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The Student-Leader Voice in Restorative Justice Practices

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The Student-Leader Voice in Restorative Justice Practices

by

Amanda Wagner

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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Abstract

As more and more schools work to develop equitable and effective discipline strategies many are turning to restorative practices. However, there is no one correct way to implement a successful restorative justice program so schools are left to experiment with different practices and procedures to determine what works best for their school community. Research suggests that there are numerous benefits to developing a restorative program at a school but studies largely exclude the student perspective. Since students are a central part of a meaningful restorative justice program, it is important to hear their voices and experiences. The purpose of this research project is to better understand how student-leaders at a suburban middle school perceive their newly implemented restorative justice program and learn what their experiences can teach administrators and staff about how to improve the program. This research study focuses data collection on the student experience. Research methods include a focus group with student-leaders, interviews with administrators, and anonymous online surveys with the same student-leaders from the focus group. Findings suggest that restorative programs are most successful with students and teachers involved in the program understand and maintain their distinct roles in the restorative process. When roles are correctly implemented, student-leaders experience empowerment and leadership in their school community. As demonstrated in the findings, a lack of maintaining these roles leads to disempowerment of students. Additionally, it is crucial that the greater student body and school community understanding the purpose and process of a restorative program in order for the program to be successful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What does equitable and effective school discipline look like? This is the crucial and difficult question educators from all over the world ask themselves and each other daily. While many schools maintain more traditional, punitive methods of discipline such as suspension and expulsion, a growing number of schools are turning to restorative practices.

Historically, restorative practices were used in pre-modern civilizations of the Americas and the South Pacific (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016). The emphasis in restorative practices is on the perpetrators taking responsibility for their actions and then repairing the harm that was caused to any individuals and the community as a whole. Australia and New Zealand are believed to have had the first restorative justice systems in schools. These countries developed programs in schools over 25 years ago (Fronius et al., 2016). The early uses of restorative practices in the United States were part of the juvenile justice system to reduce the number of juveniles being incarcerated. It is not clear when the first schools in the United States started to use these practices but restorative practices are growing in popularity in schools across the United States.

Like in native cultures, schools in the United States are now using restorative methods to help students take responsibility for their actions, repair harm and build stronger school communities. These restorative justice programs highlight not only the misbehavior of the perpetrator(s) but also the impact the misbehavior had on the victim(s)

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and their school community. They ask questions such as, *who was impacted? How were they impacted? How was the community as a whole impacted? How can harm be repaired? How can the perpetrator(s) take responsibility for their actions?* These questions direct the focus on the harm that was caused to individuals and to the community and focus attention on how to repair this harm. These methods are believed to be more equitable, effective, and humanized than traditional, punitive methods (Mullet, 2014). Punitive methods such as suspension and expulsion do not create an opportunity for the perpetrator to reflect on their behavior or attempt to make amends and repair the damage that was caused. Punitive methods focus on punishing the perpetrator who broke the rule while restorative methods focus on the perpetrator taking responsibility and resolving the situation so they can stay in school and move forward as a member of the community. Restorative methods provide all students with an opportunity to be successful in school because it allows for them to stay in school rather be suspended or expelled. Students who use restorative justice are given the opportunity to continue to learn and become more productive members of their school community.

Research Summary

Research suggests that students' positive feelings toward school are related to social and academic success (Baig, 2016; Cavanagh, 2009). Additionally, research shows that successful implementation of a restorative discipline program can positively impact school culture and climate (Mullet, 2014). However, research also demonstrates that there is no one right way to implement a successful restorative justice program at any given school, it is heavily dependent upon the community and school in which the program

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exists. Because of this, it is difficult for schools to know exactly what will make their program successful and school may have to go through a trial and error period before they have a stable and successful restorative practice program. Most research studies focus on the perspectives of administrator, teachers, and even quantitative data analysis. However, these studies largely lack the student voice and experience (Shaw, 2017; Smith, 2004). The purpose of this research is to better understand how student-leaders involved in the newly implemented restorative justice program at a suburban middle school perceive the successes and challenges of the program and what can their experiences teach us about how to improve the program.

This research examined student perceptions and experiences of the newly implemented restorative justice program at a suburban middle school. It explored the implementation of a new restorative justice program in its first year and the successes and challenges of the program ultimately identifying the areas of strength and areas for improvement. Five student-leaders involved in the restorative justice program participated in a focus group session as well as an online survey and administrators were interviewed. Administrators, teachers, and students involved in the restorative program have been practicing restorative circles as a form of discipline since spring of 2017. However, there has had no examination of the perceived effect of this program from the perspective of student-leaders or administrators involved in the program until this research project.

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Audiences

This research project provides administrators, students, teachers, and the general school community with valuable information about their own restorative justice program. Thus, one aim of this project is to inform the school community about the strengths and suggestions for improvements to the program. Additionally, it is important to understand how the students and staff perceive the effectiveness of the program. If the school community can better understand this, it can make informed decisions about how to proceed with the program, and their efforts to shift school culture. This research examined what changes and adaptations need to be made to better the restorative justice program, and ultimately how to better improve the school culture and climate at the suburban middle school.

In addition to the school site community, educators who may be interested in implementing restorative justice programs at their own school sites can learn from the successes and challenges of this particular restorative justice program. As more schools are attempting to use restorative justice because it is considered to be more equitable, fair, and meaningful than punitive methods. School discipline is a social justice issue because traditional punitive methods are historically not equitable or just for minority populations. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in 2010, more than 28% of Black male middle school students had been suspended at least once, nearly three times the rate for white males (Losen, 2011). Additionally, Black females in middle school were suspended, more than four times as often as white female middle school students (Losen, 2011). Punitive methods of school discipline and expulsion and suspension are racially discriminatory practices and keep students out of school. One

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reason to implement restorative practices is to eliminate the institutionalized racism that is fed by punitive discipline practices. Even though Black students and other non-white students do not have more misbehaviors than White students, they are suspended and expelled at a much higher rate (Losen, 2011). Restorative methods focus on keeping all students in school, not suspended or expelling anyone. This research study pays close attention to these issues because the focus is on better understanding restorative practices and ultimately how they can be improved to better support the entire school community and all students regardless of their racial background. This research project can help to inform educators and other graduate students on issues of equitable school discipline.

Summary of Findings

Findings from this study indicate that the restorative justice program at the suburban middle school is most successful when students and adults understand and maintain their distinct roles in the process. Successful restorative circles and experiences occur when the students and adults involved understand how their roles differ and are committed to not crossing boundaries of others. Challenges and issues arise, however, when students and adults do not understand or maintain their distinct roles. The student role requires that students know how to ask appropriate questions and be leaders in the circle. Adults are meant to serve as support, facilitators, note-keepers, and witnesses to the circle. Students cannot successfully play the adult role and more importantly, adults cannot successfully play the student role.

