

The Effects of a Restorative Practice Program on Discipline Referrals, Discipline, Absences, and
Teacher Perspective in a Title I Middle School in East Tennessee

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory mixed-methods study was to investigate restorative practice initiatives in a Title I middle school in East Tennessee. Quantitative analysis was performed to look for significant differences between in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspension, alternative school, discipline referrals, and absenteeism before and after implementation of the program. Qualitatively, focus groups were conducted with teachers both before and after implementation of the program to gather perceptions of the program's effectiveness on student behavior and school culture as a whole. The quantitative data showed there was no significant difference in discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions, absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism in fall 2018 and fall 2019. The number of in-school suspensions, combined suspensions (in-school and out-of-school), and alternative school referrals were significantly less in fall 2018 than fall 2019. The qualitative data found positive results from the focus group of educators with the implementation of this restorative practice program. The focus group reported students felt that trust and fairness played an important role towards their satisfaction with the restorative practice program. Also, the focus group reported the students developed good listening and communication skills and they felt a sense of empowerment to be a part of the initial restorative practice process. Based on the results of this study, further exploration of scheduling circle sessions, developing professional training for all teachers, and a longer period of time with the restorative practice program are needed to provide the data to see the success of this program.

Keywords: trust, fairness, communication, empowerment

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to those most influential in my life. To my mother and father for instilling in me the inspiration to learn and for their understanding and loving hearts. To my daughter, who continues to fill my life with joy, love, laughter, and encouragement. They have inspired and helped me become the person I am today.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background

Restorative practice is focused on the belief that those affected by harm can work together to repair the relationship and with a collaborative effort true accountability can occur. Wachtel (2016) states, “Restorative practice is a social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making.” Restorative justices are defined as a subset of restorative practices that consist of formal or informal responses to crime and other misconduct after it occurs. The definition of restorative practices will include the use of informal and formal processes that precede the offense, and proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing (Wachtel, 2016). The concepts of reparation and restoration are integral to understanding restorative justice. Much of the diversity in practice and definition is due to the fact that restorative justice theory has developed alongside restorative justice practice (Daly & Proietti-Scifani, 2011).

According to Howard (2009), the use of restorative practice in schools is a fresh idea for education. The application of the longstanding doctrine of restorative fairness has been embraced by police forces in North American, England, and Australia. The police have applied restorative impartiality to a wide range of situations from immediate responses to complex situations, regarding the harm of individuals with very serious consequences. In recent years, restorative practice has not been restricted to the justice system entirely, but has been used in the most multifaceted political and community state of affairs. Restorative justice was the root for

the peacemaking practice that ended the civil war in Papua New Guinea and provided another example of restorative practice in the mid-1990's following the official ceasefire in Northern Ireland where there was growing interest in developing a non-violent, restorative community as an alternative to the ongoing use of retribution and other acts of vengeance. Howard (2009) stated despite the intricacy and continual nature of the differences these large-scale attempts to affect restorative practice had a major impact.

From 1974 to the mid-2000's, suspension and expulsion rates doubled in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). A study out of Texas found that across three cohort groups of seventh graders, more than 900,000 students over the course of six years, nearly six in ten public school students were suspended or expelled at least once between their 7th and 12th grade school years (Fabelo et al., 2011). A move away from zero tolerance policies is currently decreasing the number of suspensions nationwide (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). "In 2008, the American Psychological Association 's Zero Tolerance Task Force found schools with higher suspension and expulsion rates had lower ratings for overall school climate." This research indicated that suspensions and expulsions did not reduce future student misconduct. Restorative practices are one possible alternative to zero tolerance policies.

According to Skiba, et al. (2014), restorative practices promote a constructive and orderly school environment. Students and all members of the school population can learn and practice self-discipline, compassion, and accountability for their actions in all situations. A restorative practice program incorporates restorative circles that bring students involved in the disciplinary actions together in deferential space to promote conversation, provide accountability and resolve all conflicts between the community stakeholders. Restorative practices can be applied in a variety of ways so schools, families, and populations from lower income

communities can provide a means to their educational system that can be inexpensive to implement but have great significance in their school system (Skiba et. al., 2014).

In the last few years, there has been a significant interest in the application of restorative practice philosophy within the educational culture as a whole. According to Zehr (2002), restorative practices are based on the concept that when disagreement occurs and one or both participants are harmed, the damage needs to be addressed. Restorative practices advocate ownership of the behavior and involves discussions where accountability for the problems are established through a consensual agreement. Restorative practice relies on the basic belief that people are connected through a network of relationships and when harm occurs between people the community is also harmed. Educational institutions across the country are encouraged to implement restorative practice programs as an alternative to suspensions and other disciplinary actions to replace punitive techniques to discipline. Restorative practice programs can significantly improve the school environment and support the social and emotional abilities of students and teachers. Many studies have provided an emergent awareness to interventions, such as restorative practice programs, that help students recognize the effects of their actions. As a result of restorative practice programs, studies have reported lower suspension rates, improved school climate, and improved student attendance.

Statement of the Problem

In light of research, punitive discipline methods were far from effective in helping students reach their goals. Punitive discipline resulted in a poor school climate, attendance and almost doubled the number of suspensions in the 1970s (Boucaud, 2019). Restorative practice will identify the difference in discipline, attendance, and teacher perspectives pertaining to the restorative practice approach in a Title I middle school in East Tennessee before and after

implementation. Skiba (2014) suggested “Exclusionary policies have a negative impact on school climate and students’ engagement with school.” Recent studies indicate discipline practices, such as suspension, might be hindering student success. One study found suspension to be the top predictor of students dropping out of school (Flannery, 2015). Another report estimated graduation rates for suspended students were 68 percent, compared with 80 percent for non-suspended students (Rumberger and Losen, 2016). Often these suspensions involve non-violent offenses (Skiba et al., 2014). Violations include tardiness, absenteeism, and disrespectfulness to instructors (Gonzalez, 2012). A study by Gonzalez (2012), suggests restorative practices can both prevent harm through building relationships and stakeholder involvement to repair damaged relationships.

In many schools, statistics show punitive strategies like suspension and expulsion are not working. In one recent study, schools with high suspension rates were found to be less safe and less equitable (Skiba et al., 2014). Zero-tolerance policies may seem like the answer to disciplinary actions; however, in the short term, these policies emphasize punishment and its consequences instead of examining the root cause of student behavior. Additionally, these policies do little to repair the damage to relationships and fail to prevent recurrence. Restorative practices in a school setting are generally seen as a non-punitive technique to handling conflict (Fronius et al., 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory mixed-methods study was to examine the effects of the implantation of a restorative practice program on discipline, discipline referrals, absenteeism, and teacher perspectives. The school in this study was a low-income middle school in East Tennessee and was considered a Title I school. The U. S. Department of Education’s purpose of

Title I funding “is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (U. S. Department of Education, 2013). This school received free lunch for all students at the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year. Teacher perceptions, absenteeism, and disciplinary measures both before and after the implementation of a restorative practice program will identify any positive and negative changes.

As part of the mixed-methods study used for this research, focus group interviews with teachers and quantitative methods were used to gain information on ISS, OSS, alternative school, discipline referrals, absenteeism, and teacher perspectives. Two interviews were conducted with a focus group of teachers regarding the perceived needs for the program prior to the study and again after the program was initiated. Data was obtained through PowerSchool regarding ISS, OSS, alternative school, and absenteeism. Discipline referrals were used to generate teacher discipline reports. After the study is complete, findings will be shared with the teachers and administrators that were involved in the study.

Significance of Study

This study examines a restorative practice program before and after implementation in a low-performing Title I middle school in East Tennessee. Restorative practices show promise with decreasing discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. According to Gregory et al. (2016), over the course of a school year, greater use of restorative practices was associated with lower teacher referrals for misconduct and student behavioral issues. Another report conducted two years after launching restorative practices in an Oakland, California middle school found a 74 percent drop in discipline referrals and 77 percent drop in referrals for violent behavior

(Summer, Silverman, and Frampton, 2010).

Some studies have reported links between implementing restorative practices and improved overall school climate to include up to three years after implementation (Jain et al., 2014). In Oakland, California, two thirds of school staff reported in a survey that they acknowledged the restorative practice program as having improved the social-emotional growth of students (Jain et al., 2014). Some studies have reported increased openness and connectedness between students and teachers and greater respect for students after implementing restorative practices (Gregory et al., 2016). Another study indicated that students had enhanced problem-solving skills after exposure to restorative practices, indicating they could better manage conflict with each other and with school staff (McMorris et al., 2013).

Other related studies have looked at the connection between restorative practices and student attendance, which have found positive correlations. One study found chronic absenteeism in schools implementing restorative practices decreased by 24 percent as opposed to schools who did not implement the program where absenteeism actually increased by 52 percent (Jain et al., 2014).

This study will provide findings of restorative practice initiatives introduced in a Title 1 middle school in East Tennessee. This study also seeks to identify techniques to guide schools in their implementation of restorative practices as well as to provide feedback to educators regarding teacher's perspectives on restorative practices. Additionally, the study will use t-tests before and after to examine discipline referral patterns and attendance following implantation of a restorative practice program.

Research Questions

Several questions were formulated in order to examine the implementation of restorative practices in a Title 1 middle school in northeastern Tennessee. The questions examine teacher perceptions regarding restorative practices and the relationship between implementation of a restorative practice program and disciplinary actions, attendance, and school climate. The research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

RQ2: Is there a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

RQ3: Is there a significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during fall 2018 versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practice?

RQ4: Is there a significant difference in the number of students suspended (both in-school and out-of-school) during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

RQ5: Is there a significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

RQ6: Is there a significant difference in the number of absences during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

RQ7: Is there a significant difference in the number of students who are considered “chronically absent” during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

RQ8: What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after training (but before institution) in restorative discipline practices?

RQ9: What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after a semester of instituting restorative discipline practices?

RQ10: Have teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction changed regarding restorative discipline practices in this time frame?

Definition of Terms

Restorative Justice: Understanding the definition of restorative justice is crucial for discernment of this study. Braithwaite (1999) defines restorative practices as those that promote healing rather than hurting, community involvement, respectful conversation, forgiveness, and making reparations. Hopkins’ (2003) defines restorative practices as practices focused on managing behavior and shifting away from punitive measures. Fronius et al. (2016) suggest that restorative justice practices are broadly described as non-punitive approaches to handling conflict. Restorative justice is defined by its specific emphasis on respect and relationships. By upholding members’ dignity and addressing their human needs, the process encourages and gives power to partakers to discuss their encounters openly and honestly and to collaboratively settle on reparation.

Suspension: Suspension is a compulsory leave handed over to a student as a type of punishment that can last anywhere from one day to a few weeks, during which the student is not allowed to attend regular classes or participate in school activities (Skiba, 2006). In schools in the United States, there are two types of suspension; In-School (ISS) and Out-of-School (OSS). In-school suspension means the student comes to school during the regular school day but reports to a designated room or area for the entire school day (Skiba, 2006). Out-of-school means that the student is barred from entering the school or school grounds (Skiba, 2006). Alternative school means the students are placed in an alternate classroom setting at a designated location for a given length of time based on the discipline policy of the school system. Students who do not adhere to the suspension could be arrested for trespassing and it could result in an extension of their prior suspension. Students are not allowed to attend any after-school activities while they are suspended from school (Skiba, 2006).

Discipline Referrals: A discipline referral is a way for a teacher to refer a student to an administrator to be disciplined. It's usually a physical form that a teacher will fill out and turn into the office with information about the occurrence and what steps the teacher has taken to correct the incident. An administrator will be given the referral and decide how to officially discipline the student. A referral means the misconduct is either too severe for the teacher to properly discipline the student in the classroom or the teacher has tried to discipline the student on his or her own without success. More serious problems, such as drugs and violent behavior, should always mean a discipline referral and instant removal from the classroom. Others within the school environment may write discipline referrals such as coaches, counselors, bus drivers and other educational personnel if they observe a behavior that needs to be reported.

Chronically Absent: Chronically absent is defined as a child enrolled in a school under the authority of a local board of education whose total number of absences, at any time during a school year, is equal to or greater than 10 percent of the total numbers of days a student is enrolled during the school year.

In Tennessee, the law measures each school district by what is called the Chronically Out-of-School Indicator. This indicator will be based on what research calls chronic absenteeism, which is defined as a student missing 10 percent or more of the days the student is enrolled-for any reason, including excused absences and out-of-school suspensions (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019).

Absence: Absence means an excused absence, unexcused absence, or disciplinary absence, defined by the State Board of Education. In Tennessee the policy states absent is when a student is marked not present at school, for either unexcused or excused reasons. According to the state attendance policy a student who is absent for half of a school day should be marked absent. Excused absence is a student who is absent due to excused reasons which usually requires documentation as defined by the individual school district. An unexcused absence is a student who is absent due to unexcused reasons and each school district will define the policy stating what constitutes an unexcused absence.

