From Exclusion to Restoration: Implementation Successes and Barriers

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**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Date: 10/21/2019

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From Exclusion to Restoration: Implementation Successes and Barriers

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by
Chris White
December 2019
Dedication

I dedicate this to the wonderful educators with whom I have had the pleasure to work with daily. Though the task is not easy, it is worthwhile and fulfilling. To the team . . . we work hand-in-hand to make a student’s tomorrow better than his or her today . . . and that’s all that counts!

I dedicate this to my own personal children . . . I hope you receive patience, understanding, and mercy that the teachers in this study provided.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to God . . . this was not easy, but was unlikely ever meant to be; however, with His guidance, this turned from impossible to worthwhile.

Thank you to my wonderful wife for your support throughout this process especially when the stress levels were extreme. Thank you to my wonderful kids who could not necessarily figure out why the computer was attached to my fingers at times but loved me anyways. Thank you to my always positive and optimistic parents for their love and support over the years.

Thank you to Dr. Rademaker and Dr. Kellmayer who gave me the jumpstart somewhat early in the doldrums of beginning the literature review and methodology. Also, thank you to Dr. Scott who served as a valuable member of my dissertation committee.

Thank you to my mentors . . . Mrs. Benton, who took a chance on a stranger to be an administrator and begin my leadership journey, and Mrs. Treat, who built my professional capacity more than any other human I know.
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Abstract

Exclusionary suspensions have been used extensively to handle student discipline and promote a perception of a safer environment in schools. However, an increasing number of school administrators have begun seeking alternative methods, such as restorative practices, in an effort to change the approach towards handling misbehaviors, conflict, and damaged relationships. This study occurred in a Grade 9 campus in northern Texas. The goal of the researcher was to better understand the challenges and successes of implementing restorative practices at the school during the 2018–2019 school year from multiple perspectives. Utilizing the principles of a program evaluation approach—deliberatively democratic evaluation—the researcher sought feedback from all power levels—parents, faculty members, and students. A mixed methods sequential explanatory design was utilized whereby quantitative data was collected first using ex-post facto analysis and faculty survey results. Next, the researcher used qualitative measures—parent surveys, open-ended faculty survey questions, and student focus groups—to ascertain perceptions related to implementing restorative practices during the school year. During the implementation year, there was a significant decline in referrals, exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rates. In addition, the researcher received many positive responses from stakeholders related to a growing culture of trust, empathy, and forgiveness. Finally, results from this study suggest administrators would be prudent to communicate reasons for the shift to restorative practices, provide professional development for teachers, engage all stakeholders, celebrate early successes, and explore methods to build sustainability and an environment where faculty work with students rather than administering discipline to students.

Keywords: restorative practices, discipline, sustainability, exclusionary suspensions
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Across the United States, schools constantly exclude or suspend students from school when they commit infractions. Approximately 3.5 million students are suspended each year in U.S. public schools, both in-school and out-of-school (United States Department of Education, 2014). Not surprisingly, suspensions negatively affect academic performance because students are being removed from the learning environment (Hope & Skoog, 2015). In an era of increased accountability on student performance, schools cannot afford to routinely lose instructional time caused by the overuse of suspensions. Accordingly, school administrators need a better system to rehabilitate students with multiple discipline referrals and construct an environment built on respect, empathy, and understanding (Mullett, 2014).

To combat the suspension problem, many school officials are investigating other methods of handling discipline issues. The primary impetus for focusing on discipline is a school’s need to maintain the safety of teachers, students, and other stakeholders. One approach that is gaining traction in many school districts is restorative practices (RP), which has been used commonly in the penal system under the name of restorative justice (RJ), to increase safety by reducing criminal behavior and recidivism (Mullett, 2014). The foundation for RP is to repair the relationship between the offender and the recipient of the harm when an infraction is committed. In this study I explored the interaction of implementing RP at a Grade 9 campus in Texas during the 2018–2019 school year.

Background

To understand the current context of discipline in schools, it is essential to explore the progression of various societal perspectives and their connection to public schooling. From the colonial era until the antebellum period of the United States, schools were viewed as an extension of the home in which religious beliefs and moral standards would be reinforced to all
children regardless of class distinctions (Dannells, 1997). During the post-Civil War period until the prohibition era, schools operated within the *in loco parentis* concept, which means “in place of the parent” (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). This legal doctrine supported a disciplinary approach whereby teachers and other school officials took the place of parents while the students were in their care, having the moral and educational responsibility for children (Dupper & Dingus, 2008).

From 1950–1990, the climate continually shifted towards an atmosphere of progressive consequences and punishment, especially in corporal form (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). The prevailing belief among policymakers and educators was if consequences were harsh enough, misbehaviors by students would be avoided (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Since the 1990s, this ideology has been pushed to include zero-tolerance policies as a response to violent crimes with weapons being committed by juveniles (Mongan & Walker, 2012). Concurrently, school districts have also implemented their own zero-tolerance policies to encompass not only violent behaviors related to weapons, but also alcohol, drugs, fights, and repeated infractions (Buckmaster, 2016).

The current retributive disciplinary climate of suspensions and expulsions, known as exclusionary practices, have been found to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the amount of problematic behaviors found in society and schools among youth (Buckmaster, 2016). Consequently, many school district administrators are searching for alternatives to exclusionary practices in an effort to rehabilitate and educate students for a brighter future. These alternative approaches, such as positive behavioral interventions, supports (PBIS), and RP, are built upon teaching students and keeping them in school rather than removing them (McIntosh, Ellwood, McCall, & Girvann, 2018).
**Statement of the Problem**

Several researchers have reported negative effects of the abundance of suspensions. These include (a) feeling disconnected from school (DeMatthews, 2016); (b) increased dropout rates (Mullett, 2014); (c) a decline in academic performance (Kinsler, 2013); (d) teachers’ lower expectations (Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015); (e) poor attendance (Gregory, Huang, Anyon, Greer, & Downing, 2018); and (f) higher incarceration rates (Langberg & Ciolfi, 2017). If the issue of excluding students at such exorbitantly higher rates (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017) is not properly addressed, the cycle of unintended, negative consequences is likely to continue. Furthermore, leadership at this school and many nationwide will likely continue to be frustrated with growing attendance problems, which impact how schools receive funding, and achievement gaps, which determine school ratings and ultimately affect administrators’ ability to retain their jobs or advance their careers.

I investigated the overuse of exclusionary practices, which results in superfluous time students are excluded from the school environment in various stages of suspensions. By suspending rather than instructing, educators perpetuate a growing epidemic in U. S. public schools: Excluding students from school leads to higher dropout rates, higher incarceration rates, poor academic performance, and higher absenteeism and disconnects those students from the school culture (DeMatthews, 2016; Ford, 2016). Further research is needed into practices that create an environment to empower students toward a culture of respect and understanding, especially in the transition grade levels, rather than suspend them.

While there are alternative methods to suspension available to administrators, such as RP, neither researchers nor practitioners have a thorough, contextualized understanding of the implementation of RP in public schools. This is particularly true in the United States because the RP approach is in its nascent stages.
Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to understand the benefits and barriers of implementing RP at a transitional Grade 9 campus in Texas. This urban campus routinely averages approximately 500 students, where nearly 75% of the student body consists of Black and Hispanic students. Furthermore, the school is situated within a district of more than 20 schools—elementary, intermediate, middle, ninth grade, and high schools. Overall, the district’s demographic numbers are similar to the school in this study because approximately 70% of students are Black or Hispanic. Likewise, the district’s economically disadvantaged students represent nearly 60% of the population, which is similar to the school in this study. Finally, the school district spans two cities in the north central region of Texas; students who attend the school in this study reside in these cities.

In addition to the detrimental effect of traditional disciplinary practices on overall suspension rates in many schools, minority, special education, and economically disadvantaged students are particularly vulnerable to exclusionary suspensions. Therefore, I sought to determine if RP had an impact on various measures, such as referral rates and exclusionary suspensions for each group of students.

I conducted a program evaluation of RP that collected data from several sources—surveys, focus groups, and descriptive statistics—and from various constituent groups, such as students, teachers, counselors, and administrators. Ultimately, it was my goal to understand the challenges of implementing RP and whether RP has changed key discipline metrics, such as referrals and exclusionary suspensions. Finally, this study sought to better understand the perceptions about two key components—attitudes toward RP and the degree of implementation—from a variety of school stakeholders.
Research Questions

Q1. To what extent did key discipline metrics for all students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

a. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Black students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

b. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Hispanic students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

c. To what extent did key discipline metrics for White students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

d. To what extent did key discipline metrics for special education students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

Q2. What are the perceptions of the various school stakeholders—teachers, counselors, and assistant principals—regarding the implementation of RP?

Q3. How do students describe their experiences with RP?
Context of the Study

This research study was conducted at a Grade 9 campus in Texas. A brief context of this school related to referrals and past attempts to handle discipline is provided below, but a more through description of the school will follow in Chapter 3.

Discipline referrals. From 2014–2018, discipline referrals have risen steadily, forcing students to miss valuable class time (see Table 1). Specifically, there has been a 25% increase in referrals from the 2014–2015 school year to the 2017–2018 school year. Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, and Smolkowski (2017) described subjective office referrals as those where the teacher has the option to draw upon their own belief system to decide whether or not a given behavior deserves an office referral. The majority of the referrals, 61%, fit these criteria in which the infraction was described as disrespect, persistent misbehavior, or disruption. Only 39% of classroom referrals were objective, or mandatory, referrals.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic School Year</th>
<th>Number of Discipline Referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014–2015</td>
<td>750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015–2016</td>
<td>842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016–2017</td>
<td>867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017–2018</td>
<td>1006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with the increase of office referrals, students have spent more days outside of the classroom and in some form of suspension. In the 2017–2018 school year, more students spent more time in all three aspects of suspension—in-school, out-of-school, and alternative school—than in any of the previous 3 years. Specifically, this has been a more significant problem for minority students. To that end, though Black students comprised only 40% of the student body during the 2017–2018 school year, they received 62% of the referrals.
**Academic achievement.** Not surprisingly, academic performance has been on the decline at this Grade 9 campus over the past five years. According to academic performance reports, achievement on standardized tests has dropped from 71% to 64% (passing standards remained the same) on all cumulative tested areas using the same test to measure performance—the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR; Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

**Past attempts to address disciplinary referrals.** From 2014 to 2018, this school used PBIS to recognize positive behaviors from students. PBIS places an emphasis on “school wide systems of support that include proactive strategies for defining, teaching, and supporting appropriate student behaviors to create positive school environments” (PBIS, n.d., para. 1). Administrators and teachers attended numerous hours of training to affect the positive culture in their buildings. Though some minor components of PBIS remain—signs around school to remind of expectations and ‘trust cards’—it is no longer primarily used at this campus.

Whereas this program created a plan to identify and reward positive behaviors, it did not provide a comprehensive strategy for addressing negative behaviors and repairing harm when these types of infractions occurred. Consequently, when classroom disruptions, altercations, disagreements, or words of disrespect occurred, there was no system to engage the parties in beneficial conversations to rebuild the relationship. In many cases, the behaviors were typically repeated, and the same students fell right back in the suspension cycle again. Riley (2018) cautioned that schools must do a better job of learning from the recidivism problem by creating systems to reeducate students when they commit harmful infractions.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have briefly explored the history of discipline in schools to provide a context for how school leaders approach handling behavioral issues. Furthermore, this chapter introduced the problem at a Grade 9 campus, which is similar to problems faced by
administrators at schools across the nation. Chapter 2 will further investigate exclusionary suspensions, zero-tolerance policies, and restorative practices to demonstrate the need to further study alternatives to traditional disciplinary practices.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Corporal Punishment.** School districts in Texas may use this form of discipline, which is defined as inflicting physical pain by slapping, spanking, paddling, or hitting (Texas Education Code, n.d.).

**Discipline Referral.** When a school conduct code infraction is committed, a faculty member provides a written or electronic record of the infraction, or referral (Anyon, Lechuga, Ortega, Downing, & Simmons, 2018).

**Exclusionary Practices.** An approach that excludes or removes students from the academic learning environment when an infraction has been committed. Depending on the nature of the incident, the student is typically excluded for a specific number of days (Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainbolt, 2018). According to the Texas Education Code (TEC; n.d.), administrators are not permitted to suspend students out-of-school for longer than three days. Also, the TEC does not permit administrators to remove special education students—using either in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, or alternative school without first conducting a meeting to determine if the behavior leading to the suspension was a manifestation of their disability (n.d.).

**Restorative Circles.** A process by which the offender and the recipient, along with other faculty members or social support members, engage in a discussion about the incident(s) that led to harm in the relationship. The goal of the circle is to understand each other’s perspective and build empathy among both parties (Walker, Sakai, & Brady, 2006).

**Restorative Practices.** An overall programmatic approach, which is both proactive and reactive, that seeks to address school discipline issues through building respect, empathy, and
understanding. This approach is often viewed as an alternative to suspending students because it forces them to critically think about behaviors and engage in conversations on how to avoid them rather than removing them completely (Buckmaster, 2016).

**Retributive Discipline.** Often viewed as the traditional model in which most schools operate, this approach suspends students in a variety of methods—in-school, out-of-school, alternative school, and expulsion—to address problematic behaviors. Recently, significant research has explored the negative effect of retributive discipline, also known as exclusionary practices, in schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Lustick, 2017; Mullett, 2014).

**School-to-Prison Pipeline.** The school-to-prison pipeline describes a phenomenon by which students who are placed in out-of-school suspensions and alternative school placements have significantly higher odds of being in prison at a later date; minority groups, such as Black and Hispanic students are particularly vulnerable—three times higher than White students—in experiencing suspensions that place them in the pipeline (Ford, 2016).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Statement of the Problem

The problem at the Grade 9 campus under study, as well as at many campuses across the United States, was the amount of time students are spending in exclusionary suspensions, which remove them from the classroom setting. Consequently, students are falling further behind academically and becoming further disconnected from school. If leaders at this school do not explore and implement other options for handling discipline issues, they are likely to continue the cycle of declining academic performance and other secondary, negative consequences that are further discussed in this chapter.

Focus of the Literature Review

The focus of this literature review was to juxtapose traditional approaches to discipline used in most schools with a new approach—RP—that some schools are implementing to address the amount of suspensions students receive. In this chapter, I explore traditional disciplinary practices, including corporal punishment and exclusionary suspensions, which still exist in many schools, and review the literature related to the negative consequences of exclusionary suspensions. Then, I review literature related to RP, explain the theory behind it, and explore the barriers and successes in implementing it. Finally, I discuss the limitations in current research related to RP, especially in the United States.

For nearly a century, the two major methods of discipline were used by many schools were corporal punishment and isolation to prevent and handle problematic behaviors (Harber & Sakade, 2009). With the increasing number of violent crimes juveniles were committing in the 1980s and 1990s, policymakers passed the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward weapons and crime in schools (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Schools began
applying this same zero-tolerance rationale to other school discipline issues, leading to an era of exclusionary suspensions that spans the last 20 years (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016).

On the other hand, over the last decade some schools have been adopting RP in an effort to build relationships with students, mutual understanding, dignity, respect (Lustick, 2017), and to reduce the amount of time students are suspended from class. In this literature review I summarize research on traditional disciplinary approaches—corporal punishment, zero-tolerance policies, and exclusionary practices—as well as the negative effects that result from exclusionary practices, such as a disconnection from school, increased absenteeism, higher dropout rates, increased recidivism, a decline in academic performance, achievement gaps, and the creation of two unintended outcomes—a school-to-prison pipeline and a racial discipline gap. Then, I explore RP to help mitigate the negative effects of past disciplinary approaches.

This literature review began by performing a keyword search derived from the research questions using Abilene Christian University’s (ACU’s) online library, called OneSearch. I entered key terms and phrases such as restorative practices, restorative discipline, restorative justice, and racial discipline gap. As authors’ names kept showing up as being integral contributors to the topic, I entered those authors’ names in the search bar to explore other studies pertaining to the topic. Finally, I categorized research studies into various topics in an effort to synthesize the literature’s most salient points related to various disciplinary approaches that schools have used.

**Traditional Approaches to Discipline**

When schools’ doors were first opened to the mass public following the post-colonial era, it was assumed that educators were responsible for maintaining rigid standards of discipline and extending similar religious, moral, and social values that were taught in the home (Dannells, 1997). At its core, the first schools in New England were charged with educating in one of two
domains: the morality of the common man—obedience, honesty, submissiveness, and piety—and the training of future church and state leaders (Lauderdale, 1975). With available alternatives according to socioeconomic status, such as private tutoring, apprenticeship, and agricultural education, schools were primarily homogenous settings with little to no behavioral issues (Lauderdale, 1975). One obvious factor underlying the education experience for teachers, students, and families was that schooling was non-compulsory until the antebellum period, which meant students who attended schools, or their parents who sent them, presumably desired to be there (Rauscher, 2015).

**A shift in approach.** With the advent of compulsory education in Massachusetts in 1852 (Rauscher, 2015) that slowly shifted throughout an increasingly industrial United States, schools became more heterogeneous; students from dissimilar backgrounds and classes converged upon a common public space (Lauderdale, 1975). Expectedly, schools faced significant challenges as they educated a more diverse student population. For a majority of the 19th and 20th centuries, schools used two major approaches to prevent issues with or handle discipline: corporal punishment and isolation (Font & Gershoff, 2017). Educational theorists noted that for children to succeed in school, motivation was essential. While encouraging students to find interest in their work was desirable, the threat of punishment worked just as well (Middleton, 2008).

**Corporal punishment.** The most common and controversial method of handling student misbehavior, used sparingly in post-colonial times and in the past 20 years but widely used over a 200-year span in between, is corporal punishment (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). Courts during this lengthy period have routinely ruled that teachers and school administrators are able to use such force as a teacher “reasonably believes necessary” to handle problems expeditiously (Garrison, 2001, p. 116). Though its use has decreased significantly since 1980, 19 states still allow corporal punishment (see Table 2; Gershoff & Font, 2016).
Table 2

*States That Allow Corporal Punishment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>Missouri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
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</tbody>
</table>


Across the United States, African Americans and students with disabilities are subject to a disproportionate amount of corporal punishment (Rollins, 2012). In southern U.S. states, specifically Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Georgia, and Louisiana, Black students are three to five times more likely to receive corporal punishment than White students (Gershoff & Font, 2016).

A preponderance of research studies suggests that physical means of correction like corporal punishment, is ineffective in changing behaviors or improving compliance; in fact, a synthesis of the literature suggests that other risks, such as psychological problems, aggression towards others, mental health, and future family violence are associated with this type of punishment (Durant & Ensom, 2012). Therefore, while school administrators may enact corporal punishment to induce short-term compliance, they may be unaware of the negative long-term effects.
Zero-tolerance. School district administrators and governing bodies (i.e., school boards) continued to implement policies that closely mirrored perceptions and beliefs in society through to the end of the 20th century (Buckmaster, 2016). For example, one policy that permeated into the approach to discipline was the zero-tolerance policy born out of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 (Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017). Zero-tolerance disciplinary practices are defined as a “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). As a result, school officials abandoned rehabilitative measures in favor of a “get tough” mentality that infiltrated how discipline was handled, even for minor offenses (Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017, p. 807). Research has routinely found zero-tolerance policies as ineffective in changing student behavior; however, they have been found to contribute to negative student outcomes, such as increased dropout rates, low attendance rates, and poorer academic performance (Buckmaster, 2016; Kline, 2016; Skiba & Nesting, 2001). Therefore, rather than searching for new alternatives, school administrators that implement zero-tolerance policies may continue to experience frustration not only with lack of behavior change, but also with a continued decline in academic performance, high dropout rates, and poor student attendance.

Zero-tolerance environments were not heavily scrutinized nor in the national discussion until 1999. According to Thurau and Wald (2010), Jesse Jackson first drew the nation’s attention to the potential issues with zero-tolerance policies when he brought forth a case involving seven Black boys who were expelled for two years in Illinois following a fight, without weapons, at a football game. In the following year, Opportunities Suspended was released by The Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project. This report chronicled the increase of
suspensions and expulsions, especially of minority students, as a result the zero-tolerance stance school administrators were taking in conjunction with the increased police presence in schools (Thurau & Wald, 2010).

