A Restorative Approach for Equitable Education

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Abstract

The compounding effects of systemic racism and the coronavirus pandemic have posed significant challenges to students, practitioners, and schools, particularly for Black and Latinx students who have borne the brunt of structural inequities. But these events have also created an opportunity for educational leaders to rethink school structures to better address the needs and nurture the assets of young people in the short and long term. This brief describes how schools can ameliorate—rather than exacerbate—racial inequities with research-based practices that advance a restorative approach to schooling and make learning environments more supportive, equitable, and anti-racist.

Introduction

The events of 2020 and 2021 have rocked our country to its core and made plain the long-standing racism and deep structural inequities that undergird all aspects of U.S. society. The police shootings of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks, among others, have triggered uprisings across the nation and have reinvigorated calls for police reform, including the removal of police in schools, and an end to the criminalization and dehumanization of Black and Indigenous communities as well as other people of color.

The COVID-19 pandemic that has upended nearly all aspects of daily life has exacted a particularly devastating toll on the same communities that acutely bear the brunt of systemic racism and its felt effects. Because of long-standing structural inequities, these communities have greater infection and mortality rates, higher unemployment, more housing and food instability, and less access to technology and the internet—essential tools for learning, as well as many aspects of daily life.

These multiple and ongoing crises are contributing to a collective and individual trauma that has deep implications for the mental health, wellness, and opportunities to learn for youth across the nation. They are also causing many to reflect on our traditional way of "doing school." This includes both holding a mirror to how educational systems have contributed to societal inequities and shifting increased attention to the essential role that trusting relationships and school-based supports play in creating the conditions necessary for students to learn and thrive.

As school and district leaders rethink school structures and practices for both the short and long term, their work should be grounded in two essential questions: How can we address the acute needs of young people and adults who continue to grapple with the dual impacts

of COVID-19 and systemic racism? And how can we take this moment to advance long-needed changes to transform schools into nurturing communities that are committed to equity, diversity, and anti-racism?

Advancing Equity Through a Restorative Approach to School

While the current moment is wrought with crises and difficult reflections, it also presents significant opportunities for schools to reimagine and redesign their structures and practices to pave a more equitable path forward. Redesigning schools so that they are restorative spaces—environments where young people are known, nurtured, and healed—is a key way that schools can embody more equitable approaches to meet students' immediate and long-term needs.

Restorative approaches are a central dimension of a whole child approach to education, which recognizes and attends to the unique strengths, needs, and interests of students. Based in the science of learning and development, restorative approaches support students' academic, cognitive, and social-emotional growth; their physical and mental health and well-being; and the promotion of their distinct individual identities. Restorative approaches also recognize the long-standing inequities present in both schools and society and are grounded in ameliorating those inequities by building safe, inclusive learning environments where consistent, caring relationships can thrive and every young person is valued and affirmed.

This brief is the first in a series of publications that will explore ways schools can adopt more equitable and restorative approaches. It provides an overview of essential practices for building safe, inclusive learning environments that meet learners' acute needs, while nurturing their healthy development and success. Future briefs will dive deeper into these practices, including identity-safe school environments, culturally responsive pedagogy, restorative discipline practices and policies, and relationship-centered schools.

Building Safe, Inclusive School Environments

Safe, supportive learning environments—where students feel a sense of belonging and where relational trust prevails—are the foundation of a restorative approach to education, whether in person, online, or in a blended model.[1] Research emerging from the science of learning and development shows that positive, supportive relationships build strong brain structure and buffer against adverse experiences.[2] Stable, caring relationships with teachers and other adults are also linked to better school performance and engagement.[3] Even one stable relationship with a committed adult can help buffer a child from the effects of serious adversity.[4]

Authentic relationship building requires dedicated time and space for students and practitioners to engage and for educators to learn about students' unique experiences away from school. Restorative structures, such as advisory systems, support community building and relationships and provide consistent opportunities for teachers to check in on students' academic, social-emotional, and mental health needs and connect them to appropriate supports. Staff development is also essential to creating learning environments that are physically and psychologically safe and that can also provide engaging learning experiences that foster curiosity and cognitive growth. The impact of COVID-19 on under-resourced communities also amplifies the need for states, districts, and schools to challenge the biases and discriminatory policies that hold students back.

