

ABSTRACT

Philip Cook, EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MIDDLE SCHOOL (Under the direction of Dr. Jerry Johnson, PhD). Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations, May 2026.

This Dissertation in Practice examined the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black students in a rural, low-socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina. Persistent disparities in disciplinary outcomes continue to disadvantage Black students nationally, despite evidence that punitive approaches such as zero-tolerance policies fail to improve behavior or academic achievement. Guided by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework and grounded in principles of equity and social justice, this study explored whether restorative circles, an evidence-based component of restorative practices, could serve as a viable alternative to exclusionary discipline and strengthen students' sense of belonging and relationships with staff.

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model across three phases. Quantitative data included pre- and post-implementation discipline referral rates disaggregated by race and classroom. In contrast, qualitative data were collected through focus groups with staff, students, and parents. Twenty percent of the faculty at Seahawk Middle School implemented restorative circles during the 2024–25 academic year.

Findings indicated a reduction in overall referrals for participating classrooms, particularly among Black students, and an improvement in student-reported sense of belonging and relationships with teachers. Teachers described enhanced classroom community, more

constructive dialogue around behavior, and increased empathy and accountability among students. Limitations include the single-site design and one-year implementation period.

The results suggest that restorative circles mitigate discipline disproportionality, promote equitable learning environments, and enhance relational trust between teachers and students.

Implications for practice include the need for sustained professional learning in restorative approaches, integrating SEL competencies into daily instruction, and providing systemic support for scaling restorative frameworks in rural schools.

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE
FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MIDDLE
SCHOOL

A Dissertation

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By

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DEDICATION

Growing up, I always knew I wanted to be an educator. My first goal was to be a teacher and a coach, and then eventually become a principal. Completing a doctoral program was never on the list until a few years ago. Along this journey, many individuals have supported and encouraged me, and I am deeply grateful.

To my wife, Natalie, I owe you everything. From the moment you came into my life, you have inspired me to become the best version of myself. You push me daily to be a better father, husband, friend, and educator. Your constant support and unconditional love have made this journey as smooth as it could be. Thank you for believing in me.

To my kids, Brynlynn and Hughes, my prayer is that you always know how much I love you. You brighten my day every single day. Throughout this process, you may not have realized it, but you were my biggest motivation to finish. I strive to be my best because of you, and I love you both more than words can say.

To my parents, thank you for always being my biggest supporters and for always being just a phone call away. Your listening ears and unwavering encouragement mean everything.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade students belonging to minority racial or ethnic groups are subjected to disciplinary actions in school at a higher rate compared to their white counterparts (Wiley, 2021). In 2017, the Office of Civil Rights reported that Black students were four times more likely to experience disciplinary measures in comparison to their peers (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Further findings from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2016), substantiate that annually racial and ethnic groups receive a higher rate of out-of-school suspensions. Research suggests that exclusionary practices limit children's learning opportunities and decrease the time they spend engaged in meaningful educational activities (Laco & Steinberg, 2019), thus disproportionality in the administration of disciplinary measures is a likely contributing factor in achievement gaps (Kyere et al., 2020).

Restorative practices have been implemented in schools to address the disproportionate disciplinary patterns (Buckmaster, 2016). Schools are implementing restorative practices to minimize student misbehavior by enhancing school atmosphere and reinforcing student-teacher connections. In a study conducted in 2016 by Gregory et al., it was found that the more use of restorative practices across an academic year resulted in a reduction in teacher referrals for instances of misconduct or defiance. Research has shown that restorative practices can effectively reduce the higher rates of suspensions that students of color, male students, and children with disabilities sometimes face in certain cases (Kim et al., 2023). This study aims to introduce restorative circles, a technique used in restorative practices, to tackle the disproportionality in student discipline at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina.

Background of the Focus of Practice

America's schools have long been grappling with disproportionality in student discipline. Punitive discipline persists with consistent outcomes, even with research that suggests it does not fix the problem (Losen & Martinez, 2013). In the 1990s, schools across the nation adopted zero-tolerance policies that provided predetermined consequences for students' behaviors at school (Skiba, 2008). The consequences, which were often severe, were imposed no matter the gravity of the behavior (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). The underlying objective of formulating and executing these policies was to uphold and preserve discipline within the educational institution (Huang & Cornell, 2021). With the adoption of zero-tolerance policies, the desire was that discipline and the disproportionality of discipline within schools would decrease (Robins, 2005). Yet the empirical evidence accumulated over time demonstrates that zero-tolerance policies are not effective in addressing issues of disproportionality and discipline (Skiba, 2008).

Findings from the United States Department of Education (2021), found that the number of students who were suspended during the 2020-21 academic year amounted to more than 3.4 million, representing approximately 14.5% of the overall student body. According to the North Carolina School Report Card (2022), the State of North Carolina has a short-term suspension rate of 14%, which corresponds to 146 students per 1,000. Furthermore, according to the NC Department of Public Instruction (2022), 14% of children experience in-school suspension, with a rate of 145 students per 1,000. Perera (2022) highlights that the 2017 Office of Civil Rights study documented a discernible increase in school suspensions. Specifically, Black students exhibited a four times higher likelihood of experiencing disciplinary measures in comparison to their White or Hispanic peers. NCDPI (2022) has identified a similar discrepancy in school

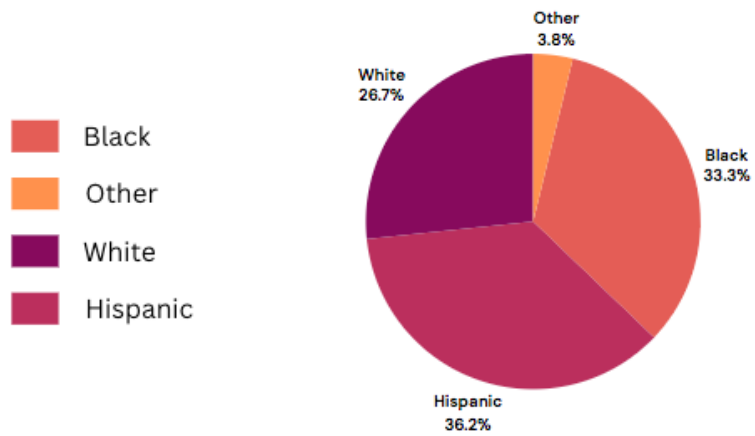
suspension rates, revealing that Black students are 25% more likely to be subjected to disciplinary actions.

The significance of suspensions and expulsions should not be underestimated, as scholarly research has demonstrated a strong association between suspensions and long-lasting negative impacts during adolescence on academics and behaviors (Skiba & Losen, 2015). The performance disparities among students can be attributed to a multitude of intricate factors. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found score gaps between Black and White students in 2022. The average NAEP scores showed a disparity of 15.90 points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). With a specific focus on Black students, this study examined how restorative circles may reduce discipline referrals in classrooms and school settings so educational institutions can effectively address and mitigate problems associated with discipline disproportionality and, by extension, with academic outcomes.

Context of Study

Seahawk County School District (a pseudonym) is a rural school system with a total of eight schools. With a student population of roughly 2,900, the district employs 565 personnel throughout the district. Seahawk Middle School (SMS) currently serves 680 students enrolled in grades six through eight. Figure 1 shows the demographics of the school (Powerschool, 2025).

The student population consists of 33.3% Black students, 26.7% White students, 36.2% Hispanic students, and 3.8% other. According to Powerschool (2024), during the 2023-24 school year, SMS had 783 discipline referrals. Out of the 783 referrals, 70% originated from the Black subgroup, despite the institution having a diverse population. This rate is concerning, particularly considering the broad population that SMS serves.



Note. (PowerSchool, 2025).

Figure 1. Seahawk County Middle School Demographics, 2024-25. (Powerschool, 2025)

The 2023 Panorama School Climate Survey of SMS students presents empirical evidence indicating that students would benefit from social and emotional learning in order to maximize their overall development and achievement (McCoy, 2023). The findings revealed that students held the perception that teachers have the capability to provide assistance in addressing personal issues. However, students did not perceive teachers as genuinely caring about their overall welfare and state of being (McCoy, 2023). In addition to completing the school climate survey, during the 2022-23 school year, SMS students completed a social and emotional survey.

Findings from the survey indicated that more than 40% of students did not feel a sense of community in their classroom (McCoy, 2023). As evidenced in the findings a need exists for implementing supplementary assistance to enhance the school atmosphere. Although the district is dedicated to ensuring fairness for every student, the analysis of the data leads to the recommendation that SMS examine different disciplinary approaches, while considering the variables of race and gender.

According to the findings of the Resilience and Learning Survey conducted in 2023, 71% of the surveyed staff expressed the belief that it is imperative to provide training at the school level pertaining to staff wellbeing, stress and trauma management, as well as techniques aimed at fostering student resilience and enhancing social-emotional skills. According to the survey results, one of the items that received the lowest ratings pertained to the extent to which teachers are able to exert control over student conduct within their classroom. After a schoolwide professional learning, 40% of the staff members reported a discernible shift in their cognitive perception on the underlying factors contributing to student discipline. The data obtained from SMS staff indicates the necessity to provide assistance for student discipline in the school and highlights the need for change.

District personnel met with the scholarly practitioner to discuss the impact of behaviors at SMS. Of the five district personnel interviewed, all five indicated that classroom and school communities, overall behavior, and behavior disparity were points of interest worth exploring more in-depth (P. Cook, personal communication, August 4, 2023). During these conversations, the superintendent committed that they would provide SMS support to address the concerns of the behavior and school community by allowing the district behavior team to provide monthly professional learning.

The community of Seahawk County is actively engaged in all aspects of their children's education. School-wide behaviors and teachers building a sense of belonging within their classrooms were discussed at the August 10, 2023 parent meeting. Of the parents and community members attending the meeting, 100% agreed that SMS needed to address behaviors and work to build a positive school culture (P. Cook, personal communication, August 10, 2023).

Statement of the Focus of Practice

The focus of this study is to address disproportionality within student discipline and to find alternatives to punitive discipline that better support students and provide students with a sense of community within their schools. Educators' instructional abilities are only impactful in an environment where students feel safe, valued, nurtured, and cared for is created (Morton, 2022). The 2017 Office of Civil Rights Discipline Report reported a significant increase in school suspensions among Black students (Perera, 2022). In 2017, Black students were four times more likely to face disciplinary action than their White or Hispanic counterparts. The Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (NCDPI) reported in 2022 that there is a discrepancy in school suspension rates, with Black students being 25% more likely to face disciplinary actions. During the 2023-24 school year, SMS saw an increase in unwanted

behaviors in the form of office referrals. Consequently, 70% of referrals were Black students in comparison to 17% of Hispanic students and 13% of White students (PowerSchool, 2024).

Literature posits that teachers should receive training to acquire essential skills to effectively support students. Training would include identifying the root causes of behaviors, asking supportive questions, building positive relationships, and learning how to help repair the harm students have caused (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Attentive to that literature this Dissertation in Practice intends to strengthen staff training in order to develop their capacity to successfully support students in the academic environment. It focuses on behaviors and the establishment of a classroom community.

Study Guiding Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate the impacts of a promising practice as an intervention for mitigating the disparity in disciplinary measures between Black students and their counterparts at Seahawk Middle School, located in Eastern North Carolina.

This study is directed by the following questions.

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black students in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?
2. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' sense of belonging at in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?
3. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' relationships with staff at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?

The primary objective of question one is to determine whether restorative circles can effectively improve student conduct and address the issue of disciplinary disproportionality, which forms the central focus of this investigation. Questions two and three address the

interpersonal connections and students' feelings of inclusion within the educational environment. Both of these effects are complementary to the broader goal of closing the discipline gap between Black students and all of their peers.

Overview of Study

To address the questions that are guiding my investigation, I employed a convergent mixed-method design. This methodology entails utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data in the study process, followed by the development of an intervention, and subsequently collecting data once more to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The implementation process is based on the improvement science model using iterative phases of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA). Collectively with my study partners, we designed the study around three distinct phases. In the initial phase, quantitative disciplinary data from Seahawk Middle School was examined, as well as qualitative data from focus groups to gain baseline data to help determine if restorative circles had a positive impact. In the second phase after implementation of the intervention had begun, qualitative and quantitative data was gathered to track the progress of restorative circles and assess their impact. Data from focus groups, official observations, and school-wide discipline records were gathered during this phase and used to help determine the impact of restorative circles. Finally, focus groups data, and comprehensive school discipline data was gathered during the third phase. During each stage, my collaborative study partners and I analyzed the data employing the techniques from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework to assess the impact of restorative circles and make well-informed decisions.

The CASEL framework, which delineates the essential skills for effectively managing personal emotions and behaviors, as well as engaging in successful interpersonal relationships,

provided a solid platform for the study. According to CASEL (2020), the integration of restorative justice and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can yield favorable outcomes such as improved school and classroom environment, more attendance and engagement, less reliance on punitive measures, and diminished inequities in disciplinary actions.

The study participants include staff members from Seahawk Middle School who completed the introductory restorative practice professional learning. Invitations for staff participation were distributed in late Fall 2024 and only those who consented to the additional training were invited to participate. In addition, a group of ten students who are assigned in the classrooms where staff members are using restorative circles also took part in focus groups. Five parents, whose children are enrolled in classes taught by a staff member who is using restorative circles, also took part in focus groups. In order to maintain the study's rigor, my study partners conducted the focus groups with staff members to minimize any potential biases or positionality. To ensure the study's rigor, it is important to involve my Collaborative Study Partners (CIPs) in the intervention planning and keep them informed on the study's implementation. My CIPs and I also completed regular monthly observations by conducting walkthroughs and analyzing data.

Study Partners

Throughout this study, I worked collaboratively with multiple stakeholders to gain insight to address the problem of practice. The collaborative study partners included the district superintendent, director of testing and accountability, and director of human capital. Initial collaboration focused on defining the problem of practice and presenting alternative strategies to address it. This team had a pivotal role in overseeing the implementation, analyzing the data, and evaluating the efficacy of restorative circles. Furthermore, apart from my collaborative study partners, an additional 20% of the SMS staff, as well as students and parents, served as study

partners. Attendance by study partners during the investigation was recorded through the written minutes of the meetings. My study partners played a crucial role in carrying out this investigation.

Conceptual Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for the integration of "social and emotional learning" (SEL) into the public school system (CASEL, 2020). In 1994, CASEL was established based on a concept, and formed a diverse network consisting of researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates from throughout the nation who are deeply dedicated to promoting social and emotional learning (SEL) for every student (CASEL, 2020). Implementing SEL programs in school districts and garnering support from parents and educators proves to be an effective approach to helping students manage emotions, problem solve, and maintain healthy relationships (CASEL, 2022).

The CASEL framework outlines the necessary abilities for effectively navigating personal emotions and behaviors, as well as the capacity to engage in successful interpersonal interactions (CASEL, 2020). CASEL categorizes the competencies into five domains: self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making, as organized in Figure 2. Per CASEL (2020), combining restorative justice with SEL can lead to positive results, including better school and classroom atmosphere, increased attendance and involvement, decreased use of exclusionary practices, and reduced disparities in disciplinary actions.



Note. (CASEL, 2020).

Figure 2: CASEL Competencies.

Including the CASEL framework in this study is significant for several reasons. The CASEL paradigm (CASEL, 2020) emphasizes the significance of establishing human connections and enhancing behaviors, both of which are identified as positive results from using restorative circles. Although this study focuses on restorative circles, both restorative practices and SEL can be integrated simultaneously to promote shared objectives and optimize results, such as fostering a more positive school or classroom environment, enhancing student attendance and involvement, diminishing the use of punitive disciplinary measures like suspensions, and mitigating disparities in disciplinary actions. Through the integration of restorative circles, study participants implemented the five competencies of CASEL.

Definition of Key Terms

Several key terms are used throughout this study and are defined as follows:

Continuum of Practice – An analytical framework for comprehending restorative activities (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

Culturally Responsive Teaching – CRT is an educational approach based on instructors' ability to effectively teach in a cross-cultural or multicultural environment, known as cultural competency (Hammond, 2015).

Discipline Disproportionality – Arises when discrepancies exist in using exclusionary disciplinary measures, such as out-of-school suspensions, among different racial and ethnic groups (Larson et al., 2019).

Expulsion – The act of the local education agency (LEA) removing a student from their usual school due to disciplinary reasons, for the duration of the current school year or a longer period, as per the LEA's (Meek & Gilliam, 2016).

Implicit Bias – Refers to the automatic and unconscious opinions and thoughts that influence one's conduct towards different groups of individuals (Hammond, 2015).

In-School Suspension – Transfer from a classroom due to misconduct to a different area inside the school premises (Lightfoot, 2021).

Out-of-School Suspension – Transfer from a classroom due to misconduct to outside of the school (Lightfoot, 2021).

Punitive Discipline – School discipline which encompasses various measures such as suspension, expulsion, and "zero tolerance" rules to enforce repercussions or disciplinary actions (Wiley, 2021).

School-to-Prison Pipeline – Strategies and procedures that systematically drive vulnerable young individuals away from regular public schools and into the juvenile or criminal justice system (Henry et al., 2022).

Zero Tolerance Policies – School discipline policies contain predetermined minimum penalties, usually suspension, for students who exhibit specific actions (Lightfoot, 2021).

Assumptions

According to Kolenda (2023), assumptions are influential, frequently unconscious ideas that direct one's choices and behaviors. In this section, I present four assumptions that I consider crucial to the study.