Teacher Perception: Teacher perception refers to the teacher's own distinctive experience in the restorative justice program with regards to the effectiveness, fairness, satisfaction after training (but before institution) in restorative discipline practices and after a semester of instituting restorative discipline practices within the classroom. Teacher perceptions will be measured qualitatively through the focus group interviews.

Delimitations

The restorative practice program was put in place during the fall of 2019 and all seventh and eighth grade students' data were applied in this study. Data used in this research was discipline referrals, ISS, OSS, and alternative school information and absentee reports. This study was conducted in a single middle school in upper east Tennessee.

Limitations

To ensure reliability, PowerSchool information and data regarding ISS, OSS, and alternative school data along with absentee reports must be accurate and up to date. Student behavior and absenteeism information could be determined on demographic and the student's socio-economic environment. The teachers involved in the focus group, answered interview questions pertaining to their perspectives on the implementation of the restorative practice program. All information was based on their personal responses to the perceived comfort with restorative practice programs. Potentially, the focus group's perspectives will vary due to the academic and social differences of their classroom students.

Study Organization

This dissertation is structured into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces restorative practices involving ownership of behavior and discussions with participants where accountability for the problems is established through a consensual agreement. A Title I middle school began the restorative practice program to improve discipline, attendance, and school climate. The statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, definition of terms, delimitations, and limitations of the study are made available.

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature involving restorative practice programs and cites several case studies with regard to zero tolerance, chronically absenteeism, student discipline, and progressive discipline approaches. Information is provided on improving school climate with the use of restorative practice programs. Finally, Chapter 2 provides information on the positive effects of a restorative justice program within other similar school case studies.

Chapter 3 delineates the methodology for this study. The research plan and justification are addressed in this chapter. The data compilation procedures and methodical techniques for both the qualitative and quantitative data research component is presented. Chapter 4 presents the results of this study. Chapter 5 provides a dialogue of the outcomes and implications for prospective study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Restorative practices in schools started with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IRP) in the 1990s. IRP began developing SaferSanerSchools to intervene in American education and society as a whole (Chmelynski, 2005). Wachtel (2016) states there is a remarkable change in student behavior due to the loss of attachment to parental and community involvement in today's culture. Schools have generally become larger, more impersonal, and educators feel less connected with the families of the children they teach (Chmelynski, 2005). Restorative practices involve changing relationships by engaging people to participate in activities together rather than participate in activities by themselves or for themselves. Research suggests a foundation of restorative practice may replace of out-of-school suspensions to change behaviors, lower suspensions, and increase attendance.

Traditional measures involving suspension are largely ineffective according to research (American Psychological Association, 2008). School districts are looking for alternative ways to create an environment of safety, accountability, and fairness. Many school districts are encouraging schools to introduce restorative practices in place of disciplinary punishment. Restorative practice programs vary in design but most bring together those who were harmed and those engaged in the harm with adults representing the school and community. For example, McCold (2003) states restorative circles and restorative conferences allow victims, offenders and other stakeholders to come together to explore how everyone was affected by the offense and how to repair the harm and meet their needs. For educators, circles provide opportunities for students to share their feelings, build relationships, solve problems, and to play an active role in

addressing disciplinary action (Riestenberg, 2002).

Schools are affected by student misbehavior. Research shows that many of these depraved behaviors from students are an attempt to fulfill a genuine physical or psychosocial need or to attain an adult's attention (Haiman, 1998). According to Solter (1998), many incidents of misbehavior are signs of children or youth trying to meet their own needs or to get the attention of an adult. "Obvious needs are for food, clothing, safety, shelter, and love. Additional needs are for physical closeness, individual attention, an intellectually stimulating environment, meaningful activities, and respect." Research indicates that because children often don't know how to ask for help or have not developed positive strategies to fulfill their needs, they can turn to negative behaviors (Solter, 1998).

Historically, inappropriate behavior has primarily been addressed through punitive disciplinary approaches. The majority of educational districts have a zero-tolerance policy for unacceptable school behavior. To ensure a safe and secure learning environment, many district policies state any student who engages in drugs, weapons, aggravated assault on a staff member or other employees of the school on school property or at a school activity, and any transmissions of a threat by electronic devices will result as a zero-tolerance behavior. All discipline for a zero-tolerance offense as described by the districts usually results in expulsion for a period of not less than (1) one calendar year. The Director of Schools for each district is given the authority to modify these expulsion requirements on a case-by-case basis as part of the appeal procedure set out in each prescribed Student Rights and Responsibility Policy for the school district. Research has shown disciplinary practices such as suspensions, expulsions, and zero-tolerance policies are damaging and do not make schools safer (Haft, 2000). Such disciplinary measures weaken school relationships and hinder students' reentering into the

school environment (Bazemore, 1999). Diminishing school climate using these practices of zero-tolerance has caused some to say it is contributing to what some call a school to prison pipeline in the United States. The school to prison pipeline is a process where students are pushed out of schools into prison. This practice of criminalizing youth is carried out by disciplinary policies within schools that put students in contact with law enforcement (Cole, 2019). “Once they are in contact with law enforcement for disciplinary reasons, many are pushed out of the educational environment and into the juvenile and criminal justice system,” (Cole, 2019, p.1).

A goal of every school should be to understand how restorative practices can change the students’ behavior towards building positive relationships between themselves and their teachers, thus improving the school climate. One major factor to discuss is the difference between discipline and punishment. Arnold (2014) states school discipline relates to the actions taken by a teacher or school association towards a student (or group of students) when the student’s behavior interrupts the current educational activity or breaks a rule created by the teacher or the school system. It describes the term “discipline” as pertaining to the punishment that is the result of breaking the rules while the goal of discipline is to set restrictions limiting certain behaviors or positions that are seen as harmful or against school policies and educational standards. Today many school systems are shifting the focus from punishment to alternative approaches such as restorative practices to offset high dropout rates and inequitable punishment upon minority students (McCluskey et al., 2008). Restorative practice is a model that has been used with some success within juvenile justice and education programs. The model looks for a way to repair harm to others by recognizing the impact on the victim, community, and offender. It provides an avenue of accepting accountability for the misconduct and repairing the relationship with the victim. In schools, restorative practices might include teachers and students devising classroom

expectations together or setting up community building in the classroom (Davis, 2015). Zero tolerance policies have not always worked well for students across the cultural and social community (Davis, 2015). As an alternative to the policies of corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion, restorative justice programs were launched to give students a voice in their discipline, as well as an opportunity to make a constructive contribution to their community (Davis, 2015). Each student who has misbehaved has the opportunity not only to give their side of the story but also to have a voice in determining their consequences. Consequences focus on opportunities for restoration (Dalporto, 2013). The focal point of restorative justice is relationship building within the community over the individual student and their delinquency, creating awareness that everyone has a part in the community, and it is everyone's responsibility to support the values of the community (Dalporto, 2013). In turn, a restorative justice program not only increases an understanding of the community's values but also provides a relationship to be developed between the community and the school.

Principles of Restorative Practices

In recent years, restorative justice approaches have been making a strong presence in schools across Canada and the United States as zero-tolerance policies concede to a more non-adversarial approach to discipline and school climate matters. Restorative practices have been described as “a whole-school ethos or culture comprising principles and practices to support peacemaking and solve conflict through healing damaged relationships and making amends where harm has occurred while preserving the dignity of everyone involved” (Meyer & Evans, 2012). Restorative practices are positive as they aid in constructive relationships and school climate. Meyer and Evans (2012) state several principles of restorative practice should include the following: Interpersonal relationships which are healthy interpersonal relationships

developed within the school community with students, teachers, parents, personal dignity which preserves the idea that every person belongs and is respected, cared for and has the right to equitable treatment, mutual respect and understanding where a respectful conversation about what happened is established and a value is given for each person's experience, restorative conferencing where a pledge is made to resolve a situation using conflict resolution and healing of interpersonal relationships, and restitution where an agreement is established and efforts made to mend the harm, resolve conflict and reinstate interpersonal relationships.

Under the definition of restorative practice, there is no single standard of practice because each school has its group of people, history, strengths, and areas of improvement that must be reflected in their approach. While there will be differences in the types of restorative practices implemented, there is one common factor among all of them which is the opportunity for the victim and the transgressor to discuss how they are involved, to share their experiences honestly and safely, to take responsibility and work in partnership to determine restorative consequences to repair the harm (Drewery, 2004).

Restorative practices range from informal to formal activities, which involve stakeholders (Wachtel, 2016). These stakeholders will include students, educators, families, and local communities (Restorative Practices Working Group, 2014). A list of activities should include the following: (1) Community conferencing, which involves students and educators, affected by the misbehavior to participate in the conflict decision and prevention process. (2) Providing a community service program that requires the student to complete meaningful and relevant service to repair damage to the school community. (3) Peer juries which consist of trained student jurors to discuss with the student the reason for their misbehavior and to determine who was affected and provide restitution. (4) Circle processes are common techniques used to foster

relationships and a sense of school and community pride to respond to bad conduct. This technique of restorative practice develops interpersonal and communication skills by inviting students and educators to take a turn speaking (i.e. about what occurred, how they feel about it, how it affected them and the school along with how to make amends) and listening in a controlled environment. (5) Preventative and post-resolution programs are tools that provide students with opportunities to learn problem-solving and instructional skills. (6) Peer mediation where a student leadership genre is used to train student leaders to support their fellow students in resolving conflicts. Affective statements and questions are informal techniques used to make possible communication of feelings and expressions on the impact of behavior for students who misbehave. Social-emotional learning allows students to learn skills that enhance their awareness and management of emotions, to develop empathy and to build positive relationships (Restorative Practices Working Group, 2014; Wachtel, 2016).

Restorative practices exemplify an attitude that, when infused into the foundation of the school community, can be engaged to extend and sustain a safe and caring school climate. According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices, restorative practices “reduce crime, violence and bullying, improve human behavior, strengthen human behavior, strengthen civil society, provide effective leadership, restore relationships and repair harm” (Wachtel, 2016). Additional research from the International Institute for Restorative Practices found fewer disciplinary referrals, reduced rates of suspensions and expulsions, less instructional time lost due to behavior management, improved educator morale and retention, and improved academic outcomes and a decline in disproportional rates of disciplinary referrals of minority students (Porter, 2007). Restorative practices are also associated with improvements in attendance, academic achievement and graduation rates, and a reduced number of classroom disruptions thus

improving the entire school climate (McMorris et al., 2013).

Additionally, restorative practices may serve as an alternative to other disciplinary procedures. Zero-tolerance policies consist of viewpoints related to punishment originally intended for drug offenses in the 1980s (Gonzalez, 2012). The war on drugs went from the streets to the schools, where both severe offenses (such as bringing a weapon to school) and minor offenses (such as cussing a teacher) were not tolerated on school property (Gonzalez, 2012). In the 1990s, these policies were put into practice in school districts to target and prevent violent behavior (Winslade & Williams, 2012). The U.S. and Canada passed legislation for school systems to establish operation policies that were strong on crime (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). The U.S. passed the Gun-Free School Act in 1994, and Canada adopted the Safe Schools Act in 2000. These guidelines have shaped how school environments react to infractions within their community by emulating the conventional criminal justice approach (Gonzalez, 2012).

Gonzalez (2012) states that several research studies suggest punitive discipline policies in school both exclude students from educational opportunities and fail to make schools safer. Also, students have a higher chance of becoming part of the juvenile justice system when zero-tolerance policies disconnect them from their school and community.

Progressive Discipline Approach

A study in Ontario, Canada was enacted in 2008 when the Ontario Education Commission regarding behavior, discipline, and safety introduced a bill. The proposed legislation called for a more progression disciplined approach such as prevention and early intervention on student misbehavior. The law also provided a program solution for successful reentry of suspended and expelled students. Progressive discipline approaches rely on a variety of disciplinary interventions so students can learn from their mistakes and improve their

behavior. The “framework of progressive discipline shifts the focus from one that is punitive to a focus that is supportive and corrective in nature” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). Progressive tactics of discipline include meetings with students and their parents, taking away privileges, peer arbitration, and restorative practices. The shifting away from zero-tolerance towards progressive discipline measures in education came from the criminal justice system. Restorative practices have their roots in the cultural customs of people around the world who seek to “live and learn in a good way with each other” (Durham District School Board Safe Schools, 2012) and value “harmony and respect” (Lewington, 2016). Although this practice has been around for years, its modern-day approach comes from restorative justice or other alternative methods to discipline in the criminal justice system. Correctional institutions in Canada have defined restorative justice as a “non-adversarial, non-retributive approach to justice that emphasizes healing in victims, meaningful accountability of those responsible for the harm and the involvement of citizens in creating healthier, safer communities. “Restorative justice works to repair the damage and promote healing and growth” (Pakan, 2007). The Canadian institutions suggest that traditional methods of punishment do not emphasize repairing harm and restoring respect while developing relationships with the victim, as the restorative justice approach does.

