
Restorative Justice in NYC High Schools

Perceived Impact and Mixed Findings from a Randomized Controlled Trial

By Lama Hassoun Ayoub, Lina Villegas, Elise Jensen, and Andrew Martinez

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I. Introduction

Over the past several years, a growing number of schools across the United States have begun embracing restorative justice approaches to respond to and prevent school-based conflict, bullying, and violence. This turn represents a marked departure from a decades-long national trend of punitive school discipline, characterized by increased reliance on “zero-tolerance” policies; exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspension, expulsion); securitization, including police, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras; and persistent racial inequities in school discipline (Cruz et al. 2021; Losen & Martinez 2013; Monahan & Torres 2010).

Amidst mounting evidence and advocacy decrying the harmful, discriminatory, and ineffective nature of such policies, restorative justice (RJ) has been promoted as a more humane and just approach than punitive discipline (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008). Founded and influenced by practices of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and New Zealand (Ortega et al. 2016; McCaslin 2005), restorative justice is an approach that emphasizes attending to root causes of conflict; addressing harm; and fostering relationships, empathic dialogue, and community accountability (Fronius et al. 2019; Morrison 2015; Zehr 2015).

With a focus on prioritizing relationships and underlying causes of conflict, restorative justice in schools involves drawing from a range of practices including various forms of circles (e.g., for building community, addressing harm, providing support, facilitating reentry); mediation; informal one-on-one conversations; and mental health support, among other practices (Sandwick et al. 2019). Often, multiple strategies are used in combination to respond to a given situation or school setting (Evans & Vaandering 2016; González 2015; Sasson et al. 2021).

In addition to building and nurturing healthy relationships across the school community, repairing harm, and addressing violence and conflict, RJ practitioners also work to improve racial and gender equity, strengthen social and emotional competencies, and create a supportive school environment (González 2015; Gregory & Clawson 2016; Sandwick et al. 2019). Scholars and practitioners have called for intentional anti-racist or racial justice frameworks to be integrated into restorative justice in schools to advance racial and intersectional equity and ensure that restorative practices are equitably applied (González et al. 2019; Payne & Welch 2015; Song & Swearer 2016; Watkins 2020).

The Present Study

The literature presents inconclusive results regarding the effectiveness of RJ in schools (Anyon et al. 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; González 2015; González et al. 2019). There is little uniformity in restorative justice implementation, although some key components of successful implementation (e.g., staff buy-in, resources) have been identified (Sandwick et al., 2019). Because no two schools are likely to implement restorative practices identically, evaluating them with scientific rigor—typically requiring large samples—has been inherently challenging. As such, randomized controlled trials of restorative justice in schools were virtually non-existent in 2015 (at the time the current study was proposed), and most existing research relied on qualitative, quasi-experimental or pre-post designs. The push for quantitative rigor resulted in the present study, a mixed method randomized controlled trial, along with other recently published or ongoing rigorous evaluations.

The restorative justice program in question aimed to improve school climate, strengthen relationships schoolwide, prevent and intervene in conflict, reduce incidents and suspensions, and enhance any existing restorative practices already in place. Restorative justice has the potential to reduce dependency on punitive measures (e.g., suspension) when an incident occurs at school. Additionally, given the priority placed on building community and providing mental health support, restorative justice may also reduce such incidents altogether, while creating a positive school climate. As such, the primary quantitative outcomes in this study were incident rates, suspension rates, and school climate¹. We hypothesized the following:

- Hypothesis 1: Students in the treatment group would have fewer incidents and suspensions than the control group.
- Hypothesis 2: Students in the treatment group would have fewer incidents and suspensions than the comparison group.
- Hypothesis 3: Students in all of District 18 would have fewer incidents and suspensions than the comparison group.
- Hypothesis 4: The treatment group would have a more positive school climate than the control group.

The current study includes a rigorous process evaluation, used to develop a detailed description of program implementation (Appendix B) as well as an analysis of perceptions of

¹ Although restorative justice often centers racial and gender equity, looking at equity measures was beyond the scope of this study. This study also did not include outcomes such as social-emotional skills or quality and quantity of relationships.

impact.² Key results from both the process and the outcome evaluation are presented in the next section of this report (Main Findings). The final section (Discussion) includes a summary of the key results and a discussion of study limitations and future directions for RJ practitioners and researchers.

Methods Overview

The restorative justice program implementation occurred during the 2017-2018 school year (Year 1), the 2018-2019 school year (Year 2), and the fall of 2019. The program continued in a more limited capacity throughout the 2019-2020 school year (Year 3) but was ultimately disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closings. The study primarily focused on Years 1 and 2, with some additional analyses for the outcome evaluation in the fall of Year 3 when possible.

Random Assignment

High schools in New York City's District 18 were eligible to participate in the study. As of 2016, there were a total of 14 high schools in the District. Four schools were deemed ineligible because they were involved in other research or other intensive programming efforts (e.g., restorative justice implementation by other agencies). Ultimately, ten schools across four campuses³ were randomly assigned to either the control group or the treatment group. Table 1 presents the characteristics of the schools.

² Additional publications focusing on other aspects of implementation documented through the process evaluation are forthcoming.

³ Many schools in New York City share a campus; that is, multiple high schools are located in a single building. Schools on shared campuses have separate principals, administrations, staff, and classes, but share an entrance, cafeteria, school safety agents, building emergency protocols, and metal detectors. For this study, three treatment schools were located on one campus. This campus also included a fourth school that was not part of the study. Two other treatment schools were located on another campus, also shared with two other schools, not part of the study. Four control schools were located on one campus and a fifth control school was in its own building, as a stand-alone school.

Comparison Schools Because the control schools received basic RJ training from the NYC Department of Education (DOE), we chose to include a set of matched comparison schools with no RJ training from nearby districts as a third study group. These schools, drawn from Districts 17 and 23, were systematically selected based on their characteristics (see Table 1). More information can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1. Treatment, Control, and Comparison Groups Differ in Baseline Incident and Suspension Rates

	Treatment	Control	Comparison
Number of Schools	5	5	9
Number of Students	1,778	1,424	2,369
Male	54%	55%	57%
Race/Ethnicity ¹			
Black	86%	86%	82%
Hispanic	10%	10%	13%
Student with a Disability	19%	21%	20%
Economically Disadvantaged	79%	76%	84%
Incident Rate (per 10 students) ²	2.7	1.9	2.0
Suspension Rate (per 10 students) ²	1.2	0.9	0.7

¹ White, Asian, Native American, and multi-racial students are less than 4% of the school population.

² Total Incidents and suspensions are divided by group population to calculate rates.

Restorative Justice Implementation in Treatment Schools

During Years 1, 2, and 3 (limited involvement), restorative justice activities were implemented across the five treatment high schools (see Appendix B for a detailed program description). These schools already had access to training and some coaching as part of the DOE’s broader restorative justice initiative, but also received additional RJ staffing support—one full-time RJ coordinator per school and three additional coordinators who rotated across the five schools. The coordinators did not have additional school responsibilities beyond leading the RJ programming in these schools. The program consisted primarily of two components: relationship-building circles and harm circles. To implement relationship-building circles, coordinators were integrated into the standard course schedule (e.g., during Advisory) and utilized a curriculum developed by the RJ team. Impromptu topics were also integrated based on student interest. The overall purpose of these circles was to build relationships through facilitated dialogue and activities. Harm circles convened students in response to conflict, with the aim of responding to specific incidents, such as student misbehavior. In addition to implementing circles, the coordinators also conducted training and provided individualized RJ coaching to school staff.

Evaluation

This evaluation includes both a rigorous process and outcome evaluation. The process evaluation was essential to describe and document the implementation, fidelity to the proposed model, challenges, and lessons learned. It included interviews, focus groups, observations, and collection of program data. Each aspect of the process evaluation involved a range of stakeholders, including students, teachers, and school administrators. Data were primarily collected at the five treatment schools; staff interviews and observations also occurred at the control schools, though to a lesser extent. A more detailed description of process evaluation methods can be found in Appendix A.

The outcome evaluation aimed to examine whether restorative justice programming was effective in (a) reducing incidents in treatment schools (as compared to control/comparison schools); (b) reducing the use of suspensions in treatment schools (as compared to control/comparison schools); and (c) influencing school climate. Further details on the study sample, key variables, and analytic strategy can be found in Appendix A.

II. Main Findings

Our main findings are presented in two sections: student and staff perceptions of impact, drawn from qualitative process evaluation data; and impact on key measures, drawn from NYC DOE administrative data.

Perceptions of Impact

This section presents results on the perceived impact of restorative justice, specifically relationship-building circles, harm circles, and mediations. Student focus groups and one-on-one staff interviews were conducted to better understand how students and staff perceived the impact of these activities during the second year of program implementation (see Appendix A for complete description of methods and Appendix B for a program description). Although interviews and focus groups involved a wide array of individuals in the school communities, qualitative results may be influenced by selection bias, favoring those more heavily involved in the program.

Relationship-building circles

Relationship-building circles are a practice that involves regular ongoing circles designed to promote a sense of community in schools. The staff and students we spoke with identified three ways in which relationship-building circles led to positive benefits for the schools and students, by: (1) building positive relationships within the school, (2) creating a space for students to cope with challenges and support one another, and (3) promoting social-emotional skills.

Building positive relationships Both students and staff reported that relationship-building circles helped to foster positive relationships within the school community. Specifically, the circles helped to build positive relations between students, students and teachers, and members of the school staff. The perceived benefits of relationship circles were generally consistent across students and staff, and across treatment schools. Some viewed relationship-building circles as helpful in reducing student-student and student-teacher conflict.

