller. 2009. “Attention Deficit Disorder in African-American Children: What Can Be Concluded from the Past Ten Years?” *Clinical Psychology Review* 29(1): 77–86.

research that shows that these restorative practices reduce suspensions. When students are suspended for disciplinary issues, the suspension creates a vicious cycle. Suspension leads to reduce instructional time, which negatively impacts student achievement. This ultimately increases a student's likelihood of dropping out. This paper argues that restorative practices might be a way to break this vicious cycle and help students to stay in school and graduate.

Since it is a known fact that high school graduates and, better yet, college graduates, earn more over their lifetime and are less likely to become involved with the criminal justice system, I feel that it is my duty to do whatever I can to short circuit the school-to-prison pipeline. The many “Lakishas” in school districts like mine across this country deserve to receive an equal chance to learn.

Lately, the emphasis has been on the “black and brown boy problem,” as evidenced by Obama's My Brothers' Keeper Initiative. According to Monique Morris, “there is an absence of research and data on outcomes associated with RJ programs and their impact on girls of color, specifically Black girls.”⁷ The struggles that black girls face in school are not single-issue struggles. They struggle because they are black and because they are girls.

I argue that restorative practices transcend boundaries and barriers. They are truly intersectional and holistic. RP practices have the potential not to only effect change in schools, but in the larger community as well.

What are Restorative Practices?

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices, restorative practices include “the use of informal and formal processes that precede wrongdoing, those that proactively build relationships and a sense of community to

prevent conflict and wrongdoing.”⁸ They define social capital as the connections among individuals, and the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviors that bind us together and make cooperative action possible.

Restorative practices are preventative, not punitive. They are practices to employ and introduce before a problem occurs. There are different restorative practices that are utilized in different settings.

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One restorative practice that is used more often in educational setting is the circle. In education, circles and groups provide opportunities for students to share their feelings, build relationships and solve problems, and when there is wrongdoing, to play an active role in addressing the wrong and making things right.⁹ A circle can be proactively used to develop relationships and build community. It can also be used as a response to wrongdoing—as a way to solve problems and conflicts. Circles allow all stakeholders to have a voice and an opportunity to speak and listen to one each other.

Circles are usually done in a sequential format. One person speaks at a time and each person must wait to speak until his or her turn. No

⁷ Morris, M. 2016. *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*. New York: New Press.

⁸ See <http://www.iirp.edu/what-we-do/what-is-restorative-practices/defining-restorative>.

⁹ Riestenberg, N. 2002, August. *Restorative Measures in Schools: Evaluation Results*. Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Conferencing, Circles and other Restorative Practices. Minneapolis, MN, USA.

one should interrupt. Most times, a talking piece—a small object that is easily held and passed from person to person—helps keep everyone on track. Only the person who is holding the talking piece has the right to speak.¹⁰ Both the circle and the talking piece have roots in ancient and indigenous practices.¹¹

There are also other informal restorative practices that can be utilized in a classroom. Another example of such a practice is affective statements, which communicate people's feelings, as well as affective questions, which cause people to reflect on how their behavior has affected others.¹²

A teacher in a classroom might employ an affective statement when a student has misbehaved, letting the student know how he or she has been affected by the student's behavior: "When you disrupt the class, I feel sad," or "disrespected" or "disappointed." Hearing this, the student learns how his or her behavior is affecting others.¹³

When I think of this informal restorative practice, I envision what could have happened for Lakisha in my school, had we tried RP first. Imagine if time was taken to help Lakisha to reflect on her own behavior? I am sure that she probably would have made better choices going

forward. The outcomes for Lakisha, and black and brown girls like her, would greatly improve. Furthermore, I argue that restorative practices are a way of disciplining with dignity.

How are school districts using restorative practices?

There are many school districts that are using RP and finding success for their students. School districts in Pennsylvania have begun to follow schools like Oakland School District and Chicago Public Schools in their efforts to look for alternatives to zero-tolerance policies. Keeping students in school so that they can learn is now becoming the priority.

