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Restorative Practices in Schools – the Benefits and Challenges

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RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS – THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Are restorative practices within schools an effective method for increasing student success? This literature review looks at the evidence available of restorative practices in reducing suspensions and expulsions, improving relationships, dealing with bullying, bringing about improved school morale through restorative circles, and lastly, looking at the challenges of successfully using restorative practices in schools. The evidence in literature does show the clear benefits that restorative practices have in all the mentioned areas. The challenges to implementing these practices are significant and need to be weighed before pursuing the venture of restorative practices in schools. Despite the challenges, restorative practices are one method to increase student success and more effectively meet the needs of students in our complex world.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Context

In schools, there has been historically a punitive regulatory framework that has been employed in the form of exclusionary practices, such as office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. This has continued and progressed through zero tolerance policies implemented by local, state, and federal levels of regulatory bodies in the United States (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). The American Psychological Association states that zero tolerance is "a philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" ("Are Zero Tolerance Policies," 2008, p. 852). Zero tolerance is the most widespread discipline reform effort in American schools today, with virtually every public school in the United States being mandated by federal law to use a zero-tolerance approach for firearms violations due to the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994. Many other schools apply a similar zero tolerance approach to other weapons, illegal drugs, over-the-counter medications, and other prohibited behaviors (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Then in 1999, in Columbine, Colorado, two students opened fire at their high school, killing thirteen people and injuring twenty-one others. In the years following this incident, the application of zero tolerance policies was accelerated to apply to many other school behaviors. This increased the use of suspensions and expulsions, "which some have said laid the foundation for the growth of the school-to-prison pipeline" (Evans & Vaandering 2016, p. 20).

Restorative practice in schools has its roots in restorative justice, which is an alternative to the punitive approach within the field of criminology. However, restorative justice began as a field in the criminal justice system. Restorative Justice is primarily focused on some form of mediated encounter between the perpetrator and the victim following an incident of harm (Bevington, 2015). The principles of restorative justice started before western civilization with indigenous communities such as the Navajo

in Native America and Maori tribes in New Zealand using conflict resolution and group conferencing to heal relationships (Evans & Vaandering 2016). One way that restorative justice has been studied and used is through restorative circles or peacemaking circles. Peacemaking circles were a practice done by many native groups in the United States and Canada and were used in resolving disputes and conflicts (Coates et al., 2003). The Elmira Case of 1974 in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, is considered by most as the first Western application of restorative justice principles. This case started the approach of victim-offender reconciliation, which created programs for addressing harm and confronting crime in ways that prioritize relationship and healing. With "the first victim-offender reconciliation program (VORP) in the United states was in Elkhart, Indiana in 1978" (p. 15-16). Through the 1980s, restorative justice initiatives in any system remained small and had little impact on the larger system. Through the early 1990s, the movement slowly began to be recognized as a viable option for a small number of interested crime victims and offenders (Umbreit et al., 2005). Throughout the 1990s, conferences and papers focused on restorative justice were happening throughout Europe. Then in 1994, the American Bar Association fully endorsed the practice of victim-offender mediation and recommended its development in courts throughout the country (Umbreit, 1998).

The principles within restorative justice have since been more widely applied to schools. The first documented use of restorative justice in schools began in 1994 in Australia, led by Margaret Thorsbome in response to issues raised by a serious assault after a school dance (Cameron & Thorsbome, 1999). The work then continued in the countries of New Zealand, Canada, the UK, and the United States (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). School-based restorative justice practices have been largely off-shoots of victim-offender mediation, family or group conferencing, and circle conferencing. School-based restorative justice practices "require a philosophical and practical shift away from punitive and retributive control mechanisms and more to a responsive and restorative practice towards the needs and concerns of the school community" (Gonzalez, 2016, p. 104-

105). Rather than focusing on external rewards and punishment as a motivational lever, restorative justice focuses on the motivational lever of relational elements. The restorative approach process necessarily includes those closest to the harm and those closest to the community affected (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

The goal of a school disciplinary system must be to both ensure a safe school climate while also avoiding policies and practices that may reduce students' opportunity to learn. While the goal of zero tolerance policies from the past has been to ensure the safety of the school climate, the implementation of zero tolerance has also created practices that reduce significant numbers of students' opportunities to learn. Furthermore, the Zero Tolerance Task Force found that "despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero tolerance policies have not provided evidence that such approaches can guarantee safe and productive school climates for other members of the student population" (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006, p. 857). So, the evidence does not support that zero tolerance policies ensure a safer school environment and clearly reduce students' ability to learn by removing them from school altogether. This shows the necessity for considering alternative disciplinary practices that can better work toward safe school environments without removing large numbers of students from the opportunity to learn.

Rationale

The problem I am addressing is how to confront challenging student behavior other than the traditional model that the evidence shows is not effective. According to the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, just six years ago, 5.28% of all public-school students missed school because of an out of school suspension (2015). This percentage has stayed consistently around 5%, with students missing out on schooling due to suspension or expulsion. Students that have at least one of these disciplinary actions against them are more likely to drop out of school and more likely to

have contact with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). The system that schools have used to confront challenging student behaviors is not working and not producing the student success that was hoped for. I wanted to look for another method, a different approach that would meet the time that we are in and the specific issues that we are facing in our modern world. I wanted to focus on a system that was more relationship focused and more centered on not just consequences to the problem behaviors but on helping struggling students and even their families navigate through these complex difficulties. Restorative practices meet these criteria, and not only that, but training also and implementation of restorative practices have begun in many school districts across our country and world. Therefore, I want to take a deep look at whether using restorative practices within schools is an effective method to increasing student success.

Definition of Terms

Restorative Justice is primarily focused on some form of mediated encounter between the perpetrator and the victim following an incident of harm (Bevington, 2015). Restorative justice is reactive, consisting of formal or informal responses to crime and other wrongdoing after it occurs (International Institute for Restorative Practices, n.d.).

Restorative practices also include the use of informal and formal processes that precede wrongdoing, those that proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing (IIRP, n.d.).

