Restorative Justice and School Social Work Practice: Promoting a Positive School Climate and Culture

In recent years, a movement has occurred steering away from a zero-tolerance approach to one that "improves school climate using proactive preventative measures" (Lutsick, Norton, Lopez, Greene-Rooks, 2020, p. 89). As "the restorative practices movement seeks to develop good relationships and restore a sense of community in an increasingly disconnected world, these practices have been applied not only in justice systems, families, workplaces, and neighborhoods but also within schools" (Costello, Wachtel, Wachtell, 2019, p. 6). These practices aim to create safe, supportive learning environments, where students cultivate a sense of belonging, develop strong, trusting relationships, and are empowered - the bedrock for academic achievement and overall learning success.

Restorative practices have roots in various Indigenous communities worldwide. They are based on traditional healing practices and values associated with building and repairing community, and peacemaking. Through restorative practices, environments are created where young people are known, nurtured, and healed. Circles, "as a symbol of community" (Costello, Wachtel, Wachtel 2019, p. 22), intentionally create a space that lifts barriers between people, and fosters connections, collaboration, and mutual understanding. In schools, restorative practices can be used "**responsively** to promote healing or brokenness within relationships as well as **proactively** to build relationships, socio-emotional and problem-solving skills, and the overall capacity of students and adults to resolve conflicts" (Parameswaran, Molloy, Kuttner, 2024, p.190). As a result, schools nationwide have increasingly adopted a restorative practices framework.

An underlying commitment to student and community well-being is a cornerstone of school social work practice. Operating from a strengths-based perspective, understanding the interplay of person-in-environment, and training in group work, school social workers are well-postured to facilitate, and provide school-wide leadership toward implementation of these practices as an effective alternative to zero-tolerance discipline, and as a means to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline. To lead these efforts, administrators and school staff are increasingly turning to school social workers to guide the implementation efforts of restorative practices, "because of their understanding of the importance of relationships, relevant skills, and training" (Scott, Jones, Cavanagh, Metas Vigil, & Pointer, 2020, p. 57). The School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA) recognizes the value of restorative justice practices in schools and the pivotal role of school social workers in implementing this approach with fidelity.

Promoting Student and School Well-Being
School social workers apply a holistic approach that is aimed at eliminating barriers that interfere with learning and one's overall well-being with a strong emphasis on supporting the entire school community. Adopting a whole-child, whole-school approach, school social workers focus on providing prevention, intervention and postvention services not only at the individual level, but also across the

entire school community (Tan, & SSWAA, 2024, p. 3). This comprehensive approach aligns with the Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), which integrates various components such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and restorative justice practices. Central to this framework, PBIS principles guide social workers in proactively defining, teaching, and reinforcing positive behaviors. School social workers play a crucial role in helping students develop essential social skills and contribute positively to their school community by establishing a supportive environment where behavioral expectations are clearly defined and consistently maintained. Restorative practices further enhance this environment, by focusing on building community, strengthening relationships, resolving conflicts, and repairing harm. As part of the MTSS framework, these practices work in tandem with PBIS and SEL to support student's academic, social, and emotional well-being. Throughout this integrated approach, school social workers are instrumental in fostering a nurturing and effective learning environment that supports and addresses the diverse needs of all students.

Building on the foundation established by PBIS, and restorative practices within the MTSS framework, school social workers extend their efforts to the universal or Tier 1 level, by collaborating with educators to implement SEL programs aimed at fostering emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and healthy relationships among all students. A key component integrated into these efforts is the use of classroom circles. These circles serve as a powerful tool to build community within classrooms, giving students a voice and the opportunity to take ownership of their learning environment. By establishing regular rituals such as check-ins and check-outs, setting classroom norms, and discussing academic goals, circles create a sense of safety and belonging among students (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2019, p. 22-27). These practices are essential for nurturing a positive classroom culture where every student feels respected and empowered.

Furthermore, school social workers facilitate the use of circles not only among students but also as a means to bring staff together throughout the school year. Staff circles help build team spirit, foster open communication, and set intentions for collaboration throughout the academic year. By aligning goals and establishing shared norms and expectations, staff circles contribute to a cohesive and supportive school community where educators can effectively support student growth and development.

The positive impact of these initial efforts at Tier 1, set the stage for more targeted interventions at Tiers 2 and 3. As highlighted, "restorative practices are built around an 80/20 model meaning they are 80% proactive and 20% reactive" (Smith, Fisher, & Fry, 2022, p. 14). At the Tier 2 level, social workers identify and assist students who require additional support beyond universal interventions. They conduct small group sessions focusing on specific social or behavioral skills, providing targeted interventions to address individual needs and prevent further challenges from escalating. In this Tier, responsive circles serve as a proactive strategy to intervene early, addressing interfering behavior issues before they intensify. These circles are instrumental in navigating conflicts and resolving potential harm within the school community. By facilitating structured dialogues, school social workers aid students in exploring the root causes of their behavior, understand the impact on others, and work towards meaningful resolutions. This approach not only supports students in developing essential conflict-resolution skills but also promotes accountability, honesty, compassion, and fosters a sense of empathy and mutual respect among peers.