- **Student relationships** Students and school staff reported that circles enable students to “make friends,” feel “connected,” “bond” with one another, feel a sense of belonging to the school, and learn more about their peers. Thus, circles served as an

entry point for many friendships (e.g., “Some of the friends that I have now are actually from circle. I talk to them in there.”). One student discussed the ways in which circles helped her overcome past challenges: “[I]n middle school I used to get bullied, and when I came to high school, I was keeping to myself. But as soon as I did circle, I felt more comfortable coming out and making more friends and being comfortable to talk to others.”

Circles were noted as particularly helpful to students transitioning into the school—in some instances from another country. Some students also reported that circles helped to dispel negative preconceptions of others—a necessary first step toward developing positive relationships.

When I first came to the circle, there was a girl in my circle that I absolutely hated. And during circle I learned that she’s not a monster and she doesn’t eat people and stuff. So, I feel like without circle, I would have never talked to her. But since we were in the same environment, we were [...] allowed to talk to each other without all the negativity.

Circles also allowed students to identify and connect with peers with whom they shared something in common. Some reported that engaging in circle conversations *over time* helped to facilitate positive peer interactions: “As I progressed in Crew⁴ longer and longer, I had conversations with [the other students], we grew a bond. Now I’m cool with all of them now.”

The positive student relationships developed in relationship-building circles were felt to help prevent conflict. One teacher reflected as follows regarding students: “They’re less likely to have conflicts with certain kids ‘cause they know them a little better, like right off the bat from the circles and such.”

- **Student-teacher relationships.** Teachers explained that because of schools’ primary focus on academics, it doesn’t leave a lot of time to get to know the students or to interact with them in non-academic ways. Circles are a way to combat that, allowing students and teachers to get to know each other. A teacher explained:

I’ll share my opinions and thoughts [in circle] just like [students do] so they can see that we’re not just robots. [...] Sometimes [teachers] can be a little robotic,

⁴ This refers to the period in which circles took place in one of the treatment schools.

this teaching profession, but it's just like, look, we're people too. We have ideas and thoughts and we've thought about things in certain ways too.

Relationship-building circles were also reported to strengthen student-teacher relationships. School staff suggested that circles allowed teachers and students to “get to know” and better understand one another, ultimately minimizing conflict. Some staff stated that the opportunity to build positive student-teacher relations was particularly beneficial to new teachers, and more broadly for schools that experienced high levels of staff turnover. A teacher pointed out: “In the last couple of years we've had a pretty large influx of new teachers. And I think RJ maybe has helped alleviate the stress that they would experience if there was no structure in place like that.”

Some teachers and students reported that the circles were “giving students a voice” and helped to eliminate student-teacher power differentials as teachers engaged in circles in a collaborative and non-authoritarian manner. The circles were described as having a humanizing element, allowing students and teachers to learn about each other as *people*. One teacher reflected on the humanizing benefits that students and teachers would have missed if the schools did not hold circles.

[Students] would've missed out on that a lot. [...] understanding that adults are humans too and we can talk to them on a certain level and understand that they deserve respect and getting that respect. Adults, I think, would've missed out on also seeing their students as not just students [...] I think a lot of times teachers and adults don't get to see the vulnerable self of our teenagers because the teenagers are so busy like putting up a mask because [...] they're defensive.

- **Staff relationships** While not discussed as frequently, some staff reported that the circles helped to strengthen staff relationships. This was typically experienced when circles were held during on-site professional development trainings led by the school-based RJ coordinators. One teacher explained that relationship-building circles allowed staff to meet and get to know one another—something they had not previously done despite having worked at the school for several years.

We held [the circle] on the third floor. It was so interesting to learn certain things about people that I worked with, and people that I don't even know their names who were working in the same building as me, and I've been here five years. So,

it was amazing to see that happen and actually take place, and I guess it's restorative to come in and do that.

Creating a space for coping and support The healing qualities of relationship circles were evident across many student and teachers' descriptions. Circles appeared to support students' mental and social health, serving as a space for students to actively discuss problems and challenges. One student compared circles to counseling, but where "you don't actually have to go to the counselor. The counselor comes to you." Both students and teachers indicated that circles offered students the opportunity to express themselves and relieve stress. Many participants stated that the circles provided students with a needed "break" from the school day; and allowed students to discuss frustrations and problems and calm down by talking about their feelings. One teacher used an analogy to highlight circles' ability to prevent build-up of situations or emotions: "Restorative justice is like a pressure-release valve on a boiler. It's very good. [...] Here at this school, [it] provides students with an opportunity to speak about different situations that affect them and affect their education that they don't get the chance to in a classroom environment."

Moreover, some school staff emphasized the importance of having students decompress given that conflicts often result from students internalizing their problems and "holding things inside." One teacher noted that students' ability to decompress translates to fewer classroom disruptions.

The circles were described as having qualities akin to a mutual support group, with students facing similar challenges and voluntarily supporting one another through these challenges. For example, students offered emotional support through active listening and open displays of care and empathy. One student's description reflected the mutual support offered by stating that a circle "gives time to cry with people, like [who are] going through the same stress as you."

Sometimes circle participants received feedback and different viewpoints on problems from other circle members. This led some students facing challenges to reframe how they thought about their problems. For example, one student explained, "When you hear other people's opinion, you find 'oh it wasn't even that bad,'—it wasn't as bad as you think it was." Some students even actively solicited feedback from other circle members to better cope with and process their challenges.

Circle facilitators were also viewed as sources of support, providing emotional and even instrumental support (e.g., connecting students to resources). At times, facilitators followed up with students after the circle ended to speak further about challenges students may have shared. In some instances, this resulted in circle facilitators referring students to additional support services (e.g., social worker). Thus, relationship-circles served as a space for coping and as an entry point for on-going support.

Promoting social-emotional competencies Participants' responses reflected a wide-range of perceived social-emotional benefits derived from participating in relationship-building circles. Social-emotional skills include competencies that enable the recognition and control of emotions and behaviors, the development of relationships, responsible decision-making, and the establishment of positive goals (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning 2005).

Students and staff reported that the circles facilitated intra-personal growth such as self-awareness, reflection, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-control. They also noted gaining inter-personal skills, which served as the mechanism through which they forged the positive relationships discussed above. Students identified listening skills, eye contact, tolerance of and respect for others, and empathy as competencies they learned in circles. One student expressed being able to “listen more,” instead of fighting, because of the circles. Others discussed learning to trust and “open up” and express feelings.

The relationship-building circles appeared to serve as a space that enabled students to apply these competencies. One student stated, “Because when circle teaches you how to help someone and how to be in a relationship and help others, people in the circle can actually go up to others [in the circle] to help them and make friends with them.”

Some students reported applying the skills learned during circles to other social contexts: “I think it does [help], not only with the people you have circle with, also the people outside because you develop good listening skills and other skills from circle that you can apply to other friendships, to build them.”

Harm Circles & Mediation

Harm circles were used to address persistent problems, heal fractured relationships, and resolve conflicts (i.e., among students, or between students and teachers) by exploring and addressing the root causes of confrontation. Mediation was another way to handle conflict; it did not involve as much preparation as harm circles, and in many cases was enough to

restore a relationship. Mediation sessions consisted of conversations between two parties involved in conflict with the support of the RJ coordinator and/or a school-based staff (e.g., teacher, dean). Often the program used a harm-circle/mediation hybrid, drawing from elements of both. In interviews with researchers, students who participated in harm circles and mediations reported positive experiences. This was true even when they initially felt uncomfortable sitting and communicating with the person(s) with whom they had conflict.

The teachers we interviewed also cited the positive impact of mediation and harm circles on students. At the individual level, students who participated in harm circles and mediations were reported to develop social-emotional skills. At the school level, interviewees believed that harm circles and mediations de-escalated conflict, in turn helping to prevent violence and reduce the use of punitive disciplinary actions like suspension. Here, we discuss social-emotional skills and the prevention of conflicts as perceived benefits of harm circles and mediations. While many interviewees assessed these restorative activities as a valuable tool for addressing conflict, a few were skeptical that they could prevent the same conflict from reemerging or escalating later.

Building Social-Emotional Skills Interviewees stated that through harm circles and mediation, they were able to practice active listening and affective language, gain perspective, and learn to reflect and exercise self-control. As mentioned in the previous sections, interviewees identified that relationship-building circles promoted and strengthened those skills. Therefore, when a harm circle or a mediation session took place, students leveraged some of the skills gained in relationship-building circles. In some cases, interviewees mentioned that they applied what they learned in mediation or circle to interactions with other people and in other spaces (e.g., with friends, outside of the school). Such social-emotional skills are essential parts of a restorative culture.

- **Active Listening and Affective Language** Students explained how the structure of harm circles promoted respect and allowed all participants to express themselves. Many interviewees assessed this as one of the things they liked about participating in a mediation or harm circle. One student commented, “Everyone had their time to share, and everyone was respectful. If someone disagreed with [...] what you had to say, they did not interrupt you to say it. They waited ’til after everyone waited their turn to speak [...] I like that we all got the chance to talk.” Another student connected respecting all participants’ voices with active listening: “Everyone got their time to speak, and it wasn’t like a back and forth, it was more [...] like you spoke your piece and everyone took it into consideration.”

- **Perspective** Active listening and the use of affective language created the conditions for participants to consider another’s point of view. Most of the interviewees referred to the perspective gained when they described their experience—and listened to others’ experiences—during mediation or a harm circle. They valued the opportunity to listen in a “safe” space to the other person’s interpretation of what the problem was. One student described: “You can hear the other person’s side of the story and they can hear where you came from [...] I like that I can hear the other person’s side of the story and it’s private.”
- **Reflection and Self-control** Interviewees reported that mediations and harm circles allowed them to reflect upon and learn how to exercise self-control. One student made explicit connections between gaining perspective, reflection, and thinking through how she could have acted differently.

Yeah, it has helped me. Cause I remember there was a time with one of the situations where I had overreacted and it like made me realize [...] from the other person’s side, realize that I should have thought about something before I did that action [...] So, it made me reflect on some of the decisions that I should have taken.