Peacemaking or restorative circles are a simple structured process of communication that helps participants reconnect with a joyous appreciation of themselves and others and is designed to create a space that is safe for all voices and for each participant to move towards their best self (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

Research Focus

I narrowed the focus of the research that I looked at by examining restorative practices and how they have been utilized, specifically in schools. Restorative practices started earlier in the criminal justice system, and so there is more history with how they have been implemented in this system. I choose to make it specific to schools because I wanted to know the data of whether using restorative practices within schools is an effective method to increasing student success. Furthermore, the criminal justice system and the school system have different outcomes they are seeking, and so it was important to me to center my research on the specific calling that schools have. I choose to focus the areas of success of restorative practices that I looked at to their effectiveness in reducing suspensions and expulsions, improving relationships, dealing with bullying, and bringing about improved school morale through restorative circles. I also wanted to look at the challenges and limitations of restorative practices in schools because I did not want to come into the research with a preconceived conclusion based on my own limited experience and understanding of restorative practices in schools. I wanted the literature review to be balanced and to take an objective look into how effective the restorative method was in increasing student success.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

I am examining the published literature on using restorative justice practices within schools. I will study the results of restorative practices in reducing suspensions and expulsions, improving teacher and student relationships, dealing with bullying and other discipline issues, how specifically using restorative circles brings about improved school morale, and lastly, to look at the challenges of using restorative practices in schools. This information should help in determining if using restorative practices within our schools would be effective methods to benefit student success. The literature in this thesis was located through searches of ERIC, Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, and Google Scholar with publication dates of 1995-2020. These searches were narrowed using the following keywords: "restorative practices in schools", "restorative practices and bullying", "restorative circles", and "restorative practices and suspension", and "restorative justice".

Results of Restorative Practices

The positive results of restorative practices being implemented in schools are evident. There are four main ways that restorative factors show positive results, and each will be discussed below. One way is reducing the number of suspensions and expulsions, especially for students of color. The result of this is more time for these students to be in classrooms and learning the skills that they need to be successful in school. Lowering the suspension and expulsion rates also lowers the rate at which students will drop out of school and lowers the chance that they will be involved in the justice system as adults. Another positive result of the literature is a marked improvement in relationships. This stems from the humanistic nature of the restorative practices, as well as the focus on building understanding and empathy. Thirdly, looking specifically at restorative circles and the positive results they bring to the overall school morale. Lastly, a reduction in bullying is a positive result that will be discussed. After

looking at four positive results gleaned from using restorative practices in schools, the limitations and challenges of using restorative practices in schools will be examined.

Reduction in Suspensions and Expulsions

Suspensions and expulsions are a common occurrence and often the way schools in the U.S. deal with significant behavior issues. According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, in the United States in the 2013-14 school year, 5.28% of all public-school students were given at least one out of school suspension. This accounts for 2,635,743 suspended students in one year in our country that were removed from school for disciplinary reasons (2015). Also, suspension is one form of discipline that is shown to be used more frequently in urban settings and often not for serious offenses, but instead for disobedience. These suspensions begin with academic frustrations and produce increased behavior problems due to these academic difficulties. Suspensions then exclude them from additional academic instruction, which increases the academic frustration, often resulting in dropouts or expulsion. This can be a different solution if students develop protective factors, such as positive academic competence and social behavior (Evans & Lester, 2010).

The current research shows that using reward or punishment is not effective (Gossen, 1998) and explains that “when we frighten, shame, or chastise children their brains downshift and they can’t make moral sense of their actions” (p. 182). So, considering the educational situation our country is in with regards to dealing with behavior problems, restorative practices are one method that has been applied and tested to see its effectiveness. One such case that really shows the impact of restorative practices on suspensions and expulsion rates in a district is where both educators and restorative stakeholders collaborated over multiple years. In this case, six high schools and two middle schools were identified to be part of the restorative pilot project. These schools were specifically chosen precisely because they had the highest suspension and expulsion rates in the district. During these first two years of collaboration, there were significant shifts in district wide suspensions and expulsions. In the academic

year of 2012/2013, there were 8038 suspensions and 178 expulsions in the district, whereas in 2014/2015 there were 4872 suspensions and 71 expulsions (Darling & Monk, 2017). This is a 39.39% decrease in suspensions and a 60.11% decrease in expulsions.

A Texas study by the Council of State Governments (CSG) Justice Center examined school discipline data and other information maintained by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Data collected for the resulting study relate to nearly one million public school seventh grade students in a Texas public school in the academic years 2000, 2001, or 2002 (Fabelo et al., 2011). What they found was that 59.6% received at least one disciplinary action (a suspension or expulsion) between seventh grade and twelfth grade. Half of all students who received such disciplinary actions were involved in at least four violations, and the average number of violations experienced by each disciplined student was more than eight. It is not only that most students received a suspension or expulsion in the Texas public school that was a significant finding. What the study also found was that nearly 10 percent of those students with at least one disciplinary action dropped out of school, compared to just 2 percent of students with no disciplinary action. This accounted for 53,646 student dropouts over the course of the study. Another correlation was that 23 percent of students who were involved in the school disciplinary system at least once had contact with the juvenile justice system. “Students who did not have any occurrences of suspension or expulsion had just 2 percent contact with the juvenile justice system” (p. 66).

In another 2-year study between June of 2015 and 2017, researchers from the RAND Corporation conducted a randomized controlled trial of restorative practices in 44 schools in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district. The district chose to implement the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program, designed by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (Augustine et al., 2018). With the control schools that did not adopt the program of restorative practices, from the 2014–15 school year to the 2016–17 school year, the days lost to suspension in the district declined by

18 percent. In the schools that did adopt the restorative practices program, suspension rates declined by 36 percent during the same time period. Since 2003, Denver Public Schools have also implemented restorative justice interventions into their discipline and behavior management processes. Utilizing informal classroom meetings, victim impact panels, and restorative conferencing, resulted in a 68 percent overall reduction in police tickets, a 40 percent overall reduction in out-of-school suspensions in seventeen schools, and an 82 percent decrease in expulsions (González, 2012).

In another large urban district, researchers looked at students who received restorative interventions in the first semester and if there is an association with lower odds of disciplined students receiving additional office discipline referrals or out of school suspensions in the second semester. This study included 180 schools in the district, encompassing 9,921 students in grades K-12 that received one or more office discipline referrals in the 2012-13 school year (Anyon et al., 2016). One hundred and twenty-six staff members (37 teachers, 28 administrators, and 61 support service providers) representing 53 District schools participated in 2-day training that emphasizes restorative interventions in response to discipline incidents. The district policy in the district "strongly recommended to administrators and teachers that students be offered a restorative intervention for behavior that leads to a discipline action" (p. 10). The results of the study revealed that students who received restorative interventions as consequences for behavioral referrals in the first semester had lower odds than their peers of being referred to the office for misconduct in the second semester and were also less likely to receive an out of school suspension in the second semester. These results were equivalent across all racial groups. Another result revealed was "that restorative intervention participants had lower odds of receiving a second-semester office discipline referral in schools that had higher schoolwide restorative intervention rates" (p. 17). When a student participated in at least one restorative intervention in the first semester and was at school with an average 1st semester restorative intervention rate, they had a 28% probability of receiving an office discipline referral in the second

semester. This probability of receiving an office discipline referral in the 2nd semester further dropped to 18% when they were in a school with a schoolwide restorative intervention rate that was one standard deviation above the mean.

