RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: IMPLEMENTING AN ALTERNATIVE TO DISPROPORTIONATE OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSION AND EXPULSION RATES OF BLACK STUDENTSQUALITATIVE METHOD STUDY

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by
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[1] The BSD data contained in this paper represents a real school district. The use of BSD is intended to maintain the districts' anonymity.

[2] PTMS stands for Pfeiffer Town Middle School. The PTMS data contained in this research paper represents a real middle school. The use of PTMS is intended to maintain the schools' anonymity.

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DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this to my parents, Mamie Mitchell Cowan, my late father, Ezra A. Cowan, my two beautiful girls, Piper and Courtney, my six siblings, Andra, Ashley, Ruben, Jerome, Chavis and my favorite sister, Veneta.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my Chair, Dr. Reginald Wilkerson, for his continued support and guidance. He provided valuable insight that assisted in my continued development as an educator.

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ABSTRACT

This research describes the application of improvement science focusing on implementing restorative practices (RP) to decrease suspension and expulsion rates of Black students. Black students are suspended and expelled disproportionately compared to their White peers in South Carolina. Due to the high suspension and expulsion rates, school districts are implementing restorative practices to decrease the suspension and expulsion rates of minorities. This study utilizes a qualitative method of data collection and analysis to determine if the use of RP is effective in decreasing suspension and expulsion rates of Black students.

RP employs two informal and two formal tools for conflict resolution. The informal tools are affective statements (AS) and affective questions (AQ). AS are ways of expressing yourself, and AQ allows us to elicit from each other what we think and feel (Costello et al., 2019). RP formal tools consist of small impromptu conferences and restorative circles. Small impromptu conversations can be used in conjunction with AS and AQ to support positive behavior and address inappropriate student behavior. Restorative circles are a process to proactively build bonds and community to positively impact the increase of suspension and expulsion rates of Black students (Costello et al., 2019).

This study provides qualitative data by conducting teacher/student surveys, post-RP implementation semi-structured interviews with teachers, and uses a RP classroom observation checklist. The data will support utilization of RP and will net a reduction in suspension and expulsion rates of Black students.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Problem of Practice

Over the years, schools in the United States, from Kindergarten through 12th grade, have used different methods to punish misbehaving students. It was once common practice for teachers to use rulers to slap students on the wrist and paddle students for more egregious behaviors. As time passed, it was no longer acceptable for teachers to use corporal punishment to maintain order in the classroom. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration introduced the Zero-Tolerance concept to schools across America with the Drug-Free Schools and Campuses Act of 1989 (Chen, 2022). Zero-tolerance expanded with the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandated that any student caught with a gun at school would be expelled for one year (Chen, 2022).

However, zero-tolerance policies have unintended outcomes. For example, Black male and female students disproportionately receive discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions at a rate two to three times greater than White students (Gregory et al., 2017). It is said that people are punished so that they will be less likely to misbehave in the future so that others will be deterred from similar misbehavior (Skinner, 1953). “Minority overrepresentation in school punishment is by no means a new finding in school discipline research” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 318). Nationally, school policies began to embrace zero-tolerance policies, which were created initially to be a deterrent for bringing weapons into schools (Fromke, 2018).

Schools are infamous for instituting inflexible tardy and absentee policies grounded in principles of equality so that every student is punished the same way for not complying. Equality is not equity. This inflexibility might punish students experiencing poverty for

their parents' lack of access to jobs with flexible hours and paid leave. (Gorski, 2018, p. 174)

The fundamental assumption of zero-tolerance policy is that removing disruptive students will result in a safer school environment for all (Ewing, 2000, as cited in (American Psychological Association, 2008).). School shootings and the events of 9/11 led to policy development that ramped up the use of exclusion discipline in schools (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Zero-tolerance eventually became the de facto policy for school discipline (Morris & Vaandering, 2012).

Despite their intent, zero-tolerance policies do not reduce discipline infractions. Instead, these policies may alienate students from school altogether. The disproportionate exclusion of Black students from school correlates with the disproportionately high number of Blacks incarcerated in the American prison systems (Lustick, 2021b). Therefore, there is a particular concern in the administration of school discipline in the overrepresentation of Black students in the use of exclusionary and punitive consequences (Skiba et al., 2002). "Schools are seeking alternatives to zero-tolerance policies, which have been found to be ineffective and harmful" Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 371). "Schools are also seeking alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices (suspension and expulsions), which have been found to not only be harmful (Massar et al., 2015) but also increasingly used in schools across the United States" (Losen & Martinez, 2013, as cited in Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 371).

Black students are impacted most by zero-tolerance policies. The substantial and persistent unfair practices in discipline have been described as constituting a school-to-prison pipeline, which underscore the imperative for schools to adopt an evidence-based approach to

successfully and equitably respond to student's behaviors (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018; Wald & Losen, 2003, as cited in Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021).

Thompson (2016) stated:

> The purpose of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies is to deter disruptive behavior and increase school safety. But despite this honorable intent, zero-tolerance policies have neither deterred disruptive behavior nor created safer schools. Once enacted, zero-tolerance policies actually increased out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. (p. 332)

Zero-tolerance policies evolved into a means of social control and were applied at all educational levels to varying degrees. The policies mandate the application of predetermined consequences, which are most often severe regardless of how atrocious the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context (American Psychological Association, 2008).

Findings such as these have led policymakers and educators in schools across the country to examine how best to reduce the use of exclusionary practices for students of marginalized groups (Gregory et al., 2017). Furthermore, to what extent have the disciplinary practices associated with zero-tolerance led to increased school safety or improved student behavior (Skiba, 2000). Rather than reducing the likelihood of disruption; however, school suspensions, in general, predict future rates of misbehavior among the students suspended (Bowditch, 1993; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003; Tobin et al., 1996, as cited in American Psychological Association, 2008).

Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies are intended to be facially race-neutral; however, these have been applied disproportionately against Black students (Thompson, 2016). Zero-tolerance aims to deter disruptive behavior and to create safer schools. However, the practices are not accomplishing their intended purpose. Instead of schools applying the measures to the

most heinous behaviors across all races and ethnic groups, educators apply them disproportionately to Black students for tardiness, absences, disrespect to teachers, and non-compliance with classroom rules (Thompson, 2016).

Due to implicit biases, Black students are suspended or expelled for the same offenses that White students commit but for which they do not get expelled (Thompson, 2016). “Implicit bias refers to preconscious, unacknowledged schemas that distort perceptions of racial outgroup members. Such Schemas arise without a person’s conscious awareness—and even against one’s stated intentions or beliefs—especially in ambiguous or tense circumstances” (Dovidio et al., 2002; Payne 2006, as citied in Morris & Perry 2017 p. 129). Implicit bias can be experienced in any arena in which Black people are involved when teachers of any race or gender impart their implicit bias on Black students, and it has a lasting impact. “One type of contributor: teachers’ internalized negative beliefs about Black students—which likely arise from perceived criminality of Black people so prevalent in society” (Edwards, 2016, as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017, p. 188). Furthermore, Gregory and Roberts focused on beliefs because they are likely the underlying foundation upon which everyday teacher-student interactions are built. They may often guide how teachers manage classrooms, build relationships, deliver instruction, and respond to misbehaviors (Weinstein, 2002, as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

Through emerging professional opinion, qualitative research findings, and substantial literature from social psychology suggest that the disproportionate discipline of Black students may be due to a lack of teacher preparation in classroom management, a lack of training in culturally competent practices or racial stereotypes (American Psychological Association, 2008).

As educational scholars continue to direct their attention to the disparities in school discipline, educators understand that discipline is necessary for schools; however, there

continues to be a noticeable difference in the discipline based on race and gender. A 1975 Children's Defense Fund report first highlighted these disparities, demonstrating that African American students were twice as likely as White students to receive a suspension (Children's Defense Fund, 1975, as cited in Morris & Perry, 2017). Black students are more likely to be punished overall, and Black girls have increasingly become a target of suspensions and expulsions. Furthermore, based on a study of classroom observations, Morris (2007) found that educators disciplined African-American girls for assertive behavior interpreted as loud and overbearing (Morris & Perry, 2017). African-American students are more frequently exposed to harsher disciplinary strategies, such as corporal punishment (Gregory, 1996; Shaw & Braden, 1990), and are less likely than other students to receive mild disciplinary alternatives when referred for an infraction (McFadden et al., 1992, as cited in Skiba et al., 2002).

Implications of Suspension and Expulsion

The consequences of suspension and expulsion for Black students have long-lasting implications. Suspensions and expulsions are associated with adverse outcomes, such as an increased risk of dropping out of school (de Brey et al., 2019). Morris and Perry (2017) presented numerous disadvantages that accompany the suspension and expulsion of Black students. They stated that suspension and expulsions influence the widening educational achievement gap that exists between Black and White Students. The authors, furthermore, posit that excessive disciplinary practices discourage Black students from becoming educators and increase their chances of entering the justice system. These activities marginalize the teaching population and allow implicit bias to perpetuate more deeply into future generations of a non-diverse teacher population.

Leaders in school equity have long called for teachers to reflect on how their beliefs impact interactions with Black students (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). Higher suspensions are linked to lower academic achievement at individual and school levels (Morris & Perry, 2014, as cited in Morris & Perry, 2017). Regularly disciplined students feel spurned by the education system, prompting a cycle of disengagement that can include dropping out of high school and contact with the justice system (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009; Peguero & Bracy, 2015, as cited in Morris & Perry, 2017). Due to the racial disparities in school punishment, the U.S. Department of Education issued a set of guiding principles in 2014 regarding school punishment, reviewing the literature on racial disparity in discipline and reminding educators of the requirement to administer discipline fairly (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, as cited in Morris & Perry, 2017). Based on the information above, discipline, race, gender, and the justice system are intertwined.

Gorski (2013) argued that equity literacy includes the "ability to recognize biases and inequities, including those that are subtle" (p. 22). In their intervention to break the "prejudice habit," Devine, Forscher, Austin, and Cox (2012) asked participants to recognize when their responses to others are based on a stereotype (as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017, p. 188).

Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion Rates

National Data

As we continue to analyze the negative impact of zero-tolerance on Black students, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) provides important details on the persistent problem. Many teachers may not be aware that, despite holding conscious egalitarian beliefs, they can also demonstrate implicit racial bias as measured by the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 2009; Van den Bergh et al., 2010, as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017). "For many teachers, it is

likely difficult to reconcile discrepancies between conscious racial beliefs with those held outside of conscious awareness" (Gregory & Roberts, 2017, p. 189).

The 2017-2018 CRDC data of K-12 students reported that 2.5 million students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (OSS). Black students accounted for 15.1% of the total enrollment during the 2017-2018 school year but registered an expulsion rate of 38.8%—more than double the enrollment rate (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021). Regarding suspension rates in 2017-18, Black students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (38.2%) at rates that were more than twice the amount of their total student enrollment (15.1%).

Black girls received out-of-school suspensions (13.3%) at rates almost two times their amount of their total student enrollment (7.4%). Black boys received out-of-school suspensions (24.9%) at rates more than three times the amount of their student enrollment (7.7%). This was the largest disparity across all race/ethnicity and sex groupings. (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021).

> Gender interactions show that Black girls are much more likely than other girls to be cited for infractions such as dress code violations, disobedience, disruptive behavior, and aggressive behavior—and these gaps are far wider than the gaps between Black boys and boys of other races for these offenses. (Morris & Perry, 2017, p. 128)

In Morris and Perry's research, Black girls experienced much higher levels of punishment than any other girls, signaling how race interacts with femininity. The data sets below are the latest numbers publicly available as the Civil Rights Data Collection department limits public use of disciplinary data in the interest of privacy.

Table 1

Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) Nationally

(Sum total of all students enrolled in public schools)

Year	Total Enrollment Based on the 45-Day Count PK – Grade 12	Total Number of Black Students Enrolled	Total Number of White Students Enrolled	Total Number of Students Receiving One or More Day-OSS	Total Number of Black Students Suspended	Total Number of White Students Suspended	Total Percentage of Black Students Suspended	Total Percentage of White Students Suspended	Total Percentage of Black Students Enrolled	Total Percentage of White Students Enrolled
2017-2018	50,922,024	7,696,501	24,096,313	2,508,595	924,641	794,790	38.2%	32.9%	15.1%	47.3%

Note. These numbers compare the national OSS and expulsion rates of Black and White students (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021).

Table 2

Expulsion Rates Nationally

Year	Total Enrollment Based on the 45-Day Count PK – Grade 12	Total Number of Students Expelled	Total Number of Black Students Expelled	Total Number of White Students Expelled	Total Percentage of Black Students Expelled	Total Percentage of White Students Expelled	Total Percentage of Black Students Enrolled	Total Percentage of White Students Enrolled
2017-2018	50,922,024	101,652	36,934	34,187	37.6%	34.8%	15.1%	47.3%

Note. These numbers compare the national OSS and expulsion rates of Black and White students (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021).

The total enrollment number is the sum of all students enrolled nationally during the 2017-2018 school year.

During the 2017-2018 school year, nationally, students were suspended a total of 11,205,797 days; Black students were suspended 4,671,301 days (41.7%) of the total days. As mentioned earlier, Black students make up 15.1% of the total enrollment nationally.

State Data

A look at the state data collected by the South Carolina Department of Education shows the number of days missed by Black students due to OSS is staggering. During the 2017-2018 school year, the Black student enrollment population was 33.6%, and Black students missed a combined total of 213,933 days due to OSS. On the other hand, White students, who represented 50.68% of student enrollment, missed 95,484 days due to OSS (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.).

Table 3 illustrates students who received one or more days of OSS in South Carolina. The percentages are based on the total of all students suspended. The total enrollment is only Black and White students enrolled during the 2017-2018 school year.

Table 3

OSS in South Carolina

Year	Total Enrollment Based on the 45-Day Count PK – Grade 12	Total Number of Students Receiving One or More Days of OSS	Number of Black Students Suspended	Number of White Students Suspended	Total Percentage of Black Students Suspended	Total Percentage of White Students Suspended
2017-18	780,670	80,633	47,403	23,452	60.4%	29.9%

Note. This information was updated in 2018 (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021).

Table 3 illustrates the persistent issue of Black students receiving OSS. If a student with academic enrichment services receives OSS, that student will not receive academic enrichment during the suspension. The disparate rates show that differentiated discipline based on race may contribute to suspensions.

When students are expelled, they miss the remaining portion of the school year and must repeat the grade they were in when they were expelled. Table 4 illustrates the expulsion rates of students expelled in South Carolina. The expulsion category presents the same data as OSS; Black students bear the brunt of expulsions as well.

Table 4

Expulsion Rates in South Carolina

Year	Total Number of Students Expelled	Total Number of Black Students Expelled	Total Number of White Students Expelled	Total Percentage of Black Students Expelled	Total Percentage of White Students Expelled
2017-18	2,900	2,099	801	72.3%	25.7%

Note. This information was updated in 2018 (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2021).