For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that each class at Seahawk County Middle School has a roughly equal distribution of behavior concerns and demographics. Additionally, it is assumed that the diverse composition of students fosters an environment that optimizes student learning and behaviors across all classrooms. Furthermore, it is expected that the instructors in the focus group implemented restorative circles in their classrooms with fidelity. The

comprehensive implementation of restorative circles was crucial in assessing the impact of the intervention. Throughout the study, my CIPs and I employed a walkthrough tool to supervise the implementation of restorative circles in order to mitigate this limitation. The third assumption is that staff members consistently adhere to the behavioral flow chart at Seahawk County Middle School, which shows the steps educators are required to take before writing a referral. An assumption made by me is that every staff member complies with the flow chart and consistently notes behaviors. The data collected would be consistent with staff adhering to the behavior flow chart. A fourth assumption is that all staff members at SMS are genuinely committed to the students' well-being and do not act on biases.

Scope and Delimitations

This study is delimited to a single middle school in Eastern North Carolina, within a single district, with an estimated 680 students. Staff members of Seahawk County Middle School who have consented to participate in restorative practice and restorative circle training were involved in this study. The number of staff participation is equivalent to 20% of the total staff. Participants incorporated restorative circles into their classrooms throughout the 2024-25 academic year with the aim of reducing the number of disciplinary referrals for Black students. This study was conducted on a sample size representing 20% of the entire student population. All students whose teachers consented to participate engaged in restorative circles however, the focus of this study is to address the disproportionality of Black students who receive disciplinary referrals.

Limitations

During this study, it is crucial to identify any limitations in order to accurately assess the efficacy of restorative circles. The initial limitation that this investigation must acknowledge is

its restriction to a single middle school in a single district in Eastern North Carolina which may limit the application of results to other settings. The aim of this study would be to achieve transferability so that others can apply the findings to their own contexts.

An inherent limitation may arise from the influence of professional learning (PL) on the staff's perception of restorative practices and restorative circles. Partnering and having an external company to facilitate professional growth raises questions: Does PL involve all staff members effectively? Have the teachers fully embraced restorative practices and recognized the significant influence they can have on kids and the school? Pre and post interviews were conducted to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of the training.

Another potential limitation is the teachers' capacity to implement restorative circles effectively and accurately inside their classrooms. Although teachers have received adequate training to administer restorative circles, the question remains whether they consistently applied them to observe the potential positive impact. To overcome this constraint, a walkthrough form was developed to offer personnel feedback and record the accuracy of restorative circles.

A potential limitation is teachers' inherent biases. Seahawk County is a small rural community where many staff instruct numerous children from the same family. A constraint arises when staff members cannot maintain objectivity due to the influence of a student's previous actions, mainly if they come from a specific household. Another constraint associated with biases is the predisposition of staff members towards a particular group of students. To overcome this constraint, the personnel involved in the study received unconscious bias training.

The broader applicability of findings may be constrained due to the study's exclusive focus on 20% of the Seahawk County Middle School students and its duration of only one academic school year.

Significance of Study

The problem of disproportionate student discipline, resulting in suspensions, especially amongst students of color, is not limited to Eastern North Carolina, but rather it impacts all schools across the United States (Welsh & Little, 2018). In general, the presence of discipline referrals by students has negative repercussions on schools, classrooms, and particularly students (Skiba et al., 2011). Even after taking into consideration demographic and achievement characteristics, the study by Skiba et al. (2011) found that both out-of-school suspension and expulsion are linked to a number of poor academic outcomes for Black students. Based on the findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2024, there exists a significant disparity of 15.90 points in academic performance between Black and White students as measured by NAEP scores. This difference can be attributed to the disparity in disciplinary actions between Black and White students, as well as the resulting loss of instructional time due to suspensions.

Correlational research has continuously shown a strong negative link between out-of-school suspensions and academic achievement (Kyere et al., 2020). Research indicates that children with a history of suspension are more likely to be absent from school without permission, leading to a loss of valuable learning opportunities compared to those with no suspension record (Heilbrun et al., 2018). The academic achievement gap is also evident at SMS, as Black students are surpassed in State exams by their Hispanic and White counterparts, as illustrated in Table 1 (NC School Report Card, 2024).

Table 1

2024 SMS Student Performance

	Math	ELA	Science
Black	15%	20%	41.6%
Hispanic	30.5%	33.9%	61.2%
White	38.9%	33.9%	68.2%

Note. (NC School Report Card, 2024)

The decision to implement restorative circles was based on the belief that such an approach would be advantageous in tackling the issue of high suspension rates and, by extension, should lead to improved academic achievement and enhanced well-being among students. The primary focus of restorative practices is to enhance the overall school environment and create a sense of community (Brummer, 2021). The goal of the study is to investigate the effects of restorative circles implementation to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact it has on student discipline in a classroom setting and in eliminating the disproportionality in student discipline issues. Implementing restorative circles would also lead to an increase in instructional time for students, thereby boosting student achievement at the school.

Restorative practices facilitate the primary objective of enhancing school climate through the transformation of student attitudes, fostering a sense of belonging and resolving conflicts in relationships (Brummer, 2021). Specifically, restorative circles were chosen due to their effectiveness in helping students understand how their actions affect others and damage the sense of community. Restorative practices, in turn, help students take responsibility for their actions and give them the tools to repair those all-important relationships necessary for positive sense of community between students and staff (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). Establishing such a positive classroom community will bolster all other aspects of the school and foster a sense of worth, nurturing, and concern for all students, especially SMS's Black subgroup.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

Throughout this study, the concepts of equity and social justice, which are core elements of restorative practices, are both examined in an effort to determine whether restorative circles impact student discipline. Although the introduction of restorative circles in classrooms may not eliminate the disproportionality in disciplinary actions experienced by Black students in

comparison with their peers, the intervention aims to narrow the difference by establishing a classroom atmosphere that fosters both inclusivity and responsibility, regardless of students' ethnic backgrounds. We are thus cultivating an environment that promotes fairness and equality.

At SMS, where 70% of office discipline referrals (Powerschool, 2024) originate from the Black subgroup, it is imperative to implement an intervention. The aim is to address the disproportion in student discipline by introducing restorative circles in 20% of the school. By implementing this approach, research suggests that there will be a cascading impact on kids, resulting in increased classroom attendance, improved academic performance, and a heightened sense of community within the school. Specifically, we were looking at those students in classrooms of staff members who are implementing restorative circles to see whether or not there is a reduction in office referrals in general and if there is a closing of the gap between the number of referrals and suspensions between the Black subgroup and their peers.

Advances in Practice

This study expands upon previous research on the implementation of restorative practices in schools nationwide. It demonstrates how restorative practices can help educational institutions foster and maintain a positive environment, resulting in a reduction of negative behaviors. This, in turn, can lead to improvements in attendance, academic performance, and overall school culture (Weiss, 2023). Unlike other studies, this study addresses the disproportionality in discipline issues being faced in a rural middle school in Eastern North Carolina. The majority of other studies concentrate on urban communities.

In a macro sense, there are significant concerns surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline (Novak & Fagan, 2021). Understanding the relationship between numerous out of school suspensions and a student's likelihood to become involved in the criminal justice system.

Establishing a secure environment in our schools, characterized by responsibility, equity, and a supportive atmosphere would be advantageous for all children and help to break that school-to-prison pathway.

This study has the potential to inform practice among rural schools with regard to implementing sustainable restorative circles within classrooms to address the disproportionality in discipline referrals and out of school suspensions that exists between Black students and their peers. In doing so, schools can create powerful classroom and school communities and decrease disproportionality within student discipline. The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to a reduction in suspensions and facilitate the adoption of restorative circles in classrooms as an alternative to punitive disciplinary measures such as suspensions.

Summary

Chapter 1 provided the background and context for the study's implementation. The chapter also contained the focus of practice, statement of problem, the guiding questions of the study, an overview of the study, and information about my collaborative study partners. The theoretical framework that this study is grounded in, along with defining essential terms, assumptions, constraints, delimitations, and the significance of the study, were presented in this chapter. In Chapter 2, I will analyze the literature to create a review that presents current research and identifies areas where more research is needed. Chapter 3 will focus on the techniques employed in the course of the study. Chapter 4 will discuss the comprehensive findings of the investigation, while Chapter 5 will offer a concise overview and suggestions for future actions.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Based on the findings of the 2017 survey conducted by the Office of Civil Rights, it was observed that Black students demonstrated a significantly greater probability, four times higher, of encountering disciplinary actions when compared to their White or Hispanic counterparts. According to the findings of the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (2022), there exists a notable disparity in school suspension rates, wherein Black students are subjected to disciplinary proceedings at a rate that is 25% higher compared to their counterparts. The subsequent literature analysis delves into potential factors contributing to the observed disparity in suspension rates.

The literature review consists of five primary sections, with each providing an overview of one of the major factors contributing to the inequalities in suspension rates among Black children within schools in the United States. The first section focuses on discrepancies in disciplinary actions, encompassing an examination of implicit bias, the phenomenon of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the enduring consequences of disproportionality. The subsequent section examines zero-tolerance policies and their consequential influence on suspension rates. The third section examines the literature on classroom management and social-emotional learning, examining their respective effects on students within the educational environment. Finally, the review considers literature on restorative practices and their potential to address the issue of disproportionality in school discipline effectively.

Read collectively, the work presented in chapter two suggests that there is a widespread need for an intervention to address different behaviors in schools across the country. This study will contribute to the current literature by examining the effects of restorative practices, specifically restorative circles, on students in a rural, low-socioeconomic middle school. Given

the predominant emphasis on urban districts in current research, this investigation holds promise for providing assistance to a wider range of school districts around the country.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for the integration of "social and emotional learning" (SEL) into the public school system (CASEL, 2020). In 1994, CASEL was established based on a concept, and formed a diverse network consisting of researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates from throughout the nation who are deeply dedicated to promoting social and emotional learning (SEL) for every student (CASEL, 2020). Implementing SEL programs in school districts and garnering support from parents and educators proves to be an effective approach to helping students manage emotions, problem solve, and maintain healthy relationships (CASEL, 2022).

The CASEL framework outlines the necessary abilities for effectively navigating personal emotions and behaviors, as well as the capacity to engage in successful interpersonal interactions (CASEL, 2020). CASEL categorizes the competencies into five domains: self-awareness and self-management, social awareness and interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making, as organized in Figure 2. Per CASEL (2020), combining restorative justice with SEL can lead to positive results, including better school and classroom atmosphere, increased attendance and involvement, decreased use of exclusionary practices, and reduced disparities in disciplinary actions.

Including the CASEL framework in this study is significant for several reasons. The CASEL paradigm (CASEL, 2020) emphasizes the significance of establishing human connections and enhancing behaviors, both of which are identified as positive results from using

restorative circles. Although this study focuses on restorative circles, both restorative practices and SEL can be integrated simultaneously to promote shared objectives and optimize results, such as fostering a more positive school or classroom environment, enhancing student attendance and involvement, diminishing the use of punitive disciplinary measures like suspensions, and mitigating disparities in disciplinary actions. Through the integration of restorative circles, study participants implemented the five competencies of CASEL.

Disparities in School Discipline

In the past few decades, there has been growing interest among scholars, legislators, and educators in the subject of K-12 school discipline policies and procedures with a focus on the existence of disproportionalities (Welsh & Little, 2018). The issue of racial inequities in school punishment, namely between Black and White students, has been a prominent and enduring problem within the education profession (Gerlinder, 2022). Disproportionality arises when discrepancies exist in using exclusionary disciplinary measures, such as out-of-school suspensions, among different racial and ethnic groups (Larson et al., 2019). A considerable body of scholarly literature exists that suggests that students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds experience an unequal distribution of disciplinary actions (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). As Tefera et al. (2022) state, there exists a systemic disparity in school disciplinary procedures, wherein kids of color, specifically Black students, are disproportionately subjected to more severe disciplinary measures in comparison to their counterparts.

According to Perera (2022), an investigation conducted by The Office of Civil Rights in 2014 identified significant inequalities in the rates of disciplinary proceedings based on racial classifications. Black students were experiencing suspensions at a rate more than three times higher than that of White students. According to the 2017 Office of Civil Rights K-12 Student

Discipline report, there was a notable rise in school suspensions (Perera, 2022). In particular among Black students, just three years later are now four times more susceptible to this disciplinary action compared to their White or Hispanic counterparts. According to the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2022), there is a discrepancy in school suspension rates, with Black students being 25% more prone to experiencing such disciplinary actions. In the remainder of this section, we will examine the subjects of implicit biases, long-term consequences, zero tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, alternatives to punitive discipline, positive behavior intervention supports, culturally responsive teaching, and the implications of policy and law.

Implicit Biases

The possibility of racial prejudice in teachers' disciplinary choices is a major empirical concern in studies that have examined teacher assessments of student behavior (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Lindsay and Hart (2017), also discuss that if there is a presence of racial bias in instructors' judgments of student behavior, it can lead to an underestimation of the extent of the discipline gap that is based on race. Simson (2014) also found, using empirical research findings, that the influence of preconceptions and prejudices on the differential treatment of Black and White kids inside school disciplinary procedures. According to Simson (2014), it is unlikely that the courts will provide a comprehensive solution to these systemic issues. Therefore, advocates will need to employ alternative strategies in order to mitigate and reverse the adverse effects of punitive school discipline on all students, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

Several researchers (Okonofua et al., 2022; Skiba & Losen, 2015) have posited that racial disparities in disciplinary outcomes could be attributed to racial bias, particularly when variations in student behavior fail to explain these disparities adequately. Skiba and Losen (2015)

state that it is essential to acknowledge that assessments of student behavior may be influenced by racial bias. Ongoing research demonstrates that disciplinary interactions are often exacerbated by racial bias and a lack of cultural sensitivity and knowledge among school personnel, including administrators at the school level and instructors in the classroom (Gullo & Beachum, 2020; Larson et al., 2019).

Long Term Consequences

Research indicates that suspension during middle school is linked to substantial and enduring adverse adolescent consequences (Skiba & Losen, 2015). According to Balfanz et al. (2015), an examination of 400 students who were in the ninth grade and apprehended by law enforcement revealed that a significant number of students encountered difficulties throughout their middle school years, including frequent absences from class, poor academic performance leading to course failure, and reading abilities below the expected grade level. According to Tobin and Sugai (1999), there is a notable correlation between the suspension of kids in the sixth grade and the subsequent occurrence of disciplinary issues persisting throughout their secondary and high school years. Frequent suspensions during secondary education have a detrimental impact on students, leading to feelings of alienation, less instructional time, and, ultimately, an increased likelihood of dropping out (Skiba et al., 2011). Even after accounting for factors such as socioeconomic status, research has found a correlation between elevated levels of suspension and expulsion and decreased academic performance across the entire school (Anderson & Ritter 2017).

School to Prison Pipeline

The phenomenon known as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Losen & Martinez, 2013) has been brought to the forefront by researchers and legislators. This trend refers to the relation

between exclusionary discipline policies and heightened involvement with the juvenile justice system (Meek & Gilliam, 2016). According to the study conducted by Skiba et al. (2014), both out-of-school suspension and expulsion are associated with various poor developmental outcomes for Black students even after accounting for demographic and achievement variables. According to a study conducted by Katsiyannis et al. (2012), there was a significant association between middle school suspensions and subsequent violent criminal charges in adulthood. The research findings indicated that individuals who had experienced suspension during their middle school years were five times as likely to be charged with a violent crime compared to those who had not been suspended.

Alternatives to Punitive Discipline

In their study, Welsh and Little (2018) undertook a thorough examination of the various factors that contribute to disparities in disciplinary actions, as well as the emerging evidence for alternate approaches to exclusionary discipline. The researchers discovered several programs and strategies to assist educational institutions and districts in decreasing the use of exclusionary disciplinary measures. These programs include School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support and professional development interventions that enhance teachers' culturally responsive practices.

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports

Scholars have proposed the implementation of diverse disciplinary approaches as a means to mitigate the issue of disproportionate discipline within educational institutions (Welsh & Little, 2018). In their study, Larson et al. (2019) suggested that using positive behavior support by instructors in the classroom can enhance students' impressions of the disciplinary environment and their level of participation within the school. In their study conducted at the

high school level, Flannery et al. (2014) investigated the relationship between Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and problem behaviors. Employing a multilevel growth model, the researchers discovered a significant association between the deployment of PBIS and a reduction in Office Discipline Referrals (ODRs). According to the study's findings, there was a decrease in the occurrence of ODRs as the fidelity of PBIS implementation increased. Educational institutions implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) demonstrated noteworthy reductions in instances of misconduct, in contrast to educational institutions that did not adopt PBIS, which observed escalations in misbehavior (Flannery et al., 2014). The implementation of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) has been found to have a positive correlation with enhancing school climate perceptions. As Gage et al. (2020) states, implementing PBIS has a significant impact on several aspects, such as enhancing the overall school environment, fostering a greater sense of safety within the school community, promoting academic success, and, notably, decreasing the frequency of student suspensions.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

In light of the research indicating that SWPBIS fails to mitigate and redress racial disparities in disciplinary consequences effectively, educational institutions are increasingly adopting culturally responsive iterations of PBIS (Welsh & Little, 2018). Culturally responsive pedagogy is an instructional strategy that prioritizes the needs and perspectives of students, placing them at the center of the learning process. This approach incorporates cultural references and acknowledges the significance of students' cultural origins and experiences in all facets of education (Samuels, 2018). The strategy aims to facilitate active participation, intellectual development, and academic success for all students through the inclusion of diverse perspectives,

recognition and cultivation of students' cultural assets, and affirmation of their personal experiences and global significance (Tefera et al., 2022 & Samuels, 2018). As Samuels, 2018 states culturally responsive pedagogy is defined as educators who demonstrate a strong dedication to cultural competence, develop elevated academic standards, and adopt a dual role as both facilitators and learners.