A pilot restorative justice program was implemented at Cole Middle School in West Oakland, California, at a school that primarily served students of color from low-income families. During the observational year of 2008-2009 at Cole, Henderson Center researchers observed classrooms, restorative justice circles, and other special events put on by the school. In all, Henderson Center researchers conducted over forty observations and interviewed twenty-one students, ten parents and guardians of students, twelve teachers and staff members, and ten community members. Additionally, twenty-four students answered a questionnaire on their perceptions of restorative justice. The Henderson Center also analyzed data on disciplinary issues published by the Oakland Unified School District and the California Department of Education. "The average suspension rate in the three years before restorative justice was implemented was fifty suspensions per one hundred students. In the two years after restorative justice was implemented, the rate fell to only six suspensions per one hundred students" (Sumner et al., 2010, p. 31). This reduction in suspension rates at Cole Middle School was 87 percent. The expulsion rate at Cole Middle School went from .709 expulsions per 100 students to being eliminated the two years following the implemented restorative justice.

Marked Improvement in School Relationships

As restorative justice was developed in the criminal justice system, "restorative justice seeks to provide, perhaps for the first time, a much clearer framework for restitution, in which offences can be punished, but within a context where the relationship damaged by the offence is the priority and based on the premise that this damaged relationship can and should be repaired and that the offending individual can and should be reintegrated, not only for the good of that individual but also for that of the community as a whole" (Mccluskey et al., 2008, p. 201). Cameron and Thorsborne (2001) found in their

research that three fundamental components were the core of restorative practices in relation to creating a fair process: engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity. A study with 135 student teachers at Indiana University was done where they wrote detailed descriptions of one effectively managed and one ineffectively managed discipline incident. The results from the study showed that the student teachers cited five types of discipline problems and used seven different management strategies. The three most frequent discipline problems were defiance, disruption, and inattention. The most obvious indicator of whether a strategy was effective was the extent to which it was "authoritarian" or "humanistic" (Tully & Chiu, 1995, p. 169). The most effective discipline management strategy found in dealing with aggression was Explanation. Explanation is a key component of restorative practices, with its goal of trying to build an understanding of relational difficulty, as well as building empathy for the other person, which in turn works to improve the relationship. Explanation, which is discussing the desired behavior with the student or the whole class and the whys of the behavior, was shown to be effective in every incident of aggression it was used.

In another study, two large and diverse high schools on the East Coast of the United States started implementing restorative practices during the 2011-12 school year. The International Institute of Restorative Practices developed the teacher and student implementation survey scales as part of their training materials. With the surveys, the quality of teacher-student relationships was measured using two different sources—student surveys and school discipline records (Gregory et al., 2014). The results showed that "higher student-reported restorative practice was associated with greater teacher respect and fewer misconduct/defiance referrals issued to Latino, Asian, White, and African American students" (p. 15). When a teacher reported that a student was more cooperative, then the student was more likely to see the teacher as more respectful. An interesting finding was that racial group membership was not associated with teacher respect, or in other words, the degree to which the student found the

teacher respectful was not related to their race. Conversely, “when the students reported greater implementation of the restorative practice elements, they tended to view those teachers as more respectful and there was a lower associated use of misconduct/ defiance referrals” (p. 16).

In another research study in a large suburban high school setting, all the participants with restorative practices identified moments when having used a developed restorative language created a much more enjoyable student discipline experience. One dean pointed out that “changing her language immediately changed the student language, and that soon a peaceful, more meaningful resolution could be found” (McFaul, 2017, p. 94)

Starting in 2008, Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) has offered restorative justice services for students recommended for expulsion, in partnership with the Legal Rights Center of Minneapolis, a community nonprofit. In 2010, the University of Minnesota joined this partnership as an external evaluator, undertaking a multi-year evaluation aimed at assessing program effectiveness (McMorris et al., 2013). A total of 83 students and 90 parents/guardians completed pre-conference surveys and, of those, 59 students and 73 family members completed a post-conference survey about six weeks later, yielding follow-up rates of 71% and 81%. The Restorative Conference Program (RCP) also collected school record data, including attendance, suspensions, and indicators of academic achievement, during the year prior, year of the disciplinary intervention, and year after. Most students were referred to the program for assault (48%) or a weapon (29%). Overall, students reported high levels of satisfaction and awareness. “Almost all student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they (95%) and their family members (96%) had followed through with their part of the conference plan. Approximately 91% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the conference program to a friend, while 83% agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped them be more successful in school. A strong majority of students (81%) also reported that they had used new sources for help because of participating in the RCP” (p. 23). Because of their participation in the RCP, “75% reported that they

understand the impact of their behavior on people around them, and 71% indicated that they make better decisions, and they understand the impact their behavior has on the people around them. Additionally, 61% said they learned how to solve problems non-violently, and 51% reported they received more help from adults at school" (p. 24). The restorative program also left a positive impression on the parents of the expelled students, with 96% percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the program. There was also an increase in student reports of liking school, with mean responses increasing on a 4-point (0-3) scale from 2.00 to 2.17. They also reported knowing someone at school they could ask for help on the post-conference survey, with mean scores increasing from 2.14 to 2.36. Lastly, reports of skipping or cutting school dropped from 0.64 to 0.42 when asked how often you skipped or cut school in the past month. From these surveys, it appears that the RCP interrupts downward trajectories and returns students to a path of improved relationships in school, which in turn affects their chances at finding academic success.

In another study project showing the effect of restorative practices on school relationships, a specific school was selected for the project because it was in a target community, and the principal was interested in collaboration. The school is in San Diego, in a densely populated ethnically and linguistically diverse urban community with some of the highest rates of violence, poverty, domestic violence, trauma, and immigration in the city (Ingraham et al., 2016). The participatory culture-specific intervention model (PCSIM) and the Multicultural consultee-centered consultation (MCCC) approaches guided the implementation of RP. In this process, participants actively engaged in the identification of the goals, design, and delivery of interventions, and evaluation of results to inform further project activities, thereby adapting the activities to align with the specific cultures of this school community. Surveys, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observations, written reflective narratives, and rating scales were used to collect a wide range of ethnographic data from participants. The measures addressed the questions of how teachers, parents, and students responded

to the RP, and how parent and youth participants were affected by their leadership roles. Efforts were made to track changes in teacher, student, and parent attitudes and beliefs as they learned and implemented RP at school and at home. The results were an 85% reduction in behavioral referrals from project years 1 to 3. Parental concerns about children graduating decreased by 20% from 67% to 47% (a 30% change), and parent and community engagement increased. What was evident, according to the study, was that "students' enthusiasm and reflections clearly demonstrated they embraced and valued RP" (p. 376).