Additionally, the restorative justice program is most successful when the greater school community understands the purpose of the program. Students and other community members who do not truly understand the purpose of restorative justice have

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a negative perception of the program. This lack of understanding leads to a bad reputations of the program, which limits its success. Therefore, it is important to teach the greater community of students, teachers, other staff members, and even parents about the program. A restorative justice program will be more successful if the greater community has buy in and in order to have buy in they must understand what happens in restorative justice.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

Research suggests that punitive methods of school discipline are almost never effective and often detrimental to students. Punitive school discipline can foster negative feelings towards school, create hostile learning environments, and increase dropout rates (Hantzopoulos, 2013). Schools are turning to restorative methods of discipline as an alternative. Restorative justice focuses on the harm that was caused by a misbehavior and repairing such harm, rather than the rule that was broken and punishing the culprit (Day, Snapp & Russell, 2016). This focus on repairing the harm done to an individual or community has many positive benefits for all involved in a disciplinary incident.

This research study explores how student-leaders involved in the restorative justice program perceive the strengths and challenges of the program, ultimately highlighting how to improve restorative justice at their school. Since studies show that punitive methods of school discipline have a negative outcome, schools, like the one in this study, are looking for alternative methods of discipline and restorative justice is one

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alternative. Research also suggests that positive feelings toward school are related to student success. The literature also shows that restorative practices are linked to positive school culture and affirmative reports of student experience (Day, Snapp, & Russell, 2016). From this information one could assume that implementing a restorative justice program would benefit their school community. The challenge is that research also demonstrates that there is no one correct or effective way to implement a restorative justice program (Smith, 2014). Therefore, schools don't know where to start or how to implement a successful program on their own. Additionally, the research does not highlight the voice and perspective of students involved in restorative programs. Some studies do include the voice of the students with the misbehaviors and their experience with restorative justice. However, the voice of the other students involved in the process, the student-leaders, is largely excluded.

School Connectedness and Community

Research shows that students with positive feelings about school and a strong sense of school connectedness are happier and more successful in school socially and academically (Biag, 2016; Day, Snapp, & Russell, 2016). One study describes three facets that make up *school connectedness*: perceptions of adult support, school safety, and high academic standards (Biag, 2016). This study defines school connectedness as “a belief by students that adults in school care about them as well as their learning” (Biag, 2016, p. 32). This definition of school connectedness highlights an important element, which is the student perception of whether or not adults care about them. However, it

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does not include connectedness to other elements of the school community, such as their peers and peer interactions.

Another study measured school connectedness with a five item scale asking students to rate their feelings on the following topics, “I feel close to people at this school”; “I am happy to be at this school;” “I feel like I am a part of this school”; “The teachers at this school treat students fairly”; and “I feel safe at my school” (Day, Snapp, & Russell, 2016). This understanding of school connectedness includes the peer relationships and overall feeling of being a member of a school community. For the purposes of this research study, school connectedness includes the feeling of being connected to adults and to peers. For the purposes of this research study, school connectedness includes the feeling of being connected to adults and to peers. Including both adult and peer connections is crucial to understanding a student experience of school connectedness because students interact with adults and peers each day.

Day, Snapp and Russell (2016) focused on student perception of school connectedness during times when the school handled situations of homophobic bullying with supportive methods rather than punitive methods. One outcome was that students who did not directly experience homophobic bullying had the highest rates of feeling school connectedness and students who were directly involved in the bullying had higher rates of school connectedness with supportive discipline strategies rather than punitive strategies (Day, Snapp, & Russell, 2016). This suggests that supportive strategies make more students feel connected to others at their school and to their school community. Research by Day et al., (2016) uses the term *supportive strategies* to describe discipline

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strategies that most studies, including this study, would call *restorative strategies* or *restorative practices*.

Another study by Mullet (2014) highlights the negative aspects of punitive methods of discipline and how these practices are about “getting even” with the student who had the misbehavior and caused harm to the community. It points out the punitive methods choose a consequence for someone rather than working together with someone to determine a consequence. This practice is shown to have a lesser long-term impact on the student and their ability to learn from the experience. Additionally, it can create a sense of powerlessness in the student and cause them to become angry and defensive. Ultimately, this can distract them from the harm that was caused by their actions and makes it difficult for them to experience empathy as a response (Mullet, 2014).

The historical context for these traditional, punitive methods is rooted in beliefs that existed in England after the Norman Invasion. These beliefs suggest that criminals must be punished and held accountable by the government. Our schools often have similar systems where students must be punished by administration if they break a rule. This is a punitive approach to discipline as opposed to a restorative approach (Yerace, 2016). According to Yerace (2016), in the year 2017, we should not still be practicing discipline methods that stem from England in the 11th century. Yerace (2016) suggests that punitive methods are outdated and restorative practices help the community heal and support the victim(s) of the misbehavior.

Additionally, these methods address the student who caused the harm and require them to reflect upon the misbehavior and how they can repair community harm and relationships (Mullet, 2014). Mullet suggests we must move from “getting even” with the

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student to “getting well” and healing the community and individuals involved in any incident of misbehavior. Mullet looks at restorative justice as a community issue and argues that one of the greatest things restorative justice seeks to do is to create climates of care and strong school community.

Research by Shaw (2017) highlights the belief that students must be held accountable for the way their behaviors impact their community and argues that restorative justice helps students be accountable. This study suggests that practicing restorative justice provides students with a learning opportunity to better understand “ethics, justice, citizenship, and positive relationships” and understand the impact of their behavior on their community (Shaw, 2007). The learning opportunity that Shaw highlights helps students to take accountability for their actions and understand the impact their actions had on their community. If a person can understand this, they are less likely to misbehave in the same way in the future. More traditional methods focus on simply punishing a student for breaking a rule and do not require the student to do any reflecting on how their choices impact others in the community.

Another study by Mirsky (2007) shares the belief that restorative justice fosters strong community values. This study claims that restorative practices encourage a strong sense of community by placing the responsibility of student misbehaviors on the student and uses a collaborative approach to repair the harm caused by the wrongdoing. It suggests that students involved in restorative justice give and receive support through their participation in restorative circles and help other students to address their own behavior (Mirsky, 2007). This work amongst peers is what gives strength to the sense of community. Practicing restorative circles is a form of community building. Mirsky

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(2007), like Shaw (2017), also emphasizes the importance that students with misbehaviors must be held accountable for their actions and because of this they can learn from the experience and are less likely to repeat the misbehaviors and ultimately build stronger school communities.

