Developing a Pedagogy of Restorative Physical Education

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the process of developing an alternative physical education program using restorative justice practices as a transformative approach to social–emotional learning.

Method: This study utilizes qualitative case study methods to examine the implementation process and short-term outcomes. Data sources include focus group interviews, student journals, observations, and reflective field notes. Trustworthiness of the findings are supported by triangulation, peer debriefings, prolonged engagement, and external program reviews.

Results: The implementation of social and emotional learning was substantiated by student engagement with four class goals in which they aimed to participate in physical education as "champions," "heroes," "achievers," and "peacemakers." Restorative pedagogy included restorative chats, listening circles, community circles, and healing circles.

Conclusion: This study suggests that transformative curriculum, such as restorative justice, offers a transformative approach to social and emotional learning that is applicable to physical education.

Keywords: restorative justice | social and emotional learning | transformative pedagogy | community-engaged scholarship

Article:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an area of research and practice receiving attention from physical education researchers and policymakers (Wright, Gordon, & Gray, 2020). Several instructional models provide physical educators with best practice frameworks for teaching SEL (Dyson, Howley, & Wright, 2020). National standards for physical education include SEL in their description of physically literate students as valuing physical activity and exhibiting responsible behaviors (SHAPE America, 2013). Despite its promise to offer positive learning experiences to all students, the SEL movement has hardly acknowledged the insidious nature of race and racism on education policies and practices, such as SEL (Rogers, Griffin, & Warren, 2020). This is especially problematic for Black students who are often bound to racially segregated schools, and as Darling-Hammond (2005, p. 205) explains, "the schooling experiences of African-American [students] in the United States continue to be substantially separate and unequal." The authors believe this is an urgent concern because physical educators are reaching a growing consensus on positive outcomes of SEL without considering how SEL addresses race and equity. The purpose of this study was to examine the process of developing an alternative physical education program using restorative justice as a transformative approach to SEL.

SEL and its Applications in (Physical) Education

The SEL has been described as a "process through which youth and adults cultivate skills and abilities necessary to effectively problem solve, negotiate conflict, and efficaciously navigate the world around them" (Warren, Presberry, & Louis, 2020, p. 2). A framework for SEL promoted by the Collaborative on Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a leading model for defining and implementing SEL in education generally (Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, & Xie, 2018) and physical education specifically (Gordon, Jacobs, & Wright, 2016). The CASEL framework suggests that SEL is represented in five interrelated competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationships skills, and social awareness). Meta-analysis studies have found SEL interventions to improve student academic performance (Corcoran et al., 2018), improve students' sense of belonging in schools, reduce behavioral problems (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010), and promote positive youth development (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). These studies have drawn attention to the importance of implementation fidelity for SEL programs. Durlak et al. (2010) found that the presence of four "SAFE" (i.e., sequenced, active, focused, explicit) attributes are important to successful outcomes. This suggests that SEL implementation is enhanced by sequenced activities to promote SEL skills, introduced through active learning, focused on SEL skills that are explicitly targeted by SEL programs. SAFE measures have also supported SEL skill development in physical education contexts (Gordon et al., 2016; Hemphill & Richards, 2016).

There is a long history of scholarly conversation about physical education and SEL-related topics, such as positive character development (McCloy, 1930), values-based education (Wandzilak, 1985), and responsibility skills (Hellison, 1978). This conversation has argued that effective physical education programs can promote positive outcomes, such as improved communication skills, leadership, and teamwork, among other personal and social skills. However, the academic community has often questioned the veracity of such claims (Hellison & Walsh, 2002). In more recent history, physical educators' have situated their work in positive youth development, suggesting that youth develop positive internal and external assets through physical activity that are applicable across contexts and the lifespan (Wright & Burton, 2008). While this promising line of work continues, it tends to be situated in disciplinary perspectives from sport psychology (Weiss & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2009) and has been more prominent outside of schools than within them (Armour, Sandford, & Duncombe, 2013). Given this history, it is no surprise that a growing interest in SEL has been met with claims that "we have been doing this all along" and questions from others on "does SEL work" in school physical education (Dyson et al., 2020, p. 2). One important distinction is that SEL is situated within a larger education movement where a critical mass of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers are advocating for the adoption of SEL in school curriculum (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

A review of research focused on personal and social development in physical education reported that SEL outcomes commonly associated with physical education include work ethic, behavior control, goal setting, decision making, problem solving, responsibility, leadership, cooperation, relationship building, communication, and prosocial behavior (Opstoel et al., 2020). Hellison's (2011) model of teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) was the most cited instructional approach. Another review of research shows that TPSR is closely aligned with SEL and has demonstrated the ability to promote equity and inclusion (Dyson et al., 2020). In the United States, research on the TPSR model has often been associated with urban schools characterized by students who are underrepresented in public spaces and underserved by public institutions (Richards & Shiver, 2020). While TPSR has shown promise in urban physical education (Wright & Burton, 2008), the evidence base related to working with urban youth is often situated in out-of-school contexts (Martinek & Hemphill, 2020). More research on TPSR in urban school physical education may promote a better understanding of SEL among diverse students.