In an exploratory qualitative study, 37 participants were interviewed in a victim offender mediation operating in a mid-sized Midwestern city in the United States. The question raised is how and why restorative discourses work in victim offender mediations? They defined a case as a particular victim offender mediation session composed of an adult victim, a youth, and his or her family members, the mediator, and a referral source. They examined four different victim offender mediation cases (Choi et al., 2011). Semi-structured interviews and observation were the primary data collection methods. An observation "over a 1-year period was another source of data, mainly complementing and/or validating the interview data" (p. 342). From the data, the youths shared why the Victim Offender Mediation was a ''good punishment for them in four ways: a learning opportunity; an opportunity to see different aspects of their crimes; an opportunity for a better understanding of their victims; and an opportunity for putting a human face on a crime" (p. 344). Most of the youths described their experiences as being ''nerve-wracking'' or even ''scary'' because they had to face the people they harmed and yet what was also observed was that the victim offender mediation processes appeared to help these youths fully realize the extent of the consequences of their actions (p. 352).

In a qualitative case study, data was collected about the implementation of Restorative Justice as a disciplinary practice within a five-month period during the 2018–2019 school year of a middle school. They collected data using three methods: interviews, observations, and review of

documents. They interviewed three teachers that incorporated RJ practices in their classes, one administrator who was using RJ practices with students who had received disciplinary referrals, and six students enrolled in classes where teachers were using RJ practices for discipline. Both researchers also conducted observations within the classroom, as well as within the common areas throughout the school during different time periods throughout the day across multiple days. Lastly, they reviewed respect agreements/contracts created as a class and displayed within the classroom, letters students had written to the teacher or their peers focused on restoring the relationship, and the book the staff read to learn RJ principles, "Discipline that Restores" (Weaver & Swank, 2020). As a class, they created a respect agreement at the beginning of the year to define respect and to illustrate how each member of the class can exhibit respect to one another and their environment. During the observations, the teacher Ms. Jones pointed to the agreement when a student engaged in behavior violating the agreement. In response, students would either stop the behavior or approach the teacher to inquire about this reference to the agreement. The teacher welcomed questions from students and used these interactions as an opportunity to teach students to question or disagree respectfully. Additionally, some students reported that "they used the agreement beyond the classroom, reminding them to act respectfully in other areas of their lives" (p. 4).

An appreciative evaluation was conducted over four months, with six volunteer participants at one inner-London primary school. The main purpose was to explore in-depth people's "experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings, and knowledge" of restorative approaches in their school (Bevington, 2015, p. 107). The process was divided into four phases: appreciative interviews; create a vision of future success; develop provocative propositions; and create a plan of action. The staff reported that the benefits of restorative work the children received were the same benefits that they had received. It taught the children and staff to be more thoughtful and reflective about their behavior, about how they engage with each other following an incident of conflict.

The Scottish Executive funded a pilot project on restorative practices in three Local Authorities in 2004. They then commissioned a team to carry out a two-year evaluation of the pilot and investigated the ways in which 18 pilot schools were developing their restorative practices. There were ten primary, seven secondary and one special school in urban, suburban and rural areas (Mccluskey et al., 2008). In the schools, there was strong evidence that they became identifiably calmer and pupils generally more positive about their whole school experience. Students described staff as fair and listening to both sides of the story and most staff identified improvements in staff morale. There was clear evidence of children developing conflict resolution skills.

Restorative Circles to Bring about Improved School Morale

Peacemaking or restorative circles are a process to build community, resolve conflict, and in turn, improve relationships. “The Circle is a simple structured process of communication that helps participants reconnect with a joyous appreciation of themselves and others. The Circle is designed to create a space that is safe for all voices and for each participant to move towards their best self” (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p. 3). The start of restorative circles in schools stems from the influence of native groups in Canada and the United States. In many Native traditions, circles were and still are used in resolving conflicts (Coates et al., 2003). One of the first efforts to adapt peacemaking circles as a restorative justice approach in schools was made by the South Saint Paul Restorative Justice Council (SSPRJC). With the help of the Dakota County Community Corrections, they did a qualitative study to find out how circle work has impacted its participants. They interviewed a total of 62 people, and 13 circles were observed. Some of the outcomes from these interviews were that 40% of the participants noted that one of the most important results was having offenders take responsibility and be held accountable for their actions. The second most frequently identified outcome was the benefit to future relationships between the victims and the offenders.

A study over a 7-month period looked at how educators in four urban schools (two elementary, one middle, and one high school) used responsive circles. Twenty-two responsive circles, led by 13 different teachers, were observed. The four schools implemented the SaferSanerSchools Whole School Change Model, a program developed by the IIRP (International Institute of Restorative Practices). There were three types of data collected for the study; observations of responsive circles, assessment of each responsive circle using the RP-Observe tool, and interviews with staff members in the four schools (Wang & Lee, 2018). Of the 22 responsive circles observed, 9 of them were done in response to a student receiving detention or in-school suspension. Eight of these responsive circles were completed in the detention area of the school. The 13 other circles observed were completed in a classroom setting, although all the circles were done reactively in response to a conflict. What was found was that around 70% of educators interviewed felt that "such circles had a positive impact on individual students and/or the classroom climate" (p. 190). Not all educators in the study perceived positive impacts of responsive circles. About 30% of the educators that were interviewed were doubtful or unwilling to agree that responsive circles had a positive impact on individual students and/or the classroom climate.

In another study looking at the impact of restorative circles at an urban high school, they were introduced during the 2011-12 school year and then near the end of the 2012-13 school year the data was collected. Thirty-five high school students and 25 school staff or administrators who were involved with restorative circles at some capacity were interviewed to check their effectiveness. The structure behind the school's use of restorative circles was when conflict arises, both staff and students have the option of initiating a circle with the goal of helping to repair the harm, restore relationships and create accountability. Those invited then choose whether to participate or not. Before the circle, the facilitator, who is usually the school staff trained in restorative circles conducts pre-circles with each person involved in the conflict (Ortega et al., 2016). There were five subcategories of positive outcomes for both students and adults that emerged from the interviews given. Four out of five subcategories

overlapped for both the students and the adults. One of these was both feeling there were less punitive methods being used to deal with behavior and conflict. This was a way to interrupt the ¨School-to-prison Pipeline" that recent studies have shown with regards to suspensions, expulsions, and detentions leading to students moving from the school system to the prison system later in life. Another positive outcome noted by most students and adults was improved relationships. "Students and adults talked not only about restored relationships, but also actual improvements in their relationships" (p. 464). A third positive outcome that overlapped amongst adults and students was the prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict. Three themes emerged from adults and students were the learning of new skills and tools such as reflection and talking through conflict, seeing students using restorative circles independently in their lives to deal with conflict, and overall, less physical fighting. The fourth positive outcome shared by both students and adults was meaningful dialogue. "Three themes came out of this as well, with meaningful dialogue coming due to understanding and connecting, no rumors or boosting in the Circle, and getting to the actual cause of the issue" (p. 465). A student only subcategory that came out of the interviews was ownership of the Circle process, with students coming to find that circles were their preferred way of dealing with the conflict they had in their life. The adult only subcategory that emerged was adults seeing the students impacted in observable ways; "students were more focused on academics, had more confidence and were better behaved" (p. 465).