In summary, research has routinely revealed zero-tolerance policies to be ineffective in changing behavior, insufficient in making schools safer (Losen, 2014), and unfairly administered to groups of students. LaMarche (2011) cited several organizations, such as Dignity in Schools, Alliance for Educational Justice, the Advancement Project, and the Atlantic Philanthropies, among several that have lobbied for a significant shift away from zero-tolerance to more positive approaches to discipline. Curran (2019) noted even in districts that did not officially adopt zero-tolerance policies, mandatory suspension and expulsion language was adopted to handle misbehaviors. When district administrators or governing bodies adopt policies that make suspensions mandatory for certain behaviors, campus administrators may be pressured to enforce the stricter policies over more rehabilitative measures (Curran, 2019).

**Exclusionary suspensions.** While many states moved away from corporal punishment as a primary approach to handling misbehavior, and as a result of zero-tolerance policies permeating to schools from the criminal justice system, exclusionary suspensions became the primary avenue for handing out consequences (Anderson & Ritter, 2017). Exclusionary suspensions involve school administrators suspending students out-of-school or sending them to an alternative placement (Anyon, Lechuga, Ortega, Browning, & Simmons, 2018). Similar to the belief that the threat of harsh consequences, such as corporal punishment, will prevent future misconduct, educators hypothesized out-of-school suspensions and alternative placements would deter problematic behavior (Novak, 2018).

One critical assumption of suspending students from school is the school will be safer if students who commit infractions are absent from the school environment; however, there is an
absence of literature to support this. In fact, Skiba (2000) asserted that “there appears to be little evidence, direct or indirect, supporting the effectiveness of suspension or expulsion for improving student behavior or contributing to overall school safety” (p. 13). Likewise, González (2012) claimed exclusionary suspensions deprived students of valuable learning time and failed to make schools safer. Finally, Perry and Morris (2014) posited while policies that remove rule-violating students from school has become the norm, a growing body of research challenges their morality and effectiveness, arguing that suspension and expulsion are overused and ineffective.

A preponderance of the research has shown that exclusionary suspensions actually increase problematic behaviors rather than decrease them (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anyon et al., 2018; Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Langberg & Ciolfi, 2017). Between 2011 and 2012, 3.45 million students received out-of-school suspension (Cholewa, Hull, Babcock, & Smith, 2018). This number would fill every large stadium and ballpark in the United States (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). When students return from suspension, frustration often leads to reoccurring behaviors, which ultimately leads to an unending cycle of further exclusionary discipline (Kline, 2016). In addition to the increase of misconduct, exclusionary suspensions have created further problems, such as disconnection from school, absenteeism, increased dropouts, recidivism, lower academic performance, a school-to-prison pipeline, and a racial discipline gap.

**Disconnection from school.** One unintended consequence that grew out of exclusionary suspensions is students’ feeling of disconnection from school. When students face out-of-school suspension or alternative school placement, researchers have found them to feel psychologically disconnected from school (Anyon et al., 2016). When the referral that leads to the exclusionary suspension is written by a teacher, other research has shown that students feel disconnected from the school and the teacher (DeMatthews, 2016). Finally, some students reported a sense of
alienation from and a lack of belonging to the overall school culture as a result of being suspended repeatedly (Gregory, Huang, Anyon, Greer, & Downing, 2018).

Excessive exclusionary suspensions have been associated with higher levels of mistrust of authority figures both in and out of school (Kirk & Matsuda, 2011). Moreover, Morris (2005) suggested that an overly punitive school environment can create student apathy and disconnection. Feeling of disconnection, not only for students who received suspensions in schools but even for those in schools where punitive levels are high, has manifested through high levels of anxiety, distrust, and uncertainty, and has been associated with lower levels of math and reading achievement (Perry & Morris, 2014).

**Absenteeism.** In addition to a sense of disconnection, students who have been suspended from school have further problems with attendance (DeMatthews, 2016). In a survey of 500 American superintendents in 2014, 92% of respondents reported out-of-school suspensions were associated with negatives outcomes, such as higher absenteeism and truancy (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). In one quantitative study, researchers ran ANOVA and MANOVA analyses and found that schools in which students received more exclusionary discipline, typically experienced lower attendance rates from the suspended students (Bradshaw, Paz, Debnam, & Johnson, 2015). In other words, students who were suspended from school were found to attend school less regularly after the suspension was served. The converse to this was also found to be true in one study—lower rates of exclusionary discipline resulted in lower rates of absenteeism and truancy (Flannery, Frank, & Kato, 2012).

**Dropouts.** In the most extreme cases, students drop out of school altogether because they feel disconnected from school, are chronically absent, and feel frustrated by exclusionary practices of discipline (DeMatthews, Carey, Olivarez, & Saeedi, 2017). In a Texas study, researchers reported exclusionary discipline relates to a 24% increase in high school dropout
rates (Marchbanks, Blake, Smith, Seibert, & Carmichael, 2014). Minority and special education students are particularly vulnerable to the relationship between suspensions and dropouts as they were found to be three times more likely to drop out because of repetitive out-of-school suspensions (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017). Figure 1 shows the discrepancy in suspension and graduation data from a longitudinal study of White, Hispanic, and Black high school males (Losen, 2014).

![Bar graph showing graduation rates by race for students with and without exclusionary suspensions.](image)

*Figure 1.* A bar graph of graduation rates by race for students with and without exclusionary suspensions. Graph created based on research by: Losen, D. (Ed.). (2014). *Closing the school discipline gap: Equitable remedies for excessive exclusion (disability, equity and culture).* New York, NY: Teachers College Press. Copyright 2015 by Teachers College Press.

Particularly pertinent to this study, the proportion of students who failed or were retained in ninth grade has increased sharply over the last twenty years; this retention in ninth grade more accurately predicts a student’s likelihood to dropout or become incarcerated more than that of any other grade level (Wald & Losen, 2003). Figure 2 further shows the negative effects of students, especially Black students, who dropout of high school in relation to future incarceration (Curry, 2011).

Recent studies have begun investigating the economic impact that the suspension-dropout problem has caused. For example, the additional dropouts that resulted from exclusionary suspensions account for a $711 million economic effect on the state of Texas (Marchbanks et al., 2013).

In summary, a synthesis of the literature in this area suggests that exclusionary suspensions and expulsions are moderately associated with higher dropout numbers (Marchbanks et al., 2014; Maxine, 2018), which have a negative economic impact on the economy (Marchbanks et al., 2013) and disproportionately affect minorities (Girvan et al., 2017; Maxine, 2018). If graduation is the end-goal of the public school system, then the fact that research strongly links suspension to the failure to graduate (Losen, 2014) is grounds for pursuing other approaches to exclusionary discipline.
**Recidivism.** Research repeatedly shows that the use of exclusionary practices by school administrators does not reduce the amount of subsequent referrals received by students (Riley, 2018). As school leaders implement policies that resemble the criminal justice system, one unintended consequence is that recidivism—the same students committing the same infractions that warranted the original suspension—has increased (Welch, 2017). The results from the most substantial exclusionary practice of removing students completely from the home campus via alternative school placement or expulsion has proved no better in reducing the return rate of offenders (Booker & Mitchell, 2011).

While the assumption that removing students would deter future infractions may seem intuitive to many, some research has shown school suspension rates appear to predict higher rates of future misbehavior from those same students (Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008). As opposed to suspensions, participation in alternative programs designed to educate and repair harm, such as restorative justice, has shown positive results in reducing recidivism (de Beus & Rodriguez, 2007). Finally, recidivism rates have been significantly related to how long a school uses RP with students. To that end, McCold (2008) reported students who engaged with RP over a period of time showed a higher reduction in repeat referrals than those who did not remain enrolled in RP programs.

**Academic performance.** Unsurprisingly, students who miss valuable class time because of suspensions perform more poorly on report cards and on standardized tests than students who are not suspended (Hope & Skoog, 2015). In one study, researchers found schools with higher exclusionary rates have lower proficiency levels on statewide standardized tests, not just for the suspended students, but for all students (Perry & Morris, 2014). This important finding mirrored those from another study, where survey results showed exclusionary practices negatively impacted various variables of school culture, including academic achievement, because of the
perception of inequity in distributing consequences fairly to students (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017). These findings suggest not only the negative impact that exclusionary suspensions have on academic performance but also that students are aware, at least to some degree, of the negative toll the suspensions have on the culture of the school.

Arcia (2006) conducted a quasi-experiment with groups of suspended and non-suspended students who were similar in socioeconomic characteristics and followed over two years. Arcia (2006) concluded the suspended students were up to five grade levels behind non-suspended students, suggesting a substantial effect of suspension on academic performance. Getting behind in academic achievement is not just a phenomenon seen during middle and high school years. In fact, suspensions in elementary school resulting from behavioral problems are among the highest predictors of later underachievement in a student’s academic career (Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh, 2016).

**School-to-prison pipeline.** One of the most negative effects of exclusionary practices is the track towards prison in which many students find themselves. A plethora of research, including a 2014 seminal report by the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, has found a positive relationship between suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) and the increased risk for future arrest (Ford, 2016; Langberg & Ciolfi, 2017; Perry & Morris, 2014; Ramey, 2016). One antecedent for creating the school-to-prison pipeline that exists is the tendency to suspend students for “typical adolescent developmental behaviors as well as low-level type misdemeanors: acting out in class, truancy, fighting, and other similar offenses” (Mallett, 2016, p. 2). Thus, the pipeline is understood to be a set of policies and approaches in school discipline that make it more likely for some adolescents to enter the criminal justice system than to receive a quality education (Mallett, 2016).
The statistics of minority students who are suspended out-of-school or sent to alternative school and are later incarcerated are disproportionately higher than those of White students (Barnes & Motz, 2018). A seminal study conducted by the United States Department of Education (2014) reported that although Black students made up only 12% of student enrollment, they accounted for 28% of arrests and referrals to law enforcement. Moreover, one nationwide study reported that Black males with no prior criminal records were six times more likely to be jailed than White males for the exact same offense (Wald & Losen, 2003). This phenomenon, which is also present across other disciplinary approaches such as corporal punishment and exclusionary suspensions will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Students were found to be more likely to be incarcerated than they were a generation ago (Gonzalez, 2012). In a study using meta-analysis, Maguin and Loeber (1996) discovered that the removal of students from instruction, via suspension, contributed to juvenile delinquency. This study also reported an association between suspension and a continuing cycle of failure and repeated encounters with law enforcement (Maguin & Loeber, 1996).

Schools began implementing systematic measures that increased the likelihood that students would encounter law enforcement officers throughout the school day. To that end, school districts, such as the Los Angeles Unified School District began establishing their own police departments and the New York Police Department’s School Safety Division employed more officers than entire police departments in cities such as Washington D.C., Detroit, Las Vegas, and Boston (Gonzalez, 2012). Thurau and Wald (2010) claimed the number of police officers employed within schools has significantly increased to approximately 17,000 nationwide; however, despite the placement of law enforcement in schools, there has not been a significant decrease in minor or major offenses. In a subsequent article, Wald and Thurau (2010) synthesized the main findings from a preponderance of research:
Arguments that such heavy-handed tactics are necessary to keep schools safe no longer fly. Schools with harsh, zero-tolerance codes and heavy police presence are often less safe than those that embrace more flexible and nuanced responses to student misbehaviors. They are also frequently the same schools with shockingly high dropout rates. (para. 10)

Finally, the reach of law enforcement in schools has resulted in disciplinary infractions that were once handled internally but are now referred to law enforcement officials (Hirschfield, 2008), which increases the likelihood that misbehaving students will be suspended, expelled, or placed in detention facilities (Morris, 2012).

**Racial discipline gap.** No group has felt the negative effects more than Black students, who are suspended at a rate three times higher than White students (United States Department of Education, 2014). This phenomenon has been referred to as the racial discipline gap (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; DeMatthews, 2016). In a widespread study of one possible and controversial cause of the racial discipline gap in schools—implicit bias—has been a topic of significant research over the past 15 years (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Edwards, 2016; Girvan, Gion, & Smolkowski, 2017). McNeal (2016) argued implicit bias involves “stereotypes and other biases against certain groups of students [that] has impacted the ability of school administrators to apply their discretionary power in a non-biased, equitable manner” (p. 289).

The phenomenon of implicit bias has been linked to overrepresentation, not only in discipline referral numbers but also for special education referral numbers as well (Wiley, Brigham, Kauffman, & Bogan, 2013). Othman (2018) reported that Black students, aged six to 25, have a relative risk ratio of 1.4 of being referred to special education, which means Black students are moderately more likely than peer groups to be referred. On the other hand, this same study found White and Hispanic to be underrepresented, as evidenced by ratios lower than 0.9 for both racial groups (Othman, 2018). Some researchers have drawn a parallel from the placement of African Americans into special education, especially males, to their suspension. In
other words, African Americans are disproportionately referred to special education in the same manner they are disproportionately sent to the school disciplinarian’s office (Kearney, 2011; Woodson & Harris, 2018). In fact, Kearney (2011) found a connection between minorities in special education and higher dropout and incarceration rates similar to problematic relationships between exclusionary suspensions and dropout/incarceration rates.

The racial discipline gap not only affects African Americans’ perception of respect, care, connectedness, and equity, but studies have found other racial groups’ perceptions of these same factors in the school were negative when a racial gap was present (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017). A recent longitudinal study conducted in Texas found African Americans were 17% more likely to receive out-of-school suspension for a first infraction and 31% more likely than White students to receive a discretionary discipline referral when other variables such as demographics, academic performance, and absenteeism were taken into account (Fabelo et al., 2011). At the school level, Skiba et al. (2014) reported that the percentage of Black students enrolled at a school was one of the strongest predictors of out-of-school suspension (OSS) in a multilevel study in a Midwestern state. Although it is not the primary focus of this study, the racial discipline gap will be investigated to some degree throughout this study.

**Restorative Practices**

Maxine (2018) asserted, “It is imperative that schools reconsider the way they discipline students, and look to holistically develop them into positive, contributing members of society” (para. 11). Accordingly, a growing number of school leaders are pursuing other approaches to discipline, stimulated by statistics from exclusionary practices and in some cases, state policymakers who are attempting to change the landscape intersected by economics, incarceration, and education (Marchbanks et al., 2013). Moreover, school administrators who are
interested in improving “school climate and community-building to the social and emotional well-being, behavior, and competency of students” have been searching for new methods to meet “these ends” (High, 2017, p. 527). One of the most popular new methods, RP marks another significant shift in disciplinary practice from removing the offending student from school to repairing relationships between the offender and the offended (Mullett, 2014).

**Theoretical framework.** To better understand the search for such a new approach, it is beneficial to situate the need within educators’ need for balancing, controlling, and supporting students’ development towards productive, positive behaviors. One theory that explains this delicate balance is the social discipline window theory (Buckmaster, 2016). Figure 3 (see permission to reprint in Appendix H) depicts the delicate balance that educators, especially school administrators, face when determining outcomes of infractions in an effort to teach or punish (Wachtel, 1999).

![Social discipline plane](image)


Inherent in the theory is the educator’s ability to define his or her own practice within these two spectrums and plot the point within the plane; from this point, it can be determined
whether the educator is high or low in terms of controlling variables or potential outcomes, such as behaviors and safety, as well as supporting growth and development (Buckmaster, 2016). This plotting results in placement in a window of intersecting axes (see permission to reprint in Appendix H), as seen in Figure 4 (Wachtel, 1999).

![Social Discipline Window](image)


The bottom left quadrant (low support, low control) reflects an educator who sees little need for supporting adolescents’ growth and development in addition to few, if any, behavioral expectations for students (Buckmaster, 2016). The bottom right quadrant (low control, high support) reflects educators with very few behavioral and academic expectations but believe in and are willing to support students in development (Wachtel, 2009). The top left quadrant (high control, low support) demonstrates educators with a punitive mindset, often seeking approaches such as exclusionary practices to provide rigid consequences for misbehavior (Buckmaster,
Finally, the top right quadrant (high control, high support) reflects the restorative practices that are being used in growing numbers to support students while still having high expectations for their behavior (Wachtel & McCold, 2001).

The need to balance safety, behavioral change, and maintain control while also encouraging students’ adolescent development through education and support create conditions by which the school and classroom environment can experience vast swings from permissiveness to overly punitive (Buckmaster, 2016). The philosophy underlying RP maintains that “human beings are happier, more productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things WITH them rather than TO them or FOR them” (McCold, 2008). Furthermore, Wachtel (2000) hypothesized that the punitive method (TO) and paternalistic (FOR) modes are not as effective as the restorative (WITH) mode. Therefore, understanding the implementation of a program that appropriately strikes a balance between these two seemingly opposites can help school leaders approach better outcomes that benefit control and support.

The basics of restorative practices. Gonzalez (2015) highlighted the essential assumption and distinction from previous practices of exclusionary suspensions in a seminal, multiyear study of RP implementation:

The underlying assumption of restorative justice is that students who commit delinquent or offensive acts are breaching the social contract between them and the school community. That social contract cannot be restored if the breaching party is absent—that is, if the school’s first and most frequent response is to ban the offender from the community. The inclusive community-based framework of restorative justice lies in sharp contrast to exclusionary discipline policies. (p. 154)
The basic, foundational principle of RP involves the mutual building of understanding, respect, and repairing of harm when a disciplinary infraction is committed (Riley, 2018). This aligns with Zehr’s (2002) assertion: “Although the term ‘restorative justice’ encompasses a variety of programs and practices, at its core it is a set of principles, a philosophy, an alternate set of guiding questions” (p. 5). Whereas the exclusionary approach fails to address the potential harm created—regardless if the relationship is student-student or student-educator—the RP method is built upon addressing the harm with the goal to reduce the likelihood of the bad behavior happening again (Riley, 2018). Furthermore, RP involves “moral learning, community participation and caring, respectful dialogue, forgiveness, responsibility, apology, and setting things right or making amends” (Adams, 2004, p. 3). Other principles include attempts to strengthen social connection, affective communication, and responsibility for one another (Gregory et al., 2016). Finally, RP can be implemented as a whole-school approach, connected to a more general social and emotional learning (SEL) framework, a targeted approach used in classrooms, an intensive method used during mediations, or a combination of approaches (Mansfield, Fowler, & Rainboldt, 2018).

One significant RP procedure used at the intensive and reactionary level is a restorative circle by which the offender and offended discuss the incident to repair the harm in the relationship (Mullett, 2014). During this circle, pertinent members from the school community may be invited if an event occurred that negatively affected them. To illustrate this approach, a scenario is offered in which a student spray paints graffiti on the side of the school building (Buckmaster, 2016). The school administrator may set up a restorative circle and invite the student, the maintenance worker who cleaned the graffiti, a neighbor who was offended by the unwanted art, the student’s parents, and the teacher(s) who was affected by missed instructional time to participate in the circle (Buckmaster, 2016). Whereas the traditional approach would
have likely suspended the student for a predetermined, prescribed number of days with little attention paid to all affected parties, the restorative circle attempts to engage in dialogue to rebuild the relationship that was damaged by the original act (High, 2017).

At the classroom level, teachers are seeking more proactive means to implement various practices erected upon establishing respect, building community, and respecting diversity (Liebmann, 2007). Because “a climate of trust is essential for learning—but is quite fragile among the complex interactions of many humans each school day” (Smith, Frey, & Fisher, 2018, p. 75)—teachers are implementing RP because they create communities where “long-term and deep relationships [are built] between all its members who need to coexist in a healthy way for learning outcomes to be met” (Blood and Thorsborne, 2005, p. 18). In the transition years of seventh to ninth grade, the focus lies mainly on academic progress to the detriment of SEL development. One such SEL approach being used in the classroom RP curriculum educates students to celebrate diversity, handle conflict in community circles, and understand others’ perspectives (Silverman & Mee, 2018).

With a limited amount of time and resources, school leaders face a dilemma—whether to adopt individual processes, such as restorative circles, or to implement the entire program (Liebmann, 2007). McCold (2008) cautioned that while “inserting a single restorative encounter into the life of an offending young person, if done well, can help realign their social relationships, . . . it is probably unrealistic to think any one-time intervention of an hour or so duration could counteract on-going influences of negative social environment and poor lifestyle choices leading to the current offense” (p. 102–103). Further, McCold (2008) claimed the “diluted dosage” (p. 103) rarely produces anything more than a small effect on behavior change; therefore, he hypothesized that if RP were administered in large doses as part of a comprehensive program, the positive benefits should become more pronounced. Wachtel (2000) posited RP that
integrate formal and informal approaches on an on-going basis over an extended period of time and represent a maximum dosage of appropriate practices in restoration. Therefore, administrators are adopting a multitude of options, often simultaneously, to proactively prevent and reactively handle discipline issues (Liebmann, 2007). For example, schools embracing the whole-school approach are using multiple, layered methods to handle potential conflict, including peer mediation and mentoring built on values of appropriate communication, affirmation, cooperation, and problem-solving (Liebmann, 2007). Furthermore, they are establishing councils to represent groups of students traditionally marginalized by exclusionary suspensions to bring forward concerns and ideas for social change within the school environment (Liebmann, 2007). Nonetheless, the synthesis of research has concluded that RP works best when it is integrated into the school’s overall philosophy rather than implemented in small doses or individual practices (Ashley & Burke, 2009). The current school under study used some of these practices as part of their approach, such as restorative conferences, preventing school exclusions, peer mentoring, mediation, and mentoring (from adults). The fact that this school has not implemented every aspect of RP in the first year of implementation is not abnormal. Kotter (2012) recommended that any organization attempting to establish positive change start small and implement only a handful of changes that are sustainable rather than chase the temptation of changing too many processes at once.