District Level Data

In the Basic School District (BSD), the numbers continue to show a trend of excessive OSS and expulsion rates for Black students. The data indicates that two-thirds of all students who received OSS and were expelled in South Carolina were Black.

Table 5 below shows the number of students suspended for one day. The figures are based on the number of students with and without disabilities. The data displays students suspended for one day, but the data does not tell us if the same student was suspended for one day multiple times. The table includes the total number of Black and White students with and without disabilities enrolled in the BSD. The percentages are based on the number of students suspended during the school year. For example, in the 2021-2022 school year, 1,555 students received OSS; of those 1,555 students suspended, 57.7% were Black.

The data provides a clear picture of the number of Black students that are disproportionately suspended for one day based on student population compared to White students in BSD.

Table 5

OSS Rates in the Basic School District

Year	180-Day Count Enrollment	Total Number of Blacks Suspended	Total Number of Whites Suspended	District Percentage of Black Students Suspended	District Percentage of White Students Suspended	Total Students
2020-2021	35,190	259	305	45.9%	54%	564
2021-2022	35,584	898	657	57.7%	42.2%	1,555
2022-2023	36,468	907	637	58.7%	41.2%	1,544
						3,663

Note. These numbers compare the OSS rates of Black and White students in the Basic School District (BSD Power School Student Database).

Based on the data in the table, each year there was an increase in Black students receiving OSS compared to their White peers. The number of Black students receiving OSS could have increased; during the 2020-2021 school year was a time when all students had a choice to receive instruction face-to-face or virtually during the 2020-2021 school year. Some Black families did not send their students to school during COVID. The achievement gap continues to grow and widen each year. Disproportionate disciplinary practices are just another factor that adds to the widening of the persistent academic performance gap. To understand the impact OSS has on Black students is to realize that OSS contributes significantly to the achievement gap that schools and districts continue to grapple with to determine a solution.

Table 6 details the OSS rates for students who received one day of OSS. The data display students suspended for one or more days, but the data do not tell us if the same student was suspended for one or more days multiple times. This is important because the same student could

be suspended numerous times. The percentages are based on the number of students suspended during the school year. For example, in the 2021-2022 school year, 1,899 students received OSS; of those 1,899 students suspended, 61.8% were Black.

Table 6

OSS Rates of One or More Days in the BSD

Year	180-Day Count Enrollment	Total Number of Blacks Suspended	Total Number of Whites Suspended	District Percentage of Black Students	District Percentage of White Students	Total Students
2020-2021	35,190	319	310	50.7%	49.2%	629
2021-2022	35,584	1174	725	61.8%	38.1%	1,899
2022-2023	36,468	1217	688	63.8%	36.1%	1,905
						4,433

Note. These numbers compare one or more days of OSS rates of Black and White students in the Basic school district (BSD Power School Student Database).

Table 7 breaks down the number of students expelled in the district. As shown in Table 6, the percentages were calculated based on the number of students expelled during the school years. In each instance, except for the 2020-2021 school year, Black students represented most of the expulsions, even though they are outnumbered by White students almost 2:1. Students expelled from the school district cannot attend a public school in South Carolina for the remainder of the school year. Furthermore, in the BSD, students must complete a letter of apology to the school board and provide a statement describing the measures they will take to ensure they remain productive and academically engaged if they are given a chance to return to

school. The students' reentry into the district is based on their ability to articulate their intentions clearly, and the district will then decide if the student is eligible to return.

Table 7

Expulsion Rates in the BSD

Year	Total Expulsions	Total Number of Blacks Suspended	Total Number of Whites Suspended	District Percentage of Black Students	District Percentage of White Students	Total Students
2020-2021	18	9	9	50%	50%	18
2021-2022	186	135	51	72.8%	27.4	186
2022-2023	185	138	47	74.5%	25.4%	185
						389

Note. These numbers compare expulsion rates of Black and White students in the Basic School District (PTMS Power School Student Database).

School Level Data

The school-level data provide a snapshot of the number of students suspended within the PTMS, whereby a pattern emerges. Regardless of the total number of Black students enrolled, their percentage of OSS rates outnumber the OSS percentages of White students. Table 8, below, details the OSS rates in PTMS for the last three years. The data clearly show that Black students were suspended disproportionately compared to White students from 2020 to 2023. The data displays 185 total students suspended during the year; however, a student may be suspended multiple times. The OSS rates are based on all PTMS students.

Table 8

OSS Rates in the PTMS

Year	Total Enrollment	Total Number of Black Students Enrolled	Total Number of White Students Enrolled	Total Number of Black Students Suspended	Total Number of White Students Suspended	Percentage of Black Students Suspended	Percentage of White Students Suspended
2020-2021	944	200	488	28	43	14%	8.8%
2021-2022	1006	224	512	93	103	41.5%	20.1%
2022-2023	885	190	438	104	81	54.7%	18.4%

Note. These numbers compare OSS rates of Black and White students in the PTMS for the past three years (BSD Power School Student Database).

Table 9 details the students referred for expulsion and eventually expelled from PTMS during the 2022-2023 school year.

Table 9

Expulsion Rates in the PTMS

Year	Total Expulsions	Total Number of Black Students Expelled	Total Number of White Students Expelled
2020-2021	1	1	0
2021-2022	6	1	3
2022-2023	7	5	1

Note. The 2021-2022 school year was non-traditional due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students had the option to attend school virtually (BSD Power School Student Database).

Like the OSS rates, Black students expelled from school exceed their White counterparts in each school year except for the 2021-2022 school year.

As the research has consistently shown, teachers tend to punish Black students more harshly than White students for the same infractions (Gorski, 2018). Schools must review patterns of discipline yearly and ask: Is discipline applied equitably across race and class?

Research Questions

Costello et al. (2019) are the leading practitioners of the restorative practices (RP) movement. These practitioners believe that building a good sense of community between teachers and students will allow them to manage tension and conflict easier. Based on this, it is crucial to research and implement interventions that discourage exclusionary practices used on Black students. This research study seeks to help teachers and schools use RP as an alternative to the disproportionate use of exclusionary practices on Black students, specifically OSS and expulsions.

This study will ask the following research questions: how can teachers and administrators use RP to reduce OSS and expulsion rates of Black students in public schools? How can teachers use RP to strengthen or repair teacher-student relationships? How can teachers use restorative circles to limit students' behavior issues?

The research will utilize Improvement Science to identify, apply, and test interventions to decrease Black students' disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates in grades K-12.

Theoretical Framework

RP was initially developed as RJ, which is an approach to the penal system that focuses on repairing harm and providing a voice to the offender's victims (McClusky et al., 2008). RJ guides the theoretical framework for this study. "Research in restorative justice has revealed very

positive outcomes for victims and offenders alike, including a reduction in reoffending" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 9).

Costello et al. (2019) emphasized:

> Each incident of conflict and wrongdoing represents a learning opportunity. The offending student, those directly impacted, and everyone affected by an incident all have an opportunity to share and gain insights and understanding in the wake of what has happened.

This research supports repairing teacher-student relationships, addressing the victim's needs, and constructively holding the student accountable for misbehaving.

As administrators and teachers apply punitive consequences, their range of responses is on a limited continuum. The current policies that address the entire school often miss individual students and cases. Each miss is another unchecked behavior (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). The punitive responses often applied in schools today limit educational authority to simplistic choices: to punish or not to punish (Costello et al., 2019).

RP moves beyond the Punitive—Permissive continuum. The Social Discipline Window (SDW) provides an additional disciplinary tool. The SDW describes four basic approaches to maintaining social and behavioral boundaries. The four approaches are combinations of high and low control and high and low support (Wachtel, 2016). The control section exercises restraint, and the support section nurtures and encourages.

In the figure below, the neglectful window is characterized by ignoring the behavior. This irresponsible or incompetent choice reflects a neglectful school or classroom. The fourth response combines high control and high support for wrongdoing. The combination is missing in the Punitive—Permissive continuum but is critical. "Nothing will completely overcome the

individualized behavior need deficits in each student: too much complexity exists around each student's barriers, emotional development and backgrounds" (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 147). However, the SDW provides an opportunity to address needs in a restorative manner. Figure 1, below, is the SDW.

Figure 1

Social Discipline Window

High Control and Low Support = Punitive/Authoritarian

Low Control and Low Support = Neglectful

High Support and Low Control = Permissive

High Support and High Control = RESTORATIVE (Costello et al., 2009, p. 50).

Note. This continuum illustrates how our society perceives the possible responses to wrongdoing.

Rationale for Research (Literature Synthesis)

As early as 1975, the Children's Defense Fund analyzed discipline data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and found that Black students were suspended or excluded from participating in school at rates far surpassing White students (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Since 1975, there has been data supporting that Black students are routinely suspended or expelled at higher rates than other ethnic groups. Subsequent research has consistently shown that Black students are suspended or expelled disproportionately compared to their White peers (Dhaliwal et al., 2021).

School districts have data to support the disproportionate rates of OSS and expulsion of Black students. However, over the past few decades, school districts have adopted zero tolerance disciplinary policies to reduce violence on campus, protect students, and maintain environments conducive to learning (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). A zero-tolerance approach places Black students at a disadvantage, and the policies and exclusionary practices have become a use-first consequence instead of a last-resort measure (Maag, 2012; Whitford et al., 2016 as cited in Rainbolt et al., 2019).

Zero-tolerance allows schools to remove students for various offenses, including major crimes and minor infractions such as violating codes of conduct (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017). Zero-tolerance policies automatically impose punishments on students and mandate OSS or expulsion from school for certain offenses, often without consideration of the circumstances (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). Despite zero-tolerance efforts to safeguard schools, students of color have been targeted for punishment for minor offenses in ways that question the policy's original intent (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017).

> Such policies have disproportionately been used to sanction Black children for noncriminal violations and, in many cases, have resulted in lesser penalties (if any) for White students. These policies have wrongfully rendered Black girls and Black boys as undeserving of an equitable and just education. (p. 5)

Zero-tolerance policies have created overarching problems for Black students. Such policies have been disproportionately applied to students of color attending urban schools (Triplett et al., 2014), even though they were initially designed in response to several widely publicized school shootings during the 1990s primarily by White students in rural and suburban schools (Howell, 2009). Gregory et al. (2015) reported that Black students are more likely to be punished, for example, with suspensions and exclusionary practices, for early misconduct than White students (Lodi et al., 2021).

Rainbolt et al. (2019) asserted,

> Given the negative impacts of traditional exclusionary disciplinary practices, the need for an approach that both encourages order in schools while leading to positive, inclusionary educational and personal outcomes for all students—regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and disability status—is clear. (p. 161)

RP, which aims to create interactive, inclusive, self-monitoring communities, holds promise for being such an approach.

Teachers' inherent biases toward Black students also contribute to exclusionary consequences. Gregory and Roberts' (2017) focused solely on one type of contributor: teachers' internalized negative beliefs about Black students, which likely arise from the perceived criminality of Black people prevalent in society (Edwards, 2016). The focus was on internalized

negative beliefs because they are likely the foundation for everyday teacher-student interactions (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

The article detailed a test performed by Gilliam et al. (2016) tracking the “eye gaze” of early education teachers watching a video of preschoolers interacting in class. The teachers received verbal instruction that some clips may not contain challenging behaviors. Gregory and Robert reported, "Unbeknownst to the participants, none of the videos contained challenging behavior. The measurements gathered from the eye-tracking software showed that the participants spent significantly more time gazing at Black students, especially Black boys, compared to the other students” (p. 189). The authors concluded that the results suggest an expectancy effect (the teachers expected the misbehavior of Black students). The unconscious belief by White teachers is that Black students are more likely to act out, therefore contributing to the over-representation of school discipline (Gregory & Roberts, 2017).

To investigate how to affect the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates of minorities, the literature review identifies research-based methods to decrease exclusionary discipline and punitive measures imposed on Black students. The research identifies RP that provides teachers and administrators alternatives to punitive actions and exclusionary discipline. The study also shows how RP can improve teacher and student relationships and school culture. Finally, the research identifies possible challenges to implementation and how to navigate the obstacles to implementation.

What is Restorative Justice?

The Western legal system has shaped the way most people in the United States think about crime. Since the 1970s, countries have used various programs to discourage crime in their communities. Zehr (2015) stated that the Western legal system has strengths; however, it also has

limits and failures. Previously, many in the justice field, including judges, lawyers, prosecutors, and probation and parole officers, felt the justice process deepened societal wounds and conflicts instead of promoting healing and peace (Zehr, 2015).

RJ practices present an alternative approach to conflict resolution with a constructive, collaborative, and humane framework for embracing all community members, including rule breakers (Mann, 2016). RJ practices also spread beyond the criminal justice system to schools, the workplace, and religious institutions (Zehr, 2015). Mann (2016) stated that RJ provides the systemic change that can shape educators' views of a school's disciplinary practices and how educators respond during the discipline process. In its simplest form, RJ provides opportunities for people harmed by wrongdoing to collaboratively identify its affect and determine avenues for restoration (Robbins, 2014, as cited in Mann, 2106). "Namely, it arises from a humanist tradition in which the victim and the disputant's subjective experiences of the wrongdoing are highlighted along with a belief in the need for collaborative problem solving" (Gregory et al., 2015, pp. 327-328).

"RJ practices are founded on the philosophy of non-punitive discipline measures that focus on high accountability with high support, repairing harm, accountability to relationships rather than to rules, and helping youth develop problem-solving alternatives to 'fight or flight'" (Advancement Project, 2014, as cited in Mann, 2016, p. 2). "Restorative approaches to school discipline assist youth in understanding the harm caused by negative behaviors, supports responsibility, and commit to restoring students to the standing of respectable community members" (Amstutz & Mullett, 2005, as cited in Mann, 2016, p. 2).

Contrasting with the Western legal system in many respects, "RJ echoes ancient and indigenous practices employed in cultures all over the world, from Native American and First

Nation Canadian to African, Asian, Celtic, Hebrew, Arab, and many others" (Eagle, 2001; Goldstein, 2006; Haarala, 2004; Mbambo & Skelton, 2003; Mirsky, 2004; Roujanavong, 2005; Wong, 2005 as cited in Wachtel, 2016, p. 2). "In the modern context, RJ originated in the 1970s as mediation or reconciliation between victims and offenders" (Wachtel, 2016, p. 2).

> An example of the use of RJ in the indigenous community is the Cree tribe of Canada. In the Cree system, a youth offender can be as old as thirty years of age. Instead of thinking that a nineteen-year-old boy struggling in school has the cognition to control impulsive behavior, the indigenous way recognizes that even in their thirties an individual is deeply dependent upon community connections to develop sound judgment. (Kligman, 2019, p. 10)

In the Netherlands, the restorative circle process has been used to ensure families, not government systems, are empowered to make decisions for their children. The family group conference protects the rights of children by creating a space for them to learn, speak, and participate in decisions that impact them (Kligman, 2019).