For students requiring intensive support, Tier 3 interventions are tailored to meet their unique challenges. School social workers work closely with families, educators, and community resources to develop personalized plans that promote behavioral change, academic achievement, and enhance overall well-

being. Here, restorative justice practices come into play cultivating a sense of accountability and strengthening relationships among students and between students and staff. In Tier 3, restorative justice practices play a pivotal role; for example, school social workers often facilitate restorative conferences, which are formal responses to wrongdoing. These conferences bring together affected parties—including students, families, educators, and sometimes mental health professionals—to discuss the impact of actions, address accountability, and work toward healing and reconciliation. Additionally, family group decision-making processes are utilized in Tier 3. These involve collaborative decision-making where families, along with school and community support networks, come together to develop comprehensive plans and decisions regarding a student's well-being and educational journey. This approach ensures that decisions are made with the full involvement and support of the student's family and relevant professionals, integrating wrap-around services to provide comprehensive support.

Domains of Practice: Home-School-Community Partnerships
Restorative Practices not only benefit and strengthen student relationships, well-being, and belonging, but are also transformational for the adults who serve and care for those students. Fostering authentic connections between the families and communities that represent the diversity of our student body, and our school staff is essential to promoting a respectful and safe school climate. "This calls for concerted efforts on the school to reach out to parents and community partners to engage them in co-creating safe spaces at school, in the home, and in the community"(Parameswaran, Molloy, Kuttner 2023, p. 198). Understanding the interplay of historical and present day trauma associated with discrimination, marginalization, and oppression, that permeates society is central to addressing persistent inequities and mistrust marginalized communities have experienced within the educational system. "Discrimination, marginalization, and failing to see oneself and one's own culture represented reduces the sense of belonging and is associated with reduced mental health and disengagement from school" (Hill, 2022, p. 199). School social workers can work to mitigate the harm imposed by marginalization, oppression, and bias by becoming proficient in adopting trauma-informed restorative practices framework (Sedillo-Hamann, 2023, p.98). This framework creates "racial/ethnic socialization and cultural embeddedness that emboldens students' sense of belonging and identity and prepares them to understand the sources and etiologies of racial and ethnic bias" (Hill, 2022, p. 199).

Confronting implicit bias as well as the historical and current reality of harm imposed by inequitable practices, unjust policies and systemic oppression is the ethical responsibility of social workers. Cultivating a safe and supportive school climate requires the establishment of a school culture where learning can take place that is mindful of the experiences, cultures, and views that everyone in that system brings with them. We cannot fulfill social work's primary mission of "enhancing human well-being and helping to meet the basic human needs of all people" nor "fully actualize our core professional values without advocating to reform, dismantle, or even abolish the racist and oppressive systems we may work within and beside" (NASW, 2020, p. 1). The circle process, modeled and enacted before and throughout the school year, fosters meaningful collaboration, connections, and healing between staff, administration, families, and community stakeholders.

Focus Areas: Academics, Socio-Emotional Well-being, Mental Health, and Inclusive School Climate
Restorative practices offer a promising alternative to the punitive, exclusionary discipline that has been overused with special education students, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ), as well as Black and LatinX students (Huguley, Fussell-Ware, McQueen, Wang, Debellis, 2022, p. 139). Such practices can increase "dropout rates, contribute to mental health issues, and escalate the risks of juvenile and adult incarceration" (Darling-Hammond, 2023, p. 2). While exclusionary discipline is often

implemented with the intention of maintaining order and promoting positive behavior, research shows it frequently exacerbates existing mental and behavioral health challenges and fails to deter misbehavior. Restorative practices offer an alternative approach by creating inclusive school climates where every student, regardless of background, is valued and supported. School social workers are uniquely positioned to lead the implementation of restorative practices, guiding schools in adopting these methods to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. By addressing key focus areas such as academic achievement, school climate, social-emotional development, and mental health, they leverage a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to provide comprehensive services through a whole-child approach to education. School social workers recognize and value students' intersecting social identities and lived experiences in ways that support their socioemotional development. They implement trauma-informed, healing centered engagement and mental health services, while fostering a universal, equitable, whole-school climate where students feel welcome, safe, and supported (Tan, & SSWAA, 2024, p 4).