Policy and Legal Implications

In recent decades, various alternative approaches to exclusionary punishment policies and practices have arisen at the federal, state, and district levels to respond to the inequities observed in disciplinary outcomes (Welsh & Little, 2018). Federal and state regulations, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), have been implemented to address disparities in school discipline (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). These laws promote fairer practices while discouraging the utilization of exclusionary measures (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). According to Tefera et al. (2022), the establishment of policies and practices by educational institutions is crucial to ensure the promotion of racial fairness in disciplinary measures. Hence, it is imperative to gather, disseminate, and utilize data to enhance disciplinary procedures and interventions across various dimensions (such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disability). This is particularly crucial due to research findings that indicate the existence of disparities in disciplinary outcomes among students of color and those who face multiple forms of marginalization. The issue of student discipline has been a subject of debate for many years. Although efforts have been made to promote positive behaviors, certain projects have had adverse effects on students. Numerous endeavors have had adverse effects on Black students, thus necessitating an intervention to reduce the number of office referrals for Black students.

Zero Tolerance

Background

The practice of exclusions and suspensions has historically been a prevalent approach to discipline within public schools in the United States (Lightfoot, 2021). Prominent court decisions, such as *Goss v. Lopez* (1975), have established specific procedures that educational institutions must adhere to when suspending or expelling students, notably encompassing the requirement of due process before any exclusionary action. Similarly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) establishes restrictions and safeguards concerning disciplinary exclusion, particularly for vulnerable populations. Despite these limitations, it is noteworthy that the utilization of suspension and expulsion has witnessed a notable surge since the 1970s (Skiba & Losen, 2015). Despite the heightened focus on students' rights and the decline in the utilization of conventional disciplinary methods like corporal punishment, a notable increase in expulsions and suspensions has occurred (Aronowitez et al., 2020).

The exclusionary approach to discipline, which refers to suspension or expulsion was reinforced in 1994 with the implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA), a federal law requiring a one-year expulsion for students found possessing a handgun on school premises (Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018). Following the implementation of the GFSA other states took measures to establish comparable legislation to uphold their eligibility for federal funding (Curran, 2019). Consequently, these state laws extended the scope of the GFSA, encompassing charges related to weapons, drugs, and assault (Richards, 2004). By the end of the 1990s, legislation enforcing the federal GFSA was implemented in virtually all states (Curran, 2019; Richards, 2004). Nearly every school district nationwide claimed to have adopted a disciplinary policy of zero tolerance towards weapons and other severe violations (Heaviside et

al.,1998; Welch & Payne, 2010). The following section will discuss the concept of zero tolerance, its benefits, its critics, its impact on minority students, its effect on academic performance, its long-term consequences, and its current implementation in educational settings.

Zero Tolerance Definition

For the past two decades, a significant number of legislators have addressed issues related to school safety and disruption by adopting a "get tough" approach, which involves the implementation of zero-tolerance rules and the frequent utilization of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Skiba & Losen, 2015). The American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008) has defined zero-tolerance policies as predetermined consequences that are typically severe and punitive. To effectively address instances of unwelcome behavior by students, educational institutions typically use prescriptive and punitive approaches (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). These consequences are to be applied without consideration of the severity of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (Henault, 2001).

The methods referred to as zero-tolerance policies encompass measures of exclusion, such as suspensions and expulsions, which result in removing and isolating students who engage in unlawful conduct from the educational environment and the broader community (Brushaber-Drocketon et al., 2023). The primary objective behind the formulation and execution of these policies was to mitigate the risk of violence and enable individuals who abide by the established norms and guidelines of educational institutions to concentrate on their academic pursuits within a setting that is both secure and conducive to learning (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

The Positives of Zero Tolerance

Zero tolerance policies aim to mitigate the subjective and potentially discriminatory implementation of disciplinary measures by establishing predetermined penalties (Mitchell,

2014). Despite the evolution of their stances, numerous prominent education stakeholders, including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, initially endorsed the concept of zero tolerance due to their belief that it would effectively communicate the importance of school discipline, discourage student misconduct, and enhance school safety (Kyere et al., 2020). Supporters of suspension and zero tolerance argue that removing students who have engaged in misconduct from the educational environment will foster a more favorable atmosphere for effective teaching and learning (Martinez, 2009). A study conducted by Kinsler (2013) on suspensions in middle schools in North Carolina revealed a correlation between exposure to disruptive behaviors and decreased academic performance among those students in the classroom. The interpretation of this finding suggested that removing misbehaving students would enhance academic achievement (Kinsler, 2013).

Over ten years ago, the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (Skiba, 2008) conducted a comprehensive examination and concluded that there was a lack of empirical data supporting the notion that zero-tolerance policies positively impact school climate or enhance school safety. If the zero-tolerance theory were accurate, educational institutions adopting this strategy would observe reduced student disruptive behaviors, leading to an enhanced sense of safety for students and staff members (Curran, 2019). The perspectives of experts regarding the soundness of this premise have transitioned from endorsement to criticism (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Critics of Zero Tolerance

Zero-tolerance policies have faced criticism from various stakeholders, including parents, students, professors, and agencies (Skiba & Losen, 2015). Stakeholders view these policies as arbitrary, unfair, and inappropriate approaches to administering school disciplinary actions in

response to numerous misbehaviors (Henault, 2001). Critics argue that zero-tolerance policies fail to consider individual circumstances and the underlying causes of misbehavior, leading to overly harsh punishments that do not effectively address the root issues (Kodelja, 2019). Nevertheless, zero-tolerance regulations are indicative of adverse consequences, including disengagement from school, elevated rates of dropping out, increased likelihood of being held back, involvement in the criminal justice system, substance abuse, and experiences of trauma (Henry et al., 2022). Additionally, research has shown that zero-tolerance policies disproportionately impact marginalized students, exacerbating existing inequalities in the education system (Robbins, 2005).

Zero Tolerance Impact on Minority Students

A substantial body of research indicates that students of color are subjected to disproportionate disciplinary measures within educational institutions, including but not limited to in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). A 2014 study by The Office of Civil Rights revealed notable disparities in the frequency of disciplinary actions based on racial categorizations. As an illustration, in 2014, the suspension rate among Black students nationwide was 16%, which exceeds the suspension rate among White students by more than three times (Perera, 2022). In 2017, The Office of Civil Rights reported an increase in suspensions and that Black students were four times more likely to be suspended from school than White or Hispanic students. The Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (2022) has also reported that Black students are 25% more likely to be suspended from school. The report by the Zero Tolerance Task Force of the American Psychological Association (2008) reveals a disproportionate impact on Black students when pertaining to minor infractions (Curran, 2019). The statistics are cause for concern since a correlation exists between

suspensions and expulsions and subsequent disciplinary transgressions, including diminished academic performance and eventual withdrawal from educational institutions (Kyere et al., 2020).

Impact of Zero Tolerance on Academic Performance

In addition to the impact zero tolerance has had on racial disparities in school suspension, it has also impacted academic performance (Rodriquez & Welsh, 2022). A substantial amount of correlational research has consistently demonstrated significant negative relationships between the occurrence of out-of-school suspensions and academic performance (Kyere et al., 2020). Evidence has shown that students who have had at least one instance of suspension are more prone to engaging in truancy, thereby missing valuable instructional time than those who have never faced suspension (Heilbrun et al., 2018). In their study, Rausch and Skiba (2005) analyze data at the school level, specifically focusing on public elementary and secondary schools within a single state. Their findings indicate a negative correlation between the rate of school suspensions and the proficiency rates of students in state math and English language arts (ELA) examinations. According to Skiba and Losen (2015), empirical evidence suggests that the act of suspending adolescents during their middle school years is associated with significant and long-lasting negative outcomes, including high school dropout rates. The adverse consequences associated with enrolling in schools that have greater rates of conditional suspensions are pronounced for minority students and males (Carrell & Hoekstra, 2010). According to the study conducted by Carrell and Hoekstra in 2010, the presence of a single peer experiencing difficulties within a classroom consisting of 20 students is associated with a decrease in test performance by around 0.69 percentile points.

Long-term impacts of Zero Tolerance

Disciplinary measures such as suspensions and expulsions can impact students' future academics, and careers by influencing their social associations with high-risk peers or stigmatizing them as individuals prone to disruptive behavior (Skiba & Losen, 2015).

Educational institutions that use stringent disciplinary measures, such as zero-tolerance rules, may potentially subject students to early involvement in the criminal justice system (Henry et al., 2022). The study conducted by Henry et al. (2022) revealed a clear correlation between instances of school suspensions and subsequent involvement in the criminal justice system at later stages of an individual's life. Students who receive suspensions or expulsions as a result of discretionary violations demonstrate an increased likelihood of approximately three times to have contact with the juvenile justice system within the subsequent year (Novak & Fagan, 2021). According to Krezmien et al. (2008), it has been estimated that more than 80% of adolescents involved in the juvenile court system had experienced school suspensions, while over 50% have faced expulsions. (Roache & Lewis, 2011) also discovered a correlation between school suspensions and involvement with the criminal justice system. It is noteworthy to add that students who experience suspension are also more prone to exhibiting a higher frequency of unexcused absences from school compared to their non-suspended counterparts (Lacoe & Steinber, 2019).

Zero Tolerance Today

Although zero-tolerance policies continue to be widespread in educational settings, numerous schools are exploring alternate disciplinary approaches to effectively manage behavioral issues (Kyere et al., 2020). According to Lacoe and Steinber (2019), further research is required to gain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of positive behavior supports and interventions (PBIS), restorative practices, and more in diverse school settings

nationwide, catering to various student demographics. It is imperative to determine which approaches are most suitable and effective for elementary schools in comparison to middle and high schools (Lacoe & Steinber, 2019). Additionally, it is crucial to explore how schools and districts can provide adequate training and support to administrators and teachers to effectively implement PBIS or restorative practices. (Kyere et al., 2020). Efforts of this nature are necessary to mitigate the adverse repercussions of suspensions on both the students who are suspended and their peers (Battjes & Kaplan, 2023). In general, the literature emphasizes the importance of reassessing zero-tolerance policies and implementing fairer and more efficient disciplinary methods that promote the success and well-being of Black students. This investigation aims to discover a change intervention to address the disproportionality in school discipline caused by zero-tolerance rules.

Classroom Management

The definition of classroom management has undergone a transformation, expanding beyond its original emphasis on disciplinary measures to encompass both instructional and non-instructional acts undertaken by teachers (Emmer & Stough, 2001). These actions are aimed at creating an environment conducive to facilitating academic and socio-emotional learning. In education, it is anticipated that teachers can provide emotional support to their students while establishing a structured and efficient learning environment that facilitates academic success (Garwood et al., 2017).

Teacher educators have always asserted that effective classroom management is an essential pedagogical competency that teachers must acquire in order to optimize instructional outcomes within the classroom setting (Stough et al., 2015). Furthermore, research has also indicated that when educators possess strong classroom management skills, their students attain

higher levels of achievement and exhibit greater enthusiasm towards the content being taught (Klopfer et al., 2019). To function successfully in a classroom environment, all children, especially those with emotional and behavioral problems, need teachers who are skilled in managing disruptive and distressed behaviors while attending to the needs of the students in the class as a whole (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).

The study completed by Stage and Quiroz (1997) highlights the significance of maintaining a harmonious balance between teacher interventions that provide explicit repercussions for inappropriate conduct and teacher interventions that acknowledge and incentivize appropriate behavior. In addition, Korpershoek et al. (2016) researched and delineated significant elements of classroom management. These elements encompass commencing the academic year with a constructive focus on management, organizing the physical space in a manner that facilitates efficient management, and establishing and executing rules and operational procedures. This section will discuss the consequences of poor classroom management, the benefits of excellent classroom management, the influence of teacher-student relationships, culturally responsive education, and the difficulties in implementing effective classroom management.

Poor Classroom Management Impacts

Research findings indicate that the effectiveness of teaching is contingent upon the creation of a healthy and enhanced educational environments that focus on relationships and classroom culture (Nisar et al., 2019). The educational institutions characterized by exemplary instructional techniques, but inadequate administrative oversight yielded unsatisfactory academic outcomes (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). Without effective administration, classrooms can devolve into disorderly and disorganized learning environments that hinder the development of

students' reading competency (Roskos & Neuman, 2012). In their study where they observed students and gained feedback from teachers, Garwood and Vernon-Feagans (2017) observed a significant association between behavior problems and low performance in most students. Moreover, student's disruptive behavior can also have a negative impact on their classmates' academic performance by impeding the regular flow of classroom instruction.

Positive Impacts of Classroom Management

In their study, Oliver et al. (2011) found that the implementation of effective classroom management strategies and practices by teachers can lead to a reduction in students' aggressive, negative, sluggish, and inattentive behaviors during the learning process. Educators who implement successful classroom management strategies can anticipate enhanced academic outcomes inside their classrooms. Research has demonstrated that the use of good classroom management strategies has a substantial impact on students' academic progress and serves to mitigate behavioral issues among students (Klopfer et al., 2017.; Korpershoek et al., 2016).

The results of a study conducted by Klopfer et al (2019), validate the notion that offering instruction on proactive approaches to tackle emotional and behavioral difficulties in children might result in a shift in the attitudes and teaching methods of pre-service teachers. This change in mindset is likely to result in teachers responding more positively when addressing undesirable behaviors, enhancing their classroom management.

Teacher-student relationships

Positive connections between instructors and students have a crucial role, particularly in early elementary school, since these relationships can potentially enhance children's intellectual and behavioral development (Garwood et al., 2017). Marzano's (2013) research has revealed that the quality of teacher-student connections is a fundamental element that significantly impacts all

other areas of classroom management. The meta-analysis findings found that teachers who established high-quality relationships with their students experienced, on average, a 31% reduction in discipline difficulties, rule infractions, and associated issues over the course of one year compared to teachers who did not cultivate such relationships (Marzano & Marzano, 2013). The study also found that the optimal teacher-student interactions are distinguished by specific teaching characteristics, namely, displaying suitable levels of authority, demonstrating appropriate levels of collaboration, and being cognizant of kids with elevated needs (Marzano & Marzano, 2013).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Burden and Byrd (2010) emphasized the significance of acknowledging and valuing the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students in order to cultivate an optimal educational setting and mitigate disruptive behaviors. Teachers, particularly those operating within multicultural communities, to serve as role models for their students and to possess a comprehensive understanding of the cross-cultural disparities between their students' native culture and the desired culture (Al-Obaydi, 2019). This awareness is crucial in order to avoid overlooking situations that may evoke sensitivity. Culturally responsive classroom management is an educational technique that effectively manages classrooms by incorporating cultural responsiveness for all students rather than solely focusing on racial or ethnic minority students (Al-Obaydi, 2019).

In their study conducted in (2004), Weinstein et al., proposed a comprehensive framework for Culturally Responsive Classroom Management. This framework, derived from existing literature on culturally responsible pedagogy, multicultural counseling, and caring, consists of five essential components. These components include:

1. the recognition and acknowledgment of one's cultural perspective and biases,
2. the acquisition of knowledge regarding students' cultural backgrounds,
3. the awareness of the broader social, economic, and political context,
4. the ability and willingness to employ culturally appropriate management strategies and
5. the dedication to fostering caring and inclusive classroom communities.

The objective of classroom management, in turn, is to establish a conducive setting wherein students exhibit acceptable behavior driven by a feeling of personal accountability rather than being motivated by the fear of retribution or the pursuit of rewards (Weinstien et al., 2004).

Challenges

The challenge of effective classroom management can be attributed to the inadequate focus on the content, insufficient formal training in the field, and the absence of pedagogy grounded in real-world experiences (Eisenman et al., 2015). According to a 2014 poll by the National Council on Teacher Quality, over 40 % of newly hired instructors in 2012 expressed the need for more adequate preparation in effectively managing classroom scenarios. Novice educators often experience a phenomenon known as "reality shock" upon entering the classroom, as they encounter a discrepancy between the theoretical emphasis of their teacher education programs and the practical demands of managing a classroom (Roache & Lewis, 2011).

One challenge for educators in having a positive classroom management plan is that preservice programs exhibit variation not just in the degree to which they incorporate instruction on classroom management but also in the specific content related to classroom management that is included (Stough et al., 2015). As Brownwell et al. (2005) state, the distinction becomes evident when comparing the curriculum of special education programs with that of general education programs. The training provided to general education teachers before

their service mainly emphasizes content knowledge and group instruction. In contrast, the training provided to preservice special education teachers tends to prioritize modifications and individualized instruction.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that engaging in collaborative efforts with cooperating or mentor teachers yields favorable results for preservice, novice, and beginning educators (Brownwell et al., 2005). Preservice field experiences, undertaken with a classroom management curriculum, should incorporate a diverse student population and foster collaboration between preservice and in-service teachers (Brownell et al., 2005). When providing evidence-based practices to support classroom management, it is essential to identify the obstacles that hinder teachers' adoption of the practices due to the educators' ability (Monahan et al., 2014).

The absence of longitudinal studies hinders researchers from determining if the favorable impacts of positive classroom management observed in a given year are enhanced, sustained, or nullified by succeeding classroom experiences (Garwood et al., 2017). According to Garwood et al. (2017), inadequate classroom management practices employed by teachers may compound behavior problems among students already at risk for academic issues. Overall, the literature highlights the significance of recognizing and dealing with unconscious bias, cultural issues, and relationships to reduce disparities in disciplinary outcomes and establish an inclusive learning environment that promotes the success of all students. Implementing restorative methods and offering continuous support and training to teachers are crucial measures for attaining this objective.

Social Emotional Learning

The notion of social-emotional learning (SEL) has had a resurgence in both educational practice and policy despite its longstanding presence in the field (Soland & Kuhfeld, 2022).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) encompasses a range of dimensions that educational institutions commonly aim to shape (Soland & Kuhfeld, 2022). Other terms associated with SEL include "social and emotional skills," "soft skills," and "noncognitive skills." School-based SEL refers to implementing practices and policies to facilitate the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, and attitudes by children and adults (Elias et al., 2015). As Elias et al., (2015) suggests, these efforts are designed to increase personal development, foster positive social interactions, promote ethical behavior, and facilitate effective and productive work.