Expected outcomes for schools using RP. After the shooting at Columbine High School, administrators implemented zero-tolerance policies in an effort to thwart unwanted behaviors; however, after careful study of the negative effects of exclusionary practices, Columbine High School has since shifted to RP in an attempt to build community, compassion, and respect (Buckmaster, 2016). Likewise, Chicago public schools came under intense scrutiny for its exclusionary suspensions, low academic performance, and poor graduation rates;
consequently, it implemented RP and has begun to see improvements in each dimension over the last three years (Buckmaster, 2016).

A Virginia study of 23 high schools reported a 52% reduction in long-term suspensions and a 79% reduction in bullying as a result of implementing practices that are similar to RP (Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). These researchers identified practices that utilized threat assessment guidelines, which Buckmaster (2016) considered a departure from zero-tolerance policies used in most schools. These guidelines required students to help learn the consequences of their harmful actions in lieu of exclusionary suspension. Furthermore, a comprehensive study of Denver high schools revealed students who attended schools using RP were 69% less likely to be suspended from school (Gregory, Huang, Anyon, Greer, & Downing, 2018). Surveys conducted at two large, diverse eastern U.S. high schools showed students’ perceived teachers as having better relationships with students and being more respectful and equitable to all students (Gregory et al., 2016). A case-study of a Virginia high school using RP demonstrated a significant drop in recidivism of incidents and a narrowing of the racial discipline gap by more than 20% (Mansfield et al., 2018).

Citing international studies by Morrison (2007) that showed positive outcomes for teachers, students, parents, and community members using RP, Gonzalez (2015) conducted the first longitudinal study of RP implementation in the United States and had five important findings about the implementation of RP in an urban setting (Denver, Colorado):

1) Systemic implementation of RP, in conjunction with reform of discipline policies, played a key role in addressing disproportionality in discipline referrals.

2) The positive impact of RP was correlated with higher student achievement.

3) The implementation of RP should have multilevel goals—short, medium, and long-term—for maximum effectiveness.
4) The implementation of RP must be flexible across districts to allow for changes that are responsive to individuals’ needs.

5) The most effective model of implementation was comprehensive rather than a single process.

Furthermore, this seven-year study demonstrated a significant decrease in recidivism and its reduction across all racial groups, as shown in Table 3 (Gonzalez, 2015). From Table 3, it is evident that RP has the potential to provide a sustainable way to reduce referrals for all students and limit suspension duplications and recidivism.

Table 3

Total Suspensions, Enrollment, and Suspension Rates by Race (2006–2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Suspensions</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>DPS Suspension Rate (%)</th>
<th>Black Suspension Rate (%)</th>
<th>Hispanic Suspension Rate (%)</th>
<th>White Suspension Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006–2007</td>
<td>7,090</td>
<td>66,960</td>
<td>10.58</td>
<td>17.61</td>
<td>10.18</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007–2008</td>
<td>6,739</td>
<td>67,324</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.46</td>
<td>10.16</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008–2009</td>
<td>6,432</td>
<td>72,005</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>14.79</td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009–2010</td>
<td>5,944</td>
<td>76,090</td>
<td>7.81</td>
<td>15.20</td>
<td>8.68</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–2011</td>
<td>5,969</td>
<td>78,354</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>14.90</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011–2012</td>
<td>5,515</td>
<td>81,392</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>12.70</td>
<td>5.90</td>
<td>2.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012–2013</td>
<td>4,751</td>
<td>84,424</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>10.42</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data from Denver Public Schools (DPS) over 2006-2013 period.

A synthesis of research studies leads to two emerging themes for school districts that implement RP. First, the implementation of RP does not tend to replace other disciplinary approaches, including exclusionary practices, PBIS, or other approaches (Buckmaster, 2016; Sartain et al., 2015). In fact, numerous researchers have reported the benefits of implementing RP in conjunction with a program such as PBIS (Fronius, Persson, Guckenberg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016; Riley, 2018). Second, several barriers exist due to incongruent values and beliefs about how to handle discipline issues within schools and the worthiness of RP (Buckmaster, 2016; Sartain et al., 2015).
**Barriers to implementing RP.** Many barriers have been reported for schools trying to effectively implement RP. One barrier is the turnover that occurs at schools—as soon as RP reaches full implementation, teachers and administrators leave for promotion because of the demonstrated successes (Mansfield et al., 2018). Moreover, the extended time associated with conducting restorative circles create problems for already overloaded administrators and teachers (Fronius et al., 2016; Marsh, 2017). The funding necessary to initially and continuously train teachers can be substantial, although districts can train in-house or seek grants (Mansfield et al., 2018; Mayworm, Sharkey, Hunnicut, & Scheidel, 2016). Another barrier to implementing RP is the resistance faced from teachers and administrators who view this approach as being too soft on discipline when the alternative would remove the problem in the short-term (Marsh, 2017). Parents also fear safety can be compromised when actions are not dealt with swiftly and with harsh consequences (Kamenetz, 2018). Therefore, convincing parents that another option that keeps students in the school environment is better than removal can be a tough proposition.

The traditional power structure where teachers and administrators hand out discipline to students rather than work with them is ultimately transformed to a new structure that involves a major shift in philosophy (Jones, 2013). Also, the prevalence of implicit bias in schools can provide a significant obstacle for administrators looking to implement RP to reduce referrals, especially with respect to the racial discipline gap (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Edwards, 2016). Moreover, there has been some confusion on what exactly RP is, who is responsible for implementing it, and what it entails (Fronius et al., 2016).

In addition to these implementation barriers, the necessary time to implement a truly restorative setting has been of recent focus in the literature. For example, some researchers have suggested a shift in attitude about the purpose of punishment, such as “paying the offender back” (Fronius et al., 2016, p. 15) to facilitating behavior change (Mansfield et al., 2018) and open
communication to repair harm (High, 2017) can take one to three years (Karp & Breslin, 2001). On the other hand, the complete shift to a restorative climate within a school can require three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013). As schools and districts consider how to allocate their resources, the time factor is a potentially significant implementation barrier (Fronius et al., 2016).

**Research-based best practices for implementation.** Though many potential challenges and barriers exist to successfully implementing RP to transform discipline management in schools, Kiddle and Alfred (2011) posited that it boils down to examining “how we behave, how we think about harm, how we hold and share power, and how we can shift existing practices” (p. 21). To assist schools with implementation, six steps were suggested (Kiddle & Alfred, 2011):

1) Identify the need and recognize that better outcomes are possible.

2) Assess readiness for school wide restorative practices.

3) Build interest.

4) Attend an initial training.

5) Engage school and district stakeholders.

6) Develop an action plan.

Gonzalez (2015) listed six similar action steps for schools or districts who may be considering implementing RP:

1) Establish reasons for implementation and gain buy-in from key stakeholders.

2) Develop a clear vision with short, medium, and long-term goals.

3) Create a practice that is responsive, effective, and adaptive.

4) Adopt a discipline policy and practices that integrate RP.

5) Develop school-based practices that promote a whole-school approach, rather than a program-based model.
6) Invest in a continuous system of growth and professional development for employees and other interested community members.

Though school leaders may forge their own path by choosing to adopt only some of these steps (Kiddle & Alfred, 2011) or may not face all of the barriers listed in this section, creating and following an action plan may help build RP as a sustainable program (Fronius et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2015).

Synthesis of the Research

A synthesis of the existing research related to exclusionary suspensions suggests removing students from school for disciplinary reasons is riddled with problems. These problems include more students dropping out of school, being disconnected from school once the student reenters, incurring more subsequent absences after returning from suspension, becoming involved in the criminal justice system, performing at lower academic levels than peers, proliferating the racial discipline gap, and repeating the offenses in the future. On the other hand, a preponderance of the research reveals programs implemented to educate and support students, such as RP, tend to reduce suspensions, increase connections between students and the overall school community, and limit recidivism of future offenses. At the very least, the literature compels school administrators to rethink current disciplinary practices to ensure alignment between philosophy and practice. Finally, the research shows that while RP is a time-consuming process and has potential barriers school leaders must overcome, they are worthwhile.

The Need for Further Research

A review of the literature suggests that the evidence for the effectiveness of RP is in its beginning stages, especially in the United States (Fronius, et al., 2016). Furthermore, Fronius et al. (2016) claimed that while preliminary evidence suggests promising results across measures, such as discipline, graduation, attendance, school culture, and academic performance, the
evidence is limited, and research lacks the internal validity necessary to equate such improvements to implementation of RP. Many rigorous studies are underway to help understand the effects of RP, but more research is needed, especially about its implementation, training, staff buy-in, and sustainability (Fronius et al., 2016).

Middle school grades (sixth through ninth grades) begin the significant shift toward not only an escalating discipline disparity between Black and White students but also the amount of exclusionary suspensions of all students (Loveless, 2017). Researchers hypothesized several reasons for the increasing suspensions out-of-school and in-school, and expulsions that revolve around the transition between elementary to middle school and middle school to high school (Arica, 2007; Eccles, Lord, & Buchanan, 1996; Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Specifically, the transitions to stricter behavioral policies, classes going from small-group settings to large-group, less engaging lessons, higher academic expectations, a decline in the quality of teacher-student relationships, and the shift of owning the educational experience from teacher to student are cited as the major antecedents to the proliferation in exclusionary suspensions during the middle school years (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013).

Accordingly, school administrators are currently in a complex quagmire: they must balance school safety concerns with avoiding the overuse of exclusionary discipline practices that further alienate students and place them on a trajectory aimed more toward dropping out and prison rather than graduation (Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). Therefore, it is critical for educators and policymakers to pursue promising alternatives, such as RP or other methods, which are showing gains towards creating positives outcomes of respect, dignity, and understanding if they are to meet their goal of meeting basic human needs and be “constructive institutions within society” (Buckmaster, 2016, p. 2).
Changing the culture. Tucker (2019) warned against the rolling out of top-down initiatives in schools, often leading to resentment and anger. Instead, Tucker (2019) suggested administrators looking to implement programs or other initiatives are advised to establish the purpose of the program to build buy-in from teachers and other faculty members. Similar to Sinek’s (2013) suggestion of starting with the why, Gregory (2017) posited that school leaders can establish trust among stakeholders by explaining the purpose and mission behind the initiative to reduce anxiety and support, rather than subvert any change initiative. Finally, in addition to providing a “roadmap” (Tucker, 2019, p. 56), leaders should provide ongoing, adequate training and build an infrastructure of a dedicated learning community where teachers are committed to improving student outcomes through experimentation and continuous learning.

Deliberative Democratic Evaluation

This study used a program evaluation approach called deliberative democratic evaluation (DDE). This rationale for using this approach is further explained in the next chapter; however, this section will provide a brief review of the literature pertaining to DDE.

DDE was proposed by Ernest House and Kenneth Howe as a method to “collect, process, and analyze stakeholder perspectives in a systematic, unbiased fashion, making those perspectives part of the process of arriving at evaluative conclusions” (House & Howe, 2003). The approach is grounded in the expectation that the inclusion of multiple perspectives, from multiple power levels, will improve the validity of the findings of the evaluation (House & Howe, 2003). Hreinsdottir and Davidsdottir (2012) added that DDE takes into account whose interests are represented throughout the evaluation because it is vital to include all stakeholders’ viewpoints to ensure an accurate evaluation.

Power. The literature surrounding DDE consistently suggests that power imbalance, or at least the lack of including all stakeholders’ views, is typically reflected in most program
evaluations. For example, Hreinsdottir and Davidsdottir (2012) stated, “Powerless groups often have scant access to the evaluation” (p. 520). House and Howe (2003) commented that evaluators typically attend to the clients’ interests while others represent the stakeholders’ interests being served in the evaluation. Instead, they proposed a balance between attending to all parties’ interests in an effort to represent an accurate picture of the program absent of power levels. The role of the evaluator is to ensure all sides are equally valued to attain valid findings (House & Howe, 2003). In the case of school evaluations, students’ insights may be valuable to the evaluation but are often excluded (Hreinsdottir & Davidsdottir, 2012). Moreover, Greene (2000) suggested time constraints make it difficult to obtain participation from members with the least power. Finally, Hreinsdottir and Davidsdottir (2012) argued that the most beneficial reason to use DDE is obtaining the voices from those without power; by doing so, power imbalances are addressed, participation from multiple power levels are secured, and a more open, honest discussion about core issues ensues.

**Principles of DDE.** In an effort to arrive at sound inclusions, House and Howe (2000) suggested researchers implement the three principles of DDE—inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation. The following sections will review each of these principles.

**Inclusion.** According to House and Howe (2000), this principle reflects the value of finding input at all levels of the subject organization of study but also acknowledges that all input may not hold equal weight. However, it is vital to deliberately design evaluations that incorporate feedback from any and all power levels. In a subsequent article, House and Howe (2003) suggested this connects to the overall principle of a democracy in that the evaluator can reconcile conflicting perspectives by, at the very least, seeking and including those perspectives in the overall evaluation. Similarly, McNamara and Morris (2014) positioned the evaluator as an active participant who ensures all stakeholders are included, addresses competing views as an
authoritative expert, judges the legitimacy of various claims, and is the final decision maker in choosing what evidence to support. Finally, Podems (2017) synthesized the main tenet of inclusion in DDE:

An evaluation should aim to provide relevant information to various and diverse audiences, each of whom has a different vested interest in the program and the related evaluation, such as those who can benefit from, or be damaged by, either one. (p. 6)

Thus, the inclusion of all stakeholders who have a legitimate interest in the contents of the evaluation is vital throughout the different steps in the overall process.

**Dialogue.** To prevent inaccuracy or misunderstanding, the next step is providing deliberate time for critical discussion or dialogue about the issues and evidence being evaluated (House & Howe, 2000). Moreover, stakeholders are invited to judge the claims being presented in the evaluation, critique them, and provide counterclaims if such are warranted (McNamara & Morris, 2014). These processes are similar to debate and public town hall meetings in the democratic process of voting where the evaluator plays the role of moderator of moving the dialogue along and visiting issues of critical importance (House & Howe, 2003).

**Deliberation.** To draw well-reasoned conclusions, evaluators must finally provide time for extensive deliberation including further thought, reflection upon their own interests, and refinement of values (House & Howe, 2000). This step in the process has two important benefits, according to McNamara and Morris (2014): (a) it gives the evaluator the opportunity to better understand various stakeholders’ thoughts, interests, and experiences; and (b) the evaluator can use reflective and unbiased deliberation to make impartial judgments about conclusions and claims that are indefensible. Podems (2017) added other benefits for evaluators during the deliberation phase—they can uncover problems that still remain and ones that have been hidden in the data collection phase.
Summary

This literature review has investigated the past and present approaches used to address discipline issues within schools. Specifically, it has juxtaposed the problems associated with exclusionary suspensions, such as increased absenteeism and dropouts, a disconnection from school, a widening of the racial discipline gap, increased recidivism, decreased academic performance, and the creation of a school-to-prison pipeline—with the promise of other alternatives, such as RP, to justify future research. Situated within the social discipline window theory, RP attempts to delicately balance educators’ needs to control and maintain a school environment of safety and academic progress with the need to support adolescent students in their social and emotional development. Because RP is in its beginning stages in American public education, more research is needed to determine its effectiveness in reducing the referrals that lead to exclusionary placements, especially during the transition years between elementary and high school.

The next chapter describes the methodology—a mixed-methods program evaluation—to better understand the benefits and challenges of implementing RP at an urban, Grade 9 school setting in Texas. This literature review provided an introduction to the program evaluation approach that is discussed further in the next chapter. Through the use of descriptive statistics, a teacher survey, and student focus groups, the study also sought stakeholders’ perceptions about the implementation process as a whole.
Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

One of the primary aims of school administrators is to establish discipline guidelines that promote behavior change. More importantly, discipline management measures are created to ensure safety and promote student achievement for all (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Faculty who continue to use ineffective punitive consequences as the main vehicle for addressing problematic behaviors are experiencing frustration as they face higher dropout rates, chronic absenteeism, disconnection from school, and lower academic performance (Girvan, Gion, McIntosh, & Smolkowski, 2017; Hope & Skoog, 2015).

This chapter reviews the purpose and research questions explored, discusses the methodology used in the study, including population, sample, and instruments, and describes the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, in this chapter I explain ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the research project.

To complete this study, I conducted the research in phases. First, I compared statistical data before and after an intervention—restorative practices (RP)—to explore the descriptive impact of the program on the number of referrals received in the 2018-2019 school year. Then, I collected and analyzed teacher surveys to ascertain their perceptions about the benefits and challenges of implementing RP in the current academic school year. Finally, I conducted student focus groups and parent surveys to better understand their experiences with RP.

Purpose

The goal of this mixed methods study was to examine the implementation of restorative practices at an urban public school in Texas composed of only ninth grade students. Specifically, this study aimed to better understand some of the aspects from the perceptions of key stakeholders that are successful and those that present challenges during the intervention period.
Finally, this study sought to discover the degree of change in key discipline metrics over a recent five-year period.

**Research Questions**

**Q1.** To what extent did key discipline metrics for all students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

a. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Black students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

b. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Hispanic students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

c. To what extent did key discipline metrics for White students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

d. To what extent did key discipline metrics for special education students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?
Q2. What are the perceptions of the various school stakeholders—teachers, counselors, and assistant principals—regarding the implementation of RP?

Q3. How do students describe their experiences with RP?

Research Design and Method

This study used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate RP implemented in the 2018–2019 school year. To that end, the study used qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the research questions, which allows researchers “to mix and match design components that offer the best chance of answering their specific research question” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 15). Ivankova (2015) asserted, “Mixed-methods has become a popular research approach due to its ability to address the research problem more comprehensively” (p. 3). It allows researchers to “obtain statistical trends and patterns in the data and get individual perspectives that help explain these trends” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 3). Qualitative methods in this study, such as open-ended survey questions and focus groups, allowed for a better and deeper understanding of stakeholders’ perceptions concerning implementation, experiences, and potential improvements with RP.

The study was conducted in two phases following the mixed methods sequential explanatory design by first analyzing quantitative data and then collecting and analyzing qualitative data to better explain or elaborate on the results in the quantitative phase (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). The rationale behind this design is that the “quantitative data and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem: while the qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants’ views in more depth” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 17).

The first phase used an ex-post facto, quantitative stage with descriptive statistics to compare referrals from the past three academic years (pre-intervention) with referrals from the
2018-2019 academic year (during the RP intervention period). Ex-post facto research explores circumstances that have already occurred to determine the effect of an intervention (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Moreover, Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2010) positioned ex-post facto design as appropriate when randomization or manipulation of an independent variable is implausible or impossible; instead, the researcher might use this design to explore the impact of an independent variable, the RP intervention, on a dependent variable—exclusionary suspensions. Nonetheless, this design has one major limitation: Because the data and participants are from the past and cannot be randomized, it is impossible to determine actual causal relationships between variables (Ary et al., 2010). Instead, this type of design can reveal possible relationships worth further exploration (Kerlinger & Rint, 1986), which the subsequent qualitative phase allowed me to explore (Ivankova et al., 2006).

Mark, Henry, and Julnes (2000) suggested program evaluation is an appropriate method when the researcher wants to complete one or more of four possible aims: (a) assess merit and worth of a program, (b) examine compliance levels, (c) determine areas for improvement, and (d) develop more knowledge about the program. This study evaluated various levels of all four sections, though merit and compliance are not the primary focus points. Scriven (1967) first distinguished assessment, a one-time measurement process, with evaluation, a methodological activity. Furthermore, Scriven (1967) differentiated between summative evaluation—judging the overall merit or worth of a program—with formative evaluation, which involves an opportunity to change, develop knowledge, and improve processes. Accordingly, this study sought to provide formative assessment that may be used in discovering more about RP for the purposes of improving various aspects for this school and other school leaders considering implementing similar programs to address discipline issues. Thus, the results of this study will help school leaders discern the overall effectiveness of RP in addition to identifying key leverage points for
future improvement. Below is an example of logic model that highlights short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals (ultimate impact; see Figure 5).