The increasing demand for mental health services highlights the need for universal support and psychoeducation to students and staff, helping them recognize warning signs. The implementation of universal language, processes, and procedures to promote mental health literacy, ensures that mental health services are accessible and effective. By integrating restorative principles within MTSS, school social workers help cultivate safe, supportive learning environments where students feel a sense of belonging and develop strong, trusting relationships, and bring together key members of the school community, creating a supportive network for students. These preventative efforts allow for cultural humility and responsive interventions, aligning with the National School Social Work Practice model 2.0 that emphasizes student and school well being at its core.   Through this multi-tiered approach, school social workers provide mental health services, prevention and crisis management, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes, a positive school climate, and enhanced mental health for students.

Professional Activities: Policy, Research, Practice, Leadership, and Advocacy
Through upholding our professional values of advocating for social justice and equity, from the lens of cultural humility, school social workers strive to foster safe, supportive, and inclusive school environments (Tan, & SSWAA, 2023). The reality of long standing racial disparities in discipline practices continues to be illuminated in research. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, "Black students were the only race/ethnicity of students with disabilities served under IDEA whose boys and girls were both disproportionately represented in suspensions and expulsions. In addition to Black boys and girls, American Indian or Alaska Native boys and multiracial boys also received suspensions and expulsions that exceeded their share of enrollment among students with disabilities" (2022, para. 4-5). This is one example of the extensive evidence of systemic inequities in our educational communities that ethically compels school social workers to take action.

Advocating for and engaging in reforms at school, district, community and legislative levels is critical to dismantling barriers to educational equity (Tan, SSWAA, 2023, p. 4) "Understanding the relationship between policy, practice, and research in school social work increases awareness and where our advocacy efforts can most impact social justice" (Lucio, Daly, Childs, & McCoy, 2019, p. 2). An imperative step in the assurance of initial buy-in and sustainability of this framework requires ongoing education of various stakeholders using data and personal accounts of the benefits of restorative practices. Through advocacy and facilitating professional development, school social workers can help to build the capacity of school staff and administration in using restorative justice practices and principles as well as increasing community members and families in the process. Thus, as mental health practitioners, we can stem the tide of increasing dissatisfaction and burnout among teachers and students who feel unsafe or unsupported while at school.

The following recommendations offer practitioners guidance on how to strengthen their knowledge and leadership skills in the area of restorative practices and the use of peace circles to foster a safe and supportive school climate:

1. Seek out professional development and research in the area of restorative practices to strengthen leadership capacity.
2. Engage in critical self-reflection as defined by our NASW Code of Ethics to understand personal biases and "engage in self-correction; recognize clients as experts of their own culture; commit to life-long learning; and work to hold institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility. (NASW, 2021, para. 1.05c); Tan, K. & SSWAA, 2024, p. 2)
3. Participate in and/or offer to lead school-wide committees such as school improvement/leadership team; PBIS; professional development; mental health team; etc. as a means to integrate RP with other initiatives to ensure a cohesive approach, streamlining efforts and supporting a unified framework that enhances the overall social-emotional development and academic growth of students.
4. Develop a system to implement proactive circles, an essential element of Restorative Practices. Examples include morning classroom circles in elementary schools or daily advisory circles in secondary schools are often among the first steps of establishing connections, empathy, mutual understanding and respect for diverse perspectives and experiences.
5. Provide professional learning sessions to school staff on specific Restorative Practice techniques. (schoolguide casel.org, 2020) Restorative Practices and SEL Alignment These sessions can cover:
   a. Using Affective Language: Teaching staff how to communicate using "I statements" to express feelings and needs clearly, promoting empathetic listening, and utilizing restorative questions to understand and address conflicts.
   b. Restorative Questions: Training staff on how to ask restorative questions that help resolve conflicts or challenging behaviors by focusing on understanding the root cause and encouraging personal responsibility and growth.
   c. De-escalation Strategies: Guiding staff on how to manage their own emotions when faced with challenging behaviors and how to respond in a way that prioritizes building strong relationships and skill development (separating the deed from the doer).
   d. Conferencing Protocols: Guiding staff in conferencing procedures that involve informal to formal student, staff, family, or stakeholder meetings to address student needs and conflict resolutions.
6. Engage all stakeholders (students, families, community partners) in Restorative Practice initiatives and in learning about Restorative Practices through PowerPoint presentations, and videos about restorative practices in schools and other contexts. Informational events can be held to inform parents, students, staff, and community partners of the schoolwide initiatives, and encourage involvement in the development of shared schoolwide expectations and climate practices.

Conclusion
Exclusionary discipline strategies have consistently shown their harmful effects on students and the entire school community. Based on the data outlined above, exclusionary discipline continues to create racial

disparities and other inequities in the educational system. Evidence based research confirms the effectiveness and necessity of employing restorative practices in schools. Restorative practices integrated in MTSS may be one of the most effective tools we have in reversing student learning gaps, increasing accessibility to mental health services, improving social and emotional well-being, and bridging home, school and community connection. Restorative Practice efforts align with the role and responsibilities of school social workers as outlined in The National School Social Practice Model 2.0 to promote and sustain equitable outcomes of students.

