Clinical Social Work Journal (2021) 49:346–355
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00794-z

ORIGINAL PAPER

Offsetting Racial Divides: Adolescent African American Males & Restorative Justice Practices

Ashley N. Gwathney[1]

Accepted: 1 February 2021 / Published online: 18 February 2021

Abstract

Zero-tolerance suspensions are exclusionary practices that disrupt and deny students access to structured routines, academic instruction, and school-provided meals. Throughout the United States, statistical comparisons in zero-tolerance suspensions illustrate harsh racial disproportionalities, particularly for adolescent African American males. Inequities in disciplinary practices place adolescent African American males at higher risk for dropping out of high school, retention, and incarceration. Recent literature highlights the pathway of restorative justice as a tool to decrease inequities in zero-tolerance school suspensions. This case study applies the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine this phenomenon by presenting the story of a 17-year-old African American male and his lived experience of a zero-tolerance school suspension and the social and emotional benefits of counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice. This paper seeks to contribute to the literature by illustrating the inequities of mandated school suspensions and the observed outcomes when a social worker with experience in CRT and restorative justice intervenes.

Keywords Zero-tolerance · School suspension · Counter-storytelling · Restorative justice · Restorative justice circles · Critical race theory · African American males

Introduction

Zero-tolerance school suspensions are rigid disciplinary practices that deny students access to school-provided resources and supports. The approach of this punitive practice removes students from school, regardless of student offense, circumstance, or environmental contexts (Gregory and Fergus 2017; Skiba et al. 2011). Examinations of racial disparities in zero-tolerance school suspensions have raised public controversy, particularly around the disproportionate impact on adolescent African American male students. While some scholars argue the benefits of this universal approach and contend that zero-tolerance suspensions are racially neutral and fair (Chen 2008; Killion 1998), a number of others assert that zero-tolerance school suspensions lack individualized approaches to student discipline and influence racial disparities (Augustine et al. 2018; GOA 2018; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Skiba et al. 2011; Simson 2014).

In 2018, the U.S. Government Office of Accountability (GOA) investigated the overrepresentation of African American males in school suspensions and found that adolescent African American males disproportionately account for school discipline referrals, suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement (GOA 2018). The GOA report also illustrates racial trends in disciplinary practices, noting that African American males are more likely to face school suspensions throughout their academic careers, from preschool to high school. This report, in fact, indicates that African American males are four times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts (GOA 2018). Across the country, education reform scholars offer harsh criticisms of this disciplinary practice and suggest that with it, schools are engaging in discriminatory or, at minimum, inequitable practices (Anyon 2016; Simson 2014; Skiba et al. 2011).

In a review of zero-tolerance school suspensions, several scholars reveal that nationwide 75% of schools use this approach as a standard disciplinary process (Gregory and Fergus 2017; Mallet 2016). Despite the popularity of this practice, there is limited literature that supports the effectiveness of this model in reducing student misconduct, increasing school safety, and improving academic

✉ Ashley N. Gwathney
ashley.gwathney@rutgers.edu

[1] School of Social Work, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, USA

outcomes. Recent studies illustrate that this exclusionary practice lacks evidence-based and objective protocols and relies on subjective interpretations to define student misconduct and consequences (GOA 2018; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Smith et al. 2018). Consequently, the subjectivity of this practice influences racial divides in zero-tolerance suspensions (GOA 2018; Simson 2014). In this framework, African American males face disproportionate consequences for subjective reports of disrespect, defiance, misconduct, and dress code violations (GOA 2018; Skiba et al. 2011; Simson 2014). The disproportionate implications of this approach deny adolescent African American males from accessing school-based resources, equitable educational opportunities, and social mobility.

To address discipline inequities, scholars across the nation highlight the pathway of restorative justice as an alternative discipline practice. Restorative justice is an evidence-based approach that centers on student inclusion, authentic connections, and culturally responsive pedagogy (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). In addition to restorative justice, several scholars propose that schools apply the equity-based framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Simson 2014). CRT is a grounded, multi-tiered theory that examines structural inequities and practices in social, political, and economic arenas (Simson 2014). Simson (2014) suggests that the core principles of CRT can assist schools in developing interventions that can enhance equitable outcomes for underrepresented students. To improve student-centered practices, Howard (2008) and Ladson-Billings (1999) propose the application of counter-storytelling to draw attention to the lived realities of structural barriers and injustices.

Current literature demonstrates the benefits of CRT and restorative justice in decreasing racial disproportionalities in zero-tolerance suspensions. However, gaps in the literature exist in the analysis of applying counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice. This paper seeks to contribute to the existing discussion by illustrating the benefits and outcomes of using counter-storytelling as a restorative justice tool. The presented case study of "Elijah" follows a literature review on racial disparities in zero-tolerance school suspensions, critical race theory, and restorative justice. Next, a composite case study illustrates Elijah's lived experience of systematic inequities that led to a zero-tolerance school suspension. The discussion will review limitations, generalizability, and implications for broader populations. Lastly, the conclusion demonstrates the need for equity-based discipline practices that center on individualized care and awareness of vulnerabilities.