Schools like West Philadelphia High have seen a significant decrease in the number of suspensions, down more than 50% in just two years of implementing RP. Superintendent of Schools in Philadelphia, Dr. William Hite Jr., says, "more students are making the right choices, and our principals, teachers and school staff members are providing the right supports and guidance. We are very proud of what our school communities continue to accomplish."¹⁴

But, RP's isn't just about providing discipline with dignity. It is also about building school community. It's been reported that the practices help to create and promote high-quality learning and teaching. So, using RP is a win-win and is beneficial not only for students, but the whole school community.

"The Audacity of Hope": Will the Use of Restorative Practices Help Black and Brown Girls to Stay in School?

The term, "the audacity of hope," comes from the title of President Barack Obama's 2006

¹⁰ Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. 2010. *Restorative Circles in Schools: Building Community and Enhancing Learning*. Bethlehem, PA: International Institute for Restorative Practices.

¹¹ Mirsky, L. 2004, April & May. "Restorative justice practices of Native American, First Nation and other indigenous people of North America: Parts One & Two." *Restorative Practices e-Forum*. Retrieved from http://www.iirp.edu/article_detail.php?article_id=NDA1
http://www.iirp.edu/article_detail.php?article_id=ND1

¹² McCold, P., & Wachtel, T. 2001. "Restorative Justice in Everyday Life." In J. Braithwaite & H. Strang (Eds.), *Restorative Justice and Civil Society* (pp. 114-129). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Harrison, L. 2007. "From Authoritarian to Restorative Schools. *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 16(2): 17-20.

¹⁴ See <http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/contributors/2016/11/18/jcps-praised-expanding-restorative-justice/93815098/>.

book, *The Audacity of Hope: Reclaiming the American Dream*. As we think about the plight of brown and black girls in schools around the country, this term is so fitting.

It will take audacity and boldness on the part of educators, school administrators and the community to stem the tide and help black and brown girls be successful in school and beyond. Based on the research that has already been presented in this paper, I argue that restorative practices have the potential to help black and brown girls stay in school.

With that thought and end in mind, I began the work of implementing circles as part of my classroom routine. We started this process by co-authoring circle norms. Here's what we came up with:

- Listen when someone speaks.
- Only talk when you have the speaking piece.
- Be kind and respectful.

It has been six months so far. At first, students were reluctant, and did not want to participate in circles. Now, they beg to have circles.

Maria, a fifth grade student, says this about our circles, “circles allow us to express how we feel.” My students are eager to share their thoughts and feelings. The circles have been used to mediate conflicts, as well as to share thoughts and aspirations. Not only have the circles been beneficial and instrumental in achieving a harmonious classroom environment in my classroom this year, they have also assisted administrators when having to make disciplinary decisions.

School administrator Barbara Coleman says, “it used to be that you were suspended and you are out. Now we are looking at talking it out with the student and the parents, so that we don't have to take that route.” To this end, I will continue learn more about how to implement restorative practices in my classroom. I

believe that these practices are transformative and have the potential to not only turn the wave of suspensions in my school, but help students build and form relationships both inside and outside of the classroom.

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brown girls stay in school.**

The idea is that we will effect change, one student at a time, one classroom at a time, one school at a time. My hope is that using RP will catch on like wildfire and it spread throughout my school district.

Janene Onyango is an elementary school educator whose commitment to educating, inspiring and uplifting students has span over twenty years. Over the years, she has been the recipient of various awards, including being recognized as a 2016 Burlington County Teacher of the Year, a 2015 Mulrone Scholar (University of Pennsylvania), and a 2015 NJEA Hipp Foundation Grant recipient. In addition to her responsibilities as a classroom teacher, she is currently a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, studying Reading, Writing and Literacy. Her research interests include: critical studies, educational equity, intergenerational reading practices, digital storytelling and technology in education and social justice. She has also written articles for The Review, a publication of the New Jersey Education Association, of which she is an active member. Outside of the classroom, Janene serves in her community through the many community service initiatives sponsored by her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority. Janene also is a member of the Fountain of Life Center's Serve Team ministering to youth each Sunday through their Life Kids children's ministry. She currently teaches fifth grade at Twin Hills Elementary School in Willingboro, New Jersey.