These studies all suggest that a restorative discipline program can foster a sense of school connectedness at a school. A strong sense of school connectedness on a school campus is one possible positive outcome of developing a restorative program and is one reason schools may be turning to restorative practices over more traditional practices.

Restorative Practices and School Culture and Climate

Research shows that restorative practices correlate to more positive feelings of school culture and climate. One study examines student and teacher perceptions of school climate at a middle school. The authors of this study defines school climate as, “a function of adolescents' perception of their competence and opportunities for social, emotional, and academic development” (Conderman, 2013). This definition provides a concrete understanding of school climate. School climate can be understood as the perception of one's own competence within a specific community, student or teacher, and the opportunities for one's own development socially, emotionally, and academically at a school site. This is something that students and teachers experience at a middle school. Additionally, this study was interested in measuring both teacher and student perceptions of school climate with the goal of providing a helpful model for understanding perceptions of teachers and students on a middle school campus. Therefore, if people perceive a more positive school climate when they feel they are given opportunities for

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social, emotional, and academic development, schools should find ways to provide students and ultimately teachers with these opportunities (Conderman, 2013).

Another study, (Gage, Larson, Sugai, & Chafouleas, 2016) discusses the importance of positive school culture and climate as it relates to student behavior. This study offers an alternate definition for school climate as, “the shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between students, teachers, and administrators and set up the parameters for acceptable behaviors and norms for the school” (Gage et al., 2016, p. 493). This definition provides a more open interpretation of school climate suggesting that it is not one's individual perception but rather a shared system of beliefs, values, and attitudes. These shared expectations for all members of the school community establish and determine what is acceptable and what is not. This definition ties a value system directly to behavior and this is at the core of understanding restorative practices and school climate. If behavior is directly connected to the way a student experiences their school climate, then it is crucial to understand how discipline systems impact school climate. For the purposes of this study, school culture is understood as shared beliefs and expectations that students, teachers, and administrators use to set up expectations for behaviors and interactions.

In another paper by Christopher (2015) a middle school teacher and author suggests that restorative discipline practices enhance the student experience in middle school while punitive more traditional discipline methods of suspension and expulsion do the opposite. The zero-tolerance punitive discipline methods allow for students to get caught in a negative cycle of discipline. When students are caught in this cycle they can easily develop their own negative perceptions about school. These negative feelings

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toward school perpetuate misbehaviors, force students to be out of the classroom for extended periods of time, and ultimately increases the achievement gap (Christopher, 2015). Christopher argues that when students experience restorative discipline instead, they also experience empathy from others and for others as well as a sense of dignity in themselves rather than self-hatred and hatred of school. Providing students with the opportunity to experience empathy and dignity helps to break the negative cycle. The restorative practices help to avoid power struggles with adults and institutions and ultimately contribute to a positive school climate. Restorative practices foster a more positive experience at school for students.

Research by Wachtel (2015) supports restorative practices by arguing that restorative justice is both a reactive system of discipline as well as a proactive system of discipline inside and outside of schools. In schools, restorative practices help reduce misbehavior and bullying and provide students with the opportunity to safely reflect upon their misbehaviors and determine a fair and equitable resolution. Restorative practices also create proactive opportunities for students to collaborate with their peers, practice decision-making, and prevent further conflicts from occurring. The proactive and reactive experience allow for building stronger communities (Wachtel, 2015). Ultimately, building these social bonds on a middle school campus help to build a positive school climate and allow for students to have more positive experiences at school.

A study by Cavanaugh, Vigil and Garcia (2014) suggests that misbehaviors are not only those of students, but also teachers must be responsible for making modifications to their behaviors when engaging with students. This study recommends a two-pronged approach to alter both teacher strategy and student behavior at the school,

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creating a *Culture of Care*. The concept of considering teacher behaviors in addition to student behaviors is relevant because we often focus our efforts on changing student behavior when in reality the adults often need behavioral adjustments as well (Cavanagh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014). When adults and students take responsibility and make an effort to adjust their behavior and show care for one another, a Culture of Care can develop. A Culture of Care is one that builds a stronger school culture and fosters an environment where students experience a more positive school climate.

In another study, Cavanagh (2009) explores school values and compares restorative justice practices to more traditional punitive practices. In this study the values of dignity and peacemaking are associated with restorative practices. It also discussed that some discipline systems may actually be setup to get kids “in trouble” rather than try to create a safe place at school. If a school focuses punishing students who break the rules rather than helping students learn the impact of their behaviors, students get into trouble more frequently. And, some discipline systems separate the “bad kids” from the “good kids” and acknowledging that this is a mistake. Not only do we pull students out of class with detention, suspension, and expulsion, but we can actually impact the student culture by allowing students and staff to create labels for certain students. Labels can be incredibly harmful in these cases (Cavanagh, 2009).

Unlike most studies, Hantzopoulos (2013) attributes positive culture and climate partially to restorative justice and also to many other programs of the school. The Fairness Committee, a restorative justice program at an urban high school is examined in one study. The study determines that the positive student experience at this school can only be partially attributed to The Fairness Committee because this program is only one

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of many that validate student worth at school and value the humanity of students. The school proudly provides students with other leadership opportunities in their school. This program is one of many that values student voice and participation in democratic processes and ultimately empowers students to hold themselves and their peers to high moral standards. This fosters a positive school culture and climate at this school and their restorative justice program, The Fairness Committee, is only one piece of the puzzle (Hantzopoulos, 2013).

Research demonstrates that the adoption and implementation of a restorative program can lead to the creation of a more positive school culture and climate. The development of positive school culture and climate is one reason schools are attracted to restorative practices.

Common Restorative Discipline Structures

While there are many methods to implementing a restorative justice program at a middle school, research suggests that there is no right way to implement a successful restorative discipline program. Since research also shows that restorative practice can reduce misbehaviors and suspensions, schools are looking to learn more about best practices and successful implementation (Smith, 2014). Smith explores the effectiveness of five common methods of teacher interventions to school bullying. The methods examined are direct sanctions, restorative practice, mediation - including peer mediation, the Support Group Method, and The Method of Shared Concern. The first method, direct sanctions, is more traditional and punitive methods while the following four are different types of restorative practices. Within each of these methods there are differences in

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practices. The success of implementation of any type of discipline practice is dependent upon the school community in which the practices are being implemented. There is no one-discipline program that can be copied and pasted from one school to another successfully (Smith, 2014).

One common structure of restorative justice is to have restorative circles. This is a group made up of students and staff to work with students who have had misbehaviors and as a group determine a resolution and means of repairing the harm caused to the community. One such group is The Fairness Committee at a small urban high school. This committee is comprised of students, teachers, and office staff. The Committee creates a dialogue between various facets of the school community to reach a consensus of what the appropriate consequences for misbehaviors should be. (Hantzopoulos, 2013). This method is often considered a restorative circle and includes adult and students.