Literature Review

Racial Disparities in Zero-Tolerance School Suspensions

Throughout the country, statistical comparisons in race and gender illustrate harsh racial disparities in the suspension of African American male students. An investigative report conducted by the GOA (2018) reports that in 2016, African American males in high school represented 18% of America's student population and disproportionately represented 39% of school suspensions, whereas their White peers represented 50% of the student population and accounted for 5% of school suspensions (GOA 2018). Moreover, Bottiani et al. (2018) suggest that African American males are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended than their White counterparts. They assert that the intersections of identity and sexual orientation further increase adolescent African American male students' likelihood of being suspended from school (Bottiani et al. 2018). Gregory and Fergus (2017) indicate that African American male students who experience one school suspension are twice as likely to drop out of high school than students who do not experience a school suspension. The implications of zero-tolerance school suspensions interrupt academic attainment and dehumanize the holistic development of adolescent African American males.

The subjective methodology of this practice invalidates and dehumanizes the lived realities of this student population (Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Howard 2008; Mitchell 2014). To demonstrate this, Mitchell (2014) looks to the legal case of five teenage African American male students in rural Mississippi. In 2000, all five adolescents were suspended, arrested, and charged with aggravated assault for tossing peanuts on their bus ride home. After being inadvertently hit by a tossed peanut, the school bus driver immediately stopped the bus, pulled over, and contacted police. Subsequently, each student was removed from the bus, interrogated by police, and charged with aggravated assault. Soon after, the police department dropped all charges. However, in adhering to zero-tolerance guidelines, school administrators suspended all five boys and their busing privileges. Unable to complete the 30-mile trip to school, all five boys dropped out (Mitchell 2014). These troublesome details illustrate the long-term and consequential impacts of punitive discipline practices.

Furthermore, an investigative study conducted by Gregory and Weinstein (2008) examined racial trends in disciplinary referrals and school suspensions at an urban high school. In analyzing enrollment and disciplinary data from the 2002–2003 school year, this study indicates that subjective referrals of "defiance of authority" accounted

for 67% of school suspensions. African American students accounted for 58% and disproportionately accounted for 30% of student enrollment. In contrast, White students accounted for 37% of school enrollment and comprised 5% of school suspensions (Gregory and Weinstein 2008). At a minimum, these disturbing statistics are indicators of biased inequities of zero-tolerance discipline.

The GOA investigative report (2018) urges schools to remedy racial inequities by developing equity-based supports that are inclusive and culturally responsive. The GOA (2018) report also reveals that schools with continuous racial discrepancies are at risk of losing federal funding. Scholars have proposed using the framework of CRT to assist schools in developing equitable discipline practices (DeMatthews 2016; Ladson-Billings 2012; Simson 2014). The infusion of CRT into school-wide frameworks and policies can assist schools in creating equitable, culturally responsive, and culturally inclusive practices that maintain funding.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s as a component of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which examines racial injustices in the contexts of law and policy. Using the foundational underpinnings of CLS, CRT asserts that race, gender, and class are social constructs that influence privilege, oppression, and marginalization. CRT centers on six foundational tenets: permanence of racism, race as a social construct, differential racialization, interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and intersectionality (Simson 2014). CRT scholars argue that these social constructs influence everyday occurrences of racism, prejudice, and stereotypes and, consequently, have harmful effects on underrepresented populations (Howard 2008; Simson 2014). The implications of these occurrences often emerge in the form of unconscious and conscious microaggressions.

CRT researchers assert that microaggressions are commonplaces in the lived experiences of minority populations and highlight racially charged societal norms (DeMatthews 2016; Simson 2014; Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999). According to Howard (2008), microaggressions are subtle verbal and non-verbal cues that convey hostile insults towards an individual's identity. CRT academics suggest counter-storytelling as one approach to address the emotional impacts of microaggressions and systemic inequities (Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Simson 2014). In practice, counter-storytelling acknowledges and validates narratives from the standpoint of marginalized individuals, groups, and communities. Research also suggests that its application facilitates individualized healing and transformation (Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999). Furthermore, counter-storytelling increases awareness of structural barriers that impede opportunities for marginalized groups (Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999; Ladson-Billings 2012). CRT scholars suggest that awareness of marginalized populations' lived experiences assists in identifying and remedying systemic injustices. The theoretical underpinnings of CRT aim to shift political paradigms, structural policies, and social systems.