Another student described how participation in mediation helped him to think before acting: “You’re going to argue with somebody and you’re not thinking, ‘that used to be me.’ When I get into an argument, I used to not think. I just jump. I used to black out and I just want to fight. But then mediations really taught me. I have to really think and use my head.”

Prevention: De-escalation, Less Fighting, and Fewer Suspensions Almost all interviewees who participated in harm circles referred to how they felt mediations and harm circles played a prevention role in the schools. Social-emotional skills likely played a role in the de-escalation of conflict and fights, as students put these newly acquired skills to use. They identified three primary prevention areas: 1) de-escalation of conflict, 2) decrease in fights, and 3) reduction of suspensions, with each being a logical positive outcome of the previous one. While some students referred to how harm circle and mediation participation decreased their own likelihood of escalating conflict, in most cases, they alluded to what they saw as school-wide benefits, including increased safety.

- **De-escalation** For interviewees, mediations and harm circles helped prevent their own disagreements or misunderstandings from turning into bigger fights. One student described:

[I]t has helped me with situations with people [...] there was a person that I had beef with for quite a while, we kind of like, talking about it. And like, moving on from it, 'cause without the talking circle, it would have continued [...] [T]hen I got to hear what she had to say, 'cause if I had spoken to her myself, she would have felt like I'm coming at her or, it could have got worse.

Another student discussed the importance of these activities for the school overall: "It kind of dilutes whatever problem there is before it escalates. I think that's really important, and seeing that it's such a small school, I feel like [the school size is] kind of detrimental because you cannot get these students away from everyone else's instigation, you know?"

- **Perceived reduction in fights** Interviewees perceived that without the harm circles and mediations, their schools would have more fights. As a student stated, "I think the fighting rate will go up a lot. There will be a lot of fights or stuff like that. A lot of arguments. It's a big school. But then again, when you have mediation, they sit down and talk to you. It makes the community stronger. It builds a bond with the students." Discussing what would have happened to a conflict situation without these critical outlets for talking things through, another student said, "You don't really get that [circle] environment, you don't really get that opportunity to express exactly what you have to say [...] things would have continued to spiral out of control."
- **Perceived reduction in suspensions** Interviewees attributed a perceived reduction in suspensions as connected to fewer school fights. They explained this decline⁵ as a consequence of mediation and harm circles, which were believed to reduce both the likelihood of fights and suspension. One student described the school without mediations or circles: "A lot more suspensions. Because a lot more people would be fighting, and I guess the circles prevent a lot of the suspensions." Another student explained his own experience:

⁵ Perceptions of reduced suspensions are not borne out in the outcome results, presented later in this report.

One of the situations I was in, it was going on for about almost a month. And that is where it had escalated to the point where we had to be in a circle. So, I feel like if it wasn't for the circle, it would have been continuing and I could have eventually ended up having a fight and getting suspended.

One teacher pointed out that mediations benefited students and the school as a whole: “Through mediations [...] because if we catch it early on, then there's no fights, there's no suspensions, there's no detentions, there's nothing like that. Everybody's cool, so it works out for the kid, it works out for the teacher, it works out for the school.”

Limited Perceived Impact

In some instances, school staff and students described restorative justice, or specific components of it (e.g., harm circles, mediation), as having little or no impact.

Some staff described ongoing student behavioral problems, fighting, or punitive disciplinary practices (e.g., suspensions) as evidence against restorative justice's effectiveness. In some instances, perceptions were mixed, with staff noting benefits—such as students being more open to adults—while recognizing that the school's disciplinary practices had not changed. Across some of our interviews, staff noted that punitive practices *should* still be in place and discussed how restorative justice practices were integrated into the existing disciplinary structure but did not eliminate punitive practices altogether. However, at least one staff member recognized that restorative justice practices may take time to have an impact: “I don't feel like it has become engrained in the culture yet [...] they say it takes five years to change a culture [through] restorative justice.”

Further, some students and staff reported that the relationship-building circles were not beneficial. In some instances, it was noted that the relationship-building circles do not help with conflict. This claim is not out of line with the theoretical underpinnings of such circles, which have the more proximate goal of building relationships. However, some students offered insight as to *why* relationship-building circles have limited benefits, indicating that some students do not care, do not pay attention, or fall asleep during circle. Others underscored some of the programmatic limitations of the circles, such as being heavily discussion-based and focused on world events. Although not stated directly by interviewees, the implication was that such a focus may not mobilize the full range of potential benefits purported by restorative justice (e.g., community building, improving school climate,

minimizing interpersonal conflict). One student noted that relationship-building circles are limited to certain grades and are not held across the entire school.

Some staff and students discussed the limitations of harm circles and mediations, reporting that the harm circle/mediations “do not help,” and that participating students do not care, lie, do not take the advice given, and hold grudges. One student reported that “Kids are forced to go and they say what you want to hear.” Some staff and students noted that holding single-session harm circles or mediations is insufficient to appropriately address conflict. Rather, it is necessary to hold on-going harm circles, given the protracted nature of student conflicts.

When discussing harm circles and mediations, a few students and teachers questioned how effective mediations and harm circles were in decreasing conflict and fights in a long run. For example, one student expressed their doubts about the harm circle preventing fights: “There have been times where I’ve seen students, they’ve had a problem. Before they were going to fight, I guess they had a circle. Even though they had the circle, they still ended up fighting later. So, the circle didn’t really do anything. It was more like [...] delaying it.” In the same vein, a teacher described how mediations can be beneficial to end a conflict but can also contribute to increasing problems: “There have also been situations where we’ve sat students down, and it didn’t go well. It exacerbated the situation.”

Impact on Key Outcomes

This section presents the findings from the outcome evaluation, comparing outcomes in the treatment group and their counterparts in two other study groups (randomized control group and a comparison group). We hypothesized that students in the treatment group would have fewer incidents and suspensions than the control and comparison groups; students in all of District 18 would have fewer incidents and suspensions than the comparison group; and the treatment group would have a more positive school climate than the control group.

The results are presented first comparing key outcomes (incident and suspension rates) between the treatment and control groups—the primary experiment. Next, results are shown comparing treatment and comparison groups to see if there are any differences between the RJ program and schools with *no* restorative justice program. The final set of results compare *all* District 18 schools (i.e., treatment and control groups combined, as they both received some exposure to restorative justice) with the comparison group—looking at impact of *any* restorative justice activities. Findings from additional analyses and outcomes are also discussed.

Outcomes in the Experimental Groups

The results of the primary analysis comparing the experimental groups suggest that the treatment did not significantly impact student incident or suspension rates (see Table 2). Rate ratios were used to indicate how much more likely incidents were among students in the treatment group as compared to the control group, with no statistically significant differences.

Table 2. Treatment and Control Groups Were Not Significantly Different

Number of Schools Number of Students ¹	10 2,427	
	Incidents Rate Ratio ²	Suspensions Rate Ratio
Treatment vs Control Schools	1.28	1.42
Male	1.24***	1.08
Student with Disability	1.54***	1.56***
Economically Disadvantaged	1.06	1.13

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

¹Treatment (N=5 schools; N=1,362 students); Control (N=5 schools; N=1,065 students)

²Rate Ratios (also called risk ratios) are used to say how much more likely students in the treatment group will have an incident compared those in the control group.

Treatment and Comparison Groups

The second set of analyses compared the treatment group (N=5) to schools that do not use any restorative justice practices (N=9). The analyses found no evidence of statistically

Table 3. Treatment and Comparison Groups Were Not Significantly Different

Number of Schools Number of Students ¹	14 2,967	
	Incidents Rate Ratio	Suspensions Rate Ratio
Treatment vs Comparison Schools	1.06	1.20
Male	1.18**	1.23
Student with Disability	1.22**	1.25
Economically Disadvantaged	1.15*	1.26

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

¹Treatment (N=5 schools; N=1,362 students); Control (N=9 schools; N=1,605 students)

significant differences between treatment and comparison groups on incidents and suspensions (see Table 3).

District 18 and Comparison Districts

To test whether the use of *any* restorative justice practices within a school had an impact, the third set of analyses compared eligible District 18 high schools to the nine high schools in comparison districts, where no restorative programming was implemented at the time of the study. Similar to the prior results, there was no evidence of significant differences between groups (see Table 4).

Table 4. District 18 Schools and the Comparison Districts Were Not Significantly Different

	Number of Schools	19
	Number of Students ¹	4,032
	Incidents Rate Ratio	Suspensions Rate Ratio
RJ vs Comparison	1.05	1.25
Male	1.14*	1.18
Student with Disability	1.28***	1.39**
Economically Disadvantaged	1.10	1.21

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

¹District 18 (N=10 schools; N=2,427, students); Comparison (N=9 schools; N=1,605 students)

Incident and Suspension Trends

Figures 1 and 2 display school incident and suspension rates across the sample years. Rates were calculated to account for having two full school years of data and only one semester of the third year. Incidents and suspensions were tracked over a total of 24 months including Years 1 and 2 and fall of Year 3.⁶

⁶ The outcome evaluation was originally intended to track incidents and suspensions for two years, but restorative justice activities continued through fall of Year 3. We obtained data for that semester, but all in-school programming stopped when schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. We only have four months of data from Year 3. If the time frames were treated equally, then the number of incidents and suspensions would be undercounted. Therefore, rates were calculated by dividing the total number of incidents by the number of months in the school year.

As seen in Figure 1, incident rates drop consistently for control and comparison schools, but increase slightly in the treatment schools. The largest increase across the treatment schools is from Year 1 to Year 2; rates continue to rise at a slower pace during fall of Year 3.