Another study suggests that not only are there various ways to implement a restorative program but there are also necessary requirements for making a restorative program work. Restorative practices provide students with an opportunity to learn more about justice, citizenship, ethics, and positive relationships. However, in order for this opportunity to occur, students must be willing to take responsibility for his or her actions and want to repair the harm that was caused. Students must be held accountable to their community for her misbehavior if restorative practices are to work (Shaw, 2007). So, if a student refuses to take accountability, can restorative practices be successful? This is an important question so consider. One approach to restorative practices advocates for a mixed methods approach to discipline. That is, the entire school discipline system includes restorative practices and more traditional punitive practices.

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According to Smith (2004) a key to a successful restorative justice program is Restorative Justice Ideology (RJI), which is a belief in restorative practices. In order for a school to have a successful program the teachers need to have RJI. If teachers lack a belief in these principles, schools won't be able to have a successful RJ program (Smith, 2004). Smith discusses how the history of restorative justice is grounded in the belief systems of indigenous people from around the world including aboriginal peoples of North America, the Maori of New Zealand, and native cultures of Australia, Japan, and Africa. At its core, restorative justice views harm as "a violation of people's rights and the relationships that people have with one another" (Smith, 2004, p. 412). This is opposite of the more traditional, punitive methods, that view harm as a "violation of rules, laws, or policies" (Smith, 2004, p. 411) that exist in a community. The focus on the human experience is what makes restorative practice different than punitive methods.

According to Anfara, Evans and Lester (2013) regardless of how the restorative practices are implemented, there are seven principles of restorative justice and all seven must exist for a restorative program to be successful. This study also acknowledges the differing viewpoints that some believe the restorative practices can and should exist on their own and some believe that restorative and punitive methods can and should exist in concert with one another (Anfara et al., 2013). Perhaps not all cases of discipline can be dealt with in a restorative manner.

The seven principles of restorative justice suggested by Anfara, Evans, and Lester (2013) are; *1. Meeting needs, 2. Providing accountability and support, 3. Making things right, 4. Viewing conflict as a learning opportunity, 5. Building healthy learning communities, 6. Restoring relationships, and 7. Addressing power imbalances.* Principle

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number one is based on the belief that student behavior is a reflection of their needs and if students are misbehaving it is because they are not getting something that they need to be successful. So, restorative justice must look at helping the student to get their needs met. Additionally, principles two and three, like other studies, suggests that students must be held accountable for their behaviors and in order to do that the student(s) must take responsibility for their misbehaviors (Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2004; Anfara, Evans, & Lester, 2013). Principles four, five, and six suggest that the student must be held accountable to make things right and repair the harm done to the community. Along with these practices, a successful restorative program views the conflict resolution as a learning opportunity, and ultimately restorative practices must work to create learning communities and restore and repair relationships that were impacted by the misbehavior. These concepts are discussed in multiple studies as well (Shaw, 2007; Smith, 2004). Lastly, principle number seven says that restorative practices allow students to stay in school rather than be suspended. When suspended students miss school and are kept from their learning opportunities, this is an injustice to students. This study argues that suspending students and keeping them from their learning is a systemic violence that is committed against students. This negative cycle of being removed from the learning environment as a punishment for misbehavior, leads to a negative feeling toward school and ultimately more misbehaviors and more time away from the learning environment (see also Christopher, 2015).

The literature suggests that there is no one right way to implement a restorative program at a school and this makes it difficult for schools to know how to start their own program. Because of this, schools, like the one in this study, may go through a period of

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trial and error before developing a strong program that fits well into their school community.

Conclusion

Research suggests that students' positive feelings toward school are related to academic success. Additionally, research demonstrates that successful implementation of a restorative discipline program can positively impact school culture and climate. (Cavanaugh 2009; Shaw 2007). However, research also suggests that there is no right way to implement a successful restorative justice program at any given school, it is heavily dependent upon the community and school in which the program exists (Shaw 2007; Smith 2004). Because of this, it is difficult for schools to know exactly what will make their program successful. Most research studies focus on one or two perspectives on this issue and do not consider the bigger picture including perspectives of teachers, administrators, and students on the issues of restorative practices and school culture. The purpose of this research project is to explore how students involved in the newly implemented restorative justice program perceive the strengths and challenges of the program and what can their experience teach us about how to improve the program.

This research project examined student perceptions of the newly implemented restorative justice program and offers suggestions on how the school can strengthen the program based on the successes and challenges of the student-leader experience. Administrators, teachers, and students involved in the restorative justice program have been practicing restorative circles as a form of discipline since spring of 2017. However, there has been no examination of the perceived effect of the program on the school

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culture and climate. This research project is important because it is essential that administrators, teachers, students, and the general school community understand the role the restorative justice program play on their campus. Additionally, it is important to understand how students and staff perceive the effectiveness of the program. If the school community can better understand this, it can make informed decisions about how to proceed with the program, and its efforts to shift school culture in a positive way. This research examined what changes and adaptations will need to be made, and ultimately how to better improve the school culture and climate.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

This research project asks the question, *how do student-leaders involved in the newly implemented restorative justice program perceive the strengths and challenges of the program and what can their experience teach us about how to improve the program.*

The purpose of this research is to better understand the successes and challenges of the restorative justice program and what student-leaders can teach educators about how to improve the program. Ultimately, providing the school community with practical suggestions and strategies to strengthen the restorative program as it continues to grow.

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Research Approach

This research project is largely pragmatic using mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative data collection. The pragmatic approach is based on a perspective of research that focuses on the research problem and solving this problem using any research methods necessary (Creswell, 2014). This research project seeks to understand how a restorative justice program works and how the students involved perceive the success and challenges of the program. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods will provide a wide array of data to consider and analyze to better understand if and how restorative justice impacts school culture. In this research study, students and administrators will participate in a variety of surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

In this study, students were asked to participate in an anonymous survey as well as a group session and administrators are asked to participate in an interview. The mix of quantitative and qualitative methods provided more perspectives to analyze. The survey data allowed for an element of quantitative analysis of the data to better understand, and provide more meaning, to the qualitative focus group and interview data.