Approved by the Board of Directors, August 8, 2024

Suggested citation: Berry, M. McCoy, C. & Robinson, V. (2024). *Restorative Justice and School Social Work Practice: Promoting a Positive School Climate and Culture.* London, KY: School Social Work Association of America.

References:

1. CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL Restorative Practice and SEL Alignment. (2020). Retrieved from https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/2020.12.11_Aligning-SEL-and-RP_Final.pdf
2. Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2019). The restorative practices handbook: For teachers, disciplinarians, and administrators (2nd ed.). International Institute for Restorative Practices.
3. Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2019). Restorative circles in schools: A practical guide for educators (2nd ed.). International Institute for Restorative Practices.
4. Darling-Hammond, S. (2023). Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative practices. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/169.703; https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/media/4057/download?inline&file=Restorative_Practices_BRIEF.pdf
5. Dayna Sedillo-Hamann, Trauma-Informed Restorative Justice Practices in Schools: An Opportunity for School Social Workers, *Children & Schools*, Volume 44, Issue 2, April 2022, Pages 98–106, Trauma-Informed Restorative Justice Practices in Schools: An Opportunity for School Social Workers | Children & Schools | Oxford Academic
6. Hill, N.E. Creating a Sense of Belonging in the Context of Racial Discrimination and Racial Trauma. *ADV RES SCI* **3**, 195–199 (2022). https://doi.org/10.1007/s42844-022-00067-9
7. Huguley, J., Fussell-Ware, D., McQueen, S., Wang, M., Debellis, B. (2022). Completing the Circle: Linkages Between Restorative Practices, Social-Emotional Well-Being, and Racial Justice in schools. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders.* Volume 30 (2),. pp. 138-153. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1342874.pdf
8. Lucio, R., Daly, S. Childs, P., & McCoy, C. (2019). Advocacy and Action: Changing the Conversation around School Social Work. London, KY. School Social Work Association of America.
9. Lustick, H., Norton, C., Lopez S., and Greene-Rook, J., (2020). Restorative Practices for Empowerment: A Social Work Lens. *Children in Schools.* Volume 42, Number 2. pp. 89-97. https://txicfw.socialwork.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Restorative-Practices-article.pdf.
10. Marsh,V.,(2017). Restorative Practice: History, Successes, Challenges & Recommendations. Center for Urban Education Success, University of Rochester. https://www.rochester.edu/warner/cues/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Restorative-Practices-Brief-1_marsh_final.pdf.
11. National Association of Social Workers. (2021). NASW code of ethics. Retrieved May 30, 2024, from https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English;.
12. National Association of Social Workers., (2020). Social Workers Must Help Dismantle Systems of Oppression and Fight Racism Within Social Work Profession. Retieved from https://www.socialworkers.org/News/News-Releases/ID/2219/Social-Workers-Must-Help-Dismantle-Systems-of-Oppression-and-Fight-Racism-Within-Social-Work-Profession.
13. Parameswaran, Uma & Molloy, Jen & Kuttner, Paul. (2023). Healing Schools: A Framework for Joining Trauma-Informed Care, Restorative Justice, and Multicultural Education for Whole School Reform. The Urban Review. 56. 1-24. 10.1007/s11256-023-00666-5.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373115800_Healing_Schools_A_Framework_for_Joining_Trauma-Informed_Care_Restorative_Justice_and_Multicultural_Education_for_Whole_School_Reform

14. CASEL; Guide to Schoolwide SEL Restorative Practice and SEL Alignment. (2020). Retrieved from https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/2020.12.11_Aligning-SEL-and-RP_Final.pdf

15. Scott, M., Jones, B., Cavanagh, T. , Metas Vigil, P. L., & Pointer, L., (2020). The Future of School Social Work: Providing Leadership Through Restorative Justice Coordination. Educational Research: Theory and Practice, 31(1), 57-62.

16. Smith, D, Fisher, D., & Frey, N, (2022), *The Restorative Practices Playbook. Tools For Transforming Discipline In Schools, Corwin.*

17. Tan, K. & SSWAA. (2024). National School Social Work Practice Model 2.0: A Framework for 21st Century School Social Work Practice. School Social Work Association of America. Retrieved from https://www.sswaa.org/ssw-model.

18. U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2022). Suspensions and Expulsions of Students with Disabilities in Public Schools. [infographic]. Retrieved from https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/assets/downloads/Discipline_of_Students_with_Disabilities_Part3.pdf.