Ontario’s move toward making schools safer involved the entire school community to center on collaboratively promoting constructive student behavior through a policy of regulations, structuring healthy and courteous relationships throughout the whole school community, averting inappropriate behavior through prevention programs, and concentrating on inappropriate behavior through progressive discipline methods such as restorative justice (Pakan, 2007).

Student Discipline and Restorative Practices

Many school districts are looking for a different solution to the traditional punitive model of school discipline. The districts want a distinctive solution that yields better results in terms of resolving conflicts and preventing students from repeating their offenses. Restorative justice programs have been well researched and are considered applied methods that help educators to rethink the disciplined approach (Catapano, 2019).

In your typical school model of discipline, behavioral infractions earn a harsher penalty for each progressive incident of the behavior. The biggest problem with this type of model is that a wide range of behaviors receive the same punishment. Catapano (2019) sites an example involving a student who receives multiple tardies receiving detention in the same way as a student who swears at a teacher. “The Civil Rights Project, a division of UCLA research, reported that 3.3 million K-12 students are suspended each year, and 102,000 are expelled.” If a different approach to discipline could be considered these extreme disciplinary measures could be avoided. Many schools maintain a thin array of disciplinary options that fall short of the full range of components considering the student’s actions. Catapano stated in 2007, the “National Center for Education Statistics reported that nearly one in every four students nationwide had been suspended at least once.”

Restorative school discipline should not be considered an add-on program for behavior management or another tool for educators to use to deal with student behavior. Restorative justice programs and school discipline should represent a school culture that permeates all parts of the school’s organizational atmosphere, the associations within the school, as well as interactions between the school and community. Ultimately, restorative practice programs recognize schools are educational institutions, and strategies and procedures should be for the

students and their school community. School districts should bear in mind responses to student behavior should be consistent with their educational goals of supporting teaching and learning and not punishment, retribution, and exclusion (McCluskey et al., 2008).

The school should be the vehicle where every student's behavior should be consistent with the educational goals of the school community and are dealt with through compassionate educational involvement.

Restorative school discipline could be the basis to educate not just in one subject area only but beyond to include citizenship and become a contributing member of the student's community. Restorative justice discipline programs could provide all members of the school community with the skills for constructive social interactions, associations, and decisions that support educational learning.

One recent study provided by the Chicago Public Schools reported that due to changes in school discipline policies, training in classroom management, and the use of restorative practices on school discipline issues with teachers and students resulted in, according to one teacher, "lawlessness" (Perez, 2015). Several schools report that they did not have a behavioral specialist or a designated school staff member to intervene with students, staff, and parents on discipline issues nor the resources to train staff members on discipline practices that address the students' needs. District training on restorative practices was not provided to all schools and the restorative practice program was only used on a weekly basis. The study suggested the new discipline policies enacted by the district placed more substantial limits on the use of suspensions and sought to keep students in the school environment.

Knoff (2015) advises that restorative practice programs are beneficial but "only when they are matched to the students who will most benefit from those programs." He suggests

schools should focus on programs like restorative practice, which reinforces the skills students need to cope with regarding behavioral issues. He felt a restorative practice program did provide intervention strategies to help the most challenging students tackle their unacceptable behaviors (Knoff, 2015).

Classroom management continues to be an issue for every educator, administrator, and parent. Educators should focus on providing a safe and supportive classroom that allows students an opportunity to learn and grow. School districts have several frameworks and guidelines that are used for stopping and preventing student behavioral problems. Suspension is one of the options used in disciplinary measures. School districts have both in-school suspension (ISS) and out of school suspension (OSS). These suspensions are administered because a student is severely disrupting the learning atmosphere. From a school personnel perspective, the only recourse is to remove the offending student so threats to the safety of students and school personnel are limited. Research and surveys have suggested that the most cited discipline problems have little to do with violence but instead focus on insubordination and defiance (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). A study of a large school district in Florida also found insubordination and other non-violent offenses compromised the majority of OSS (Mendez et al., 2002). Skiba, Peterson, and Williams examined the disciplinary referrals and punishment of two middle schools in the Florida district and found that the majority of offenses led to non-violent referrals. In-school suspension became a subsidiary of the OSS plan because many educators were frustrated with the discipline design and felt that ISS was a more rehabilitative depiction of discipline. ISS keeps students in the classroom atmosphere, and school officials can punish inappropriate behavior more constructively. There are often limited case models of school districts that use ISS so effectively that it dramatically changes the disciplined environment and

suspension rate in their schools (Haley & Tomczyk 2000). Turpin & Hardin (1997) felt ISS programs were a limited success and did not alone validate the effectiveness of this method for school discipline.

Chronic Absenteeism and Restorative Practices

The behavior of absenteeism is described as a period when a student is not attending school, which in turn often leads to the loss of academic success (Strickland, 1998). Although not all students who are chronically absent are considered truant, the non-attendance of school can be detrimental to students in many other ways (Strickland, 1998). For example, perfect attendance does not determine grade point average, but lack of attendance does have a relationship to grade point average (Strickland, 1998). Attendance is a problem in the United States and students are missing more school than they attend (NCTQ, 2014). If a student is chronically absent or truant, suspending them from school only continues the cycle of behavioral issues and mitigates their ability to come to school to gain the academics required for graduation. Research indicates students missing more than 10% of school during a school year are more likely to drop out (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Improving School Climate Through Restorative Practices

A positive school climate means everyone who includes students, parents, staff and community members feel they are in safe hands and appreciated. Everyone has a role to play in promoting healthy relationships and a school climate that encourages appropriate student behavior.

One study at Cole Middle School in Oakland, California, began a program of restorative practices in 2005-06 school years. Significant benefits in terms of quantifiable data were noticeable between 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years when the suspension rate at the school

dropped. The school had been suspending almost one-third of the student population (30.3%). After the implementation of the restorative practice program, student suspension rates dropped to 10.3% (Jain, et al., 2014). Suspensions declined by 87%, and expulsions fell to zero during the implementation of who school restorative practice (Sumner et al., 2010). The staff reported that restorative practice programs improved the overall school climate during the first year of implementation (Jain, et al., 2014). The students shared the use of restorative justice circles enhanced their ability to understand their peers better, to manage their emotions, to develop greater empathy, and to resolve conflict with parents, improve the home environment, and maintain positive relationships with peers (Jain, et al., 2014).

Another study conducted in public schools by Port, et al. (2012) found there was significant progress made with student behavioral issues and a positive school climate atmosphere was present as a result of the reparative dialogue established through restorative practice programs. Grossi and Santos (2012) also found students demonstrated increased respect for other students while showing more promising approaches to conflict. Additionally, restorative practices played a primary role in helping to resolve disputes in the school, which provided a better overall school climate.

Researchers found positive results for the school climate of Midway High School in New Zealand through the use and practice of restorative programs. Kaveney and Drewery (2011) reported teachers using restorative practice programs had better relationships with their students. An improvement in student awareness was found, and teachers reported restorative practices had positive effects on teacher and student relationships. The school climate improved with students being more caring, respectful, and considerate toward the staff and fellow students.

McCluskey (2008) reported positive results from a two-year pilot program, which

investigated the effects of restorative practices in eighteen schools in Scotland. Findings in the research showed improvement in school culture and a decrease in discipline referrals. In Adelaide Australia at Lonsdale Primary School, administrators implemented a restorative justice program to offset increasing aggression within the school environment. Lane (2005) reported that not only an improvement in school climate was apparent, but also parents were more supportive of restorative based programs versus other disciplinary techniques.

Restorative practices were introduced at Palisades Middle School in Pennsylvania during the fall of 2000. According to Mirsky (2003), the school climate was ill-mannered and impertinent and disagreements were common. The school principal reported he was suspending around 200 students during a school year for everything from disrespect to skipping classes. The entire staff was trained in restorative practices. The teachers used restorative practices in the classrooms in the form of circles, where students and faculty share information and problems. Students wrote in their journals about what happened in a discipline situation and suggested how to resolve the situation. The school saw a statistical decrease in the number of problems that occurred each day and data indicated a substantial drop from the 2000 school year to the 2001 school year in discipline problems and incidents of fighting. Teachers felt restorative practices had a positive effect on academic performance while providing an improvement in the school climate (Mirsky, 2003).

Springfield Township in Philadelphia received many urban transfer students who moved from place to place regularly. The administration felt their biggest challenge was integrating students from different systems into the culture of the school (Mirsky, 2003). The staff was trained in restorative practices and used check-in and checkout circles with both their classroom management and academic issues to help create the culture deemed appropriate for the school

environment. The administration provided a list of questions for students to think about during their in-school suspension assignment. These questions asked the student to think about: “What happened? Who do you think has been affected by your actions? What can you do to repair the harm?” The administration then discusses the questions with the student and brings in the teacher involved to talk about the situation and mend any disputes. The administration considers restorative practices to be a part of the building culture and data shows that since restorative practices were introduced a decrease in discipline problems has occurred. The improvement in the school culture and climate have changed the school’s core values with restorative practices (Mirsky, 2003).

Teacher Perceptions and Restorative Practice

Studies suggest punitive measures like those currently used in our justice system do not reduce recidivism or decrease violence in youth (Choi, Green, & Gilbert, 2011). Schools have shown they are not prepared to deal with the increasing amounts of violence, bullying, and other serious problems affecting our communities (Morrison, 2006). Behavioral issues and other aggressive acts are significant concerns for educators since student success depends on how well students interact with their peers and adapt to the school environment (Alvis, 2015). Ineffective disciplinary methods in schools have helped to perpetuate aggression acts resulting in the rising rates of suspensions and detentions of students (Morrison, 2006). School experiences help students gain the emotional skills needed to engage and interact positively with their peers (Goleman, 1998). For this reason, schools need to examine alternative means to discipline that will help prevent hostile behaviors and help students build better relationships with their teachers and the school environment.

In recent years, restorative justice supporters have begun promoting restorative practices

in schools. Restorative justice approaches allow students to understand the effect of their negative behaviors on those that have been harmed and help them to restore relationships while making amends (Zehr, 2002). In schools using restorative practice programs, therapeutic interventions are used instead of more punitive methods to behavior management. Restorative practices work from a whole-school, strength-based model that allows for meaningful and supported opportunities for students to take responsibility and be accountable for their actions (Zaslow, 2009). Students and teachers work together by discussing inappropriate student behaviors and collaboratively reaching an agreement that meets the needs of everyone involved (Varnham, 2005). Restorative activities include peer mediation, restorative conversations, classroom circles, thinking plans, small and large group restorative meetings, and formal restorative conferences (Macready, 2009).

Teachers use restorative practices at the elementary level to help instill values, skills and ethical principles for working with others (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). At the secondary level, educators address specific behaviors that disrupt the harmony of the school and classroom environment through problem-solving circles, conferences, and peer mediation. Morrison and Vaandering (2012) found that restorative programs increase positive emotions such as empathy and while diminishing negative emotions such as anger, humiliation, and fear. Hargreaves (1997) proposed that emotions, feelings, relationships, and human interactions all influence learning. Teachers found that students who participate in restorative circles form a different kind of relationship with each other that is based on inclusiveness, empathy, equality, connectedness, and respect (Boyes-Watson, 2005).

A study was conducted in a Title 1 public suburban elementary school in northeastern New York with over 1000 students in Pre-K to 6th grade. The study found that teachers felt the

major strengths were connections made by the staff between all stakeholders, had a set of standard procedures allowing stakeholders to know what to do, expect, and made a great impact on school climate.

Positive Effects of Restorative Practices

Many school districts, along with their stakeholders have become increasingly concerned about suspensions especially about suspending younger children from elementary and middle schools. Statistics prove suspended students are less likely to graduate, possibly because they miss the instructional time needed to proceed academically (Augustine, et al., 2018). Restorative programs have gained momentum in the educational community as an approach to reduce suspension rates, help improve absenteeism and school climate. If educational institutions can improve relationships with the students and staff and build a sense of community within the school, it might bring results of students less inclined to misbehave and have a desire to attend school.

A study conducted in the Pittsburg Public School district in 2015-16 and 2016-17 represented one of the first controlled trials of the effects of restorative practices on school climate and suspension rates (Augustine, et al., 2018). The researchers found that restorative justice community school-wide programs have several positive effects. An improvement in overall school climates through the perception of the teachers, a decrease in overall suspension rates, and a reduction in the suspension rates between low and higher income students.

