

The Future of School Social Work: Providing Leadership Through Restorative Justice Coordination

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Abstract: *As the use of restorative practices in schools spreads across the country, school social workers are increasingly asked to take a leadership role in responding restoratively to wrongdoing and conflict and coaching teachers and administrators in restorative practices. Because of their understanding of the importance of relationships and relevant skills and training, social workers are a well-positioned to lead restorative justice implementation efforts. In order to fill this role, we argue that social workers need a specific training on restorative justice practices relevant to their work and educational background. This article reviews the existing literature on the role of social workers in implementing restorative practices in schools and provides an overview of the method and findings of a study investigating what a restorative justice training specific to social workers would involve. A summary of the resulting recommended curriculum is also provided. The conclusion explores the importance of this study and suggests areas for further research.*

Key Words: Restorative Justice, Restorative Practices, Schools, Social Work

INTRODUCTION

Restorative justice is increasingly used in schools as an alternative to punitive measures such as suspension and expulsion. A restorative approach in a school shifts the emphasis from managing behavior to focusing on the building, nurturing and repairing of relationships. (Hopkins, 2003, p. 3)

By bringing those involved in an incident of misconduct or conflict together to discuss what happened, the harm caused, and what can be done to repair that harm and make things right, the restorative justice process provides an opportunity for the emergence of understanding, empathy, and community healing. This paradigm shift to focus on the impact on relationships and repairing those relationships rather than rules and punishment has resulted in very positive outcomes in schools including increased graduation rates, higher rates of attendance, and improved

school performance. Repairing relationships is crucial because the teacher-student relationship in particular is key to student success (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). Restorative justice also works to eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline caused by students of color being disciplined more often and more harshly than their white peers (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

Often, schools look to the social worker to take the lead in implementing restorative justice. This is because social workers are often already the go-to people for responding to student behavior problems. Additionally, the prior training of these social workers in education in strengths-based approaches, social inequalities, respectful communication, and cultural humility provides a wealth of applicable skills in the facilitation and integration of restorative practices. Despite this natural fit, very little research has been done on the role of social workers in implementing restorative justice in schools. This paper explores what a restorative justice training specific to social workers would involve and proposes a tailored curriculum. As restorative practices continue to spread in schools, this research provides a valuable launching point for more intentional and specific training of social workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite social workers in schools being increasingly called upon to take a leadership role in implementing restorative practices, there is very little presence of restorative practices in social work education. Restorative practices have been relatively well-established in sociology and criminal justice curricula since the mid-1990s, but other human service disciplines, including social work, have been slower to adopt them. More recently, there has been greater advocacy for the inclusion of restorative justice in social work curriculum (Geske, 2005; van Wormer, 2006; Roche, 2006; Britto and Reimund, 2013).

Gumz and Grant (2009) completed a systematic review of the social work literature and described a scarcity of practice orientation and principles related to restorative practices among social work practitioners and educators. Ever since this study was completed a decade ago, our search of the research literature showed a lack of published studies regarding the use of restorative approaches by social workers in education.

Efforts to move social workers into the school setting continue to gain momentum as public and private school administrators seek solutions to complex student issues, including managing student behavior and disciplinary practices. Few professionals within the school leadership structure are better equipped with the requisite skillsets and training than social workers to assess students' bio-psycho-social and environmental needs. Social work has a strong alignment in values with restorative practices (Commins, 2016) and many social workers are interested in restorative practices as a way to increase student well-being. However, there is limited research and a lack of tailored training opportunities. This study endeavored to fill this gap by exploring how social workers could be trained to lead the implementation of restorative justice principles and practices in educational settings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken using an appreciative inquiry (Cram 2010) approach and involved asking the following questions: (1) What is going well with the existing professional development?, (2) What would professional development and curriculum specifically for social workers implementing restorative practices in educational settings look like?, and (3) What steps

can be taken to revise the existing professional development training to meet the needs of social workers?

In line with the appreciative inquiry approach, first, the existing research-based professional development training (Cavanagh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014) was acknowledged. The curriculum for this training consisted of the following 16 modules: the importance of relationships, basic principles of restorative practices, collegial relationships, teacher-student relationships, community circles, restorative conversations, restorative circles, brief restorative assessments, classroom conference circles, pre-conferences, conferences, agreements, stages of implementation, blending together current practices with restorative justice, culturally sustainable restorative practices, and developing an action plan. This existing curriculum was used as a starting point to envision a revised curriculum that would meet the specific needs of social workers in charge of leading coordination and implementation of restorative practices in schools. The decision was made to make observations of what people said and did during the training that might be informative in revising the training to meet the needs of social workers who are employed by and work in schools.