Transformative Social and Emotional Learning

Recent scholarship notes the race-neutral lens in which SEL programs are often situated. A color-blind approach generalizes SEL across contexts without accounting for systemic factors that shape students' ability to take on personal and social responsibility (El Mallah, 2020). Schools in urban environments are characterized by diverse populations that are more likely to be disadvantaged by economic and structural issues (Milner, 2012). Urban schools offer learning experiences that are different from those in suburban or rural settings, and this is particularly true for Black students. For example, Black students are more likely than any other racial group to experience punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices, such as out-of-school suspension. The exclusionary punishments are rooted in classroom practices where subjective conflicts are not resolved effectively. Consequently, Black students are more likely to be referred to disciplinary principals (Milner, 2020). Gregory and Fergus (2017) assert that there are two reasons for this disparity in school punishment, a reliance on color-blind approaches to policy, and a focus on student behavior that dismisses the role of adults (i.e., teachers and administrators). There is an urgent need for transformative approaches to SEL that account for injustices that are endemic to the public schooling experiences of minority youth and Black students in particular.

Transformative Social and Emotional Learning (TSEL) is a justice-oriented extension of SEL focused on race equity (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Williams, 2019). A working definition is offered by CASEL, suggesting that TSEL is "a process whereby students and teachers build strong, respectful relationships founded on an appreciation of similarities and differences, learn to critically examine root causes of inequity, and develop collaborative solutions to community and societal problems" (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018, p. 3). TSEL also acknowledges that SEL competencies can be problematic; for example, the competency "responsible decision making" may cause harm in contexts where individuals are blamed for problems without examining systemic causes of inequities. If applied in a color-blind manner, one might conclude that the overrepresentation of Black students in out-of-school suspension is due to their behavioral irresponsibility. This faulty logic fails to consider systemic racism and its enduring impact on Black students in schools (Milner, 2020). To account for this, TSEL offers a revision of the five SEL competencies to include "equity elaborations" that account for race in the design and implementation of SEL programs (Jagers et al., 2019). Furthermore, TSEL reminds scholars to consider the competencies necessary for teachers to provide culturally appropriate student learning opportunities (Warren et al., 2020). This requires teachers to consider how race and racism has shaped their own lives and how an antiracist perspective can inform their pedagogy (Legette, Rogers, & Warren, 2020).

Restorative justice has been cited as a promising approach for implementing TSEL in public schools (Jagers et al., 2019). It has shown promise for holistic implementation in urban schools (Wadhwa, 2016) and for countering punitive practices impacting Black girls in schools (Morris, 2018). Many urban schools have adopted restorative justice for its procedural conferencing process, which has been shown to reduce school suspension (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016). Restorative conferences are an administrative practice used to include parties impacted by conflict in a process to determine a just outcome. Conferences may be impactful on their own, but they are disconnected from restorative pedagogy in the classroom. A holistic model of restorative justice emphasizes a values-based commitment to building, sustaining, and, when necessary, repairing relationships (Wadhwa, 2016). The values are complemented by pedagogical practices that help cultivate inclusive classroom communities (Pointer, McGoey, & Farrar, 2020). The most common restorative pedagogical tool is the circle process, which is used to invite the perspectives of all students into conversation (Pranis, 2005). Affective statements and questions are also commonly employed as restorative pedagogy that aims to identify a person's feelings as they experience conflict or develop relationships (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2018). These pedagogical tools are often called "restorative practices" because they draw upon restorative justice but are not necessarily aimed at achieving justice.

Similar to SEL, restorative justice is not inherently transformative and can promote values that further marginalize students. For example, Annamma and Winn (2019) explain that teacher education programs that prioritize standards and curriculum implementation often reinforce political messages grounded in Whiteness. Winn (2018) expands on this critique, suggesting that many schools prefer the language of restorative "practices" to emphasize personal responsibility without considering institutional or systemic injustices. Justice-oriented approaches require intentional reflective practices grounded in four pedagogical stances are necessary to assist teachers in the "mindset work that must occur for practitioners to be open and to be fully immersed in restorative justice practice" (Winn, 2018, p. 32). These complementary stances are values-based in their claims that (a) history matters, (b) race matters, (c) justice matters, and (d) language matters. Restorative justice practice informed by intentional pedagogical stances may provide a model for TSEL in physical education. Adopting these pedagogical stances, for example, might suggest to physical educators that a school's history of racial injustice in punishment practices matter when they respond to student misbehavior. These stances might also balance scholarly interest in individual responsibility with the responsibility of public institutions to provide a just education to students. Scholars have suggested that the focus on restorative justice in schools is skewed toward disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline at level of school administration (Morris, 2018). Restorative pedagogy that builds leadership skills, repairs relationships, and helps students process their school experiences is needed for Black youth in urban schools. Winn (2018) explains that a justice-oriented restorative pedagogy can be transformative in subjects, such as English education, history, mathematics, and social studies. The purpose of this study was to examine the process of developing an alternative physical education program using restorative justice as a transformative approach to SEL. Research questions included (a) Is it feasible to implement restorative justice in high school physical education? and (b) How was restorative justice pedagogy evident in the alternative physical education program?