One of the most comprehensive evaluations of restorative practices used in schools was conducted in the United Kingdom. This study employed surveys and interviews with over 5,000 students, 1,150 educators, and 600 community members (Bitel, 2005). Many schools that had established restorative practice programs saw a reduction in bullying, improved over-all school

behavior, and educators who looked for different ways to punish misbehaviors. Educators who engaged in restorative practice programs felt the school climate had improved and students were more satisfied and felt they had been dealt with more fairly in the process.

Another study of 18 schools in Scotland produced comparable accomplishments to those demonstrated in the United Kingdom. The study was conducted for two years through surveys, facilitated interviews, and focus groups where educators employed restorative practice programs (McCluskey et al., 2008). This research indicated that students felt more positive about their school experience. Attendance and staff morale improved while disciplinary referrals and rates of expulsions decreased (McCluskey et al., 2008).

A study conducted at City Springs Elementary and Middle School in Baltimore showed restorative practices brought about noticeable changes in student behavior and school climate. Many teachers at City Springs felt the restorative practice approach was just as disruptive at the beginning of the program as their student misbehaviors. Most of their attitudes from other years of experience were to suspend the kid or get them out of their classroom. When the restorative practice program was initiated and as the teachers learned to build relationships with their students by gathering them together and asking and answering questions, and the students began to share their feelings, express what's on their mind and learn about each other the teachers started to see positive results. The school started a school-wide approach of circles to defuse a disciplinary situation. The teachers were taught to quickly assemble a circle and get students to talk about what they think when they behave a certain way and ask them how they can make the situation correct. If circumstances necessitated it, the circle approach was used more formally. In these discussions, everyone should talk through an incident with parents and supporters for both students (Shah, 2012). Over two years, the school found that suspension

rates had declined in middle school. It was also concluded that a more favorable level of student engagement and school involvement was noted.

In 2015, the Lakehead School District explored the implementation of restorative practices within three of their schools. While the initial evaluation revealed positive findings, such as a decreased number of suspensions and enhanced student attitudes toward learning, it also concluded that the payback of restorative practices could be maximized when they are implemented school-wide (Lewington, 2016).

Summary

A secure, respectful, and well-ordered learning environment where teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community are engaged in social responsibility is essential to the student learning process. A progressive discipline approach is a foundation for a school approach that uses a gamut of prevention and intervention programs that addresses inappropriate student behavior and builds strategies to promote positive behaviors. Restorative practices are replacing zero-tolerance policies regarding disciplinary and school climate issues. Restorative practice programs are used as a cohesive and proactive approach where the major goal is to reintegrate students into a successful learning process (Zheng & DeJesus, 2018). A constructive learning and teaching climate is necessary for student achievement and welfare.

Research has indicated a relationship between students' success and school climate (Safe Schools Action Team, 2008). Bringing about a positive school climate is not easy and requires a whole-school line of attack. Despite the increasing popularity of restorative programs in U.S. schools, there is at this point little research on the impact of such practices in school settings (Anfara et al., 2003).

Recent studies indicated the proportion of suspensions where restorative practices were

implemented were not conclusive in reducing the overall total; however, restorative practice programs did have a positive impact on reducing the possibility of students being re-suspended. The Toronto District School Board in Canada reported almost 73% of students who participated in a restorative practice program after their first suspension did not have any suspensions in the rest of their school career; 6% more than students who had not participated in a restorative practice program at 67% (Zheng & DeJesus, 2018). While there was almost no difference in absenteeism rates in the school year when students were first suspended, the following school years, a more substantial 7% of students who had participated in a restorative practice program had a lower absentee rate than students who had not participated in a restorative practice program.

The research on restorative practice programs in schools is still developing and several of the case studies have indicated promising results with school climate, student behavior, and relationships between students and staff (Ashley & Burke, 2009). Some researchers suggest a shift in attitudes toward punishment may take one to three years, and a change to a school restorative practice program where a significant difference in school climate is documented might take up to three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013), (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

Although a growing body of research has established that restorative practices can foster positive relationships and improved school climate, the impact of restorative practices as an intervention for students facing exclusionary discipline is still to be determined. The purpose of this study is to evaluate and provide an overview of discipline practices, discipline referrals, absenteeism, and teacher's perception about a restorative practice program initiated in a low-income middle school in east Tennessee as well as results from the use of the restorative practice has in the overall school environment.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design and Methods

Introduction

In the fall of 2019, a school-based restorative practice program was implemented at a middle school in rural East Tennessee. This program focused on improving overall discipline, attendance, and school culture. All staff members including administration, teachers, and counselors met with students regularly and participated in restorative practice circles. These circles focus on identifying the problem and developing solutions to assist students in gaining restorative and coping mechanisms. Students were able to discuss and identify valuable reasons behind their actions and discuss other ways to better address issues. The restorative practice method focused on improving the school community and culture throughout the grade levels. Through the restorative practice program and circle time, students were able to feel a sense of community and be able to identify with their peers on a deeper and personal level.

The purpose of the exploratory sequential mixed-methods study was to explore the implementation of restorative practices based on the perceptions of the teachers and overall discipline in coordination with attendance data from fall 2018 and fall 2019 in at a high school in rural East Tennessee. Data were analyzed to determine if ISS, OSS, and alternative school placement demonstrated an increase or decrease at the school level between the seventh and eighth grade students in fall 2018 and fall 2019. A focus group consisting of three seventh grade teachers, three eighth grade teachers, and one related arts teacher was interviewed to determine their perspectives regarding the implementation of the restorative practice program and the effects of overall student behavior, achievements, and school climate.

This chapter provides a rationale for the exploratory sequential mixed-methods design of the study. The populations, participants, and samples used in this study are described. Data collection methods are included along with an analysis of the data sets. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the results displayed in Chapter 4.

Rationale for Using Mixed-Methods

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods were used for this research design. A mixed methods research represents research that involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or in a series of studies that investigates the same underlying phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie, 2008). By utilizing a mixed-methods approach with restorative practices, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the program and demonstrates an overall perspective of how the design added to the school-wide culture. Hughes (2016) states, “quantitative analyses employ descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas qualitative analyses produce expressive data that provide descriptive details (often in narrative form) to examine the study’s research objectives. This design allows for qualitative and quantitative components to intertwine and provides a better insight into the overall school results. By beginning this with a qualitative inquiry, the teacher’s perspective of school climate was identified through interviews then the quantitative instruments were used to document measurable changes.

Qualitative Components

Qualitative research methods were used to gain insight and collect valuable information regarding the teacher's perspectives on discipline and attendance in middle school. All middle school teachers were trained and given the appropriate tools to implement the restorative practice program. Focus group interviews were conducted consisting of seven teachers prior to

implementing the restorative practice program and after it was effective for a semester. The main purpose of the teacher interviews were to compare and contrast the overall school's discipline, attendance, and school climate. The responses were analyzed and used as a guide to determine the effect of restorative practices within the middle school environment.

Quantitative Components

PowerSchool reports were generated to determine student's ISS, OSS, alternative school placement, and discipline referrals in fall 2018 and fall 2019. Attendance data were generated to identify the number of days absent for each student in fall 2018 and fall 2019. Data were entered in SPSS and calculated to determine any significant differences in those components between fall 2018 and fall 2019.

Qualitative Research Questions

The following three research questions were used to address the qualitative research in the study:

1. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after training (but before institution) in restorative practices?
2. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after a semester of instituting restorative practices?
3. Have teachers' perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction changed regarding restorative practices in this time frame?

Quantitative Research Questions

The following seven research questions were used to address the quantitative strand in the study:

1. Is there a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

2. Is there a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

3. Is there a significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative discipline practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during the fall 2018 versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

4. Is there a significant difference in the number of students suspended (both in-school and out-of-school) during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of students suspended (both in-school and out-of-school) during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

5. Is there a significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

6. Is there a significant difference in the number of absences during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of absences during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

7. Is there a significant difference in the number of students who are considered “chronically absent” during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the number of students who are considered “chronically absent” during fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Population

The population for this study was generated from a middle school in rural East Tennessee. In 2018-2019 there were a total of 98 seventh grade students and a total of 99 eighth grade students. There were 49 males and 49 females in seventh grade and 55 males and 44 females in eighth grade. The student population was 92.9% Caucasian, 5% African American, and the remaining 2.1% Hispanic or Latino. In 2019-2020 there were a total of 103 seventh grade students and a total of 112 eighth grade students. There were 49 males and 54 females in seventh grade and 66 males and 46 females in eighth grade. The student population for seventh and eighth grade was 92.5% Caucasian, 3.3% African American, and the remaining 4.2% Hispanic or Latino.

Sample

To obtain a sample, the population were generated for seventh and eighth grade students from PowerSchool. The total student size was 161 students in seventh and eighth grade. From this list student information was identified such as attendance, ISS, OSS, alternative school, and the number of discipline referrals. The sample size included all students who were enrolled in the East Tennessee middle school in fall 2018 and fall 2019. Seven teachers across grade levels were identified by the administration to participate in a focus group to obtain information regarding teacher's perspective on the restorative practice program before and after implementation.

Instrumentation

Qualitative Instrumentation

Qualitative data were collected in the form of focus group interviews. A focus group is a small group of people who are knowledgeable and can offer valuable information about the subject matter. "Focus groups are used for generating information on collective views, and the

meanings that lie behind those views. They are also useful in generating a rich understanding of participants' experiences and beliefs” (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, Chadwick, 2008, p. 204). Focus group interviews were used to gain insight into the teacher’s perceptions of attendance, discipline, and overall school climate. Focus group interviews are completed and facilitated in a small group setting. The focus group questions are guided to generate an overall idea of the school climate and culture pertaining to attendance and discipline. The focus group met based on administrative decisions pertaining to which teachers would be participating in the study beginning in fall 2019 and then again at the conclusion of fall 2019 to ensure triangulation of qualitative data. The questions, which were asked in the focus group interviews, were asked in a general setting with the seven teachers providing input among all grade levels as a whole. Focus group interviews were held in the library and facilitated by the researcher. The qualitative data were analyzed using the Creswell’s six generic approaches to analyzing qualitative data.

Quantitative Instrumentation

The quantitative data were gathered through PowerSchool generated reports and the school’s discipline referral forms. The reports included fall 2018 and fall 2019 attendance, ISS, OSS, and alternative school placement information. For the quantitative strand only students enrolled in the seventh and eighth grades during fall 2018 and fall 2019 were analyzed. Students were given a number and compared based on if they were enrolled in the middle school throughout fall 2018 and fall 2019. Information was entered in the SSPS program and tests were generated to compare the data.

Data Collection and Procedures

Before the study was conducted, a proposal was sent to Milligan College IRB for approval. Consent to conduct research was granted by the school system’s superintendent and the

principal of the middle school. A consent form was given to the teachers involved in the focus group regarding the research. A copy of the consent form was provided to every teacher. Once informed consent was received, the restorative practice program was implemented. The researcher kept all consent forms.

Participants experienced minimal risk during the study. Participants could experience some level of anxiety from being questioned about their classroom and school environment and when asked to expand on any negative aspects generated utilizing the restorative practice program. All information was provided to the teachers in regard to how the information that is collected was utilized for the study.

Focus group interviews were conducted by contacting seven teachers. Three teachers from seventh grade, three teachers from eight grades, and one related arts teacher were selected to participate in the focus group interviews to gain insight into the teacher's perspectives on the implementation of the restorative practice program. The researcher asked scripted questions and teachers were recorded with sound only via an iPad. The teachers freely discussed and answered the generated questions within the small group setting. Two sessions were conducted one in August 2019 and the other in December 2019 following one semester of implementing the restorative practice program.

Questions asked during the interviews were related to the perceptions based on attendance, discipline, and overall school climate. The qualitative data were scored using Creswell's six generic steps (Creswell, 2009). Information from the focus group was used to gain insight into teacher's perspectives after implementing the restorative practice program pertaining to attendance, discipline, and overall school climate.

In August 2019, PowerSchool data were accessed to show fall 2018 discipline records

and discipline referrals were provided to the researcher. The quantitative data were collected again in December 2019 to reflect the data collected for the fall 2019 semester. The quantitative data were inputted in SPSS and statistical tests were run to compare fall 2018 and fall 2019 data.

Copies of all information were kept in a file along with hard copies of the teacher's consent forms and transcription information. All information was kept in safe storage to protect the confidentiality and integrity of the research project.