During the 2017–2018 academic year at Towson University, a university instructor and a department chairperson joined efforts to infuse restorative practices and community circles into their teacher education curriculum. They first introduced restorative practices in a course through readings and videos that defined and demonstrated restorative practices in schools. In the next course, the interns participated in a group research project on restorative practices and presented their findings to their peers. They also observed community circles practiced at the middle school. In their final two semesters, they completed their part- and full-time internships, during which they continued observing

restorative practices in action and participating in community circles (Silverman & Mee, 2018). The interns liked realizing they were not alone in their emotions as they heard from one another during community circles. Furthermore, they discovered common bonds that would have otherwise unnoticed not only by articulating thoughts but also, and perhaps more importantly, by listening to one another. When asked if they could see themselves initiating community circles in their own middle or high school classrooms, "each intern responded with an emphatic yes" (p. 4).

Reduction in Bullying

In 2017, 20.2 percent of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school during the school year. Ever since 2005, the percentage of students reporting being bullied has stayed over 20%, with the highest report coming in 2007 at 31.7% (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These numbers show the problem throughout schools in the United States with bullying. So, the question is how restorative practices deal with bullying in schools. In a study designed to look at explaining differences across four bullying status groups in relation to restorative justice being implemented, self-report data were collected from 343 students. Bullying was measured using two questions: "How often have you been part of a group that bullied someone during the last year?" and "How often have you, on your own, bullied someone during the last year?" Victimization was measured using one question: "How often have you been bullied by another student or group of students?" (Morrison, 2006, p. 379-380). Follow-up questions were asked to measure provocation, and students reported being excluded. Students who reported that they did not participate in bullying in school, nor felt they were victims of bullying (nonbullies/nonvictim group), indicating that they were more likely to use shame acknowledgment strategies (i.e., taking responsibility and making amends), and less likely to use shame displacement strategies. This was also true for the nonbullies/victim group, yet this group reported significantly fewer levels of respect within the school community and reported lower levels of emotional group value.

A logical complement exists between the PBIS framework and Restorative Practices in many ways, including the focus on reducing exclusionary discipline and maximizing instructional engagement. It seems the Restorative Practices can be situated within the multi-tiered layers of the PBIS framework (Knoster et al., 2017). In a study looking at the impact of School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) on bullying, they used the PBIS model in 37 Maryland public elementary schools to determine the impact on discipline problems and the school environment. The schools were matched on select baseline demographics, with 21 schools being randomized by the research team to the intervention condition and 16 schools being assigned to the comparison condition, which refrained from implementing SWPBIS for four years (Waasdorp, 2012). Analyses indicated that children in schools that implemented SWPBIS displayed lower rates of teacher-reported bullying and peer rejection than those in schools without SWPBIS. A significant interaction also emerged between grade level of first exposure to SWPBIS and intervention status, suggesting that "the effects of SWPBIS on rejection were strongest among children who were first exposed to SWPBIS at a younger age" (p. 154).

In a study, five interventions were examined that are being employed by schools in addressing cases of bullying: Direct Sanctions, Restorative Practice, Mediation, the Support Group Method and the Method of Shared Concern. The examination of each approach looks at the amount of engagement with students in the attempted resolution of a bully/victim problem and the effectiveness of the interventions in resolving such problems (Rigby, 2014). With the restorative practice approach, those identified as bullies or offenders are present with the victims of bullying. The offender is to listen to the victim and hear how the behavior has affected them. The offender or offenders are asked to reflect on what happened and how they view the situation. The goal is to raise the awareness of the harm that has been caused and draw out a restorative response, with top goal being the relationship between the bully and the victim being restored. "There is some opportunity with this approach for the participants

to decide how the problem is to be resolved, yet there is also noteworthy external pressure for them to provide an appropriate restorative response" (p. 411). The success rate reported by schools was 73%. This was an improvement in comparison to the approach of direct sanctions, which are simply the negative consequences that are placed on students who are discerned to be responsible for the acts of bullying. This approach does not usually engage the students involved in the problem, and according to the teachers in the study who used this approach, it is successful in stopping the bullying in 62% of cases.

In 13 middle schools throughout Maine, a randomized controlled trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention was implemented. Intervention and control schools were matched based on demographic, academic, and disciplinary data and then randomized them so that six schools received the Restorative Practices Intervention and seven did not (Acosta et al., 2019). The intervention was applied for two years and started at baseline with where the schools were at and then results were tested after two years. The data was gathered through surveys given out via computers in the schools. The students' restorative practices experience significantly showed improvement in positive relations with all school climate, school connectedness, peer attachment, social skills outcomes, and fewer reports of physical and cyber bullying. These results show that a restorative environment can strengthen youth development and reduce bullying. The authors suggest that "while the intervention itself did not create a whole-school change, if restorative practices are used consistently enough, they seem to predict a reduction in bullying victimization by building a more supportive environment among all students and staff" (p. 886).

In a study looking at the contribution of three key facets of restorative justice in reducing school bullying, it involved 1875 students from grades 7 to 10 from 9 coeducational public and private schools in 3 school regions in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2005). The Bengali version of the original "Life at School Survey" was administered at the nine schools. Out of all the students that were

asked, 92% participated in the survey. In the study they found that re-integrative shaming, where disapproval needs to be accompanied by actions that will reestablish the bond between the authority figure and the offender, and shame acknowledgment, with restoratively discharging shame on the part of the child, are both associated with less school bullying. Shame displacement, where children displace blame and anger onto others, is associated with higher levels of school bullying. Stigmatizing shaming, or bullies being treated as outcasts, only made bullying worse for children who did not like school. The most interesting result from the study was that the strongest effect on bullying is that parental forgiveness of wrongdoing is strongly associated with reduced bullying. Forgiveness was shown to have a bigger effect than reintegrative shaming and stigmatization.

Challenges of Using Restorative Practices in Schools

As I have already shown, research shows that restorative practices in schools reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions. The discipline policies that often remove students for behavior through suspension or expulsion, these "students then experience decreased academic achievement, further fueling negative attitudes and leading to increased dropout rates" (Gonzales, 2012, p. 294). So, on the one hand, restorative practices allow for students to remain in schools at higher rates and so, in turn, reduce the tendency for students to drop out. This does not though, address students that then remain in school but continue to struggle with even wanting to do well academically. The question that naturally must be asked is, do restorative practices make for better students academically? Do restorative practices change the motivation for struggling learners? Academic researchers have spent many years studying motivation in students. In a study by Ryan and Deci, they define motivation as simply to be moved to do something (Daniels, 2010). In school, Daniels points out that teachers cannot make someone motivated, but what they can do is create motivating learning environments. Three general answers to how to do this have emerged from the research and student feedback. They are "feeling a sense of autonomy or control, feeling connected to the class or school, and feeling as though

they have the skills or ability to meet the challenges of school" (p. 25). With regards to feeling connected to the class, it often involves modeling how to do the work, and then giving activities that allow students to apply their learning in a variety of ways that fit them. Daniels also mentions that "students need and want to know how their academic learning connects to their lives and design their own understanding from their work" (p. 26). Restorative practices do address the issues of autonomy and feeling connected to your classmates and teachers by building community, but it does not address the academic content that the students learn. So, while students feeling as though they have more control and more connection in school is beneficial to academic achievement, it does not change the motivation to learn or their connection to the academic content.