Student's social-emotional skills are developed through a variety of elements which include school experiences (Loeb et al., 2019). Furthermore, the inclusion of policies and practices aimed at enhancing a school's culture and climate, as well as fostering positive relationships, can further enhance a student's SEL development (Valosek et al., 2019). Jackson (2018), found that teachers have the potential to influence the social-emotional development of students, leading to favorable outcomes such as improved grade point average, timely completion of grades, reduced suspensions, and increased attendance throughout the school day. This section will discuss the fundamental skills and abilities of social and emotional learning (SEL), as well as SEL programs such as Emozi and Second Step. It will also cover topics such as mindfulness, cultural sensitivity, the application of SEL, teacher training in SEL, and the effects of SEL.

Core Competencies of SEL

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has defined five fundamental categories of social and emotional competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, and responsible decision-making (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). CASEL, 2020 describe each competency as the following:

- Self-awareness refers to an individual's capacity to contemplate and comprehend their own emotions, thoughts, values, and experiences, and the potential impact of these internal factors on their subsequent behaviors
- The self-management core competency pertains to an individual's capacity to effectively regulate and exert control over their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.
- The social awareness competency encompasses the enhancement of various skills, such as empathetic capacity, perspective-taking abilities across numerous contexts, awareness of individuals and groups from different backgrounds, and the commitment to equitable treatment of others.
- Interpersonal skills pertains to one's capacity to develop and sustain healthy and mutually beneficial relationships by effectively connecting with others and considering their emotions in various scenarios and social interactions (CASEL, 2020).
- Responsible decision-making encompasses the capacity to make constructive and beneficial choices, taking into account many individual and societal considerations such as personal and scholastic objectives, ethical principles, safety considerations, and prevailing social norms.

These competencies enhance students' academic achievement, foster positive social behaviors, and cultivate social connections during their years in school (Elias et al., 2015; Valosek et al., 2019). Additionally, they mitigate behavioral issues and psychological discomfort while equipping young individuals with the necessary skills to thrive in higher education, professional settings, familial environments, and society (Mahoney et al., 2018).

SEL Programs

Social and emotional learning programs consist of a carefully designed educational

framework that includes systematically organized units and learning opportunities (Durlak et al., 2022). These programs aim to cultivate environments that foster healthy relationships for individuals of all ages, facilitating acquiring knowledge, attitudes, and skills linked to social and emotional competencies (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019). The National Commission on SEL (2018), states that programs can be implemented through various organizational strategies. Standalone classroom instruction, integration of SEL principles into academic curricula, and comprehensive whole-school methods are a few of the ways.

Emozi

One curriculum that has had favorable effects on all students is Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), now called Emozi (Taylor et al., 2017). As Barrett (2017), explains, the SEL lessons and activities incorporate explicit instruction on critical principles such as gratitude, self-regulation, and reflection. These instructional approaches leverage literacy as a means to effectively teach SEL. Emozi integrates these fundamental skills by utilizing a theoretical framework called the theory of constructed emotion, which incorporates aspects of emotion and neurobiology (Barrett, 2017). Meta-analyses examining immediate and enduring effects have provided substantial evidence of the significant outcomes within students' social, emotional, and academic growth achieved through Emozi (Osher & Berg, 2017). Osher and Berg (2017), also stated that programs like Emozi have a favorable impact on classroom environments by fostering a conducive atmosphere and facilitating optimal learning conditions, as described by researchers as being characterized by care, cooperation, cultural responsiveness, effective management, active participation, and safety.

Second Step

Second Step, which primarily aims to instruct students in developing social-emotional

skills is crucial for long-term success and is another proven effective SEL curriculum (Perez-Clark et al., 2023). The program consists of several components, including classroom curriculum, audiovisual elements, training materials, resources, and administrator manuals. Top et al., 2016 state that the Second Step curriculum aims to enhance students' comprehension, regulation, and articulation of emotions, cultivate healthier interpersonal connections, and promote the exercise of conscientious decision-making both inside the school environment and in their lives outside of school through the use of engaging lessons. Lessons provide valuable skills for overcoming the various problems encountered in life since research suggests that evading unpleasant occurrences may contribute to heightened emotional difficulties (Perez-Clark et al., 2023). Providing young individuals with educational resources and practical experiences that allow them to use their talents in supervised environments could enhance their capacity to maintain self-control and make constructive decisions (Committee for Children, 2020).

Mindfulness

In recent years, there has been an increasing acceptance among educators towards the widely adopted concept of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness, sometimes simplified to include breathing exercises and meditation, should recognize its cultural roots as it utilizes mindfulness to improve productivity and focus (Shilts, 2018). Duane et al., 2021 address the need for educators to implement mindfulness in affirming, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed ways. Mindfulness-based interventions have been found to enhance students' self-awareness and bolster their capacity to tolerate distress (Duane et al., 2021). According to Morton (2022), the implementation of trauma-informed practices in schools has been associated with the development of enduring resilience in kids. This, in turn, has been found to result in

notable enhancements in behavioral patterns, reductions in suspension and expulsion rates, as well as significant gains in academic performance.

Culturally Sensitive

The growing emphasis on social and emotional education has appropriately led to a heightened examination of equity-related concerns (Walls, 2021). Walls states that it is essential to recognize that cultural and experiential factors influence social interaction and emotional responses. Allbright et al. (2019) discovered that Black students, Latinx students, and students in special education exhibit the lowest levels of social-emotional learning (SEL). Furthermore, these disparities persist even when comparing these groups to different sub-populations of students within the same educational institution (Allbright et al., 2019). Consequently, programs aimed at fostering social and emotional development must acknowledge and address this inherent reality if they are to make a positive impact (Hurd et al., 2021).

Implementation

According to Durlak et al. (2011), the fidelity of implementing a high-quality program is crucial for achieving favorable outcomes in any social-emotional learning curriculum. One well-recognized obstacle in executing school-based interventions is the issue of monitoring and the assurance of program implementation with high fidelity (Green et al., 2021). District leaders must demonstrate their commitment to the successful implementation and long-term viability of initiatives by incorporating assessment periods and ways to monitor program implementation with fidelity (Perez-Clark et al., 2023).

Teacher Training and Support

The dependence on external facilitators to hire is an obstacle many educational institutions must consider when implementing an SEL curriculum (Green et al., 2021). In order

to effectively implement everyday practices, educational institutions must train staff to ensure the presence of adequately qualified personnel well-versed in the social-emotional learning curriculum (Perez-Clark et al., 2023).

Impact of SEL

The study conducted by Soland and Kuhfeld (2021) revealed a significant growth in SEL status with substantial growth in self-management and self-efficacy. The existing body of data on social and emotional learning practices implemented within educational settings has provided evidence of notable improvements within students' social skills, behaviors, as well as academics (Albright et al., 2019). Specifically, these practices have been shown to facilitate the development of positive social behaviors, reduce disruptive conduct, mitigate emotional distress, and enhance academic performance, as reflected by improved grades and test scores. The findings of Mahoney and Durlak 2022 demonstrate consistent evidence replicated in multiple meta-analyses conducted by different investigators at various time points. The results support their initial two hypotheses, which propose that universal, school-based social and emotional learning programs would significantly improve students' personal, social, and academic adjustment. These improvements were observed both immediately after the programs and during follow-up assessments.

Durlak et al., 2011 revealed that integrating social-emotional learning initiatives into preK-12 educational settings can yield positive outcomes. The influence of SEL on students within educational institutions can extend beyond their graduation, leaving a lasting impression on their overall well-being (Taylor et al., 2017). In summary, the literature indicates that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can be a highly effective method for promoting fairness and

eliminating disparities in discipline. However, this is only the case when SEL is applied carefully and in combination with initiatives aimed at tackling structural obstacles and prejudices.

Restorative Practices

In 2014, the Obama administration implemented guidelines pertaining to student punishment that recommended school districts update their zero-tolerance policies and adopt an alternative disciplinary approach, such as restorative practices (Lash, 2019). Restorative practices within the educational context represent a method that serves as an alternative to traditional student disciplinary measures (Augustine et al., 2018). The primary objective of this approach is to mitigate the necessity of excluding students from school (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). The restorative practices method provides a framework for analyzing instances of student misbehavior within the framework of interpersonal connections and subsequently facilitating the process of repairing these connections via acts of forgiveness and restoration (Joseph et al., 2021). Restorative practices also support the larger educational society by creating a sense of belonging and creating communities within the classrooms and school (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). This section will examine the historical background, techniques, effectiveness, criticisms, and implementation of restorative practices.

The History of Restorative Practices

Restorative practices have a historical precedent, as indigenous cultures have long prioritized holding offenders accountable and engaging in collaborative efforts to establish a framework for repairing and rejuvenating relationships (Kim et al., 2023). In 1994, a high school in Queensland, Australia, pioneered implementing restorative practices to address unwanted behaviors within the school (Blood, 2005). Subsequently, the movement expanded significantly and garnered adoption in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, many European nations,

Canada, and the United States (Costello et al., 2019a). Restorative justice, another term for restorative practices, has been effectively employed within the criminal and juvenile justice systems in the United States, prompting suggestions for its integration within the educational environment (Fronius et al., 2019). In criminal justice, the primary emphasis is on the offender, who must fulfill their obligation to the principles of justice and the state (Lodi et al., 2022). Consequently, Lodi et al. (2022) also state that the victim assumes a secondary role as the instigator of the criminal proceedings, with the state assuming full responsibility for their representation.

Restorative Practice Strategies

The objectives of restorative practices extend beyond those directly involved in or impacted by misconduct, encompassing the broader educational community (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). Restorative practices ensure that all individuals involved in a relationship, including offenders, victims, and community members, are held responsible for their actions (Costello et al., 2019a). In contrast to exclusionary disciplinary measures, restorative practices aim to foster a collaborative environment by facilitating dialogue between victims and offenders (Brummer, 2021). This approach provides a secure platform for both parties to express their perspectives respectfully (Costello et al., 2019a).

The fundamental principle of restorative practices is the concept that individuals are more likely to enact positive transformations when those in positions of power engage in collaborative actions with them rather than imposing actions onto them or acting on their behalf (Buckmaster, 2016). According to Buckmaster (2016), the Social Discipline Window, a restorative strategy, necessitates the establishment of an optimal balance between stringent control and limit setting and ample support, encouragement, and nurturing.

Amstutz and Mullet (2015) state that there are six primary objectives for restorative practices:

- Fostering comprehension and cultivating empathy among all parties involved
- Attentively attending to and addressing the needs of all stakeholders
- Promoting accountability and responsibility
- Facilitating the reintegration of students into the community
- Fostering the development of compassionate communities
- Effecting environmental modifications in instances where harm is being perpetuated

The restorative practices continuum, as shown in figure 3 outlines various strategies that schools can use, from less structured and more casual approaches to more structured and formal interventions (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). According to Costello et al. (2019a), the continuum commences with affective statements, progresses to affective questions, informal impromptu conversations, circles, and ultimately culminates in formal conferences.

Affective statements serve as a means of expressing to another individual the impact they have had on oneself through their actions, whether that impact is favorable or harmful. Complaints can be lodged when an individual engages in behavior that elicits discomfort or adversely affects another party (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). They provide an alternative to statements that are implicitly evaluative and have the potential to result in confrontation, disagreement, and additional discord (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021).

Restorative Practices are predicated upon the fundamental principle of collaborative problem-solving (Costello et al., 2019b).



Note. (Costello et al., 2019b).

Figure 3: Restorative Practices Continuum

Collaboration between educators and learners can be employed to address issues and establish shared understanding effectively. It is imperative for all parties concerned to allocate sufficient time, maintain composure, and demonstrate a willingness to collaborate (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). A strategy involving affective questions is employed to obtain the necessary responses for issue resolution (Costello et al., 2019b). These inquiries elicit the individual's emotional state and the underlying reasons for their emotional response (Costello et al., 2019b; Amstutz & Mullet, 2015).

Small impromptu conferences are the third step within the restorative practices continuum (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). This particular element occupies a position on the continuum between the informal and formal dimensions of restorative practices, and it addresses low-level occurrences that include multiple students (Costello et al., 2019a). Whether the incident occurs within the confines of the classroom, hallway, cafeteria, or beyond the premises of the educational institution during an excursion, the implementation of this approach facilitates the harmonious reconciliation of opposing parties, expediting the resolution of the matter at hand, thereby preventing its escalation into a more consequential event (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). During the conference, the staff member employs the restorative questions framework, wherein the students are prompted to reflect upon the sequence of events, their pre and post-incident thoughts, the individuals impacted by the occurrence, and the necessary steps to rectify the situation (Costello et al., 2019a).

Another approach that can be employed is the utilization of circles, which can be categorized as either proactive or reactive (Costello et al., 2019b). Proactive circles are employed to cultivate interpersonal connections (Evanovich et al., 2020). It is recommended that educators

employ this particular pedagogical approach for around 80% of the time in order to foster a sense of community among students and effectively disseminate course material.

As Evanovich et al. (2020) explain, as students gain increased familiarity and proficiency in utilizing the circular format throughout various facets of their academic routine, they can employ this format for problem-solving purposes and tackling more substantial challenges. Responsive Circles are convened in response to an occurrence, disagreement, or problem (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021). Restorative practices serve as a mechanism for students to assume accountability for their conduct, recognize the potential consequences of their behavior on others, and devise a strategy to repair the damaged relationship (Costello et al., 2019b).

Success of Restorative Practices

The impacts of restorative practices have been examined by researchers over varying durations of one, two, three, and seven years of application (Huguley et al., 2022). According to a study conducted in 2016 by Gregory et al., increased implementation of restorative practices during an academic year led to a decrease in teacher referrals for instances of misconduct or defiance. Armour (2013) presents findings that there was a significant reduction of 84% in suspensions among 6th-grade students in a Texas school following the implementation of restorative practices. Additionally, there was a notable decrease in the number of referrals. Implementing restorative practices in a Minnesota primary school significantly reduced disciplinary referrals, in-school suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions (Riestenber, 2003). Specifically, the school saw a 57% decrease in discipline referrals, a 35% decrease in the average duration of in-school suspensions, and a 77% decrease in out-of-school suspensions. According to Lewis (2009), a high school located in West Philadelphia, which was previously identified as one of the state's "Persistently Dangerous Schools," experienced a significant reduction in violent

acts and major incidents. The school witnessed a 52% decrease in such incidents following the implementation of restorative practices. Subsequently, in the following year, there was a further decline of 40% in these occurrences.

Studies have also indicated that restorative practices have demonstrated efficacy in mitigating the disproportionate suspension rates experienced by students of color, male students, and children with disabilities in some instances (Kim et al., 2023). In their study, Vincent et al. (2016) collaborated with a high school to conduct a field test of training for restorative discipline, which was implemented as part of an initiative to decrease school-wide discipline. The researchers observed that introducing this program resulted in greater levels of perceived racial justice and reduced office discipline referrals (ODRs). The study additionally emphasized that the occurrence of ODRs diminished to a complete absence for Black, Asian, and multiracial students after the execution of implementing restorative practices (Vincent et al., 2016).

The Case Against Restorative Practices

Joseph-McCatty and Hnilica (2023) found that a significant challenge to the successful execution of restorative justice was the perception, held by many professionals, that this approach was excessively lenient towards students or that students would exploit this leniency to engage in misconduct. Goldys (2016) found that not all individuals exhibited receptiveness or a willingness to implement restorative practices. Educators interviewed during the study believed that students must learn from their errors by implementing disciplinary measures, and their reluctance to repeat the behavior is their aversion to facing punitive consequences (Goldys, 2016). Another one of the challenges encountered during the implementation of restorative practice is when certain victims express reluctance or unwillingness to participate in a conference or circle alongside the one responsible for causing them harm or distress. Victim-

offender conferencing is a problem-solving approach that prioritizes future outcomes over the admission of previous misdeeds (Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023).

Implementation of Restorative Practices

Implementing restorative practices necessitates comprehensive training and a fundamental transformation in the mindset of educators and staff members, as it is a reform approach heavily influenced by contextual factors (Kim et al., 2023). Likewise, the successful execution of restorative practice is enhanced when educators and school officials demonstrate support for this approach (Evanovich et al., 2020). Evanovich et al. (2020) explain that the manifestation of support and commitment from school leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring the long-term viability and efficacy of the implementation process. Establishing a "trusting community" has been recognized as an essential prerequisite for successfully implementing restorative practices (Brown, 2017). The study conducted by Brown (2017) examines the implementation of restorative practices in twelve high schools in California. It specifically focuses on the staff's beliefs regarding the consistent and fair enforcement of school regulations and how these perceptions relate to the preparation for restorative justice practices. For the successful implementation of restorative practices in schools, it is imperative to exhibit patience, secure cooperation from all relevant parties, and effectively address the genuine difficulties at hand (White & Weiss, 2022).

White and Weiss (2022) found that restorative practices can assist educational institutions in cultivating and sustaining a constructive atmosphere and addressing instances of misconduct, including those involving physical assault. When educational institutions establish an environment that fosters problem-solving, accountability, and sympathetic understanding, students engage actively and demonstrate enthusiasm in assuming responsibility and

collaborative leadership in facilitating its implementation (White & Weiss, 2022). Lodi et al., (2022) provide evidence supporting positive outcomes in schools, including benefits for teachers, students, and the wider school community. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the criteria for implementing restorative approaches and practices in educational contexts may vary. In summary, the literature indicates that restorative practices can effectively address the issue of disproportionality in education by promoting fairness, cultivating inclusive school environments, and tackling the underlying reasons for disciplinary discrepancies.