Leveraging Advisories to Deepen Relationships

UCLA Community School, which began the 2020–21 school year with remote learning, leveraged its high school advisory system to foster deeper relationships and build community among teachers, students, and families. In the first week of school, all students and teachers began and ended their day in their advisory class, which consists of a small group of students—organized by grade level—and a single teacher who stay together for at least one academic year. At UCLA Community School and in schools around the country, advisories create an in-school "family" of sorts, providing a home base for students and a single point of contact when family members have questions and concerns.[5]

During advisory, students engaged in activities designed to help their classmates and teacher get to know them and their interests. For example, they created a Zoom background representing "who they are as a person," including three images or symbols to represent their interests. Students then shared their personalized backgrounds with their advisory. Students also watched a TED Talk by novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie called *The Danger of a Single Story*, which became the basis for an advisory discussion; a writing assignment ("What are the "single stories" people have about you?"); and a sharing out to build community and understanding.

Between the bookend advisory periods, teachers spent the first week in one-to-one conversations with families of each of their students to build relationships and to share information and resources. Explained high school lead teacher Robert Ly, "Feedback and communication will strengthen not only the student–teacher relationship, but it will also improve the parent–teacher relationship."[6]

With the disruption of an already inequitable school system, we have the opportunity to rebuild in ways that create a long-lasting transformation of educational experiences, enabling all students to learn in safe, inclusive, and supportive environments. To achieve this, we must invest in culturally responsive teacher training, reduce discriminatory discipline policies, and provide tools and personnel to meet students' diverse needs.

Invest in Adult Capacity to Develop Cultural Responsiveness and Create Identity-Safe, Affirming Learning Environments

To build strong relationships and safe, supportive learning environments, teachers must understand, value, and build upon the cultures, identities, and experiences of students and their families.[7] This includes understanding and acknowledging biases that may negatively affect how they view and treat their students and the students' caretakers, based on race, ethnicity, language background, gender, sexual orientation, or income. This implicit bias is particularly felt among Black students, who often are taught by teachers with racial backgrounds that do not match their own. On average, non-Black teachers of Black students have significantly lower expectations than Black teachers, interact with Black students less positively than with white students, and are more likely to label them "troublemakers."[8]

Though many teachers enter the profession with the best intentions, holding these implicit biases can lead to social-identity threat, in which students feel stigmatized and attacked based on their identities. Students experiencing threats to their identities in school, including stereotyping, may feel less capable or less worthy, which can lead to negative self-perceptions and impaired performance.[9] Anti-racist and culturally responsive

training can support teachers and school leaders to recognize the conscious and unconscious biases that can lead to segregated tracking systems, disproportionate disciplinary actions, inauthentic family engagement, and inequitable access to extracurricular opportunities.

Anti-racist educators value and respect the abilities and humanity of their Black, Indigenous, and other students of color and see and elevate their potential. They also take a holistic approach to seeing where inequities occur throughout the school, including teaching and learning practices, staff demographics, definitions and measures of student and teacher success, school and district policies, resource allocation, and teacher opportunities for growth and leadership, and they commit to developing and growing their critical consciousness. Educators who are aware of existing inequities and stereotype threats can affirm and convey confidence in their students and families, hold high expectations, and provide them with needed supports.[10]

Culturally responsive educators also view the experiences of students and families through an asset-based lens. This includes, for example, elevating students' voices in the classroom, providing materials and activities that draw upon students' knowledge and cultures, building upon students' experiences, and promoting equity.[11] Such teachers learn about their students' communities and develop strong connections with students' families and larger social networks. These ties can be sustained through check-ins and class meetings; conferencing; journaling; close observations of students; and consistent, positive communication with students' families, including through home visits.