In a rigorous analysis of the findings from a small case study of eight primary school children about their experiences during restorative circles and the meanings they ascribe to them. The data was gathered by a practitioner who was well known and trusted by the children. This was considered important because the quality of the investigation was seen to be dependent on the children being willing to freely share their views and opinions. Care was also taken to ensure the selected group included equal numbers of boys and girls and that they were of mixed ability, social background and personalities (Leach & Lewis, 2012). The findings of the children's expressed views suggest circle-time was "often devoted to group counseling sessions in which matters relating to their social and emotional development are raised and discussed. The children's comments highlight the problems that can arise when doing this, and particularly when adult positional power is used in the classroom to address adult agendas about children's social and emotional development, including encouraging children to share personal feelings and emotions, about which they can feel uncomfortable and would prefer not to be discussed among peers" (p. 47). A common value with restorative circles is confidentiality, that what's said in the circle should stay in the circle. This was true for this case study, and yet some voiced their concerns over occasions when "secrets mentioned during circle-time are repeated outside the circle and

the classroom" (p. 47). Four of the children also spoke of occasions when they had done something wrong, and it was discussed during circle-time. During these experiences, shame, guilt, and anxiousness were common feelings. The findings demonstrate that well-intentioned activities to 'voice' pupils can have unintended negative consequences. Even though the intention it seems in this case study is for staff and teachers to help the children with the social, emotional aspects of learning, "circle-time is an occasion when children can all too easily be left feeling isolated, vulnerable, threatened and stigmatized" (p. 50).

Four cases of restorative justice involving parties of different cultural backgrounds have been studied by means of participant observation and follow-up interviews in the time period of June–September of 2008. One case was mediated in Oslo, and three cases in Helsinki. The data collection was conducted in the form of informal qualitative interviews with 31 mediators, administrative mediation staff, and project leaders (Albrecht, 2010). Important findings from both Oslo and Helsinki are that there can be challenges for mediators in multicultural cases. Albrecht also goes on to conclude that "the mediator should be aware that restorative justice as practiced in the Nordic countries is not a familiar concept for migrant minorities from all cultures. While immigrants and refugees from certain cultures apparently can relate very well to it, others seem to have more conceptual and practical problems with it" (p. 21). While there are benefits for minorities that restorative justice practices bring, mediators need to take into consideration the weaker position of immigrants and refugees. Also, in multicultural cases, the parties may be confronted with communication styles they have no previous experience with which can lead to dissonance and difficulties to come to a mutual understanding. The research findings show that there is "no clarity about the role of the mediator or the mediation models in cross-cultural restorative justice, and that further knowledge needs to be acquired about the minority population's perspectives in order to make restorative justice practices more efficient" (p. 21). What was identified in cross-cultural cases is that It

seems helpful to conduct preparatory meetings with the participants before restorative justice mediation.

During the restorative circles being implemented at a particular urban high school, the goals were for participants to; understand each other, take responsibility for their choices, and generate actions for moving forward together that are agreeable to all involved (Ortega et al., 2016). There were two areas of negative outcomes that students and staff identified at the urban high school. Nineteen students and ten adult staff talked about feeling frustrated about their circle experience because "they believed that their peers had lied in the circle" (p. 463). The perceived lying could be from not trusting the other members in the circles or from not aligning with the values laid out for restorative circles. When not committing to the circle guidelines, students would also fight with one another instead of following the laid-out expectations. Another identified outcome was that of disappointment, with 12 students and seven adults pointing this out. They discussed feeling this due to others "not taking it seriously or messing around" (p. 463) and "not having everyone important to the conflict" (p. 464).

Another research study was conducted in a large suburban high school setting located in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Participants were informed of the research study during a weekly meeting held at the school. The goals and objectives of the research study were presented, outlining the specific details related to their potential involvement (McFaul, 2017). Data collection took place during an eight-week period in the fall of 2016. The study "utilized semi-structured focus-group interviews, semi-structured individual interviews, and review/analysis of two surveys" (p. 55). The first theme that emerged was a common perception, or appearance, that the Restorative Discipline model is weak and does not look like what school staff is familiar with traditionally. The staff at Northwestern High School voiced frustration over "increased behaviors of disrespect, general non-compliance, and lack of consequences" (p. 67). McFaul states that "what I've come to realize is that the calm and more conversational manner of restorative practice gives some individuals the impression that indeed,

nothing is actually happening. It's not until they are directly involved in the process, that they come to realize the significant meaning behind the restorative approach" (p. 68). Therein lies the need for improved communication to be taking place with staff, helping teachers better understand the benefits of a restorative model, and how these efforts can improve the school and classroom environments. "The lack of communication exacerbates these misunderstandings" (p. 73). Making time for communication with staff is essential, and yet finding the time to communicate with all staff individually is a struggle. There does not seem to be enough time for the Dean's or administrative staff to talk with teachers before or after a referral. The second theme that emerged was that "without the purposeful implementation of a schoolwide restorative training model, discipline responsibilities continue to fall primarily on the shoulders of student deans" (p. 75). One reason for the lack of a clear support structure at Northwestern, and likely many other schools, is that issues of discipline are traditionally handled by individuals assigned to this specific role within the school. Also, it is difficult to get all the necessary staff and community members to be on the same page and all embrace a system that is different. McFaul noted that the deans "will agree that involving some staff members in their response, or inviting them to participate in restorative conferences, is extremely frustrating because they often take such a negative tone" (p. 78). At the same time, each of the participants found restorative conversations to be more time-consuming, and while beneficial to a larger degree, the volume of students to be seen was overwhelming. Each participant voiced the need for more trained staff members that would be available to take the lead in these efforts. This lack of time and additional support was also shared as "the reason why each dean would also admit to sometimes not using a restorative approach when such an effort would have been possible" (p. 95).