Summary

This literature review provides an analysis of literature investigating the adverse effects that disproportionality has exerted on students, as well as literature examining the underlying factors contributing to this phenomenon. The suspension rate of Black children has been adversely affected in comparison to their White and Hispanic counterparts due to the implementation of zero tolerance policies, classroom management methods, and the absence of social and emotional learning.

Although further research is required to fully understand the implications of restorative practices, preliminary findings suggest that they have the potential to decrease the issue of disproportionate disciplinary measures within schools nationwide. The study will enhance the existing literature in this chapter by conducting research in a rural environment. This research aims to assist educators and policymakers in developing more efficient, culturally appropriate, and long-lasting methods for resolving conflicts, fostering community, and reducing disciplinary disparities between Black students and their peers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF STUDY

The focus of this study is to address the disproportionality within student discipline and to find alternatives to punitive discipline to better support students and provide students with a sense of community within their schools. In this chapter, I will examine the methods employed to address this problem of practice and to assess the effectiveness of these efforts.

Study Guiding Questions

The aim of this study is to investigate potential solutions that might mitigate the disparity in disciplinary measures between Black students and their counterparts at Seahawk Middle School, located in Eastern North Carolina. This study is directed by the following questions

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black students in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?
2. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' sense of belonging at in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?
3. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' relationships with staff at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?

The primary objective of the initial question is to determine whether restorative circles can effectively improve student conduct and address the issue of disciplinary disproportionality, which forms the central focus of this study. Questions 2 and 3 primarily address the topics of interpersonal connections and students' feelings of inclusion within the educational environment. Both of these effects are secondary to the broader goal of closing the discipline gap between Black students and their peers.

Study Design and Rationale

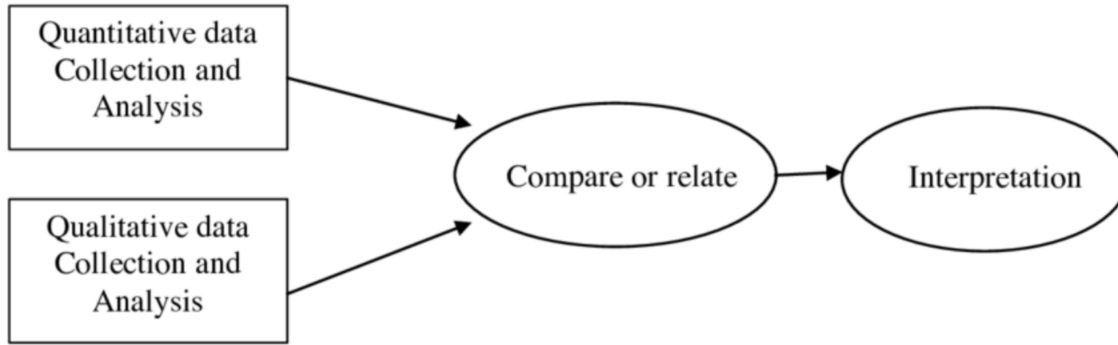
This study aims to assess the influence of restorative circles on Black students at a rural, economically disadvantaged middle school in Eastern North Carolina. During the 2024-25 academic year, restorative circles were introduced in 20% of the classrooms of Seahawk Middle School as a promising measure to reduce disciplinary disparities. Table 2 depicts the chronological sequence of events for this improvement science study. After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and consent from the 20% of staff members who were responsible for implementing restorative circles, my CIPs and I conducted a professional learning session on restorative circles. After this session, the staff commenced the implementation of the discussed strategies in their classrooms. The progress of the implementation was monitored using the walkthrough instrument.

This study utilized an improvement science approach, incorporating a convergent mixed methods design. A convergent mixed methods research design is a systematic approach for gathering, examining, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data within a single study to investigate a problem of practice, as shown in Figure 4. Qualitative research involves gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data, primarily narratives and visuals, to understand better a specific topic of interest (Mertler, 2022). Quantitative research, in contrast, depends on gathering and examining numerical data to depict, elucidate, forecast, or regulate variables and phenomena of interest (2022). Employing a convergent mixed methods strategy requires gathering abundant and intricate data, which leads to a holistic comprehension of the study problem (2022). Qualitative data was gathered during the investigation using focus groups and the walkthrough instrument. The collection of quantitative data was facilitated by Educators Handbook, which effectively organized discipline data.

Table 2

Study Timeline

May-September 2024	October-December 2024	January-February 2025	February-April 2025
<u>Phase 1</u>	<u>Phase 2</u>	<u>Phase 3</u>	<u>Phase 4</u>
-Met with Collaborative Study Partners	-Submitted IRB	-Teachers Implemented	-Data Analysis
-Analyzed Student Discipline Data	-Pre Implementation Focus Groups	Restorative Circles	-Dissemination of Findings
-Developed Focus Group Protocol	-With CIPs Provided Restorative Circles Professional Learning	-Post Implementation Focus Group	
-Planned and Developed Restorative Practices Professional Learning	-Teachers Implemented Restorative Circles	-Analyzed Student Discipline Data	
-Conducted Pilot Study		-Analyzed walkthrough data	
Scholarly Practitioner Journaling – Captured field notes during CIPs meetings			



Note. (Mertler, 2022).

Figure 4: Convergent Mixed Methods Design.

By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data throughout the study, a comprehensive examination of the effects of restorative circles on Black students can be achieved.

Mixed methods research enables a comprehensive investigation by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. Mertler (2022) asserts that employing a mixed methods research approach enables the utilization of the advantages of one data type and analysis to compensate for the limitations of the other. Moreover, the amalgamation and incorporation of quantitative and qualitative data yields a more comprehensive examination of the subject at hand than either method used in isolation (Mertler, 2022).

This study utilized the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) model, a framework for the improvement cycle (see Figure 5). The PDSA, or Plan-Do-Study-Act, is a methodology used to assess the effectiveness of an adopted change (Perry et al., 2020). Implementing four phases enables the cognitive process of breaking down the task into separate steps, planning, evaluating the outcome, improving it, and then doing more testing. Walter Shewhart, a polymath in the 1920s, utilized improvement science to study and apply his knowledge in statistics, engineering, and physics. As a result, he successfully created several tools for process control (Howard et al., 2023). His work pioneered the blueprint for the current Plan-Do-Study-Act or PDSA Model. Despite being widely disregarded by educators during his lifetime, Shewhart's PDSA model has become the foundation of what is now known as improvement science in education, focusing on learning and improvement tools (Moen & Norman, 2010). It enables individuals to develop hypotheses on necessary modifications and evaluate them within a "continuous feedback loop" (Perry et al., 2020). The design of the study specifically targeted the study questions that

What changes
are we going to
make based on
our findings?



What exactly are
we going to do?

What were
the results?

When and how
did we do it?

Note. (Moen & Norman, 2010).

Figure 5. Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA).

Table 3

Matrix of Study Questions, Methodology, and Approach to Data Analysis

<u>Study Question</u>	<u>Methodology</u>	<u>Method</u>	<u>Analysis</u>
What is the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black populations in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern NC?	Quantitative	Discipline data	Descriptive statistics
What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' sense of belonging at in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern NC?	Qualitative	Focus Groups	Inductive analysis coding
What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' relationships with staff at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?	Qualitative	Focus Groups	Inductive analysis coding

serve as the foundation for the study. Table 3 illustrates the approach, methodology, and data analysis that was employed to address the inquiries guiding questions.

Context of the Study

The context of the study is Seahawk County Middle School, situated in Seahawk County, a rural area in eastern North Carolina. Seahawk County Middle School serves students in the sixth through eighth grades and has an estimated student population of around 680. Out of the total of 680 students, 38% identify as Hispanic, 35% identify as Black, 28% identify as White and 4% identify as belonging to other racial or ethnic groups (see Figure 1). The school employs approximately 65 staff members, with 45% of the personnel being Black, 49% being White, and 6% being Hispanic.

Study Partners

Engaging in collaboration with my study partners is crucial for implementing the improvement science method. My study partners consist of the district's Superintendent, Director of Human Capital, and Director of Testing and Accountability. Table 4 shows how my collaborative study partners actively participated throughout the entire study process. During the process, I documented their involvement by noting their name in the minutes of every meeting and recording their participation in conducting the focus groups. Their collective expertise, extensive experience, and commitment to assisting me enabled me to execute the change intervention effectively.

Ethical Considerations

As part of this study, I fulfilled East Carolina University's requirements for the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) modules. This program is specifically tailored for educational researchers who are conducting studies involving human participants. It

Table 4

Collaborative Study Partners' Roles

Collaborative Study Partners	Role in Study	Meetings
- Superintendent - Director of Testing and Accountability - Director of Human Capital	Initial collaboration on identifying the problem of practice and proposing potential solutions for addressing it. This team played a crucial role in supervising implementation, analyzing the data, and reflecting on the impact of restorative circles.	Monthly meetings were scheduled to oversee the implementation of restorative circles using walkthrough data. Data analysis sessions were also be planned monthly to dive into discipline data throughout the school, specially looking at the classrooms implementing restorative circles.
All educators of Seahawk County Middle School.	All staff completed an initial professional development on restorative practices to decide whether they want to join the study group.	The initial training was held in the Winter of 2024. Discipline statistics were shared to the entire staff twice in the 2024-25 school year. A comparison was presented between classes that practice restorative circles and the rest of the school.
Families of students from Seahawk Middle School.	All families were invited to participate in an informational workshop regarding restorative practices, focusing on restorative circles.	The initial workshop was held in the Fall of 2024.
Teachers involved in implementing restorative circles	Teachers participating in the study received introductory training in restorative circles. These teachers then subsequently implemented restorative circles in their classrooms during the 2024-25 school year. Further professional	Bi-monthly meetings were conducted with these teachers to review the fidelity of implementation, address any issues related to restorative circles, and analyze discipline data from their classrooms and the school. Focus groups were completed both before

Students who are in the classes of teachers who are implementing restorative circles.	development sessions were conducted for these teachers during the 2024-25 school year. Students in classes where restorative circles were used engaged in focus groups to assess the impact.	and after implementation to collect qualitative data on the impact of restorative circles. Focus groups were done both before and after implementation to collect qualitative data on the impact of restorative circles.
Families of students who are in the classes where restorative circles are implemented.	An informative session was conducted for families of students participating in classes utilizing restorative circles.	Randomly selected families were invited to engage focus groups to assess the effects of restorative circles. Ten families were utilized in the data collecting.

is a mandatory requirement set by the Institutional Review Board of East Carolina University and Medical Center, as documented in Appendix A, IRB Approval Form.

Alternatively, Seahawk County school district lacks a formal research requirement and process for approving research studies. Although there is no official procedure, discussions occurred with the Superintendent to ensure that the study being carried out aligned with his vision for the district. A written agreement was drafted allowing the completion of the study within the middle school.

Staff members of SMS were recruited to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary so a consent letter was shared with potential participants documenting the requirements for their involvement in the study, notwithstanding their agreement to participate. Students and family members acting as participants were issued a letter requesting their agreement to participate in the investigation. Written permission was obtained from all participants before conducting any focus groups or collecting and analyzing data. Staff and families utilized Appendix B, while students utilized Appendix C, as they required parental consent.

Consent letters and research protocol ensures that all focus group responses are confidential and securely stored for documentation purposes. The data from this investigation was gathered and examined in partnership with my collaborative study partners. The data was securely saved in a password-protected Cloud-based storage using Microsoft 365. The data collected will be retained for five years and subsequently deleted by me in the capacity as the scholarly practitioner leading the study. As the principal, my responsibility was to supervise and assist the staff members in implementing restorative circles in this study. Therefore, one of my

CIPs led the staff focus groups to ensure that the staff feels at ease expressing their genuine ideas about the change intervention.

Study Procedures

This investigation seeks to analyze the impact of restorative circles on reducing undesirable behavior in classrooms and school settings, to enable educational institutions to effectively tackle and alleviate issues related to discipline disproportionality. Each phase of this study followed the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle (PDSA), which is a systematic approach employed to measure the efficacy of an implemented intervention (Moen & Norman, 2010). There is a long history of success for this approach in improvement science. It offers a well-defined strategy for implementing the change intervention and if required, can be replicated multiple times as the need arises (Perry et al., 2020). Every stage was meticulously organized in cooperation with my collaborative study partners (CIPs).

Phase I

Plan

Upon reviewing the research on restorative practices and discipline data from 2022-23 at SMS our team decided to implement restorative circles to tackle the issue of disproportionality. Phase I of this study began in late Fall of 2024, when my collaborative study partners and I built a professional learning plan to educate staff on restorative practices with an emphasis on restorative circles (see Table 5). We explored whether the implementation of restorative circles, employed with fidelity, reduced discipline disproportionality. The primary goal was to observe a positive impact on behaviors, as evidenced by a decrease in the frequency of disciplinary referrals among our Black students. A secondary goal was to assess whether Black students experience a positive change in their interactions with staff and an improvement in their sense of

Table 5

Phase I – Building The Foundation

<u>PDSA Steps</u>	<u>Plan for each step</u>
Plan	With CIPs we created focus group questions, a walkthrough document, as well as a detailed professional learning (PL) plan for restorative practices, with an emphasis on restorative circles.
Do	A pilot study using a cognitive lab approach to validate the focus group questions, as well as the walkthrough instrument was conducted.
Study	Analyzed the qualitative data from the pilot study. Made revisions to focus group questions and walkthrough instrument.
Act	Discussed with CIPs how to implement the focus groups, and the professional learning on restorative circles.

belonging.

Description of Participants and Recruitment Strategies

This study targeted staff members, students, and families of SMS students. A concise email was sent to recruit staff members to ask for volunteers for the study. The objective was to secure the participation of 20% of SMS staff members in the study and implement restorative circles in their classrooms. Ten students were randomly chosen from the participants' classes and requested to participate in the study, with the consent of their parents. The study involved inviting and obtaining agreement from ten families of students who are part of the same classes where restorative circles are being implemented.

Instrumentation

Collecting data was crucial for directing this study and addressing its guiding questions. The data collection process started with examining student discipline reports from Educators Handbook, a platform utilized by SMS for collecting and analyzing discipline data. More specifically the data from the Educators Handbook on student discipline addressed the study question of the influence of restorative circles on the behaviors of Black students. The quantitative data helped guide discussions with my collaborative study partners regarding potential interventions to rectify the disproportionality in discipline at SMS. Data from Educators Handbook was collected monthly during the study to examine trends in disciplinary referrals. This data was then utilized to assess if the restorative circle's intervention positively affected disproportionality in student discipline. The data was saved in a password-protected folder without including students' identities.

Before implementing the change intervention, a focus group was conducted using interview questions developed with the help of my study partners. The focus group questions

collected fundamental qualitative data from students, staff, and families. Participants responded to open-ended questions during the focus groups, with follow-up questions asked as necessary. These questions were presented during focus group sessions. The focus groups were carried out through in-person conversations, and information was gathered through focus groups with teachers, students, and families regarding restorative practices and disciplinary procedures at SMS (see Appendix D). The focus groups were conducted at the start and conclusion of the study. Data was securely stored and utilized solely for research objectives. Participants voluntarily participated in the focus group and signed a consent form to safeguard the study.

The focus group questions ask participants about their understanding of restorative practices, ways the school can improve behavior support, the atmosphere at SMS, and other topics related to its culture, environment, and behaviors. These questions helped to answer the study question on how restorative circles affect Black students' sense of belonging and relationships in school.

A walkthrough document recorded the fidelity of execution of restorative circles during the study. Appendix B displays the walkthrough document my collaborative study partners, and I used to monitor implementation. In our monthly meetings, we analyzed this data and the monthly discipline statistics from Educators Handbook. This data collection aims to determine whether restorative circles positively affect office referrals for Black students. Data collection and analysis are crucial for the success of this study. Utilizing the tools above enabled my collaborative study partners and me to make well-informed decisions regarding our next course of action.

Do

During phase 1, a pilot study using a cognitive lab approach was conducted to evaluate

the validity and reliability of the focus group instrument, as well as a walkthrough tool. My CIPs and I jointly developed the focus group protocol to ensure its alignment with the objectives of this investigation. The creation of the walkthrough tool for monitoring the execution of restorative circles also took place during this phase. Following the creation of these two instruments, the focus group protocol and the walkthrough tool, a cognitive laboratory technique was utilized. A cognitive laboratory employs the methods of conducting concurrent think-aloud interviews accompanied by subsequent probe questions (Jobe & Mingay, 1990). Cognitive laboratories receive direct feedback from participants and prove particularly beneficial when experimenting with novel test question formats. This approach has demonstrated its efficacy (Jobe & Mingay, 1990). The cognitive laboratory was conducted with the participation of a middle school counselor, a parent of a student at SMS, two assistant principals from other schools within the same school district as SMS, and a math interventionist. Throughout the laboratory, the team diligently addressed the crafting of the focus group questions and meticulously reviewed the walkthrough tool, providing ideas and adding comments for reflection.

Study

Following the pilot test, my CIPs and I used the qualitative data from the cognitive lab to enhance both the focus groups questions and the walkthrough tool. This investigation used a convergent mixed methods design. Utilizing a convergent, mixed methods approach necessitates collecting copious and complex data, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Mertler, 2022). Using quantitative and qualitative data can allow for a complete analysis of the impact of restorative circles on marginalized students. The qualitative data gathered in this pilot study was crucial for the success of the study as it offered the necessary

information for making adjustments to the instrumentation and the broader implementation of restorative circles.

Act

After making revisions to the focus group protocol and walkthrough tool, I met with my collaborative study partners to form a plan to conduct the pre-implementation focus groups. Our team also decided the parameters of the professional learning on restorative practices, with a focus on restorative circles.

Summary of Phase I

Phase 1 entails carrying out a pilot study and gathering qualitative input on the instruments that were utilized to gather data during the course of the study. The plan for implementing restorative circles professional learning also was developed during this phase.