Over the past decade, the field of education has benefited from applying the principles of CRT. Leading CRT and education reform scholar Ladson-Billings (1999) argues that the social constructs of race, class, and gender often influence which students have access to quality, inclusive, and equitable schooling experiences. Ladson-Billings (1999) suggests that minority students disproportionately encounter academic and structural barriers. Using a CRT perspective, Ladson-Billings (1999) indicates that racial disparities in advanced placement courses (AP), graduation rates, and disciplinary practices are explicit indicators of structural inequities (Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999). In other words, gaps in student achievement and disciplinary practices highlight existing structural imbalances and discriminatory blind spots.

To remedy these shortcomings, education reform scholars propose the application of CRT to highlight and address structural gaps in academic settings. In using a CRT perspective, school administrators and key stakeholders look to racial trends as a key indicator to identify systematic inequities. In application, this indicator aids school administrators in evaluating policies and practices that foster racial disparities, particularly in academic achievement, attendance, and disciplinary practices (DeMatthews 2016; Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999; Simson 2014). Moreover, this framework guides school administrators in the decision-making process of developing and implementing equitable procedures and interventions (DeMatthews 2016; Howard 2008; Ladson-Billings 1999; Simson 2014). CRT can thus help educational institutions minimize structural barriers and racial disparities in zero-tolerance school suspensions (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Ladson-Billings 1999; Smith et al. 2018). To increase equitable discipline practices, several scholars have proposed restorative justice as a holistic approach for mitigating systematic injustices (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019).

Restorative Justice Practices

The restorative justice framework centers on infusing equity, well-being, and inclusion into disciplinary practices (Fronius et al. 2019). Restorative justice is an evidence-based approach that aims to direct school districts away from zero-tolerance suspensions (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). Restorative practices seek to protect students' academic, social, and emotional well-being by keeping them in school (Anyon

2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019; Gregory and Fergus 2017). Restorative practices center on a paradigm shift that centers on strengthening student engagement by fostering empathic connections with staff, peers, and the community. This paradigm shift conceptualizes student misbehavior as a function of unmet biopsychosocial needs (Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). From this perspective, the disciplinary decision-making process considers students' physiological, social, and emotional needs. These holistic essentials include access to food, shelter, resources, and emotional supports. Restorative justice practices provide students access to individualized approaches that consider unique circumstances in determining disciplinary consequences (Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019; Simson 2014). The restorative justice model is composed of several interlocking concepts of holistic well-being, inclusion, and construction of peer connections through restorative circles.

Restorative circles are a vital component of restorative justice and are composed of a group advisor, peers, teachers, caregivers, and community members (Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). Restorative circles center on addressing the social and emotional needs of students while enhancing access to authentic connections. Collectively, group participants, staff members, and parents engage in restorative circles to provide support, understanding, and empathy in an identity-safe setting (Augustine et al. 2018). Additionally, this application focuses on cultural responsiveness and ensures students can access culturally representative and inclusive spaces (Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2018). The overarching aim of restorative circles is to enrich connections through active listening, empathic validation of thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Over the past decade, restorative justice has gained recognition in public schools and has shown benefits in improving equitable outcomes (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). Recent research surrounding restorative justice confirms positive outcomes of decreasing school suspensions, minimizing racial disparities, and increasing academic achievement throughout the school milieu (Augustine et al. 2018; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Payne and Welch 2015). A recent randomized control study conducted by Augustine and colleagues (2018) examined the effectiveness of the restorative model Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities Initiative in an urban school setting (Augustine et al. 2018). To examine changes in school climate and school suspensions, this study compared 22 schools with implemented restorative practices to 22 schools with no restorative approach (Augustine et al. 2018). This study indicates that schools with restorative justice practices had an overall 16% reduction in zero-tolerance school suspensions and decreased racial disparities between African American and White students in suspensions (Augustine et al. 2018).

Additionally, restorative justice practices also boosted 10th-grade PSAT scores by 0.1, suggesting an educational benefit to using a restorative justice framework (Augustine et al. 2018). These studies support the argument that restorative practices strengthen school climate and decrease racial disproportionalities in school suspensions. Additional studies suggest that restorative circles help reduce suspensions and attribute decreases to sharing personal narratives during restorative circles (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). These studies also suggest that consistent teacher training, peer-led learning communities, and teacher coaching plays a role in staff buy-in, engagement, and fidelity of restorative practices (Anyon 2016; Augustine et al. 2018; Fronius et al. 2019). While studies have shown the equitable outcomes of this practice, it is essential to note that nationally such practices are not standard, particularly for adolescent African American males who continue to overrepresent school referrals, expulsions, and suspensions (GOA 2018). As a result, the disproportionate suspension of adolescent African American males inhibits their access to equitable learning conditions and outcomes. The disenfranchisement of this student group places them at higher risk for retention, dropping out of high school, and exposure to the criminal justice system. For this case study, I propose the intervention of counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice to increase constructive outcomes for adolescent African American males. I contend that the sharing of lived realities increases educational achievements, emotional healing, and social supports.