A convergent parallel mixed methods approach allowed for a collection of as much data as possible. This allowed for an interpretation of the data together (Creswell, 2014). This approach was most practical because both forms of data around the same time and integrated and interpreted together. Additionally, it is crucial that this research project has taken a humanized approach to the research. As a teacher at the school site, I am both a researcher and participant in this school community. It is important that I learn from the community about what the community needs. This meant listening to my students and colleagues about their perceptions on these issues with an open mind and

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open heart. I am a part of the learning community at this suburban middle school and care deeply about supporting this community to develop a more positive school culture and a stronger restorative justice program. Through this research I learned more about the members of the school community and their feelings toward the restorative justice program. I was in a unique position to have deep and meaningful conversations about our shared experiences at this school. I designed open-ended questions so colleagues, and students could help guide the direction in which the interview and focus groups went. I did my best to create a shared learning experience through this research and in the end was able to provide the community with information that can help us to improve our discipline program and school culture.

Research Design

The research was conducted at an affluent suburban middle school in the Bay Area. There are a total of 789 students in the school district in the 2017-2018 school year. According to the California Department of Education, the racial breakdown of the school is 80.6% White, 5.1% Two or More Races, 8% Hispanic, 3.2% Asian, 0.9% African American, 0.6% Filipino, 0.3% Pacific Islander, 0.1% American Indian or Alaskan Native. This middle school serves two cities, is fed by four elementary schools and feeds into two possible high schools. English Language Learners make up 3% of the school district population and 8.3% of school district receives free and reduced lunch.

Participants in the study are voluntary members of the school community including the two administrators of the middle school and student-leaders who are

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participants in the newly implemented restorative justice program at the middle school, grades 7-8.

Student-leaders in the restorative justice program were invited to participate in the online student survey and focus group sessions. A total of 12 students were invited; 8 girls and 4 boys. Participation was solicited by speaking with students involved in the restorative justice program at the school site. Students were told about the research project during a brief meeting. Additionally, their parents/guardians were contacted by sending a print letter home with the students. Parents were offered phone, emails, and face-to-face communication with me if they had questions or concerns. Student-leaders who chose to participate also signed an ascent to participate form. Ultimately, five students chose to participate, three White 8th grade girls, one White 7th grade boy and one African American 7th grade girl. Both administrators were asked to participate in individual voice recorded interviews.

Methods

The participants in this research project participated in various experiences. The five student-leaders participated in an anonymous online survey as well as a voice recorded focus group session. The focus group questions guided the discussion and follow up questions were determined by participant responses. The focus group session took place during an advisory period in a school conference room. Advisory is a block of time the schools has twice a week for students to work on schoolwork and meet with teachers. Both school administrators each voluntarily participated in a 30-minute interview.

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Research Positionality

I am not only a researcher in this community. In addition to being a researcher I am a general education teacher at the school site and a teacher involved in restorative justice program. I have a dual relationship with each of the participants in the study - I am: researcher, teacher, colleague, and employee.

I am also highly aware that I have personal feelings regarding the restorative justice program, restorative practices in general, and the school culture at the school site. I know that I want our restorative justice program to be successful and my position as a teacher-leader involved the program has allowed me to see the great potential, current successes, as well as the challenges that already exist. I know there is room for improvement in our program and much desire at the site to make the program more successful. My unique role as researcher, teacher at the school site, and participant in the restorative justice program allows me to have multiple perspectives. I am aware of these feelings and did my best to ensure I allowed for the participants in the study to explain their own personal feelings and experiences without projecting judgment on them. I do believe my deep connections to the site and participants allowed for shared learning throughout this research project.

Data Analysis

The data collected during this research project was collected simultaneously over the span of two weeks. The data was analyzed separately and then integrated to understand overall results. Survey results were examined and coded separate from focus group and interview data, then examined in comparison to one another. As a researcher, I

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better understood the data by developing a conversation between quantitative and qualitative forms of data. The quantitative data added a more concrete quantitative understanding to the deeper qualitative research. The qualitative research provided a deeper understanding and helps to describe the experience of the various participants. Using convergent parallel mixed methods of data collection will help with the understanding and interpretation of each other.

Data was coded by identifying the source of the information, whether it came from a student focus group, administrator interview, or student survey. I separated out the interview and focus group data from the survey data. Then, data was coded to find patterns in how each group of participants perceives the restorative justice programs successes and challenges. Patterns in the survey data were determined by examining pie charts automatically created through Google Forms and many survey questions were long answer responses that were coded the same way as the focus group and interview responses.

Validity and Reliability

The research study displays validity and reliability through rich, thick, description, identifying bias and positionality, and presenting discrepant information. The data was carefully reviewed and all codes were checked multiple times to ensure accurate representation. As a researcher, I did my best to be true to participants experience and voices. The aim of data interpretation was to give a platform for participant voices to be heard.

Chapter 4: Findings

According to the findings, the restorative justice program at the suburban middle school is most successful when students and adults understand their distinct roles the restorative process and maintain these roles. Successful restorative circles and student experiences occur when the students and adults understand how their roles differ and are committed to not crossing boundaries of others' roles. Challenges and issues arise, however, when students and adults do not understand or maintain their distinct roles. Restorative circles are intended to be student led and students must be empowered to run the circle meetings. This means that students are well equipped with questions to ask the respondent and the skills to work with others in the group. Adults are meant to serve as support, facilitators, note-keepers, and witnesses to the circle. While the adult's role is crucial, it is important that the adult not control the circle because the student-led aspect is key to the process. Students cannot successfully play the adult role and more importantly, adults cannot successfully play the student role.

Additionally, the restorative justice program is most successful when the greater school community understands the purpose of the program. Students and other community members who do not truly understand the purpose and process of restorative justice tend to have a negative perception of the program. This lack of understanding leads to a bad reputation of the program, which limits its success. Therefore, it is important to teach the greater community of students, teachers, other staff members, and even parents about the program. A restorative justice program will be more successful if the greater community is invested in the program. In order to have community

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investment, the community must understand the purpose and process of the restorative justice program.

When roles are clear and maintained

According to the findings, when students and adults understand and are held accountable to their distinct roles, success occurs in a restorative circle. One way in which success occurs is the student-leaders who participated in the restorative circles experience feelings of empowerment. All five focus group students reported feeling empowered by their experience with restorative justice. One student said, “It [restorative justice] encourages you to help others and know you can help them.” Another student reported, “It helps you feel better about yourself knowing you’ve contributed to the welfare of someone else.” Students also reported that they had not had these opportunities in other facets of school life and that restorative justice provided them with an opportunity to embrace their role as leaders and helpers. Another student wrote in the survey “I feel SO good about myself going to RJ. I feel good about myself because I am helping other people and seeing how they change.” It is evident in the way that student-leaders talk about their experience in restorative justice they feel empowered by their experience in this program.

This sense of empowerments is directly tied to the role restorative justice student-leaders play in the restorative process. They are the leaders of the circle and work together with their peers to help another peer resolve an issue. Not only are they responsible for asking questions and offering support but they also are empowered to make decisions around discipline and repairing harm that was caused by the misbehavior. They are trusted by the administrators and teachers to make these important decisions.