Phase II

Phase II started with pre implementation focus groups to capture baseline data from staff, students, and families. In addition, focus groups were conducted by my collaborative study partners and me. Table 6 shows the steps that were taken in phase 2. Once the baseline data had been established teachers received restorative circles professional learning. The training on restorative circles encompassed a comprehensive understanding of restorative practices, with a specific focus on restorative circles. Additionally, it provides the necessary strategies for the successful implementation of restorative circles. The aim of this intervention is to mitigate the disproportionate rates of student discipline and decrease the frequency of referrals for Black students, while concurrently fostering a positive influence on students' sense of belonging and interpersonal connections within the educational setting.

Table 6

Phase 2 – The Plan

<u>PDSA Step</u>	<u>Plan for each step</u>
Plan	Planned for the collection of baseline pre-test focus groups with participants. Planned for the PL and the implementation of restorative circles.
Do	Conducted focus groups, completed professional learning on restorative circles and implemented restorative circles within 20% of classrooms.
Study	Collected post-test focus group data. Analyzed walkthrough data, as well as discipline data with my CIPs each month.
Act	With CIP developed a plan for conducting post implementation focus groups.

Plan

In collaboration with my CIPs, we planned Phase 2, which began with collecting baseline data from participants. Following the completion of focus groups, I coordinated with my CIPs, to implement restorative circles professional learning to staff. The restorative circle professional learning consisted of a three-hour training session that covers the rationale behind the benefits of restorative circles, as well as the strategies and skills that staff members can employ to effectively implement restorative circles in their classrooms.

Do

Phase 2 began with collecting baseline data from teachers, students and families through a focus groups. A collaborative study partner administered the focus groups to SMS staff, while the scholarly practitioner administered focus groups to families and students. During phase 2 a restorative practice trainer provided restorative practices professional learning. The PL was completed by the 20% of SMS staff that incorporated restorative circles in their classroom. The staff members responsible for executing restorative circles have obtained informed consent, participated in focus groups, and attended professional learning seminars on restorative circles.

Study

During the 2024-25 academic year, various data was gathered and examined with my CIPs. The impact of restorative circles was examined by analyzing discipline data from the Educators handbook using a descriptive analysis approach. Furthermore, the walkthrough data and focus group data was subjected to inductive coding analysis to evaluate the effects of restorative circles. Analyzing discipline data from the Educators handbook, walkthrough data, and focus groups data was used to assess the impact of restorative circles during phase 3. At the

beginning of each month, my CIPs and I convened to examine both qualitative data from the walkthrough document and quantitative data from Educators Handbook.

Act

With my CIPs we developed a plan for conducting focus groups with all of the key stakeholders, staff, students and families. Using the qualitative data from these focus groups, my CIPs and I, looked to determine if more PL is needed for the staff who are implementing restorative circles.

Summary of Phase II

Phase II of the study contains initial focus groups, as well as implementation of restorative circles professional learning for staff. The data collected from this phase of the study guided the work in phase III.

Phase III

Phase III is the final stage of the study. The main objective of this phase was to assess the impact and effectiveness of the implemented intervention, restorative circles. Table 7 shows the detailed plan of collecting and analyzing the data.

Plan

In phase III, I convened a meeting with my CIPs to develop a plan for analyzing data. The convergent mixed method design allows for qualitative and quantitative data to be collected simultaneously providing a comprehensive examination of the effects of restorative circles on students from Black students. Table 3 presents the data analysis plan for examining the data.

Do

The examination of the data with my CIPs was a crucial component of phase 3. In phase 3, the collection of focus group qualitative data, the organization of final walkthrough data,

Table 7

Phase 3 – Collecting The Data

<u>PDSA Step</u>	<u>Plan for each step</u>
Plan	With CIP developed a plan for analyzing data.
Do	Collected focus group data, Educators Handbook discipline data and walkthrough data.
Study	Analyzed the data with my CIPs to see if as the result of the implementation of restorative circles there has been a positive influence on behaviors as evidenced by a reduction in the number of disciplinary referrals for our Black students and if those same students see an improvement in their relationships with staff and see an improvement in their sense of belonging.
Act	Shared findings with stakeholders to address impact of RC on policy initiatives at district and state level.

together with discipline data from the Educators Handbook, was undertaken to facilitate a comprehensive data analysis throughout the study phase. Data on discipline was gathered from the 20% of classrooms that are using restorative circles, as well as from the remaining classrooms in the school.

Study

Following the focus groups meetings, the next step was to analyze the collected data using the plan in Table 3. I met with my study partners to analyze the qualitative data. The qualitative data obtained from the focus groups was transferred to a distinct document for coding. The main focus was on discovering common patterns and themes in the responses of study participants and making comparisons. Inductive coding was used throughout the analysis of the qualitative data. Inductive coding is a method of analyzing data in which the researcher examines and interprets unprocessed textual material to create concepts, themes, or a model of a process by making interpretations based on the facts. It is crucial to analyze quantitative data from the Educators Handbook of the 2024-25 school year to see if restorative circles had the desired positive impact.

Act

After collecting and analyzing the focus group data, the study findings were shared with various stakeholders, including families, and other schools within the district. This stage involved brainstorming ideas for future research recommendations based on the outcomes of my investigation.

Summary of Phase III

Phase III was the final research stage where qualitative and quantitative data were collected through focus groups, walkthroughs, and the Educators guide. Subsequently, this data

was analyzed with the help of study partners. Phase III aimed to assess the efficacy of the interventions implemented during Phase II.

Study Design Rigor

Scholarly study requires the essential attribute of rigor. Rigor often pertains to the reliability of your findings and the capacity to replicate similar results under the same circumstances. Mertler (2022) argues that the level of research rigor is closely associated with the trustworthiness of both quantitative and qualitative data. This trustworthiness is defined by four key factors: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

The focus group questions were developed through a collaborative effort between my study partners and myself. These questions were designed to align with and effectively capture the main focus of this study's guiding questions. Furthermore, preliminary research was undertaken to validate the data collection instrument and to identify potential difficulties with the focus groups. The final design of the data collection instruments was guided by feedback from participants in the pilot phase. Another step to prevent bias is for my collaborative study partners to conduct the focus groups with SMS staff. I desired to establish my role as their direct superior as separate from their feedback, ensuring that the participants have confidence that their comments will not have any influence on their employment.

The PDSA process enables systematic introspection, review, and modification as required throughout the study (Perry et al., 2020). The recurrence is crucial for the rigor of the study as it allows for collecting a more significant amount of data, yielding a more comprehensive understanding of the situation at hand and the impact restorative circles may have in the classroom. Another aspect of how this study design affects the rigor is its utilization of a mixed methods approach, which enables the incorporation of various data sources. Using multiple

sources of data enhances the understanding of the change intervention and its efficacy. This study utilizes a convergent mixed methods technique, which enables the utilization of multiple data sources (see Figure 5). Data triangulation, which involves the use of various data sources, can significantly improve the accuracy and precision of research conclusions (Mertler, 2022). Ultimately, with the assistance of my study collaborators, we meticulously scrutinized and assessed the data, reports, and conclusive analysis through member checking.

This investigation explicitly targets a single middle school in a rural area of eastern North Carolina, where only 20% of the faculty utilized restorative circles. Nevertheless, the study takes steps to promote transferability to allow findings to be implemented in schools around the state and nation, provided that they modify it to suit the specific needs of their school or district.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The study is delimited to a single school of approximately 680 students. The study was implemented with a sample representing 20% of the overall school population. The delimitation to a single school in a single district limits generalizability, but care was taken to capture sufficient detail to support transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of results to other similar settings.

A primary limitation of this study is the potential influence of professional learning (PL) on the staff's perspective of restorative practices and restorative circles. If staff members do not fully support the (PL), it could have a detrimental effect on the successful implementation of restorative circles. Another possible limitation is the teachers' ability to proficiently and precisely carry out restorative circles inside their classes. Although staff received training, ongoing coaching and feedback was necessary to effectively support them in implementing the

instruction. Finally, an additional potential limitation is the inherent biases of teachers and how this can affect their relationships with students, as well as disciplinary measures.

This study is premised on several assumptions, starting with the fact that each class at Seahawk County Middle School has a comparable distribution of behavior concerns and demographic characteristics. Furthermore, it is presumed that the varied makeup of students cultivates an atmosphere that maximizes student learning and conduct in all classrooms. Moreover, it is expected that the teachers in the focus group faithfully execute restorative circles in their classes. It is assumed that the Seahawk County Middle School staff members constantly follow the behavioral flow chart. Another presupposition is that every staff member at SMS is sincerely dedicated to the welfare of the kids and lacks any form of bias.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

Since 2010, I have held various positions at Seahawk County Schools. I have held positions as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, and am currently serving as a principal (since 2018). Throughout my tenure as a principal, I led an elementary school and began my first year as the principal of Seahawk Middle School in 2023. The main objective of this study is to design a strategy that effectively tackles the issue of disproportionality in student discipline, which can be implemented in schools nationwide. With sixteen years of experience as an educator, I have personally witnessed the empirical evidence about the unequal distribution of student disciplinary actions. This firsthand knowledge stems from my teacher, assistant principal, and principal roles. As the leader of the building, my responsibility is to identify vulnerabilities and develop strategies to mitigate them. That is why I chose to research the issue of disproportionality in student discipline. As a scholarly practitioner, I supervised every step of the study by overseeing my team of collaborative study partners, coordinating, strategizing, and

facilitating meetings, and implementing each stage of the PDSA framework. Significantly, the techniques and systems employed for data collection and analysis were designed to eliminate any potential for data distortion resulting from bias or external influence. Although I supervise the staff members of SMS, the focus groups were led by my CIPs to facilitate participant sharing. This was a deliberate and premeditated action to ensure that teachers did not experience undue pressure when answering the questions, allowing them to express themselves candidly and without apprehension of reprisal.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I discussed the research methods used in this study. The study questions were the driving force behind this study and gave extensive information on the utilization of the PDSA model and the convergent mixed methods methodology that was employed. In addition, the rigorous design of the study, ethical considerations, delimitations, limitations, and assumptions were discussed, along with my role as a scholarly practitioner. Chapter 4 will focus on the implementation, data collected, analysis, and results of the study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

With a specific focus on Black students, this study examined how restorative circles could reduce discipline referrals in classrooms and school settings. By implementing restorative circles educational institutions can effectively address and mitigate problems associated with discipline disproportionality and, by extension, with academic outcomes. This study utilized a convergent mixed methods approach to identify the impact of restorative circles on disproportionality within student discipline. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected throughout the study to answer the following guiding questions: (1) *What is the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black students in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?* (2) *What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' sense of belonging at in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?* and (3) *What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' relationships with staff at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?*

Chapter 4 will discuss the data collection process, how the data was analyzed, the demographics of participants and the results from the study.

Data Collection

As the scholarly practitioner leading this study, I analyzed the impact of restorative circles on Black students in a rural, low-socioeconomic middle school in Eastern, NC. The data collected provided evidence to assess the impact that restorative circles had on Black student's discipline referrals, the impact restorative circles had on Black students' sense of belonging, as well as the impact on Black students' relationships with staff members.

The data collection process outlined in Chapter 3 was executed precisely as specified from September 2024 to June 2025. During phase 2, data was gathered to assess the effects of restorative circles, as illustrated in Table 8.

Data Analysis

In phase III of implementation, the primary purpose was to evaluate the impact and efficacy of restorative circles. The employed convergent mixed-method design facilitated the simultaneous collection of qualitative and quantitative data. This included a thorough analysis of the impact of restorative circles on Black students. Table 3 (p. 62) outlines the data analysis plan for analyzing the data. All acquired data has been stored in a password-protected Microsoft 360 folder.

After collecting and compiling qualitative data from the focus groups, the inductive coding method for data analysis was applied to generate codes, categories, and themes from the collected data. Organizing the data in this manner demonstrated the significant impact of restorative circles on kids' sense of belonging, relationships between students and staff, and student discipline, particularly among Black students.

The data gathered from walkthroughs during the implementation of restorative circles was analyzed using inductive coding. These data were utilized to assess the integrity of restorative circle implementation and the questions posed by staff during the circles.

Educators Handbook is a platform utilized by SMS to gather student discipline data. This program categorizes data by demographics, gender, grade level, offenses, and further criteria. Descriptive statistics were employed to examine the data and ascertain whether restorative circles had the anticipated positive impact. Descriptive analysis was employed to identify trends and correlations within the qualitative data.

Table 8

Data Collection Timeline

What type of data was collected	When was data collected	How was it collected	What study question does it
Educators handbook discipline data.	Before, during, and after implementation of restorative circles.	Data was downloaded from Educators Handbook.	1. The impact of restorative circles on student behaviors for Black students.
Pre-implementation focus group sessions with staff, student and parents.	Focus groups were held with for each of the groups before implementation.	Notes were collected through the use of Otter.AI	2.Sense of belonging. 3.Relationships with staff.
Walkthrough data to monitor restorative circle implementation.	Monthly during implementation and completed by principal investigator and CIPs.	Monthly through classroom walkthroughs.	1. The impact of restorative circles on student behaviors for Black students.
Principal investigator journal entries	Monthly during implementation.	Was collected on a Microsoft Word document.	1.The impact of restorative circles on student behaviors for Black students.
Post-implementation focus group sessions with staff, student and parents.	Focus groups were held with for each of the groups following implementation.	Notes were collected through the use of Otter.ai.	2.Sense of belonging. 3.Relationships with staff.

Throughout the process of implementing the restorative circles into action, I kept a notebook in which observations were documented. Coding based on inductive analysis was utilized so that codes, categories, and themes could be defined more precisely. For the purpose of gathering qualitative and quantitative data, the convergent mixed-method design proved to be both useful and advantageous.

Results

American educational institutions have historically contended with disparities in student disciplinary measures. Data continues to show that punitive discipline does not correct the student behavior (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Students from minority racial or ethnic groups, from pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade, experience disciplinary actions in school at a disproportionately higher rate than their white peers (Wiley, 2021). This study examined the implementation of Restorative Circles in 20% of classrooms at a rural middle school in eastern North Carolina. The purpose of this study was to reduce student behavior and decrease referrals for Black students during the 2024-25 academic year.

Demographics

Table 9 summarizes the participants' backgrounds and demographics. I began each interview by capturing some background information from each of the study participants. This project aims to reduce the number of referrals for Black students. Table 9 indicates that all student participants in the focus groups were Black, as were all of the parents. This facilitated the acquisition of insights into the interpretations of restorative circles by Black students and families, as well as the effects on behaviors, students' sense of belonging, and relationships. The SMS staff is diverse, comprising 36% Black, 54% White, and 10% Hispanic.

In this study, staff members were invited to participate, with 67% of the participating staff

Table 9

Participants Demographics

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Gender (By percentage)</u>	<u>Race (By percentage)</u>
Students (10 total students)	Male – 50% Female – 50%	Black – 100% White – 0% Hispanic – 0%
Staff (12 total staff)	Male – 25% Female – 75%	Black – 67% White – 23% Hispanic – 0%
Parents (10 total parents)	Male – 20% Female – 80%	Black – 100% White – 0% Hispanic – 0%

Note. (PowerSchool, 2025)

members identifying as Black.

Results from Focus Question 1

The initial research question aimed to assess the influence of restorative circles on the disciplinary behavior of Black students at a rural, low-socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina. The data gathered during the study indicated a reduction in referrals across classrooms where teachers employed restorative circles. A decline in monthly referrals in Core 1 where restorative circles were implemented with fidelity compared to cores without such implementation was also evident, as well as a decrease in the percentage of referrals for Black students.

In the 2023-24 academic year, the staff members who would be implementing restorative circles in their 2024-2025 Core 1 classroom completed a total of 130 referrals (Table 10). During the 2024-25 school year, while the teachers were implementing restorative circles in their Core 1 classroom, their total referrals fell to 55. The reduction of 75 office referrals suggests that restorative circles had a positive influence on the classes in which they were implemented.

Restorative circles were implemented with fidelity in ten classrooms across SMS (Implementation Data, 2025). In those classes, teachers observed a reduction in the number of office referrals compared to the other three core classes they instruct (see Table 11).

The initial study question investigates differences in the number of referrals for Black students following implementation of restorative circles. The analysis reveals that Black students constituted 70% of referrals in 2024 and 49% in 2025 (Educators Handbook, 2025). This 21% reduction could point to the efficacy of restorative circles yet suggests that further efforts are necessary (see Table 12).