The examples above magnify facets of RP. The Cree Nation understands that tribal members in their 30s depend on community support to improve their decision-making skills. The Dutch use family circles to ensure that their children have space to learn and grow with their guidance, free of government interventions.

In another example in 1974, a probation officer arranged for two teenagers to meet with their victims following a vandalism spree and agree to restitution, known as the "Kitchener Experiment" (Armour, 2012; Wachtel, 2016). The positive response led to the first victim-offender reconciliation program in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada. Kitchener, Ontario, is considered the beginning point of today's RJ movement (Armour, 2012).

The primary objective of RJ is to repair relationships that lead to positive engagement. "RJ is best understood as a distinct praxis for sustaining safe and just school communities, grounded in the premise that human beings are relational and thrive in contexts of social engagement over control" (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 139).

What are Restorative Practices?

The birth of restorative practices (RP) is undergirded in RJ. "RP were introduced to mitigate the punitive disciplinary methods that lead to both numerous and ineffective suspensions, as well as racial disproportionality in school discipline" (Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023, p. 6). Research suggests that race is the most significant predictor of the likelihood of OSS or expulsion even when controlling for socio-economic status (SES) (Skiba et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2008, as cited in Welsh & Little, 2018). Although RJ provided a blueprint for schools to address behaviors, RP expanded upon RJ (Wachtel, 2016). RP relies on the intentional use of dialogue to build capacity, repair harm, and strengthen relationships (Costello et al., 2019). "RP, in fact, can be proactive—aimed at building up community—or reactive—aimed at repairing harm after a wrongdoing takes place" (Marcucci, 2021, p. 1)

RP has evolved into an alternative to zero-tolerance policies and the exclusionary discipline that has gained popularity in urban districts (Gregory et al., 2016; Rafa, 2018; Song & Swearer, 2016). Costello et al. (2019) wrote the framework for the restorative philosophy, and the continuum of restorative strategies are widely cited in the RP literature (Meetze 2018, p. 23). RP promotes a non-punitive approach to classroom management and school discipline (Dhaliwal et al., 2021). Under this approach, schools proactively build a positive campus climate to prevent misbehavior by cultivating strong relationships between and among students and educators (Dhaliwal et al., 2021). There is emerging research suggesting that RP may be a particularly

effective approach to preventing office discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions (González, 2012; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, as cited in Anyon et al., 2014).

To implement RP, schools must adopt informal and formal responses to student misbehavior to effectuate RP. Informal and formal responses range from AS and AQ to more formal responses, Small Impromptu Conferences (SIC) and Restorative Circles (Wachtel, 2004, as cited in Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

The RP intervention can potentially be more efficient than narrower programs at preventing incidents, such as bullying, because it broadly targets middle school environments (Acosta et al., 2019). Costello et al. (2019) defined "Restorative" as a change in attitude and believing in students even when—and especially when—they seem to be behaving badly. The authors stated, "In RP, we start with the premise that students who misbehave are unaware of the impact of their behavior" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 12).

On one end of the continuum are informal strategies requiring training and little time to implement (Meetze, 2018). At the opposite end of the continuum are formal strategies that require high-skill training and more time to implement (Thosborne & Blood, 2013, as cited in Meetze, 2018). The following is a list of informal and formal strategies this DiP will evaluate.

1. Affective Statements
2. Affective Questions
3. Small Impromptu Conversations
4. Restorative Circle/Check-in Circles

Affective Statements

The most informal type of response on the RP continuum is AS. The term AS is another way of communicating people's feelings (Wachtel, 2016). AS encourages people to clearly

express how they feel when they have been harmed by another person's behavior (Wachtel, 2013). Using AS facilitates a change in dynamic between teacher and student. AS develops a child's sense of agency and identity (Smith et al., 2015, as cited in Tande, 2018). "AS helps you build a relationship based on students' new image of you as someone who cares and has feelings, rather than as a distant authority figure" (Costello et al., 2009). For example, AS can be used to acknowledge success, hard work, collaboration, or any other desirable behavior. The more specific you are about what the student did and how you feel, the better. "Good job today, Sam" is much less meaningful than "Sam, I was pleased that you worked for the entire class period today" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 11). It is harder for students to act defiantly or disrespectfully toward teachers or adults who clearly care about them and their future (Smith et al., 2015).

It is essential for students to humanize teachers so that students can relate to teachers and not view them as assigners of class work, projects, and homework. AS allows teachers to set a positive tone for the class; as a result, misbehaviors seem to decline in frequency. Costello et al. (2019) stated that AS can be used to acknowledge success, hard work, collaboration, or any other desirable behavior. Providing positive feedback in the form of AS affirms that students are cared for and respected by teachers and administrators. AS provides students with tools to communicate their feelings and reflect on how negative behavior impacts others (Wachtel, 2016).

Affective Questions

AQ is the second category on the continuum list. AQ requires slightly more time to implement than AS. For example, AQ is used when challenging behaviors occur between students, such as when teachers seek out why an incident occurred. AQ can assist in determining the root cause of the misbehavior.

The following is a list of AQ that can be used when challenging situations arise:

1. What happened?
2. What were you thinking at the time?
3. What have you thought about since?
4. Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way have they been affected?
5. What do you think you need to do to make things right? (Costello et al., 2019).

A teacher may use these AQ above in a private setting during a challenging situation to avoid embarrassing the student(s), which can cause a student to shut down. Teachers can have the restorative questions on a piece of paper to hand to the student (Costello et al., 2019). Teachers may use other AQ to elicit a response from students. For example, teachers may ask, "Who do you think has been affected by what you did?" "How do you think they've been affected?" In answering the questions, instead of being punished, the student can think about their behavior and amend future behaviors (Tandy, 2018). Using these AQ gives the student "an important opportunity…to reflect on the impact of their behavior and to learn empathy for those they have affected" (Costello et al., 2019, as cited in Meetze, 2018, p. 8).

Small Impromptu Conversations

Rainbolt et al. (2019) summarized SIC as the involvement of two or more people in low-level conflict that breaks the cycle of escalation and requires answering restorative questions. In SIC, "groups and circles are somewhat more structured but do not require the elaborate preparation needed for formal conferences" (Wachtel, 2005, p. 87). SIC actively engages students in expressing their feelings, thinking about the impact of their behavior, and conflict resolution (Costello et al., 2019). For example, if two boys argue over a football at recess, yelling for them to stop may not resolve the conflict. In a SIC, the teacher would ask the students, "Can

you come over here, please?" "What happened?" If one tries to blame the other, a teacher may say: "We are talking about you now. What is your part in the situation?" Finally, the teacher can ask them, "What can you do to improve it?" (Costello et al., 2019).

Teachers need to intervene in student misbehavior for RP to work. In an intervention, the teacher becomes the facilitator and allows students to express their concerns. Each student can reflect on the situation during and after the intervention to resolve the conflict.

Restorative Circles and Check-in Circles

> Restorative circles, are opportunities for everyone involved to have a voice and be heard. During restorative circles members take turns speaking and listening in a safe environment; student conferences that include those who are harmed and those who have done the harming; and peer mediation, which allows students to guide other students through the restorative process. (Payne & Welch, 2018, p. 227)

One of the benefits of restorative circles is that they provide a safe environment for people to express and exchange intense emotion (Wachtel, 2005). Check-in circles are used to check in on students at the beginning of the school day. Check-in circles also provide an opportunity for teachers to gauge their students to determine how they are feeling or what they might be thinking, depending on student responses.

For example, a homeroom teacher may conduct a check-in which each student will respond to a question or statement like:

1. How are you feeling today?
2. What is one of your academic goals for the day?
3. Make a commitment about your behavior in school today.
4. Review something you accomplished last week (Costello et al., 2019).

Valuable information can be gathered by using a simple check-in. For example, when students are disengaged, teachers can ask follow-up questions to discover what problems or obstacles the student may be experiencing that day. A circle is a versatile restorative practice that can be used proactively to develop relationships and build community or reactively to respond to wrongdoing, conflicts, and problems (Wachtel, 2013).

Opposition to Restorative Practices

There is little qualitative data on whether schools' adoption of RP has actually shifted school culture and climate toward improvement and less on how administrators negotiate implementation with pressure of maintaining order within the school (Lustick, 2021a). Consequently, RP has received mixed reviews. One study in the Pittsburgh Public Schools found reductions in OSS rates for elementary students after two years of exposure to a version of RP (Augustine et al., 2018, as cited in Hollands et al., 2022). The number of days lost to suspension declined by 36% over two years compared with an 18% decline in control schools (Hollands et al., 2022). Although Hollands et al. found no significant evidence for a reduction of OSS in middle school students in this particular study, the authors noted several likely challenges in implementing RP.

The authors suggested that the difficulty of implementing RP—and school-wide approaches more generally—with fidelity is the likely cause of disappointing findings (Hollands et al., 2022). Variable quality of implementation may explain the mixed findings across studies of RP because higher fidelity in implementing RP has been associated with greater improvements in the racial discipline gap (Gregory et al., 2016, as cited in Hollands et al., 2022). The discipline gap refers to the interpersonal and school-level discipline that leads to Black and

Brown students receiving more frequent and punitive discipline in schools than White students (Gregory et al., 2010, as cited in Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023).

In another study that spanned over three years and included 72 schools, the number of office discipline referrals (ODR) received by Black students continued to occur but was significantly smaller in the implementer group. Although the number of ODR appeared to remain constant over the three years, a steady increase in ODR continued in the non-implementation group for Black students. Similarly, there was an under-representation of White students receiving ODR in both groups (Vincent et al., 2011).

Another study illustrating this point took place in Riveredge, a school in New York. The school had a reputation for fighting and was accused of being soft on discipline due to their use of RP. The new Riveredge principal (Cody) wanted to earn back the community's trust and promote RP. However, he did not have full support from his teachers. The principal had some systems in place but could not contractually compel teachers to use RP in their classrooms. He asked teachers to lead community circles at least once per week, but teachers did not conduct the circles with fidelity (Lustick, 2021b).

A guidance counselor in the school recalled an incident in which a Black student "snapped" when he felt the school safety officer got into his personal space. Another principal (Jeanne), the principal from another floor in the school, witnessed the exchange. Jeanne followed the student up the stairs to report the exchange she saw to Cody. Jeanne reported she felt personally threatened and wanted the student suspended. Cody eventually suspended the student, causing the student to miss two critical exams. In this example, Cody allowed Jeanne's racial bias to create a deeper racial divide between him and the student. Cody's unwillingness to accept the student's legitimate frustration thwarts any attempt to engage the student in a restorative

conversation to repair the harm Cody created by following the recommendation of Jeanne (Lustick, 2021b).

Proponents of Restorative Practices

Data suggest that RP has produced positive results for Black students. Proponents of RP (e.g., Baliga, 2021; Zehr, 2002, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2022; Davis, 2019; Tyler, 2006) argue that RP can mitigate reliance on exclusionary discipline by addressing the root causes of misbehavior, all while improving school climate and academic engagement. The authors argue that while traditional discipline approaches manage student behavior, restorative approaches develop students' social and emotional capacities and nurture school relationships, making students less likely to misbehave. They argue that RP can help students view institutional power as more just by giving them agency and creating a clearer tie between student behavior and scholastic responses. In this way, RP differ from exclusionary discipline, which, theory and research suggest, may lead students to feel school rules are unfair, may fracture student-teacher relationships, and may catalyze an attitude of defiance (Way, 2011, as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2022; Pesta, 2021)

Improvement Science Intervention

Educators continuously apply methods to improve their students' educational experiences and outcomes. When problems present, educators look to use strategies to alleviate the problem within schools and districts. The Improvement Science Method approach looks to improve or mitigate issues systematically. "Improvement science is a methodological approach built on pragmatism and science that uses disciplined inquiry to solve problems of practice (PoP). Improvement science focuses on high-leverage problems and the system that surrounds those problems" (Perry et al., 2020, p. 27). Hinnant-Crawford (2020) defined improvement science as

a methodological framework undergirded by foundational principles that guide *scholar-practitioners* to define problems, identify changes to rectify the problems, test the efficacy of those changes, and spread the changes.

This study will apply the improvement science application to the implementation of RP. Bryk et al. (2017) described improvement science: "Improvement science deploys rapid tests to change to guide the development, revision, and continued fine-tuning of new tools, processes, work roles, and relationships" (p. 8). First, RP will be fully implemented at the 8th-grade level at a test school, PTMS. Data will be collected from August 2023 through October 2023. Data collected will include classroom observations transcribed in field notes, teacher and student surveys, and semi-structured teacher interviews. The RP strategies will be adjusted based on data collected over nine weeks. The RP implementation plans will be reviewed every three weeks using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle to evaluate progress. Chapter 2 discusses the PDSA Cycle in more detail.

The PoP in this research is Black students' disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates. The study uses improvement science to answer the following research question: How can RP decrease suspension and expulsion rates of Black students? In improvement science, researchers ask three core questions:

1. What is the specific problem I am now trying to solve?
2. What change might I introduce and why?
3. How will I know whether the change is actually an improvement?

Improvement science deploys rapid tests of change to guide the development, revision, and continued fine-tuning of new tools, processes, work roles, and relationships (Bryk et al., 2017). Improvement science aims to develop the know-how for a reform idea to spread rapidly

and more effectively. Researchers can use improvement science to promote a different viewpoint on practical change efforts.

Due to the practicality of the improvement science methodology approach, some may assume the process lacks rigor. On the contrary, as Perry et al. (2020) stated, "Despite improvement science being a practical approach that encourages the integration of experiential knowledge with extant theory and applied social science inquiry, it is still a rigorous and scientific methodology" (p. 29). The first step required is identifying the current problem that needs to be fixed. As the researcher identifies the problem, the next question to ask is how to improve the problem. An excellent problem-solving method is applying the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle (PDSA). "The heart of the cycle is articulating hypothesis, based on working theory of improvement, and then gathering data to test them" (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 121). Improvement science also suggests conducting tests on a smaller scale.

The PDSA Cycle

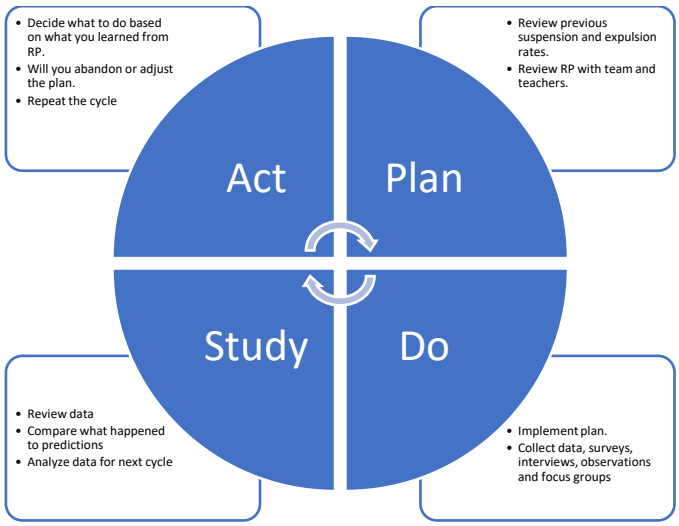
As discussed, the PDSA cycle is the improvement science framework for this research. The PDSA cycle has been described as "a cycle for both learning and improvement." It is designed to build new knowledge with each additional cycle—about what works, what does not work, for whom, and under what conditions" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 160).