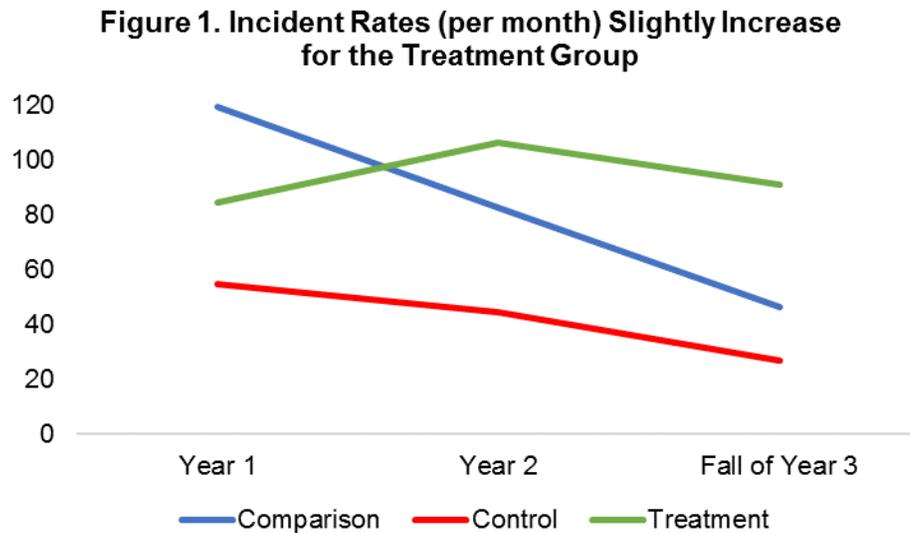
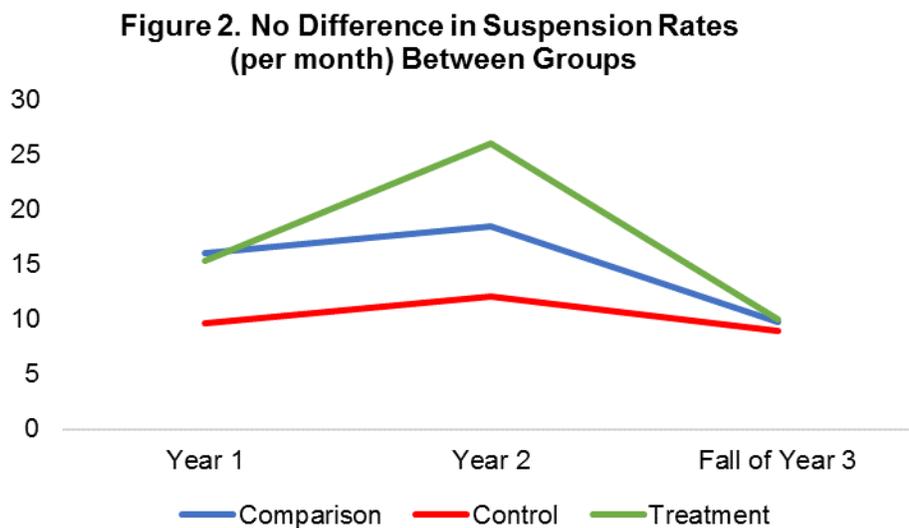


Figure 2 shows that suspensions in the treatment schools noticeably increase from Year 1 to Year 2, followed by a substantial drop during fall of Year 3. Rates across the comparison schools also decline considerably from Year 2 to fall of Year 3, while rates in the control schools change little across the study period. By fall of Year 3, suspension rates across all schools were not significantly different.



School Climate

We also examined school-level climate measures. The results mirrored the key outcomes described above, with no significant differences between groups (tables not shown).

III. Discussion

This report presents results from a randomized controlled trial evaluating restorative justice in selected high schools in New York City. The study involved five treatment schools, which implemented restorative justice through dedicated RJ coordinators; five control schools, with trained RJ teachers and school staff but without the experimental program implementation or dedicated coordinators; and 13 comparison schools, with no restorative justice exposure. The outcome analysis found no evidence of the impact of restorative justice on incidents, suspensions, or school climate in treatment schools, when compared to both control and comparison schools over the first two years of implementation. The qualitative analysis indicates positive perceptions of restorative justice, including perceptions that the program did influence student behavior, schoolwide relationships, and conflict and suspensions.

While the quantitative and qualitative results appear contradictory, these findings present an opportunity to advance our understanding of restorative justice in schools, while simultaneously challenging underlying assumptions among researchers and policymakers. We propose several explanations for the finding focused on study limitations and implementation challenges. Foundational challenges with evaluating programs like restorative justice permeate across those explanations. Specifically, a narrow focus on suspension decline by both policymakers and practitioners compels researchers (including ourselves) to prioritize those quantitative outcomes. However, as we discuss further below, significant reductions in use of suspension may be an unrealistic aim. The long-standing reliance on suspension is based in policies and practices driven by higher-level principals, administrators, and decision-makers; restorative justice practitioners in individual schools are unlikely to influence these systemic responses, especially in early implementation. Further, more intermediate outcomes, such as increased social-emotional skills, school connectedness, and other measures of school transformation may be more relevant outcome measures than suspension. And notably, unlike many previous studies, this program and evaluation were implemented in a school district with some of the highest suspension rates in New York City. Many existing efforts to expand restorative justice are focused on schools around the country with privilege and a strong existing appetite for whole-school transformation. We hope this study sheds light on the challenges inherent to both implementing and evaluating restorative justice in contexts struggling with decades of disinvestment, structural racism, and poverty.

Implementation Challenges

Several notable challenges affected program implementation in ways that likely influenced the mixed findings in this report.

- **Goals of Restorative Justice** Some practitioners would argue that the goals of restorative justice in schools are not well-measured through existing data such as incident and suspension numbers. Restorative justice is built upon a mindset shift, requiring significant change in long-standing school culture and beliefs about community, punishment, discipline, and authority. As such, it may be difficult to measure the impact of restorative justice on measures like suspension, despite widespread perceptions of positive impact. Additionally, the qualitative results highlighted numerous areas of impact that were unmeasured in this study, including improved relationships and social-emotional skills, and specific school climate improvements. Novel data collection, such as quantitative measures of relationships and relationship quality; social-emotional skills, nuanced school safety, climate, and respect measures; or qualitative data may provide greater insight into the impact of restorative justice.
- **Evaluation Readiness** This evaluation only examined process and outcomes in the first 2.5 years of restorative justice implementation. Multiple studies spanning a longer period (five to seven years) have seen schools show positive results only after two or three years of implementation (Augustine et al. 2018; Davison et al. 2019; Mansfield et al. 2018). One of these studies (Davison et al. 2019) even saw a *rise* in suspension rates among Black students in the first two years, with this rate only beginning to drop in the third year of programming. In many cases, restorative justice is initially implemented in schools on a small scale and expanded over the years, potentially leading to different results in the latter years of implementation (Mansfield et al. 2018). Because of the proliferation of restorative justice in New York City (and elsewhere across the country), this makes the use of rigorous methods such as randomized controlled trials more challenging, as control schools may adopt restorative practices over the course of the study as the local department of education moves to expand such practices. As such, we do not believe the program was ready for an extensive evaluation—or at least may have benefitted from an evaluation focused on alternative, more intermediate outcomes (e.g., connectedness, social-emotional skills). Further, it is our recommendation that future evaluations should employ quasi-experimental approaches beginning three to five years after initial implementation.

- **Inconsistent Implementation across Schools** The study involved program implementation across five schools within one district. While these schools were more similar to each other (and the control schools) than they would be to schools outside the district, we learned through our process evaluation that their unique contexts made uniform implementation nearly impossible. Moreover, such uniformity across multiple school contexts is not a reasonable expectation for this type of program. As such, researchers and practitioners must proceed with caution when expecting consistent results with restorative justice. This was further underscored by findings from a recent study (Augustine et al. 2018), where results from a large randomized controlled trial in Pittsburgh yielded mixed results, with hints of inconsistent implementation. The absence of an intensive process evaluation in the Pittsburgh study made conclusive explanations difficult.
- **Significant Structural Challenges** The staff implementing the restorative justice program in the treatment schools identified significant structural challenges to program implementation, including the need to assist students with accessing basic rights (e.g., clean water) and services (e.g., mental health support). This context points to a group of schools that have experienced structural and systemic inequities, including disinvestment by the Department of Education as well as the city at-large in the surrounding communities. This context also has direct consequences for program evaluation, as this evaluation, and many others, are often examining a specific set of student outcomes (e.g., suspension rates) and not accounting for larger contextual realities.

Notably, in reviewing the results, RJ staff identified challenges in implementation inherent to restorative justice practice in schools. Specifically, reliance on circles to improve school culture and climate and reduce suspension rates may be unrealistic without the ability to hold those who have caused harm within the school community accountable, including when schools and adult staff members are causing harm. The true impact of circles is in the school community's ability as a collective to address the harms uncovered. Many restorative justice efforts may have limited capacity for such impact due to the schools' inability to address harm and move beyond existing disciplinary responses. In essence, RJ implementation without explicitly addressing structural issues within puts the onus on the harmed party (students) to respond better, rather than on the school/system to address the harms experienced by students.

Study Limitations

Despite a strong research design, including a randomized controlled trial and mixed methods, this study suffered from notable limitations.

- **Baseline Differences** At baseline, the treatment schools have significantly higher incident and suspension rates than either the control or comparison schools. That is, in the year prior to restorative justice implementation, despite random selection, the treatment schools had an average incident rate of 2.7 compared to 1.9 for control schools and 2.0 for comparison schools. Similarly, the treatment schools have a suspension rate of 1.2, compared to .9 and .7 for the control and comparison schools, respectively. These baseline differences between the study groups likely influence the outcome results, but more importantly, they influenced implementation. The treatment schools may have been more challenging environments, with higher levels of student conflict and greater reliance on punitive measures, despite the use of randomization.
- **Sample Size** The study relies on only five treatment schools and five control schools, resulting in statistical power challenges for multi-level models. There were two reasons for limiting the number of schools in the study. Namely, the DOE chose to focus on District 18 schools because of their disproportionate use of discipline and the Department of Education's interest in alternative approaches. The implementation of the RJ program also required a full-time commitment from the coordinators. To conduct a randomized controlled trial in more than five schools would not have been possible given the existing resources. Therefore, the size of the sample, even when including comparison schools, is small, and conclusions have limited generalizability.

Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights for the field regarding the use of restorative justice in schools. Generally, we conclude that restorative justice programs are promising, with the potential to shift the ways in which students interact with each other and influence relationships between school staff and students. In the long term, restorative justice may have the potential to reduce conflict in schools and, concurrently, incidents and suspensions (though this is difficult to measure in a short study). However, restorative justice implementation in similar schools will be significantly influenced by the underlying reasons driving schools to resort to suspensions in the first place: structural inequities, under-resourced communities, over-worked staff and principals, and deep racial disparities in academics and discipline. These are not problems that restorative justice can solve, and it would be a detriment to the field for these challenges to implementation to be considered as a sign of the ineffectiveness of restorative justice in schools.

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Appendix A. Methods

This study involved a randomized controlled trial examining the impact of restorative justice in high schools. Ten schools were randomly assigned to either the treatment or the control group. The five treatment high schools received on-site, full-time restorative justice coordinators to lead schoolwide restorative justice implementation (described in Appendix B).

School Sample and Timeframe

As described in more depth in Appendix B, District 18 schools struggled with high incident and suspension rates, the highest in New York City. Accordingly, the mayor's office and the Department of Education launched a restorative justice initiative targeting the district in the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. In the spring of 2016, the DOE started to provide some schools in the district with restorative justice training and support, but the initiative ultimately involved all District 18 schools.

For treatment schools, formal implementation of the restorative justice program began in the 2017-2018 school year (Year 1), the 2018-2019 school year (Year 2), and in the fall of 2019 (Year 3). The program continued in a more limited capacity during the 2019-2020 school year but was ultimately disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and shelter in place orders. The process evaluation focuses on Year 1 and Year 2, while the outcome evaluation includes analyses with Years 1, 2, and 3. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both the NYC Department of Education (DOE) and the Center for Court Innovation (the Center).

Random Assignment

High schools in New York City's school District 18 were eligible to participate in the study. As of 2016, there were a total of 14 high schools in the district. Four schools were deemed ineligible, primarily because they were involved in other research or other intensive programming efforts (e.g., restorative justice implementation by other agencies). Ultimately,

ten schools across four campuses⁷ were randomly assigned to either the control group or the treatment group.

All ten schools in this study participated in the broader district-wide initiative to use restorative justice practices to reduce school suspensions. As part of this initiative, all the schools had access to training and support through an external organization. Principals were required to send at least five school staff, including themselves, for basic restorative justice summer training. Schools then incorporated different permutations of programming, typically at the discretion of the school principal.

During Years 1, 2, and 3, the Center implemented a restorative justice intervention across the five treatment high schools. These schools already had access to training and some coaching as part of the DOE's broader restorative justice initiative, but also received additional staffing support—one full-time restorative justice coordinator per school and three additional coordinators who rotated across the five schools. The coordinators did not have additional school responsibilities beyond leading the restorative justice programming in these schools. More details on implementation can be found in Appendix B.

Comparison School Selection

Because the control schools received basic restorative justice training from the NYC DOE, we chose to include a set of matched comparison schools with no restorative justice training from nearby districts as a third study group. These schools, drawn from Districts 17 and 23, were systematically selected based on their characteristics (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, disability status, and economically disadvantaged)—though not on incident or suspension rates. To create the comparison group, we ran a series of crosstabulations to assess the significance between 2016 school characteristics. Our goal was to match schools to District 18 on select characteristics, ensuring minor significant differences⁸.

⁷ Many schools in New York City share a campus; that is, multiple high schools may be located in a single building. For this study, three treatment schools were located on one campus, also shared with a fourth school that was not part of the study. Two treatment schools were located on another campus, also shared with two other schools, not part of the study. Four control schools were located on one campus. One control school was a stand-alone school. Schools on shared campuses have separate principals, administrations, staff, and class, but share an entrance, school safety agents, building emergency protocols, and metal detectors.

⁸ Although there were significant differences (using chi-square test statistic) between the schools' race/ethnicity and economically disadvantaged student populations, the differences were no more than 8%, so we did not make any adjustments for sampling bias.

Process Evaluation

Data Collection Methods

A rigorous process evaluation was essential to describe and document the implementation, fidelity to the proposed model, challenges, and lessons learned. This process evaluation included interviews, focus groups, observations, and collection of program data. Each aspect of the process evaluation involved included students, teachers, and school administrators. Data were primarily collected at the five treatment schools; staff interviews and some observations also occurred at the control schools, though to a lesser extent. Table 4 provides an overview of process evaluation methods. This report does not include formal analysis of all data sources, given the extensive nature of process evaluation data collected. Future publications may focus specifically on further analysis of process evaluation data, both quantitative and qualitative.

Table 5. Process Evaluation Data Sources

	N	Timeframe			
		Y1 FALL	Y1 SPRING	Y2 FALL	Y2 SPRING
Staff Interviews	94			X	X
Student Focus Groups ¹	85			X	X
Student Exit Surveys	1313		X	X	X
Relationship-Building Circles	1270		X	X	X
Harm Circles	43		X	X	X
Staff Exit Surveys	85		X	X	X
Relationship-Building Circles	81		X	X	X
Harm Circles	4		X	X	X
Circle Observations	48		X	X	
Program Data (circles) ²	2,258	X	X	X	X

¹ Eleven focus groups with a mean of six students per group.

² The N for program data represents the number of circles logged by RJ program staff.

Staff Interviews A total of 94 semi-structured staff interviews were conducted across the five treatment schools during the second year of implementation. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and, on average, lasted about 30 minutes. These interviews include teachers (60%), administrators (e.g., principals, deans; 16%), professional support staff (e.g., guidance counselors, school social workers; 6%), paraprofessionals (7%), and RJ coordinators (11%). Two slightly different versions of the instrument were used—one for staff with experience leading circles and one for staff who had not led circles. The instrument

covered the following areas: perceived barriers and facilitators to restorative justice implementation, staff buy-in, training and competencies, resources and policies supporting the programming, perceived outcomes, and recommendations.

In the five control schools, 30 interviews were conducted during the spring of 2019. These interviews were also audio recorded and lasted an average of 30 minutes. The interviews included teachers (46%), administrators (30%), and professional support staff (24%). The same two instruments used for the treatment schools were used for interviews in the control schools. In most cases, we used the instrument for staff who had not led circles, and in few cases, we used the one for staff who led circles with teachers and counselors who acted as RJ coordinators (e.g., facilitating circles, mediations).

Student Focus Groups A total of 11 semi-structured focus groups (85 students in total) were conducted with students across the five treatment schools. Focus groups were audio-recorded. An average of six students participated in each focus group. Students had participated in either relationship-building circles or harm circles/mediations. The focus groups were conducted in the fall and winter of Year 2. The focus groups lasted up to one hour and were designed to understand students' experiences with circles and perceived benefits of circles. Students were also asked to share any recommendations for future programming.

Student Exit Surveys Exit surveys were conducted for students who engaged in relationship-building circles, as well as those who participated in harm circles, mediations, or the harm circle/mediation hybrid.

- *Student relationship-building exit surveys:* A total of 1,270 exit surveys were completed by students who participated in relationship-building circles. The surveys were administered at the end of each school semester, on paper, starting in spring Year 1 and took about ten minutes to complete. Three data collection waves were conducted as follows: spring Year 1; winter Year 2; spring Year 2. The exit surveys consisted of demographic questions and 22 close-ended questions assessing students' experiences with the circles (Circle Feedback Form), the use of restorative practices at the school (RP-Use Scale – student version), and the perceived impact of the circles. The Circle Feedback Form and the Restorative Practice Use Scales were adapted from the RP-Assess manual (Gregory 2017). The instrument also included two opened-ended questions, asking students what they like most and least about the circles. The instrument was modified in the third wave of data collection to include

five additional questions about harm circles and mediations due a low response rate from the student harm circle exits surveys (see below).

- *Student harm circle/mediation exit surveys:* Additionally, brief exit surveys were administered to students who participated in harm circles (n=43). The instrument consisted of demographic questions and seven closed-ended questions, adapted from the Restorative Conference Feedback Form(Gregory 2017a). The exit survey also included three open-ended questions, which asked students about their experience in the harm circles/ mediations. The exit surveys were administered following a harm circle, typically within several days after the circle. These data were collected starting in the fall of the Year 1.

Due to low response rates, the student harm circle exit survey interview was modified to include nine additional open-ended questions in the spring semester of Year 2. These questions were added to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of harm circles. These additional questions asked students about their experience in harm circles/mediations, perceived benefits, and recommendations. The research team first administered the closed-ended portion of the exit survey (the same survey used prior to the modification) and subsequently administered the semi-structured interview portion of the instrument. Overall, 23 students responded to the modified version.

Staff Exit Surveys Exit surveys were conducted with teachers and school staff who participated in relationship-building circles. They were also collected for a few teachers and staff who participated in harm circles.

- *Teacher relationship-building exit surveys:* A total of 81 exit surveys were completed by school staff who participated in relationship-building circles. Staff completed these surveys at the same time student exit surveys were completed Teacher exit surveys consisted of demographic questions and 36 close-ended questions, including questions about staff members' role in circles, experience in circle (Circle Feedback Form), use of RJ practices (RJ Use Scale), any support received in order to implement RJ practices (Restorative Practices Support Scale), and perceived impact of RJ practices. These scales were drawn or adapted from the RP-Assess (Gregory 2017). The instrument also included three opened-ended questions asking staff about their general experience in circles, challenges, and what the kinds of support they need in their use of restorative practices.

