

# Math Corps: An Ethnographic Examination of Culture & Discipline

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## ABSTRACT

### **Background:**

In the United States, zero tolerance policies are a form of structural violence as they disproportionately target and harm Black students. Zero tolerance policies directly contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline which violently harms Black students and Black communities (Lind and Nelson 2015; Kaba 2017). In recent years, restorative justice has emerged as an alternative response to zero tolerance policies. Restorative justice seeks to apply discipline practices that restore communities rather than cause further harm. As restorative justice programs have emerged in educational settings across the United States, scholars such as Schiff (2018) have called for a social movement understanding of restorative justice in order to collectively dismantle structures of injustice such as zero tolerance policies. This research uses zero tolerance policies and restorative justice as a framework to understand the cultural and disciplinary models of Math Corps, a national mathematics enrichment and mentorship program that primarily serves young, Black students. This study takes an anthropological approach to examine the community, culture, and discipline in Math Corps and seeks to demonstrate how Math Corps can be conceptualized as a part of a broader restorative justice social movement.

### **Methods:**

This research comes from fieldwork conducted during the summer of 2019 as a part of the Humanities and Sciences Summer Scholar Program. This fieldwork took place over a period of three weeks on site at Math Corps at Cleveland State University. This fieldwork was conducted using a mixed-methodological approach including the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups, participant observation, and qualitative surveys. This initial period of fieldwork resulted in the collection of ethnographic data that informed a cultural understanding of Math Corps. Over the past, I engaged in a deeper analysis of the results of this fieldwork, drawing on literature from the field of anthropology of education and social movement theories.

## **Results:**

The results of this study show that Math Corps is a social movement community within the broader restorative justice movement. Linked together through social networks and a common culture, members of Math Corps share a collective identity. These relationships, culture, and sense of belonging are important aspects of Math Corps' disciplinary model which is conceptualized as a model for long term self-growth and transformation. Collective identity, or membership to the Math Corps family, is an important tool as Math Corps expands its reach as a social movement. As an individual movement and as part of restorative justice, Math Corps seeks to transform the world into a more just society for all. Math Corps disrupts unjust structures by providing a quality mathematics education to its members while also promoting a self-defined culture of kindness, greatness, and growth.

## **Discussion & Conclusions:**

The discussion of zero tolerance policies and restorative justice in context of the discipline and culture of this ethnographic study shows how discipline is conceptualized and constructed through structural and cultural forces. Zero tolerance policies are forms of structural violence and create punitive cultures of control. In order to disrupt the structural violence of zero tolerance policies, that culture must first be disrupted. Thus, restorative justice, to be an effective response to zero tolerance policies, must be conceptualized as a social movement or a movement culture to transform school cultures and communities. This ethnographic study of Math Corps provides valuable insight on how movement culture and collective identity is constructed, and how they are used to transform individuals' point of views and beliefs. This study is an original contribution to the field of anthropology of education, as it uses an anthropological approach to examine restorative practices as a response to oppressive structures.

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