According to Hinnant-Crawford (2020), "Embedded in each PDSA cycle are opportunities for inductive and deductive learning. The first half of the cycle is the Plan and Do phases; they illustrate the deductive inquiry" (p. 161). During the first two phases, a theory is developed and tested. The two latter phases, study and act, provide an opportunity for inductive learning. In these phases, researchers move from observing data to a clarified understanding of a revised theory (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Each section of the cycle breaks down each stage of the process. Below is a visual of the four stages of the PDSA cycle:

Figure 2

PDSA Cycle



Note. The PDSA cycle for improvement science (Bryk et al., 2017, p. 122).

Plan

In this study, the *plan* stage was developed at the district level by the Office of Student Family and Support. BSD has trained PTMS administration, and I trained my 8th-grade teachers on RP in August 2023. A refresher was provided before the 2023-2024 school year. Finally, the team brainstormed to predict students' responses and discuss how to appropriately respond using role play.

Do

The *do* stage included informing the pilot team of teachers of the implementation plan of RP for an exploratory case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and explaining that their participation

in the study is optional but encouraged. I presented information to the 8th-grade teachers in August 2023. I asked the group to let me know if they would participate by the following week. Once I established the eight core teachers participating in the study, the next step was to train the teachers on RP. I trained the teachers on August 18, 2023. The training took approximately 2.5 hours. I trained the teachers on the multi-tiered AS, AQ, SIC, and RC approach. During our monthly Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in August, we discussed the days of the week teachers would conduct check-in circles. On August 25, 2023, I conducted a pre-survey with teachers and students.

During the case study, the teachers tracked their interventions in a spreadsheet and document RP taken before writing a referral. A referral is the process of a teacher or administrator documenting a student's misbehavior in PowerSchool. Depending on the severity and frequency of the misconduct, a student may receive punitive consequences. The teachers tracked their information weekly for data collection. I reviewed the data collected weekly to determine behavior trends, including teacher/student/interactions, team meetings, and field notes, as teachers continued using AQ, AS, and SIC for RC.

Study

"The study cycle is just that: an opportunity to reflect on what happened during the do phase. In this study phase, you compare the predictions articulated during the planning phase to what actually happened" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 169). Hinnant-Crawford also recommended asking the team the following questions during the PDSA cycle:

- Did this go as we expected? Were our predictions close?
- What happened that was unexpected?
- What conditions could have influenced our outcome? (p. 169)

During the study cycle, the team analyzed the data before implementing any changes to determine success rates. Then, the team sifted through the data to assess its reliability and if the data collected answered the questions posed by the team. Finally, in this phase, I summarized what was learned during the stage. The team reflected on what was learned during the first cycle and adjusted the driver diagram, if necessary. I discuss the driver diagram later in this chapter.

Act

During the *act* cycle, the team used the data from the study phase to determine the next steps. This phase summarized what was learned during the stage. The team used the data to learn what worked and applied it in the next cycle. The team identified areas that did not work and discarded them for the next cycle.

Restorative Practices Implementation Contingency Strategies

As with all initiatives, challenges may arise. Teachers will have questions, students will have questions, and I will need to consider all scenarios when implementing new protocols. Below is a list of challenges that may arise along with the solution-oriented questions I used to assist with answering teacher inquiries:

- What happens if AS and AQ do not work?
    - What AS or AQ were used during the conversation?
    - What was the situation?
    - Was this the first experience using during AS or AQ?
    - Did you use open-ended questions?
    - Was this a student with whom you have a good student-teacher relationship, or was this a student with whom you have a challenging relationship?
    - Did you allow the student space to explore issues in a non-threatening way?

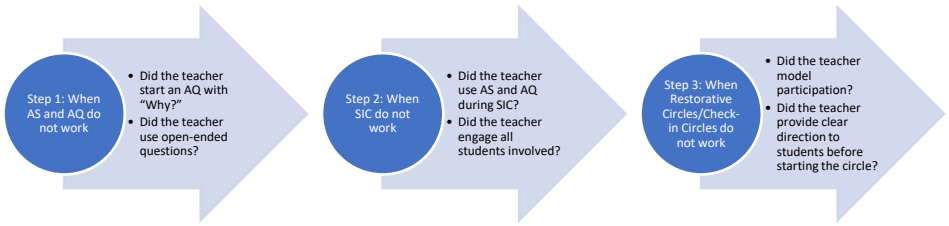
    - Did you start an AQ with “Why?”
- What happens when SIC does not work?
    - How effective are your AS and AQ?
    - Did you engage all the students involved?
    - Are you using AS and AQ during SIC?
    - Did you encourage students to communicate with each other empathetically?
    - Did the SIC take place in a small group setting?
- What if AS & AQ are effective responses? Will you still add SIC and Restorative Circles/Check-in Circles?
- Yes, to ensure teachers understand the multi-tiered continuum of restorative responses in the event a more formal restorative response is required.
- What if teachers push back on RP?
    - Probe to determine why the teacher(s) does not want to use RP.
    - Remind teachers that RP is a district initiative, and each school and teacher must be in compliance with district protocols.
    - Determine if the push back is due to a lack of comfort when using RP.
- What about the students who do not respond to RP?
    - Determine if RP has been implemented with fidelity.
    - Probe deeper to determine how RP was used in the classroom.
    - Schedule an observation during a restorative circle/check-in circle.
    - Determine if the teacher has developed a sense of community in your classroom.
    - Ask the teacher if they provided clear directions to students before starting the circle.

- Did the teacher model participation?
- Provide a refresher training for the teacher(s).

Below is a flow chart illustrating how to effectively counter RP challenges in schools. There may be challenges presented during the study that will require a more in-depth solution. If that occurs, I will discuss solutions as specific challenges develop.

Figure 3

Flow Chart



Note: This diagram illustrates a few examples of effectively countering RP challenges.

Driver Diagram

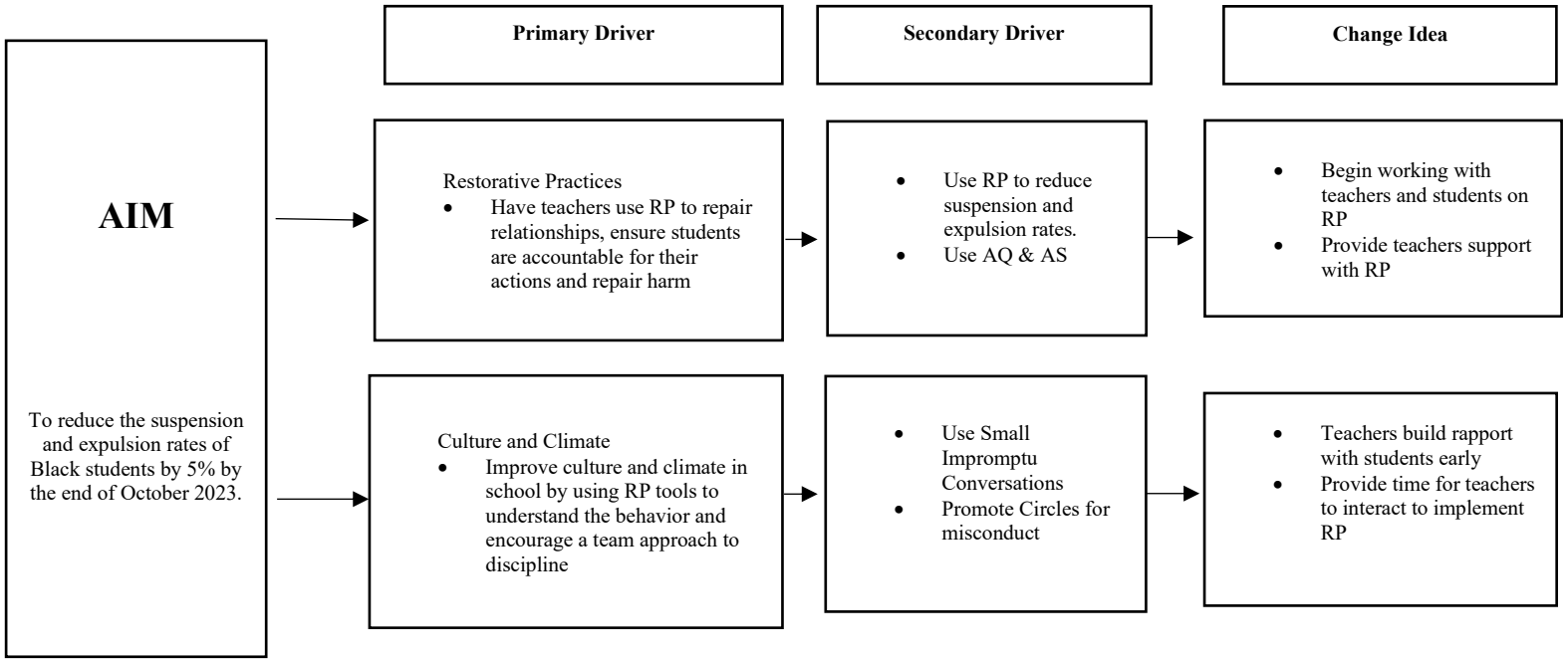
For this research, I utilized an improvement tool called a driver diagram. "The diagram is used to organize the group's best ideas at the time. For example, the diagram shows the leverage points in a system where change might happen" (Perry et al., 2020, p. 90). The diagram provides a graphic for "visually representing a group's working theory of practice improvement" (Bryk et al., 2015, as cited in Perry et al., 2020, p. 91). The driver diagram assists with the PDSA cycle.

The driver diagram has an aim, primary drivers, secondary drivers, and change ideas, representing a group's working theory. "A driver diagram creates a common language and coordinates efforts among different individuals with a common problem" (Perry et al., 2020, pp.

152-153). Figure 4 illustrates the driver diagram, identifying the AIM, primary and secondary drivers, and change ideas.

Figure 4

Driver Diagram



Note. This driver diagram identifies the aim, primary and secondary drivers, and the change ideas for implementation of RP (Perry et al., 2020, p. 154)

The aim is to identify how long it will take to achieve the change and at what rate. The primary driver does not communicate the entire theory of improvement; it supplies the highest leverage parts (Perry et al., 2020). Secondary drivers activate each primary driver. They are the "how" of change (p. 154). Teachers used AQ and AS to address misbehaviors.

As displayed in the secondary driver category, classrooms will use circles to manage curriculum, restore behavior, and share student concerns to improve and repair relationships. The school will transition from a zero-tolerance mindset to a RP mindset. The last step in the driver diagram is the change idea. The basis of a change idea is how to generate change in a current system (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). In the change idea section, I trained teachers early on RP and the advantages of building strong, healthy relationships with students.

Conclusion

The PoP in this research is the disproportionate OSS and expulsion rates of Black students. Studies have been conducted on implementing RP in schools across the United States. While some findings are mixed, the preponderance of positivity communicated by the teachers and the data show that RP contributes to an overall downward trend in racial and other discipline gaps. An added benefit of implementing RP as a discipline approach is that RP is a positive and effective way to improve school culture. RP implementation begins the process of recognizing the role implicit biases and teacher/administrator tolerance plays with regard to understanding and addressing discipline gaps between Black students and White students (Rainbolt et al., 2019, p. 178).

As we recognize the roles exclusionary practices and zero-tolerance policies have played on Black students across South Carolina, it is clear we need to adjust our approach to discipline. No data suggest exclusionary practices decrease misbehavior or improve the school environment

(Rainbolt et al., 2019). RP exhibits promise to alleviate the harmful effects of exclusionary consequences, particularly for Black students (Meetze, 2018). This study provides relevant data for schools that feed into PTMS, other middle schools in BSD, or neighboring districts to consider implementing in a RP-centered approach to discipline in schools with their students and staff members.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Research Site

The Basic School District (BSD) has adopted RP and implemented RP for the 2022-2023 school year. This research study was conducted in PTMS, located in South Carolina's Low Country. Perry et al. (2020) stated that improvement science moves research from laboratory settings and places it in real-world classrooms. A researcher needs to find one or more individuals to study that are accessible, willing to provide information, and distinctive for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I obtained permission from the school and school district leaders to conduct the research and gather data.

The BSD is the fourth largest school district in South Carolina, currently serving over 36,000 students. BSD spans over 1,000 square miles. PTMS has 31 teachers, three guidance counselors, and 847 students in 6th through 8th grades. Based on the South Carolina Department of Education website, the PTMS school zone has a poverty index of 49.7% for 2022. Despite the high poverty index, there is income diversity. PTMS has students living in homes in gated communities and others living in government-subsidized housing. Some parents have a family vacation home on the beach, and others have never visited the beach. According to the South Carolina Department of Education website, South Carolina has a poverty index of 61.1%. The lower poverty index at PTMS could explain the financial diversity within the school.

PTMS Student Demographics

Over the past three years, PTMS has experienced an increase of Multiple Language Speakers (MLs), improving diversity on campus. Table 10 illustrates the student demographics for the 2022-2023 school year:

Table 10

2022-2023 PTMS Student Demographics

Race	Population	Percentage of Students
Black	171	20%
White	434	51%
Hispanic	157	19%
Asian	11	1.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2	0.2%
Multi	71	8.4%
Hawaiian	1	0.1%
Total	847	

Note. The table illustrates the student demographics of PTMS (PTMS Power School Student Database).

PTMS Teacher Demographics

Table 11

2022-2023 PTMS Teacher Demographics and Gender Breakdown

Race	Gender	Population	Percentage of Teachers
Black	M	3	.04%
Black	F	9	13%
White	M	13	19%
White	F	40	58.8%
Hispanic	F	3	.04%
Asian	F	1	.014%
Total		68	

Note. The table illustrates the number of teachers employed with PTMS (PTMS Power School Student Database).

Table 11 includes Guidance Counselors, Teacher Aides, the In-school-suspension coordinator (ISS), and the School Psychologist. White female teachers represent more than half of the teacher population, while Black teachers combined represent .17% of the teacher population.

Organization of the Study

The participants in the research were 8th-grade teachers. I used the 8th grade teachers for this study because I am the 8th grade administrator, and I have historical data on OSS and expulsion rates for the 2022-2023 school year to serve as baseline data.

As a certified RP trainer, I trained the 8th-grade team members on August 18, 2023. The training ensured that teachers understood how and when to apply RP during conflict intervention. The teachers understood the multi-tiered approach and how each level filters into the next.