Although the researcher participated in conducting the interviews, it was the role of the teachers to implement the restorative practice program in the classroom. The researcher did not implement the restorative practice circles or methods into the school or the classroom. The researcher provided the administration with the results from the focus group interview questions in August 2019 and December 2019 and all quantitative results that were generated on discipline and attendance.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Strand

A multiple step qualitative data analysis utilizing Creswell's six generic steps approach was used and followed after qualitative data were collected (Creswell, 2009). The following steps were used to analyze the qualitative data:

1. Organized and prepared the data for the analysis: the researcher transcribed the focus interview questions from the audio recording and typed it on a document for further analysis and use.

2. The researcher read and interpreted the data for a general understanding of the topic and teacher perception: responses were noted and categorized by teacher responses to better understand the dynamics and responses in order.
3. Detailed analysis with a coding process: teacher responses were organized into categories. Similar responses were grouped to assist in developing themes and similar thoughts.
4. Coded responses to generate theme: each category was analyzed and grouped with other categories to develop a related theme or response.
5. Represented themes in the qualitative narrative: A flow chart was created to display teacher responses for each theme. Phrases and keyword that were taken from teacher responses were used to ensure understanding of the material.
6. Interpreted the meaning of the data: the researcher analyzed data to determine the perceived need for the restorative practice program and changes to the overall school climate.

The qualitative steps were taken to increase and improve the validity and reliability of the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2009). By utilizing these steps, the researcher was able to organize the data, develop a conclusion about teacher perspectives pertaining to the overall school climate. Based on the analysis of results, the researcher was able to develop an assumption of the school environment before and after utilizing the restorative practice program.

Quantitative Strand

Data from PowerSchool pertaining to discipline and attendance was entered into SSPS for statistical analysis. For quantitative question #1, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester, following the institution of the restorative practice program. For quantitative question #2, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practice program. For quantitative question #3, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restrictive practices. For quantitative question #4, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of students suspended both in-school and out-of-school during the fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices. For quantitative question #5, a paired t-test was used to test if the number of students placed in alternative school during fall 2018 and fall 2019, following the institution of restorative practices. For quantitative question #6, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of students absent during the fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices. For quantitative question #7, a paired t-test was used to test for a significant difference in the number of chronically absent students during the fall 2018 and fall 2019, following the institution of restorative practices.

Summary

The exploratory sequential mixed-methods design encompassed both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the data. By conducting focus group interviews, the researcher has access to individual teacher experiences and their perspectives regarding the overall school climate. After analyzing the qualitative data, a better understanding of classroom teacher's perspectives were gained and acknowledged on how they felt the restorative practice program contributed to the school climate and overall discipline and attendance. ISS, OSS, alternative school placement, and attendance were accessed through PowerSchool for fall 2018 and fall 2019 semester. Discipline referrals were given to the researcher to enter in SSPS along with all the other viable data gathered. Finally, a comprehensive analysis was completed to show the overall comparison of implementing the restorative practice program fall 2018 versus fall 2019.

CHAPTER 4

Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this sequential exploratory mixed-methods study was to explore the effects of restorative practices on ISS, OSS, an alternative school placement, attendance, and teacher perceptions. The population studied was seventh and eighth grade students in a Title I middle school in rural East Tennessee.

Qualitative data assessing teacher's perceptions of the overall school climate before and after the implementation of restorative practices were collected in the form of focus group interviews in August 2019 and December 2019. The sample consisted of three seventh grade teachers, three eighth grade teachers, and one related arts teacher. The teachers who participated in the focus group were asked questions related to the use and implementation of the restorative practice program. The following research questions guided the interview:

1. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after training (but before institution) in restorative practices?

This research question addresses interview questions 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, 5a, 6a, 7a, 8a, 9a, 10a, 11a, and 12a.

2. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after a semester of instituting restorative practices?

This research question addresses interview question 1b, 2b, 3b, 4b, 7b, 8b, 9b, and 11b.

3. Have teachers' perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction changed regarding restorative discipline practices in this time frame?

This research question addresses interview questions 5b, 6b, 10b, and 12b.

Focus group questions were generated to address the qualitative research questions and gain insight into the use of restorative practices before and after implementation. These questions were asked to the focus group participants during the August 2019 and December 2019 interviews. The researcher used the data from the interviews to sort, code, and identify themes.

Quantitative data were collected for each student enrolled in fall 2018 and fall 2019 regarding ISS, OSS, alternative school placement, and attendance were collected through PowerSchool. Discipline referral forms for each student were counted and all data were inputted into SPSS. The following quantitative research questions were addressed:

1. Is there a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
2. Is there a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
3. Is there a significant difference in the number of in-school-suspensions during the fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the restorative practices?
4. Is there a significant difference in the number of suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) during the fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
5. Is there a significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

6. Is there a significant difference in the number of absences during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
7. Is there a significant difference in the number of students who are considered chronically absent during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

In this chapter, sample and population demographics are identified and described for each part of the study. Qualitative data are shown in table form with themes listed based on the responses. Keywords and phrases from the teacher's responses are included and an asterisk indicates keywords or phrases that were repeated by teachers in the interviews. Quantitative data are shown in the form of tables to identify the levels of significance for each research question.

Demographic Data

The population studied was all seventh and eighth grades students that were enrolled in fall 2018 and fall 2019 in a rural Title I middle school in East Tennessee. Three teachers that taught seventh and eighth grade along with one related arts teacher was interviewed. These interviews were conducted as focus groups. Each question was read and the teachers had appropriate time to respond. These responses were coded by hand by the researcher.

Qualitative Strand Findings

Responses to Interview Question 1a (August 2019): Thinking back over this past school year, tell me some ways the school environment was conducive to learning.

Common themes emerged such as communication and cohesiveness. Teacher responses are presented in Table 1a.

Table 1a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 1*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Communication	4	- Classroom Expectations* - Procedures - “We communicated classroom expectations.”
Cohesive	3	- Working together - “We are a team” - “All students and teachers work well together.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 1b (December 2019): Thinking back over the fall semester, how has the school environment been more conducive to learning after implementing restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as communication, relationships, and organization. Teacher responses are presented in Table 1b.

Table 1b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 1b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, and Quotes
Communication	5	- Expectations* - Consequences for actions - Conversations and circles - “Conversations with other teachers that focus on leadership.” - “Communication with other teachers discussing issues.”
Relationships	3	- Other teachers, students, and administration - “Key relationships have been built with everyone.”
Organization	2	- Overall organization - Higher Standards - “We are trying to hold them to a higher standard both academically and behaviorally.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 2a (August 2019): Thinking back over this past school year, give me examples of the main issues regarding discipline and attendance in this school climate. Common themes emerged such as tardy and attendance. Teacher responses are presented in Table 2a.

Table 2a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 2a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Tardy	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Late to class - Too many tardies - Spending time at lockers* - “Students are lingering too long at the lockers.” - “Students stay too long in the bathrooms.”
Attendance	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Struggling at home - Missing class instruction - Same students every year - “Students who struggle at home have a hard time getting to school.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 2b (December 2019): Thinking back over the fall semester, name issues regarding discipline and attendance which have improved after implementing restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as communication and follow through. Teacher responses are presented in Table 2b.

Table 2b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 2b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Communication	5	- Talking to parents - Conversations with students - “We are involving parents and students in attendance meeting.”
Follow through	2	- Tardy policies enforced - Attendance policies enforced - “Policies are in place and everyone is following through.”

Responses to Interview Question 3a (August 2019): Describe how you feel a restorative practice program will have an effect on the school climate and teacher satisfaction. Common themes emerged such as communication and leadership. Teacher responses are presented in Table 3a.

Table 3a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 3a*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, and Quotes
Communication	4	- Students having conversations and a voice* - Expectations - “We communicate our classroom expectations.” - “Students have a voice in making decisions.”
Leadership	2	- Student responsibility for actions - “Students are beginning to take responsibility for their actions.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 3b (December 2019): Tell me some ways the school climate and teacher perceptions have improved upon the implementation of restorative practices.

Common themes emerged such as meaningful relationships and comfortability. Teacher responses are presented in Table 3b.

Table 3b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 3b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phases, & Quotes</u>
Meaningful Relationships	3	- Non-judgmental - Communication with teachers - Student and teacher connection - “The office is becoming to them a non-judgmental area.”
Comfortability	2	- Administration, teachers, and students - “Students are more open to talk to administration.” - “Administration is able to better communicate with teachers.”

Responses to Interview Question 4a (August 2019): Describe how you feel a restorative practice program will have an effect on discipline and attendance in your school.

Common themes emerged such as positive thinking and school climate. Teacher responses are presented in Table 4a.

Table 4a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 4a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, Quotes</u>
Positive Thinking	5	- Circle Time - Relationships with stakeholders - Growth mindset* - “We must maintain a growth mindset and think positive.”
School Climate	3	- Everyone working together - Students learning respect and responsibility - “Everyone is working together for the same goal.” - “Students are needing to learn respect and responsibility.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 4b (December 2019): Give me an example of how restorative practices have improved discipline and attendance in your school. Common themes emerged such as responsibility and awareness. Teacher responses are presented in Table 4b.

Table 4b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 4b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Responsibility	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students taking ownership* - Teachers taking ownership* - Students addressing issues with others - “I see our students taking ownership for their actions.” - “The students are starting to address issues with each other positively.”
Awareness	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students becoming aware of their actions - Non-judgmental attitudes among all stakeholders - “The students are becoming more aware of issues and developing non-judgmental attitudes.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 5a (August 2019): Tell me some ways the majority of the staff believe the restorative practice can improve student behavior. Common themes emerged such as resistant to change and examples. Teacher responses are presented in Table 5a.

Table 5a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 5a*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Resistant to Change	2	- Thinking it is another program - Frustrated need more time (short period) - “Teachers are resistance to change and will think this is another program.”
Examples	4	- Provide videos and proof - Show positive outcomes - “Teachers would like to see documented proof that showed positive outcomes.”

Responses to Interview Question 5b (December 2019): What aspects of your experience with restorative practices lead you to believe the majority of the staff now believes restorative practices have improved overall student behavior? Common themes emerged such as positive conversations and student’s actions. Teacher responses are presented in Table 5b.

Table 5b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 5b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Positive Conversations	3	- Colleague conversations about students - Essential student conversations - “Conversations are occurring that are essential in understanding the issues at hand.”
Student’s Actions	5	- Student discipline is decreasing - Positive student conversations - “We see more positive student conversations happening and discipline decreasing.”

Responses to Interview Question 6a (August 2019): Describe how the majority of the staff believe restorative practice can improve student attendance. Common themes emerged such as building relationships and staying informed. Teacher responses are presented in Table 6a.

Table 6a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 6a*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Building Relationships	6	- Demonstrating care - Demonstrating love - Demonstrating safety* - “Everyone in the building demonstrates care and love for one another.” - “Proving safety is essential when developing relationships.”
Staying Informed	4	- Continue to improve attendance - Learn effective ways to help with students* - “We need to stay informed and continue to learn ways to improve.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 6b (December 2019): What about your experience leads you to believe the majority of the staff now believes restorative practices has improved overall student attendance. Common themes emerged such as communication and attendance policies. Teacher responses are presented in Table 6b.

Table 6b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 6b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Communication	4	- Students talking to teachers - Contact with parents - “We are staying in contact with teachers and parents during this process.”
Attendance Policies	4	- Students in class more often - Students following policies - “Students are being present in class and following policies.”

Responses to Interview Question 7a (August 2019): Tell me some ways the staff is familiar with the purpose and methods of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as trainings and discussions. Teacher responses are presented in Table 7a.

Table 7a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 7a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Reponses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Trainings	3	- Presentations - PowerPoints - “We need trainings and presentations to implement this properly.”
Discussions	5	- Conversations with colleagues - Conversations with administration - “Important conversations are occurring with colleagues and administration.”

Responses to Interview Question 7b (December 2019): Tell me some ways the staff is more comfortable with the purpose and methods of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as benefits and comfortability. Teacher responses are presented in Table 7a. All seven teachers were interviews.

Table 7b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 7b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Benefits	4	- Documented results - Student’s attitudes - “We see documented results of success and student’s attitudes are improving daily.”
Comfortability	3	- Provided resources to assist - Continued training - “Teachers are feeling more comfortable with the trainings offered.”

Responses to Interview Question 8a (August 2019): Describe how the staff feels about implementing restorative practices with the majority of the students of Sullivan North Middle. Common themes emerged such as trainings and discussions. Teacher responses are presented in Table 8a.

Table 8a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 8a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Reponses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Hopeful	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feeling excited - Anxious for this to work - Want the best for the students - Willing to do whatever for the students - “We are feeling excited and will do what we can for the students.” - “We want the best for our students.”
Nervous	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hoping it is beneficial - Hoping to understand the program - “We are hopeful this program will be beneficial.” - “I hope to fully understand the program and how it will help our students.”