- *Staff harm circle/mediation exit surveys:* Additionally, brief exit surveys were administered to staff who participated in harm circles (n=4). The instrument consisted of demographic questions and the same seven closed-ended questions as the student version of the harm/mediation circle exit survey, adapted from the Restorative Conference Feedback Form (Gregory 2017). The exit survey included three open-ended questions, which asked students about their experience in the harm circles/mediations.

Circle Observations A total of 48 circle observations were conducted by members of the research team using an observation protocol, adapted from the RP-Observe and RP-Assess Circle Quality Checklist (Gregory 2017). The circle checklist consisted of general questions about the circle (e.g., attendance) and 25 yes/no questions. The observation protocol assessed three areas: circle format, circle quality, and facilitation. Circle format assessed if circle elements traditionally used in restorative circles were incorporated into the circle (e.g., “A Centerpiece is in place”). Circles were observed in the spring of Year 1 fall of Year 2.

Program Administrative Data A total of 2,258 relationship-building circles were logged by program staff using a brief Relationship-building Post-Circle Form. This form was completed by an RJ coordinator following each circle and included questions related to attendance and participant type (e.g., students, teachers), curriculum used and topics discussed, a checklist of the restorative circle elements included (e.g., talking piece), and a single item facilitator rating of circle engagement. After completing the paper form, program staff entered the responses into a secure database, which could be accessed only by members of the research team.

Analysis

Audio-recorded staff and student interviews (including focus groups and harm circle/mediation interviews) were transcribed verbatim. All data were analyzed using well-established coding procedures (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). Transcripts generated from interviews and focus groups were independently analyzed by two members of the research team to identify relevant text corresponding to perceived program impact. After independently reviewing each transcript, the research team convened to discuss the coding. Any discrepancies were resolved by consensus. Final excerpts and corresponding codes were applied using Dedoose software. A second coding phase involved child coding. All excerpts corresponding to program impact were exported from Dedoose and were then independently reviewed by two members of the research team to develop the child codes.

Quantitative process data (e.g., administrative program data, exit surveys) were cleaned and coded in SPSS. Data reduction strategies were implemented before analysis. Missing data were handled primarily through pairwise deletion across analytic strategies. These data were primarily used for internal reports to the RJ team through the duration of the study and were analyzed descriptively.

Outcome Evaluation

The outcome evaluation aimed to examine whether restorative justice was effective in (a) reducing incidents in treatment schools (as compared to control/comparison schools); (b) reducing the use of suspensions in treatment schools (as compared to control/comparison schools); and (c) influencing school climate.

Sample

The sample includes 4,032 high school students in NYC public school District 18 (treatment and control groups) and Districts 17 and 23 (comparison group). Of those, 1,362 are in the treatment group (5 schools); 1,605 are in the control group (5 schools); and 1,605 are in the comparison group (13 schools).

The study sample includes 9th graders from Year 1 and Year 2 and 10th graders from Year 1, to ensure that students had complete data for all study years. They were tracked through the fall semester of Year 3. Because this study did not follow a cohort, students in the sample could have been enrolled in school for a minimum of one month up to the full length of the study (24 months).

Key Variables

Incidents and Suspensions Two key outcome measures were constructed from DOE discipline data, which was provided at the student level. The first includes all student incidents⁹ that occurred in the school, regardless of disciplinary reaction from school administrators (e.g., classroom removal, suspension, other response). The second measure was suspensions, derived from the disciplinary responses to the student incidents. School suspensions were combined into one measure that includes both principal's (in-school) and superintendent's (out-of-school) suspensions.

⁹ Often referred to in the literature as infractions, this includes any incident listed in the DOE Discipline Code. For more information, see <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/discipline-code-kindergarten-grade-5-english>.

Rather than report raw numbers, in Figures 1 and 2, incidents and suspension rates were used instead to account for disparate lengths of time students were included in the study. Specifically, Years 1 and 2 are full school years (10 months each), while fall of Year 3 is only four months. Incident rates were calculated by dividing the total number of incidents (of the sample and not school) into the number of months for each year of the study. Suspension rates were calculated in the same manner.

Demographics Other student variables included sociodemographic information, including sex, race/ethnicity, disability status, and economic disadvantage (i.e., receive reduced or free lunch, or public assistance). All variables were gathered from DOE administrative data, which does not collect students' preferred gender.

School Climate In a separate school-level only descriptive analysis, the 2018 and 2019 NYC School Surveys were used to measure school climate. Specifically, we compared student scores across two questions: "Most students at school treat each other with respect" and "Discipline is applied fairly at my school." Scores for these questions were based on a 4-point Likert scale with responses, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Other questions included: "At this school, students harass, bully, or intimidate other students" and "At this school, students get into physical fights." Scores for these questions are also based on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from "none of the time" to "most of the time."

Analysis

Multilevel Modeling (MLM) was used to examine the impact of the restorative justice program on student incident and suspension rates. MLM is the preferred analytic method when students are nested within schools. Unlike traditional regression, MLM takes into account that students within one school are more similar to each other than students across different schools, which could lead to inaccurate conclusions about the data. In addition to the multilevel nature of the data, the distribution of the outcome variables showed that students were far more likely to *not* have an incident or suspension.¹⁰ Zero-inflated Poisson Regression multilevel models were used to allow an excess of zeros (i.e., no incidents or suspensions).¹¹

¹⁰ 70% of students did not have an incident and 90% did not have a suspension.

¹¹ Zero-inflated Poisson Regression multilevel modeling was conducted with the glmmADMB package in R (Fournier et al. 2012).

Appendix B. Program Description & Implementation

This chapter presents a brief description of the origins of the restorative justice program and an in-depth description of its components. This program was embedded in a larger initiative of the NYC Department of Education, supported by the mayor’s office, to promote safe schools and to move away from overly punitive approaches to discipline. The implementation of restorative justice in five (treatment) schools in District 18—the district with the highest suspension rates in the city in 2015—involved regular relationship-building circles with students; mediations and harm circles when conflict occurred; and a wide range of community-building and support activities, including school-wide activities, clubs, and one-on-one in-depth conversations and coaching with teachers and students.

Restorative Justice in New York City Schools

After five years of increasing suspensions in New York City schools, suspensions began to decline in 2012 (Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline 2015). Contributing to this reduction, among other factors, were the NYC Department of Education’s (DOE) first attempts to encourage schools to adopt less punitive ways to manage student behavior (NYC School-Justice Partnership Task Force 2013). By 2013, only about 14 schools in New York City were known to have implemented the use of restorative practices to address conflict and promote school safety (Gonzalez 2016). In a school district spanning 1,800 schools and educating 1.1 million students, this represents less than 1% of all NYC schools. Advocacy organizations, such as Dignity in Schools,¹² Advocates for Children,¹³

¹² The Dignity in Schools Campaign is a local and national coalition of organizations, advocating for an end to the school-to-prison pipeline and racial and economic inequities in education. More information can be found at: <https://dignityinschools.org/>.

¹³ Advocates for Children of New York is an organization focused on children’s right to education, especially students experiencing discrimination or those from low-income backgrounds More information at: https://www.advocatesforchildren.org/who_we_are_afc.

and Restorative Justice Initiative¹⁴ have consistently advocated for a wide expansion of these practices in NYC schools (Dignity in Schools Campaign 2013).

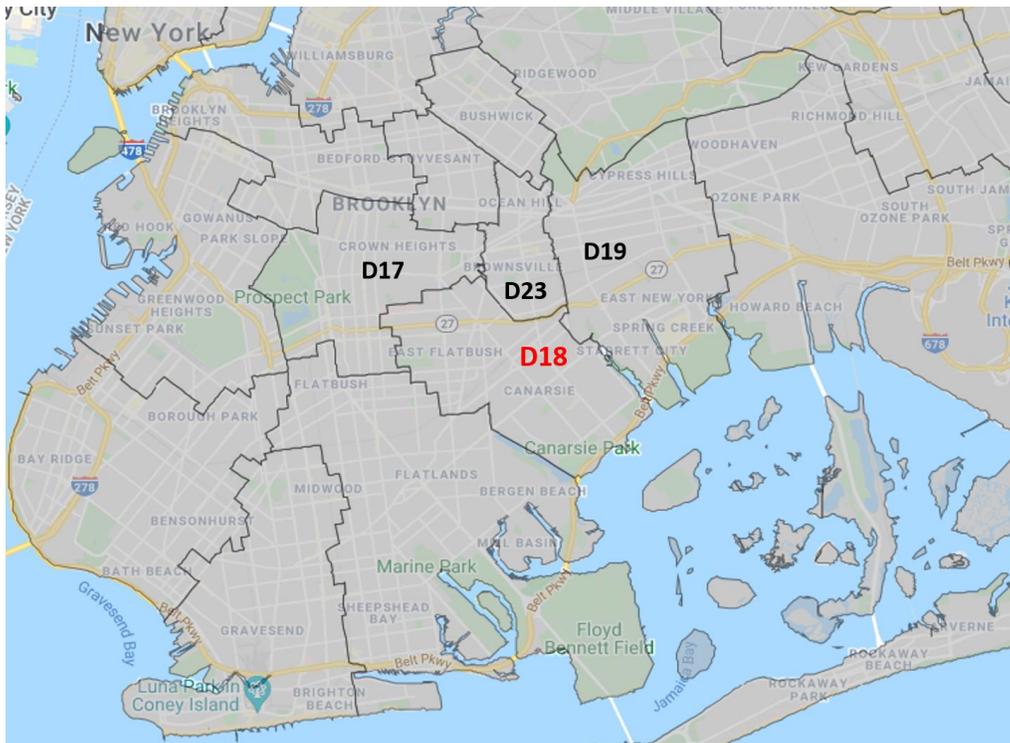
In 2015, following the recommendation of the Mayor’s Leadership Team on School Climate and Discipline, city council leaders, educators, and community stakeholders, the DOE announced a series of initiatives to end punitive and exclusionary school discipline and to make schools more equitable (The Official Website of the City of New York 2015). The initiative targeted schools with high suspension and high arrest rates.