**Restorative Practices Logic Model**

**Overarching Goal:** Reduce the amount of time students are spending in exclusionary suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRIORITIES</th>
<th>INPUTS</th>
<th>OUTPUTS</th>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
<th>IMPACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students continue to miss instructional time because of suspensions, they will continue to be disconnected from school and fall behind academically</td>
<td>Restorative Advisory Team, Community Partners (donations), Budget S for restorative circle snacks, Teachers, Professional Development Training</td>
<td>Decreased Number of Referrals, Increased Attendance Rate, Decreased Recidivism in Referrals, Less DAEP placements, Parent/Community Involvement</td>
<td>Short Term Accomplished in 1-3 years: 20% less referrals, 0.5% higher attendance, 10% reduction in recidivism, 10% fewer DAEP placements, 3 parent volunteers for Restorative Advisory Team, 60% of 9th feel connected to school</td>
<td>Students are learning in classrooms rather than in suspension or at home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Medium Term Accomplished in 4-6 years: 40% less referrals, 1% higher attendance, 25% reduction in recidivism, 20% fewer DAEP placements, 6 parent volunteers for Restorative Advisory Team, 80% of 9th graders feel connected to school</td>
<td>Students are learning from restorative circles how to better handle conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Long Term Accomplished in 7-10 years:</td>
<td>Parents and students feel a sense of school pride</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. A flowchart of the restorative practices logic model

**Program Evaluation Approach**

Because of the need to investigate perspectives from a diverse group of stakeholders—students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and parents—a DDE approach was the most suitable for this study (House & Howe, 2003). One major benefit of this approach was the active pursuit of opinions and perspective from a balance of those in power, administrators, and those not typically in power, students (House & Howe, 2003), such as administrators and students.

Other evaluation frameworks are conducted using a very limited scope and perspective, typically from the vantage point of the evaluator or using feedback from the leadership (i.e., those in power) level of the organization under study. However, House and Howe (2003) claimed the DDE framework seeks to “collect, process, and analyze stakeholder perspectives in a systematic, unbiased fashion, making those perspectives part of the process of arriving at evaluative
conclusions” (para. 3). The DDE approach lends itself to the “inclusion of relevant stakeholders, fair representation of all interests, and collective deliberation through the dialogical process” (McNamara & Morris, 2014, p. 54).

Three components— inclusion, dialogical, and deliberative— form the principles by which I conducted this evaluation. I addressed these principles in the following way:

- **Inclusion**— I sought input from multiple perspectives from all levels of power, including administrators, counselors, teachers, students, and parents. While students typically occupy the lowest level of power and decision-making in schools, their input and feedback during focus groups provided valuable insight for answering RQ2 and RQ3. Moreover, survey feedback from teachers and parents provided yet another avenue for inclusive input about barriers to successful implementation and suggestions for program evolution going forward.

- **Dialogical**— House and Howe (2003) asserted that evaluators cannot presume “that they know how other people think without engaging in extensive dialogue with them” (para. 16). This typically involves multiple discussions with various stakeholders to reach the goal of clarifying viewpoints and self-understandings (Howe & Ashcraft, 2005). To better understand school stakeholders’ value beliefs and to avoid the power imbalance that can occur in a discussion with multiple levels of power represented, one suggestion is to conduct the student focus groups absent of any other individuals whom the students may perceive as having more power (House & Howe, 2003; McNamara & Morris, 2014). Furthermore, to promote the dialogical aspect of this framework, McNamara and Morris (2014) suggested giving one group the opportunity to debate the accuracy of evidence presented from other parts in the evaluation. Therefore, I presented the survey findings
from teachers to the student focus groups and allowed them to engage in a discussion about the precision of the responses from their perspective.

- **Deliberation**—Because DDE rests on a foundation of a collective effort to improve programs, one of the major tasks of the stakeholders is to deliberate the merits of the programs’ values and processes (House & Howe, 2003). This study attempted to accomplish this in two ways: (a) The teacher survey sought input on program components that are worthy of keeping as well as those that should be eliminated, and (b) I asked both student focus groups which components of RP improved school culture and which made it worse.

In summary, I compared statistical data before and after an intervention (introduction of RP) to explore the number of referrals and exclusionary suspensions students received in the 2018-2019 school year. The next phase involved surveying faculty members to determine their perceptions about various benefits and challenges while implementing RP. Then, I conducted focus groups of students to better understand students’ experiences with the program. Finally, I asked open-ended survey questions to the parents of the students in the focus group.

**Population**

I conducted this research study at a public Grade 9 campus in Texas. It was founded in the early 1990s in an effort to provide a separate environment for freshmen students to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. Beforehand, freshmen students in this district attended with upperclassmen, but district leaders believed that if ninth grade students were isolated from upperclassmen, they were more likely to be successful (T. Lovette, personal communication, August 28, 2018).

**Demographic information.** This school was composed of 520 students, with 40% Black, 35% Hispanic, 17% White, and 8% other ethnic groups (see Table 4). In addition, 7.8% of
students were classified as English language learners (ELL), and 8.3% of students received special education services. According to the Texas Education Agency (n.d.), students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch are determined to be economically disadvantaged students. At this campus, 53.5% of students were categorized as economically disadvantaged. The enrollment numbers have stayed relatively stable in the past four years, only varying by adding or subtracting an average of seven students each year. The demographic statistics have remained stable over that same time with very little variance in racial or economically disadvantaged compositions.

Table 4

*Student Demographics for 2018–2019 School Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Group</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>% of Student Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, 50 teachers were employed at the school with an average tenure of 5.6 years of overall teaching experience. Of the 50 teachers, 70% were White, 20% were Black, and 10% were Hispanic (see Table 5). Each year, the school has had to replace approximately six teachers through attrition or promotion. Over the past four years, many of the teachers (N = 21) who were hired to replace outgoing teachers have had experience in other districts. On the other hand, since the 2014–2015 school year, only four teachers were new to the profession when they were hired at the school.
Table 5

*Teacher Demographics for 2018–2019 School Year*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Group</th>
<th>Number of Teachers</th>
<th>% of Teacher Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sampling**

Throughout the study, purposeful sampling was the primary sampling method used. For example, to answer RQ1 and the subgroups associated with the first question, I only analyzed archival discipline data from teachers who have been employed since the 2014–2015 school year. This sample size \((N = 33)\) was attained because these teachers have profound knowledge of any programs that existed to address discipline issues before the intervention in addition to the current RP intervention program. In addition, teachers who had not been employed at the school for the entire period did not provide sufficient referral data for analysis. Data from the four years under investigation in this study has been stored in the *Skyward Student Management* platform since the district adopted it in 2011 to record attendance, discipline, and gradebook entries.

This research study used two working models to ensure an appropriate sample size: information power and saturation. In contrast with traditional research norms of appropriate qualitative sample size being sufficient as it reaches saturation, Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2015) proposed *information power* to be a more appropriate measure to determine when sample size is appropriate. Sufficient information power, as the authors presented, is affected by research aims, specificity, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy. Finally, they argued the richer the information that is derived from the sample size, the less the number of participants needed and vice versa. To that end, the richness of the insight from students, counselors, teachers, and
administrators to answer RQ2 and RQ3 was obtained through focus groups, open-ended survey questions, and follow-up questions. Focus groups are particularly rich in information power because as Kitzinger (1995) noted:

Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open-ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities. When group dynamics work well the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions. (p. 299)

Nonetheless, data was also collected in accordance with qualitative norms until saturation occurred. Urquhart (2013) defined this point as reaching a level where no new codes can be developed while analyzing results. Though information power and saturation may be two powerful, yet separate markers in qualitative research sampling, this study used both points simultaneously in an effort to access meaningful results.

For example, to answer RQ3, I conducted a focus group with five students who had multiple referrals \((n \geq 5)\) in the previous academic year but had received less than two in the 2018-2019 academic year to determine what about the RP program, if anything, was successful from their perspective. Likewise, I conducted a focus group with five students who had had multiple referrals \((n \geq 5)\) in the 2017–2018 academic year and has similar discipline referrals during the 2018-2019 academic year to determine what about the RP program, if anything, was not working from their perspective. In addition, I surveyed the parents of the students in the focus group using open-ended questions to ascertain general feedback about their experiences at the school. Not only did I gain significant insight and information to answer RQ3, this opened further dialogue to answer how this program may be improved in subsequent years.

Finally, the survey was sent to 29 teachers at the school who had been employed at this school throughout the five-year period examined in this study. In addition, it was sent to both
assistant principals and counselors to ascertain a diverse perspective from multiple stakeholders. As this survey was strictly voluntary, I expected half of the surveys to be completed ($n = 17$).

**Materials and Instruments**

**Quantitative.** To access the archival data needed for RQ1, I retrieved discipline data from the school district’s Skyward technology platform. Skyward houses all archived and current data related to attendance, grades, and discipline. Furthermore, teachers and administrators have sole autonomy to use this technology application to record attendance, enter grades, and submit referrals. Teachers who enter the school district receive orientation training to use this program in each of these domains. When entering referrals, for example, teachers and administrators are required to enter full details of the location and actual incident. Then, the campus administrator, who has also been trained to use this program, checks to ensure each field has been entered correctly, including what action has been taken to remedy the situation. It is housed for the duration of the student’s enrollment in the school district. Finally, a district discipline officer ensures that all data has been entered correctly for each student before it is submitted to the state each year.

For this specific study, I exported only discipline referral data since the 2014–2015 school year into Microsoft Excel. I then sorted data by these criteria:

- Year referral was assigned by teacher or administrator
- Last name
- First name
- Gender
- Federal race code
- Offense type (e.g., classroom disruption, disrespect, authority insubordination, and so on)
This allowed me to use descriptive statistics to compare the number and type of referrals by gender, race, and year. Analysis of descriptive statistics allowed for a basic understanding of the teachers’ perceptions on RP implementation and the change in key metrics related to discipline referrals. Whereas attendance data was not directly examined during this study, as it is outside the scope of the research questions, future research may benefit from investigating this measure in relation to referrals, suspensions, and other key school-culture measures.

For RQ2, I used SurveyMonkey to conduct an anonymous survey with questions to ascertain teachers’ perceptions about the degree of implementation and challenges during the intervention period. This survey contained Likert-scale items, which are ordinal questions or statements used to measure attitudes and beliefs from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree (Boone & Boone, 2012). The items were as follows:

1. There is no place in meetings with students for emotions and feelings.
2. The people involved in a conflict need to agree to a way forward.
3. People who cause harm should be punished.
4. It is important that the person who caused harm is given support to change his or her behavior.
5. Students are given opportunities to make amends if they are responsible for causing harm.

Qualitative. The survey also had one open-ended question at the end to allow teachers an opportunity to provide general feedback related to RP implementation. The second open-ended question allowed teachers to provide suggestions for continuing the program in subsequent years. In addition, the parent survey consisted of 10 open-ended questions to ascertain parents’ perceptions of RP in the 2018–2019 school year as well as suggestions for future years.
For RQ3, I conducted a focus group of five students using semi-structured questions. Kitzinger (1995) claimed focus groups are “particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way” (p. 299). In addition, Kitzinger (1995) suggested the most appropriate group size is between four and eight participants. Although some of the questions were written prior to the focus group, semi-structured questions allowed for flexibility to follow a potential direction in the conversation (Galletta, 2013). Finally, in accordance with a focus group technique suggested by Kitzinger (1995), I handed participants a stack of cards with statements and had them sort the statements (on a spectrum) according to the extent to which the group viewed the statement as a positive or negative experience. The statements on the index cards included the following (see Appendix F):

- Interactions with administrators
- Communication with teachers
- Communication with other students
- Classroom restorative circles
- Relationships with students
- Relationships with teachers
- Being redirected when I misbehave
- Behavioral coaching conversations

Krueger and Casey (2009) reported a best practice to include recording the focus group in some manner so the researcher can fill in gaps when coding. Therefore, I used an iPad to video record the interactions so I could not only playback the audio from the focus group, but also give close attention to the body language or other nuances that may have been missed during the initial interaction. Krueger and Casey (2009) commented interpreting body language can be
tricky but can also provide clues for possible avenues to explore in follow-up conversations with participants.

To appropriately develop the focus group questions and other qualitative measures, Chenail (2011) suggested conducting field tests of questions through a variety of techniques, including an expert panel, a small sample of potential participants, or “interviewing the investigator” (p. 258). For the purposes of this study, I conducted a field test of the survey and focus group protocols using the school’s RP implementation team. This team was given the questions in a mock focus group to evaluate and scrutinize potential items for the teacher survey and student focus group protocols. Finally, this field test determined if wording, length, and sequence of questions was appropriate.

**Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

**Quantitative.** Before attempting to retrieve archived data, I sought district approval (see Appendix B) to use the data in addition to ensuring all data has been de-identified. Data (upon approval) were sent to me with no identification markers—names or identification numbers. To compare referrals from 2018–2019 year to the previous three years, I set parameters in Skyward to include all referrals from August of 2014 to May of 2019. Then the report was exported to Microsoft Excel so that referrals could be sorted by year, federal race code, gender, and special education status. With this set of data I was able to compare statistical data from August of 2014 to May of 2018, which is before RP was introduced at the school, with data from the 2018–2019 school year, the intervention period. These data were analyzed in an attempt to triangulate data with the qualitative metrics previously described.

To analyze the quantitative data collected from the survey, I used the ‘analyze data’ feature from SurveyMonkey, which provided a mean, median, standard deviation, and a graphical representation for each question. I then analyzed results from the survey to discover the
extent to which the implementation of RP had occurred. For example, the Likert survey items were averaged by SurveyMonkey on a scale between 1 (none) to 5 (often). When an item averaged closer to 1, this suggested a perception from teachers as an area of the RP program that had not yet been implemented or adequately implemented. On the other hand, if an item averaged closer to 5, this suggested a perception from teachers as an area of the RP program that had been implemented adequately and often. (Note: Some items were reverse-scored and thus items were separated into three sections).

**Qualitative.** Before I conducted the focus groups and collected data, I had a school district representative send invitations to parents and students to participate, asking for permission from the parents and agreement from the students. I identified student participants for the focus group by running a discipline referral report from the Skyward technology platform. Fifty-seven students were identified as having five or more referrals during the academic year (2017–2018). Of those 57 students, 28 of them had two or fewer referrals in the 2018–2019 school year, which served as the main criteria for the first focus group. To align with the school’s demographic population, three Black students, one White student, and one Hispanic student were chosen to populate the focus group. However, data were not officially collected until official IRB approval was obtained to collect data from Abilene Christian University (ACU). Of these students, three were male and two were female (see Table 6).
Table 6

Participants in Focus Group 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 5</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Students attended a different school in 2017–2018.

Next, 11 of the 57 students had five or more referrals during the 2018–2019 school year. Though the race of the sample aligned with the school’s overall population, only one female was used in this sample because she was the only female with more than five referrals (see Table 7). This group was assembled to conduct the second focus group.

Table 7

Participants in Focus Group 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Federal Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Referrals in 2017/18</th>
<th>Referrals in 2018/19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Students attended a different school in 2017–2018.

Once the focus groups were conducted, I coded the video recordings along with notes from the sessions. Predetermined codes were set beforehand to include categorizing responses related to cultural aspects, such as connection to school, likelihood to attend school more often, relationships, and suggestions for improvements in subsequent years. During the second coding
pass, I further categorized responses into emergent codes that emanated from the responses. Finally, I categorized responses into themes during the third coding pass. Krueger and Casey (2009) described this coding process as the “constant comparative phase” (p. 129) by which patterns are discovered, themes emerge, and relationships are determined between the data to help explain the phenomenon in the most appropriate manner.

The survey administered to teachers, counselors, and assistant principals included two open-ended questions that were coded similarly to the focus group responses. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggested open-ended questions to be the most appropriate method for participants to answer freely and allows for avenues of responses that may be critical but missed with closed-ended questions. To that end, I coded faculty responses during the first pass in categories, such as cultural, procedural, and environmental. These initial descriptive codes assigned basic labels to data (Saldaña, 2013). During the second coding pass, I was looking for various themes or patterns to emerge. According to Saldaña (2013), these codes align with values, perspectives, and beliefs. Finally, during the third pass, I analyzed the data in search of relationships between the various themes to determine teachers’ perceptions of implementation and areas for improvements. This coding pass often leads the creation of a story or narrative behind the data, which is used in conjunction to developing overall themes from qualitative data (Saldaña, 2013).

Ivankova (2015) argued that “there is no true mixed methods study without methods integration or mixing” (p. 21). Furthermore, Ivankova (2015) suggested integration can occur at three different stages: (a) study conceptualization, (b) when connecting the two (qualitative and quantitative) strands, and (c) at the conclusion of data collection when discussion occurs. For the purposes of this study, integrating both methods occurred during study conceptualization because the design—doing the quantitative before the qualitative—logically flowed from discovery (longitudinal referral analysis) to confirmation (survey) to explanation (focus groups). To
connect the strands, if no descriptive effect was found in the quantitative strand, the survey and focus group protocols must be altered (Ivankova, 2015) to explain why no effect was found or how the process may be improved. Finally, the two strands were integrated during the discussion phase, as I made inferences (Ivankova, 2015) and drew conclusions.

**Trustworthiness.** As a mixed-methods study, this research attempted to establish validity and trustworthiness. Triangulation using different methodologies provided a more comprehensive picture of the results than any one approach could do alone (Heale & Forbes, 2013). In addition, Guion, Diehl, and McDonald (2011) claimed one meaningful way to triangulate data was through different sources, known as data triangulation—in this case, teachers and students—to gain better insight on multiple perspectives or program outcomes.

Establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative study is crucial to ensure rigor “without sacrificing the relevance of the qualitative research” (Krefting, 1991, p. 215). One method of establishing dependability and credibility, according to Krefting (1991) and Shenton (2004), is to reduce the distance between researcher and participants through prolonged contact and lengthy periods of observations. By reducing this distance and describing the context in thick detail, readers are better able to transfer the findings to their own site (Shenton, 2004). To that end, this study described the contextual factors in great detail so that readers may apply information gleaned from this research into their own schools.

**Researcher’s role.** One important component of any study is the role the researcher will have in the interviews with participants, data collection and analysis (Leavy, 2017). Because every researcher carries his or her own experiences and perceptions into the process, the researcher must be cognizant of how these views permeate into the research study as a whole (Creswell, 2013). Aamodt (1982) noted the qualitative approach is reflexive where the researcher is part of the research instead of separate from it; being a critical participant rather than observer
allows the researcher to analyze himself or herself in the context. Furthermore, being simultaneously employed as a leader at the study site calls for extra care in communicating the intent and role of the researcher (Conley-Tyler, 2005). In an effort to mitigate the perceived power differential between myself and participants, I was transparent that the goal of this study was to better understand and evaluate the implementation of RP without any evaluation on the participants themselves. This is especially important with regards to teachers who may be apprehensive to give feedback about a program in which the researcher is a leader at the school; therefore, I ensured anonymity of responses before the survey was sent.

About the student focus groups, another member of the administrative team, such as a trained counseling professional, was present at all times to assist students in feeling more comfortable discussing their experiences. In addition, the school counselor was available to discuss any emotional fallout that may have resulted from the conversations. Finally, results were interpreted from the survey to determine possible areas for improvement, which was vital to answering RQ2. In other words, if this study would have only analyzed successful areas, it would not have been able to answer the research question pertaining to possible improvement areas.

**Ethical Considerations**

This received approval from ACU’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol before any data collection took place (see Appendix G). Protecting human subjects is critical while conducting a study at any site (Creswell, 2013). All participants were assured of anonymity when using SurveyMonkey because their results were aggregated into averages and not identifiable by individual. In addition, students and their parents were informed that they were coded as Student 1, Student 2, Student A, Student B, and so forth, depending on which focus group they were assigned to, to ensure anonymity during the reporting phase. I sought and obtained permission
consent from both students and their parents before conducting the focus groups. Teachers were also informed about the purpose of the study and sent an email link to SurveyMonkey after permission had been granted by the district’s superintendent (see Appendix B) to use this study site. Finally, all participants were guaranteed confidentiality and I will store their responses in a locked cabinet for three years.

Shahnazarian, Hagemann, Aburto, and Rose (n.d.) reported, “The Belmont Report and The Nuremberg Code both address voluntary informed consent as a requirement for the ethical conduct of human subjects research” (p. 4). Consequently, participants—both teachers and students—were instructed that their participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. I obtained permission from students and parents through an informed consent form but I also gave further instruction as to voluntariness during the focus group.

