

Can restorative practices bridge racial disparities in schools?

EVIDENCE FROM THE CALIFORNIA HEALTHY KIDS SURVEY

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Stubborn Disparities

In California, Black students have markedly lower academic achievement than their White peers (Cano, 2020). Black students are also more likely to experience exclusionary discipline, such as suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2020). These racial disparities in schools have proven remarkably stable (Cano, 2020; Losen & Martinez, 2020). And recent research (Pearman et al., 2019) suggests that the Black-White discipline gap and Black-White achievement gap are related. This suggests a critical question: what, if anything, can be done to mitigate these racial disparities in schools?

Theory and Research on Restorative Practices

Advocates of restorative practices (e.g., Gomez et al., 2020) contend that introducing these practices may help ameliorate racial discipline gaps and could, over time, bridge racial achievement gaps. In a restorative paradigm, schools often set aside time in the school day for students and teachers to deepen their relationships by sharing their emotional worlds; teachers help students develop social and emotional skills, such as empathy and introspection, that prepare them to manage conflicts; and when conflicts do occur, students and teachers guide members of the school community through conflict resolution processes designed to repair relationships. Advocates (e.g., Tyler, 2006; Zehr, 2015) further argue that whereas exclusionary practices can lead to disengagement and catalyze further misbehavior, restorative practices can enhance community bonds, reducing misbehavior while increasing academic motivation.

A recent review of quantitative studies of restorative practices in schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020) found that in most cases, the introduction of restorative practices preceded reductions in discipline disparities (see, e.g., Armour, 2014; Augustine et al., 2018; González, 2015; Gregory et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2018; Jain et al., 2014). However, in other cases, schools that utilized restorative practices did not see any shift in the discipline gap (see, e.g., Anyon et al., 2016). It is perhaps more concerning that in one randomized controlled trial, while training teachers in restorative practices appeared to reduce discipline disparities, it also seemed to reduce academic achievement for students overall, reduce achievement for Black students in particular, and *increase* the racial achievement gap (Augustine et al., 2018). Still, in some other studies, the introduction of restorative practices preceded improvements in academic performance (Armour, 2014; Jain et al., 2014; McMorris et al., 2013).

In their review of studies about restorative practices, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) noted that practitioners use the term to describe a wide array of practices—including proactive community-building circles and suspension diversion programs, such as student courts—and that researchers studied restorative practices using a wide array of methods, including pre-post analyses and randomized controlled trials. They opined that the variability in study findings may be partially owing to the variability both in how restorative practices are *defined* by practitioners and in how these practices are *studied* by researchers. Extant literature thus leaves unclear whether increasing student exposure to restorative practices could help reduce racial discipline and achievement gaps.

Examining Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey

To investigate whether increasing student exposure to restorative practices could help reduce racial discipline and achievement gaps, we reviewed survey data from 838,166 California middle and high school students who participated in the California Health Kids Survey (CHKS) between the 2013/14 and 2018/19 school years. The CHKS includes eight questions about students' experiences with restorative practices. We used students' answers to these questions to create a measure, ranging from 1 to 5, that indicates how much exposure each student had to restorative practices. So, for example, students whose restorative practice exposure scores were "1" had extremely little exposure to restorative practices. Students with a score near "3" had moderate exposure. And students with a score of "5" had extremely high exposure to restorative practices. The average student had a score of 3.36, and the standard deviation of exposure score was 0.83.

We then utilized multivariate regressions to estimate the relationship between students' levels of exposure to restorative practices and their disciplinary¹ and academic² outcomes, adjusting for a range of student, parent, and district characteristics (see the appendix for more information about our measures and methods).

¹ Suspension rate is captured in the CHKS data by a question that asks whether students have missed school in the past 30 days due to being suspended (0 = "no," 1 = "yes"). This question only appeared in the 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17 CHKS data. Analyses on this measure are thus restricted to the aforementioned years.

² The CHKS does not ask students to report their grade point average (GPA) directly. Instead, it asks students to indicate which of eight options best fits the grades they received in the last 12 months. Categories include options such as "mostly F's" and "A's and B's." We adapted these options to create a measure of estimated GPA ranging from 0 (low GPA) to 4 (high GPA). Notably, data on academic achievement is available for all years (2013/14 through 2018/19), so models related to these measures can leverage a larger universe of student data than models related to discipline.