In exploring the impact of restorative approaches on well-being, Norris looked at the implementation and delivery of restorative programs in three schools through the efforts of the local Youth Offending Teams. School 1 chose a reactive-only model of RA, consisting of initial meetings,

restorative conferences, and follow-up meetings. The process length varied in School 1 between participants, ranging from one to approximately 46 weeks. School 2 maintained their whole-school ambitions, implementing both proactive and reactive practices, although it was later discovered that little formal RA conferencing took place, and the proactive practices were limited in scope. The staff at School 3 adopted a hybrid of proactive classroom practices and a whole school approach. In this model, the RA Officer's main role was to train the staff members in proactive classroom practices and had little contact with students (Norris, 2018). There were limited significant findings relating to changes in the outcome measures (happiness and school engagement) in each school over time. The reactive-only RA model in School 1 did not progress sufficiently enough to considerably influence happiness or school engagement scores over the time periods. The testing of individual participants in formal RA processes did not yield any significant changes either. "The chasm that is between the established school culture and the changes needed for RA programs to flourish resulted in an extremely limited ability of RA to make any difference to outcomes of the participants" (p. 9). The proactive-only whole-school approach, as seen in School 3, resulted in more positive outcomes than both School 1 and 2. A comparison of both School 2 (traditional whole-school approach) and School 3 (proactive-only whole-school approach) did record a significant difference in happiness and school engagement between these two settings, with School 3 recording a significantly better. In School 2, like School 1, there were only pockets of use, and they were more informally and less consistently enforced compared to both Schools 1 and 3. This is not a unique outcome and several evaluations have noted that "both whole-school ambitions are difficult to achieve and, if achieved, are difficult to sustain over time" (p. 10). The researchers also found that the different models of RA impact participant well-being to different degrees, depending on the consistency of implementation. This points to the "importance of consistent school-wide practices as the stimulus to initiate positive trends in both happiness and engagement within the school" (p. 11).

Bevington noted that there are “certain factors that can indicate that a restorative response is either not possible or not appropriate” in a school setting (Bevington, 2015, p. 113). The factors that they identified included the emotional state of the child or the member of staff, low self-esteem, lack of confidence or competence of the member of staff, lack of time or physical space. These factors are issues that would seem to be prevalent in all school settings. The staff in the appreciative evaluation did look at how to overcome these factors. Bevington looked at having “a core of highly skilled staff on whom to call for support, the school to develop a shared bank of resources and ideas for how they support the children to develop restorative skills, and a renewed focus on emotional intelligence within staff development” (p. 113). The staff at this school did agree that it is important to attempt to work with students restoratively as much as possible, yet it was also important for staff to feel free to be honest when they are unwilling or unable to engage in a restorative response. In summary, there was the idea that it is not always appropriate or necessary to respond to incidents of conflict in a restorative way. Further understanding and research are needed to help define when restorative responses are appropriate and needed and when they are not.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

I examined the literature on restorative practices in schools by looking into five areas. I choose to look at the effect of restorative practices in reducing suspensions and expulsions, improving teacher and student relationships, dealing with bullying, the use of circles to bring about improved school morale, and some challenges of using restorative practices in schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, there were 2,635,743 suspended students in 2013-14 in our country that were removed from school for disciplinary reasons for at least one day (2015). Suspensions exasperate issues by excluding students from additional academic instruction, which then increases the academic frustration, which often results in dropouts or expulsion (Evans & Lester, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011). The use of suspensions and expulsions in dealing with behavior issues does not seem to be the best practice and seems to have more of a negative effect on future outcomes. I looked at the literature to find out how effective restorative practices are in reducing suspensions and expulsions. Research shows that restorative practices being implemented at schools result in a dramatic shift in the number of suspensions and expulsions (Augustine et al., 2018; Darling & Monk, 2017; González, 2012; Sumner et al., 2010). In one study, they found that students who received restorative interventions as consequences in the first semester had lower odds than their peers of being referred to the office for misconduct in the second semester; as well as being less likely to receive an out of school suspension in the second semester (Anyon et al., 2016).

I researched the literature on restorative practices effect on improving school relationships. A fundamental component found at the core of restorative practices and the most effective discipline management strategy identified in dealing with aggression was explanation (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Choi et al., 2011; Tully & Chiu, 1995). Furthermore, the higher the student-reported restorative

practice was in the schools, the greater the respect for teachers and other students inside the schools and out (Gregory et al., 2014; Weaver & Swank, 2020). There were also fewer behavioral referrals reported in schools when restorative practices were utilized (Gregory et al., 2014; Ingraham et al., 2016). In other studies, the whole school experience of students was more positive and enjoyable, including when going through the student discipline experience, when using restorative practices and language (Mccluskey et al., 2008; McFaul, 2017). What was also found was that students and their parents that were receiving restorative practices in response to behavioral referrals embraced and would recommend the restorative approach (Ingraham et al., 2016; McMorris et al., 2013). Another interesting finding found in multiple evaluations was that the benefits of restorative work the children received were the same benefits that the staff also had received, namely being more reflective about their behavior and increased morale (Bevington, 2015; Mccluskey et al., 2008).

I also looked more specifically at the use of restorative circles and their effects on overall school morale. Boyes-Watson and Pranis have stated that the circle is designed to create a safe space (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). The restorative circle can be used to build community within the school, deal with conflict, and as a disciplinary approach. An outcome that was identified was in the prevention of destructive ways of dealing with conflict and instead having relationship focused interactions that have offenders be held accountable for their actions towards victims and yet have this be done in less punitive ways (Coates et al., 2003; Ortega et al., 2016). An additional result of restorative circles was an observable positive impact on the classroom climate and in improved connection within relationships (Ortega et al., 2016; Silverman & Mee, 2018; Wang and Lee, 2018).

Over the last 15 years, over 20% of students aged 12-18 reported being bullied during the school year (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics., 2019). So, how does restorative practices impact bullying in schools? There is a correlation between restorative practices and PBIS, in that both focus on reducing exclusionary discipline and

maximizing instructional engagement and both displayed lower rates of teacher-reported bullying and peer rejection than the schools that do not implement these two strategies (Acosta et al., 2019; Knoster et al., 2017; Waasdorp, 2012). In studies examining trying to restore the relationship between the bully and the victim, they found that using the restorative practices of reintegrative shaming, as a response to wrongdoing, forgiveness of wrongdoing, and shame acknowledgment, are all associated with less school bullying (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2005; Morrison, 2006; Rigby, 2014).

Lastly, the negative effects of using restorative practices, as well as the challenges of using restorative practices in schools were investigated. Restorative practice approach has been shown to keep more students in school but does not address the feeling of competence at school (Daniels, 2010). In studies involving restorative circles, what has been found is that well-intentioned activities to give a voice to pupils in dealing with conflict can have unintended negative consequences, such arguing, distrust among members, feelings of shame and anxiety, and disappointment (Leach & Lewis, 2012; Ortega et al., 2016). Another challenge is when restorative practices are used with people of different cultural backgrounds, this often leads to challenges for mediators that lead to difficulties to come to a mutual understanding (Albrecht, 2010). There is also the difficulty to have consistency in implementation and communication among all staff across entire schools. This lack of communication intensifies misunderstandings among staff and the responsibility for implementation often falls on a few individuals instead across all staff (McFaul, 2017; Norris, 2018). Having the time and physical space to both align staff and to implement the time-consuming nature of restorative practices is also a significant hurdle to overcome (Bevington, 2015; McFaul, 2017). The emotional state of participants and the competence and confidence of staff engaged in restorative practices makes it difficult to know when restorative approaches are appropriate (Bevington, 2015).