Method

This paper is situated in the scholarship of engagement, which posits that universities should be committed partners to community institutions in their work to address societies most pressing problems (Boyer, 2016). This approach is consistent with histories of Black education and successful models of SEL in physical education. Collaboration between universities and K–12 schools was a source of resilience in Black communities prior to school integration. Walker (2018, pp. 24–25) explains that "Black educators in higher education and in public schools did not exist separately from one another . . . research ideas were disseminated into public schools and public schools held researchers accountable for the viability of research plans." Similarly, much of the research on the TPSR model has emerged from engaged scholarship (Wright, Fuerniss, & Cutforth, 2020), characterized by the integration of research with activities traditionally viewed as service (Martinek & Hellison, 1997). Following this tradition of engagement, the current study employed the concept of reciprocity (Cooper & Orrell, 2016) to ensure constructive engagement with community partners that centers the needs and interests of community-based perspectives. This practice may facilitate a merging of theoretical perspectives preferred by universities with social issues facing practitioners in adjacent communities. The research team formed a partnership with a public high school and nonprofit social service provider to address a community-identified concern related to exclusionary discipline practices at the partner school. A qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003) is employed to examine the development of an alternative physical education program through a university–community partnership.

Community Partnership and Context

This research is situated in what Milner (2012) classifies as an "urban emergent" school, signified by its location in a city with a growing population and less than 1 million residents, student diversity, and academic disparities that are often observed in larger urban cities. A precise definition of urban education is not yet realized, but the presence of inequality is central to its definition in education research (Welsh & Swain, 2020). In this urban context, the partnership team was most concerned with vast disparities in school punishment practices. At the time this partnership was formed, Black students in the school district were 4.2 times more likely to receive short-term school suspension than White students, representing 71% of out-of-school suspensions despite representing 41% of students. A nonprofit social service agency was contracted by the school district to help address community-based challenges that have a negative impact on students at school. This agency, Communities of Promise (pseudonym), identified the issue of exclusionary punishment as a top priority, and facilitated the school–university partnership described in this study.

Marshall High School

Exclusionary punishment was especially apparent at Marshall, the district's historically Black high school. Marshall has been led by Black principals and senior administrators since its founding in the 1920s. Its students were impacted by poverty in the surrounding urban neighborhood. It was common for Communities of Promise to assist Marshall students with housing, childcare, food, and other social services to help students stay on track for high school graduation. Consistent with national trends in urban schools (Milner, 2013), Marshall students were often in conflict with teachers and students. The conflicts too often escalated and resulted in school suspension. During the initial year of this study, 36.5% of Marshall students were chronically absent from school (i.e., absent for 10% or more of the total school days). A large contributor to chronic absenteeism was school suspension (30% of absences), causing those excluded by punishment to be further alienated from school.

Consistent with histories of African American education (Walker, 2013), Marshall High School is a symbol of Black struggle and resilience. Many of its alumni are revered for their achievements as "Black firsts," such as becoming the first Black judge elected to a state court, first Black congresswoman in the state's delegation, first Black medical doctor at the local hospital, and first Black baseball player for a professional team. It continues to produce successful graduates who follow the illustrious path of their predecessors to success in public service, athletics, business, and community service. Marshall students have played prominent roles in national civil rights protests since its founding in the 1920s through the current Movement for Black Lives. Given this distinguished history, it was clear that Marshall High School holds considerable assets to address the problems it faces.

Partnership Profile

Communities of Promise served as a bridge between the university and Marshall High School, leveraging its knowledge of the assets possessed by each institution. The issue of exclusionary punishment was the primary concern at the inception of this partnership in 2016. Despite an interest in research, the university partners were advised that research goals are transactional in nature and often have not served Marshall High School's interest. Therefore, it was determined that research agendas would not be pursued until trust could be established and the research could be situated in the interests of Marshall. The university offered expertise in program development related to physical education, SEL, and restorative justice. Many teachers and administrators were well trained in SEL and restorative justice through elective professional development but purposely dismissed those programs as being disconnected from the particular needs of Black students. Throughout one academic year, the partnership team discussed these issues once each month, and the university researchers visited the school weekly to observe classes, meet with teachers, and volunteer in school-led programs. The most illustrative example of reciprocity is reflected in the conflicting interests of the school and researchers. The research team proposed an afterschool physical activity program for students who were suspended from school or at-risk for school dropout. This approach has shown promise in scholarship on SEL (Martinek & Hemphill, 2020). The school officials asserted, however, that university researchers do not possess the resources necessary to address complex issues that our target population may experience. An afterschool program might only serve as a momentary distraction from the persistent challenges students were facing. Instead, the school district recognized opportunities to reform ninth-grade physical education in a manner that could reach a larger number of students as they begin their high school experience.