Findings: Restorative Practices May Bridge Discipline Disparities and Improve Academic Achievement for All

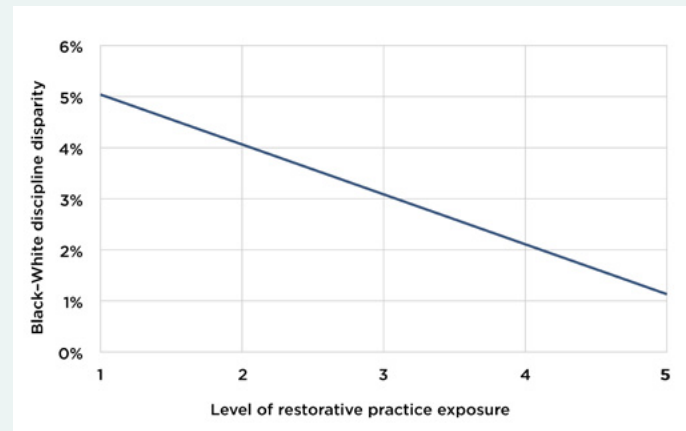
Students with higher levels of exposure to restorative practices evidenced smaller Black-White discipline disparities (see Figure 1).

In our models, for both Black and White students, higher levels of exposure to restorative practices predicted lower levels of exposure to discipline. However,

because this relationship was stronger for Black students than for White students, higher levels of exposure also predicted smaller Black-White discipline disparities. To put these results in perspective, imagine two schools that each have 100 White students and 100 Black students. All else being equal, if the first school had a very low level of restorative practice utilization, then, in a given month, we would expect three White students and *eight* Black students to be suspended. So, we would expect a large Black-White discipline disparity of about 5 students in 100 (depicted as “5%” in the graphic above). If the second school had a very high level of restorative practice utilization, then we would expect *zero* White students to be suspended in a typical month and only one Black student to be suspended. So, we would expect a much smaller Black-White discipline disparity of about 1 student in 100 (depicted as “1%” in the graphic above).

In short, students with the highest levels of exposure to restorative practices experienced Black-White discipline disparities that were *five times* smaller than those experienced by students with the lowest levels of exposure to restorative practices. In supplemental analyses, we also found that higher levels of exposure to restorative practices predicted lower rates of exposure to discipline for American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic students (see the appendix).

Figure 1. Estimated discipline disparity between Black and White students as a function of level of exposure to restorative practices



Note: The figure depicts predicted Black-White discipline disparity as a function of Black and White students' levels of exposure to restorative practices. Related models adjust for student, parent, and district factors (see the appendix).

Exposure to restorative practices was associated with a higher GPA for all students, Black students, and White students (see Figure 2).

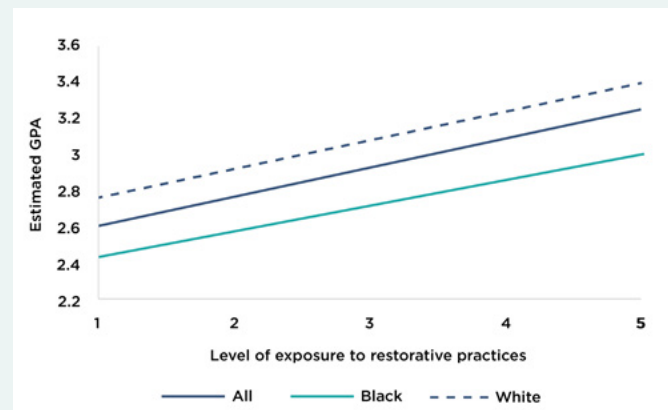
To put these results in perspective, all else being equal, we would expect a Black student with a very low level of exposure to restorative practices to be a “C+ student” and a Black student with a high level of exposure to be a “B student.” Meanwhile, we would expect a White student with low exposure to restorative practices to be a “B- student” and a White student with high exposure to be a “B+ student.”

Notably, we did not see evidence that exposure to restorative practices will bridge racial achievement gaps. But we also did not see evidence that exposure to restorative practices will harm academic achievement. Rather, we saw evidence that exposure to restorative practices is associated with higher achievement for students overall, for Black students, and for White students. In supplemental analyses, we also found evidence that exposure to restorative practices is associated with improved academic achievement for American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic students (see the appendix).

Implications

The analysis found that students who had larger exposure to restorative practices saw less exposure to exclusionary discipline, smaller racial disparities in discipline, and improved academic achievement. While additional research is necessary, schools and districts may want to invest in the kind of sustained professional development that can increase students’ levels of exposure to restorative practices.