Limitations of the Research

I limited the pool of research that I looked at by examining restorative practices and how they have been utilized in schools. I could have taken a broader approach and investigated studies with how restorative practices have been used in the criminal justice system, since there is more history with how they have been implemented in this system. Restorative practices were first documented being used in schools in 1994, and so there has not been a lot of time for studies and work to be done in the field that I specifically am reviewing.

I thought going into this endeavor that there honestly would be more research and more studies on restorative work in schools. I thought this mainly due to how much restorative practices are being highlighted in schools where I work and live. I noticed how many of the studies that I reviewed were within the last 5 years, and so this made me excited to see what new research comes out within the coming years. I did think there would be more empirical evidence for how restorative practices and restorative circles have affected students academically.

Implications for Future Research

There is significant evidence in literature with how restorative practices affect keeping students in school and increase school morale, but significantly less in regards how restorative practices in turn improves student achievement in school and how it affects students post educationally. It is one thing to both proactively and reactively deal with issues that students bring with them to schools, and in turn create a rehabilitative and relationship focused environment instead of a punitive and task driven one. The question that remains though is, does this different approach create greater success for the future with students? What parts of restorative practices are fully and practically helpful to making students future ready, and what parts are only partially helpful and potentially areas that need to be cut out?

Implications for Professional Application

One of the things that brought me to do a literature review on restorative practices in schools in the first place was both the belief and experience that the traditional model of dealing with behavior in schools not giving us the results we were working for. The research further proved to me that punitive behavior approach methods simply have the opposite affect than what they intend, in that they drive more students away from school. Suspensions and expulsions exclude students from academic instruction, which then only increases the academic frustration of those students. The research shows that restorative practices do reduce the number of suspensions and expulsions, and so in this way I have really been persuaded to consider aspects of restorative practices that do not produce this same outcome. Also, instead of working through the problems with the students in relationships, the traditional model simply removes them for a time and then hopes that the punishment only dissuades them from further problematic behavior. As you can imagine, this only trailblazes easier paths for these students to end up dropping out of school altogether. As Gossen highlighted, the current research shows that using punishment or reward is not an effective way to change behavior. Yet, the research shows that most educational systems continue to use these traditional models, with the same negative results. I wanted to look at an alternative method to these areas of education that could potentially change my outlook on how I and others could approach discipline and correction in schools. I wanted to look at an approach the was more relationship-focused, and this led me to restorative practices.

The research also was conclusive in that using restorative practices had an overall net positive effect on both school relationships and school morale, and in turn reducing bullying. A key aspect of restorative practices is explanation, and it has been found to be the most effective discipline management strategy found in dealing with aggression. Explanation is the act of discussing the desired and the whys of the behavior. This aspect is what I found throughout my restorative practices and restorative circles literature review, where relationship is central, and solutions and corrections are

found amid communication. This facet is what really persuades me in adopting restorative practices, in that the solutions are focused on helping students see how to navigate through the problems and not just showing them the consequences of the problems. It focuses in on building understanding and in turn empathy for each other, and then the outcomes are less bullying, more kindness, and more students that want to be in school. I believe students misbehave and act out for so many different reasons and so many variables are working together to influence them. Reasons could be to seek attention, past trauma, avoidance of uncomfortable situations, not understanding the schoolwork, or something as simple as lack or food or sleep. Then even if we know that it is attention seeking behavior or escaping from something stress-inducing, there are other questions from there that require examining. For example, why are they seeking attention in socially inappropriate ways in the first place? Why does this thing that is causing them stress, so bad that they feel the need to escape? These are complex people with complex issues, and simple fixes are just not sufficient.

Now I do not swing in my thinking completely to the other side where I do not think consequences for behavior need to be eliminated altogether. I think there definitely needs to be a balance of working through problems together and then also consequences on the other end as well. I believe one main reason why this is necessary, is that it is preparing students to better navigate the world we live in. There are always consequences to behavior, both good and bad, and I want to show my students that it is the same in school as well. Therefore, I want to have restorative practices and their relational focus as a foundation to all I do in managing behavior. Yet once this in the foundation, there continues to be a need for accountability, consequences, and boundaries. This was shown when I looked at the challenges of restorative practices, when in case studies, school staff often communicated feeling as though nothing was being done in response to significantly serious behavior. The response that schools have often resorted to in order to show how serious the behavior is, in suspensions and expulsions, is not the answer from my research. Instead, focusing on righting the wrongs specific to the

situation and taking the time and energy to work through the difficult situation is the answer. This is not an easy fix, because through my literature review, it highlighted the difficulties of getting all staff aligned on these practices and having the time to implement them is exceedingly difficult. The only way that I see restorative practices being truly effective is if entire schools and districts unite in these approaches and then give the necessary time and energy to implementing them successfully. In the school that I work, only the selective few behavioral specialists and EBD teachers were asked to take restorative practice trainings. I want to be a part of encouraging this to be a school wide initiative that we all embrace. Having some staff utilizing restorative practices and some staff focused on traditional methods, results in inconsistency in dealing with behavior and factions within staff teams. It also results in staff that are not capable to administer restorative practices in ways that do not cause more distrust and dissension.

Conclusion

The question I have sought to answer in this literature review is whether using restorative practices within schools is an effective method to increasing student success. When I write that word success, I do not mean simply improved graduation rates or test scores. I mean this, as well as building students life skills by working through conflict to make them more future ready. I mean helping students listen more closely to those different than them, in order to produce more empathy and less bullying. I think of student success as keeping students in school, improving school communities and climates, and reducing the feeling of not belonging to a sense of belonging. These are lofty aspirations, but the question is whether restorative practices increase the likelihood that schools across the world get closer to this version of success. The literature shows that restorative practices do reduce suspensions and expulsions, and invariably graduation rates. It also shows how it increases the connections, trust, and the overall climate of entire schools. It has been shown to increase communication, and empathy towards others that hurt, or we have hurt.

Lastly, restorative practices in all that they have shown promise in, have significant hurdles in front of them for them to have the effect of increasing student success. From my viewpoint, these hurdles are worth trying to overcome. I think the evidence that has been gathered shows that restorative practices are a worthy endeavor for school districts to pursue. It is also a worthy endeavor for me personally and professionally to pursue. I want to call my school and district toward restorative practices to meet the complex needs of our students. This requires test scores and getting through curriculum as important, yet secondary in the short term. The successful high achieving students still need to be challenged academically and they will continue to achieve, but the students that are struggling to learn and struggling to be appropriate in these settings need a better more effective way forward.

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