Assumptions

This study rested on the primary assumption that students and teachers would answer the survey or participate in the focus group with a desire to answer truthfully. I ensured confidentiality and anonymity to increase the likelihood that all participants would be truthful. In addition, I fully explained the purpose of the study so participants could better understand that their contributions may lead to positive changes in future implementations.

Second, this study rested on the assumption that the focus group sample was representative of the population of students. To that end, I selected students to match the demographic of the school who also fit the criterion of disciplinary referrals from the previous academic year and the implementation year.

Finally, this study assumed that all teachers and students were aware that RP was a meaningful change from previous practices. Therefore, the program was reviewed with teachers and students before the survey and focus group sessions. Within that assumption, this study
presumed that students and teachers experienced areas that could be improved for future implementations of RP.

**Limitations**

Several limitations have been identified in the current program evaluation study. For the purposes of the current study, I have categorized these limitations as (a) design limitations, (b) contextual limitations, and (c) transfer limitations.

**Design limitations.** One major design limitation that must be addressed is that of researcher bias. Because I am employed as the leader of the school where the evaluation took place, the potential for researcher bias was profound. Furthermore, teachers and students participating in various data collection methods—surveys and focus groups—have a tendency to provide answers consistent with their perceptions of the researcher’s beliefs (Conley-Tyler, 2005). Therefore, it was critical that I remained detached from any discipline assignments—detention, in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and alternative school placements—in response to teacher referrals, by letting the assistant principals handle all discipline issues.

Secondly, to combat employees’ perception to answer “what I wanted to hear” it is important to ensure anonymity and confidentiality for all instruments of data collection. For example, to obtain more accurate results from the survey, I assured teachers that all responses would be anonymous. In addition, it was crucial to overtly establish my purpose and role in conducting this program evaluation before conducting focus groups and surveys.

Another major design limitation was the use of archival data to explain the impact of the RP program being evaluated. To that end, the quantitative component of this mixed-methods study involved comparing past referral and suspension data before the intervention to data collected during the intervention period. There are many complex layers when analyzing student discipline referrals—teacher perceptions and biases, parental involvement levels, and individual
students’ personal factors to name a few—therefore, a major limitation of this study was that it was implausible to identify a cause-effect relation between the independent variable (intervention) and dependent variable (change in referrals).

**Contextual limitations.** It was also important to note the contextual factors that underlie this study. In this case, teachers and administrators were accustomed to a worldview that a certain offense *should* lead to a certain consequence. This cycle has been embedded over years of practice. However, this study was only conducted over one academic year. Therefore, time can be viewed as a limitation for two separate reasons. First, because the implementation time frame was relatively small, all of the nuances of RP cannot be accurately experienced or explored. Second, because implementing RP as an alternative to the time-honored tradition of suspending students for infractions involved considerably more time to conduct, it cannot be determined with certainty to what extent teachers adopted and attempted new RP procedures to handle discipline issues, or which teachers opted for the less time-consuming method of referring students out of their classrooms. In other words, some teachers may not have pursued RP methods because of its time-intensive nature, not because it was not implemented well or has not been shown to be effective.

Another contextual limitation involved the original request for conducting the program evaluation. While an external group or agency may recommend this to ascertain the overall effectiveness of a program, I initiated this program evaluation as a result of a sincere interest in understanding potential programs that impact student discipline. Conley-Tyler (2005) claimed that internal evaluators, such as myself, experience several advantages:

- It is more cost-effective.
- I had more in-depth knowledge of the program and context.
- I was more readily available to conduct research.
However, some limitations exist when the auditor or evaluator is situated within the organization (Conley-Tyler, 2005):

- It can be perceived as less objective.
- Organizational members may be less likely to criticize.
- The study may be compromised because the researcher does not want to expose deficiencies.
- Some participants may be less inclined to participate in fear of being recognized.

**Transfer limitations.** One final limitation of this study was the aims of this program evaluation in relation to generalizability and transferability. Because the goal of this study was to better understand the impact and challenges of implementing RP in only one school, the ability to generalize the results to other schools may be limited. However, Stake (2014) asserted a single context, such as this study or case studies, offer significant value because readers can exercise “vicarious experience” (p. 1155) by which they can translate what was learned from the study to their own contexts.

**Delimitations**

This study only examined the impact of RP at one Grade 9 public school situated in an urban Texas setting. This site proved to be productive because of the school’s growing trend of discipline referrals over the past three years, but more importantly, the willingness of the administration to seek new alternatives to remedy the problem.

Next, only teachers who have been at the campus for a four or more years were included to meet the purpose and accurately address the research questions. Moreover, I included in the first focus group only students who have demonstrated a turnaround in discipline referrals, from multiple infractions in previous years to zero in the 2018–2019 school year. Likewise, for the
second focus group, I selected only students who had shown little to no turnaround in discipline referrals from the previous year.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to better understand the perceptions of RP implementation, both the successes and challenges, from key stakeholders at a 9th grade public school in Texas. The mixed-methods study employed quantitative measures, such as descriptive statistics, to analyze how various critical metrics—referrals, suspensions, and the extent to which students experienced recidivism—changed from before and during the intervention period. Furthermore, I surveyed teachers using both close-ended and open-ended questions to evaluate the program’s implementation barriers and areas for future improvement. Finally, I conducted focus groups of students who have experienced success with RP as evidenced by reduction in referrals from the previous academic year, and students who have had limited success as evidenced by a lack of reduction in referrals from the previous academic year. The use of these variety of methods attempted to triangulate data and provide a better overall program evaluation.

I chose a mixed-methods program evaluation design because my goal was to help organizational leaders make informed decisions about potential improvements to critical programs. With a long, entrenched history of suspending students leading to a multitude of problems—subsequent absenteeism, increased dropouts, disconnection from school, and recidivism—it was essential to evaluate alternative methods to handle student discipline and maintain school safety. Therefore, this study’s methodology appropriately addressed the purpose of better understanding what factors led to better outcomes when implementing RP at the study site.
Chapter 4: Results

Purpose

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the barriers and successes of implementing RP at a Grade 9 campus in Texas. Specifically, my aim was to better understand some of the aspects of RP that were successful and those that presented challenges from the perceptions of key stakeholders during the intervention period. Finally, I sought to discover the degree of change in key discipline metrics—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rates—during the 2018–2019 school year from previous years when RP was not used. Therefore, I explored the following research questions:

Q1. To what extent did key discipline metrics for all students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

a. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Black students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

b. To what extent did key discipline metrics for Hispanic students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

c. To what extent did key discipline metrics for White students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation
of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

d. To what extent did key discipline metrics for special education students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of RP for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used?

**Q2.** What are the perceptions of the various school stakeholders—teachers, counselors, and assistant principals—regarding the implementation of RP?

**Q3.** How do students describe their experiences with RP?

This chapter answers these research questions by presenting and explaining the data acquired from discipline referral analyses, teacher surveys, parent surveys, and student focus groups. In addition, this study was situated within a DDE approach by which I sought opinions from all power levels in the school (House & Howe, 2003). This increased the likelihood that the researcher had a more comprehensive evaluation (Howe & Ashcraft, 2005).

**Study Sequence**

I conducted the study in two phases following the mixed-methods sequential explanatory design by first analyzing quantitative data and then collecting and analyzing qualitative data to better explain or elaborate on the results in the quantitative phase (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). The rationale behind this design is that the “quantitative data and their subsequent analysis provide a general understanding of the research problem” while the “qualitative data and their analysis refine and explain those statistical results by exploring participants’ views in more depth” (Ivankova et al., 2006, p. 5). To that end, I used descriptive statistics to investigate the change in referrals in years before RP was implemented to the number referrals during the implementation year. Next, I surveyed teachers at the campus using 17 Likert-scale items and
two open-ended questions. In the next phase, I conducted two focus groups of students to determine their experiences with RP. Finally, I surveyed 10 parents using open-ended questions to ascertain their perceptions of the program.

**Quantitative Findings**

**Referral analysis.** The first step in the study involved investigating referrals from the past five years. Specifically, I was interested in examining the number of discipline referrals before the introduction of RP in the four school years from 2014 to 2018, and during the implementation year, 2018–2019. Figure 6 represents the total number of referrals teachers entered at this school for each academic year.

![Discipline Referrals](image)

*Figure 6. A line graph of discipline referrals by school year, 2014–2015 to 2018–2019.*

As seen in Figure 6, discipline referrals for all students increased steadily over the four-school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 until RP implementation in the 2018–2019 school year. It is important to revisit the assertion that there is not causation or correlation in these data because the implementation of RP cannot be isolated as the independent variable with number of referrals as the dependent variable because discipline referrals are a complex process. Instead, I sought to
investigate the change in referrals as a starting point and later explore school stakeholders’ experiences via qualitative means with surveys and focus groups. During the implementation year, discipline referrals dropped nearly 75% from the previous year and nearly 60% from the initial year, 2014–2015.

To address RQ1, I sought to determine the change in referrals among different racial groups and special education students over the five-year period. Specifically, the subset of questions under RQ1 were designed to compare differences in discipline referrals, in each category (Black, White, Hispanic, and special education students) from the four years leading up to the implementation of RP with discipline referrals during the implementation period. Table 8 (see below) reports the discipline referrals for each of these categories over those five years.

Table 8

*Total Referrals by Race, 2014/15–2018/19*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals for Black students</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals for White students</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals for Hispanic students</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of referrals for special education students</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Referrals included for top three race categories at school and special education.

As seen in Table 8, the number of discipline referrals for Black students rose steadily each year until the implementation year. During the 2018–2019 school year, referrals for Black students decreased by more than 460 referrals from the previous year, which represents a 68%
drop. Similarly, Hispanic students experienced an increase in discipline referrals from 2014 to 2018, but dropped by nearly 170 referrals (79%) during the implementation year of 2018–2019. White students saw very little change in discipline referrals from 2014–2018, but also saw a significant decline in the implementation year—79% reduction. Finally, special education students increased slightly over the four years prior to RP implementation, but saw a 62% reduction in referrals from the year prior to implementation to the 2018–2019 school year.

A preponderance of the research cited in the literature review indicated a racial discipline gap in terms of referrals received by minorities, especially Black students, as evidenced by receiving a disproportionate percentage of referrals compared to their makeup of the student body. Table 9 depicts the same issue at the subject school.

Table 9

Referrals by Race as Percentage of Total for School Years 2014/15–2018/19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of total referrals for Black students</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>74.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total referrals for White students</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total referrals for Hispanic students</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>20.6</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of total referrals for special education students</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Referrals included for top three race categories at school and special education.

During the five years, the percentage of White students fluctuated between 18–22% of the total student population, but each year, their referral percentage was underrepresented as their
rate was between 7–14% of total referrals to the office. Similarly, Hispanic students were constantly underrepresented in the discipline data. Over the five-year period, Hispanic students were 30–35% of students; however, they received 15–21% of referrals. On the other hand, Black students were consistently overrepresented in the discipline data each year, including during the implementation year. Throughout the study period, Black students were 37–40% of the student population, but they received 66–74% of the referrals. As seen in Table 9, this trend continued in the implementation year (2018–2019); although Black students only made up 40% of the population, they received over 74% of discipline referrals. Special education students were represented at a relatively equal rate to their composition in the student body; however, their percentage of the total referrals increased during the implementation year. Each year they ranged from 9–11% of the total student body and their referral rate was 8–12% of total referrals written.

**Recidivism.** One of the aspects of this study, recidivism—the number of students with repeat referrals—is cited repeatedly in the research as a significant problem in discipline referrals, especially with minority students. Table 10 reports data from the past four years and in the RP implementation year, 2018–2019.
Table 10

Referral Recidivism, Number of Students, 2014/15–2018/19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Black students with &gt; 1 referral</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of White students with &gt; 1 referral</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Hispanic students with &gt; 1 referral</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of special education students with &gt; 1 referral</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Recidivism data for top three race categories and special education students at school.

Black students were disproportionately represented in recidivism referrals in every year; while there were only twice as many Black students as White students, Black students with multiple referrals typically ranged from a four to eight times higher rate than White students. While the implementation year of RP—2018–2019—saw a significant decline in the recidivism number of Black students, the rate actually increased (to 12 times the number) when compared to White students. Likewise, the number of Hispanic students remained roughly similar to the number of Black students over the five years, typically between 5–9% more Black students than Hispanic students each year; however, the recidivism rate was nearly three times higher for Black students before the implementation year and almost five times higher during the implementation year. Finally, special education students experienced minor levels of fluctuation in recidivism; however, there was an almost 50% drop in recidivism during the implementation year.
Exclusionary suspensions. Throughout the literature, minority students are not only referred to the office at higher rates, but they are also subsequently suspended from school via out-of-school suspension or alternative school at higher rates than their White counterparts. In addition, special education students are also suspended from school at disproportionate rates compared to students who do not receive special education services. Table 11 summarizes the exclusionary suspension data over the study’s five-year period.

Table 11

Exclusionary Suspensions, Number of Students, 2014/15–2018/19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Black</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclusionary suspension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of White</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclusionary suspension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Hispanic</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students with</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exclusionary suspension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of special</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with exclusionary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suspension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Exclusionary suspension data for top three race categories and special education students at school.

Black students disproportionately received exclusionary suspensions each year. For example, in the 2014–2015 school year, Black students received 73% of exclusionary suspensions though they made up 38% of the student body. In the implementation year, 2018–2019, Black students were still disproportionately excluded from school, receiving 67% of the exclusionary suspensions even though they only made up 40% of the student population. On the
other hand, White students were underrepresented in exclusionary suspensions, receiving 15% of exclusionary suspensions in 2014–2015, though they comprised 22% of the population; in the implementation year, they received 9% of the exclusionary suspensions but made up 17% of the student body. Similarly, Hispanic students were underrepresented in 2014–2015, receiving only 13% of referrals even though they made up 31% of the student population. During the RP implementation year, they received 23% of exclusionary suspensions though they comprised 35% of the student body. Finally, special education students were slightly underrepresented in exclusionary suspension data, receiving only 6% of exclusionary suspensions even though they made up 9% of the population in 2014–2015; they received 7% of exclusionary suspensions in 2018–2019, though they comprised 10% of the population.

**Faculty survey.** RQ2 was designed to ascertain feedback from various stakeholders about the various successes and challenges of implementing RP during the 2018–2019 school year. In addition, the survey items included various items related to key RP components such as respect, repairing harm, understanding, conflict resolution, and empathy. This allowed me to better understand the current belief system of teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, and administrators at the study school after the implementation of RP. Thirty-three faculty members were sent the survey, 24 responded, which is a 72% response rate.

I used an existing faculty survey protocol from the Minnesota Department of Education, which developed an entire series of tools for schools considering an RP implementation. In fact, the authors commented this implementation toolkit provided guidance and would “give practitioners and administrators additional ways to build reflection into their work and to use the data and feedback collected through these tools as a learning loop for continually improving practice” (Beckman, McMorris, & Gower, 2012, p. 3). After researching various protocols, I determined this set of questions to be the most pertinent to address RQ 2. Therefore, I sought
permission from the site administrator, Nancy Riestenberg, and received it before administering the survey to the faculty at the school (see Appendix A). The survey was then uploaded to SurveyMonkey and sent out to faculty members after receiving permission from the school district’s superintendent (see Appendix B).

Set 1 of survey items (see Table 12) includes items where disagree or strongly disagree responses align with RP principles of empathy, respect, and repairing relationships. Conversely, strongly agree or agree responses would be characterized as not aligning with RP principles. All four items in Set 1 were scored on a five-point Likert scale. Possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Finally, 24 out of 33 faculty members (ones who have been here the entire 5-year study period) responded, which represents a 72% response rate.
Table 12

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Teacher Survey, Set 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restorative Practices Questions</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (1)</th>
<th>Agree (2)</th>
<th>Unsure (3)</th>
<th>Disagree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. There is no place in meetings with students for emotions and feelings.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>45.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. When someone causes you harm, you lose respect for that person.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. It is best that people who are harmed do not meet with the person that harmed them.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12.50</td>
<td>62.50</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. People who cause harm should be punished.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>29.17</td>
<td>20.83</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average Scores | 3.60 | 0.91

Note. The study only surveyed the faculty members who had been at the school for ≥ 5 years.

From set 1, the mean scores from the two statements highly aligned (Beckman, McMorris, & Gower, 2012) with a restorative mindset. First, in item 1 ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.85$), a vast majority, 23 out of 24, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the belief that there is no place for students’ emotions. One faculty member, however, responded there was no place for students’ emotions in meetings. In item 3, ($M = 4.13, SD = 0.60$), 87.5% or 23 out of 24 of respondents replied that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that students should not meet with other student(s) who harmed them, with no responses in the strongly agree or disagree columns.
On the other hand, the mean scores from two statements moderately aligned (Beckman, McMorris, & Gower, 2012) with the restorative mindset. In item 2, \((M = 2.88, \ SD = 1.05)\), 3 of 24 responses strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with losing respect for someone when he/she causes you harm, with a majority (21 out of 24) of responses in the middle. Also, in item 4 \((M = 3.04, \ SD = 1.14)\), responses resembled a bell curve whereby 20 out of 24 responses were in the middle about the statement: “People who cause harm should be punished.”

The second set of survey items (see Table 13) included items where agree or strongly agree responses aligned with RP principles of empathy, respect, and repairing relationships. On the other hand, strongly disagree or disagree responses would be characterized as not aligning with RP principles. All three items in Set 2 were scored on a five-point Likert scale where possible responses ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Finally, 24 out of 33 faculty members also responded to this set of statements.

All three survey items in set 2 “highly aligned” (Beckman, McMorris, & Gower, 2012) with a restorative mindset in that the mean was at or below 2.00. In item 1, \((M = 1.75, \ SD = 0.97)\), 22 out of 24 faculty members strongly agreed or agreed that people in a conflict need a way forward. Next, in item 2, \((M = 1.38, \ SD = 0.56)\), 23 out of 24 faculty members strongly agreed or agreed that people who cause harm be given support in changing their behavior. Finally, in item 3, \((M = 1.46, \ SD = 0.71)\), 21 out of 24 respondents indicated they believed people who caused harm should be allowed to make amends.
**Table 13**

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Teacher Survey, Set 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restorative Practices Questions</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Responses in Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The people involved in conflict need to agree to a way forward</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. It is important that the person who caused harm is given support to change their behavior</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When someone causes harm they should be allowed to make amends</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Average Scores** 1.53 0.75

*Note.* The study only surveyed the faculty members who have been at the school for ≥ 5 years.

The third set of survey items (see Table 14) included items where *nearly always* or *mostly* responses aligned with RP principles of empathy, respect, and repairing relationships. On the other hand, *sometimes* or *rarely or never* responses would be characterized as moderately aligned or not aligned with RP principles. All ten items in Set 3 were scored on a five-point Likert scale where possible responses ranged from 1 (*nearly always*) to 4 (*rarely or never*). Responses of *unsure* received a zero (0). For the purposes of this set, *unsure* responses were not included in calculating mean or standard deviation, because I wanted to keep the format of the survey as originally presented by the Minnesota Department of Education, but assigning a value to *unsure* skewed the data unnecessarily. Finally, 24 out of 33 faculty members also responded to this set of statements.
Table 14

*Mean, Standard Deviation, and Distribution of Responses for Teacher Survey, Set 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Restorative Practices Questions</th>
<th>Descriptive Statistics</th>
<th>Responses in Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I am allowed to contribute to solving school-based behavioral problems that affect me.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Within this school, disagreements are normally resolved effectively.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. When students, staff, and/or parents are in conflict, everyone’s views are listened to.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Students are given opportunities to make amends if they are responsible for causing harm.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When a student causes harm, the main response by the school is not a sanction or punishment.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. In cases of bullying, the person harmed is asked to say what could be done to make things better.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. When someone does something harmful, those involved help to decide how similar incidents could be avoided in the future.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Students and staff communicate to each other in a respectful way.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The parents/caregivers of students relate to me in a respectful way.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The students and their parents are invited to contribute to resolving school-based behavioral problems that affect them.</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Average Scores**

|                       | 1.88 | 0.73 |

*Note. Unsure* response was not included in mean or standard deviation calculations for Set 1.
Again, set 3 items were designed to elicit responses related to beliefs of respect, conflict resolution, and communication. However, this set also included an emphasis on items related to positive behavior modification, rather than punishment, and interactions with other members of the school community such as parents. In this set of survey items, 7 out of the 10 mean scores “highly aligned” with an RP environment or mindset. Three out of 10 mean scores (≥ 2.00) were categorized as “moderately aligned” with an RP environment or mindset. Taken as a whole, the mean for this entire set of 10 items was 1.88, meaning RP values of respect, conflict resolution, communication, positive behavior modification, and interaction with various stakeholders tended to nearly always happen or mostly happen. The exceptions for this set, where the mean score was ≥ 2.00 but < 3.00 (and therefore, “moderately aligned”) were item 5 (punishment/sanction; \( M = 2.60, SD = 0.57 \)), item 6 (positive behavior modification for bullying cases; \( M = 2.06, SD = 0.92 \)), and item #8 (communication between staff and students; \( M = 2.00, SD = 0.65 \)).