Responses to Interview Question 8b (December 2019): Describe how the staff feels about implementing restorative practices with the majority of the students. Common themes emerged such as beneficial and results oriented. Teacher responses are presented in Table 8b.

Table 8a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 8b*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Beneficial	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Excited about the changes - Students seem happy - Climate is encouraging - “Our students seem happy.” - “Everyone is excited about the changes.”
Results Oriented	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Results are positive - Staff is optimistic of future results - “We are seeing positive results.” - “We look for future results to positive.”

Responses to Interview Question 9a (August 2019): Describe how you feel the school climate will improve with the result of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as cohesiveness and mindset. Teacher responses are presented in Table 9a.

Table 9a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 9a*

Themes	Number of Responses	Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes
Cohesiveness	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Everyone on the same page - Families working with the school - “Everyone is on the same page with circles including families.”
Mindset	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Growth mindset* - Positive Outcomes - “We must have a mindset for growth.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 9b (December 2019): Tell me some ways the school climate has improved with the result of restorative practices. Common themes

emerged such as root cause analysis and positive environment. Teacher responses are presented in Table 9b.

Table 9b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 9b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Root Cause Analysis	4	- Understanding the main issue - Gaining insight to helpful resources - “Teachers are beginning to understand the root cause of issues.”
Positive Environment	6	- More positive thinking* - More positive attitudes - “We all have a more positive thinking about the program.” - “Teachers seem to display good attitudes about implantation of restorative practices.”

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 10a (August 2019): Give me some examples of how the staff believes restorative practices will improve the overall school culture. Common themes emerged such as better attitudes and better relationships. Teacher responses are presented in Table 10a.

Table 10a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 10a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Better attitudes	6	- Positive work environment - Students happier - Better overall behavior - “We hope this program will provide better behavior and a happier environment.”
Better Relationships	7	- All stakeholder included in decisions - All stakeholders build meaningful relationships. - “All staff needs to build relationships with other staff members, students, and parents.”

Responses to Interview Question 10b (December 2019): Give me some examples of how the staff believes restorative practices has improved the overall school culture. Common themes emerged such as consistency and positive thinking. Teacher responses are presented in Table 10b.

Table 10b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 10b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Consistency	4	- All stakeholders are consistent with issues - Discipline issues are consistent - “Everyone needs to be on the same page with school issues.”
Positive Thinking	3	- Everyone is positive with the implementation - Better attitudes and thinking about school related issues.” - “I feel that everyone has a positive attitude with the program.”

Responses to Interview Question 11a (August 2019): In your experience what leads you to believe that students will handle conflict with other students as a result of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as positive and conflict resolution. Teacher responses are presented in Table 11a.

Table 11a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 11a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, and Quotes</u>
Positive	5	- Better outlook on behavior and attitudes - Better relationships with peers - “I hope this will provide a better outlook and relationships with peers.”
Conflict Resolution	3	- Working out issues between peers - Working together with all stakeholders - “I am glad that this program will help bring all stakeholders together.”

Responses to Interview Question 11b (December 2019): Describe how you feel the students can handle conflict with other students as a result of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as student voice and collaboration. Teacher responses are presented in Table 11b.

Table 11b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 11b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Student Voice	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students advocating for themselves - Discussing issues with peers* - Discussing issues with teachers - Students being able to discuss issues <p>- “Students are discussing issues with other students and teachers more often.”</p>
Collaboration	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Everyone working together - Talking through issues - Teachers working together - Students talking with each other <p>- “I like that everyone is working together and dealing with issues collaboratively.”</p>

* Indicates a response that was given by multiple participants

Responses to Interview Question 12a (August 2019): In your experience what leads you to believe that the staff will handle conflict with students as a result of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as belief in the program and respectful. Teacher responses are presented in Table 12a.

Table 12a. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 12a*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Belief in the program	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thinking positivity about the results - Working together as a school to receive the best results - “We have belief in the program.” - “We all need to work together to gain overall positive results.”
Respectful	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demonstrate concern - Respect other’s viewpoints - “I am glad that everyone is respectful of other’s viewpoints and opinions.”

Responses to Interview Question 12b (December 2019): Describe how the staff feels they can handle conflict with students as a result of restorative practices. Common themes emerged such as belief in the program and respectful. Teacher responses are presented in Table 12b.

Table 12b. *Teacher Responses to Interview Questions 12b*

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Key Words, Phrases, & Quotes</u>
Trust	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Builds trust within the school - Honesty - Lasting relationships - “We feel this program has created lasting relationships and has built trust.” - “Everyone displays honesty when dealing with difficult tasks.”
Positive viewpoints	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respectful conversation - Hopeful - “We have maintained hope and respect.”

The themes in the qualitative data revealed that change of teacher's perceptions regarding a restorative practice implementation provided meaningful relationships with all stakeholders and a more positive school climate. The data from SSPS were used to compute the quantitative data to determine and significant changes in ISS, OSS, alternative school placement, and absenteeism.

Quantitative Strand Findings

Research Question 1. Is there a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of discipline referrals per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of discipline referrals issued per student before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of referrals issued per student in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results did not show a significant difference ($t(159) = .768$, $p = .444$) between the mean number of referrals per student in 2018 ($M = .88$, $sd = 2.032$) and the mean number of referrals per student in 2019 ($M = .78$, $sd = 1.488$). The results of the paired samples t-test are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Paired Samples t-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 Discipline Referrals*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Discipline Referrals 2018	.88	2.032	159	.768	.444
Discipline Referrals 2019	.78	1.488			

* $p < .05$

Research Question 2. Is there a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of out-of-school suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of out-of-school suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of out-of-school suspensions per student issued in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results did not show a significant difference ($t(160) = -1.36, p = .174$) between the mean number of out-of-school suspensions per student in 2018 ($M = .19, sd = .863$) and after the restorative practices were implemented in 2019 ($M = .34, sd = 1.095$). The results of the paired samples t-test are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 Out-of-School Suspensions

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
OSS 2018	.19	.863	160	-1.36	.174
OSS 2019	.34	1.095			

* $p < .05$

Research Question 3. Is there a significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of in-school suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of in-school suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices

A paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of in-school suspensions per student issued in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results showed a significant difference ($t(160) = -3.085, p = .002, ES = .286$). The mean number in-school suspensions per student were significantly less in 2018 ($M = .23, sd = .823$) than after restorative practices were implemented in 2019 ($M = .62, sd = 1.743$). The effect size is .286, indicating the implementation of restorative practices showed a small effect on the number of in-school suspensions per student. The results of the paired samples *t*-test are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 In-School Suspensions

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ES</i>
ISS 2018	.23	.823	160	-3.085	.002*	.286
ISS 2019	.62	1.743				

* $p < .05$

Research Question 4. Is there a significant difference in the number of suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of suspensions per student issued before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices

A paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of suspensions per student issued in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results showed a significant difference ($t(160) = -3.058$, $p = .003$, $ES = .272$). The mean number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions per student were significantly less in 2018 ($M = .4224$, $sd = 1.46$) than after the restorative practices were implemented in 2019 ($M = .9565$, $sd = 2.36$). The effect size is .272, indicating the implementation of restorative practices had a small effect on the number of suspensions per student. The results of the paired samples *t*-test are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ES</i>
ISS &OSS 2018	.4224	1.46	160	-3.058	.003*	.272
ISS & OSS 2019	.9565	2.36				

* $p < .05$

Research Questions 5. Is there a significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of alternative school placements per student before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of alternative school placements per student before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

A paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of alternative school placements per student in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results showed a significant difference $t(160) = -2.019$, $p = .045$, $ES = .181$). The mean number of alternative school placements per student were significantly less in 2018 ($M = .00$, $sd = .000$) than after alternative school placements per student in 2019 ($M = .02$, $sd = .156$). The effect size is .181, indicating the implementation of restorative practices had a small effect on the number of alternative school placements per student. The results of the paired samples *t*-test are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 Alternative School Placement

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ES</i>
Alternative School 2018	.00	.000	160	-2.019	.045*	.181
Alternative School 2019	.02	.156				

* $p < .05$

Research Question 6. Is there a significant difference in the number of absences during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of student absences before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of student absences before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

A paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of student absences in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results did not show a significant difference between $t(160) = -.041$, $p = .967$ the mean number of student absences in 2018 ($M = 9.10$, $sd = 7.326$) and the mean number of student absences in 2019 ($M = 9.12$, $sd = 6.833$). The results of the paired samples *t*-test are displayed in Table 6.

Table 6. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 Attendance

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Attendance 2018	9.10	7.320	160	-.041	.967
Attendance 2019	9.12	6.833			

* $p < .05$

Research Question 7. Is there a significant difference in the number of students who are considered chronically absent during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

Research Hypothesis: There is a significant difference in the mean number of chronically absent students before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the mean number of chronically absent students before and after the institution of restorative discipline practices.

A paired *t*-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean number of chronically absent students in 2018 and 2019 after the restorative practices had been implemented. The results did not show a significant difference between $t(159) = -.589$, $p = .557$ between the mean number of chronically absent students in 2018 ($M = .44$, $sd = .498$) and chronically absent students in 2019 ($M = .47$, $sd = .501$). The results of the paired samples test are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. Paired Samples *t*-Test Comparing Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 Chronically Absent

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Chronically Absent 2018	.44	.498	160	-.589	.557
Chronically Absent 2019	.46	.501			

* $p < .05$

Summary

The quantitative data showed the mean number of in-school and out-of-school combined suspensions, alternative school, and in-school assignments were significantly less in fall 2018 to fall 2019. The mean number of student discipline referrals, absenteeism, out-of-school suspensions, and chronic absenteeism showed no significant difference from fall 2018 to fall 2019. The qualitative data showed the focus group felt perceptions on the effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction did produce a change in the overall school climate from fall 2018 to fall 2019. The quantitative and qualitative research will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory mixed-methods study was to examine the effects of a restorative practice program on discipline, discipline referrals, absenteeism, and teacher perspectives in a rural Title I middle school. By allowing the focus group to use restorative practices in their educational programs, the educators were able to make changes in the discipline and absenteeism patterns within their classrooms and at the respective grade level. The restorative practice program placed emphasizes respect, building relationships, and meeting the needs of the school. The following research questions guided the study:

1. Is there a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
2. Is there a significant difference in the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
3. Is there a significant difference in the number of in-school suspensions during fall 2018 versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
4. Is there a significant difference in the number of students suspended (both in-school and out-of-school) during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?

5. Is there a significant difference in the number of students placed in an alternative school during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
6. Is there a significant difference in the number of absences during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
7. Is there a significant difference in the number of students who are considered “chronically absent” during fall 2018 semester versus fall 2019 semester, following the institution of restorative practices?
8. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after training (but before institution) in restorative practices?
9. What are the perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after a semester of instituting restorative practices?
10. Have teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction changed regarding restorative practices in this time frame?

Discipline data were obtained to provide a quantitative examination of the use of a restorative practice program. Focus group interviews were used to gain insight on the perception of effectiveness and satisfaction of the restorative practice program initiated within the respected grade level. The interviews provided a perceived level of satisfaction of training before and after the initiation of restorative practices.

This study was conducted to provide administrators and educators with data and information on several key discipline and absenteeism issues within a school setting along with providing educators key viewpoints regarding the implementation of a restorative practice program. The data collected is related to restorative practices in a low-income middle school

setting. The review of this study focuses on circles and group conferencing and the data tracked by individual students and their recidivism rate with behavioral issues. This study should provide educators with information on the implantation and effectiveness of the family group model when working with students and their families.

Summary of Findings

Quantitative Strand Findings

Analysis of the quantitative data revealed three significant changes before and after the implementation of a restorative practice program in a low-income middle school. The mean number of students who were assigned in-school and out-of-school combined suspensions was significantly less in fall 2018 than in fall 2019. The mean number of students who were assigned in-school suspension was significantly less in fall 2018 than in fall 2019. The mean number of students who were assigned alternative school was significantly less in fall 2018 than in fall 2019. The quantitative analysis also displayed no significant difference in discipline referrals, absenteeism, out-of-school suspensions, and chronic absenteeism between the fall 2018 and fall 2019 semesters.

Qualitative Strand Findings

Analysis of the qualitative data revealed that before implementation of the program, the focus group felt that restorative practices would produce a change in the school climate. After program implementation, the focus group felt the restorative practice program did produce more meaningful relationships with stakeholders. Also, the group felt students did develop comfort levels conducive to open discussions about their behavior and life choices. The interview data revealed school climate did improve after the implementation of the restorative practice program regarding attendance and behavioral concerns. The teachers reported students began to take on

leadership roles and demonstrate a sense of responsibility among their peers. The teachers felt more comfortable in handling difficult school situations and were able to develop a collaborative dialogue with other teachers to address their students' needs. These findings were used to regulate the restorative practice program within the school environment and continue to provide teachers and students with the resources to enhance the school climate.