Alternative Physical Education Program

Over 2 years, an alternative physical education program was implemented with an explicit focus on restorative justice. A university research team was led by three professors (M.A. Hemphill, J. Rinker, and and O.L. Dyson); two graduate students (Sun and Mary); and three undergraduate students1 (Sarah, Brittany, and Jason). Six members of the research team completed at least 2 days of training on implementing restorative justice in education through a reputable national organization (Costello et al., 2018). The research team led a physical education program with ninth-grade students twice per week for 90 min during regularly scheduled physical education class in the 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 academic years. All students were given a choice between the traditional physical education program offered by the school and the alternative program. Students who were known to have issues with conflict and school attendance were strongly encouraged by school officials to attend the alternative program. The TPSR model served as a basis for the physical education program, with adaptations to integrate restorative justice (Hemphill et al., 2018) including using restorative circles (Pranis, 2005) to replace the awareness talk and group meeting that are common bookends to TPSR lessons. Taekwondo served as the physical activity content, with a certified Taekwondo expert serving as lead instructor. The researchers did not have experience implementing this approach and considered the program to be a work-in-progress to be shaped by experience and input from key stakeholders. Each academic semester, 24 lessons were implemented and an average 19 students attended each lesson. At least three members of the research team attended each lesson and participated alongside students in all activities. Due to the elective nature of participation, the students sometimes fluctuated during the first year of the program, making it impossible to provide precise demographic information. However, there was equal gender representation and student race/ethnicity mirrored that of Marshall (i.e., Black = 78%; Hispanic = 14%; Asian = 3%; White = 2%).

A Marshall physical educator was assigned to support the alternative program by ensuring access to facilities, equipment, and assist with logistics. Physical educators and other school officials periodically visited the class as a show of support, but there was no collaboration among teachers and researchers in developing the new program. Instead, the researchers were given autonomy to develop their program while the traditional physical education courses benefited from reduced class sizes. Each class followed a sequential format (i.e., relational time, opening circle, Taekwondo, closing circle). Rituals common to restorative circles were included, such as using symbolic relics in the center of the circle. As one example, a news article depicting the namesake behind Marshall High School was used as a centerpiece. A conversation was held about who Mr. Marshall was and why he is important, establishing him as an honorary figure. The placing of this story at the center of the circle serves as a reminder of norms the class aspired to. A talking piece was always used in circles to signify who has the right to speak and call the attention of others who are listeners. The talking piece was typically voluntary provided by students who were asked to share what the object means to them before introducing it to the circle. Circle time was a top priority of the program. While it was most common for a circle to last 5–10 min, the researchers often allowed circle conversations to continue to for as long as 30–45 min.

This research was reviewed and approved by the institutional review boards of the university and the school district. Reflective of the community-engaged approach to scholarship, the school district required the program to have a primary intent to improve the learning experience of students. This impacted the nature of data collection. Most notably, informed consent permission slips were difficult to obtain from some students who would benefit from the program. To prioritize giving all students an access to the learning opportunity, the research protocol was revised such that individual informed consent was not required. As a consequence, this study does not report identifiable individual data from students and relies heavily on reflective data from adult participants. When student voice is included, a pseudonym is provided to illustrate the student's gender identity and assist with the flow of the paper.

Data Collection

Several sources of data informed this case study including reflections, field notes, focus group interviews, student journals, and program evaluations. First, reflections were recorded by all members of the research team immediately after each class. A structured reflection form was e-mailed to all members of the research team with question prompts to report on the strengths and weaknesses of the lesson overall and specific segments of the lesson. Second, one research team member was assigned to take reflective field notes as a participant observer for the duration of each lesson. Field notes included a list of topics discussed in circles, comments on physical activities, and other examples of the strengths or weaknesses. Third, focus group interviews were employed with students who had demonstrated a strong commitment to the program through their attendance and participation. These interviews were conducted as a circle process, building on the student's familiarity with circles and ensuring equal opportunities to speak among all students. Fourth, student journals were periodically completed to provide students an opportunity to elaborate on the values of the program. Finally, external program evaluations were performed by two physical education scholars who did not have a role in the program. The evaluators were asked to provide a nonparticipant observational account of the program and debrief program leaders on their perception of the activities.

Data Analysis

All data were transcribed and uploaded to a shared software platform to allow multiple researchers to engage in an inductive analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Following a broad review of the data, preliminary themes were suggested. Three co-authors (M.A. Hemphill, Y. Lee, S. Ragab) met periodically to review the themes and develop definitions that were derived inductively through the findings. Following several practice rounds of coding, this led to the development of a consensus codebook that included an audit trail of all findings related to each thematic code (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings including triangulation of multiple sources and the inclusion of several data analyst, peer debriefings, and prolonged community engagement (Burke, 2016). This was further enhanced by external program evaluations conducted by two university physical education scholars who were not affiliated with the research program.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of developing an alternative physical education program using restorative justice as a transformative approach to SEL. Results are organized in two themes that address each research questions: (a) Is it feasible to implement restorative justice through high school physical education? and (b) How was restorative justice pedagogy evidence in the alternative physical education program?