Building Trust Through Home Visits

Throughout the country, school communities and school districts are implementing Parent Teacher Home Visits, a model of home visits developed in 1998 in Sacramento, CA. Developed by families and teachers, the model includes five core practices designed to foster deeper understanding and relationships of trust between educators and families. These include: (1) arranging visits in advance and keeping them voluntary for families and teachers; (2) providing training for teachers and compensating them for visits outside of their school day; (3) avoiding targeting of specific students for home visits so there is no stigma associated with them; (4) conducting visits in pairs, so educators can debrief following the visits; and (5) focusing the first visit on relationship building.

More than 700 communities in 27 states and the District of Columbia have adopted this model of home visiting, one of the cornerstones of which is creating the time and space for educators and families to share their "hopes and dreams" for a student. Visits occur in students' homes (or another off-campus location, if families prefer).

The core practices of the Parent Teacher Home Visits model have been found to contribute to shifts in mindsets of both educators and families.[12] Many educators, for example, reported recognizing and shifting deficit assumptions (such as believing families who do not come to school do not care about their children's education). Parents, for their part, realized interactions with educators did not have to be negative and gained confidence in their interactions with their children's teachers.[13]

In particular, the study found that centering a visit on "hopes and dreams" creates an opportunity for positive interaction and for educators and families to see their shared interest in the student's success, laying the groundwork for future partnership and—in many cases—shifting preconceptions of educators

and families alike. This low-stakes interaction also contrasts with the experience of many families interviewed for the study, for whom interactions with school "were often focused on negative topics or [left them] feeling judged."[14] Meeting outside of school—most often in students' homes—also removed the power differential that often exists in a typical meeting on a school campus, where the educator is viewed as in charge or the expert.

A separate study of the same districts found that students who received a home visit were less likely to be chronically absent from school and more likely to score proficient on the standardized English language arts (ELA) test. According to the study, "attending a school systematically implementing home visits was associated with 35% higher odds of scoring proficient on standardized ELA assessments compared with attending a school that did not systematically implement home visits."[15]

Connecting Across Distance

Nick Bua, a teacher at Monterey Trail High School in the Elk Grove Unified School District in Sacramento, CA, conducted home visits with families in spring 2020 as part of a districtwide effort. "As a teacher, it has been pretty transformative for me to do these home visits," said Bua. "When you get into the home of a family and you learn their full story and you step into their lives and their world, it really changes how you see that student in the classroom, and it changes what that phone call home is like." Bua said the relationships developed through home visits were especially valuable when his school shifted to distance learning.[16]

Last spring, when COVID-19 forced schools to shift to distance learning, Bua was among the first teachers in the country to begin conducting virtual home visits. Parent Teacher Home Visits is now offering training for teachers throughout the United States in virtual "bridge" home visits, designed to connect families and educators across distance.

Replace Discriminatory Discipline Policies With Restorative Approaches and Social-Emotional Learning

The harsh discipline practices and over-policing of Black and Indigenous students and other marginalized groups that occurs in many schools have also undermined the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments. Disproportionalities in suspension and expulsion rates between students of color and their white peers appear as early as preschool and continue throughout the pre-k through 12th grades.[17] These punitive, exclusionary punishments are particularly inflicted on Black youth, who often receive harsher punishments for minor offenses and are more than twice as likely as white students to receive a referral to law enforcement or be subject to a school-related arrest.[18]

Students of color are more likely to attend schools employing law enforcement officers but no school counselor.[19] Middle and high schools where Black students comprise the demographic majority are also more likely to have security staff but not mental health providers, further reflecting what is often called the "school-to-prison pipeline" that places schools among the web of institutions and practices that contribute to the criminalization of Black youth. For many Black students and other students of color, the presence of police officers in their schools poses a physical and psychological threat in a place that should be supportive and

welcoming.[20] The long-standing racial disparities in school discipline and lack of available supports for students have been at the core of calls for police-free schools that have gained momentum in the wake of protests against police killings. During the spring and summer of 2020, several school districts across the country voted to remove police from school campuses, and many others have taken the issue under consideration.