Methodology

As a licensed school social worker in the role of a guidance counselor at an urban public high school, I work with several marginalized student groups and encounter systematic barriers and unmet student needs. My clinical background includes cultural competency, interpersonal process, and systems theory. In this educational setting, I am the only African American guidance counselor and the only counselor with knowledge and experience in CRT and restorative justice. My educational background and experiential knowledge enhance my ability to advocate and empathize with marginalized student groups. This paper presents the case of an adolescent African American male and his lived inequities of a zero-tolerance school suspension. In this case study, I illustrate the harsh inequities of exclusionary discipline and the opportunities that arise from the implementation of counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice. Furthermore, a qualitative case study can demonstrate how and why phenomena occur in real-life contexts (Baskarada 2014; Baxter 2008). Additionally, qualitative studies are useful in examining the generalizability of interventions

to larger populations (Baskarada 2014; Baxter 2008). This qualitative study eliminates potential identifying information to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

Case Study

At the time of this study, Elijah is a 17-year-old African American male in his junior year of high school. He is the oldest of three siblings and resides in the custody of their maternal grandmother due to the incarceration of both parents. This case study follows Elijah through his initial presentation to the guidance office, his lived experience of a zero-tolerance school suspension, and his subsequent return to school. Throughout Elijah's story, I highlight the interventions of counter-storytelling and restorative justice practices.

Zero-Tolerance School Suspension

At the start of the fall semester, Elijah arrived at the guidance department with a request to change his schedule. He presented with a restricted affect and agitated mood. To assist in exploring his concern, I prompted him to enter my office. Using open-ended questions, I asked Elijah to share more about his presenting temperament. He irritably replied that his Algebra II teacher made several comments that left him feeling "disrespected and insulted." When prompted to share an example of the comments, Elijah explained that his math instructor frequently called him and other African American male students' "homie" and separated them in class. To gain a deeper understanding of his experience, I asked Elijah, "How do these experiences make you feel?" Sarcastically, Elijah tilted his head to the side and replied, "How do you THINK it makes me feel!?" According to Howard (2008), the negative undertones of the term "homie" is used to depict African American males as dangerous, uneducated, and violent. To validate his reaction, I responded, "I think it hurts. I had a similar experience once, and it left me feeling insulted, angry, and alone. Am I right? Do you feel this way?" Elijah raised his shoulders and quietly mumbled, "I guess so. It hurts somewhat." To acknowledge his feelings, I validated his concerns and bravery in sharing his experience by saying, "Thank you for telling me this story. I know that was not easy to do, and I am grateful that you shared this with me. We will work together to find a solution."

To facilitate the session, I opened our conversation to allow him to express any additional frustrations or feelings. He replied, "Nah, I'm good. This isn't new. I'm used to this." Following his lead, I redirected our conversation to his schedule change request. To explore his connections to family supports, I inquired about his relationship with parents or caregivers. He revealed that he lived with his grandmother and stated that his parents were "away." He went on to share that none of his family members could attend meetings on the phone or in person. After exploring his family support system, I informed Elijah that I would submit the request on his behalf. Throughout this session, I reflected on Elijah's response of "normalcy" to his racialized experience and began the process of conceptualizing an appropriate theoretical framework. To close our initial session, I thanked him for reaching out for support, acknowledged his courage in sharing his story, and established a follow-up session.

Elijah and I met a week later, and I informed him that due to school policies, his request to switch classes was denied. During our follow-up session, he said, "Ms. G, I have no idea how I'm gonna' make it! I'm struggling with this teacher. I know he does not like me!" He left my office, frustrated. Five days later, Elijah returned to my office. This time, he was escorted by a school resource officer. School resource officers are school-based police officers that interact and engage in the daily activities of schools. In some educational settings, they are employed to engage in disciplinary processes and have legal privileges to reprimand, remove, and arrest students (Mallet 2016).

After being escorted into my office, Elijah thrust himself into an office chair, visibly distressed and out of breath. Standing in the office doorway, the school resource officer raised his hand, pointed at Elijah, and aggressively stated, "You do not move! Your administrator will be processing consequences." I felt profoundly compassionate for Elijah, as witnessing this interaction was reminiscent of the handling of a criminal offense. Elijah remained in my office for over an hour while his disciplinary referral was processed and consequences were determined. Throughout his time in my office, he appeared anxious, irritated, and restless. He struggled to articulate his classroom experience and often repeated, "I asked to get out of that class. You didn't listen to me!" With further prompting, he expressed feelings of distress, isolation, and anger, and he bellowed, "This school doesn't care! YOU didn't listen." In response to his anguish, I replied, "I hear you, and I understand your feelings. This makes me upset too. Can you tell me more about what happened?" Elijah shared that he had a "heated" verbal outburst in his Algebra II course, "Mr. Smith kept picking on me, and I finally reached my limit!" While sharing the details of this experience, he relayed how he had fallen asleep in class. In standing up from his chair, he demonstrated how his teacher, Mr. Smith, pulled out his chair and shouted, "Yo! homie, get up, sleep on your own time." Elijah revealed that this action had pushed him "over the edge."