Discussion of Findings

Quantitative Strand Findings

Research Question 1. This research question focused on the number of discipline referrals during fall 2018 versus fall of 2019. The t-test results showed no significant difference between fall 2018 and fall 2019 on the mean number of referrals per student. Restorative practice is utilized as a problem-solving approach to school discipline and the reduction of discipline referrals. Research suggests restorative practice is a proactive approach to school discipline issues that build a classroom around common violations through discussions to connect students to their classroom community which results in increasing compassion and empathy (Riley, 2018). Based on the findings, the teachers have not changed their approach for referring students to the administration. Teachers were limited due to scheduling issues that were in place before the implementation of the restorative practice program. The circle process was used in the implementation of the restorative practice program; however, due to scheduling, teachers felt constrained in implementing a continual restorative practice circle process in their daily schedule. The staff felt the need for a better schedule when implementing circles outside of the regular class time. The focus group felt they needed more time to be able to institute the circle process within the school day and this is possibly the reason the discipline referrals being sent to

administration did not change. The circle is beneficial because it assists students with developing problem-solving skills and identification of the root cause of the behavior.

Research Question 2. This research question focused on the number of out-of-school suspensions during fall 2018 versus fall 2019. The t-test concluded there was no significant difference between fall 2018 and fall 2019 on the mean number of out-of-school suspensions. The out-of-school suspensions did not change due to the absence of reoccurring restorative circles within the classroom and not providing the students with the necessary skills for a constructive behavioral arrangement during this time frame. The staff and administration felt students needed to remain in the school environment rather than in an out-of-school setting. The staff felt the elements of the restorative justice program did not reach the offender with a shared understanding of the program. Providing more skills for allowing the victim and the offender ample time for reflection and using the circle process to achieve the attended goal might be beneficial in the future.

Research Question 3. This research question focused on the number of in-school suspensions during fall 2018 versus the fall 2019. The results revealed fall 2018 suspensions were significantly less than fall 2019 suspension between the mean number of in-school suspensions. The increase in in-school suspensions could be due to the short timeframe this study examined. The students need to have time to develop alternative approaches to handle their behavior. Some researchers suggest that a shift in attitudes toward punishment may take one to three years and a shift to a school restorative practice program where a significant difference in school climate is documented might take up to three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013), (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Research indicates discipline problems focus on insubordination and defiance of classroom instruction (Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Restorative practices help students

develop coping mechanisms for handling behavior. When a restorative practice program is implemented, there is a focus on including the student and defiance in the school community and repairing relationships, which is done through the circle processes of victim-offender conferencing (Zehr et al, 2015). Through these processes, students can learn essential problem-solving techniques that may be converted to assist with future school incidents. While an increase was seen in the fall semester, research showed that the use of ISS provides a limited amount of change until after a three to five year institution of the restorative practice program.

Research Question 4. This research question focused on the number of suspensions both in-school and out-of-school during fall 2018 versus the fall 2019. The results revealed fall 2018 suspensions were significantly less than fall 2019 suspensions between the mean number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions. In-school suspensions likely increased in fall 2019 due to the lack of time spent developing the restorative practice program while providing the necessary tools to build relationships and to teach students how to communicate their behaviors. Out-of-school suspensions did not change significantly due to the fact school administration felt the need to keep more students in the school environment. ISS keeps students in the classroom atmosphere and school officials can punish inappropriate behavior more constructively (Haley & Tomczyk, 2000). By continuing the restorative practice program, students will learn how to repair relationships and address behavioral issues. They will become more actively engaged in their school and it will help them deal with future incidents in their lives. The ISS and OSS numbers within this research were likely increased due to the large number of ISS suspensions. Research suggests that a shift in attitude away from punishment toward a restorative practice program might take up to three years (Karp & Breslin, 2001). To create this type of attitude shift, the school administration may want to evaluate the process and utilize restorative practice

programs to understand the root cause of the discipline issues. Trainings on discipline topics need to be on-going, supported with coaching, and follow-up with the administration (Bummer, 2016). These professional trainings need to enhance not just restorative practice skills but a change in thinking about discipline, behavior, and child development (Bummer, 2016).

Research Question 5. This research question focused on the number of students placed in alternative schools during fall 2018 versus the fall 2019. The results revealed fall 2018 alternative school placements were significantly less than fall 2019 between the mean number of alternative school placements. The alternative school placements likely increased because the student rights and responsibilities handbook for the school district was revised and alternative school placements instituted where in-school or out-of-school punishments were previously administered. For example, students who were previously suspended for the use of tobacco products during fall 2018 were placed in an alternative school for this type of in the fall of 2019.

Research Question 6 & 7. These research questions focused on the difference in the number of absences and cases of chronic absenteeism during the fall 2018 semester versus the fall 2019 semester. The results indicated no significant difference in the mean number of per student or cases of chronic absenteeism. Using only one semester to evaluate attendance results does not allow adequate time for parents, students, administrators, and teachers to fully implement restorative circles on a regular basis. Teachers need more opportunities to participate in personal contact with parents regarding the restorative practice program in order to move the needle to increase attendance. Literature suggests more research needs to be conducted with interpreting the motivations for students to attend school and the understanding why students are absent or chronically absent is imperative to understanding the problem (Corvill-Smith et al., 1998). Participating in a restorative justice program and researching restorative practices are two

major dynamics in making a shift away from behavioral concerns. The middle school should continue to evaluate the attendance policy and establish a procedure to inform parents about their thoughts on resolving their concerns and solicit parental involvement. This plan should meet the needs of the entire school community.

Qualitative Strand Findings

Research Question 8: In response to the perceptions on effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after training (but before institution) in restorative discipline practices the focus group responded students needed more instruction on how to respond to situations that produce behavioral issues with other students and ways to respond to those issues. The focus group deemed communication was the key component in resolving behavioral difficulties and providing leadership roles for students who felt they did not have a voice within the school environment. Teachers stated, “We are in constant communication with other teachers about students.” They reported, “Restorative practice circles were necessary for the reduction of tardies and absenteeism.”

The focus group considered communication with all stakeholders was needed for the enhancement of a restorative communication narrative. Restorative communication should be built on the principle of relationships that emphasize the primary role of creating and maintaining relationships for all communicators. Positive communication builds positive relationships (Bledsoe, 2018). They reported the use of restorative circles did provide students the voice of respect they felt they deserved. The teachers commented, “Students have a voice in making decisions.” The personal benefit of providing communication that is respectful to each other can reaffirm our inherent dignity (Bledsoe, 2018). This type of communication is what the focus

group was hoping restorative practices would provide to their students and all people involved in their educational growth.

The focus group also felt that all stakeholders should take responsibility for the ongoing health of the school climate. If stakeholders miss the mark and do not provide healthy communication through restorative practices, they will impact others and all their relationships with them.

Research Question 9: In response to the perceptions on effectiveness, fairness, and training/satisfaction of teachers after a semester of instituting restorative discipline practices the focus group believed restorative practices gave cohesiveness not just to the students but the staff. The teachers stated, “Everyone is on the same page with circles including families.” Emphasis was placed on providing a program where all stakeholders were together in their decision-making endeavors. The focus group expressed that they were holding their students to a higher standard towards their education and behavior while providing goals for future improvement in school climate. The group reported that the students felt their voices were being heard and the reinforcement of social skills including mutual respect was increasing. They stated, “Everyone is working together for the same goal.” With an increase in mutual respect, the students should start to develop work and career-ready attitudes along with improved relationships between and among students, teachers, staff, and administrators.

Findings confirm that restorative practice programs and interventions vastly impact school climate. Research indicates that the feelings of remorse created through restorative practice programs also lead to changes in student behavior (Alvis, 2015). Morrison (2006) found that school-based restorative practice programs are effective in decreasing bullying and other

harmful behavior. This is consistent with the qualitative research conducted within the focus group who voiced that the wrong-doers were being held accountable for the effects of their actions on others while providing minimization of disruption and distraction among their peer groups. One teacher stated, “I noticed our students not being as distracted and more on task during the class and while doing their in-class assignments.”

Research Question 10: In response to having changed the teachers’ perceptions on effectiveness, fairness, and satisfaction regarding restorative discipline practices in this time frame, the focus group felt that the restorative practice program had provided more language communication, more organization within the classroom expectations, and more conversations conducive to learning. At the beginning of the program, the focus group stated they were nervous about implementing a new plan but were hopeful the program would have positive results and an improvement in the school climate. They were thinking optimistically about the program and “We have belief in the program and need to work together to gain overall positive results.” Upon implementation of the restorative practice program, the focus group felt restorative practices enhanced all stakeholder’s sense of belonging and develop confidence in their ability to reach a mutual understanding while developing creative solutions to issues within their classroom. The group felt that trust and honesty were also built within the school environment. The focus group felt “This program has created lasting relationships and built trust to be able to handle conflicts constructively.” Lastly, the focus group reiterated “We are glad this program will help bring all stakeholders together.”

Limitations of the Study

Although steps were taken to ensure the quality of research during this given time frame, barriers remain that need to be addressed as part of this study. First, the results indicated the

short time frame for this study might have been inadequate because research states a “roll-out plan needs to plan trainings, parent involvement and the how-to of at least a 1-3 year plan” (Brummer, 2016, p. 4).

Another limitation of this study was that some teachers within the focus group did not have a knowledge base about restorative practices or programs before the training. Lack of knowledge on the subject by the teachers within the focus group may have skewed their responses due to an insufficient understanding of the topic. Follow-up trainings were provided to the focus group by the administration using PLC’s for progress after the implementation of the program.

The study did not take into account that teachers had to give up their planning time, which prevented the teacher from addressing other educational subjects. Student absences and tardies also produce issues with providing a scheduled time for circles to be presented by the focus group. Restorative practices require individual training for teachers and school personnel that can be costly and time-consuming for many schools (McCluskey, 2008). Also, restorative practices require a whole-school approach, which is often challenging because it requires schools to adopt and enforce clear and specific standards that meet the goals of the program (McCluskey, 2008).

Conclusions

There were two general conclusions drawn from this study. The first conclusion is that the quantitative data showed there was no significant difference in discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions, absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism in fall 2018 and fall 2019. The in-school suspensions, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and alternative school showed fall 2018 was significantly less than fall 2019. These results indicate that the restorative practice

program needs to be in place longer than one semester to see the benefits over an extended time period. While improvement was not seen immediately, this is typical of a large change in school discipline and attendance. The effort to improve and maintain good discipline and attendance is a long term, ongoing commitment. More time is required to adequately measure whether a program such as this could provide data showing a significant change. Researchers suggest that a change in mindsets toward punishment may take one to three years and a change in school climate might take up to three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013), (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

The second conclusion is that the qualitative data found many positive results from the focus group of educators in the implementation of this restorative practice program. The focus group found many examples of meaningful exchanges and a program, which used the circle processes by respectively repairing the students who were involved in the infractions discussed in the study. The circle process allows people to tell their stories and offer their perspectives (Pranis, 2005). Circles offered the students an alternative to contemporary meeting processes that are often relied upon as a win-lose positioning and argument (Roca, Inc., n.d.). The focus group of teachers reported that their students talked about using the circle process to work through their conflicts because it was intrinsically democratic and allowed all voices to be heard. The teachers indicated the students felt a sense of empowerment to be able to initiate and be a part of the process. The focus group believed all of the participants did take responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the group while building confidence in their ability to reach a mutual understanding and develop creative solutions to their problems. Student responses revealed to the focus group of teachers the importance of trust and fairness and how that, in turn, played an important role with the focus group towards their satisfaction with the restorative practice

program. Also, the teachers reported the students developed good listening and speaking skills while minimizing aggressive behaviors.

Although the data did not show an improvement in some areas, the focus group and administration found that through the enhancement of a restorative practice program and providing communication with all stakeholders, a healthy and successful gauge of the program's strength was a present factor. The focus group deemed the restorative practice program increased communication among students and teachers, developed cohesiveness with all stakeholders, and gave students a voice. They felt the climate of the school improved and many students developed leadership roles within the school. As the school moves forward with the program, providing communication between the school and community is a vital component. As changes are made with school board policies, data will need to be updated for an alternative school, in-school and out-of-school placements. The effectiveness of this restorative practice program will need more time and research to provide the necessary data needed to see the success of this program.