Table 10

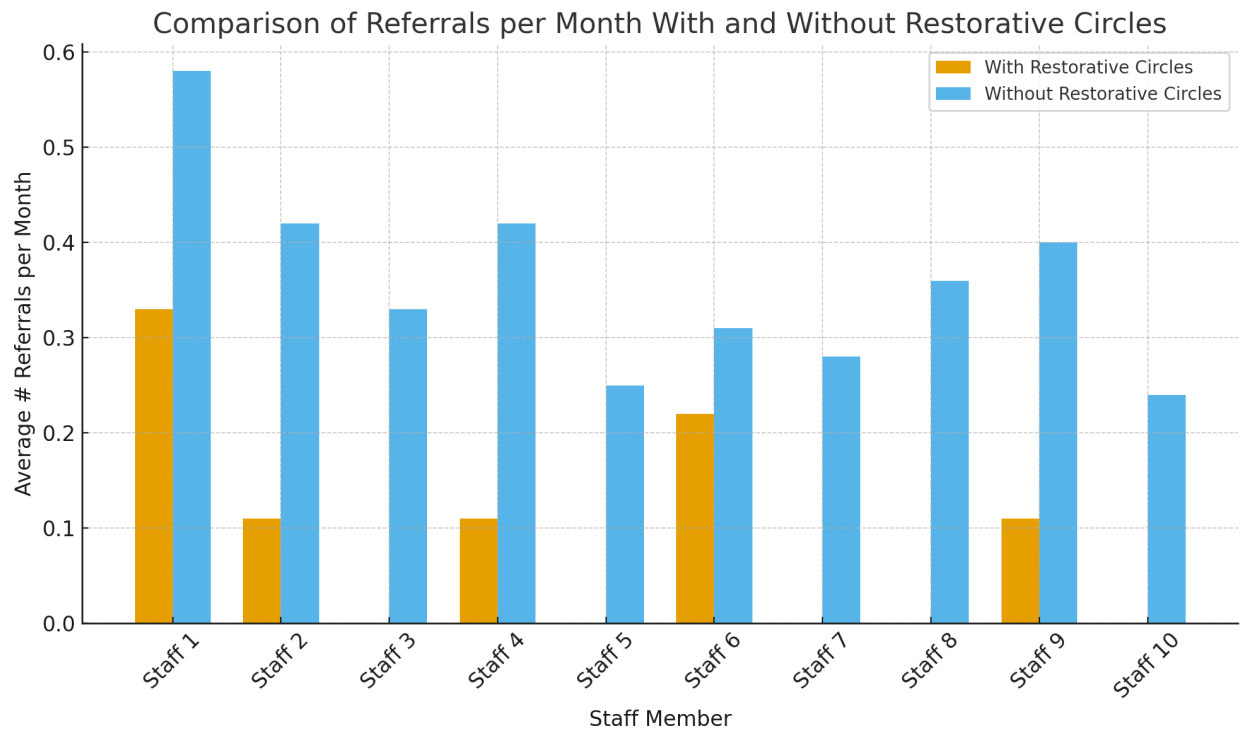
Total Student Referrals for a Year for Staff Implementing Restorative Circles

<u>2023-2024</u>	<u>2024-25</u>
130	55

Note. (Educators Handbook, 2025)

Table 11

Student Discipline Data Per Core



Note. (Educators Handbook, 2025)

Table 12

Referral Demographics

<u>Race</u>	<u>2023-2024</u>	<u>2024-25</u>	<u>Percent Change</u>
White	15%	30%	+25%
Black	70%	49%	-21%
Hispanic	15%	21%	+6%

Note. (Educators Handbook, 2025)

In 2023-24, Black students were 3.55 times more likely to be referred than White students and 4.91 times more likely to be referred than Hispanic students. In 2024-25, Black students were 1.38 times more likely to be referred than White students and 2.47 times more likely to be referred than Hispanic students.

Evidence shows that, when executed with fidelity, restorative circles are associated with decreases in student discipline rates among Black students in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina.

Results from Focus Question 2

The second research question aimed to determine whether the establishment of restorative circles can enhance students' sense of belonging within the school environment. The qualitative data in Table 13 indicate that children experienced a heightened sense of belonging in classrooms where restorative circles were consistently utilized, as evidenced by focus groups. Insights collected through focus groups indicate that restorative circles fostered opportunities for kids to be acknowledged, listened to, and valued by their peers and educators. Students reported that restorative circles promote open communication, trust, and empathy, which are all essential elements of a supportive learning environment. During the post-implementation focus group, a student stated, "The kids love her [talking about a teacher], and they really want to learn with her. They want to come to school because they have a good relationship with her and feel as though her class is a community." This perspective highlights how restorative circles can transform the classroom into an environment where students not only acquire knowledge but also cultivate a profound sense of connection and community. These findings indicate that restorative circles may function as an effective means of fostering students' sense of belonging and enhancing robust student-teacher connections.

Table 13

Students Post-Implementation Focus Group Codes-Categories-Themes

<u>Codes</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Themes</u>
1. Teacher-student relationships 2. Respect between students and teachers 3. Conflict with teachers	1. Relationships & Respect	1. Positive Relationships with Staff are Foundational to Student Success
4. Consistent adult behavior	2. School Climate and Culture	2. Consistency Builds Safety and Predictability
5. Teacher availability and approachability	3. Relationships & Respect	3. Accessibility Builds Trust and Encourages Student Voice

Table 14

Parents Post-Implementation Focus Group Codes-Categories-Themes

<u>Codes</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Themes</u>
Kids feel comfortable with the teacher	Trust and Communication	Importance of Relationships in Shaping Student Behavior and School Culture
Students should be able to talk to the teacher	Teacher Responsiveness and Listening	
Teachers need to make students feel comfortable		
Teachers should listen and try to handle the problem	Bullying and Retaliation	Root Causes of Misbehavior and Violence
Students retaliate after being bullied		
Bullying causes behavioral escalation		
It starts on social media	Social Media and External Triggers	Recommendations for Preventive and Restorative Interventions
Parents need to know what's going on social media	Mediation and Early Conflict Resolution	
Mediation with students is needed	Community and Multi-Tiered Support	
Take both students to the office to resolve it		
Find the root before it grows		
Every school should have someone students can trust		
Some kids need someone to talk to who's not a therapist		

During the staff post-implementation focus group, staff indicated that while implementing restorative circles they were more inclined to build positive relationships with their students. These deliberate relationship-building strategies were regarded as a crucial transformation in classroom culture. As one staff member stated, “Restorative circles have allowed me to build positive relationships with students and build a classroom environment where all students can thrive. Not only has this helped behaviors decline in my classroom but has increased the engagement level of all students.” This statement illustrates a prevalent trend evident in staff feedback on restorative circles. Not only do restorative circles enhance classroom management but also fostered an inclusive and emotionally secure environment that encourage both academic and social-emotional development. Table 15 shows some of the codes, categories, and themes from the staff post-implementation focus group that highlight relationships, and sense of belonging.

Results from Focus Question 3

Research findings demonstrate that teaching success depends on the establishment of a positive and improved educational environment that emphasizes relationships and classroom culture (Nisar et al., 2019). This fundamental comprehension correlates with the third research question, which investigates the relationship between Black students and their educators.

The post-implementation focus groups with students and staff indicated that robust, trust-based relationships are not just appreciated but crucial for significant learning experiences. Students indicated that being acknowledged, listened to, and understood by their teachers enhanced their motivation and readiness to engage. Similarly, educators indicated that restorative circles facilitated more authentic connections with Black students, resulting in enhanced communication, decreased disciplinary occurrences, and more equitable relationships. These

Table 15

Staff Post-Implementation Focus Group Codes-Categories-Themes

<u>Codes</u>	<u>Categories</u>	<u>Themes</u>
1. Students respect teachers more when relationships are strong.	1. Building Positive Relationships	1. Relationships as the Foundation of School Culture and Student Success
2. Relationship-building makes students more motivated.		
3. Relationships create a family-like classroom.	2. Impact of Teacher-Student Relationships	
4. Students become protective of teachers.		
5. Relationships promote leadership and empathy.		

findings confirm that cultivating relationships is essential for an inclusive school climate and indicate that restorative circles may act as an effective mechanism to close relational gaps and enhance equality.

One student remarked in the focus group, “Although restorative circles were initially awkward, they help me to better understand my teacher, which improved our relationship.” Table 15 reinforces this idea, as one of the themes identified in the staff focus group was Relationships as the Foundation of School Culture and Student Success. As one of the participating teachers stated, “Restorative circles proved highly beneficial to me throughout this year not only in building and maintaining positive relationships with my students, but with classroom management as well. By the end of the year even my two most challenging students whom I worked with all year to talk to, instead of talk at, ended the year talking to me.”

Ancillary Findings

Restorative circles can influence academic performance, social and emotional learning, and the overall school environment. This investigation yielded several ancillary findings. The academic performance of children in the intervention classes was analyzed to investigate the potential influence of restorative circles on their academics. Table 16 indicates that some classes did outperform their peers. The table indicates that 60% of the participating teachers' classes exceeded the school average in academic growth in both Mathematics and English Language Arts. Four of these teachers exceeded the school average in both their English Language Arts and Mathematics scores. Although this data is encouraging, it remains unclear for determining if restorative circles were the cause of the increase.

Table 16

Academic Performance Post Implementation

<u>Staff Member</u>	<u>Math Growth on Diagnostic</u>	<u>ELA Growth on Diagnostic</u>
Staff Member 1	Up 103 from school average	Up 111 from school average
Staff Member 2	Up 62 from school average	Up 87 from school average
Staff Member 3	Down 27 from school average	Down 42 from school average
Staff Member 4	Down 4 from school average	Down 23 from school average
Staff Member 5	Up 36 from school average	Down 23 from school average
Staff Member 6	Down 25 from school average	Up 71 from school average
Staff Member 7	Up 59 from school average	Up 57 from school average
Staff Member 8	Down 10 from school average	Up 79 from school average
Staff Member 9	Up 24 from school average	Down 13 from school average
Staff Member 10	Up 76 from school average	Up 36 from school average

Note. (Edmentum, 2025)

One educator remarked in their post-implementation focus group, “establishing a classroom community has enabled my students and me to explore new strategies, as they are eager and committed to supporting me. This form of support makes my job fun to attend daily.” Additional data is required for determining whether restorative circles might enhance school culture and mitigate teacher burnout; nonetheless, this quotation from an experienced educator indicates potential.

Summary

This chapter presents results from analysis of the data obtained during the study and provides responses to the guiding study questions. Results of the data analysis indicated a reduction in the disciplinary incidents experienced by Black students when their teacher engaged in restorative circles. The qualitative results from the focus groups indicated an enhancement in students' sense of belonging, as well as in the relationships between students and staff. The subsequent chapter will encompass a description of the findings, an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for practice, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, & RECOMMENDATIONS

American educational institutions have historically contended with disparities in student discipline measures. Educational institutions persist in employing punitive disciplinary measures, despite evidence demonstrating their ineffectiveness in addressing the problem. (Losen & Martinez, 2013). In the 1990s, educational institutions nationwide implemented zero-tolerance rules that established fixed repercussions for student conduct within schools (Skiba, 2008). Consequently, harsh consequences were enforced irrespective of the behavior's severity (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). The primary aim of developing and implementing these

policies was to maintain and safeguard discipline within educational institutions (Huang & Cornell, 2021). The implementation of zero-tolerance policies aimed to reduce disciplinary actions and their disproportionate application in educational institutions (Robins, 2005). Empirical evidence amassed over time unequivocally indicates that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective in resolving disproportionality and discipline issues and that it can indeed exacerbate the disproportionality of student discipline (Skiba, 2008).

According to the United States Department of Education (2021), over 3.4 million students were suspended during the 2020-21 school year, constituting approximately 14.5% of the total student population. The North Carolina School Report Card (2022) indicates that the short-term suspension rate in North Carolina is 14%, equating to 146 children per 1,000. Moreover, the NC Department of Public Instruction (2022) reports that 14% of children undergo in-school suspension, equating to 145 students per 1,000 students. Perera (2022) emphasized that the 2017 Office of Civil Rights study recorded a notable rise in school suspensions. Black students demonstrated a fourfold increased probability of facing disciplinary actions relative to their White or Hispanic counterparts. NCDPI (2022) revealed a comparable disparity in school suspension rates, indicating that Black children are 25% more likely to face disciplinary measures.

The importance of suspensions and expulsions must not be overlooked, since academic research indicates a robust correlation between suspensions and enduring adverse effects on academic performance and conduct during adolescence (Skiba and Losen, 2015). Extensive correlational research has repeatedly shown significant negative correlations between out-of-school suspensions and academic performance (Kyere et al., 2020). Research also indicates that children with a history of suspension are more likely to exhibit truancy, resulting in a greater loss

of instructional time compared to their peers who have not experienced suspension (Heilbrun et al., 2018). Moreover, there is extensive and consistent evidence of disproportionality in the distribution of suspensions and expulsions associated with race that parallels persistent achievement gaps between Black and White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). While performance discrepancies among students can be ascribed to numerous complex factors, disproportionality in the distribution of exclusionary discipline is clearly a contributing factor. Attentive to these dynamics, this study specifically investigates how restorative circles can decrease discipline referrals among Black students in educational settings, enabling institutions to effectively address and alleviate issues related to disciplinary disproportionality.

Summary of the Findings

In this study, I sought to determine the effectiveness in restorative circles and the impact it would have on Black students' referrals in a low-socioeconomic middle school in rural Eastern, North Carolina. Throughout the implementation of the study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the implementation. The three guiding study questions of the study are:

1. What is the impact of restorative circles on student discipline for Black populations in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern NC?
2. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' sense of belonging at in a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern NC?
3. What is the impact of restorative circles on Black students' relationships with staff at a rural, low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina?

Throughout the study, a noticeable decline in referrals was observed in the cores where restorative circles were implemented. The number of referrals generated by educators utilizing

restorative circles in Core 1 decreased by 75 referrals, going from 130 in the 2023–24 academic year to 55 in the 2024–25 academic year. A 21% reduction in the referral rate among Black students, from 70% in 2024 to 49% in 2025, signifies progress towards equitable discipline. The use of restorative circles had a positive impact on the discipline referrals of Black students, as evident in the quantitative data presented.

The second question investigates the impact of students' sense of belonging in a classroom environment. Students in classrooms that implemented restorative circles reported feeling more acknowledged, appreciated, and connected, as indicated by comments shared in the focus groups. The themes identified from the focus groups included trust, empathy, and open communication, all of which fostered a heightened sense of community. One student articulated their desire to attend school due to a strong rapport with their teacher, expressing the sentiment that "her class is a community."

Question three examines the impact of restorative circles on the relationships between students and instructors, with a specific emphasis on their effect on Black students. Students and instructors have said that restorative circles have improved relationships, particularly benefiting Black students. The students felt acknowledged and understood, leading to heightened motivation and engagement. Educators noted that restorative circles facilitated the development of equitable and trust-based relationships, leading to improved classroom management and enhanced emotional safety.

During the process of analyzing the effects of restorative circles, it became abundantly evident that the intervention had a favorable effect on student conduct, student behavior, improved connections between students and staff, and also improved students' sense of belonging.

Interpretation of the Findings

CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) is a non-profit organization dedicated to advocating for the integration of "social and emotional learning" (SEL) inside the public education system (CASEL, 2020). Research indicates that the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs within school districts, coupled with support from parents and teachers, effectively aids children in regulating their emotions, resolving conflicts, and fostering healthy relationships (CASEL, 2022). CASEL (2020) asserts that the integration of restorative justice and social and emotional learning (SEL) can yield advantageous results, including an enhanced environment in educational settings, increased attendance and engagement, a decrease in exclusionary practices, and a mitigation of disparities in disciplinary processes.

In the framework of CASEL, the key focuses are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Although not all competencies were explicitly addressed in the focus groups, numerous students, staff, and parents highlighted the impact of restorative circles on these qualities. One educator stated, "Restorative circles have facilitated the development of positive relationships with my students and have helped me comprehend the factors that trigger their reactions." A staff member from the Post Implementation Staff Focus Group (2025) stated "By acquiring this knowledge, I will be more adept at addressing their specific needs."

Jones and Bouffard (2012) assert that students who exhibit superior emotional regulation and self-awareness are more adept at responding to daily situations. One student stated, "the implementation of restorative circles in the classroom allowed me to rethink certain behaviors I had previously had." One student who participated in the post-implementation focus group in

2025 stated, "I improved my behavioral management by listening to my peers and understanding the emotions of others."

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI, 2022) indicates a difference in school suspension rates, revealing that Black children are 25% more likely to face such disciplinary actions compared to their peers. During the 2023–24 academic year, seventy percent of disciplinary referrals at SMS were attributed to students who identify as Black. During the 2024–2025 academic year, this rate decreased to 49% of referrals. The decline in these rates indicates the potential to aid in mitigating the discrepancy in school discipline rates.

Alternatives to Punitive Discipline

Welsh and Little (2018) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to discrepancies in disciplinary actions and the developing evidence for alternative approaches to exclusionary discipline. Despite initiatives to encourage positive behaviors, specific initiatives (e.g., zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline) have had a negative impact on students. Various initiatives have negatively impacted Black students, hence requiring an intervention to decrease the frequency of office referrals for Black students. Table 10 indicates that educators who utilize restorative circles experience fewer behavioral issues in their classes, thereby reducing disciplinary disproportionality.

Classroom Management

Teacher educators have consistently maintained that proficient classroom management is a crucial pedagogical skill that teachers must have to enhance instructional results in the classroom (Stough et al., 2015). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that educators with proficient classroom management abilities facilitate improved student accomplishment and increased engagement with the curriculum (Klopfer et al., 2019). Research findings indicate that

the efficacy of teaching depends on establishing a positive and supportive educational environment that emphasizes connections and classroom culture (Nisar et al., 2019). According to a statement made by a participating student during the post-implementation focus group (2025), “Restorative circles have helped to build positive relationships with my teacher and my classmates. These relationships have helped to keep our classroom a fun and exciting place to be”.

Restorative Circles

In 2014, the Obama administration established guidelines for student discipline that advised school districts to revise their zero-tolerance policies and embrace other disciplinary methods, such as restorative practices (Lash, 2019). Restorative methods in education constitute an alternate approach to conventional student disciplinary actions (Augustine et al., 2018). A study by Gregory et al. (2016) found that enhanced adoption of restorative practices over an academic year resulted in a reduction of teacher referrals for misconduct or defiance. Armour (2013) reports a substantial 84% decrease in suspensions among 6th-grade children in a Texas school after the use of restorative techniques. The reduction in referrals in classrooms that adopted restorative circles is consistent with the research findings.

Limitations of the Study

Despite careful planning and implementation, certain limitations within the study may have affected the results and must be recognized. A notable limitation is the restricted generalizability of the results. Only 20% of the school staff implemented restorative circles, resulting in a limited sample size that may not fully reflect the broader middle school population or other educational settings.