Figure 2. Estimated GPA as a function of level of exposure to restorative practices, by race



Note: The figure depicts predicted GPA (for all students, Black students, and White students) as a function of students’ levels of exposure to restorative practices. Related models adjust for student, parent, and district factors (see the appendix).

Limitations

It is important to note that our models are not designed to estimate “causal” effects. In other words, we cannot glean from these models whether exposure to restorative practices *causes* fewer suspensions or improved GPAs. Instead, we can only say that restorative practices are *associated* with the aforementioned positive outcomes. That is, student exposure to greater levels of restorative practices tended to coincide with less discipline exposure, smaller racial discipline disparities, and better academic achievement.

While we controlled for a range of student, parent, and district factors, there were many factors that we did not control for because they were not available in our data. Thus, based on the data available to us, while it is *possible* that student exposure to restorative practices does indeed abridge discipline disparities and improve academic achievement, it is *also* possible that unobserved student-, school-, or community-level characteristics drove both student exposure to restorative practices and student outcomes. Additional research is thus warranted to estimate the causal effect of these practices.

Another critical facet of this research is that we were (intentionally) not identifying the impact of restorative *programming* (i.e., teachers receiving professional development in restorative practices). Instead, we were attempting to evaluate restorative *practices* (i.e., students being exposed to teachers who actually, for example, help resolve conflicts or inculcate conflict resolution skills). We draw this distinction because prior work (e.g., Acosta et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2016) has found that while restorative practices hold great promise, restorative *programming* alone may not be adequate to ensure that students are exposed to these practices. Thus, a critical lingering research question is: what kinds of restorative *programming* can encourage teachers to adopt restorative *practices*? In their review of research on restorative practices, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) cite myriad practitioner guides suggesting that teachers use restorative practices more often in schools that have adopted a restorative culture and that adopting a restorative culture requires professional development and coaching sustained for as many as three to five years. This may provide a clue into the kinds of restorative programming that can generate the effects suggested by our analysis.

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Appendix: Methods and Regression Tables

Measuring restorative practice exposure

To establish a consistent definition of restorative practices, we reviewed CHKS measures related to three “core” types of restorative practices that emerged from the literature review by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020): (a) school practices to help students gain social and emotional skills that can help them manage conflict, (b) school practices to guide and resolve conflict when it occurs, and (c) school practices to ensure a broadly inclusive community. Table 1 provides a list of CHKS survey items that capture dimensions of these core types of restorative practices. These survey items were used in the analysis to determine the extent to which hundreds of thousands of California students experienced restorative practices.

Table 1. List of selected CHKS items utilized to measure restorative practice utilization in schools, subdivided by practice type

Core practice type	Related CHKS survey items
Social and emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » This school encourages students to feel responsible for how they act. » This school encourages students to understand how others think and feel. » This school encourages students to care about how others feel. » Students are taught that they can control their own behavior.
Conflict resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » This school helps students solve conflicts with one another. » If I tell a teacher that someone is bullying me, the teacher will do something.
Inclusive community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Teachers show it is important for students of different races to get along. » The adults in this school respect differences in students.

By averaging a given student's scores on these eight items, we calculated a scale measure (ranging from 1 to 5) that captured each student's level of exposure to restorative practices. This scale measure had an "excellent" internal consistency score with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.910. This score indicates that scale items are related but not duplicative.

Relationship Between Exposure to Restorative Practices and Disciplinary and Academic Outcomes

To ascertain the relationship between restorative practice exposure and disciplinary and academic outcomes, we conducted a series of multivariate regressions where we adjusted for student, parent, and district characteristics. We estimated one model for all students, then we estimated five separate models for Black students, White students, American Indian students, Asian students, and Hispanic students. Formally, in each model, we regressed students' disciplinary experiences on their restorative practice exposure scores and the aforementioned control variables. Using these models, we estimated the Black-White discipline disparity as a function of students' level of exposure to restorative practices, adjusting for the student, parent, and district characteristics.

Our models all have the following form:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{RP SCORE}) + \beta_i(X_i) + \varepsilon$$

Y is our outcome of interest; for our models on disciplinary outcomes, our outcome is a dichotomous measure indicating whether a student missed school due to suspension in the last 30 days; for our models on academic achievement, our outcome is an estimated measure of a student's recent GPA;

α is the intercept (expected value of Y when all predictors have a value of 0);

RP SCORE is the student's score on our scale measure of RP exposure;

β_1 is the coefficient indicating the adjusted relationship between the RP score and the probability of experiencing a suspension;

X_i is a vector of student-, parent-, and district-level covariates used as controls, with **β_i** being the coefficients on those terms; and

ε is our error term, which captures the variation in Y; this is not predicted by our model.