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Because of this, students feel like their voices are heard. The role of the teacher in the circle is not a decision maker. In the circle, the teacher is expected to minimally participate, take notes, complete paperwork, and essentially ensure that the restorative process has been followed and everyone is safe. It is the responsibility of the students to lead the discussion. It is crucial that students feel like they are at the center of this experience for them to feel empowered to help others. It is also important to have the support of the teacher in the circle but not necessarily the leadership of the teacher.

Another success that occurs through restorative justice is that students are given opportunities to serve their school community and build a sense of school connectedness. One student told a story of a time she walked past the girls' bathroom and saw a girl on the floor crying. Normally, she would have simply walked past the girl and gone on with her own business, she said. But, because of her experience with restorative justice, she knew she could help the girl, or at least try to help. So she sat next to her, asked her if she was ok, and just listened to her. The girl shared her story of a difficult time she was having at home and in the end felt better because the student-leader stopped to talk with her. Still today, these two students say hello to each other around campus. When restorative justice student leaders connect with others on campus they slowly build a stronger community on campus, stronger school connectedness. The student-leader's face lit up when she told this story, there was a clear sense of pride and empowerment.

The opportunity to learn and be empowered is not reserved only for the student leaders involved. Restorative justice is a learning opportunity for the respondent as well. The respondent is student with the misbehavior that was sent to a restorative justice circle. Administrators and students agree that restorative justice provides this individual

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or individuals with an opportunity for growth and learning, not a punishment. One administrator said, “having an alternative means of discipline allows the author of the offence [respondent] to realize they have made a mistake, not a life ending mistake, but a mistake. Restorative justice is an opportunity to check themselves.” Meaning, that it is a chance for students to reflect on the mistake and realize it isn’t the end of the world, nor is it ok to simply walk away, there was harm caused and it must be repaired. This administrator also suggested that developmentally not all middle schoolers are ready to accept responsibility and truly reflect on their behavior. Therefore, restorative justice may not be right for them. However, restorative justice still offers the opportunity for growth for most students. This administrator believes that educators are in schools to help students grow into good people and restorative justice can support this growth.

The successful outcome of a restorative circle requires that the respondent learns from their experience with restorative justice, feels truly remorseful, works to repair the harm. One way in which a student is required to repair the harm is by serving on one to three restorative circles, as a student-leader. The number is decided as part of the circle. The focus group students in the study were proud to share stories of student success in this way. Some students however do not stop there, they continue to serve in future restorative circles, essentially becoming a student-leader in restorative justice program. All respondents must serve on one to three future restorative circles, as a peer leader, to help another student who is going through the process; this is always part of the harm-repairing project. However, if a student likes their experience serving in restorative circles they can ask to continue participating. At this middle school there are currently three students who have had this experience. Student-leaders told one story of a 6th grade

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girl who was involved in a cyber-bullying incident. When she came to the restorative circle she truly realized what she had done, she took complete responsibility for her actions, she repaired the harm and she continues to return to restorative justice to serve others in her community. This is one of the ideal outcomes of restorative justice and the student-leaders felt incredibly proud when describing this story. They were proud of the student and themselves.

These feelings of empowerment and pride among the student-leaders have made many of them want to bring restorative justice to their high school next year. They have been so impacted by their experience participating that a group of 8th graders intend to start a restorative justice club and build a restorative justice program as freshman next year. Their enthusiasm for this project is contagious and energizing. At the middle school, there is also a desire to grow and expand. Administrators and students reported wanting a more diverse group of student-leaders involved in restorative justice.

Additionally, students and administrators say they would like to expand the restorative program at the school beyond restorative justice circles as a means of discipline. This means they want to see the use of restorative practices across campus, in classrooms, and in public spaces during breaks, passing, and lunch. This would entail students and adults on campus using restorative language and practices in all interactions on campus rather than only using these practices in formal restorative circles.

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When roles are not clear and maintained

Finding indicate that issues arise when students and adults involved in the restorative justice program do not understand the limitations of their roles and do not follow their distinct expectations of their roles. The greatest issue that arises is that of student disempowerment. Students reported that while they usually feel a great sense of empowerment in their role as student-leaders they can also feel incredible disempowered when teachers or administration overstep their roles. One student said, “it is difficult when everyone in the circle is not on the same page.” He went on to talk about how he feels when a teacher in the circle talks too much, offers suggestions, asks too many questions, and dominates the conversation. This is frustrating for the students because the circle is meant to be student led, not teacher led. Another student shared about a time when a teacher arrived to a circle twenty minutes late and essentially made them start the circle over, even though the students were feeling ready to wrap it up. They then disagreed about the restorative project plan and the teacher strongly encouraged the group to change the plan. While this account is extreme and not a frequent occurrence, the feeling of disempowerment spread throughout the room. Students felt like they lost their voice and their role in the circle. They shared experiences in other circles when teachers participate too much so the students don’t feel heard or important. These student-leaders believe they are best suited to support their peers. One student said, “We know better than teachers what the best project would be because we experience this environment every day and teachers don’t. We know more about the school and what goes on than teachers do.” Even with the best intentions, teachers can easily disempower students. It is

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crucial all adults involved understand the importance of the student-led process and honor and respect that.

Other issues occur when the respondent does not understand their role. Their role as the student in the restorative circle is to take responsibility for their actions, honestly reflect on their choices, and ultimately repair the harm. However, this is not always the case. One challenge the students described is when the respondent won't take responsibility for their actions. In reality, this student never should have been referred to restorative justice in the first place. Restorative justice only works if the person when the misbehavior takes ownership of their choices.

This problem is currently being resolved with the implementation of pre-circles. A pre-circle is a five to ten minute meeting that takes places with the respondent and one to two student leaders. This is an opportunity for the student-leaders to familiarize themselves with the case, facts, truth, and the students themselves. If at the end of this meeting the respondent is not able to fully take responsibility and sign a contract to that end, they will not be referred to restorative justice, instead they will be directed back to administration for a more traditional method of discipline. The implementation of pre-circles ideally will negate the issue of a student not taking responsibility.

Another issue that was talked about in the focus group was the lack of follow through with some of the projects. This occurs when students and adults do not follow up with the respondent. At the end of each restorative circle the team makes a decision about what the restorative project will be and a deadline for that project. A student-leader who is present in the circle is assigned to follow up with the respondent and ultimately an administrator or teacher is responsible for ensuring the project has been completed

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appropriately. However, this piece of the program is still lacking. Therefore, at times, students may not be completing their projects. This is a point of frustration for the student-leaders because they see that the program cannot be successful if students are not completing their restorative projects.