Implementing Restorative Justice

Over the course of two academic years, the restorative justice physical education program was implemented four times with 76 student participants. A coherent lesson format was consistently followed and facilitated the integration of SEL concepts into physical activity. The program adopted values-based goals for students to aspire to be champions, heroes, achievers, and peacemakers within and beyond physical education (see Table 1). These person-centered labels allowed the researchers to set expectations for participation in the program and also invited students to elaborate on the goals based on their preference. Students were commonly asked questions like, “who is a ‘champion’ in your life,” “what does ‘hero’ mean to you,” “how can you be an achiever at school,” or “who is a ‘peacemaker’ who you admire?” Through circle processes, students elaborated on program goals in a way that creates shared norms. The researchers made clear that students are expected to show respect during class, but students contributed their view of the values, “to me a champion is someone who puts others before themselves but knows how to have self-love and care at the same time,” according to Nicole. Conversations with students helped the researchers understand that they view “heroes” differently. Students appreciated learning about “heroes” who had achieved “black firsts” from their school. But they also admired heroes in their community who “tried his hardest to help out his family” and achievers among their peers who “strive to get out of here” to pursue postgraduate opportunities. Reflections routinely reported students attaching the values of the program to their lived experiences. Field notes captured the following circle:

> We were talking about Hero. Several questions were who is your hero and what are characteristic make up the hero we look up to? Most students said their heroes were mom and dad. The characteristics of hero that majority students answered was being responsible. For example, a female student said “my mom is being responsible, she is working very hard and taking care of family.” Another student said, “my dad always comes back home no matter what time, he keeps going and never gives up.” Also, a female student said “my mom is taking care of my classmate who is not able to pack lunch” so her mom packs lunch for her friend.

Restorative conversations affirmed that the goals were meaningful to students but provide students with a voice to shape their expectations in the image of their friends and family who they admired more than distant examples of admirable figures presented to them by outsiders of their community.

Another way restorative justice was evident in program implementation was through the consistent use of a scripted lesson format following the sequence of relational time, opening circles, physical activity with life skill integration, and closing circles. Reflection reports from researchers confirmed circle processes were held at the beginning and end of nearly every class, with an occasional exception when the opening circle ran so long that the closing circle was abbreviated or eliminated. It was common for one of the four goals to be a theme discussed in opening circle, lead to integration into Taekwondo, and conclude with a reflective circle. The most successful integration approach was the use of partners to practice punching, kicking, and defense techniques. This aligned well with the “Hero” theme, which calls for students to take responsibility, help others, and care for their class/community. Following practice sessions with peer feedback, students often had opportunities to demonstrate their success in a physical activity circle. Students were aware of some inherent risks with a contact sport like Taekwondo. Following the “Peacemaker” theme, listening circles were employed to discuss the importance of physical and emotional safety, communication, and forgiving honest mistake. The listening circles preempted occasional mistakes that occurred in practicing punching or kicking. Anthony reported that

Table 1. Value-Based Goals for the Restorative Justice Physical Education Program

	Champion	**Hero**	**Achiever**	**Peacemaker**
Definition	Champions are considerate of others' feelings and well-being. They teach us how to be optimistic through adversity. To champions, challenges provide an opportunity to grow.	Heroes do good and courageous things for other people. They have a strong sense of justice and goodness and acts upon that sense. Their heroism causes ripple effects throughout the community.	Achievers have clear goals and vision. They can transport themselves into the future in their mind, create clarity on what it looks and feels like, and then translate goals and vision into their reality.	Peacemakers are willing to wade into conflicts to create harmony. They value nonviolence, dialog, tolerance, empathy, and inclusion. To peacemakers, conflicts are opportunity for positive change.
Expectations	Respect Integrity Confidence	Responsibility Helping others Care for community	Preparation Self-direction Perseverance	Self-control Open-mind Cooperation
Activity integration	Meditation/reflection Gestures (bow, handshake) Rules and boundaries	Partner practice Peer feedback/support Positive "shout outs"	Predication and effort Goal setting/monitoring Accept challenges	Physical/emotional safety Communication Forgive honest mistakes
Student elaborations	"I respect as long as I'm respected" "I don't compare myself with others because I respect myself" "Being empathetic, understand others, putting myself in someone's shoes"	"Always helping someone whether its physical or emotional" "Giving a hand when needed" "Someone that makes a good example"	"Being persistent" "Set goals and achieve them in life" "Push past your problems to get stuff done"	"Find solutions to help others" "Talk it out instead of being physical" "Listen to others and their opinions"

students avoided conflicts when they "control the strength of each kick depending on if the person holding the target can handle it."

The implementation of restorative justice was most evident in students depictions of the program and the relationships they perceived to develop within it. Thomas explained, "I've had teachers where they'll teach [content] once and move on" but he perceived that "you guys take time to make sure that everybody understands what is being taught." Tara agreed, explaining that in her experience, "if you're struggling or something, someone would come over and offer you help or do it with you." Ally agreed with several students that "I feel like if I need somebody to talk to, I can come to the circle." This proved true on a number of occasions when students brought difficult issues to the circle. Sarah's notes capture the most illustrative example,

> The circle question was "what challenges have you faced and how have you overcome it?" A female student shared about a death in the family due to violence.