The data were collected and stored in a secure spreadsheet on Google Drive. I used the Power School tool to track referrals and determine why students were suspended or expelled on the spreadsheet. I was the only person with the right to edit the spreadsheet. There was an additional spreadsheet for teachers to track the steps used for RP, for example, AQ, AS, SIC, and Circles. At the end of the nine-week cycle, I conducted a survey on students to determine if RP for that cycle improved behaviors and enhanced relationships with teachers. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers at the end of the research. I also administered a post-survey to teachers and students who participated in the research. The semi-structured interviews were recorded for accuracy.

Positionality

The 2023-2024 school year is my third year at PTMS as an assistant principal. As the Special Education and 8th grade administrator, my position requires direct contact with the

students and teachers. The school participated in RP on a smaller scale last year, which allowed me to apply non-punitive actions when students received a referral requiring punitive action.

As a Black male educated in public schools in the South, I experienced unfair treatment from teachers several times. For example, as a 9th grader, I allowed a White student to copy a few answers off my science test. I knew what I did was wrong; however, I had no idea he copied all my answers. As a result, we missed the same questions, and our test scores were the same. When the teacher confronted us regarding the test scores, we remained silent. She asked us who cheated several times. The teacher stated, "Since you don't want to speak up, John, you will retake the test, and Ezra, you're getting a zero and a trip to the Principal's office."

The teacher's implicit bias in assuming I cheated and giving me a zero while allowing the White student to retake the test devastated me. As it relates to Black/White discipline gap, it is often asserted that teachers' underlying unconscious negative beliefs about Black students' predilection toward disruption or violence is a driver of differentiated treatment (Carter et al., 2015; Kunesh & Boltemyer, 2015, as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017). This incident represents one of many experiences I had with implicit bias as a Black male student. My anecdotal experiences provide additional credence to the persistent imbalanced treatment of Black students in public schools.

In the incident above, the teacher could have applied AQ by asking both students what happened and why we cheated. After the teacher determined what happened based on our feedback, a restorative response could have been to allow both of us to retake the test. Instead, the teacher allowed implicit bias to guide her to the conclusion that I was the only wrongdoer in the equation.

According to Costello et al. (2019), “RP aims to develop community and to manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and relationships” (p. 47). RP teaches users that developing rapport is required to repair damaged relationships. My responsibilities extend to the teachers by guiding this transition. For example, several teachers have embraced zero-tolerance measures and expect students to receive punitive consequences for behaviors ranging from mild to moderate. Therefore, I am mindful that although some teachers may not embrace RP, the BSD has adopted the RP, and all PTMS teachers are required to follow the initiative. At this point in the study, my prediction is that RP may not reach each student, but it will reduce OSS and expulsion rates of Black students by 5%-10%. If that prediction comes true, we will have data to convince other districts that RP is an effective alternative to zero-tolerance policies.

Research Methods and Design

The research was a qualitative exploratory case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used the improvement science theory (Byrk et al., 2017) to understand the impact of RP had on OSS and expulsion rates of Black students at PTMS. I analyzed the experiences of 8th-grade teachers applying RP in the classrooms and reviewed how the teachers adjusted their approach to discipline. The data collection and analysis research timeframe was August 2023 through October 2023 and took place at PTMS. PTMS was selected to pilot the RP program by the district. I played an active role in developing, implementing, and sustaining the program for the school.

Methods of Data Collection

The data collection methods included gathering documents or field notes, teacher and student surveys, and semi-structured interviews with teachers and students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Before data collection, I gained permission to research at this site by obtaining approval

from the Basic school district office, PTMS's administration, and Clemson University's Internal Review Board (IRB).

During the first quarter of the semester (45 days), I collected data on the use of RP based on a multi-tiered approach to discipline. For example, teachers implemented a quick check-in circle for the first three weeks at the beginning of class. When a behavior issue occurred, teachers used AS or AQ. During the first cycle, teachers were instructed only to use AS or AQ during a behavior intervention and not to use both simultaneously to allow teachers to become proficient with AS and AQ. After the first PDSA cycle, the team discussed the findings and implemented the next PDSA cycle. During the team's weekly meeting, I conducted a SIC refresher and instructed teachers to implement SIC over the next three weeks. In the second cycle, the team introduced SIC, AS and AQ simultaneously, implementing a more rigorous version of RP. Lastly, the team implemented RC, AS, AQ, and SIC during the third and final cycle. This is the full arsenal of RP.

Qualitative data collection included questions for the participants and utilized the pattern described by Creswell and Poth (2018): "Research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional. They restate the purpose of the study in more specific terms and typically start with a word such as *what* or *how* rather than *why* to explore a central phenomenon" (p. 137). The data collection methods included the following:

- Teacher pre-surveys (see Appendix A)
- Student pre-surveys (see Appendix B)
- Teacher post-surveys (see Appendix C)
- Student post-surveys (see Appendix D)
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers (see Appendix E)

- Classroom observations (see Appendix F)

I reviewed referrals weekly to determine how many OSS and expulsions have occurred during the week. I shared a Google-based tracker electronically with participating teachers so they could log RP interventions throughout the week, along with any consequences. I checked the tracker daily for RP interventions. I conducted weekly meetings with teachers to ask what RP interventions worked, what students responded to, and what areas were more challenging. The tracker provided data on teachers who used RP in the classroom. For teachers who did not update the tracker routinely, I probed to determine their challenges. Then, I asked the teachers what steps can I take to assist with prompt, comprehensive data input to ensure the detail and accuracy of entries were not compromised by the passage of time.

Surveys. At the end of the study, I conducted a survey comprised of five to eight questions for the seven teachers and students involved in RP. I had seven 8th-grade teachers who have agreed to participate in the research. The surveys were anonymous to ensure that respondents were comfortable replying accurately and honestly. I used a numerical scale that defines only the endpoints (such as a 1 to 4 scale, where 1 = *not at all useful* and 4 = *extremely useful)* is preferable because numbers are less fraught with connotations that vary across respondents (Newcomer et al., 2015).

Teacher and student names were not recorded in the survey to maintain anonymity. Researchers must protect the privacy of anyone they obtain data from, whether the sources are records, surveys, or interviews (Newcomer et al., 2015). Furthermore, anonymity in the surveys lends itself to more truthful responses because the responses are non-attributional.

Semi-Structured Interviews. After the second PDSA cycle was complete, I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers in person or through Google Meet. The purpose of the

interviews was for me to find out how the implementation of RP by teachers went during the PDSA cycles from their perspective. The teachers were asked six questions.

1. What is your opinion of the goals and purpose of restorative practices?
2. Please share your knowledge of how the implementation process went.

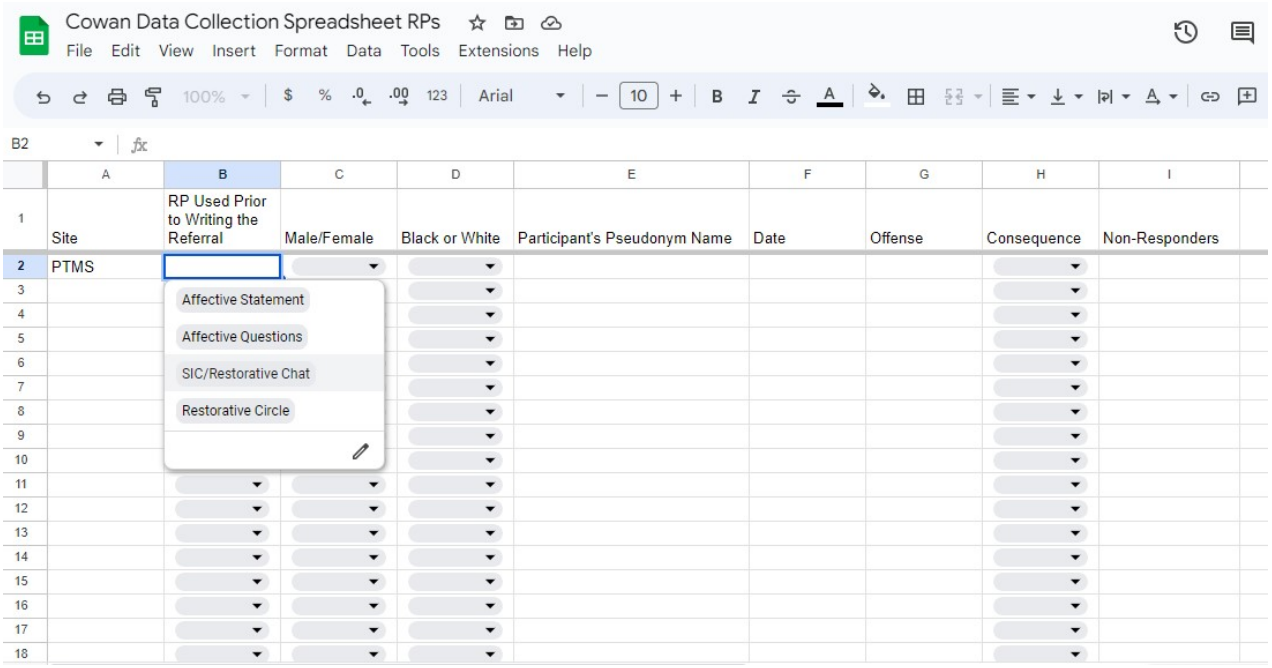
   What restorative measure(s) are you most comfortable using? Affective questions, affective statements, restorative chats, or restorative circles?
3. What professional development opportunities did you receive on restorative practices outside of your training at PTMS?
4. What are your thoughts on the implementation of restorative practices in your school?
5. Was adequate communication provided about implementing and supporting restorative practices at your school?
6. What other supports do you believe the BSD needs to implement restorative practices district-wide fully?

Methods of Data Analysis

For the study, all data was compiled in a spreadsheet. A qualitative data analysis was conducted on all the data collected. Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing data for analysis, then reducing the data into themes, and finally presenting the data in figures and tables or discussions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). No other individuals in the school had access to the document. The data was managed in a protected Google Sheet file. The table below is an example of the data collection table.

Figure 5

Data Collection Table



Note. This data collection table will enable teachers to document activity.

Once a week, for the duration of the study, I pulled the data collection spreadsheet to analyze the total OSS, expulsion recommendations, and RP interventions. I discussed the weekly data with the 8th-grade teacher participants as a group. I met with the teachers individually or as a group two times, then met with them as a group six times. I opened the discussion by asking teachers to provide feedback on successes and challenges for the week; I asked 6-8 questions and offered strategies for improvement.

I started identifying trends, successes and failures, and areas of improvement. As the weeks progressed, a few trends began to emerge. I will discuss the trends in the third chapter.

Validity

A qualitative study takes data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants to assess for accuracy and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As researchers strive to understand a problem, one must be involved in the study, meet with participants, teachers, and students, and spend extensive time in the field. Therefore, I solicited participants' views on the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Bazeley, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Glense, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants played a critical role because they were asked the following question: how does the ongoing data analysis represent[s] their experience? (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012).

As changes became necessary, I made adjustments, and the data log sheet was updated daily for data collection.

Conclusion

The key to successfully implementing improvement science is ensuring everyone understands the plan and their role as participants. Implementing a process with fidelity is also important, as is being open-minded to what the data are showing you. However, challenges occurred during implementation, for example, a lack of buy-in from teachers, complaints of time limitations, a strong desire to maintain zero-tolerance policies, and the number of new responsibilities introduced by the administration. For change to occur, researchers must ensure these barriers are overcome. The data collection methods, when followed correctly, provide clear and concise feedback to make informed decisions as we advance the research. Thus, successful implementation of RP should include ample time for training and implementation, adequate

resources, transparency, power sharing, and commitment to upholding and supporting the intervention's long-term relationship-building capacity (Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023).

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will introduce and summarize the research findings. Over the course of nine weeks, I was able to complete two PDSA cycles successfully. A few themes emerged during this qualitative exploratory study during each PDSA cycle.

Using RP as an alternative to the disproportionate rates of OSS and expulsions of Black students has not been extensively studied. The studies that have been conducted yielded success, but this research supports the full implementation of RP with sustainability. The data support the conclusion that using RP as a multi-tiered approach to discipline reduced Black students' OSS and expulsion rates.

Our school district implemented RP during the 2022-2023 school year, and PTMS was selected as a pilot site for the district. Adhering to the directives of the district, I trained teachers on RP in August 2022. A few months into the new school year, there was a power transition, resulting in a new vision for the district. RP did not disappear, but there was uncertainty surrounding the initiative. In August of 2023, I conducted a more detailed training to prepare teachers for the research. However, before the research began, I needed a baseline of knowledge from the students. For example, I needed to understand how familiar students were with the multi-tiered intervention steps of RP.

Student Pre-Surveys

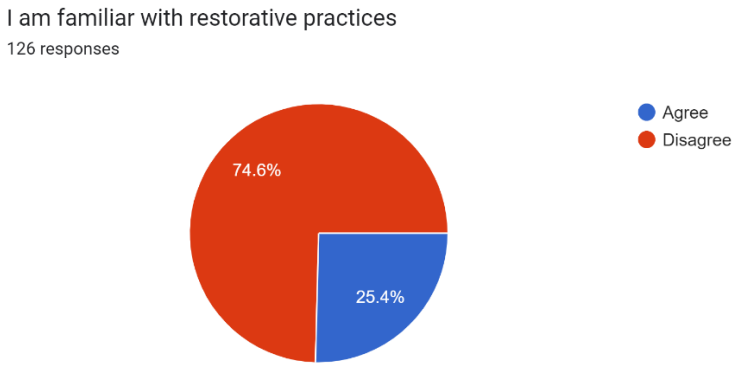
The research included 126 students and seven teachers. The first step was to conduct a pre-survey on the students to gain a baseline of student knowledge of RP, if not by name, then by substance, as most students will not know what RP is, but will understand the concept once it is explained to them. The survey consisted of six questions, and the responses ranged from agree to disagree. I simplified the response choices to ensure a clear answer from the students. Through

their responses, I determined their level of exposure to RP before the study. At the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, teachers received an abbreviated training in RP and were strongly encouraged to use the tools provided to decrease referrals. Based on the training provided to the teachers, most students should have been familiar with several RP interventions in the fall of 2023 when this study was conducted.

In the following sections, I provide the results of each survey conducted during and after the research. As you will see, a small percentage of students were familiar with RP or the interventions. The results of the student pre-survey are in the table below.