Observations were made in January of 2017 during the facilitation of this professional development training with social workers who worked for a nonprofit agency in New York. Observation data in this study were analyzed separately by two researchers and themes were identified using an inductive approach (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The resultant themes were evaluated for continuity and agreed upon by both researchers.

FINDINGS

Observation data in this study were analyzed separately by two researchers and themes were identified using an inductive approach (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The resultant two themes were evaluated for continuity and agreed upon by both researchers. The quotes included in the discussion about themes were recorded as field notes during the observations.

THEME ONE: PARALLELS BETWEEN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND SOCIAL WORK PRINCIPLES

Social workers are trained to work from a strengths-based position when interacting with other people (Murphy & Sparks, 2018). However, a training participant said, “We are rewarding people more than we are focusing on what people are doing wrong.” These social workers realize that disciplining based on rules and punishment does not change behavior. In the training the participants attended, the idea of affirmative inquiry was emphasized (Patton, 2003). The idea is based on building on what is going well to create an action plan that will help people move forward towards the ideal.

People involved in restorative justice and social work are concerned with inequalities related to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. Several participants agreed when one participant made this statement, “Schools have a lack of accountability.” With regard to school discipline the concern is focused on accountability for discriminatory discipline policies and practices that result in students of color being disciplined more often and more harshly, resulting in some of these students becoming involved with social services and/or in the school-to-prison pipeline (Cavanagh, 2009).

Also, people involved in restorative justice and social work emphasize the use of “I” statements when talking about problems as a technique for improving communication (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2012). In this way, they talk about their feelings and thoughts, rather than speaking for

someone else. One participant said, “Everyone uses ‘I’ statements and makes sure to say ‘from my perspective.’”

Finally, social workers believe that people need to have agency, that is, people need to have the opportunity to make their own choices. As one participant noted, ““We have to remember values of people we are helping and not force anything upon them.” A primary value of restorative justice is that people must participate in restorative practices freely and voluntarily. One participant said, “as social workers, we need to get out of our own way. We are often making problems worse. We need to mine the family and youth resources—what skills and capabilities do they already have?”

THEME TWO: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative justice in schools is focused on relationships, specifically, the proactive building and maintaining of them and reactively healing the harm to them as a result of wrongdoing and conflict. One participant explained, “Kids will not listen to you unless they know you and have a relationship and trust you.” An important focus is on how harm to relationships is healed, with the objective being to ensure that the wrongdoing or conflict causing the harm does not happen again.

The focus of restorative justice principles and practices training is on teachers because the goal is to keep children, particularly children of color, in the classroom where they are learning. One observer entered this field note, “There is confusion about teacher and student relationships rather than social worker and client.” Social workers need to be aware of the importance of teacher-student relationships. The research is clear that the teacher-student relationship is the key to student success (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). Thus, the training of social workers needs to focus on building the capacity of teachers to utilize restorative practices in the classroom to build relationships proactively and address problems related to wrongdoing and conflict reactively.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CURRICULUM

Based on the research findings, the professional development curriculum was revised to fill the specific needs of social workers in schools. Each of the 16 modules was revised to more directly serve the educational needs of social workers leading restorative justice implementation in schools. The training builds on their pre-existing skills and education to provide what they need to fulfill this important leadership role.

The revised curriculum supports social workers in building teachers’ understanding of the importance of building positive relationships in the classroom and a student-focused approach. When relationships are prioritized, there are significantly fewer disruptions, resulting in more time for learning. Social workers are tasked with supporting teachers in increasing their capacity to build positive relationships and repair relationships following wrongdoing or conflict. Restorative practices provide the tools (including the circle, restorative conversation, restorative assessment, and restorative justice conference) to do this important work.

Social workers will also be trained to serve as restorative justice facilitators in their schools. Social workers are well suited to facilitation work because they know how to create a space for people to tell their story and share their feelings, and how to listen rather than immediately responding. These are essential attributes in an effective facilitator. They will also be trained to be leaders in developing and implementing an action plan for restorative culture change, creating a Culture of Care.

CONCLUSION

The curriculum developed through this study has the potential to better support social workers as they increasingly take on the leadership role in implementing restorative practices and building the capacity of teachers and administrators to respond restoratively to wrongdoing and conflict in schools.

This paper is intended to begin the conversation about how to better support and train social workers fulfilling this important leadership role. The next step is to implement the curriculum developed as a professional development course for social workers in education. Feedback and evaluations will guide further revision of the 16-module course. Further insight could be gained through interviewing social workers who are already in the role of Restorative Justice Coordinator about their experience and needs in assuming leadership of restorative practices implementation in their communities.

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