Additionally, students reported that at times student-leaders would ask inappropriate questions during a restorative circle. They will ask these questions with the best of intentions but as students reported it is “awkward and uncomfortable.” One example is when a student-leader asked a respondent, in the middle of a restorative circle, “are you being abused at home?” even though the student-leader’s intention was to try to help the other student, they very likely could have offended the student and certainly made everyone uncomfortable. During the focus group all the students talked about this issue and how it throws off the entire circle experience. It is crucial that students understand their role as a student-leader and don’t overstep boundaries in the circle, even with the best of intentions.

A lack of understanding

Findings also indicated that issues arise when the greater school community does not understand the purpose or the process of the restorative justice program. There are many students and adults within the middle school community that do not understand the purpose or process of restorative justice. One cause of this lack of understanding was the launch of the program. Due to an unorganized launch of the program in the spring of 2017 and a change in administration over the summer, the greater community was not made fully aware of the program. As a result, the majority of the student population does not understand the purpose of restorative justice or the process that occurs. Additionally,

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administrators and students believe that many teachers have a limited understanding because the staff had a short introduction to the philosophy of restorative justice during a staff meeting in the fall of 2017. One administrator said, “I wonder if teachers and staff in general know enough about it [restorative justice].” This administrator suggested that because there was not a clear launch of the program, teachers are left wondering about what the program really does.

Additionally, due to the launch of the program there is a lack of diversity in the restorative justice student-leaders. While this is slowly changing, there is a clear “type” of student who is involved, a student who is generally responsible in the classroom and does not have behavior issues themselves. While the group is evenly split between boys and girls, it lacks other types of diversity such as racial diversity and type of student. That is, most of the initial group of students, who were trained for restorative justice circles are generally successful students in the classroom, don’t “get into trouble” and have a generally positive view on school. Administration and students suggest that the program would benefit from students with diverse experiences. This is likely due to the initial recruitment process. In the spring of 2017 an administrator emailed teacher and asked for recommendations of students who would be a good fit for the program, and only a few teachers responded. Since then, the program has grown to include students who have been respondents and chose to stay and become study leaders and even a couple students who were referred by administrators to join.

This lack of diversity and lack of understanding leads to a negative perception of the program on the part of the greater student community. Student-leaders, when asked about their peers’ perceptions, reported that they hear students saying things like, “it

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[restorative justice] is a stupid club” and “it’s for the try hards.” One student-leader suggested that he doesn’t believe the perceptions are necessarily negative but a result of the fact that students really don’t know what goes on in restorative circles. They have not been educated about the purpose and the power of restorative circles. The student-leaders have a desire to get out into their community and teach their peers about the program.

Chapter 5: Discussion

According to the findings, the restorative justice program at the suburban middle school is most successful when students and adults understand what their distinct roles are in the restorative process and maintain these roles. Successful restorative circles and experiences occur when the students and adults understand how their roles differ and are committed to not crossing boundaries of other roles. Challenges and issues arise however, when students and adults do not understand or maintain their distinct roles. Additionally, it is critical for the greater school community to have an understanding of the purpose and process of a restorative justice program.

Implications for Academic Literature

Similarities between prior research findings and the findings from this study include the topic of school connectedness. Research studies of Day, Snapp, and Russell (2016) suggest that students with positive feelings toward school foster a greater sense of school connectedness and restorative practices can help to create such positive feelings (see also Biag, 2016). According to the research findings of this study, student-leaders engaged in the restorative justice program feel a sense of school connectedness due to

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their skills and experience with being helpers. Because of their experience with restorative justice, these students reach out to their peers to offer help and this makes them feel more connected to the school community.

Another similarity between with literature review and the research study is that both show there is no one right way to implement a successful restorative justice program (Shaw, 2007). The literature strongly suggested that the implementation of a successful program is based on the community in which the program serves, and successful restorative justice programs vary greatly from school to school. The research study supports this in that data highlighted successes of the program but also areas of challenge and improvement. The need to adjust elements of the restorative program is evidence that the one way in which the school was taught to run the program is not the exact best way for the program to be run at this particular school site.

In contrast to earlier research, this study included the perspectives of student-leaders. Much of the reporting in the other studies is from the teacher or administrator perspective or from quantitative data analysis. In this research study, student voice was highlighted as the greatest source of data. Providing the audience with an authentic student voice adds to the vast body of literature on the subject. The students are at the core of school systems, the student experience is the center of our schools therefore it is important to hear from the students about how schools can improve the student experience. Additionally, the literature review did not address the importance of student and adult roles within restorative justice programs in schools. The findings of this

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research study suggest that the understanding and maintaining of distinct roles is key to a successful restorative practice.

Lastly, the literature did not stress the importance of the greater school community understanding the purpose and process of the restorative program. The research findings suggest that a positive perception of the program requires that the entire school community to understand the purpose and process of the restorative program. A lack of understanding leads to negative assumptions about the restorative practices amongst students at the school.

Implications for practice and policy

The research findings serve as a reminder for educators to take time to have meaningful and honest conversations with students to hear their perspectives, interpretations, and experiences. Students want to be heard by their teachers and being open to these conversations is important for teachers. The student-leaders in the study longed to be heard and make a difference in their school community and the lives of their peers. The students know the kind of impact they can make on the lives of others because they experience it through restorative justice. They want to be able to help others too. In order to do this, their voices must be heard. It is a helpful reminder to teachers that students are people with feelings and it is important we treat them as people, not just students.

More specifically, with some adjustments, the middle school restorative program can be made stronger and even more effective in the future. Students and administrators call for restorative practices to be used not only in the office for disciplinary practices but also in every classroom at the school. This is a commitment the staff at the middle school

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has already made for the coming year. In order for the integration of restorative practices in the classroom to be successful, school and district administrators must provide all staff with effective and meaningful training to ensure the launch of campus wide restorative practices is understood and effective. In order for teachers to embrace restorative practices across campus they must feel comfortable and confident in the practices. This would entail teachers using restorative language and practices to resolve small disputes in the classroom or with individual students as well as students using such practices to communicate with one another. This will require outside training and a commitment from teachers to learn and integrate these practices into their own teaching practices.

In addition, in order to strengthen the already existing restorative justice program, the school should invest in effective training to retrain involved students, train new recruits, and retrain involved teachers. If the school wants the restorative justice program to thrive, students and staff must be provided with the opportunity for further trainings to ensure all parties understand and maintain their roles. The manager of the program may also consider creating student and staff folders to use in the circles. In these folders involved people would find role cards with reminders of how to participate in the circle, possible questions to ask in the restorative circle, and a list of possible meaningful restorative projects. The folder could help ensure that the policies and procedures are being executed in the best and most consistent way possible.