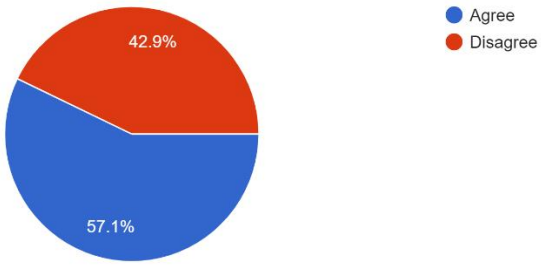
Figure 6

Student Pre-Survey



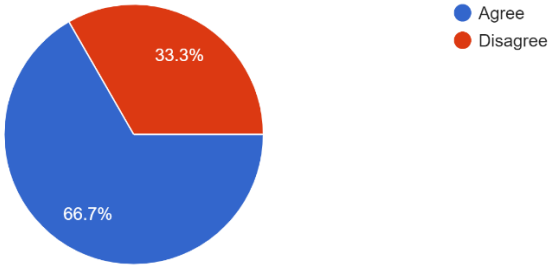
I am familiar with affective statements

126 responses



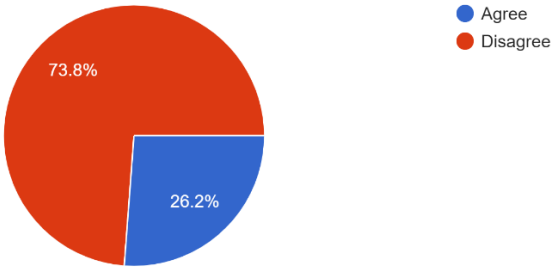
I am familiar with affective questions

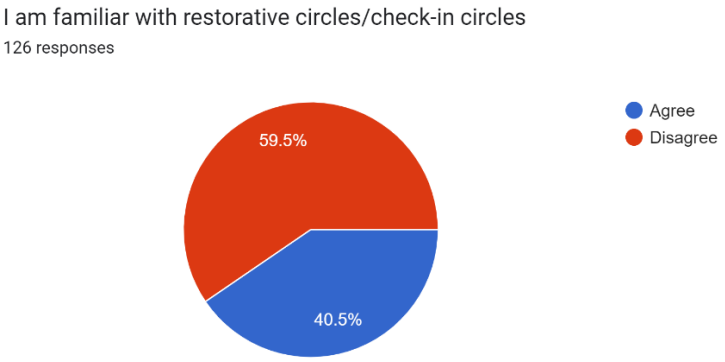
126 responses

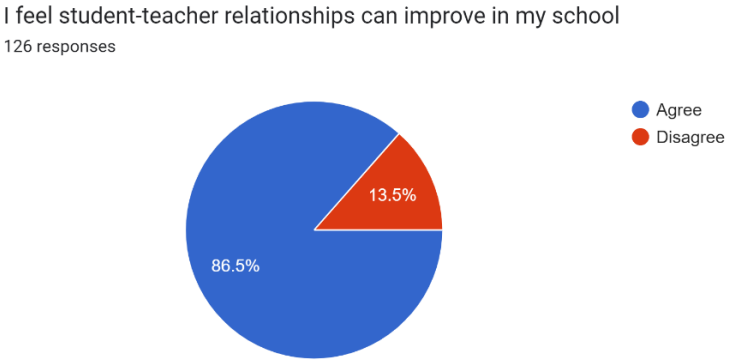


I am familiar with small impromptu conferences

126 responses







Based on the survey results, most students were unfamiliar with RP and felt that relationships with their teachers could improve. During my classroom conversations, students expressed their frustrations with referrals and wanted to improve student-teacher relationships. Some students felt that teachers were out to get them and did not trust that teachers had their best interest in mind. RP focuses on improving relationships and teaching students problem-solving skills for later in life.

> We need to hear what they're trying to tell us through their behavior and use that to guide them in a different direction. To achieve this objective, educators need to build relationships, crate investments in the class climate, and give students a voice all of which can be accomplished (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 16).

PDSA Cycle I Teacher Use of Multi-Tiered Intervention

During the first meeting with teachers on August 21, 2023, I explained the PDSA cycle of improvement science. The teachers and I discussed the data from the first quarter of 2022, including the number of referrals written and the number of referrals resulting in OSS for students during the *plan* phase.

The primary purpose of the meeting was to reintroduce AS, AQ, and check-in circles, explain how each intervention worked, and create a plan. For the first PDSA cycle (4 weeks), teachers used AS, AQ interventions, and check-in circles for their students. During the *plan* phase of PDSA, the team brainstormed to predict how students may respond to RP and possible challenges during the cycle. Teachers predicted that some students would respond positively and others negatively to AS, AQ, and check-in circles. For example, teachers predicted that students might not take the interventions seriously and may laugh when teachers ask AQ, such as, what were you thinking when you did that? How did your action(s) impact your classmate? How can you make this right? In preparation for responses, the team role-played how to react to inappropriate responses from a student.

However, that was not the case. Students mostly responded positively when teachers calmly asked AQ or made an AS. For example, if a teacher responds to inappropriate behavior by yelling at the student to correct it, some students match the intensity or go into a shell. RP has assisted teachers in responding calmly to de-escalate the situation. When calmly approached with an intervention, students often match the calm interventions with an appropriate response, correct their behavior, and apologize.

For the purposes of this research and to protect teacher identity, I provide pseudonyms for the teachers. As teachers conduct an intervention, listening without an agenda and responding

restoratively is essential to the success of RP. During the first full week of implementation, Ms. Jones conducted an intervention with a student who violated the dress code policy. Ms. Jones stated that she used an AS with a student who wore an inappropriate shirt. Ms. Jones explained that the shirt was not a positive reflection of the student. The teacher was concerned the student would respond negatively to the AS, but she did not. The next day, the student was dressed appropriately, and the teacher told her she looked nice today. The teacher felt the positive response was significant because the student had not violated the dress code policy since the RP intervention.

This is an example of "guiding students to better understand the impact of their behavior is more likely to influence their future behavior than the standard sanctions we use in schools" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 52). The teacher stated that the student involved in the abovementioned interaction was Black, and building a relationship with her was important. According to Morris and Perry (2017), Black girls disproportionately receive referral for dress code violations in middle school. "RP is assisting me to develop stronger relationships faster with my students."

Teachers also began check-in circles during the first week. I participated and observed the check-in circles throughout the week. The check-in circles improved as more students began to share information about themselves. Other students became more comfortable after hearing their peers share information and began to share themselves. Due to the success of the check-in circles, the team wanted to discuss their experiences during our next meeting. However, the meeting was canceled due to Hurricane Idalia. This is the reason there are 2 PDSA cycles instead of three. Idalia interrupted the first cycle.

On September 6, 2023, I conducted a team meeting to share the results and experiences of the first week of implementation. Based on the feedback, teachers' least favorite intervention

was AS, but they experienced success with AQ and check-in circles. Teachers were excited to see how well the check-in circles and AQ worked with their students. Below are the responses from the teachers. Mr. Smith reported that using the AS and AQ early in the school year assisted in allowing him to set a positive tone in his classroom. Ms. Jackson stated, "I rarely experience negative behaviors." The teacher used AS to affirm student progress on research papers and STEM tests. Ms. Henry said:

> [I] usually have pretty good relationships with the kids; still, it takes a little more time. I think consciously doing this has made that relationship building a bit faster, specifically the conversations we're having from the affective questions. Yes, I think the circles probably help bond the class. And then, the AS and AQ build a better rapport quicker with individual students.

AS provided a gateway for teachers to express their concerns positively, and students were more receptive to AS than teachers displaying apathy. When teachers used AQ, it allowed time and space for students to be heard and understood, which promoted positive behaviors. Ms. Brown stated that RP, specifically the check-in circles, has encouraged students to trust teachers more and improve empathy for their peers. The teacher used an example from last year that students did not trust students, and students stated teachers were "out to get them." This year, utilizing RP, the teacher expressed that teacher-student trust has improved.

RP allows teachers to listen to students through a restorative lens on how to express and self-advocate for themselves. Teachers reported that students express themselves more respectfully than before, allowing them to work through classroom issues positively. "Allow students to tell their side of the story so they learn to communicate and hear one another" (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 18). Teachers also said that students are engaging with each

other more respectfully and learning how to resolve conflict effectively. Through AS, AQ, and check-in circles, students have a sense of comfort and trust with their teachers that most students have not experienced, based on reports from teachers participating in the research.

Teachers also did an excellent job conducting check-in circles during the first cycle. Several topics were discussed during check-in circles with students. For example, teachers asked how the first week of school was, how they felt about tropical storm Idalia, how they felt they performed in the iReady assessment (an assessment that measures English and Math competency), what their academic goals are, what stresses students about the 8th grade, and what are some things that make you anxious? Students provided appropriate feedback based on the data.

Student awareness of their roles in classroom comportment and accountability for their actions has been a welcome byproduct and added benefit of RC. Ms. Jones reported that the class misbehaved during recess, and she wanted to talk sternly to her class while walking back to the classroom. Instead, when they arrived at the classroom, she used AQ to ask them what they could do tomorrow to improve things. The teacher reported that several students raised their hands to provide feedback. For example, one student said, “We should not close our Chromebooks before you tell us to.” Another stated, “We can stop talking when the teacher is talking.” Allowing students to take responsibility is key. “Responsibility means both parties involved in negative behavior need to own their actions and consequences and move forward” (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 19).

Ms. Henry stated that many behavior issues originated in the home. “Often, the behaviors seen here are not rooted here but emanate from a deeper problem from the home.” The comment from Ms. Henry is supported by research. Costello et al. (2019) stated that many conflicts and

misbehaviors that manifest during school originated outside the school building. Children come to school with unresolved feelings about things that happened with friends, family members, acquaintances, and strangers in their neighborhood. Punitive responses fail to address the actual cause of the behavior. RC provides a forum for students to discuss what is happening beneath the surface.

Ms. Henry stated that it is not always a good idea to address an issue as soon as it happens. Sometimes, students are not ready to chat; they need time to cool down and process. When a teacher or student is dysregulated during an intervention, it is best to take time to regulate and then revisit the conversation. If people have a bad attitude beforehand, don't address the issue; don't rush it, even if it takes a few extra days (Costello et al., 2019).

Do Phase of Restorative Practices

After brainstorming and predicting, the team turned their attention to the *do* phase of the cycle. In this phase, I demonstrated how to correctly log their interventions and student responses to the spreadsheet. I reviewed the log daily to see the interventions taking place. During the eight-week study, teachers recorded 97 interventions with their students. The spreadsheet provided valuable information to observe how teachers responded to misbehaviors and how quickly they would write a referral. The interventions included AS, AQ, SIC, and restorative circles/chats. As mentioned earlier, seven teachers and 126 students participated in the research. Each intervention required the teacher to record whether a punitive consequence was given and if the interaction with the interventions was positive or negative.

Study Phase of Restorative Practices

During the study phase of the PDSA Cycle I and after the first four weeks, I analyzed the data from the data collection sheet and calculated the percentages of the times teachers used AS,

AQ, SIC, and Check-in circles. The data revealed SIC was used most often (35.5%), and AS was used the least (16.1%). After the first cycle, I analyzed the number of referrals written and referrals that resulted in OSS for Black students. The data revealed the 8th-grade team experienced a 71% reduction in referrals and referrals leading to OSS during the first cycle. Most of the referrals were minor infractions, such as dress code violations. I will provide the complete results of the interventions and referrals later in this chapter.

During the next weekly meeting, I shared the referral data and the RP intervention information with the teacher and asked teachers what RP intentions went well, why it went well, which ones did not, and why. The teachers expressed that SIC, a combination of AS and AQ, went well because teachers were more comfortable fusing the two interventions during an encounter.

When I asked the teachers about their experiences with AS and why it was used the least, they stated that expressing their feelings to students felt awkward, and they were not used to saying how student behavior impacted them. I acknowledged to the teachers that AS are more challenging than they look because they may not always be used for sharing their feelings. To improve the outcome of the second PDSA cycle with AS, I retaught AS to the teachers. I encouraged teachers to use AS to set boundaries and provide student feedback instead. I reminded teachers that AS can go beyond the "I statement" in relation to another's behavior. An affective statement is any statement that maximizes positive affect or minimizes negative affect (Wachtel, 2013).

After teachers were comfortable with SIC, I asked them to continue using SIC but incorporate more AS into the intervention during the second PDSA cycle. Asking teachers to use

AS during SIC interventions will provide additional practice with AS, improving their comfort level with the intervention during the second PDSA cycle.

Impact of Affective Statements

Again, AS is the most informal type of response on the RP Continuum (Wachtel, 2013). Teachers used AS 17% of the time during their interventions with students. AS is another way to express your feelings or share impact. "Affective statements can be used to acknowledge success, hard work, collaboration, or any other desirable behavior" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 11). AS are excellent opportunities to provide feedback to students when they misbehave or are off task, and it is a good way for teachers and students to have their voices heard.

During an interaction with a student, Ms. Jones stated:

> I had a conversation with a student regarding a student walking to recess. The student had a look on her face, and I knew she had a really bad day. And I already asked her to put away her Airpod. She is new to the school, so I don't know her well. Students know that Airpods are not allowed at our school, but she was allowed to listen to them at her old school. I found that her previous school allowed students to listen to Airpods after I made the AS, that it makes me feel sad when students don't listen when I ask them to do something. The student apologized and said that she was having a bad day, her anxiety was kicking in, and at her old school, she would listen to her music when having a bad day. The conversation went well, and talking was effortless after I expressed how I felt when she did not put away the Airpod initially.

Using AS during the interaction allowed Ms. Jones to learn the student was allowed to wear Airpods at the previous school and that the student experiences anxiety. Ms. Jones now understands why the student had Airpods out, and the student may have anxiety. Ms. Jones

would be within the school's rules if she decided to write the student a referral; however, through AS, she recognized an opportunity to bridge a gap and allowed RP to create an opportunity for a new student to trust a teacher. These are the experiences that generate stronger teacher-student relationships.

Teachers correct students daily when they violate classroom or school rules, and AS can provide an alternative.

> Informal AS can be offered when you see a student something that makes you or others feel uncomfortable as a teacher. They offer an alternative when you are tired of saying, "Don't do that," "Stop that," or, "Don't you think you're being inappropriate?" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 14).

Ms. Jones also stated, "I enjoy AS. I try to phrase it in a positive manner, so I am not coming off as combative, and in most cases, they're going to do what you ask them with no problems." Ms. Jones provides a clear example of why using positive or neutral interactions with students is vital to encourage positive behaviors. Ms. Jackson stated, "RP takes a little more time, and I think consciously doing this has allowed for relationship building to be a bit faster, specifically from the conversations we are having with AS." Relationship building is critical for middle school students. Ms. Jackson provides an example of using AS to build culture and climate by building stronger relationships quicker to influence positive behavior. Maynard and Weinstein (2019) stated that the classroom community promotes self-responsibility and effective actions.

Impact of Affective Questions

The teachers utilized AQ during the first PDSA cycle. It was the second most commonly used intervention at 22%. Teachers expressed that they felt comfortable asking questions to elicit student responses. Asking AQ during conflict was helpful for the teachers during the research.

AQ are helpful during conflict because they are a series of structured questions to elicit specific information from both the person wronged and the wrongdoer (e.g., What happened? What were you thinking when this happened? What can you do to fix this? How do you think you can demonstrate that you're sorry?) (Gray, 2021). "Accepting that conflict is an integral part of life is crucial to adopting RP. Students will not always behave appropriately in school, and dealing with conflict is part of an educator's job, whether we like it or not" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 15). AQ provides teachers with questions that, when used appropriately, will provide them with the why behind the action.