Recommendations

This study was designed to discover if a restorative practice program implemented in a low-income middle school would have an effect on discipline referrals, discipline, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, alternative school, absenteeism, chronic absenteeism and teacher's perspective before and after the implementation of a restorative practice program. The quantitative data collected reflected no significant difference notation on discipline, discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions, absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism upon implementation of a restorative practice program. The fall 2018 semester was significantly less than fall 2019 in in-school and out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions and alternative school

placements upon implementation of a restorative practice program. The focus group of teachers felt that the restorative practice program along with the interventions put in place vastly impacted the overall school climate. A recommendation should include during the beginning of each school year a scheduled restorative practice instructional program should be designed and made available for all stakeholders. This program will provide empowerment throughout the implementation of a restorative practice program and engage all parties involved in the decision-making process. Based on the results of this study, further research with practical applications of a restorative practice program on attendance and discipline should be studied. Parental meetings with educators should be scheduled during the first two weeks of school to address attendance and discipline policies. After scheduled meetings with parents and educators, an on-going training program should be established with peer coaching for all staff to provide the necessary support and early intervention needed for a successful restorative practice program. The administration should provide opportunities for a school wide flexible schedule for circles and offer training for students and families to introduce a restorative practice approach.

The findings of this study will not be conclusive until more time and a widespread distribution of the findings can be administered and measured with validity. After that point, the findings can be used to help promote social and emotional growth with a positive school climate for all stakeholders.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made for practice:

1. The school should implement a restorative practice professional development program for all staff members and make the initial investment in building

communication between the school and community resources to establish a restorative practice program that lasts and helps ease the burdens of implementation.

2. The current employees of the school should be responsible for improving school climate by distributing tasks to advocate restorative practice programs with families at times when restorative action outside classroom activities is needed. The administration of the school should be responsible for creating professional learning opportunities, providing peer coaching, and ensuring instruction that provides the requirements for a restorative practice program to work within the school community.
3. A designated position for the administration of the restorative practice activities should be assigned and monitored by administrators to have assessment mechanisms for quantitative and qualitative review, and accountability of the procedures in place.
4. Administration and staff members should conduct readiness assessments to develop a model for change and a timeline for implementation for the entire school.
5. The school along with the district should support the restorative practice professional development viewpoint and help bridge the responsibilities of the staff to form a collaborative environment where all stakeholders know what is needed to support all students.
6. The school administration should allow more time before making a decision on the effectiveness of a restorative practice program.

Recommendations for Future Research

This review shows a need for more research on the use and implementation of restorative practices within this school. Based on the data and interviews with the focus group, the evidence supports the concept of relationship building along with all levels of the school community as a means to prevent and intervene in discipline referrals, discipline, absenteeism, and chronic absenteeism. In addition to decreasing discipline referrals and absenteeism and a positive student and adult relationship being fostered, it is hopeful that school suspensions would be fewer in number due to the process. In the future, a research program would need to be implemented and a hypothesis developed to see if the change in suspensions and alternative school placements are possible. Based on the results of this study, it is clear that further research with the practical application of restorative practice in all grade levels is necessary for a longer period of time such as three years to allow for the change process to be cultivated. There is a lack of studies on the long-term effects of restorative practices including recidivism, community change, and the psychological impact on the student (Gumz & Grant, 2009). There is a need for studies using multiple schools along with data measurement to examine the short and long term effects of restorative practice initiatives. The demographics of the school along with the students and how it relates to the implementation of a restorative practice program's success needs further research. This research could be conducted by using follow up interviews with all stakeholders and observing behavioral and absentee trends over a set period of time. Although there are few empirical studies in the area of restorative practice and its use in schools, studies that exist suggest that it improves the school environment and enhances learning opportunities which may lead to a decrease in behavioral and absentee problems (Chmelynski, 2005). As the teachers

reflected in their interviews, they felt better school experiences would happen when proactive methods such as restorative practices were used in conjunction with responsive measures.

The information from this study and additional research on this topic would provide administrators with the benefits of using restorative practices in their school districts. By learning about the teachers' perceptions will help school districts to recognize and work through any problems that would prohibit the successful implementation of a restorative practice program. More documentation and data on these topics for a longer period should be made available to see the full benefits of advocating for changes in the handling of school discipline referrals, discipline, absenteeism, and teacher perceptions on the matter. This information could greatly impact the future of the students and all stakeholders.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A



Date: July 19, 2019

From: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Milligan College

Re: *A Restorative Practice Program's Effects on Discipline Referrals, Absences, and Teacher Perspectives*

Submission type: Revised Submission

Dear Nancy,

On behalf of the Milligan College Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are writing to inform you that your study *A Restorative Practice Program's Effects on Discipline Referrals, Absences, and Teacher Perspectives* has been approved as expedited. This approval also indicates that you have fulfilled the IRB requirements for Milligan College.

All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission, meaning that you will follow the research plan you have outlined here, use approved materials, and follow college policies.

Take special note of the following important aspects of your approval:

- Any changes made to your study require approval from the IRB Committee before they can be implemented as part of your study. Contact the IRB Committee at IRB@milligan.edu with your questions and/or proposed modifications.
- If there are any unanticipated problems or complaints from participants during your data collection, you must notify the Milligan College IRB Office within 24 hours of the data collection problem or complaint.

The Milligan College IRB Committee is pleased to congratulate you on the approval of your research proposal. Best wishes as you conduct your research! If you have

any questions about your IRB Approval, please contact the IRB Office and copy your faculty advisor if appropriate on the communication.

Regards,

IRB Committee

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Christian leadership

APENIX B

Principal Permission to Conduct Study

To:

From: Nancy Harris Parker

Date:

Subject: Principal Permission to Conduct Study

I am currently an Ed.D. candidate attending Milligan College. The research for my doctoral dissertation involves the use of restorative practices in a Title I middle school in East Tennessee. The proposed dissertation will include the effects of restorative practices on student behavior, grade enhancement, and teacher satisfaction.

The purpose of this study will be to use discipline referrals, grade point averages, and teacher perspectives before and after the use of restorative practices. Teacher surveys will be collected at the beginning and end of the fall semester. All information will be kept confidential and teacher surveys will be anonymous.

This study will require teacher participation and provide feedback to educators about the changes incurred utilizing the restorative practices program. It will correlate and chart changes in discipline patterns and notate the relationship process of the before and after pertaining to grades through the use of restorative practices. The study will require two meetings to conduct surveys of the eighth grade faculty at the beginning of the school year, August 2019, and again at the beginning of the second semester of the school year, January, 2020. The meetings will be held in the high school/middle school library for approximately 15 -20 minutes during scheduled faculty meetings. Information regarding discipline referrals and grades will be gathered by school administrative staff and all information will be kept confidential.

This project will be conducted under the supervision of _____, Principal of _____ Middle School. Dr. Mark Dula will be overseeing my dissertation work at Milligan College.

The possible benefits of this study for your school are developing a restorative practice program that has already been established suggests positive outcomes in student discipline including zero tolerance and alternative school, enhancement of grades, and teacher perspective regarding school climate. I will be collecting data to evaluate how a new program will benefit the school.

I respectfully request your permission to conduct this research study at _____ Middle School as part of my doctoral dissertation.

Upon completion of the study, I will provide the _____ Department of Education with a copy of the research report upon request.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter. Please sign and return one copy of this form to:

Nancy Harris Parker

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above, that you willing agree for me to participate in the restorative practice program _____, to conduct this study, and that you have received a copy of this form.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Harris Parker

I hereby consent to my school district's participation in the research described above.

School District

Principal Signature

Principal Print

Date

APENDIX C

Superintendent Permission to Conduct Study

To:

From: Nancy Harris Parker

Date:

Subject: Superintendent Permission to Conduct Study

I am currently an Ed.D. candidate attending Milligan College. The research for my doctoral dissertation involves the use of restorative practices in a Title I middle school in East Tennessee. The proposed dissertation will include the effects of restorative practices on student behavior, grade enhancement, and teacher satisfaction.

The purpose of this study will be to use discipline referrals, grade point averages, and teacher perspectives before and after the use of restorative practices. Teacher surveys will be collected at the beginning and end of the fall semester. All information will be kept confidential and teacher surveys will be anonymous.

This study will require teacher participation and provide feedback to educators about the changes incurred utilizing the restorative practices program. It will correlate and chart changes in discipline patterns and notate the relationship process of the before and after pertaining to grades through the use of restorative practices. The study will require two meetings to conduct surveys of the eighth grade faculty at the beginning of the school year, August 2019, and again at the beginning of the second semester of the school year, January, 2020. The meetings will be held in the high school/middle school library for approximately 15 -20 minutes during scheduled faculty meetings. Information regarding discipline referrals and grades will be gathered by school administrative staff and all information will be kept confidential.

This project will be conducted under the supervision _____ Principal of _____. Dr. Mark Dula will be overseeing my dissertation work at Milligan College.

The possible benefits of this study for your school are developing a restorative practice program that has already been established suggests positive outcomes in student discipline including zero tolerance and alternative school, enhancement of grades, and teacher perspective regarding school climate. I will be collecting data to evaluate how a new program will benefit the school.

I respectfully request your permission to conduct this research study at _____ Middle School as part of my doctoral dissertation.

Upon completion of the study, I will provide the _____ Department of Education with a copy of the research report upon request.

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter. Please sign and return one copy of this form to:

Nancy Harris Parker

Your signature indicates that you have read and understood the information provided above, that you willing agree for me to participate in the restorative practice program at _____, to conduct this study, and that you have received a copy of this form.

Yours sincerely,

Nancy Harris Parker

I hereby consent to my school district's participation in the research described above.

School District

Superintendent Signature

Superintendent Print

Date

APPEDIX D

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of "A Restorative Practice Program's Effects on Discipline Referrals, Absences, and Teacher Perspectives". The researcher is inviting a focus group of teachers to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Nancy Harris Parker who is a doctoral student at Milligan College.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to determine if there is a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, alternative school placements, chronically absent students and absences in general following the institution of restorative discipline practices. The study will also determine the perceptions of teachers on the effectiveness, fairness, training and satisfaction after training and implementing restorative practice within the school framework.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Interview and discuss answers to prearranged questions

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at _____, Department of Education, or Milligan College will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study will not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

This study into restorative practices in a Title I educational institution can give teachers more discretion to implement restorative punishment for nonviolent behavior and develop better relationships with their teachers. It could be that better student-to-staff relationships will lead to improved student behaviors and attendance.

Payment:

There will be no remuneration for this study.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use any personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. The researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study. Data will be kept secure by Nancy Harris Parker. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by Milligan College.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any question you have now or if you have questions later. You may contact the researcher by email: _____. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can contact the Milligan College Institution Review Board at IRB@milligan.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, "I consent". I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researchers' Signature

APPENDIX E

Interview Questions for Focus Group of Educators

August 2019

1. Thinking back over this past school year, tell me some ways the school environment was conducive to learning.
2. Thinking back over this past school year, give me examples of the main issues regarding discipline and attendance in this school climate.
3. Describe how you feel a restorative practice program will have an effect on the school climate and teacher satisfaction.
4. Describe how you feel a restorative practice program will have an effect on discipline and attendance in your school.
5. Tell me some ways the majority of the staff believe restorative practice can improve student behavior.
6. Describe how the majority of the staff believe restorative practice can improve student attendance.
7. Tell me some ways the staff is familiar with the purpose and methods of restorative practices.
8. Describe how the staff feels about implementing restorative practices with the majority of the students of _____ Middle.
9. Describe how you feel the school climate will improve with the result of restorative practices.
10. Give me some examples how the staff believes restorative practices will improve the overall school culture.
11. In your experience what leads you to believe that students will handle conflict with other students as a result of restorative practices.
12. In your experience what leads you to believe that the staff will handle conflict with students as a result of restorative practices.

APPENDIX F

Interview Questions for Focus Group of Educators

December 2019

1. Thinking back over the fall semester, how has the school environment been more conducive to learning after implementing restorative practices.
2. Thinking back over the fall semester, name issues regarding discipline and attendance which have improved after implementing restorative practices.
3. Tell me some ways the school climate and teacher perceptions have improved upon implementation of restorative practices.
4. Give me an example of how restorative practices have improved discipline and attendance in your school.
5. What aspects of your experience with restorative practices leads you to believe the majority of the staff now believes restorative practices has improved overall student behavior.
6. What about your experience leads you to believe the majority of the staff now believes restorative practices has improved overall student attendance.
7. Tell me some ways the staff is more comfortable with the purpose and methods of restorative practices.
8. Give me some ways the staff is more confident implementing restorative practices now with the majority of the students of _____ Middle.
9. Tell me some ways the school climate has improved with the result of restorative practices.
10. Give me some examples of how the staff believes restorative practices has improved the overall school culture.
11. Describe how you feel the students can handle conflict with other students as a result of restorative practices.
12. Describe how the staff feels they can handle conflict with students as a result of restorative practices.