As our conversation continued, Elijah shared that in the same week, several White classmates had fallen asleep in class and, instead of being punished, his White peers were sent to the school nurse. After meeting with Elijah, I examined the disciplinary files of his fellow Algebra II classmates. Indeed, each disciplinary record showed patterns of student

misconduct, verbal warnings, and in-class consequences. In contrast to Elijah's experience, his White counterparts were not removed from class, did not receive disciplinary referrals, and were not suspended from school. These two scenarios, though situationally identical, had drastically different outcomes. After forty-five minutes of waiting, Elijah was impatient, and asked, "Am I suspended? I am suspended, right? HE violates MY space, and I get suspended!" Elijah proved to be right. He was issued a ten-day school suspension and was escorted home by school staff.

During his ten-day suspension, I remained connected with Elijah through an texting app for educators, parents, and students. Throughout his suspension, I utilized this tool to complete academic, social, and emotional check-ins. To ensure he had equitable access to course material, I collected and delivered academic assignments to his home mailbox. During our daily check-ins, Elijah frequently shared that he had little to no adult supervision, as his grandmother worked two part-time jobs. Six days into his suspension, Elijah found himself caught up in the criminal justice system. He detailed how he had become "bored at home" and went to the local mall with several other teens to "walk around." He shared that during this outing, they were all arrested and charged with shoplifting. Elijah shared that he was escorted home by the police and expressed that this situation left him feeling "confused and angry." He remained at home for the remainder of his suspension and frequently detailed how he missed school and expressed how he struggled to complete assignments.

Restorative Justice Through Counter-Storytelling

To assist Elijah in his return to school, we developed a consistent schedule for counseling. We continued our daily check-ins, established weekly individual sessions, along with 40-min restorative justice peer circles. In addressing his previous feelings of emotional distress, our initial sessions centered on building his sense of safety and resiliency. To assess his feelings of safety, Elijah and I completed the Adverse Childhood Experience Assessment (ACEs). This evidence-based tool was used to evaluate his experiences of trauma or complex trauma. This standardized questionnaire lists ten "yes" or "no" questions that center around exposure to emotional abuse, sexual abuse, parental incarceration, and poverty (Felitti et al. 1998). This screening tool helps to provide clinicians with an awareness of childhood trauma and assists in implementing informed and applicable interventions (Felitti et al. 1998). After completing the questionnaire, I tallied Elijah's score and was stunned by the result of an 8 out of 10. His score informed me that he had multiple childhood adversity experiences and was at higher risk for health complications, low self-esteem, substance abuse, incarceration, and dropping out of high school. In using this tool, I was able to assess and implement approaches that centered on creating protective and restorative interventions.

After completing the ACEs, I used CRT as a conceptual framework to explore the compatibility of incorporating counter-storytelling as a restorative practice. In considering this intervention, I explored the flexibility, similarities, and applicability of each framework. The tenet of counter-storytelling centers on validating marginalized individuals' worldviews and easily pairs with the holistic perspective of restorative justice. The holistic approach of restorative justice aims to improve relationship-building skills, peer support, and community engagement. To facilitate implementation, I explained the purpose of counter-storytelling and encouraged Elijah to share his narrative authentically. In applying counter-storytelling as a restorative practice, I also created a culturally inclusive space that included books, pictures, and wall hangings that embodied cultural and racial diversity.

As Elijah and I developed a mutual connection, he shared more about his racialized experiences in and outside of school. He explained that he often worried about how others would perceive him and sadly expressed that he often felt "nervous and unsafe in his own skin." To maintain his trust, I held a non-judgmental approach and validated his feelings, particularly when he shared that he felt "different or disliked." I would commend his courage and would thank him for sharing. I also empathically communicated that his lived experiences of racialized experiences were emotionally impactful. In using counter-storytelling as an intervention, I would prompt Elijah to explore and identify his strengths. Collaboratively, we identified empowering words that included worthy, intelligent, and loveable. The identification of positive character traits proved to be beneficial in shifting his internal belief system that he was "bad or unworthy."

By applying counter-storytelling, Elijah showed increases in awareness and validation of the harmful impacts of his racialized experiences and emotional triggers. In one session, Elijah shared that he was regretful of his verbal outburst and stated that his instructor had "caught him on a terrible day." He described feelings of humiliation, isolation, and embarrassment as his instructor shouted, "*Yo, homie*!" In this session, he disclosed his reasons for sleeping in class. He tearfully expressed that he went to bed hungry after sharing his school provided dinner with his younger brother. He went on to reveal that he woke up late, was tardy to school, and missed free breakfast. With further prompting, Elijah detailed how his classroom experience made him feel "different from the other kids." He expressed that he was not a *"homie,"* he was his instructor's student, stating, "You know, Ms. G, adults shouldn't embarrass kids like that, it can really mess a kid up." Before ending our session, I asked Elijah how often he goes to bed hungry, to which he replied, "Not all the time." Applying a holistic approach, I informed

Elijah that I would help connect his family to local resources and support networks.