District 18 and Restorative Justice

District 18 covers the Brooklyn neighborhoods of East Flatbush and Canarsie (Figure 3). Starting in the late sixties, both neighborhoods experienced a shift in demographic composition, from predominantly Jewish and Italian to the current majority Black population. In the 1970s, white parents forcefully refused the proposal of busing Black students to Canarsie schools, including a white boycott of the schools (Rieder 1985). Attempts to integrate neighborhood schools contributed significantly to the movement of White residents out of the area (Heiman 2015).

¹⁴ Restorative Justice Initiative is a network of RJ practitioners aimed at disseminating information and supporting the expansion of RJ practices across New York City. More information at: <https://restorativejustice.nyc/>.

Figure 3. Map of Brooklyn School Districts, including D18



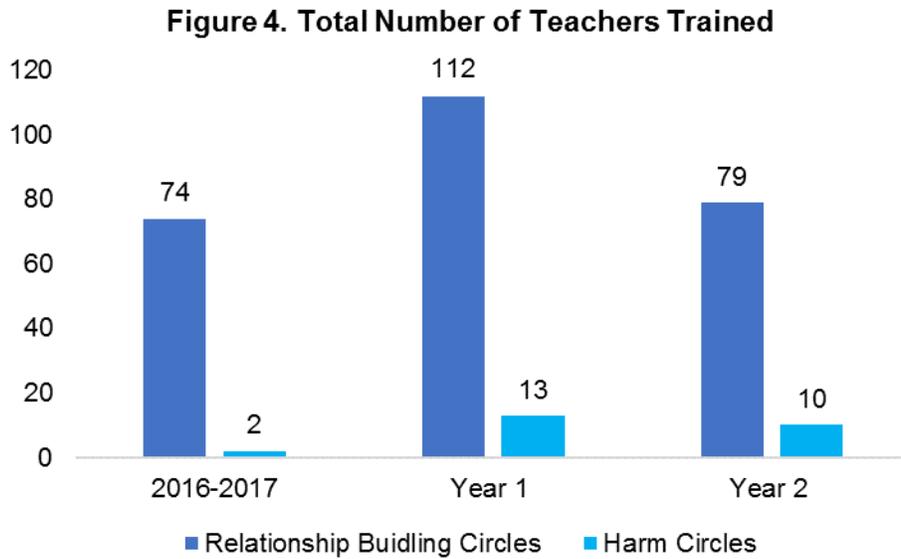
Starting in 2004 through the Impact Schools initiative, the Bloomberg mayoral administration broke up many of the city’s largest high schools, resulting in more smaller schools, housed in shared campus buildings. Three of these Impact Schools were in East Flatbush and Canarsie. In 2008, three more large high schools in the same neighborhoods were also broken up into smaller schools.

By 2018, 86% of the population in East Flatbush and 64% of the population in Canarsie identified as Black (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). Racial segregation and structural and systemic racism have contributed to the concentration of disadvantages in these neighborhoods. The structural disadvantages are reflected in education statistics from the local schools. Chronic underfunding of schools with majority Black students is endemic across the United States; as one of the most segregated school systems in the country, New York City is no exception School District 18 is one of the most racially segregated in the city, with Black students accounting for 85% of the district’s student population, in contrast

to only 25% of students across all New York City public schools. Academic inequities, often referred to as the academic achievement gap, are also a long-standing structural challenge for predominantly Black schools (Mwatela 2020). As such, poor academic outcomes are especially apparent in East Flatbush, where significantly fewer fourth graders were at grade level in math and English in 2019, compared to both Brooklyn and New York City (Furman Institute 2019). Relatedly, District 18 had the highest suspension rate of any district in the city during the 2014-2015 school year, with at least one school having a suspension rate of over 55% (NYC Open Data 2021). The well-established connections between structural oppression, academic outcomes, and disciplinary inequities (Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevárez 2017; Mwatela 2020) are lived realities in this school district.

To address the significant number of suspensions in District 18, which directly contribute to racial/ethnic disparities in discipline and academics citywide, the mayor's office and the Department of Education launched a restorative justice initiative targeting the district in the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. In the spring of 2016, the DOE started to provide some schools in the district with restorative justice training and support, but the initiative was intended to ultimately include all District 18 schools—elementary, middle, and high schools—and eventually expand to more districts across the city.

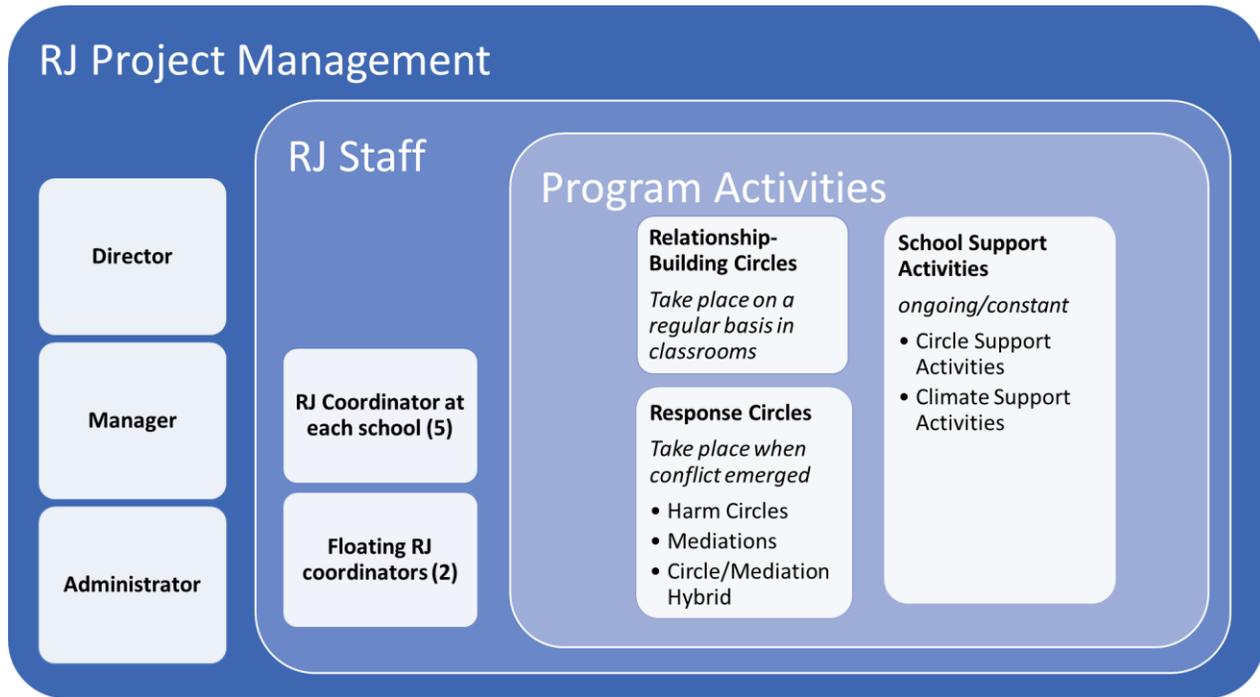
Each school selected between one and five staff members to participate in both relationship-building circles and harm circles training and received four days of on-site coaching. In addition, the DOE hired one district-wide staff person (the D18 RJ coordinator) to organize training and provide support to build district-wide capacity. Based on data provided by the DOE, Figure 4 shows the total number of teachers trained in restorative justice in District 18 over a three-year period.



Program Description

The Center for Court Innovation obtained funding to conduct a randomized controlled trial involving the implementation of fully staffed restorative justice across five randomly assigned District 18 high schools. Another five high schools were randomly assigned to the control group. The program was implemented across Years 1, 2, and 3. The restorative justice program aimed to improve school climate, strengthen relationships schoolwide, prevent and intervene in conflict, reduce incidents and suspensions, and enhance any existing restorative practices already in place. Some staff in these schools had previously received training as part of the larger NYC DOE restorative justice initiative. The team that carried out the implementation at the five treatment schools was composed of five dedicated RJ coordinators (one assigned to each restorative justice school), two assistants who floated across the five schools, a supervising coordinator, an administrator, and a program director (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Restorative Justice Program Staffing and Key Activities in Treatment Schools



It is important to acknowledge that this team structure is *not* common in the restorative justice field. Most school-based RJ coordinators are operating independently or with a small informal support network. Thus, this project presents a unique implementation strategy, with RJ coordinators connected across schools, providing support to one another, and creating space for collaboration.

After coordinating with administrators at each school to pin down program logistics (e.g., schedule, space, implementation), a full-time restorative justice coordinator was assigned to each school. These RJ coordinators did not have school responsibilities such as teaching or mandated caseloads. Rather, they led circles; provided RJ coaching; supported teachers; and developed, promoted, and participated in a wide variety of activities with students and school staff.

Program Components

To achieve their goals, the program had three core components: relationship-building circles, harm circles, and school support activities that can be divided into circle support activities and climate support activities (Figure 5).

Relationship-Building Circles Relationship-building circles were typically held during regularly scheduled class periods, either in classrooms or rooms specially designated for restorative justice. These circles were intended to build positive relationships (e.g., between peers, between students and school staff) across the school through group conversations and other activities (e.g., playing games). The Center staff drew on years of experience in youth justice, positive youth engagement, and restorative justice to design a relationship-building curriculum. This curriculum guided circle topics, while allowing flexibility for impromptu topics generated by participating students' interests.