Another important practice to implement is to launch a campaign to teach all staff, students, and parents about restorative justice. One possibility would be to hold grade-level assemblies with a mock circle or schedule student-leader classroom visits to present a mock-circle to each class. By teaching the entire school community about the purpose

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and process of the program, negative assumptions would hopefully lessen or be eliminated.

Furthermore, the school should create a recruitment process to encourage a more diverse group of students to participate as student-leaders in the program. This process could include an all school call for new participants and possibly even an application. The school community would be better served by a more diverse group of student leaders. Diversity in race, gender, age, school attendance, academic background, and behavioral experience would enhance the experience for all participants and respondents.

Once the school has a solid and stable program with clear procedures and policies, the district should consider training the 4th and 5th graders on how to hold their own restorative circles. In the event that the elementary schools embrace this challenge, all teachers should receive training and support for classroom restorative practices.

Lastly, at this time, all of the work of maintaining the restorative justice program has fallen on the shoulders of one very busy administrator. The school would benefit from paying a teacher-leader to step in and support administration with running this program. This individual could help schedule meetings, follow up with the harm repairing projects and respondent, serve as a liaison between other teachers and the program and student-leaders and the program. Additionally, this person could help organize trainings and ensure that roles are understood and maintained.

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Limitations

This study was limited by two main factors. First, one limitation of the research study was time. If the research study were longer, the research would have benefitted from holding additional focus groups with more student-leaders and with students outside of the restorative justice program. More time would have allowed for additional focus groups with other restorative justice student-leaders and non-restorative justice students as well providing a deeper understanding of the student experience.

Another limitation is the limited diversity in the small focus group. The five students in the focus group represent a collection of students within the restorative justice program who are successful academically, socially, and behaviorally. The gender, age and racial diversity of the group is limited to one 7th grade White boy, one 7th grade African American girl, and three 8th grade White girls. Due to this limited diversity and small focus group, the study has a limited perspective. Additionally, the community in which the research occurred is limited in its diversity in general. The school is a mostly homogenous, affluent, suburban community. The findings would not necessarily be applicable to a large urban school or a small rural school.

Direction for future research

One interesting path for inquiry includes learning about the experiences of the student-leaders in the restorative justice program who started as “respondents” in the program. These students had such a successful restorative experience that they chose to continue and become student-leaders in the program. The ultimate goal of restorative circles is for students to learn from their choices and repair the harm they caused. A

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student who chooses to remain part of the restorative program is someone who had a profound learning experience by participating in the restorative process. By better understanding what made their experience so impactful, schools can learn about aspects of their program is working well. This would be an interesting direction to take the research because it could teach educators more about the student experience and what made restorative justice so impactful in their lives. This knowledge could help to further improve restorative justice programs at many different school sites. It would be fascinating to learn more about how restorative justice has impacted the individual students personally and what restorative justice helped them transition to a student with misbehaviors to a student-leader on campus who works to help and support their peers.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

As suggested by the literature, there is no one best way to implement a restorative program at a school. In an effort to better understand the successes and challenges of a newly implemented restorative justice program at a suburban middle school, this research study highlights the student experience and voice of participants in the restorative justice program at a suburban middle school. Since students are at the core of the restorative justice program it is important to hear their voices and their perceptions of the successes and challenges of the program. In order to implement a more successful program going forward, a careful assessment of these successes and challenges is critical. The purpose of this research study was to answer the research question, *how do student-leaders involved in the newly implemented restorative justice program perceive the successes and*

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challenges of the program and what can their experience teach us about how to improve the program going forward.

Findings suggest that in order for the restorative justice program to be effective, student-leaders and teachers must have a clear understanding of their distinct roles in the restorative circle process and they must maintaining these roles throughout the entire process. According to the findings, when these roles are maintained, students experience empowerment and a strong sense leadership. When these roles are not maintained, students report feeling disempowered an unprepared to participate in the restorative circles.

Therefore, it is crucial that administration, involved teachers, and student-leaders revisit their roles. This will likely require additional training from an outside party. Students must understand their role as a leader and exactly how to best support their peers in the restorative circle experience and the teachers must understand their role as a supporter and facilitator but not overstep in the circle.

Additionally, findings demonstrated that there is a general lack of understanding about the purpose and process of the restorative justice program, which has lead to a negative perception of the program by students outside the program. Student-leaders within the restorative justice program reported their peers, outside the program, joking about and having negative perceptions toward the restorative justice program. The participants in the study believe these negative perceptions come from a lack of understanding of the true purpose and process of the restorative justice program.

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Due to this lack of understanding, the school should launch a campaign to educate the student population and general school community about the purpose and process of restorative justice to negate the negative perceptions of the program. Student-leaders are eager to help change this negative perception of the program and teach their peers the value of restorative justice and the hard work they do.

In order for the restorative justice program to become more successful, the school will need to invest money into meaningful and effective training for students and teachers so everyone is equipped to participate in the restorative circles effectively. Additionally, the school will need to develop policy and procedures to ensure that students and teachers understand and maintain their distinct roles throughout the restorative process. At this time, the management of the program and all people involved has fallen onto an already very busy administrator. The school would benefit from paying a teacher-leader to help run the restorative justice program. This teacher-leader could follow up with respondents and their projects, check in with student-leaders and involved teachers, manage the daily tasks of sending passes, finding meeting spaces, and manage all the trainings and any other elements of the program. This individual could also follow up with all participants to ensure that roles are understood and maintained. In turn, this will create a space for students to feel empowered. A stronger restorative justice program could lead to a more positive school culture and climate making the school a more positive place for students to learn and grow.

Developing a successful restorative justice program at a school is centered around the idea of empowered students, whether it is a student with a misbehavior or a student

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leader involved in the program. Restorative practices are focused on providing students with the opportunity to realize how their choices impact others and ultimately repair any harm they caused on individuals and community. Additionally, the restorative program serves as a way for student-leaders to be empowered to help their peers and make important decisions within their school community. Educators must take the time to listen to their students. Middle schoolers are capable of being insightful leaders and when educators provide them with a space to practice and demonstrate these skills, the outcome is priceless.

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Appendix: IRB Materials



January 8, 2018
Amanda Wagner
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

Dear Amanda:

I have reviewed your proposal entitled *Restorative Justice and School Culture: Perceptions of a New Restorative Justice Program* submitted to the Dominican University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants (IRBPHP Application, #10620). I am approving it as having met the requirements for minimizing risk and protecting the rights of the participants in your research.

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,

Randall Hall, Ph.D.

Chair, IRBPHP

Cc: Jennifer Lucko