Next, I collaborated with several school professionals to create and deliver a school-provided food basket. Using the restorative justice approach of building community connections, I connected Elijah's grandmother to multiple community-based resources that assisted in rental assistance, medical care, and food security. In maintaining a holistic approach, Elijah's instructors were provided guidance on implementing classroom accommodations. Simultaneously, with the aid of our school's administrative team, Elijah and I identified safe spaces at school for him to access emotional support, food, and rest. To best meet his needs, we selected several safe classrooms where we placed food items, clean uniforms, and essential hygiene products. In addition to safe places, he identified the nurse and the guidance office as protective places to decompress and rest if he lacked sleep from the night before.

Throughout our sessions, I felt heartbroken for Elijah as I reflected on his feelings of helplessness, humiliation, and exclusion. Elijah's experience triggered memories of my own racialized experiences in school. I often internally reflected on how schooling experiences can sway and shift life-trajectories. Throughout our sessions, I felt a deep sense of compassion and empathy for Elijah as he navigated through complex systems with little support, services, and guidance. To maintain my clinical perspective, I engaged in outside clinical supervision. During supervision, I often expressed moments of countertransference, particularly in times when Elijah shared his lived realities of microaggressions in school. These moments proved to be the most challenging for me as I experienced intense feelings of advocacy. I also experienced difficulty navigating the bureaucratic complexities and barriers in the disciplinary system that conflict with the social work values of advocacy, social justice, and restorative care. Indeed, supervision helped me navigate countertransference, advocacy outreach, and structural challenges.

As our sessions continued, Elijah and I incorporated the work of exploring his college and career aspirations. During these sessions, Elijah identified academic, social and emotional goals, next steps, and areas of needed support. Together we developed an individualized plan for his academic achievement and identified potential prospects of higher education, career training, or employment. To increase awareness of his progress, we evaluated his conduct, grades, attendance, and highlighted his growth with school administrators. These moments proved to be the most rewarding, reflective, and assuring for Elijah, as he reflected on his previous experiences of being the "target" for referrals and suspensions. This practice enabled him to feel empowered in his educational journey and provided him access to academic resources, advocacy, and support.

By the spring semester, our sessions centered on ways to increase his support network. To start this practice, we identified adults within our school community that he felt connected to. After identifying supports, Elijah and I focused on increasing his outreach to supports, particularly in times of distress. This therapeutic shift centered on the restorative approaches of relationship building, increasing empathic connections, and community support. Initially, Elijah was hesitant and struggled to express his feelings with his new supports and shared that it was "all new." After several weeks of engagement, Elijah revealed that he did not "feel alone anymore," saying, "I finally have people who listen and don't call me "bad or crazy." His expressions detailed a structural and emotional shift from our previous sessions in the fall semester. In our earlier sessions, Elijah expressed feelings of isolation, disappointment, hunger, and marginalization, often stating that he had felt "forgotten about." He often detailed the ripple effects of daily microaggressions, structural inequities, and his lack of access to student-centered supports.

Midway into the spring semester, Elijah was able to express his narrative. He revealed that "having people who listen to me makes me want to talk about stuff." By the closing of the spring semester, I recommended that we implement restorative peer groups. In introducing this practice, I informed Elijah that this practice would help connect him to peers his age. I provided Elijah with detailed information on restorative circles and informed him that group sessions would meet weekly for four weeks. Initially, Elijah was hesitant. In observing his apprehension, I informed him that group participants also had similar lived experiences. To create a safe, cohesive, and inclusive space, I selected students who also had lived experiences of school suspensions, involvement in the criminal justice system, and parental incarceration. Soon after, he agreed to participate and returned a signed consent form.

Restorative Justice Peer Circles

In organizing restorative peer sessions, my role functioned as a group facilitator. In this position, I guided students in establishing group goals, connections, and personal narratives. At the start of each session, participants were informed of privacy, limitations of confidentiality, and group objectives. To facilitate rapport, trust, and group cohesiveness, students were seated in a circular form in a private conference room. To engage students in building connections, students were provided sentence starters that centered on lived realities and experiences, a practice aligned with the CRT tenet of counter-storytelling. This tool helped alleviate group members' apprehension in starting conversations and facilitated group connections.