The coronavirus pandemic has introduced new concerns about the use of exclusionary discipline policies. The mix of lost instructional time, the emotional toll of the pandemic and the nation's racial reckoning, and the added pressures of adjusting to new routines in person or virtually have created new stresses for students and teachers. Many fear this will lead to more students acting out, and with teachers and schools stretched to their limits, it could mean a greater rush to discipline students instead of providing the social and emotional support they need.[21] For example, Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, FL, instituted a mask-wearing policy for in-person learning, which can lead to increasingly harsh penalties for students caught without one, including being barred from attending school, while several North Texas school districts adopted disciplinary action for sneezing or coughing in someone's direction, if deemed intentional. Students attending virtually must also contend with the threat of exclusionary discipline (e.g., being locked out of online classrooms) for not following the school's dress code, eating or drinking or getting up during class, cyberbullying, or purposely disturbing class. With so many students feeling disengaged from their teachers and peers, using exclusion as punishment, instead of getting to the root causes of misbehavior, may exacerbate the stress and trauma young people currently face.

As schools and districts move away from punitive discipline policies and practices, it is critical that funds are invested in restorative practices and social and emotional learning that can eliminate racial discipline disparities and provide teachers and students with more proactive, evidence-based solutions for supporting positive behavior. Restorative practices replace punitive, coercive, and exclusionary disciplinary approaches with proactive development of community caring, coping mechanisms, and conflict-resolution skills that help students develop empathy for one another and an understanding of their own behavior. Such practices result in fewer and less racially disparate suspensions and expulsions, fewer disciplinary referrals, improved school climate, higher-quality teacher–student relationships, and improved academic achievement across elementary and secondary classrooms.[22]

Social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools—a key element of restorative practice—has shown results in supporting positive student behaviors and self-perception.[23] It is important to note, however, that SEL programming must be culturally affirming, and not another form of policing Black and Brown students. This often happens when SEL is used as a mechanism for schools to regulate student behavior and conform to cultural and gender norms and values, instead of encouraging students to exercise agency and interrogate systems of oppression. To avoid this, schools should look to take a transformative approach to SEL that is grounded in a social justice framework and orients traditional SEL competencies (e.g., self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills) as a means to critically examine racial inequities and transform systems of oppression in schools, communities, and the broader social system.[24]

Provide Tools and Personnel to Understand and Support the Diverse Needs of Students

Alongside transitions to restorative practices and social and emotional learning supports, educators must have tools to understand students' strengths and needs in order to create learning environments for students that are safe and inclusive. Schools can implement universal assessments for social, emotional, and behavioral

health issues when school begins, and again in the winter and spring, to monitor students and connect them to needed supports.[25] Some states, including Louisiana and North Dakota, advised schools to use universal assessment tools (e.g., teacher, parent, and student self-reports through interviews, rating scales, and surveys) in their school reopening guidance.[26]

Developmentally appropriate assessments of students' SEL competencies can also be used to learn more about the social and emotional assets and felt needs students bring with them to the classroom, as well as to understand the effectiveness of SEL programs. Teachers can use the results of SEL assessments to determine students' strengths and provide more personalized instruction to support the growth of new competencies. SEL assessments should be used universally to improve teaching and learning, and not as a punitive accountability measure.

Many states and districts already use school climate surveys to evaluate student, family, and teacher experiences within a school community—an important first step.[27] To understand students' unique situations and better meet their needs, climate surveys and other measures of students' experiences in school should be disaggregated by race, gender, English learner status, economic background, and other traits. This allows staff to understand if disparate treatment or experiences are occurring and to take steps to address what may be the result of implicit bias and flag the need for particular strategies to support students in various circumstances.

