

Understanding Staff Beliefs and Attitudes about Implementation of Restorative Justice Practices for Juvenile Justice Involved Youth

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Abstract : Restorative justice practices continue to gain recognition globally in the criminal and juvenile justice systems and schools. Despite considerable research, little is known about how juvenile detention center staff members' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes affect implementation. As with many interventions, effective implementation relies on the staff members who must do the daily work. This phenomenological study aimed to add to the existing literature by examining staff knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes on restorative justice practices, barriers to effective implementation, and potential differences in knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes between education staff and juvenile detention officers at the research site. The present study used semi-structured interviews and focus groups of both types of staff members who work with the youth in a juvenile justice facility to answer three research questions: (1) To what extent are staff members knowledgeable about the principles behind restorative approach to discipline and about how the approach should be carried out?; (2) What are staff member beliefs and attitudes toward the restorative justice program and its implementation in a juvenile justice setting?; and (3) What similarities and differences are there between (a) knowledge and (b) beliefs and attitudes of the educators and juvenile detention officers? A total of 28 staff members participated, nine educators, and 19 detention officers. The findings for the first research question indicated that both groups (educators and juvenile detention officers) were knowledgeable about two of the three principles of restorative justice: repairing the harm done by the offender and reducing risks for future occurrence; but did not show clear knowledge of one principle, active involvement from all stakeholders. For research question 2, staff beliefs and attitudes were categorized into two types, positive beliefs and attitudes (e.g., that restorative justice is more appropriate than the use of punitive measures) and negative beliefs and attitudes (e.g., that restorative justice is 'just another program that creates extra work for staff'). When the two staff groups were compared to answer research question 3, both groups were found to have similar knowledge (showing knowledge of two of the three principles) and somewhat different beliefs and attitudes – both groups showed a mix of positive and negative, but the educators showed somewhat more on the positive side. Both groups also identified barriers to implementation such as the perception of restorative justice as 'soft', lack of knowledge and exposure to restorative justice, shortage of resources and staff, and difficulty sustaining the restorative justice approach. The findings of this study are largely consistent with current literature but also extend the literature by studying staff knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in a juvenile detention center and comparing the two staff groups. Recommendations include assessing staff knowledge and attitudes toward restorative justice during the hiring process, ensuring adequate staff training, communicating clearly to build positive attitudes and beliefs, providing adequate staffing, and building a sense of community.

Keywords : juvenile justice, restorative justice, restorative practices, staff attitudes and beliefs

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