RJ program staff collected data on circle implementation, but that data does not include circles or activities conducted by school staff or teachers. In three schools (School 1, 2, and 3), circles led or facilitated by the RJ in Schools team were the only restorative practices occurring at the school. In the other two schools, school-funded restorative justice staff and other school staff were involved in circle implementation. The official program data may not reflect these additional circles if RJ program staff were not also involved. Relationship-building circle implementation varied significantly by school. Notably, schools differed in terms of the number of weekly circles and the participating grades. In most cases, circles were primarily facilitated by the designated RJ

coordinator. Teachers participated in most relationship-building circles (81%) led by RJ coordinators. In some cases, circles were facilitated (8%) or co-facilitated (13%) by teachers or school staff trained in restorative justice or coached by the RJ coordinators. During the period for relationship-building circles, students went to the designated restorative justice room or the coordinator went to the students. On average, there were 19 students per circle, reflecting class sizes at the participating schools. Classes of more than 20 students were split into two groups and sent to two separate rooms. In such instances, one circle was facilitated by the dedicated RJ coordinator and the second circle was facilitated by a floating

Circle Elements Defined

Talking piece: Usually a meaningful object used during circles to facilitate the discussion by ensuring everyone has an opportunity to be heard. The person holding the talking piece can talk, while others listen. Participants can choose to speak or pass the talking piece if they do not want to share.

Centerpiece: An object used to mark the center of the circle. In the classroom setting, students and the circle facilitator are seated in a circle without desks or obstacles between them, with the Centerpiece in the middle.

Check-ins: These are short interactions with brief questions that allowed RJ coordinators to assess how a student was doing, or the reasons for their behavior.

Opening/closing ceremonies: These ceremonies were used to mark the beginning and the end of circles. They served as a transition from the school life into the circle space and vice versa. A song, a poem or a quote could serve as an opening ceremony.

coordinator or a teacher. Relationship-building circles were most often implemented in advisory period (44%), civics (31%), and Crew (12%). Advisory and Crew are cohort-based classes that meet to focus on skill-building and academic support.

Relationship-building circles were implemented with high fidelity to expected circle practice. Specifically, over 92% of the circles included the use of a talking piece, a central tool for ensuring equitable opportunity that helps manage disruptions in the circle. About 70% of circles included a centerpiece and a check-in question, and another 54% involved an opening ceremony. Only 34% included a closing ceremony or check out question, reportedly due to the constraints of the limited class periods and need for students to rush to their next class.¹⁵

Circles were conducted in different grades depending on the school, varied slightly and, in most cases, changed across the three years of program implementation. Three schools (1, 3, and 4) started in multiple grades (9th, 10th, and 11th), but were unable to maintain this breadth of programming over the subsequent program years, ultimately focusing on 9th graders. Two schools were able to maintain the same level of programming across all three years: school 2 limited programming to a single grade (9th), while school 5 provided programming to students in all four grades.

The number of weekly circle sessions also varied across schools. In schools 1, 2, and 4, circles took place twice a week. This was also the case for school 3 during the first year, but the circles became less frequent in year two and stopped entirely by year three. In school 5, circles were programmed every day. These variations followed individual school schedules and time availability. In most cases, circles were fit into advisory or elective periods, but not all schools have these periods. Table 6 shows the proportion of all circles by grade across all schools during the three years of implementation. In general, younger students were more

Table 6. The Majority of Circles Were Held in the 9th Grade

Grade	Percent of Circles
9th grade	50%
10th grade	20%
11 th grade	13%
12 th grade	3%
Mixed grades	14%

¹⁵ Relationship building circles took place during regular class periods. When the bell rang to indicate the end of the period, students needed to immediately go to their next class.

likely to participate in the relationship-building circles, in large part due to school preferences related to RJ implementation as well as program prioritization of newer students as a mechanism for greater culture change and sustainability.

Harm Circles and Mediations Harm circles primarily occurred in response to specific incidents, such as student misbehavior (e.g., bullying, fighting). For example, after an incident, the RJ coordinator would speak separately to the students involved and suggest a harm circle to address the problem. If students agreed, the coordinator would prepare with each student and invite other community members—such as teachers, other students, and occasionally parents—to support the involved parties. Every person participating in the harm circle was invited to talk. Because harm circles require preparation—talking to each student separately, inviting support people for each student, finding a room, coordinating everyone’s schedules—they usually took place days after a conflict emerged. However, on very rare occasions a harm circle happened immediately following a conflict. Harm circles may occur over a series of sessions until circle participants agreed that the issue had been addressed. Occasionally, harm circles were convened as *reentry circles* to help individuals transition back to school after an extended absence or suspension.

While harm circles were originally intended to serve as a key intervention to address conflict, a harm circle/mediation hybrid was ultimately the most widely used strategy for conflict resolution. Many schools had relied on mediation prior to restorative justice implementation. Mediation calls for a separate conversation with each one of the parties involved beforehand, but since it does not require convening others, it usually occurred the same day of the conflict. The RJ coordinators also worked closely with the staff conducting mediation to enhance implementation. The RJ coordinators were most likely to use the harm circle/mediation hybrid as their primary approach to addressing conflict.

The use of mediation in conjunction with harm circles or other practices to intervene in conflict is a common practice in schools implementing restorative justice. In prior studies, scholars have indicated that it is important for school staff to have multiple tools and strategies for addressing conflict (Sandwick et al. 2019). However, harm circles are intended to occur over multiple sessions to allow for deep discussions and proper reconciliation. Harm circles were rarely implemented in this way, and instead the harm circle/mediation hybrid became the most commonly used practice by RJ coordinators. This is primarily due to the logistics of conducting multiple sessions with multiple players in a school setting, the challenges to long-term engagement in conflict resolution with youth, and the perceived need to resolve conflict quickly before it escalates further.

School Support Activities The work of RJ coordinators expanded well beyond circle facilitation, as they sought to create a more supportive school environment. This work involved two main types of activities: (a) climate support activities, including creating clubs and events to build relationships and improve school climate; and (b) circle support activities, including training and coaching school-based staff, conducting one-to-one conversations with both students and staff, and creating space for connections.

- **Climate Support Activities:** These activities increased and consolidated over the course of program implementation. They were intended to cultivate a sense of belonging beyond classrooms or circles. These included pep rallies, talent shows, mural paintings, dances, and carnivals, and the RJ teams assessed them as a fundamental part of the work to build a positive school climate. RJ coordinators also promoted and guided student clubs and chaperoned students on field trips and college visits.
- **Circle Support Activities:** These activities grew out of the coordinators' presence in the schools and were more informal, allowing coordinators to strengthen relationships with students and to support students and school staff beyond time spent in circle. Coordinators held one-on-one conversations with students, restorative chats, student check-ins, conflict discussions, or interventions and support in moments of crisis. They had conversations or meetings with teachers, principals, and other school-based staff. RJ coordinators also spent a significant amount of time working with students and teachers to design, develop, and support circles, including student- and teacher-led circles.

Racial Justice and Equity

From its inception, restorative justice implementation in these five schools has directly and indirectly centered racial justice and equity. The RJ coordinator team is diverse, consisting of predominantly Black and brown staff, including three staff who grew up in the same or nearby neighborhoods as the schools they worked in. The staffing decisions on the project were intentional, as project leaders recognized the need for staff whose lived experience mirrored those of the mostly Black students in the schools.

Training for the RJ coordinators involved a heavy emphasis on topics related to identity, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and masculinity (Sasson et al. 2021). In turn, RJ coordinators led numerous circles and groups around these topics in the schools. Additionally, the RJ team regularly discussed the systemic nature of oppression in the

schools and communities in which they were working and sought to acknowledge this context in shaping their work.

Implementation Differences across Schools

The five schools were located on two different campuses. Each campus was comprised of three to five small schools (some not included in the study), with shared amenities (e.g., auditoriums, gyms, libraries, cafeterias). Entering both campuses required students, visitors, and their belongings to go through a metal detector and x-ray machine supervised by the New York Police Department's School Safety Division.

Although the program design was the same for the five selected schools, implementation varied from school to school throughout the project—a necessary adaptation to differing school contexts. Variations included programming (i.e., weekly number of circles, grades in which circles took place); designated space for restorative justice activities; pre-existing restorative justice in the schools; and leadership support, described further below.

Despite these variations, there were common implementation patterns across schools. As implementation progressed, RJ coordinators in all schools experienced increasing demands to handle students' crises and disciplinary issues. Across all schools, staff support for restorative justice varied. Some staff supported and embraced restorative practices, while others were less engaged and either did not see restorative justice as part of their job or did not believe the approach could address disciplinary issues.

Designated space for RJ In two schools (schools 3 and 4), there was a room designated for restorative justice activities, including offices for the RJ coordinators. Circles took place in these rooms, as well as one-on-one chats between students and the RJ coordinators. The rooms were decorated with inspiring messages and chairs were set out in a circle shape. RJ coordinators in the remaining schools (1, 2, and 5) had designated office spaces where they could meet with students and school staff, but circles took place in regular classrooms.

Pre-existing Restorative Approaches Most schools already had some familiarity with restorative approaches prior to the implementation of the current project. Several were already using mediation to address conflict in some cases. School 5 started using teacher-facilitated restorative justice circles two years before program implementation. In addition to the program RJ coordinator, this school had its own RJ coordinator; the two coordinators worked closely together during program implementation.

Leadership Support Principals in all five schools designated restorative justice spaces and integrated circles into the course schedule. However, there was variation across schools with respect to administrative support for the program and its implementation. Support also evolved in some schools as leadership experienced transformation in school climate. Three schools (1, 4, and 5) had somewhat consistent support from school administration across the implementation period, with increasing interest in restorative justice as a whole school approach and sustainability planning to continue beyond the end of the program. In one school (2), administrative support meant providing the resources needed for implementation without explicitly prioritizing restorative justice efforts or planning for sustainability. School 3 was an outlier, as changes in school leadership meant less frequent circles for the second year and no circles at all during the final year.