Chapter 10

Building an Agenda for Restorative Justice Practices in Education:
Utilizing Public Relations Strategies to Influence Education Reform

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ABSTRACT

Punitive disciplinary policies in schools have drastic effects on student performance and success among minority students. These disciplinary policies have a direct impact on the school-to-prison pipeline issue in America. In recent years, restorative justice practices have been implemented in schools to replace punitive disciplinary policies like the zero-tolerance policy. However, to truly see the benefits of restorative justice practices in schools, there needs to be an increased awareness of its principles and benefits. This study examines how restorative justice discourse on Twitter can build an agenda for increased awareness of restorative justice practices in schools and policy changes regarding punitive discipline practices.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, enormous amounts of research have been conducted on issues concerning discipline practices within American school systems. Some disciplinary strategies, like zero-tolerance policies, strengthen the school-to-prison pipeline

(Heitzeg, 2009). These policies are known for aiding in increasing youth violence and embedding criminal characterizations of youth in communities of color. These policies undeniably affect drop-out rates and expulsion rates—while having little evidence proving they successfully increase school safety (Heitzeg, 2009).

Disciplinary actions such as suspension and expulsion have staggering implications on student performance in Black students. When students miss class, they are not able to receive necessary class time instruction (Bell & Puckett, 2020). Many teachers do not allow students to make up assignments, thus creating barriers to academic achievement (Bell & Puckett, 2020). Furthermore—in many urban cities, school suspension decreases achievement in subjects such as math and reading (Lacoe & Steinberg, 2019). Increased adoption of diverse methods of addressing discipline in schools is pertinent to the academic performance of minority students. One method to explore is restorative justice.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice practices focus on repairing harm as opposed to focusing on the concept of punishment. This practice implements collaborative approaches that bring offenders, victims, and communities together to address the offender's offenses. Restorative justice holds students who misbehave accountable by addressing their offenses using various approaches (Mayworm et al., 2016). Some approaches are peacemaking circles, victim-offender mediation, and community conferencing (Mayworm et al., 2016).

Over the years, schools, communities, and lawmakers have rallied around the thought of turning disciplinary and behavioral violations into transformative learning experiences. This approach invites more significant opportunities to address disciplinary offenses in a less punitive manner. Brenda Morrison (2002) stated, "In broad terms restorative justice constitutes an innovative approach to both offending or challenging behaviour which puts repairing harm done to relationships and people over and above the need for assigning blame and dispensing punishment." School systems and local, state, and national governments should strongly consider adopting more policies that allow restorative justice practices to become widely utilized. One way to do this is through creating media campaigns that target understanding and adoption of restorative justice practices and programs.

The Role of Public Relations in Social Change

To change a system of governance is an act of social change. Social change movements have an interdependency on communication, media, and public relations. Movements like the civil rights movement, the women's suffrage movement, and

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