With counter-storytelling, I guided participants into the restorative practice of exploring and recognizing group members' strengths and positive character traits. This strategy prompted students to engage in peer support and encouraged group cohesion. To facilitate sessions, I actively modeled ways to empathically acknowledge and validate participants' thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences. This modeling strategy connected with the restorative tenet of increasing peer support and provided students with a framework to develop interpersonal connections. By our fourth group session, Elijah opened up to the group and revealed that his family regularly lacked access to secure housing, food, and clothing. He shared that his experiences of homelessness, poverty, and parental incarceration catapulted him into an adult-like role by the age of ten. In response, one group member questioned, "Did any of your teachers know this?" Elijah shared that none of his teachers were aware of his childhood struggles, stating, "I really don't think they care. If they did, they wouldn't be mean to us." In our closing group session, Elijah, like many of his peers, shared that his family's experiences of barriers to accessing equitable economic resources, systematic supports, and food contributed to his academic and disciplinary challenges. He further shared that he was exhausted and hungry on the day of his suspension. Examination through a restorative framework suggests that his exhaustion was not a reflection of defiance but was one merely of hunger. Elijah was not only struggling with the effects of parental incarceration, homelessness, and poverty; he was also enduring the human pains of deprivation, a deprivation for which he was then punished according to the zero-tolerance policy.

By the end of the spring quarter, Elijah shared that he no longer felt our individual weekly sessions were needed. After completing a review of initial goals and progress, I reminded Elijah that my door remained open if he needed future assistance. In closing our final session, Elijah handed me a small green notepad. Inside was a list of empowering affirmations we collected during our sessions together. He said, "Miss, I need you to give this to a kid who will need it." I agreed. Then I placed the notebook in my desk and escorted Elijah back to where he rightfully belonged, in class.

Discussion

The case of Elijah demonstrates the positive outcomes of student-centered practices, counter-storytelling, and restorative justice. Ostensibly, the consequences for Elijah's behavior were clear and direct. However, with in-depth analysis, his case illustrates recurring themes of emotional distress, social isolation, and academic exclusion. Elijah's case illustrates the adverse outcomes involved in removing students from school. His subsequent arrest also demonstrates how inequities in punitive discipline can have long-term impacts on the life trajectories of adolescent African American males. Correlational research conducted by Howard (2008) and Mallet (2016) indicate similar racial disproportionalities in zero-tolerance laws and the U.S. prison population, showing that, in total, the U.S. prison population is 93% male, 63% of which is African American. Indeed, these similarities suggest parallels between school suspensions and the criminal justice system. To date, the literature does not examine ACEs in incarcerated African American males; this is an area for much needed research. However, the literature examines the ACEs of parental incarceration. A recent study conducted by Turney (2018) suggests that children who experience parental incarceration are five times more likely to experience additional ACEs, social transgression, incarceration, and lower adult quality of life. Indeed, Elijah's case reflects plausible connections between ACEs, school suspensions, and intergenerational incarceration risk.

Despite the notable successes of using counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice, it is critical to note several limitations. First, this study is limited by the ACEs assessment. The ACEs currently does not assess for childhood trauma of racism, discrimination, or bias. As a result, Elijah's experiences of racialized trauma are not reflected in his score. Second, social workers and guidance counselors generally work in one of two distinct positions, as a guidance counselor or social worker. My unique position and educational background allow me to function in multiple capacities as an academic advisor, student advocate, and group facilitator in restorative circles. Another limitation of this study is the lack of funding in hiring social workers to perform these roles. It may not be economically feasible for many schools to hire social workers to function as guidance counselors or restorative justice coordinators.

Third, schools may also experience challenges in matching students to racially and ethnically similar social workers. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW 2015) reports that in 2006, 86% of social workers were White females, 8% were African American females, and 3% were Latina. Similarly, 85% of male social workers were White, 8% were African American males, and 2% identified as Latino (NASW 2015). In raising awareness of racial disparities, the NASW (2015) suggests that institutions increase staff diversity and inclusion to align clients with social workers of similar identities. Moreover, they assert that this action can positively impact client engagement and outcomes.

Systematic barriers in scheduling sessions that work around classroom instruction, gaining teacher buy-in, and maintaining interventions are also limitations. Restorative circles aim to involve additional stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and community members. Because of

scheduling conflicts, parental access to free childcare, and paid time off from work, it was not feasible for me to include additional participants. As a result, group sessions centered solely on the restorative practice of increasing peer support and connections. While this case study did not include parents, guardians, or other key stakeholders, social workers should consider implications of exclusion in the decision-making process. In addition, there are no formal procedures or outlines in applying counter-storytelling. Future research should consider development of formal procedures to assist social workers in implementing this practice.

Lastly, the tenure process that safeguards employment is also an impediment. Due to complexities in the tenure process, Elijah's instructor was not released from his position but was issued a written disciplinary referral and retired at the start of the next school year. While this instructor remained in his teaching role, the application of counter-storytelling provided school administrators with awareness and insight into the instructor's inequitable actions. Additionally, this intervention ignited administrative discussions on alternative approaches to student discipline. However, zero-tolerance school suspensions remain. In light of this, Elijah's case has broadened my advocacy and research in using counter-storytelling as a restorative practice, particularly with marginalized students who have experienced microaggressions in school, parental incarceration, poverty, and homelessness.