Qualitative Findings

While the quantitative components of this study provided me with a general understanding of implementing RP, the qualitative components provided me a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers and successes of implementing the program at this campus by exploring stakeholders’ experiences in more detail. Teddlie and Yu (2007) explained that the mixed methods explanatory sequential design allows the researcher the opportunity to conduct the first strand, which was quantitative in this case, to inform the second strand, which was qualitative in this case. The substantial reduction in referrals and suspensions discovered during the quantitative strand created areas of inquiry in the qualitative phase for conditions and cultural factors that may have contributed to the results. Therefore, the qualitative findings section explores perceptions of faculty members, students, and parents through the use and coding of student focus groups, open-ended parent surveys, and coding the final two questions
on the teacher survey. (The quantitative, Likert-scale questions were the first 17 questions of the survey to answer RQ2 and RQ3.)

**Teacher survey.** Like in the quantitative results section, the teacher survey (see Appendix C) encompasses responses from teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, and administrators; accordingly, the terms *teacher* and *faculty* will be used interchangeably in the following discussion. There were two open-ended questions in the survey of faculty members:

1) How, if at all, has your experience with Restorative Practices changed your practice [as a teacher]?

2) How, if at all, has Restorative Practice changed the atmosphere in the school as a whole?

**Coding.** Qualitative coding often involves moving back and forth between inductive and deductive processes to discover and verify the data that emerge (Patton, 2015). To interpret the qualitative data from teachers and other faculty members, I used three coding passes for each question to extrapolate meaning from the faculty responses, labeling them, categorizing patterns, and identifying emerging themes. Without such a classification system, the raw response data remain confusing and chaotic (Patton, 2015).

In the first coding pass, I attached labels to faculty responses to reduce copious amounts of data into meaningful categories for the purposes of analysis and reporting (Creswell, 2013). For example, the following labels were assigned to various responses to the questions:

- Change in classroom culture
- Helping change behaviors rather than punishing
- Improving conflict resolution skills
- Expanding student voice
- Increasing awareness of student social and emotional issues
- Developing an RP mindset
• Increasing respect among peers (students) and colleagues (faculty)
• Improving communication (the manner in which we speak to each other)
• Improving communication (the manner in which we listen to each other)
• Developing empathy

For the next coding pass, I then organized the labels into various response categories: responses about respect, culture, communication, changing behavior, forgiveness, and awareness of adolescent emotional needs. Table 15 illustrates the frequency in which faculty responses fit into each category.

Table 15

*Categories: Faculty Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category Number</th>
<th>Category Name</th>
<th>% of Respondents Discussing Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 1</td>
<td>Responses about Respect</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 2</td>
<td>Responses about Culture</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3</td>
<td>Responses about Communication</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4</td>
<td>Responses about Changing Behavior</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 5</td>
<td>Responses about Awareness of Adolescent Emotional Needs</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 6</td>
<td>Responses about Forgiveness</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* 18 of 24 respondents answered the open-ended questions.

To further reduce the information, a key step for coding qualitative data is identifying themes to generate substantive conclusions (Ivankova, 2015). Accordingly, in the third coding pass, I analyzed the data from the various categories to identify emerging themes:

• Adolescent students need a chance to redo things when they make a mistake.

• Providing an atmosphere where students are *expected* and *taught* to resolve conflict in a
mature manner improves the overall culture.

- Paying attention to adolescent social and emotional needs leads to a better community built upon respectful interactions.

**Emergent theme #1: Adolescent students need a chance to redo things when they make a mistake.** Several faculty members commented on the need for an environment in which adolescents are not expected to be perfect and get everything right the first time. Faculty Member A said, “To give the student an opportunity to make corrections is a game changer. It allows the offended to have a voice, the offender to make corrections.” Gilles (n.d.) posited if children see their mistakes as a natural progression of learning, they are likely to become resilient, but if they see if mistakes as a symptom of inadequacy, they will feel poorly about themselves and the learning process slows. Faculty Member B added that “[students] appreciate the opportunity to correct their mistakes.” Faculty Member C noted that restorative practice promotes forgiveness. The campus culture has a sense of recovery as opposed to revenge. Justice is gained through trust and correction, and not punishment. Naturally, discipline is still utilized when restoration practice is deemed ineffective, though opportunities for growth are still presented for reflection.

This idea of forgiveness by adults, especially when the student makes a mistake was also echoed in other responses. Faculty Member D commented, “As a whole I feel that the restorative practices used this year gave the students a second chance when bad things happened. They had a forgiving mindset and behavior issues were minimal.” Faculty Member E also remarked this idea transformed classroom management practice by “[trying] to talk to them more before writing them up [when they misbehave].”

**Emergent theme #2: Providing an atmosphere where students are expected and taught to resolve conflict in a mature manner improves the overall culture.** Numerous responses also indicated that the idea of providing high expectations and deliberately teaching
conflict resolution skills had improved various components of the school culture. For example, Faculty Member F said, “I think that preparing students to be caring citizens and restore what was lost or broken is so important. This has become an integral part of my classroom culture.” Faculty Member G commented, “Because students have various life situations, their response to conflict varies greatly . . . Students need to be taught how to resolve conflict, which facilitates positive, healthy interactions at school.” Faculty Member H added, “Restorative practices has made me address causes rather than symptoms. The focus on changing behavior has improved culture, relationships, and outcomes.” Several other responses discussed the idea of “more positive school atmosphere” (Faculty Member C), “better school environment” (Faculty Member G), a “more positive and productive school atmosphere” (Faculty Member A), “more positive and a better understanding of kids” (Faculty Member D), and “our school has better attendance rates, less discipline referrals, more respect, and our test scores skyrocketed this year” (Faculty Member E). Whether RP directly impacted some of those outcomes of school culture is outside the scope of this study, but teachers, as evidenced by their responses, at least associate some of the positive gains with the implementation of RP.

**Emergent theme #3: Paying attention to adolescent social and emotional needs leads to a better community built upon respectful interactions.** The final theme that emerged from teacher and faculty responses represented a new horizon in education whereby schools are paying specific attention to social, emotional needs in conjunction with academic needs (Rideout, Karen, Salinitri, & Marc, 2010). This theme has similarities with the first theme in the realization that one social and emotional need for adolescents is the opportunity to practice, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. When that type of environment is present, respect and trust are usually built between the adolescent and important adults in their lives such as teachers or parents (Gilles, n.d.). Teacher L remarked, “I believe the mutual respect between
myself and my students has been the biggest byproduct of shifting my mindset to restorative practices.”

Faculty members consistently commented on the sense of community where respect and trust were present in daily interactions. Teacher K said, “The threatening atmosphere has diminished … I believe we might have rescued a student . . . apparently it all made sense to him. I treated him with respect and his communication totally changed. Though one teacher (Teacher M) mentioned he/she would like to see it transfer more from the school level down to the classroom more, yet others spoke of students feeling more “support” (Teacher O), allows students a “voice” (Teacher N), and a significant shift “from very defensive and confrontational types of interactions from students before we as a staff have been introduced to restorative practices” (Teacher I).

One particular response from Teacher L summarized all three themes well:

Students know that they are part of a community that wants them to succeed. They are more willing to take ownership of bad choices and work toward repairing damaged relationships. RP supports SEL and developing emotional intelligence, which results in students making more mature decisions (both in general and after harm was done).

Understanding the perspectives of faculty members who experienced the implementation process was one essential piece of the puzzle in answering RQ2, but equally important, especially given the program evaluation framework—DDE—is the perspective of parents. The following section will summarize the parent survey in similar fashion to the teacher/faculty survey to support answering RQ2.

**Parent Survey.** Parents’ perspectives were invaluable to the overall picture of understanding RP implementation because garnering their support could enhance the school’s efforts while ignoring their input could detract from implementation efforts. I asked the parents of the students who participated in the focus group a set of 10 questions (see Appendix D) to
gain a better understanding of their experiences and contribute to answering RQ2. Finally, the survey was sent to the parents of the 10 focus group participants (students); all 10 parents responded.

Because the parent survey was an open-ended, qualitative survey (see Appendix C), I followed the same procedures for coding the responses as the open-ended part of the teacher/faculty survey—labeling responses, categorizing them, and identifying themes that emerged from the responses. Before administering the survey to parents, I submitted the questions to the school’s RP implementation team to provide feedback. After receiving the paper responses (this method was chosen to increase the likelihood of a high response rate, which was 100%), I uploaded them into Microsoft Word to begin the coding process.

The first step in organizing and analyzing the parents’ responses was to label them; I created the following labels based on their responses:

- Teachers really cared about my child
- The environment feels like family
- Constant communication between administrators, teachers, and parents.
- Atmosphere of reciprocal respect
- Inconsistency in how all teachers treat all children
- Teachers worked with parents when discipline issues were present
- Issues were handled swiftly and fairly
- Helped build a sense of community
- Expectations were clear
- Students were cordial to each other
- Teachers greeted and encouraged students
- Students should be given another chance unless it becomes a problem
• Students are treated fairly

From there, I sorted the labeled responses into the following categories based on patterns or connections:

• Responses about fairness for all students in handling discipline issues
• Responses about treating students with respect
• Responses about communication between stakeholders
• Responses about genuinely caring for all students
• Responses about extending second chances
• Responses about acknowledging/rewarding students

In alignment with Ivankova’s (2015) suggestion to identify themes for the purposes of drawing substantive conclusions, I also looked for themes in the responses that emerged from the categories. I did this by searching for frequency of responses within the six categories and continually exploring relationships between the categories. After completing these steps, the following themes emerged:

• Our children deserve fair treatment, including second chances when they mess up . . . to a point.
• Our children deserve to be spoken to with respect and acknowledged when they do the right thing.
• We value constant communication between teachers, parents, administrators, and students.

**Emergent theme #1: Our children deserve fair treatment, including second chances when they mess up...to a point.** The first theme that emerged from the data encompasses ideas of fair treatment and forgiveness. Throughout the responses, parents remarked about the need for students to be treated fairly, whether it is academically or when they misbehave. Responses
indicated parents deemed fairness to encompass faculty members refraining from overusing suspensions as the primary method for handling minor misbehaviors. Parent 9 said, “Students should be respectful and treated fairly . . . There should be consequences for infractions, but suspensions should be a last resort.” Also, one parent recognized the need to provide second chances because the possibility of difficult circumstances beyond the students’ control. This parent, Parent 6, suggested, “I am a strong believer in second chances, we never know exactly what that student could be going through outside of school or in school. It could be a cry for help.”

However, it was evident that parents’ idea of fairness also included the idea that students deserve a fair opportunity to earn an education, free of distractions. For instance, Parent 2 commented that students who disrupt the learning environment should not necessarily be suspended but should not be allowed to remain in their current class because they are hurting other students’ chances to learn. Parent 4 also agreed that students “should be given another chance unless it becomes a problem,” which indicated faculty members cannot afford to continually offer chances to students to redo misbehaviors if the wrongdoings are not being corrected. Parent 5’s remarks echoed these same sentiments: “Everyone deserves a second chance. However, if the behavior continues, they should definitely be disciplined per the school’s disciplinary policies . . . so they do not [interfere] with other students’ learning time.” However, as Parent 3 noted, inconsistencies in teacher responses to infractions—one student is suspended while another one is given redirection—can cause frustration.

Emergent theme #2: Our children deserve to be spoken to with respect and acknowledged when they do the right thing. Interwoven in this theme are ideas of respect, positive reinforcement, and positive interactions regardless if the behavior was appropriate or inappropriate. Essentially, the pattern of responses suggested that parents wanted to know their
children were ultimately cared for when in school. Parents repeatedly commented that the
environment was filled with positive interactions and respectful relationships, including student-
to-student and teacher-student communication. For example, Parent 3 said, “Overall, the teachers
were respectful of the students,” while Parent 4 responded, “I feel the faculty respects the
students and family members.” Parent 6 said that

I feel like the faculty went above and beyond with the level of respect for my child. He
came home every day talking about how well he is treated there. It makes me so proud to
be a part and to see that light shine in a child…is just a wonderful feeling.

However, Parent 10 recommended that this area “could use some work . . . some faculty are
better than others in this area.”

Other parents consistently commented on how acknowledging when students do the right
ting thing to be just as important in building a sense of community as redirecting when issues arose.
For example, Parent 6 mentioned the positive encouragement and communication “make the
students feel special, important, and able to do anything.” Parent 9 added that “the opportunities
the campus has allowed for students is a positive reinforcement as best as I can see.”

Emergent theme #3: We value constant communication between teachers, parents,
administrators, and students. The final theme that emerged out of the parent survey responses
indicated that parents value constant communication between all parties. Most of the responses
indicated parents referred to communication as email and phone communication that took place
between parents and teachers, but some respondents commented on the interactions—nonverbal
and verbal communication—that took place during the school day between teachers and students
and during parent-teacher conferences. This was especially true when a misbehavior occurred;
parents wanted to know when their child committed an infraction, but also seemed to value
honest dialogue—including listening to the parents’ concerns—about the infraction. For
example, Parent 1 and Parent 3 commented that faculty members were “good listeners” while
Parent 5 personally thanked the staff for constant communication. Parent 4 said, “The teachers were great, and I feel like they really cared about my student’s success. We were well informed by the staff about different activities, news, and [got] updates regularly.” Parent 3 later added some teachers could be nicer and should avoid “talking down” to kids.

**Student focus groups.** The final qualitative data collection technique involved conducting two separate student focus groups. While students may typically be located lowest on the power level rung, the DDE approach encourages soliciting feedback from stakeholders at all power levels (House & Howe, 2003). In addition, one suggestion from the DDE approach involves asking members of this lowest power level to question some of the responses from what may be considered to be the highest levels of power—administrators, teachers, and faculty members—to check for alignment in perspectives (Howe & Ashcraft, 2005). Therefore, one of the aims of the focus group, in addition to ascertaining students’ perceptions of the implementation of RP and overall environment, was to analyze faculty survey responses.

**Review of procedures.** The students were split into two focus groups. Focus Group 1 involved 5 students who received five or more referrals last year but less than three this year; Focus Group 2 involved five students who received five or more referrals last year and also received five or more referrals during the current academic school year. A comfortable environment was chosen free of distractions and an ample time of 90 minutes was allotted to conduct each of the two sessions. Upon entering, students were invited to complete a card sort as a warm-up activity. Then, I read some of the responses and themes from the faculty survey for discussion. Finally, I asked seven open-ended questions (prepared ahead of time after being reviewed by the RP implementation team and included in Appendix E) looking for opportunities to follow-up if clarification was needed or a new idea was introduced that I had not originally explored. These same procedures were repeated for both student focus groups.
**Card sort results.** As the five students from Focus Group 1 entered the room, they were given eight cards (see Appendix F) to place on a continuum from positive experiences this year to negative experiences this year (see Figure 7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Experiences</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative Experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Figure 7. Student focus group card sort continuum.*

In Focus Group 1, students did not place any cards (e.g., relationships with teachers, relationships with other students, interactions with administrators, being redirected when I misbehaved, etc.) on the end of the spectrum marked “Negative Experiences.” They did, however, rank “being redirected when I misbehaved” in the middle of the continuum. Table 16 summarizes where and in what order the students in Focus Group 1 placed each of the eight cards (see Table 16).

In Focus Group 2, the five students also placed the eight cards along the continuum; however, they placed the cards throughout the spectrum, including two cards slightly past neutral. Table 17 summarizes where and in what order the students placed each of the eight cards.
Table 16

*Focus Group 1 Card Sort Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Card</th>
<th>Relative Location on Continuum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Relationships with teachers</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Relationships with other students</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communication with teachers</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Communication with other students</td>
<td>Mostly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Interactions with administrators</td>
<td>Mostly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Classroom restorative circles</td>
<td>Slightly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Behavioral coaching conversations</td>
<td>Slightly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Being redirected when I misbehaved</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17

*Focus Group 2 Card Sort Results*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Card</th>
<th>Relative Location on Continuum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Relationships with Teachers</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Behavioral Coaching Conversations</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Communication with Teachers</td>
<td>Mostly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Communication with other Students</td>
<td>Slightly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Relationships with other Students</td>
<td>Slightly Positive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Classroom Restorative Circles</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Interactions with Administrators</td>
<td>Slightly Negative Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Being redirected when I misbehaved</td>
<td>Slightly Negative Experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Analysis of survey responses.** As part of the DDE approach, asking members of lower power levels in an organization’s evaluation to comment or verify responses from other power levels promotes a more comprehensive understanding and evaluation (House & Howe, 2003). Consequently, I invited students to evaluate various responses and the overall themes that emerged from faculty surveys.

I asked students from each focus group to look through the faculty survey results, discuss them, and come to a group consensus on whether they deemed the results to be one of the following: entirely accurate, mostly accurate, somewhat accurate, somewhat inaccurate, mostly inaccurate, or entirely inaccurate. Students in Focus Group 1 (labeled as Student, 1, Student 2, etc.) commented that results from the faculty survey were mostly accurate. As I studied students’ nonverbal cues, four out of the five students were nodding, which indicated they tended to agree with this assessment. Student 2 remarked, “I think the teachers mostly graded our school right . . . especially what they put on respect and giving us second chances when we mess up.” Student 3 added, “They mostly told the truth; it seems like most of the teachers are nice, respectful, and allow us to meet with each other when we have issues instead of suspending us for every little thing.” One student remained hesitant to give her opinion on the accuracy of faculty survey results. During this exercise, her body language and lack of responses indicated that she was either nervous or disinterested. I probed further to determine her perceptions and she mentioned she thought the teachers were “pretty right” about their responses. Overall, Focus Group 1 came to a fairly quick conclusion and general consensus that the results were mostly accurate.

Focus Group 2 students (labeled Student A, Student B, etc.) thought the faculty survey results as somewhat accurate, but there was some debate about this. Student A and Student D steadfastly held the results as mostly accurate, whereas Student B and Student E viewed them as somewhat accurate. Student C did not voice his opinion during this conversation but laughed
occasionally as the others discussed and debated. Student A commented, “Basically, everything they said was true . . . we might have messed up a little this year, but I think they were nicer and treated us better than teachers did in the past.” Student E saw the survey results as somewhat accurate with her point of contention that at times expectations were not exactly taught but often vague. In fact, she mentioned sometimes she felt like she got in trouble, was talked down to in front of others, and was not even sure what rule she broke. Student B agreed with this assessment. When asked if they could come to a consensus, they ultimately voted and somewhat accurate was the majority opinion. (Student C ended up voting this way). Throughout this discussion, the debate was more spirited; three of the students led the majority of the conversation and were very demonstrative with nonverbal cues using hand gestures and facial expressions that resembled determination. The students who were originally hesitant to join in the assessment (originally, these two students sat with arms crossed and just observed the others engage in debate) eventually started nodding in agreement once the more dominant individuals expressed their opinions and supported them with reasoning.

**Responses to focus group questions.** For both focus group sessions, the remaining 30–40 minutes were spent asking the students each of the seven questions, listening to responses, interjecting follow-up questions when appropriate, and taking notes. After the sessions, which were recorded on an iPad, I used Microsoft Word to write an abridged transcript (Kreuger & Casey 2009). Then, I followed the coding procedure used for the parent and faculty surveys by labeling responses, categorizing responses based on patterns, and identifying emerging themes.

The first step when analyzing the abridged transcript was to label each response to capture its essence using a key word or phrase. Some of the labels included:

- Teachers would talk to me when I got mad.
- I was glad when teachers gave me second and third chances.
• Teachers understood what I was going through.
• Administrators were fair with punishment.
• Forcing me to talk out my problems helped me before I did something bad.
• Not all of my teachers were respectful.
• I actually wanted to show up to school most of the time.
• Bullying happened less at this school.
• I did not have to worry about fights as much.
• I felt safe at this school.
• Repairing relationships is a better alternative.