> She said she was depressed but her family was helping her through it . . . everyone expressed empathy. We discussed that challenges are a type of conflict, we all face challenges. Knowing how to overcome it or resolve the conflict is what we are here for . . . the circle was important—it helped acknowledge harm caused by violence in the community.

Circles such as this commonly led to in depth discussions; reflection notes recorded that "all students were not only having problems, but they were also showing they have solutions" (Sun).

Students engaged constructively with goals that asked them to participate in class as champions, heroes, achievers, and peacemakers. They also reflected on what the meaning of those goals and helped shape the researchers' understanding of how SEL goals relate to the lived experience of students (e.g., "respect is a two-way street"). The results suggest that it is feasible to implement restorative justice as a transformational approach to SEL in ninth-grade physical education.

Restorative Justice Pedagogy

Data indicated that several pedagogical strategies emerged from the alternative physical education program including restorative chats, listening circles, community circles, and healing circles. Table 2 provides a description and example of each strategy to complement the narrative. These strategies were informed by best practices and shaped by interactions with students. For example, the program drew upon the TPSR model and restorative justice to implement circle processes, but the context of the circles were shaped as the researchers and students built trust and collaboratively explored a restorative approach to physical education. Restorative chats stand out as the only strategy to commonly occur with individual students or small groups, where researchers intentionally sought out opportunities to build relationships with students. Mary indicated early in the program that, "I found that coming early helped develop conversations with students prior to class," which then became common practice for researchers to arrive early. Sun "tried to say hello to each student individually" and often "asked them to show me skills they have learned." Michael reported a habit of identifying student's interest outside of physical education to inquire about, he explained, "I caught up with a few students who I knew had different projects going, like Amy who is trying to write a short story." These efforts were not always successful, as Jeremy explained "I tried to engage Felix," who had not seemed interested in the program although he continued to attend, "but did not get much out of him." Several weeks later, however, Jason reported that "I made a connection with Felix today . . . joked with him and he seemed motivated to participate."

Restorative circle processes emerged as a foundational restorative pedagogy that invited all students to participate with consistent opportunities to use their voice and hear the voices of their peers. The practice followed a general format that included the use of a talking piece that moved sequentially around the circle to provide speaking opportunities. The inclusive opportunities to speak helped shape three different types of circles focused on listening, community building, and healing. Listening circles, Omari explained, provided "a great opportunity to learn more about the students and see how their voices and talents manifested." Researchers consistently reported that students shaped the curriculum, such as when "students discussed the conflicts they face and the strategies they use to solve them" (Michael). Listening circles were prompted by open-ended questions, such as "what is something you are looking

Table 2. Restorative Justice Pedagogies Employed

Pedagogical strategy	Description	Data-based example
Restorative chats	Explicit attempts to build relationships or address challenges individually or in small groups with students in a way that leads to mutual understanding and/or engagement in the class.	"One student has pulled himself out and is sitting along the wall, [researcher] comes over to check and talk." (external evaluation)
Listening circles	Guided by an open-ended question, provides students a chance to listen to their peers about their experiences, values, or perspectives related to social issues.	"Selma prepared great questions about conflict resolution skills. Most students very actively engaged in the discussion, explaining their style of solving conflicts." (Sun)
Community circles	Circle processes that aim to build a community and understanding among all participants in the class. This includes explicit conversations that identify similarities and differences among students and that reinforce community standards.	"We started the opening circle by introducing [new student] to our community and inviting him to the circle. Students welcomed him by telling him what rules we have and what we expect." (reflection journal)
Healing circles	In response of harm caused to individuals or the community, healing circles provided an intentional space for students to express their thoughts and feelings and discuss how to restore community and prevent harm from reoccurring.	"This was a tough one . . . we discussed the death of a Marshall student and I think we were able to work through some of the thoughts but some students were not ready to talk yet." (Michael)

forward to?" This provoked common responses like "spending time with family," "graduation," and "spring break," and often included follow-up questions, like "what is something you are nervous about or not looking forward to?" Students responded trepidation about "national politics and its effects" and "going through family difficulties." Given this trend, students offered a common wrap-up to listening circles that included providing solutions to problems or encouragement to the challenges their peers were experiencing. Examples included feedback from students to "stay calm, keep a clear mind, lower your anxiety, and be in the moment." Student leaders often facilitated listening circles, which the researchers found helpful "because students are more likely to engage in conversation if the topics are closely related to their life" (Sun). One notable example was provided by Aaron, who led circles asking, "what are your biggest fears and what makes you happiest?" These provoked extensive conversations.