Conclusion

The case of "Elijah" tells the story of an African American adolescent male who encountered several disciplinary inequities that resulted in his removal from school. I use the case of Elijah to depict the lived experiences of academic displacement, social isolation, and emotional distress. Through the intervention of counter-storytelling, Elijah experienced a decrease in suspensions, an increase in his sense of self-worth, academic progress, and community support. Elijah's case demonstrates the benefits of using counter-storytelling as a restorative justice tool to acknowledge the lived realities of marginalized student groups. To date, minimal research exists in exploring the use of counter-storytelling as a restorative justice practice. Future studies should examine this approach's effectiveness with other disenfranchised students such as African American females, LBGTQI, deaf and hard of hearing (DHH), and undocumented students.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that the author has no conflict of interest.

References

Anyon, Y. (2016). *Taking restorative practices school-wide: Insights from three schools in Denver*. Denver, CO: Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership.

Augustine, C. H., Engberg, J., Grimm, G. E., Lee, E., Wang, E. L. & Christianson, K. (2018). *Can restorative practices improve school climate and curb suspensions? An evaluation of the impact of restorative practices in a mid-sized urban school district*. (Report No. RR-2840-DOJ). Retrieved from https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html

Baskarada, S. (2014). Qualitative case study guidelines. *The Qualitative Report, 19,* 1–18.

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report, 13*(4), 544–559.

Bottiani, H. J., Bradshawm, P. C., & Gregory, A. (2018). Nudging the gap: Introduction to the special issue closing in on discipline disproportionality. *School Psychology Review, 47*(2), 109–117. https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2018-0023.

Chen, G. (2008). Communities, students, schools, and school crime: A confirmatory study of crime in US high schools. *Urban Education, 43*(3), 301–318. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085907311791.

DeMatthews, D. (2016). Effective leadership is not enough: Critical approaches to closing the racial discipline gap. *The Clearing House, 89*(1), 7–13. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2015.1121120.

Felitti, V., Anda, R., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D., Spitz, A., Edwards, V., et al. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-37979800017-8.

Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckengurg, S., Hurley, N. & Petrosino, A. (2019). *Restorative justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review.* San Francisco, CA: WestEd Justice and Prevention Research Center. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED595733.pdf

Gregory, A., & Weinstein, S. R. (2008). The discipline gap and African Americans: Defiance or cooperation in the high school classroom. *Journal of School Psychology, 46,* 455–475. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2007.09.001.

Gregory, A., & Fergus, E. (2017). Social and emotional learning and equity in school discipline. *The Future of Children, 27*(1), 117–136.

Howard, T. C. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in PreK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record, 110*(5), 954–985.

Killion, R. (1998). Student discipline methods and resources used by Indiana secondary school administrators. *NASSP Bulletin, 82,* 44–49. https://doi.org/10.1177/019263659808259609.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education, 24*(1), 211–247. https://doi.org/10.2307/1167271.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2012). Through a glass darkly: The persistence of race in education research & scholarship. *Educational Researcher, 41*(4), 115–120. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12440743.

Mallett, C. (2016). The school-to-prison pipeline: A critical review of the punitive paradigm shift. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 33*(1), 15–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-015-0397-1.

Mitchell, S. D. (2014). Zero tolerance policies: Criminalizing childhood and disenfranchising the next generation of citizens. *University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository, 92*(2), 272–323.

National Association of Social Workers. (2017). Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Washington, DC: NASW Press. Retrieved from https://socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics.

National Association of Social Workers. (2015). *Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Payne, A. A., & Welch, K. (2015). Restorative justice in schools: The influence of race on restorative discipline. *Youth and Society, 47*(4), 539–564. https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X124.

Simson, D. (2014). Exclusion, punishment, racism, and our schools: Critical race theory perspective on school discipline. *UCLA Law Review, 61*(2), 506–563.

Skiba, R., Horner, R., Chung, C., Rausch, M., May, S., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85–107.

Smith, C. L., Garnett, R. B., Herbet, A., Grudev, N., Voge, J., Keefner, W., et al. (2018). The hand of professional school counseling meets the glove of restorative practices: A call to the profession. *Professional School Counseling, 21*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X18761899.

Turney, K. (2018). Adverse childhood experiences among children of incarcerated parents. *Children and Youth Services Review, 89,* 218–225. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.033.

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018, March). Discipline disparities for black students, boys, and students with disabilities no child Left behind act. (Publication No. GAO-18-258). Retrieved from https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-18-258

Ashley N. Gwathney, MSW, LCSW is a clinically licensed School Social Worker in New Jersey. She has worked with Rutgers University Student Support Services, Rutgers Mountainview Communities, and the NJ-STEP (Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons) programs. She is an active leader in various initiatives that center on social-emotional learning, student access, and equity. She is currently a doctoral student at Rutgers University School of Social Work.