The above list represented labeled responses from the 10 students. I continued labeling responses to get an overall sense of the students’ perspectives and experiences. From there, I sorted the labeled responses into the following categories based on patterns or connections:

• Responses about fairness
• Responses about respect
• Responses about interactions
• Responses about forgiveness
• Responses about choices
• Responses about repairing relationships
• Responses about conflict

During the final coding pass, I further looked for patterns in the categories in search of themes to capture the essence of students’ responses during the focus group sessions. The following three themes emerged from the data:

• When teachers and administrators have empathy for us and treat us with respect, we tend
to have empathy for others treat each other with more respect.

- When we are offered the opportunity to resolve conflict, rather than being suspended, it is more fair and actually helps . . . usually.
- If all systems are positive and consistent, the environment is more productive and effective.

Emergent theme #1: When teachers and administrators have empathy for us and treat us with respect, we tend to have empathy for others and treat each other with more respect.

Student responses appeared to confirm the idea that they would follow the model set forth for them by other adults at the school. To that end, as teachers and other staff members treated students and each other with respect and empathy, they were more likely to engage in the same behaviors. To illustrate this, Student 4 expressed that “teachers here seemed to actually care and talk to us like we were equals . . . that showed me they respected me . . . I started giving them more respect because of it.” Student 5 added, “Teachers and principals always asked how we were doing and helped out when we were having a bad day.” Finally, Student B commented,

When I was having a bad day or did something dumb, my counselor or coach would talk to me and hear my side. I think the kids respected teachers more for at least hearing their side and helping them talk through the situation.

Other students built off these responses as the conversation about respect and empathy grew. Students began comparing their experiences at this school with previous schools. Student C suggested that at previous schools “teachers did not understand . . . even though I got in trouble here, most of it was my fault for not listening to people’s advice. I thought most of the teachers listened and respected me, but it wasn’t like that at XXX Middle School (redacted to remain anonymous).” Finally, Student 2 conveyed that “you gotta give respect to get respect. Most of my teachers and principals give me respect, so I respect them.” Student E suggested teachers and other faculty “try to understand our problems more, keep trying, and don’t give up.”
Most of the comments during the sessions revolved around teacher and student interactions, especially as it related to empathy and respect.

**Emergent theme #2: When we are offered the opportunity to resolve conflict, rather than being suspended, it is more fair and actually helps…usually.** Students routinely commented on the opportunities to talk problems out with other students or even when they misbehaved in a teacher’s classroom. Student 3 said, “It helped being able to talk to teachers. Whenever the school has a connection with the kid, its way better than just sending them home. When they just suspended me at my past school, I just stopped caring.” During the conversation, Student D compared his experiences this year with previous experiences:

> It’s been better this year. Many of the adults cared about the kids; it really helped how present they were . . . I had at least four teachers I could talk to when I was having problems before I did anything to get in trouble. We had this thing at our school, like when we had issues, we could talk it out and it was dropped. That helps us focus on academics and other school stuff.

Finally, Student A observed, “There was another kid in my class who kept messing with people; the school didn’t suspend him but rather the teacher talked to him. Whatever he did helped because the kid would stop messing with people.”

Not every student found that the opportunity to restore or repair relationships when conflict occurred was the most effective manner to handle the issue. Student C remarked that at times he got frustrated because some other students knew “how to play the game.” When I asked him to elaborate, he mentioned a small handful of students would stir up trouble, disrespect others, or misbehave in other ways but would quickly claim they learned their lesson and ask the teacher to not write a referral. Student A said she would sometimes get exasperated at the thought of having to talk out problems. She said there were times when she would “rather just get suspended or sent to ISS (in-school-suspension) than have to go sit down in a circle and talk to someone I just had an argument with.”
Emergent theme #3: If all systems are positive and consistent, the environment is more productive and effective. Throughout both focus group sessions, an underlying tone of the need for consistency among faculty members was present. To that end, many students began statements with “most of my teachers” or “sometimes.” Oftentimes those statements ended with a positive memory or experience. For example, Student 4 commented, “Some of my teachers and coaches would help me with my anger issues,” while Student B said, “A lot of times, some of my teachers would talk to me and try to work through it rather than just getting rid of me.” Students also provided some comments about various systems that lacked consistency, such as how some students were given extra chances when others would not and some referrals would get overlooked by administrators when others resulted in suspension. Though it was outside the scope of this study, students commented that inconsistencies in student-faculty relationships (e.g., playing “favorites”), which allowed for some students to get lenient treatment for tardiness, get extra restroom privileges, or receive extended time on assignments.

The other component of this theme is the desire for a positive atmosphere filled with encouragement and affirmation. Several responses illustrated the students’ belief that teachers who spoke to them in a positive tone or encouraged them to do better consistently drove students’ respect and admiration for those teachers. For example, Student 2 mentioned that when he was having a bad day, “[he] really liked when teachers would stop me and tell me everything was going to be okay.” In addition, Student 4 commented, “In the past, teachers would be rude or act short with me, so I would just bottle up my feelings and probably do something bad . . . but this year, [they] would talk to me one-on-one and tell me I could get through it . . . just be calm.” Finally, Student E jumped in after this comment and said, “I actually got a postcard in the mail from Mr. Griffin (name changed to protect identity) telling me to stay positive and keep doing my best in his class. He said he was proud of me.”
Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the results from various data collection techniques in this mixed-method study. First, it provided descriptive statistical analyses of referrals for four years prior to the implementation of RP along with referral data from the 2018–2019 school year when RP was implemented. Next, it analyzed faculty survey data, also using descriptive statistics. Then, the chapter explored teacher and parent surveys by coding qualitative, open-ended responses. Finally, it reported results from two student focus group sessions. The next chapter provides further discussion and recommendations based on the data collected in Chapter 4.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The problem under investigation in this study was the amount of time students were spending out of the classroom because of suspension and exclusion. Furthermore, educators need a better understanding of practices and programs that educate students rather than suspend them. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand barriers and successes during the implementation of RP—a program that departs from methods of exclusionary discipline—in which the aim is repairing relationships and establishing principles of respect, empathy, understanding, and conflict resolution.

In this mixed methods study, I used referral statistics from the past five years and results from a faculty survey, and qualitative methods—open-ended faculty survey items, a brief parent survey, and focus groups of students—to investigate barriers and successes of RP implementation at a Grade 9 campus in north Texas. Underlying the study was a DDE approach in which the goal is to include perspectives from a variety of stakeholders, including from various power levels, to arrive at a balanced and unbiased set of conclusions. There were three limitations of the study: (a) design limitations due to potential researcher bias, (b) contextual limitations related to the difficulty to understand such a complex phenomenon in one year, and (c) transfer limitations, or the degree to which the design and results might be implemented and replicated at other sites. However, I took several precautions to address and mitigate the limitations.

In Chapter 5, I first discuss the findings of this study in relation to past literature on restorative practices. Then, I discuss the three limitations in more detail, including how each was addressed in the study. Next, I discuss issues of sustainability and generalizability. Finally, I provide recommendations for practical purposes and future research.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to Literature

Exclusionary suspensions and the negative outcomes associated with these exclusionary measures resulted in lower attendance rates, higher recidivism, decreased academic performance, higher disconnection from school, increased dropout rates, larger racial discipline gaps, and higher propensities to enter the school-to-prison pipeline—have existed in the school landscape for the past 20 years. In contrast, the small percentage of schools that have transitioned to a RP culture have experienced promising gains in many of these areas. In this section, I discuss the findings of the current study in relation to the research with specific attention to variables addressed in RQ1—number of referrals, exclusionary suspensions, racial discipline gap, and recidivism. In addition, I discuss how the findings answer RQ2 and RQ3 in terms of how stakeholders, such as parents, students, teachers, and other faculty members, view the implementation of RP.

Research question 1: To what extent did key discipline metrics for all students—number of referrals, number of exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism rate—change during implementation of restorative practice (RP) for the 2018–2019 school year in comparison with these metrics for school years 2014–2015 to 2017–2018 when RP was not used? To answer RQ1, I analyzed referral, suspension, and recidivism data from the four years prior to RP implementation in comparison to the 2018–2019 school year when RP was implemented.

Referrals. Before the implementation of RP, referrals had increased steadily from year-to-year. This finding is similar to what is described in the literature, whereby many school officials have abandoned educating and rehabilitating students when they commit infractions as a result of zero-tolerance policies (Rodriguez Ruiz, 2017). Instead, this zero-tolerance climate encourages teachers to write discipline referrals for students, even for minor infractions, that are typically predetermined by school discipline policies (American Psychological Association Zero
Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Therefore, the significantly higher number of discipline referrals at this school before implementing RP is similar to findings by other researchers.

On the other hand, educators at this school experienced nearly a 75% decline in the number of referrals in the year of RP implementation. Whereas the research indicates a decline in referrals is to be expected with implementing RP (Buckmaster, 2016; Gregory, Huang, Anyon, Greer, & Downing, 2018), the degree of decline of referrals in this study was unexpected and raises questions of sustainability, which will be addressed later in this chapter. Faculty survey results reflected alternative methods (than writing a discipline referral) were systematically employed when students misbehaved or caused harmed, which is a core component of RP. To that end, nearly 96% of respondents (faculty members) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” to the correlating survey item: “It is important that the person who caused harm is given support to change [his or her] behavior.” This is consistent with the restorative quadrant of the social discipline window theory, as described by Wachtel and McCold (2001) in which educators effectively balance support and control by working with students to engage in positive behaviors. Moreover, none of the 24 respondents indicated that the educators at this school sought sanction or punishment as the first responses via referral or suspension to misbehavior.

Results from the student focus group sessions and the parent survey confirmed the teacher survey responses. For example, emergent theme 2 from the student focus groups suggested students have a sense of fairness, especially as it relates to being given second chances. In numerous responses, students indicated that forgiveness or alternative responses (than a referral) to misbehavior promoted a better culture and improved relationships. This awareness of fairness and equity found here coincides with Caglar’s (2013) assertion that as students perceive their environment to be fair, “the more they enjoy their school life” but experience “dissatisfaction and alienation” when they perceive a lack of equity (p. 185).
According to survey results, parents also advocated for students to receive second chances up until a certain point. In other words, the first emergent theme from the parent survey suggested parents want to ensure a fair environment where educators extend forgiveness and the opportunity to try again when students misbehave as long as the environment remains safe. In a recent survey of 515 parents of school-aged children, Blad (2018) reported a majority of parents were concerned about the safety of their children at school; however, the reasoning departed from previous research in that educators were recommended to make changes in ways that “humanize students and maintain welcoming school environments” (para. 4). In the current study, parents, teachers, and students all mentioned forgiveness as one possible avenue toward a more welcoming and humane environment, allowing students more opportunities, especially in the transitional period of 9th grade, to retry behaviors in an effort to change them.

Exclusionary suspensions. Dominus (2016) reported that schools that implement RP have shown higher graduation rates, improved school environments, and lower exclusionary suspension rates. In contrast, many school leaders are experiencing frustration with growing suspension rates as they rely on policies set forth by a zero-tolerance culture (Perry & Morris, 2014). The experiences at this school, before and after RP implementation, mirror these results. Exclusionary suspensions continued to increase gradually, hitting a peak in the 2017–2018 school year. However, during the implementation year, exclusionary suspensions declined by 50% at the school under study. Therefore, the experiences at this school are congruent with what a preponderance of the literature has reported about the lack of a program such as RP and the implementation of RP.

Exclusionary suspensions by race. To address the subset questions of RQ1—how discipline metrics changed for each of the major races and special education students—I also analyzed exclusionary suspension data by race from years prior to implementation and 2018–
2019. Exclusionary suspensions tend to be similar to referrals because students cannot be suspended without a referral written to explain their absence from class; in other words, it serves as the foundation of documentation. Therefore, the trend in exclusionary suspensions followed the same trend in referrals—they increased steadily year-over-year until the implementation of RP. (However, there was a minor dip in suspensions during the 2015–2016 school year for Black and White students). Researchers (Buckmaster, 2016; DeMatthews, 2016; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016) routinely found that schools that implemented RP had fewer suspensions in subsequent years, so the results here aligned with a preponderance of the literature.

One of the major issues covered in Chapter 2—the racial discipline gap—was an unexpected departure in this study from the exclusionary suspension literature. A significant amount of attention has been paid to the disparity in suspensions (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; DeMatthews, 2016) of minority students—especially Black students—over the past 15 years. To that end, it was no surprise that suspensions were unequally distributed over the past four years among White and Black students at the study school. However, some researchers have recently reported promising results in reducing the racial discipline gap after implementing RP (Buckmaster, 2016; Mansfield et al., 2018). This study did not experience the same results; from the previous year (2017–2018) to implementation year (2018–2019), the percentage of Black students with exclusionary suspensions increased from 64% to 67%. This disproportionality—Black students received 67% of referrals but only make up 40% of the student body—has remained constant over the years, with both referrals and exclusionary suspensions.

The reasoning may be attributed to a litany of factors suggested in the research—implicit bias by educators (Anderson & Ritter, 2017; Anyon et al., 2018), structural racism (Anyon et al., 2018), historical and cyclical mistrust/disconnection (Bottani, Bradshaw, and Mendelsen, 2017),
deliberately unfair treatment (Sheets, 1996; Meehan, Hughes, and Cavell, 2003), or cultural mismatch between teacher and student (Losen, 2014, Lustick, 2017). In the case of this school (where minority students make up over 75% of students but only 30% minority teachers are employed), the most likely reason would be the cultural mismatch between teachers and students, which Lustick (2017) suggested can lead to tension or misunderstanding.

**Recidivism.** The final component analyzed under RQ1 was recidivism—the degree to which students received multiple referrals or suspensions in one year. A synthesis of research has suggested that exclusionary suspensions do not have the desired effect of behavioral change; instead, research has shown school suspension rates appear to predict higher levels rates of future misbehavior from those same students (Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; American Psychological Association Task Force, 2008). To that end, once students enter the referral or exclusionary suspension pipeline, they are likely to repeat misbehaviors rather than change them (Riley, 2018; Welch, 2017).

On initial inspection, recidivism totals decreased substantially during the implementation year of 2018–2019. For instance, in 2017–2018, 100 Black students, 17 White students, and 33 Hispanic students received multiple discipline referrals. During the RP implementation year, only 48 Black students, 4 White students, and 10 Hispanic students received multiple discipline referrals. However, upon closer inspection, recidivism actually increased when I analyzed recidivism as a percentage of overall referrals for each racial group. For example, out of the 674 total referrals for Black students in 2017–2018, 100 of them (14.8%) were multiple offenders. However, in 2018–2019 (RP implementation year), out of the 213 total discipline referrals written for Black students, 48 (22.5%) were multiple offenders. This suggests that whereas RP helped reduce the overall referral and recidivism numbers, a larger percentage of discipline
referrals were written to the same students in each race (White—14.8% to 16.7%; Hispanic—15.6% to 22.7%), than in the year before RP implementation.

These data highlight two important findings. First, this further underscores the recidivism phenomenon; though the school was able to experience far less referral totals for students, more of the same students received them. This is a departure from findings in other studies in which participation in RP practices reduced recidivism (de Beus & Rodriguez, 2007). The fact that this was only a one-year study may explain the lack of success reducing recidivism. In fact, McCold (2008) reported that students who engaged in RP practices over an extended period of time ($\geq 2$ years) experienced a decrease in recidivism in subsequent years. Secondly, educators at this school were still missing the mark by facilitating behavioral change with a handful of students. If educators were to capture these students early in the year, before they entered the referral pipeline, school stakeholders would likely see an even sharper decline in discipline referrals.

**Research Question 2:** What are the perceptions of the various school stakeholders—teachers, counselors, assistant principals, and parents—regarding the implementation of RP?

To ascertain the perceptions of stakeholders regarding the implementation of restorative practices (RP), I conducted a survey of faculty members (using both quantitative, Likert scale items and qualitative, open-ended items) and a survey of parents (qualitative, open-ended items). Results indicated predominantly positive responses from both stakeholder groups, which coincided with a majority the experiences of stakeholder groups cited in the literature.

**Faculty survey.** There were 17 total Likert scale items to gauge various restorative values—respect, communication, positive behavior modification, and understanding. The mean score from each survey item correlated to a scale to determine whether that item highly aligned, moderately aligned, or did not align with restorative values. Out of the 17 items, the mean of 12 responses highly aligned with restorative values, 5 items moderately aligned with restorative
values, and 0 items did not align with restorative values. Whereas I expected some level of alignment to restorative values from faculty members during the first year of implementation, the high degree to which faculty members positively responded to these items was unexpected. For example, I designed set 2 items to measure faculty members’ beliefs on whether students should be allowed to make amends and agree to a way forward rather than being suspended. In this set, the mean for all three items (average of 1.53) correlated to being highly aligned with restorative values. This belief was further confirmed during the qualitative portion of the faculty survey in which school employees routinely suggested the need to offer forgiveness and a chance to redo a behavior that ordinarily resulted in suspension in the past four years. This is particularly surprising in light of a recent national poll of over 4,000 teachers; only 26% supported measures to limit exclusionary suspensions and expulsions in favor of restorative measures to repair relationships, even if the newer disciplinary practices reduced the racial discipline gap (Loewenberg, 2018).

One other important finding from the faculty survey that contradicted findings from other studies was the willingness for teachers and other school employees to implement a new program in an era of constant programmatic reforms. In a national survey of 500 teachers, 58% reported they have experienced “too much” or “way too much” programmatic reform, referred to as “reform fatigue,” in the past two years (Education Week Research Center, 2017, p. 3). In fact, 44% responded that the amount of new reforms caused them to consider leaving the profession altogether (Education Week Research Center, 2017). However, at this study site, none of the respondents indicated that RP implementation caused them to feel overwhelmed, anxious, or experience any negative feelings, including fatigue. To illustrate, in response to the open-ended survey question, “How if at all, has restorative practices changed the atmosphere in the school as
a whole,” Faculty Member H said, “I love the changes. The threatening atmosphere has diminished, and the students seem to recognize that no one is out to get them.”

One possible reason for this lack of resistance to the new RP program implemented at the school is the constant communication of positive results from the outset by the school’s restorative team. To that end, the restorative team reported the progress constantly during faculty meetings and newsletters. This aligns with school turnaround literature in that it is important for staff members to recognize positive momentum through quick wins—small progressive steps toward the ultimate goal—to successfully implement high-level organizational change (Meyers & Hitt, 2018). Another reason for the lack of resistance to the implementation of RP at the study site was the level of experience of faculty members at the study site. To that end, in a seminal Swiss study, Huberman (1989) described novice or mid-career teachers as being more willing to try new approaches in their practices than late-career teachers. Demographic data revealed that teachers at the study site averaged 5.6 years of teaching experience (10% of teachers with 10 to 20+ years of experience); therefore, the relative willingness to try a new approach may have been higher at this site because the experience of the staff was considerably lower than the nationwide average—51% of the teachers had 10 to 20+ years of experience (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Parent survey. Data suggested that parents were slightly slower in adopting values that aligned with a restorative mindset than teachers or students. However, parents still seemed to value some of the restorative concepts of forgiveness and positive behavior correction as long as they felt their children were safe. Ewton (2014) posited that in light of the high-profile school shootings over the past 20 years, safety has displaced academic performance as the highest concern among parents. In conjunction with this need for safety assurances, parents value constant communication from faculty members, especially early on in the process, when their
child is involved in any incident where a restorative conference or circle may have taken place. This coincides with the findings of Kraft and Rodgers (2015) whereby they found a significant increase in student performance, teacher effectiveness, and parents’ satisfaction with the school when communication was consistent. Furthermore, an international study of 1,668 students found student behaviors of violence, theft, and skipping drastically declined when schools and parents were connected and in constant communication (AlMakadma & Ramisetty-Mikler, 2015). In conclusion, parents may gradually embrace the restorative mindset insofar as their worries of safety are assuaged and constant communication takes place between school and home.

**Research question 3:** How do students describe their experiences with RP?

In an effort to better understand the perceptions of all stakeholders and adhere to the spirit of DDE, I conducted student focus groups to ascertain students’ experiences and perceptions of RP. Whereas methodological triangulation (which was used in this study with qualitative and quantitative means) is the most common form of triangulation, Heale and Forbes (2013) hypothesized triangulating data sources (such as students and parents in this case) within methodologies “can allow the limitations from each method to be transcended by comparing findings from different perspectives” (p. 98). Therefore, student focus groups served as an attempt at triangulating findings from a wide variety of viewpoints, especially at the lowest traditional power levels at schools. To that end, the card sorts performed during each focus group confirmed the overall positive reaction to and effective results from RP implementation. In fact, 14 of 16 cards were sorted at either the neutral or positive end of the spectrum of experiences with only two of 16 labeled as negative experiences during the year.