Community circles emerged as an intentional strategy to collectively build relationships among the students in the alternative physical education program. This process was used to introduce new students to the program and allow students to explain the norms and expectations. Michael shared, for example: "I had background info that a new student that doesn't engage well with others . . . we decided to make the opening circle about welcoming the new student." Prompted by student suggestions, the researchers often asked students to discuss "superpowers" the possessed or what they observed in others. "The [superpower] discussion was great because it was age appropriate and popular in our culture during this time," Mary explained. Conversations in community circles surfaced individual characteristics of students that might have otherwise been overlooked. For example, researchers had often noted frustration with Felix, who rarely spoke in circles, but were surprised when Damon identified that “Felix superpower is being a good listener . . . I feel like he don’t ever say much but he always there to listen when you need him.” This perspective helped the researchers shift their focus from a deficit perspective (i.e., Felix is disengaged) to an asset-based approach that recognized his contributions to the community. Another example emerged from student created artifacts. Sun explained, “when I came to the program Sarah and one students were crafting artifacts . . . he liked to show what he has so we invited it as a talking piece.” This example of sharing prompted other students to bring artwork and other personal artifacts to the circle for sharing. As a result, community building circles were held several times to allow all students to bring in a unique artifact and explain its meaning.

A key feature of restorative justice in education is the recognition of harm experienced by all students as a result of systemic factors and interpersonal conflict. This was apparent when the circle process emerged as a place for exploring conflicts and for healing. One example of proactive discussion of conflict was related to rumors spreading, which became apparent through restorative chats with some students. It was common to use the circle process to talk about issues, such as this, why they occur, and what harm is caused. In one example, Allen used a Rubik’s cube to illustrate the problem with rumors spreading. He rotated the cube in view of the circle participants; the various colors of the object became disheveled and difficult to reassemble. Explaining the metaphor, he remarked that “rumors get carried by many people, it spirals out of control and gets further away from the facts.” This illustration prompted other students to identify sources of rumors, such as, “watch out if you are on a sports team” according to Layla. As was common in healing circles, the students’ conversation pivoted to solutions to prevent further harm, such as “just ignore it,” “I stop spreading rumors that I hear,” and “make sure you know what the truth is.” Issues like rumors were commonly experienced in schools, which provided opportunities for students to be comfortable talking in healing circles. This proved valuable when more significant harm occurred. The most notable example was the homicide of a Marshall student who was not a part of the physical education program but was popular in the school and had family connections to several students. “We had a candid dialogue, especially around coping with violence,” Omari explained. The talking piece progressed around the circle for the entire class period (90 min) with “students offering hope to one another” (Sarah). Importantly, the healing circle “helped acknowledge harm caused by violence in the community” (Michael), which expanded the conversation beyond a single instance of violence, “we learned that some students are scared because the violence is close to their homes” (Jason).

Data from this study suggest that restorative pedagogy was observed in the alternative physical education program through intentional practices like restorative chats, listening circles, community circles, and healing circles. Restorative pedagogy in physical education, the findings suggest, is most concerned with building community and strong relationships among peers. This was evident in the use of restorative chats where researchers worked to engage and re-engage students in class activities. This was also evident in the three different types of circle processes employed, all of which focused on giving voice to all students and responding to harm. Conflict was rarely observed in the program, but the researchers were reminded daily that the students were experiencing harm that ranged from routine school issues like rumors spreading to life-threatening community violence that is endemic to many urban communities. When community violence did occur, the existence of an established restorative circle for discussion and reflection seemed critical as this space for dialog must be cultivated before significant harm occurs.

Discussion

The findings of this study are shaped by the authors' commitment to community-engaged scholarship (Boyer, 2016). This approach centered the needs of Marshall High School and a nonprofit social service agency to assist in the community-identified need to address racial disparities in school discipline. This concern for the overrepresentation of Black students in school suspension consistently plagues Black students in urban schools across the United States (Milner, 2020). Multiple researchers and policy-makers have suggested that restorative justice offers promise for reducing school suspensions and improving equity in public education (Gregory et al., 2016; Milner, Cunningham, Delale-O'Connor, & Kestenberg, 2019). With Black students being 4.2 times more likely to be suspended from school than White students, it is understandable that this community-engaged scholarship explored restorative justice as a potential solution. Physical education was determined to be the most appropriate school subject in which to implement restorative justice given the inclusion of relational skills and conflict resolution in state and national standards (SHAPE America, 2013). At the time of this study, there were few published accounts of restorative justice implemented in physical education. Therefore, this study sought to address the feasibility of implementing restorative justice in high school physical education, and how restorative justice was evidenced in an alternative physical education program.

This study suggests that it is feasible to implement restorative justice in high school physical education. Recent studies have reported that secondary school physical educators have viewed restorative justice as a transformational pedagogy (Lynch & Curtner-Smith, 2019) and reported restorative discipline strategies to fit well with the TPSR model (Gray, Wright, Sievwright, & Robertson, 2019). Lynch, Schleider, and McBean (2020) also discussed how restorative practices can help physical educators move away from traditional behavior management techniques and re-envision physical education as a subject that is responsive to lived experiences of students. Another recent study found that physical educators may struggle to implement restorative justice practices in urban schools where a punitive culture exists, suggesting a broader support structure is necessary to advance restorative justice in physical education (Hemphill, Marttinen, & Richards, in press). The emerging conversation on restorative justice in physical education discusses it as most applicable as a response to rule breaking. While this is a central feature of restorative justice, established restorative schools report that proactive relationship building is more common in restorative physical education than reactive disciplinary practices (Hemphill, Janke, Flores, & Gordon, in press). This paper helps broaden this conversation to consider the types of pedagogical strategies applicable to restorative justice in physical education.