The trustworthiness of the study is further affected by this restricted implementation. The limited participation of staff in restorative circles restricts the diversity of viewpoints and experiences that can be gathered. Furthermore, while it is improbable that all twelve implementing faculty adhered to the practice with complete fidelity, steps were taken to promote consistency and quality of practices (e.g., monthly walkthroughs conducted by the scholarly practitioner). Still, divergences in execution and levels of commitment may result in contradictory outcomes.

Ultimately, the reliability is called into doubt due to the discrepancies in the facilitation of restorative circles by various staff members, which complicates the exact replication of the study and the attainment of consistent outcomes. Despite these limitations, the results suggest that transferability is still achievable. If future implementations closely follow the study's design and are executed with integrity, it is reasonable to anticipate similar positive effects in similar educational contexts. Indeed, it is reasonable to expect that positive effects will be even greater with ongoing implementation, as teachers enhance implementation capacity and students gain additional experience with processes and engage with those processes over a longer period of time.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

The results of this research indicate that restorative circles have the potential to not only reduce the number of disruptive behaviors exhibited by students, but also to reduce the degree of disproportionality that exists in the realm of discipline. As seen in the literature (Brummer, 2021, Amstutz & Mullet, 2015) and reflected in this project, when carried out with integrity, restorative circles will produce a classroom environment that is characterized by trust and respect, which will allow everyone to flourish. The implementation of restorative circles in the classroom will

result in the development of constructive connections between the teaching staff and the students, which, in turn, has the potential to boost their academic performance, attendance, and engagement.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

The concepts of equity and social justice, which are core elements of restorative practices, were both examined in an effort to determine whether restorative circles impact student discipline. Although the introduction of restorative circles in classrooms did not fully eliminate the disproportionality in disciplinary actions, it did reduce the extent of disproportionality experienced by Black students in comparison with their peers.

At SMS, 49% of office discipline referrals (Powerschool, 2025) originated from the Black subgroup, a decrease from the 70% recorded in 2024. Individual classes experienced a reduction in the quantity of office referrals. These classrooms also observed a more even distribution of disciplinary referrals among their Black, Hispanic, and White students. The goal of this study is for the intervention to be implemented across an entire school to reduce disproportionality in student discipline on a school-wide basis.

Recommendations for Practice

Maintaining a positive environment through a building and classrooms is imperative to the success of students. By implementing restorative circles throughout a building, a school can not only transform their discipline, but also have the potential to increase academic achievement. When considering the implementation of restorative circles, it is essential to articulate the why behind the need clearly. Sharing data that highlights the need for change is a critical step in gaining staff buy-in and ensuring a smoother transition. Transparency and purpose help staff

understand that restorative circles are not simply another initiative, but a meaningful approach to strengthening relationships and improving school culture.

Before implementation, it is equally essential to provide training and informational sessions to equip staff with the knowledge and confidence to apply restorative practices effectively. Investing time in these learning opportunities lays the foundation for consistent implementation and long-term success. Table 17 outlines the steps needed to potentially implement restorative circles within your setting.

Support from staff members is essential when implementing any initiative. By presenting the numbers and the rationale, it can effectively convey to the staff how this will ultimately benefit the school as a whole.

Policy makers should commit additional resources to the advancement of restorative approaches in educational settings. They have been assigned the duty of devising solutions that both avert disciplinary problems in educational institutions and foster positive and healthy

Table 17

Restorative Circle Implementation Timeline

What to implement	When to implement
Restorative practices professional learning, with an emphasis on restorative circles. During this session, present the data behind how effective restorative circles can be.	The year prior to full implementation.
Find a time in your schedule to provide 10-20 minutes for restorative circle time.	Late Spring/Summer

Hold a professional learning session prior to school starting on Restorative Circles.	Summer/Before school
Each month: -Walkthrough restorative circles. -Collect the discipline data. -Schedule time during grade level meetings, department meetings or faculty meetings to gain feedback and ask what support is needed.	Monthly throughout the school year.

relationships among students. By allocating funding and formulating future legislation, state legislators would be making a historic investment in our students and educational institutions.

Recommendations for Future Study

The purpose of this study was to provide a concise summary of the implementation of restorative circles in a middle school environment and investigate the effect it can have on the administration of discipline. Additional research that makes use of a larger sample size might prove to be beneficial. Implementing restorative circles throughout an entire school and highlighting the results obtained from the study would be advantageous for future practitioners.

In light of the fact that there is a substantial body of evidence indicating that when children are engaged in class, they achieve higher levels of academic success, a study that links academics to restorative circles would be an extremely beneficial endeavor.

Considering the research findings, a subsequent study might be conducted to investigate the sense of belonging among students and its influence on their behavior and academic achievement.

Conclusions

The importance of suspensions and expulsions should not be overlooked, as academic research has demonstrated a robust correlation between these actions and enduring adverse effects on academic performance and conduct during adolescence (Skiba & Losen, 2015).

Literature asserts that educators must undergo training to develop the crucial skills necessary for effectively assisting children. Training will encompass understanding the underlying reasons for behaviors, posing supportive inquiries, fostering constructive relationships, and acquiring skills to assist in remedying the harm inflicted by students (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2021).

The objective of this convergent mixed methods investigation was to examine the disproportionality in student discipline and to identify alternatives to punitive measures that would enhance student support and foster a sense of community within schools, specifically aiming to reduce disciplinary referrals for Black students in a low socioeconomic middle school in Eastern North Carolina. All participants participated in focus groups both before and after implementation. Disciplinary data was collected monthly and examined by the scholarly practitioner.

An analysis of the perspectives of students, staff, and families about restorative circles, along with the quantitative data gathered during implementation, indicates that restorative circles

can have a positive impact on schools. When implemented, restorative circles can have a profoundly positive impact on student behavior, transforming classrooms into supportive, engaging, and nurturing environments that foster the growth of all students.

As a staff participant stated, “Restorative circles have the potential to greatly benefit our school community. In my experience, they provide a structured and supportive space for students to process and work through difficult emotions and interpersonal challenges. Given the age group we serve, many of our students are navigating complex emotional and social situations on a daily basis. Restorative circles offer a proactive way to teach them how to manage rising emotions in a safe, constructive manner, while also helping them develop essential coping and communication skills that contribute to a healthier school climate”.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

Engaging in this process has significantly enhanced my leadership capacity, particularly in my ability to collect, analyze, and apply both qualitative and quantitative data to inform decision-making. I have developed a deeper understanding of how data can tell a story about school culture, student performance, and staff needs. This analytical growth has allowed me to identify patterns, measure progress, and implement targeted strategies that lead to measurable improvements.

Throughout this journey, I have also strengthened my academic language and written communication skills. Learning to articulate complex ideas clearly and persuasively has not only improved my ability to write at a scholarly level. However, it has also influenced how I communicate with staff, district leaders, and the community. This ability to translate data and research into actionable, understandable messages has proven essential in fostering collaboration and buy-in among stakeholders.

In addition, this experience deepened my knowledge of many important topics related to leadership, including equity, restorative practices, instructional improvement, and organizational change. The exposure to current research and evidence-based practices has broadened my perspective and informed the decisions I make as a school leader. I have learned the importance of balancing theory with practice to make thoughtful, student-centered decisions.

Finally, the process strengthened my time management and organizational skills. Balancing leadership responsibilities with academic demands required planning, prioritization, and discipline. I learned how to manage complex tasks efficiently while maintaining focus on long-term goals. These skills have not only supported my success as a doctoral student but have also made me a more effective and strategic school leader.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
Willis Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirm/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Philip Cook](#)
CC: [Jerry Johnson](#)
Date: 12/2/2024
Re: [UMCIRB 24-002126](#)
EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE ON BLACK STUDENTS
IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC MIDDLE SCHOOL

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 12/1/2024. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 5,6,7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;
2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;
4. Submission of a final report application to the UMCIRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and

5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
assent.docx	Consent Forms
Focus Group Protocol (Updated)	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
informed consent adults teachers parents.docx	Consent Forms
Informed Consents (Newest)	Consent Forms
Parents	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Phil Cook - Dissertation_Oct_3.docx	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Screenshot 2024-10-21 at 9.26.56_AM.png	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Students	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Teachers	Recruitment Documents/Scripts

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT (ADULTS)

East Carolina University

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: **EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Principal Investigator: Phil Cook
Division College of Education
Address: 220 Ragsdale, ECU, Greenville, NC 27858
Telephone #: (919)-518-4008

In this consent form, “you” refers to the person being asked to participate in the study. If you are a parent or legally authorized representative who is giving permission for a child, please note that the word “you” refers to your child.

Please check one of the boxes below:

- ☐ You are the parent or legal guardian granting permission for a child in this study. If the participant is a child, the use of "you" and “your” refers to your child.
- ☐ You are an adult participant in this study.

If you reach 18 years of age (adulthood) during the study, as recognized under local law, you must be re-consented as an adult to remain in the study.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to examine if restorative circles have a positive impact on disproportionality within school discipline. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are teacher at the school, have a child participating in the research, or are a parent participating in the research. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn the impact of restorative circles

and how they can be implemented school wide to have a positive impact on student discipline and disproportionality.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 30 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

There are no known reasons for why you should not participate in this study.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Greene County Middle School or via Zoom. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer will be around 3-5 hours for the year.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you may be asked to participate in 2 focus groups and participate in decision making pertaining to this improvement science study. Interviews will be audio/video recorded. If you want to participate in an interview but do not want to be audio recorded, the interviewer will turn off the audio recorder. If you want to participate in an interview but do not want to be video recorded, you will be able to sit out of field of view of the video camera and still be audio recorded. Interview questions will focus on the impact of disciplinary actions at Greene County Middle School, as well as the impact of restorative circles.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

Who will know that I took part in this research?

This research is overseen by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at ECU. Therefore, some of the UMCIRB members or the UMCIRB staff may need to review your research data. However, I will take precautions to ensure that anyone not authorized to see your identity will not be given that information. Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies **How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the data collection and data analysis process. Consent forms and data from focus groups will be kept in a secure, password protected Microsoft 365 folder for a minimum of three years after completion of the study. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

Who should I contact if I have questions?

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 252-747-8191, Monday-Friday between 7:30AM and 5:00PM. If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the ECU University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at phone number 252-744-2914.

I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

Participant's Name (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Person Obtaining Informed Consent: I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person's questions about the research.

Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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Principal Investigator (PRINT)	Signature	Date
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APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT (UNDER 18)

East Carolina University

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Study: **EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MIDDLE SCHOOL**

Person in charge of study: Phil Cook

Where they work: Greene County Schools

Study contact phone number: (252)-747-8191

Study contact E-mail Address: philcook@greene.k12.nc.us

People at ECU study ways to make people's lives better. These studies are called research. This research is trying to find out the impact of restorative circles on students behavior.

Your parent(s) needs to give permission for you to be in this research. You do not have to be in this research if you don't want to, even if your parent(s) has already given permission.

You may stop being in the study at any time. If you decide to stop, no one will be angry or upset with you.

Why are we doing this research study?

The reason for doing this research is to study the impact of restorative circles on student behavior.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to take part in this research because you are in a classroom where restorative circles will be implemented.

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to be in this research, you will be one of about 10 students taking part in it.

What will happen during this study?

If you agree to participate in this student, you may be asked to participate in 2 focus group sessions. One session will be at the beginning of the study (Fall, 2024) and the other one will be

at the end of the student (Spring, 2025). While your answers will be recorded using Microsoft Teams, the information will stay confidential.

The research will be conducted at Greene County Middle School or via Zoom. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer will be around 3-5 hours for the year.

Procedures for participating in the study include:

- Two zoom focus group sessions with the principal investigator, each lasting around one hour. A total of two hours.
- The zoom focus group sessions will be transcribed, but no recording will be saved,
- Participation in weekly restorative circles within your classroom.

Who will be told the things we learn about you in this study?

Only the study team has access, and all information shared will be de-identified.

What are the good things that might happen?

Sometimes good things happen to people who take part in research. These are called “benefits.” The benefits to you of being in this study is that the intervention may create a positive environment within your classroom.

What are the bad things that might happen?

Sometimes things we may not like happen to people in research studies. These things may even make them feel bad. These are called “risks.” There are no known risks associated with this study. However, please report any problems to your parents and to the researcher

Will you get any money or gifts for being in this research study?

You will not receive any money or gifts for being in this research study.

Who should you ask if you have any questions?

If you have questions about the research, you should ask the people listed on the first page of this form. If you have other questions about your rights while you are in this research study you may call the Institutional Review Board at 252-744-2914.

If you decide to take part in this research, you should sign your name below. It means that you agree to take part in this research study.

Sign your name here if you want to be in the study

Date

Print your name here if you want to be in the study

Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent

APPENDIX D: RESTORATIVE PRACTICES FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Title of Study: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE CIRCLES ON STUDENT DISCIPLINE FOR BLACK STUDENTS IN A RURAL, LOW-SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS MIDDLE SCHOOL

Date & Time of Focus Group: _____ at Seahawk County Middle School

Location of Focus Group: Seahawk County Middle School Library

Facilitator: Phil Cook

Note Taker (if any): None

Audio/Video Recording Tool: Microsoft Teams

Focus Group Participants (Names or Identifiers):

“My name is Phil Cook, and I will be the facilitator for today’s focus group on the Impact of Restorative Circles on the discipline on Black students in a rural, low-socioeconomic middle school. The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about your perspective on school wide discipline and how we can better support our students.

Each of you has been asked to participate because you are (a parent of a student) or (a staff member) or (a student) at Seahawk Middle School. It is our expectation that your opinions and experiences will help us learn more about schoolwide discipline practices. After the conclusion of the focus group, the information we discussed will be coded and categorized to identify themes across participants. Your personal information will not be connected to the results of this focus group.”

“I am passing around a consent form. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the schoolwide discipline practices focus group. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason signing this form, you are free to leave at any time. Please take a moment to read it over.”

[Pause until every participant has reviewed, signed, and returned the consent form to you.]

“Before we begin, first I would like to inform you that today’s session will be recorded using Microsoft Teams. I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and opinions.”

[Ground Rules]

1. *“Confidentiality* –Please respect the confidentiality of your peers. As facilitator, I will only be sharing the information from this focus group anonymously.
2. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
3. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.

4. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. You will not be asked to reach consensus on the topics discussed. There will be no right or wrong answers.
5. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone’s voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!”

“Are there any questions before we start?” [*Pause, answer any questions as appropriate*].

“Thank you, now let’s begin.”

Pre-Implementation Questions (Students, Staff, and Parents)

1. Based on your experience, please describe how relationships impact the classroom/school culture.
2. What are your thoughts about suspending students to address misbehavior?
 - a. What impact does suspension as a consequence have on students and GCMS?
3. What are some of your ideas for how GCMS can help students regulate their anger or behavior?
4. Do you have anything else you would like to share or that has not been addressed in our questioning?

Post-Implementation Questions (Students, Staff, and Parents)

1. Based on your experience, please describe how relationships impact the classroom/school culture.
2. What are your thoughts about suspending students to address misbehavior?
 - a. What impact does suspension as a consequence have on students and GCMS?
3. What are some of your ideas for how GCMS can help students regulate their anger or behavior?
4. How could restorative practices impact a school?
5. What are your thoughts on how restorative practices could impact GCMS? [TL1]
6. Do you have anything else you would like to share or that has not been addressed in our questioning?

[Conclusion Text]

“Thank you for participating in today’s schoolwide focus group. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned during this session with _____ in order to help improve _____. If you have any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share at a later time, please contact me at philcook@greene.k12.nc.us. Have a great remainder of your day!”

APPENDIX E: RESTORATIVE CIRCLES WALKTHROUGH TOOL

Restorative Circles Walkthrough Tool (Used in Qualtrics)

Teacher Name

Did they implement a restorative circle?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Other

Comments on teacher implementation of restorative circles

Comments on student participation of restorative circles

Other comments

APPENDIX F: AI USE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This dissertation in practice involved the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support several stages of the research and writing process in ways consistent with ethical guidance and academic integrity. The tools used, scope of application, and safeguards are detailed below.

Tools Utilized:

- **ChatGPT-4** (OpenAI, 2023): Used for refining writing structure, and suggesting revisions based on APA 7th edition conventions.
- **Grammarly Premium**: Used for grammar, spelling, and sentence-level clarity checks.
- **QuillBot**: Used to support spelling, academic language and sentence structure.

Purpose and Scope of Use:

- Identify synonyms, simplify wording, and enhance flow in early drafts.
- Provide feedback on grammar and adherence to APA formatting.

AI was **not** used for:

- Analyzing or interpreting research data.
- Generating original findings, arguments, or conclusions.
- Writing literature review summaries without cross-verification.

Ethical and Academic Considerations:

All AI-generated content was critically reviewed, edited, and rephrased by the author. The AI tools used do not meet criteria for authorship. This practice aligns with APA guidelines for acknowledging AI and reflects recommendations from Everson (2025) regarding the ethical integration of AI into practitioner scholarship.

Transparency and Responsibility:

I affirm that the final work is my own, and I accept full responsibility for all content, analysis, and conclusions. AI was used to support—not replace—my scholarly voice.

APPENDIX G: RESTORATIVE CIRCLES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Restorative Circles Professional Development Agenda

Theme: *Building Relationships, Strengthening Culture, Restoring Community*

Duration: 2 hours

1. Welcome and Purpose (10 minutes)

Objective: Set the tone and explain the *why* behind restorative circles.

2. Understanding Restorative Practices (20 minutes)

Objective: Build foundational knowledge of restorative philosophy. Traditional vs. restorative approaches to discipline

3. The Purpose of a Restorative Circle (25 minutes)

Objective: Break down the structure and purpose of different types of circles.

4. Modeling a Circle (20 minutes)

Objective: Experience the process firsthand.

5. Implementation Planning (25 minutes)

Objective: Translate learning into practice.

6. Reflection and Next Steps (10 minutes)

Objective: Reinforce key takeaways and build accountability.