Below, we provide more detail on the variables included in X_i , including their category options:

- » **Student sex**³
 - “male”
 - “female”
- » **Student Hispanic ethnicity**
 - “not Hispanic”
 - “Hispanic”
- » **Parental education**
 - “Did not graduate high school”
 - “Graduated from high school”
 - “Attended college but did not complete four-year degree”
 - “Graduated from college”
 - “Don’t know”
- » **Student grade (ranging from grade 6 to grade 12)**
- » **School district**

While we did include each student’s grade and school district as controls, we have not included related regression coefficients in Table A1 for the sake of brevity. In Table A1, for each variable in each model, we depict coefficients followed by robust standard errors in parentheses. By “robust standard errors,” we simply mean that we calculated standard errors by clustering at the level of the school each student attended. This accounts for the possibility that students within a given school were more similar to one another than students from separate schools. Table A1 also depicts both the “unadjusted” intercept (or the estimated value of the outcome when all predictors are set to 0) and the “functional” intercept (or the estimated value of the outcome when “exposure to restorative practices” is set to 0 and all other variables are set to mean values). Table A1 provides the number of students in each model as well as the number of schools they attended (and therefore the number of school clusters utilized to calculate standard errors). Finally, the table provides the r^2 value, which indicates the proportion of the variation in the outcome that is predicted by our model.

Importantly, in Figure 1 and in the related text of the report, we discussed the suspension measure in terms of percentage points. We did this for ease of readability. However, because the actual measure is a dichotomous (0-1) measure, our models are best understood as the predicted probability of suspension for a given type of student, conditional on student characteristics. In short, the “range” of our discipline measure in the report is 0%-100%, but our range in the appendix is 0-1.

³ While ideally our data would include information beyond a sex or gender binary, data in CHKS unfortunately does not capture more precise information about student sex or gender.

Returning to the contents of Table A1, the functional intercept provides an easy means of calculating the estimated value of any outcome at any given level of restorative practice exposure for students of various racial groups. To do so, one need only look to the correct model, take the functional intercept, and add the desired level of restorative practice exposure multiplied by the relevant coefficient. For example, to estimate the probability that a Black student with a restorative exposure score of “1” would experience a suspension in the prior 30-day period, we simply look at model 2 (outcome: discipline; students: Black), take the functional intercept (0.103), and subtract one times the coefficient (-0.0187). This indicates that in our models, we predicted that among Black students with the minimum level of restorative practice exposure (a score of “1”), a proportion of 0.084 (or 8.4%) will experience a suspension. Using the same method, we predicted that among Black students with the maximum level of exposure to restorative practices (“5”), a proportion of 0.009 (or less than 1%) will experience a suspension. We can repeat the same process for White students to estimate the proportion of White students who would experience suspensions, conditional on their level of restorative practice exposure.

In Figure 1 of the report, we showed estimated levels of the Black-White discipline gap conditional on restorative practice exposure. We calculated this value by taking the estimated proportion of Black students suspended at any given level of restorative practice exposure and subtracting the estimated proportion of White students suspended at the same level of restorative practice exposure. So, for example, as noted above, we estimated that among Black students with the lowest level of exposure to restorative practices, a proportion of 0.084 (or 8.4%) would experience a suspension. Looking to Model 3 and using the same approach, we can estimate that among White students with the lowest level of exposure to restorative practices, a proportion of 0.034 (or 3.4%) will be suspended. So, we can estimate that for students with the lowest level of restorative practice exposure, the Black-White discipline disparity is 0.050. Using the same method, we estimated that among students with the highest level of restorative practice exposure, the disparity is 0.011, or about five times smaller.

For Figure 2 of the report, we simply depicted the estimated GPA as a function of students' levels of restorative practice exposure. As with Figure 1, to reproduce our estimates, one need only look to the appropriate model, take the functional intercept, and add the relevant coefficient multiplied by the level of restorative practice exposure. So, for example, looking at Model 8, we estimated the GPA of Black students with the minimum level of exposure to restorative practices to be $2.29 + 0.14 \times 1 = 2.43$ (a “C+ average”); and we estimated the GPA of Black students with the maximum level of restorative practice exposure to be $2.29 + 0.14 \times 5 = 3.00$ (a “B average”).

Table A1 provides all estimates used to generate Figure 1 and Figure 2 in the report. It also includes models related to American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic students.