This study also has implications for research on SEL in physical education. Education researchers have reached agreement that students can develop competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationships skills, and social awareness) through effective SEL programs (Corcoran et al., 2018). Physical education research suggests that these outcomes can also be attained, often through the use of curricular models such as TPSR (Dyson et al., 2020). CASEL has developed an SEL model that defines how SEL applies to physical education (Wright et al., 2020) and has recently acknowledged that their SEL model falls short of addressing race equity. The TSEL model provides "equity elaborations" to account for systemic issues in SEL programs, but this model has not yet been discussed in physical education (Jagers et al., 2019). The current study provides a model of restorative justice that aligns with TSEL in its explicit attempt to address injustices experienced by Black students in public schools. The context of student learning proved vital to the researchers' ability to implement an alternative physical education program in a culturally appropriate manner (Warren et al., 2020). In this study, for example, the researchers did not have first-hand knowledge of particular issues students were facing, such as harmful rumors spreading in school or the prevalence of violence in students' communities. To develop this knowledge, adults listened to students through circle conversations that were cultivated as a safe space for sharing. This suggests that circle practices in physical education may assist students in understanding the challenges they face as larger systemic harms and not the fault of themselves or their families (Legette et al., 2020).

This study also has implications for research on TPSR (Hellison, 2011). The well-established research and practice on TPSR offers restorative justice as a framework for implementation in physical education. As shown in this study, restorative circles can be implemented to begin and end TPSR lessons, similar to the group meeting strategies commonly employed. Some researchers have already acknowledged synergy among TPSR and restorative justice (Gray et al., 2019; Hemphill et al., 2018). Restorative justice adds to the expanding boundaries of TPSR, which has been successfully adapted to suit various cultural contexts and curricular needs (Gordon & Beaudoin, 2020). The addition of restorative justice provides the TPSR community an opportunity to center the systemic injustices experienced by youth participants. Notably, TPSR was developed and still thrives in Chicago, an American center of economic activity where minority urban youth experience violence and systemic injustice at alarming rates. Restorative justice offers a pedagogy for researchers and practitioners to provide youth with a discourse to understand their plight. In this study, for example, students admired when their peers valued education as a pathway out of a violent community. Working hard in school (individual responsibility) was balanced with a conversation about justice to understand why only certain communities experience violence (Winn, 2018).

This study has limitations worth considering. The alternative physical education program was developed and implemented by researchers (faculty and students) who were provided with resources that are not available to high school physical educators. At least three adults were present for all classes, which is a sharp contrast to the teacher–student ratios commonly observed in secondary school physical education. This suggests that the program is sustainable only to the extent that the university continues to support it. There was no evidence that the program would be sustained by Marshall without the university partnership. If restorative justice is to be implemented widely in physical education, professional development programs are needed (Dunn & Doolittle, 2020). Physical educators will also need to consider what types of restorative pedagogy best fit their programs. Inclusive restorative circles take a lot of time and limits the amount of time available for physical activity participation. The program in this study enjoyed having 90 min of class time to balance physical activity and circles. Physical educators who have less time and more students to accommodate will need to include other restorative pedagogical strategies (Pointer et al., 2020). Finally, the partnership team sought to address racial disparities in school suspension. The researchers hope that restorative justice in physical education can be one element of a tapestry of restorative justice at Marshall. The alternative physical education program could not directly address this issue on its own. More research is needed to understand if students develop SEL skills like conflict resolution that help mitigate exclusionary discipline practices.

In conclusion, restorative justice offers physical educators a transformative approach to SEL as evident in this study. However, restorative justice is not inherently transformative. It requires intentional pedagogy to understand how history, race, justice, and language shapes the learning experiences of students (Winn, 2018). The authors of this study implemented a restorative justice program over two academic years in response to a community concern for racial injustice in school discipline practices. This issue is not often discussed in physical education, and it is easy to see how physical educators might view racially disparate and exclusionary practices as distant from the particular focus of physical education. That view, however, is misguided. Winn (2018) explained how restorative justice is relevant to educators in English, history, and math among others. Yet, physical education considers conflict resolution and relationship skills within its core academic standards. Some issues related to conflict, such as bullying (O'Connor & Graber, 2014), are commonly observed in physical education. This study suggests that it is feasible to implement restorative justice in physical education to respond to community needs. More work is needed, among practitioners and scholars, to realize the potential of restorative justice in physical education and to demonstrate the relevance of our subject to issues beyond physical activity.

Note

1. Five of the research team members are authors on this paper. Pseudonyms are used for all other names.

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