The most salient finding from the student focus group data is the idea that they were constantly watching the way adults interacted with them and other adults to take guidance on
how to behave. Data from this study suggest students mimic what they see as it relates to treating others with respect, empathy, and forgiveness. Likewise, Thompson (2018) conducted a correlational study to measure respect between educators and students and found students tend to show respect and experience more positive relationships with teachers and peers when they are first shown respect. Several students commented on how the respect and empathy they were shown by teachers permeated into the way they treated others, forming a domino effect in positive climate factors. This building of momentum parallels the finding from the faculty component of this study (RQ2); as positive momentum starts to build (for teachers and students) and progress is celebrated, a positive climate built upon restorative values has an increased chance to ensue.

Limitations

In Chapter 3, I discussed three categories of limitations present during this study—design, contextual, and transfer limitations. While conducting the study, it was particularly important to be mindful of the first two factors because without deliberately addressing them, there was an opportunity for the data to be compromised. In this section, I further explain these limitations and the steps I took to prevent them from becoming mitigating factors that affected the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Design limitations. The most critical limitation that was present during the study was the design of the study. To that end, because I am also employed at the study site, the potential for researcher bias had to be overcome (Chenail, 2011). According to Wadams and Park (2018), study participants’ experiences may be altered if they feel any pressure to modify any behaviors to align with the researchers’ goals. For this study specifically, this could have resulted in teachers deciding not to write referrals in fear of reprisal or negatively affecting the results. To
alleviate this issue, I removed myself from handling any discipline referrals during the 2018–2019 (implementation) school year.

The other design limitation relates to the methodology employed during this study—conducting focus group sessions with students at the school and surveying parents and teachers—presented the potential for participants to say what they perceived I wanted to hear. To mitigate this, I conducted the student focus groups and parent surveys during the last week of the school year so that students and parents had no fear of retaliation for revealing their true thoughts. Because this campus only houses ninth graders, students and parents who participated in this study no longer attend the school. Moreover, I designed the survey to be anonymous and conducted it after appraisals were due to ensure that teachers could describe their true feelings about RP implementation and have no fear of survey responses affecting their evaluations or employment.

**Contextual limitations.** The other limitation present during the study was the fact this program was a stark shift from previous disciplinary practices at this school. Therefore, it took several weeks to educate faculty members and parents on the changes, though considerably more time was spent training staff members. Data revealed that school officials inadequately communicated what RP was or what the purpose of shifting to RP was to parents. Parents routinely commented on desiring more information about RP and increased communication from the school.

Moreover, engaging in RP for both teachers and administrators requires significantly more time than the previous procedure of suspending students. In other words, teachers may have felt pressured for time due to the already pressing tasks they faced (Hampson, 2018). Therefore, to fully commit to the requirements of RP, teachers had to be willing to also commit more time to engaging in RP procedures—informal conversations, restorative circles, and
conflict resolution discussions—than the time it takes to refer students to the office. However, data from the faculty survey suggest that teachers overcame this limitation for the most part. The RP implementation team constantly communicated about implementation goals and progress to assist teachers in overcoming this limitation.

**Transfer limitations.** Though not present during the study, transfer limitations may exist as other schools try to implement RP. To that end, other school administrators looking to use RP must be aware that other cultural factors were simultaneously present at this ninth grade campus that enabled easier implementation. First, the school was arranged in teams of six teachers rather than by department. This allowed groups of teachers (rather than individual teachers having to figure it out on their own) to facilitate restorative conversations with students, especially early in the implementation period, thus making it easier for hesitant teachers to learn more about the program by watching others lead restorative circles and conflict resolution discussions. Second, school administrators had been laying the foundation for RP by implementing PBIS—a program with similar goals of acknowledging and rewarding positive behaviors (Bradshaw, Paz, Debnam & Johnson, 2015)—in previous years. Therefore, the introduction of RP did not require a drastically different mindset and change in behaviors from teachers. Despite these potential transfer limitations, Stake (2014) proposed generalizability is not in jeopardy because readers can apply lessons learned from the study to their own situations or contexts.

**Recommendations**

District and campus administrators are ordinarily given considerable latitude to choose which programs are employed at the schools under their supervision. In this section, I present recommendations for district and school administrators looking to implement RP. Specifically, I focus on the first year of implementation for school administrators. Then, I provide recommendations for future research.
Recommendations for practical applications. According to the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Project (2017), “The first year of implementation is arguably the most critical. The first year sets the tone for the culture shift by proving to educators and students that restorative practices work and that this approach is ultimately best” (p. 5). Using a synthesis of research on RP implementation and the experiences from this study, I provide five recommendations for school administrators looking to establish RP at their schools:

- Establish a vision
- Engage the school community
- Provide training
- Celebrate successes
- Build sustainability

Establish a vision. Similar to Sinek’s (2013) philosophy of starting with the why, district and campus administrators looking to implement RP must explain the reasoning behind the shift to the new program. To that end, administrators must be unafraid of discussing the controversial practices—zero-tolerance, exclusionary practices, school-to-prison pipeline, and the racial discipline gap—that necessitate a reason for change (Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, 2017). Furthermore, it is a critical step to analyze school discipline data (given that referrals and suspensions directly affect the time students spend in class learning) and allow teachers to collectively build the vision to increase staff commitment (Stanley, 2013). Senge (1990) referred to this as creative tension whereby teachers will have to decide whether to change behaviors to match the vision or change the vision to match current behaviors. Therefore, the direction of this discussion should connect historical data and past practices, the need for change, and a consensus on what a brighter future for all school stakeholders may look like. The final step in this crucial phase is for teachers and administrators to build a consensus on progress.
goals toward this vision during the first year. I recommend vision progress goals be set by marking periods (six- or nine-week periods), as these are already natural reporting periods for teachers that require no adjustment or shift on the part of teachers.

**Engage the school community.** After building a shared vision, I recommend that administrators (either at the campus or district level) deliberately engage all stakeholders in the process. An important component of this recommendation is to listen to teachers’ initial concerns and suggestions. At the campus level, the principal must work to build commitment among all faculty members—teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, and other administrators—so that they are working in a cohesive manner. Chatlani (2017) argued that the lack of faculty buy-in may diminish the overall effectiveness of implementing a new program, like RP, because teachers and other staff members are positioned at the most crucial level of implementation; their day-to-day interactions with students will ultimately decide if the initiative fails or succeeds.

However, parents and community members must not be forgotten during the transition. Hodges (2018) argued that parent engagement in the direction of school initiatives was a key driver for ultimate school success because they formed the building block for the school’s perception in the community. Therefore, administrators should deliberately include parents in the direction of implementing RP by identifying and inviting influential parents and community members to participate on the implementation team.

Data from this study suggest parents value safety, but their understanding of safety has been long entrenched in a system where misbehaving students are removed from the environment rather than rehabilitated. In conjunction with creating a new sense of safety, data from parent surveys in this study suggest parents value constant communication. Therefore, it would be prudent for administrators to communicate what RP is, what it is not, and why shifting to a focus on repairing relationships provides safer schools than punishing students.
Provide training. Next, campus and district administrators should train faculty members in the various procedures and protocols of RP. In order to successfully implement any program, including RP, teachers need ongoing, consistent professional development using a variety of strategies aimed at achieving the schools’ RP goals (Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, 2017). Weidenseld and Bashevis (2013) hypothesized that professional development cannot be a one-time event that is disconnected from daily practice. Instead, administrators should extend opportunities that are job-embedded, occur throughout the year, and allow for various access points—online and in-person—to appeal to teachers’ differing learning styles.

One specific strategy that experienced success during this study was modeling of the restorative circle, which is a primary RP protocol. Modeling allows faculty members the opportunity to role play (Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, 2017) the conversation in its entirety from a variety of perspectives—the host, willing participants, hesitant on-lookers, and the support team—to gain valuable insight and experience for conducting circles in their own contexts. This modeling exercise should be conducted during the initial staff development meetings before students return to school. Furthermore, the initial restorative circle for faculty members should take place in an intimate setting, free of distractions, where teachers can authentically engage in the process.

Celebrate successes. To avoid a stagnant implementation effort where behaviors and mindsets revert back to the status quo, administrators must deliberately celebrate successes, regardless of how small they are, early and often. Van Buren and Safferstone (2009) suggested collective quick wins—small progress measures that are established and celebrated by a team looking to implement a new program or initiative—motivate team members by building upon successes early in the process. Furthermore, the focus on team rather than individual success creates an avenue for future success because the team is able to learn about each other’s
strengths, weaknesses, motivating factors, and dynamics (Van Buren & Safferstone, 2009).

According to the American Psychological Association (2015), “If you are trying to achieve a goal, the more often you monitor your progress, the greater likelihood you will succeed . . . your chances of success are even more likely if you report your progress publicly” (para. 1). Accordingly, I recommend creating specific goals as a team that are communicated publicly to staff and parents and allow for frequent monitoring. Moreover, I recommend establishing smaller, more frequent goals (rather than year-long goals) that create opportunities for building momentum among staff members.

**Build sustainability.** Gonzalez (2012) cautioned that implementing RP is not an overnight process; rather, building a program that lasts beyond inevitable personnel changes and obstacles along the way first requires transforming the language and approach that is used around school. Consistent with the social discipline window theory proposed by Wachtel and McCold (2001), behavior management and discipline must be approached as something that is done with students rather than to students.

The next step in building sustainability is creating an RP implementation team tasked with soliciting input from teachers, establishing goals representative of the entire faculty, connecting with parents and community members, and designing a meaningful professional development plan that ensures continuous learning occurs beyond the implementation year. Therefore, I recommend establishing an RP committee that is composed of administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, parents, and community members. This will build a collective effort in establishing a program that lasts in subsequent years, even if individual members are removed from the team.

The Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership (2017) suggested that onboarding and training of new employees is necessary in creating a lasting restorative
environment. Therefore, I recommend establishing hiring protocols that reflect restorative values. This entails designing questions and a scoring rubric that aligns with the school’s vision of repairing harm and restoring relationships.

**Recommendations for this school.** Whereas the previous section provided recommendations for any school or district interested in implementing RP, in this section, I provide three recommendations for the study school, especially as it relates to mitigating the racial discipline gap. First, demographic data revealed a mismatch in race, culture, and socioeconomic factors between teachers and students. To that end, 75% of students are minority students whereas only 30% of teachers are minority. Furthermore, 53.5% of students are labeled as economically disadvantaged (based on free and eligible lunch status). Therefore, the school needs to engage in training on implicit bias, teaching students with dissimilar backgrounds, and teaching students of poverty. Payne (2003) established schools operate using middle class, White norms, which can create misunderstandings between teachers and students when a cultural mismatch—such as in this school—is present. Thus, the trainings can help teachers become aware of biases and the hidden norms in which the school operates.

Second, Kane and Orsini (2003) posited a diverse faculty is crucial for establishing a positive culture and values built upon justice, respect, and inclusion. Also, more than 30 years ago, Delpit (1988) reasoned employing minority teachers with profound, firsthand knowledge of minority students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences may lead to more successful learning experiences. However, this school still does not employ a faculty that resembles the student body composition. Therefore, the school would benefit from actively recruiting and retaining teachers from diverse backgrounds and similar experiences to the students who walk the halls.

Third, school leadership and faculty should establish a committee to analyze referrals, including where and when they happened to determine future action steps. These action steps
may include increased supervision and explicitly re-teaching expectations. Moreover, this committee would benefit from actively monitoring referrals and exclusion of minority students by establishing goals and checking for progress continuously. Finally, to address the racial discipline gap, the committee should actively seek out other schools that have experienced success with Black students by arranging school visits and discussing with faculty members at that site.

**Recommendations for future research.** There are four primary areas where future research is recommended. First, this study took place over one year. To that end, this study did not investigate the long-term effects or issues of sustainability important in a school change process. Therefore, my first recommendation for future research is a longer period of study that is able to further explore the nuances of RP implementation. Specifically, monitoring referral and suspension data from high school entrance (freshman year) to exit (senior year) may help researchers better understand the lasting effects of RP.

Secondly, this school was not able to financially afford an RP coordinator, which is a suggested position for school and district administrators looking to implement RP (Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, 2017). Therefore, I recommend future research be conducted at a school, or multiple sites, where an RP coordinator is employed. This would allow for a more reliable evaluation, according to the suggested implementation model, to take place.

To the extent that a school is interested in producing more productive citizens, how RP skills and values in school transfer to social contexts outside of the school, in the home and the community, could be explored by future researchers. Therefore, future studies could explore students’ experiences with RP by investigating how values and practices are transferred away from the school environment. For example, future researchers may be interested in surveying
students to ascertain if they use restorative circles, conflict resolution skills, and other practices with friends, parents, and siblings when relationships are harmed.

Finally, the results of the study did not positively alter the racial discipline gap. To that end, Black students were still referred and suspended at disproportionate rates in comparison to White and Hispanic students. In other words, whereas White and Hispanic students received less referrals and exclusionary suspensions compared to their student body make-up, Black students continued to receive higher, disproportionate referrals and suspensions even during the RP implementation period. Therefore, future researchers may want to explore conditions and practices that mitigate this.

Conclusions

In this mixed methods study, I investigated the implementation of RP at a Grade 9 campus in Texas. Whereas the recent history of school discipline in a majority of U.S. schools is marked by frequent suspension, increased absences, and growing disconnection of students, the results of this study add to a growing base of research aimed at a hopeful alternative for school administrators. In this study, I sought to find how various discipline metrics changed—referrals, subsequent exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism—during the implementation year of RP and explore how various school stakeholders—parents, students, and faculty—described their experiences during the 2018–2019 school year.

Results from the quantitative section revealed a significant reduction in the number of referrals, exclusionary suspensions, and recidivism for all students at the campus. However, the racial discipline gap was not lessened for Black students. Results from the subsequent qualitative section revealed that students, parents, and faculty members had mostly positive experiences to report from the implementation of RP. Specifically, each of these groups reported positive experiences with restorative values of empathy, forgiveness, and repairing harm when a
relationship was damaged without sacrificing safety. In other words, a culture started to bloom that aligned with the social discipline window whereby faculty members worked *with* students to change behaviors rather than administering discipline *to* students. This study joins a growing body of research that provides a more positive outlook than the alternative disciplinary approach—zero tolerance policies—that most American schools employ. Meanwhile, it adds to the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive picture of experiences and perspectives from a multitude of stakeholders—faculty, parents, and most importantly, the students.
References


Curran, F. C. (2019). The law, policy, and portrayal of zero tolerance school discipline: Examining prevalence and characteristics across levels of governance and school
districts. *Educational Policy, 33*(2), 319–349.

https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0895904817691840


Appendix A: Faculty Survey Permission

Chris,
Thanks for the note and compliment! I would love to get your results.

Good luck!
Nancy

From: White, Christopher M
Sent: Wednesday, April 10, 2019 9:00:53 PM
To: Riestenberg, Nancy (MDE)
Subject: notification

Nancy,

I plan on using the restorative practices survey (Pg 27-28) of the implementation checklist
(https://sherrymcreedy.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/9/13896697/r_i_toolkit_2012.pdf) with my staff (I am a principal in Crowley, TX). I am using this as part of a dissertation project studying the implementation of restorative practices at a 9th grade campus this year. Thank you for putting out this incredible resource. I would be happy to share any results that I receive if you are interested in them.

Chris White
Principal
April 24, 2019

Mr. White,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give you permission to conduct the study of restorative practices at [redacted].

As part of this study, I authorize you to do the following:

• Be given access to [redacted] discipline referral data from Skyward for the 2014-2019 academic school years. This may also be performed by a member of the district PEIMS department if your university prefers a third party collect and disseminate the data to you.

• Email [redacted] teachers and ask them to respond to a survey on SurveyMonkey regarding restorative practices.

• Survey parents about their experience at [redacted] related to discipline, restorative practices, or any other part of their experience as a parent of a student at [redacted].

• Conduct focus groups to ascertain students’ perceptions about restorative practices.

I understand that the survey and focus groups are completely voluntary and participants will agree/decline at their own discretion.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

[Signature]

Ed. D.

Superintendent

SD
## Appendix C: Faculty Survey

### Your Attitudes and Beliefs

Please mark one box for each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. There is no place in meetings with students for emotions and feelings</td>
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<td>2. The people involved in a conflict need to agree to a way forward.</td>
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<td>3. When someone causes harm, you lose respect for that person.</td>
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<td>4. It is best that people who are harmed do not meet with the person who harmed them.</td>
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<td>5. People who cause harm should be punished.</td>
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<td>6. It is important that the person who has caused harm is given support to change their behavior.</td>
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<td>7. When someone causes harm, they should be allowed to make amends.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Nearly Always</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely or Never</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. Students and staff communicate to each other in a respectful way.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. The parents/caregivers of students relate to me in a respectful way.</td>
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<td>10. The students and their parents/caregivers are invited to contribute to resolving school-based behavioral problems that affect them.</td>
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<td>11. I am allowed to contribute to solving school-based behavioral problems that affect me.</td>
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<td>12. Within this school, disagreements are normally resolved effectively.</td>
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<td>13. When students, staff and/or parents are in conflict, everyone’s views are listened to.</td>
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<td>14. Students are given opportunities to make amends if they are responsible for causing harm.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

OVER -->
15. When a student causes harm, the main response by the school is a sanction or punishment.

16. In cases of bullying, the person harmed is asked to say what could be done to make things better.

17. When someone does something harmful, those involved help to decide how similar incidents could be avoided in the future.

18. Please indicate what level of training you have had in Restorative Practice. Check all that apply.

   □ A. None -> skip to Q 21
   □ B. Awareness-raising session(s) and/or conferences -> skip to Q 21
   □ C. Training in specific Restorative Interventions (e.g. Conferences, Circles, Mediation) - > go to Q 19

19. How, if at all, has your experience of Restorative Practice changed your practice?

20. How, if at all, has Restorative Practice changed the atmosphere in the school as a whole?

21. Please add any further comments below.
Appendix D: Parent Survey

Restorative Practices Survey

1. Tell us about your experience at Crowley Ninth Grade this year.

2. How do you feel about the level of respect Crowley Ninth Grade faculty members use when interacting with students?

3. How do you feel about the level in which Crowley Ninth Grade faculty members listen to problems students are having?

4. What has been your experience with working with Crowley Ninth Grade faculty members to resolve discipline issues?

5. How do you feel about the relationships between students and other students at Crowley Ninth Grade?
6. How do you feel about the relationships between students and teachers at Crowley Ninth Grade?

7. Rather than suspending students for infractions (i.e. disrespect, arguing, skipping class, etc.), how do you feel about offering students the opportunity to try again?

8. In what areas have Crowley Ninth Grade faculty members been successful in interacting with students this year?

9. In what areas can Crowley Ninth Grade faculty members improve the way in which they interact with students?

10. What else would you like to tell us about your experience as a parent of a Crowley Ninth Grade student (relationships with other students, teachers, administrators, etc.)?
Appendix E: Focus Group Open-Ended Questions

1. How do you feel about the interactions between teachers and students this year?

2. Do you feel like the teachers treated you with respect?

3. How do you feel you were treated when you made a mistake or misbehaved?

4. Discuss a time you had a positive interaction with a student or teacher. What happened during that interaction that made it positive?

5. Discuss a time you had a negative interaction with a student or teacher. What happened during that interaction that made it negative?

6. Compare your experience at this school to other schools you have attended when it comes to handling conflict or misunderstandings with other students.

7. How could this school improve the way it corrects students when they misbehave?
### Appendix F: Student Focus Group Card Sort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships with Teachers</th>
<th>Relationships with other Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactions with Administrators</td>
<td>Being redirected when I misbehave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with other Students</td>
<td>Classroom Restorative Circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with Teachers</td>
<td>Behavioral Coaching Conversations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G: IRB Approval

[Image of a letter]

Chris White
Department of Educational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Chris,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled From Exclusion to Restoration: Implementation Successes and Barriers, was approved by expedited review (Category 7 ) on 5/28/2019 (IRB # 19-048 ). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth
Hi Chris,

Thank you for your request for permission.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices hereby grants you permission to use the Social Discipline Plane/Window in your dissertation.

Here is the recommended citation for the Social Discipline Window:

All the best,

Laura

Laura XXXXX
Director of XXXXXXX

direct XXX-XXX-XXXX | XXXXXXXXXXXX

main XXX-XXX-XXXX | XXXXXXXXXXXX