Table A1. Regression models predicting disciplinary experiences and academic achievement, based on exposure to restorative practices and student-, parent-, and district-level controls

Outcome	Discipline		
	All	Black	White
Student race:			
Model number:	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Exposure to restorative practices	-0.0113*** (0.0004)	-0.0187*** (0.0019)	-0.0090*** (0.0006)
Hispanic ethnicity	0.0015** (0.0005)	0.0185*** (0.0048)	-0.0017 (0.0010)
Female	-0.0081*** (0.0004)	-0.0072* (0.0028)	-0.0086*** (0.0006)
Parent education (reference: Did not graduate HS)			
Graduated HS	-0.0058*** (0.0009)	-0.0282*** (0.0064)	-0.0071*** (0.0018)
Did not complete college	-0.0073*** (0.0009)	-0.0372*** (0.006)	-0.0092*** (0.0018)
Graduated from college	-0.0117*** (0.0009)	-0.0406*** (0.0062)	-0.0148*** (0.0018)
Student grade	--	--	--
Student district	--	--	--
Intercept	0.0881	0.2230	0.0720
Functional intercept	0.0543	0.1017	0.0427
n (students)	475,940	22,332	133,888
n (schools)	1,227	1,033	1,199
r ²	0.0168	0.0645	0.0146

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Outcome	Discipline		
	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic
Student race:			
Model number:	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Exposure to restorative practices	-0.0143*** (0.0018)	-0.0067*** (0.0008)	-0.0123*** (0.0005)
Hispanic ethnicity	0.0104** (0.0038)	0.0223*** (0.0031)	
Female	-0.0085*** (0.0025)	-0.0044*** (0.0008)	-0.0081*** (0.0006)
Parent education (reference: Did not graduate HS)			
Graduated HS	-0.0070* (0.0035)	-0.0077*** (0.0021)	-0.0049*** (0.0009)
Did not complete college	-0.0065 (0.0043)	-0.0057* (0.0024)	-0.0069*** (0.0010)
Graduated from college	-0.0064 (0.0038)	-0.0082*** (0.0021)	-0.0075*** (0.0009)
Student grade	--	--	--
Student district	--	--	--
Intercept	0.0528	0.0961	0.1075
Functional intercept	0.0685	0.0311	0.0590
n (students)	15,923	54,155	248,173
n (schools)	1,059	974	1,212
r²	0.0362	0.0517	0.0192

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Outcome	Academic Achievement		
	All	Black	White
Student race:	All	Black	White
Model number:	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9
Exposure to restorative practices	0.16*** (0.002)	0.14*** (0.007)	0.16*** (0.003)
Hispanic ethnicity	-0.19*** (0.006)	-0.09*** (0.017)	-0.06*** (0.007)
Female	0.22*** (0.003)	0.21*** (0.012)	0.23*** (0.004)
Parent education (reference: Did not graduate HS)			
Graduated HS	0.092*** (0.005)	0.215*** (0.025)	0.1*** (0.01)
Did not complete college	0.202*** (0.007)	0.321*** (0.029)	0.243*** (0.012)
Graduated from college	0.406*** (0.008)	0.471*** (0.028)	0.469*** (0.011)
Student grade	--	--	--
Student district	--	--	--
Intercept	2.46	1.73	2.39
Functional intercept	2.46	2.29	2.61
n (students)	757,244	32,771	220,480
n (schools)	1,465	1,250	1,438
r²	0.152	0.1213	0.1551

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Outcome	Academic Achievement		
Student race:	American Indian	Asian	Hispanic
Model number:	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12
Exposure to restorative practices	0.13*** (0.008)	0.11*** (0.004)	0.16*** (0.003)
Hispanic ethnicity	-0.10*** (0.019)	-0.26*** (0.016)	
Female	0.23*** (0.012)	0.17*** (0.007)	0.22*** (0.004)
Parent education (reference: Did not graduate HS)			
Graduated HS	0.09*** (0.019)	0.14*** (0.015)	0.10*** (0.006)
Did not complete college	0.17*** (0.023)	0.17*** (0.017)	0.21*** (0.007)
Graduated from college	0.28*** (0.021)	0.33*** (0.017)	0.35*** (0.009)
Student grade	--	--	--
Student district	--	--	--
Intercept	2.87	2.62	2.23
Functional intercept	2.33	3.06	2.28
n (students)	24,686	87,964	389,269
n (schools)	1,286	1,172	1,446
r²	0.1074	0.1491	0.0908

* indicates $p < .05$, ** indicates $p < .01$, and *** indicates $p < .001$.

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