Teachers can be trained to use data from these assessments and surveys, but they alone cannot provide the identified supports and interventions students may need. Students need access to counselors and mental health personnel who are trained to work with young people and respond to the root cause of behavior. Schools can invest in holistic integrated student support systems—school-based approaches to supporting students' success that secure and coordinate supports that target academic and nonacademic barriers to achievement. Integrated student support counselors or coordinators can help connect students and families to the appropriate services and serve as an essential link between schools, families, and communities.

Survey Supports for Understanding Students' Experiences and Needs

Surveys are a valuable tool for understanding how students are experiencing school and informing strategies and practices to better support both their academic needs and their overall health and well-being.

In spring 2020, for example, a national online survey by YouthTruth made plain the incredible void that was created in students' lives as school shifted to distance learning. The daily comfort of being with friends and feeling part of a school community were two of the biggest losses felt by the more than 20,000 young people who responded to the survey.

Conducted in May and June of 2020, the survey explored students' experiences across nine areas: COVID Effect, School Logistics, Learning Experience, Engagement (including focus and motivation), Relationships, Belonging, College and Career Readiness, Obstacles to Learning, and Health and Well-Being. The results underscore the academic and the social-emotional challenges students experienced as "school" as they knew it came to a sudden stop. A full 70% of respondents reported one or more obstacles to learning,

including distractions at home; feeling depressed, stressed, or anxious; lack of adult help; and personal health issues. Students also described logistical barriers and responsibilities at home as obstacles to learning. Black and Latinx students reported a heavier "obstacle load" than white or Asian students.

Although a majority of students reported that relationships with their teachers improved slightly during distance learning, they overwhelmingly expressed a diminished sense of belonging with their school community and the loss of connections with friends. One student respondent noted, "It feels a little lonely when you are at home and doing all of the things you used to do at school, but without friends. The support numbers on the back of our ID don't really help. You don't really want to talk to someone that you barely know. You need your own friends."

The North Clackamas School District in Milwaukie, OR, is one of the school districts around the country whose students participated in YouthTruth's *Students Weighed In: Learning and Well-Being During COVID-19*. The responses from local students informed both summer offerings and the district's reopening plans in the fall, according to Dr. Shelly Reggiani, Executive Director of Equity and Instructional Services. Based on student feedback, for example, the district expanded access to telehealth services so students and families would have access to mental health supports over the summer. For the first time, the district also provided meals 7 days a week over the summer.

As the district was planning for fall 2020, Reggiani said the district is "really centering on a culture of care [and] really centering on embracing students' identity and how they are experiencing learning." Use of student surveys, she added, builds empathy and understanding among district staff. "It is a gift to know what our students are living and what they're experiencing and [we] honor that by amplifying their voice through the decisions that we make."[28]

Meeting the Equity Challenge Through Restorative Schooling

The science of learning and development tells us that U.S. schools and districts can implement structures and approaches that help students develop their voices and full identities while providing protections and support that mitigate the impact of adverse circumstances. Schools and districts can begin by developing teachers so that they enact culturally responsive and anti-racist pedagogy; replace harsh, discriminatory discipline policies with restorative practices; and provide tools and personnel to understand and support students' holistic needs.

These practices advance a restorative approach to schooling that can increase equity in U.S. schools and improve their ability to become spaces where students and educators heal from the trauma and disconnection that the coronavirus pandemic and heightened attention to racial injustice have caused. These approaches, which align with a whole child vision of education, can support students through challenges while tapping into the resilience and agency that many young people have developed as they have persisted through difficulties, made their voices heard, and exercised leadership in calls and demonstrations for racial justice. It is up to state and local education leaders to meet this challenge to ensure that every young person receives the benefits of a supportive learning environment.

Endnotes

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