Ms. Jones thought the AQ helped elicit student responses.

> I'm not the only one talking. Now that students are giving feedback, we are in a two-way dialogue. Part of the problem was that 8th graders did not feel like they were being heard. You can reach a student using SIC, take students in the hallway away from peers, and have the conference. I like asking their thoughts and giving them a chance to explain their reasoning. RP has provided them with a voice to advocate for themselves.

In this example, Mrs. Jones provided an opportunity for the students to engage in two-way dialogue in a safe space where they can be heard. The foundation of a positive mediation experience is respect, and if all parties are interested in repairing the problem, they must respect everyone's insight and emotions (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Furthermore, Ms. Jones feels "AQ allows students to respond respectfully and appropriately as opposed to lashing out, and that works for both parties." The encounter above is an example of repairing the harm and building relationships to set the tone for a positive culture and climate.

Ms. Jones stated the importance of taking a little more time to listen to student feedback when using AQ instead of quickly saying, "OK, let's move on." The students respond better

when you take time to listen to their perspectives. Ms. Jones noted it is very easy to slip back into how you have always done things and power hoarding. “I understand the importance of giving up a little power. I am still in charge, but now I provide high control and high support.”

Ms. Henry stated that she reverted to her old way of speaking to students because she thought it would be quicker than using AS or an AQ; however, it was not as effective as she thought in curbing their behaviors. “I noticed that you must continue the multi-tiered approach to be effective.” Ms. Henry provided insight into how effective RP is when used effectively compared to her previous approach to discipline. The more teachers commit to initially using RP, the more they will experience improved behaviors in the long run with their students based on the results of this study.

Check-in Circles

Check-in circles are the least encumbered form of circles. Circles give people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum, and equality (Wachtel, 2013). The circles can be used for different reasons based on the focus of the teacher and students. Circles give people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum, and equality. The circle process allows people to tell their stories and offer their own perspectives (Pranis, 2005, as cited in Wachtel, 2013). The teachers used the check-in circles several times a week to get a feel of conducting a circle and getting to know their students better. The circles can also be used to gather information about students and the teacher. For example, Ms. Henry learned she could use check-in circles to learn more about her students. Ms. Henry stated,

> I have found that I learned my students' names faster, their behaviors, good and negative faster, and overall, doing both the check-in circles, AS and AQ, I have been made more aware of who my kids are. This is my first time learning my students this quickly.

Again, using check-in circles to establish norms, Ms. Henry gained valuable insight into her students that will assist her throughout the school year.

Check-in circles can be used to integrate course content as well. "Think of the circle as adding another string to a teacher's bow, a versatile technique capable of serving multiple functions" (Costello et al., 2019, p. 41). Ms. Johnson had minimal behavior issues in her classes, so she used it to deliver content and set academic goals. Mr. Johnson asked her students:

> "How many of you are having to study more this year than last year? Things may have been easier last year, but we have 12 to 30 chapter books; you'll have to take good notes this year. Taking notes in other classes is also important as this will make you a better student."

Ms. Johnson used the circle to introduce an academic goal and provide a tool students can use to be successful.

Initially, some teachers thought students would not participate in the check-in circles but were surprised to see the participation increase each week.

Ms. Brown stated she thought getting students to participate would be difficult, but the students were eager to provide feedback during the check-in circles. "I think the check-in circles seem to build bonds and friendships among students in my homeroom class. It has also helped me positively address students."

Ms. Henry said, "The circles have helped students reflect on what is important in school and establish a change in their behavior and practice."

At the start of the second PDSA cycle, teachers felt the implementation of AS, AQ, and check-in circles was a success. When I downloaded the discipline data, I noticed a reduction in referrals. Ms. Hawkins stated, "With the progression of time and as I become more familiar with RP when I look at the number of referrals so far this year versus in years past for behavior, it's much lower."

> Instead of just suspending students or assigning detentions, mediators must brainstorm tactics that will genuinely restore balance to the situation. If a student called his teacher a derogatory name, perhaps he could write a letter of apology after school hours. If two students tease another student in a public forum, lead them toward a meaningful resolution (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 19).

Teachers were intentional in conducting check-in circles with their students during the first 5–7 minutes of class, which resulted in teachers creating stronger teacher-student relationships. A subsequent result of check-in circles is that teachers expand their tolerance window with students. Ms. Johnson stated, "As my window of tolerance expanded, I felt more comfortable with RP because I got a chance to listen objectively to my students. I could discern between a classroom-managed behavior and one that requires the administrator's attention. "

Small Impromptu Conferences

During our weekly meetings, I asked teachers what multi-tiered approach to the discipline they felt more comfortable applying; overwhelmingly, the response was SIC. Based on the data collection sheet, teachers used SIC at a rate of 46%. SIC are questioning exercises that quickly resolve lower-level incidents involving two or more people (Augustine et al., 2018). Due to SIC being a combination of AS and AQ, teachers stated it was easier to use because it fused the first two interventions.

> The purpose of a small impromptu conversation is to address a problem to keep it from escalating and to resolve the problem quickly, but in a way that gets students actively engaged in expressing their feelings and in thinking about the impact of their behavior and about how to resolve conflicts (Costello et al., 2019, p. 20).

Some of the teachers used SIC to conduct a conversation with their students. Ms. Jones stated, "You're doing it without realizing it after a while. Students react differently to you because there is a bond there, and you've had conversations with them, and you want to understand their point. You're not out to get them." SIC provides a space for teachers and students to converse and understand each other, improving student-teacher relationships. Furthermore, Ms. Jones stated, "When another staff member approaches the student about something that you've also had to do, the reaction is different; it may not be the same because they have not built that bond of trust with the teacher."

As teachers expand their knowledge of RP, they also broaden their knowledge of their students. A byproduct of the deep understanding of their students, referrals lessen, and conversations increase. For example, Ms. Brown stated,

> I have received several requests to send my students to detention from teachers not involved in the study. I don't think I've given one detention to one of my homeroom students. So, it has made a world of difference because there is a bond between all of us.

Two of the four teachers in the pod with Ms. Brown did not participate. The request for detention received by Ms. Brown originated from teachers of students who were unable to participate in the study because the referring homeroom teacher did not participate in the study.

Ms. Hawkins felt that her consistency was paramount for successfully implementing RP in her block. Each teacher in the pod participated in RP and that pod had a challenging group of students. Ms. Hawkins stated:

> The bonds we created with RP reduced the incidents of referrals and improved communication. One of my students received a referral outside of our pod, and when I read it, I felt proud of myself. The student did the same thing in my class; the difference is that the student responded to the SIC and handed over the phone; in this case, she did not.

Ms. Hawkins felt that RP was the difference and provided credence to why RP should be standard practice for all teachers in the building. Ms. Hawkins said, "I don't want the student to shut down because she is a loner, so I will keep trying with her; she is my little ray of sunshine, and we were able to compromise on an assignment."

The success teachers have expressed is due to their consistency with RP and understanding of the importance of building relationships, repairing the harm, and viewing students from a restorative mindset. The teachers are separating the act from the student. Punishment can leave kids feeling ashamed and embarrassed. By separating the deed from the doer, we are telling young people we respect them, but we don't like a particular behavior they are displaying (Costello et al., 2019).

Ms. Henry stated:

> When students do something wrong, it does not always mean they will receive a punitive consequence; it does not have to always come to that. Using AQ, we can have a conversation together to process the behavior. I have realized that many of my students

have never been taught how to communicate appropriately, and if we teach them how to communicate effectively through RP, they can talk things out with their peers and adults.

PDSA Cycle II

As the research transitioned into the second PDSA cycle, teachers became more familiar with students and their behaviors. After the first PDSA cycle, the team experienced a significant reduction in referrals. The team used SIC more than any other intervention in the multi-tiered discipline of support.

When I asked teachers how comfortable they were using AS, AQ, and SIC, most were comfortable with all three; however, they felt SIC was more impactful. Teachers also mentioned that check-in circles helped them learn basic information about their students. For example, what are their hobbies, their academic and personal goals? After sharing their information, I shared the referral data with the teachers and explained that it was a noticeable improvement from last year. After the teachers shared their information, I provided guidance for the second PDSA cycle.

The veteran teachers have used SIC in the past but did not have a label for the practice. For example, Mr. Smith stated that he uses SIC with students in the hallway to discuss their behaviors and the disruptions they cause. He felt more comfortable using SIC than AS and AQ because it was a common practice for him before the study.

Ms. Hawkins asked for guidance with coming up with topics to discuss during check-in circles that would engage her students. I provided Ms. Hawkins with several topics that touched on the dress code and other topics surrounding the policies and future activities.

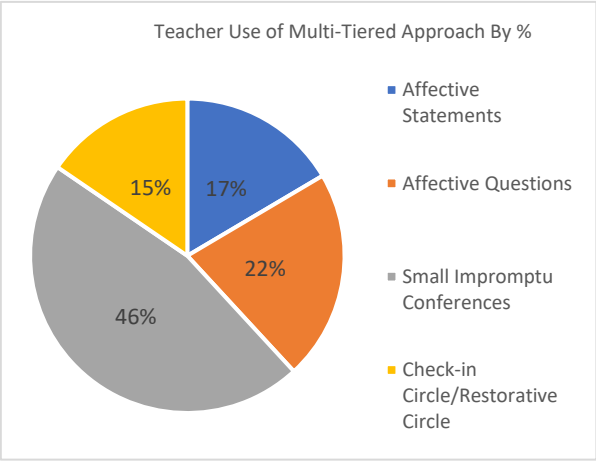
I used their feedback to guide my next steps. During the meeting, I introduced restorative circles to teachers. The team experienced a considerable reduction in referrals, but I needed to conduct an RC to address the dress code violations.

During the next weekly meeting, Ms. Hawkins shared feedback from the check-in circles regarding the dress code. I used the feedback to guide my talking points for the planned RC that took place during the second cycle.

After the second PDSA cycle, I shared the referral data and the percentages of how often teachers used a particular intervention. The data revealed that over the first 45 days, there was a 33.3% reduction in OSS referral rates for Black students compared to the first 45 days of 2022. Figure 10 provides more detailed results on referral data. Throughout the study, teachers logged 97 interventions in the data collection sheet. Teachers provided detailed interactions and recorded the outcome of the interventions in the data collection sheet. For example, teachers logged their intervention, whether the intervention was positive or negative, or whether a referral or suspension followed the intervention. Figure 7 below details the percentage of each multi-tiered support used during the study.

Figure 7

Teacher Use of Multi-Tiered Interventions



The table indicates that teachers used SIC 46% of the time during the study. As mentioned previously, SIC is rooted in AS and AQ. As teachers became more comfortable with AS and AQ, the transition to SIC was seamless. Secondly, most teachers involved in the research conducted SIC before the study but were unaware. The second most utilized multi-tiered approach was AQ, which aligns with the responses from the teachers. Teachers felt students responded when prompted with AQ, and they were able to learn more about students' reactions to RP.

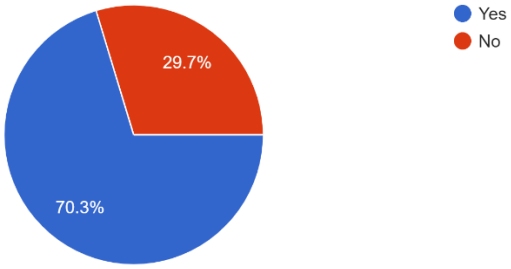
Student Post-Surveys

During the final stage of the research, I conducted a post-survey to gauge student responses to the multi-tiered approach to discipline. The students have been exposed to RP for much of the study and have experience with most of the interventions. I received 126 responses for the post-survey. The students were asked five questions to determine their level of comfort with RP and how they feel it impacts teacher-student relationships, student comfort level with other students, and if their teachers ask questions to determine what is going on. The students provided positive responses. Before administering the survey, I encouraged honesty and assured them their feedback would be anonymous, and there would be no repercussions for honesty. I explained the importance of gathering genuine insight and opinions from the students to assist me in making more informed decision-making and problem-solving with my teachers and staff regarding RP. Restorative chats received the highest votes (70.6%) from students, and no other intervention received a percentage score less than 60%. Below are the results of the student post-survey:

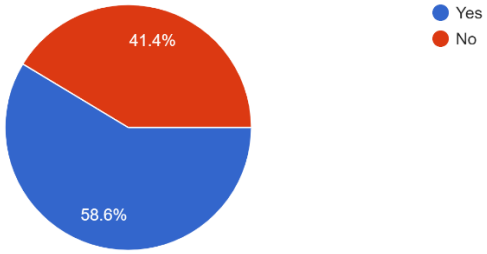
Figure 8

Student Post-Survey

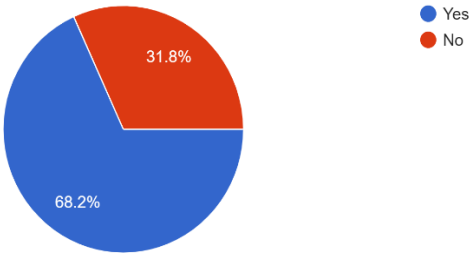
1. Do you like participating in Restorative Circles or Check-in Circles?
126 responses

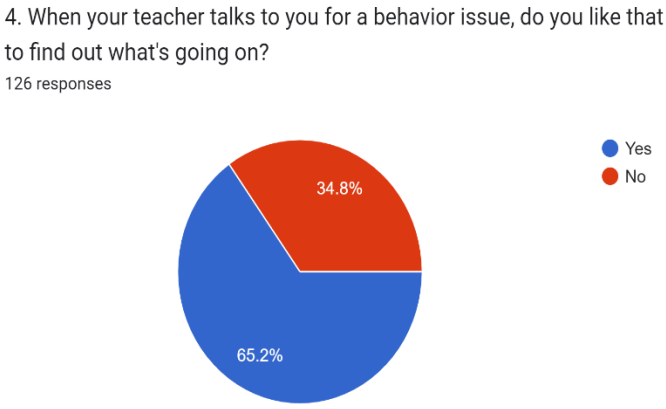


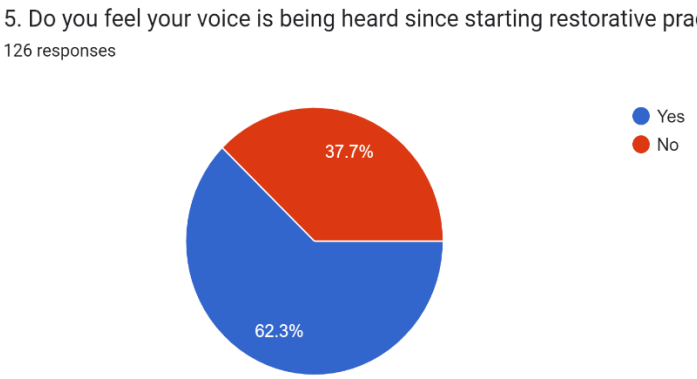
2. Since participating in the circles, do you feel more comfortable with your teachers and peers?
126 responses



3. Do you feel that restorative practices have improved teacher-student relationships?
126 responses







The data above provide strong evidence that when teachers apply RP, students feel their voices are heard, students like that teachers are asking questions to understand the root of the problem. It has improved student-teacher relationships, and students enjoy participating in the check-in circles.

Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles tackle student behavior issues and address academic concerns. Circles may be difficult initially, but when teachers start with small icebreakers, students are more inclined to participate (Costello et al., 2019). Brown (2017) said schools implementing RP provided opportunities for teachers to “be heard” through structured communication and collaboration and for students to “be heard” through circles, student councils, and working with

staff (as cited in Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021). During the research, the team conducted a restorative circle to address the large number of dress code violations. Circles represent preventive methods that can be designed and activated to support students and teachers in developing strong and positive relationships between them: circles allow a safe relational space for students to tell their stories (Lodi et al., 2021).

Over nine weeks, all grade-level students consistently violated the dress code policy. Students wore shorts that were too short, jeans and shirts with holes that revealed undergarments, and shirts that revealed the belly buttons of students. Students failed to display empathy for students who were offended by their attire. RC and conferences can represent alternative approaches to managing student behavior to find alternative disciplinary responses to suspensions and exclusions (Lodi et al., 2021). As we find alternatives, students are taught compromising skills that can lead to positive and caring emotions. As mentioned in the research, empathy emerged as a theme that students failed to demonstrate to their peers.

With the minor issue of dress code violation, I set up an RC for students and teachers. On October 18, 2023, I conducted an RC on the dress code policy. Circles are activated to address specific problems experienced in the classroom or school (Lodi et al., 2021). The dress code policy was a theme that emerged during the team meetings due to the number of referrals and the passion students and teachers displayed on the topic. Each of the seven teachers participating in the research was asked to invite two to three students who would provide their point of view maturely and thoughtfully. The RC included three teachers, 15 students, and myself. As I started the session with a brief introduction of the topic, I opened the floor for student comments and concerns.

Student 1, a female, asked to be recognized and stated:

> I don't think the dress code is very fair, and we should look at fixing it. I don't feel the fingertip length for girls is fair because some girls have long limbs, and their fingertips exceed the length of the shorts. And I don't think showing shoulders is a problem.

Student 3, a female, did not think the dress code was fair to girls because the fingertip rule is mostly applied to girls, and boys get to wear tank tops. Student 5, a male, stated the dress code is really fair because some girls wear clothing that reveals too much. The dress code should be stricter because girls show too much body. Ms. Henry stated:

> I feel the bigger issue is students that show their stomachs. It is a distraction because I don't want to see my student's stomach. At what point do we draw the line? How far are we to allow this to continue when a student comes to school wearing clothing that looks like an undergarment?

The teacher challenged the students to think about how they would feel if a teacher wore inappropriate clothing. Would you take the teacher seriously? It may be funny at first, but you will expect more from your teachers at some point. There is a specific expectation for teachers, just like there is an expectation for our students. Student 6, a female, added that she thinks teachers should be allowed to wear jeans because they are comfortable. However, I also felt that some students wear inappropriate shorts for a school setting. Student 7, a female, agreed with Ms. Henry and Student 6. "When girls wear clothing that shows their stomachs, it's kind of weird. I don't know why they are doing that, and it makes me feel uncomfortable. I think it is rude to show your stomach at school". Ms. Henry added that the primary purpose here is education, and you do not want to create a situation in which you are distracting from your main goal. You do not get to determine the dress code; the school board does that.

As the session continued, Ms. Johnson added that she was delighted that students were connecting with the standards set for students versus those for teachers. The standard for the student will not be the same for the teachers because we are adults, we have jobs, and this is our career. Therefore, we have to dress and behave as such. Teachers have the privilege to wear jeans once per month and on spirit days and notice that we follow the rules. We do not think jeans are inappropriate, but they are inappropriate for our career. Students must realize they have the freedom of choice but not the freedom to choose the consequences when breaking the rules. Students should not receive multiple referrals for dress code violations. The fourth dress code referral earns a student an out-of-school suspension.

As students continued to receive multiple referrals for dress code violations, students became more defiant. For example, students would wait a few days after receiving a referral to wear inappropriate clothing to challenge the staff. Parents attempted to justify their children's attire by stating they have the same outfit. As subsequent referrals were written for repeat offenders, those offenders earned ISS. If a student earned a fourth referral, as mentioned previously, the student received OSS. As the session continued, students began to understand the depth and breadth of the conversation. Consequently, the students attending the session started understanding the importance of dressing appropriately for an academic environment.

As the session continued, Ms. Henry told the students not to feel targeted. If you receive a dress code violation one day and your friend violates the dress code the next day and is missed, it does not mean you have been targeted. We have a hundred students to supervise and cannot catch everyone. We are building better relationships with students this year with RP, and we do not want you to think you have been targeted; at times, we miss dress code violations. Student 5 ended the session by saying:

> I went to an elementary school in a different district, and we wore uniforms. The students were respectful, took everything seriously, and were nice to all their teachers. When I came here, I noticed it was a lot different. I noticed that without uniforms, kids don't take things as seriously as they did at my old school, and I think that is because we had a uniform policy in place.

Overall, the RC was successful. During the session, students could distinguish between what is deemed appropriate attire for school and what is considered inappropriate with the assistance of the teachers. Through meaningful and respectful dialogue, students not only gained a valuable skill of conflict resolution but the session promoted a more informed student and facilitated a greater sense of mutual respect for teachers and their day-to-day battles with dress code infractions.

Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

After the PDSA cycles were complete, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the teachers. "For restorative practices to successfully bring about meaningful progress and change, careful reflection on restorative practices values and practices must occur" (Gregory & Evans, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2018, as cited in Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023, p. 3). In this section, I discuss a few of the teachers' answers provided during the semi-structured interviews.

During the interviews, I asked teachers six questions surrounding the implementation, purpose and goals, perspectives, communication, and next steps of RP. The teachers provided useful feedback during the interviews. As I synthesized the data from the interviews, several themes emerged. All the teachers expressed a high level of comfort with implementing SIC and AS in the classroom. The consistent feedback from teachers focused on the effectiveness of RP in enhancing student-teacher relationships. It underscored the importance of its continued use at

PTMS as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies for fostering an equitable educational environment in discipline for Black students. One of the themes that emerged was the ease of implementation of RP. The teachers stated they knew what to do due to the weekly meetings, observations in their classrooms, and consistent communications from me. Ms. Jackson said, "Each week, you laid out a plan and scaffolded it where it flowed nicely."

Teachers enjoy creating and participating in dialogue with students, making them more comfortable with SIC collectively. All the teachers stated they used SIC in the past but did not have a name for the intervention. Ms. Jackson said:

> Students in my homeroom were not of a population that typically acts up, but RP did have some struggling to manage high school credit classes and extracurriculars open up and be honest with their struggles. It provided strategies that prevented them from acting out negatively.

Ms. Jackson felt the check-in circles went well in her class, "It served as a good icebreaker when you ask students about their weekend and what academic goals are you setting for the week or quarter." Ms. Jackson's only challenge was that the study started at the beginning of the year when everything needed to be rolled out to parents and students, so she did not initially conduct as many check-in circles. Ms. Jackson stated, "I will continue using AS and check-in circles regularly as they elicit responses from my students, and the circles provide valuable information on my students. The students enjoy sharing during the circles." Ms. Jackson felt that the district needs to make RP mandatory but provide training for all the teachers so they know how to implement RP. "The only way it will be successfully implemented is if teachers are required to document their RP interventions; otherwise, teachers won't bother." Ms. Jackson's comment aligns with information from other studies. Joseph-McCatty and Hnilica (2023) stated that

successful implementation of restorative practices should include ample time for training and implementation, adequate resources, teacher buy-in, transparency, and power sharing, and finally, a commitment to upholding and supporting long relationships and building capacity of multi-tiered interventions.

The next teacher interviewed was Ms. Hawkins. Ms. Hawkins stated, “The goal of improving relationships was met based on her experiences with the students. What was most impactful was being able to positively voice things early in the year was nt.” When I asked Ms. Hawkins which RP she was most comfortable with, it was SIC. When asked about full implementation in the school, Ms. Hawkins stated, “It worked well with our team; I would like to see how well it works schoolwide. It would be interesting to see how much referrals will go down and how it impacts behaviors as a whole.” Teachers who participated in the study experienced discipline in a different form, which was positive and meaningful. The teachers recognized that there were referrals that may not have been warranted last year, but it was good to have both experiences to understand the impact of RP.

The next teacher I interviewed was Mr. Smith. Before participating in the research, Mr. Smith routinely conducts SIC with his students. Mr. Smith stated:

> I can build stronger bonds with my students when I conduct SIC. I was unsure about the check-in circles, but when I saw all the students participating, I saw the value check-in circles. Even the students who opted out were engaged in the conversation between the students.

Mr. Smith used SIC to allow students to set goals for themselves academically. There was a shift from behaviors-focused to more academic struggles mid-way through the study. Mr. Smith used check-in circles and SIC to discuss students taking responsibility for their academics.

My interview with Ms. Henry provided valuable insight into what was learned from the student and teacher standpoint. She pointed out that the longevity of RP within her pod will continue. “The positive outcomes far outweigh not doing RP because it changes the behaviors for students that I feel need RP the most, middle school students.” Ms. Henry felt implementation was easy; she mentioned the weekly meetings helped as she was able to ask questions to determine if she was doing a good job. When asked what RP intervention she was most comfortable with, Ms. Henry stated, “Affective statements and small impromptu conferences. I always did that with my students; I had to get used to using restorative language.” Ms. Henry was not as comfortable with circles. “Even though I have done similar things like that before, it was never in a classroom.” Ms. Henry felt that full-scale implementation should take place in BSD. Below is Ms. Henry’s response to full-scale implementation.

> Teachers need a seminar where they are trained on implementing all interventions, especially circles. We have to get teachers in the restorative mindset to ask the correct questions during interventions. Teachers look at the behavior first; instead, they should look at understanding it.

I had the most robust responses when I asked teachers their thoughts on implementing RP at PTMS. Unequivocally, teachers stated that RP has significantly impacted their students and classrooms. Below is a statement from Ms. Brown.

> I have seen a world of difference with two students in my homeroom class. One student has done a 180 with his behavior. The other one is halfway there, but I can see a change from the first day of school until now. He is still a work in progress, but RP has shown him that not everyone is out to get him. He is on probation this year due to his behavior; however, he has not received a referral so far.

Based on the data from the spreadsheet and the semi-structured interviews, most teachers felt most comfortable using SIC. The check-in circles were used frequently as well. Teachers enjoyed using the check-in circles to gather information about their students.

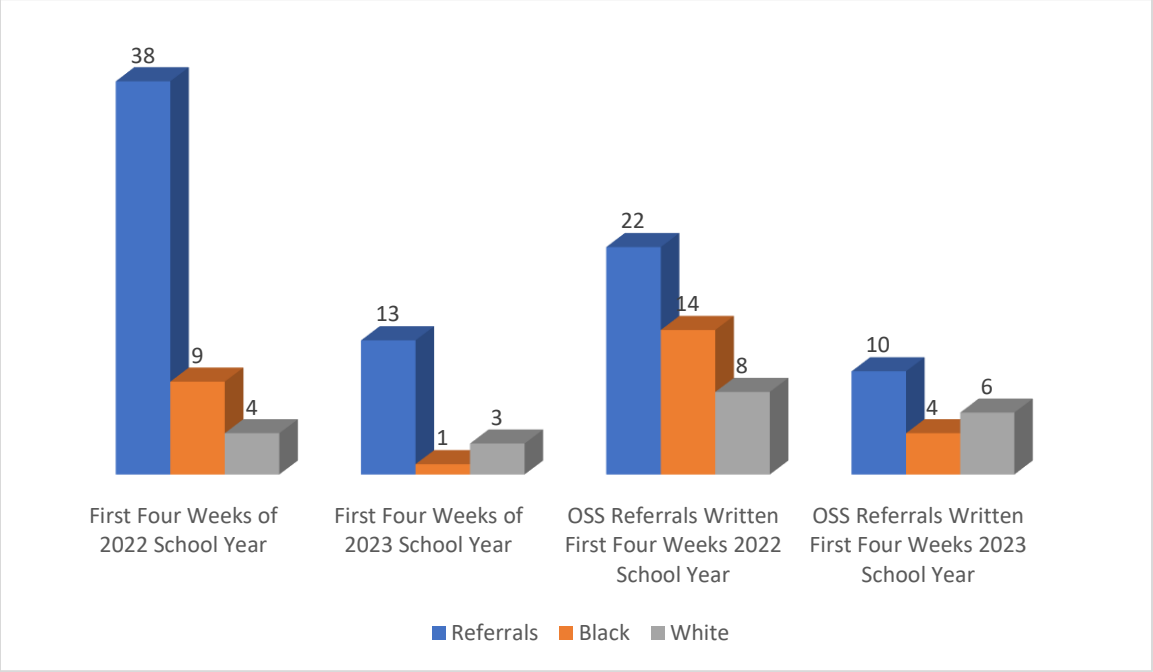
Several teachers have used similar tactics to resolve behaviors in the past, but RP has provided additional options to teach empathy and approach situations from a restorative lens. The restorative approach to the whole school promotes connections by supporting the development of fair, solid, and trusting relationships and recognizing the different experiences of marginalized student groups (Lodi et al., 2021). RP can provide positive experiences for students and improve climate and culture. Implementation of the restorative approach of the whole school helps to develop non-hierarchical leadership and promote proactive and decision-making processes among all school members, promoting a strong sense of membership (Gonzaleź et al., 2018, as cited in Lodi et al., 2021). When teachers allow students to be involved in their consequences, there is no power hoarded by the teachers. Students are more prone to follow through with the consequences and understand that their behavior was unacceptable and communicated to them restoratively.

Results

In this section, I summarize the results of the improvement science intervention. AS, AQ and Check-in circles were introduced during the first cycle. I wanted to determine if there were any distinguishable trends regarding percentages of Black students receiving referrals and receiving OSS from the first 45 days of 2022 and 2023. During the first cycle, teachers began grasping the RP concept and applying the informal interventions with their students. As mentioned in Figures 9 and 10, I broke down the referrals written during the first four weeks of the research for 2022 and 2023.

Figure 9

Referrals Written the First Four Weeks of 2022 & 2023



The figure above represents the percentages of the 38 referrals the Black and White students received during the first four weeks of school. During the 2022-23 school year, 71 Black students enrolled in the 8th grade at PTMS compared to 159 White students. Of the 38 referrals written during the first four weeks, nine resulted in OSS for Black students compared to 4 referrals resulting in OSS for White students. Based on the enrollment, Black students were disproportionately suspended compared to their White counterparts.

In the 2023-24 school year, 64 Black and 144 White students were enrolled in PTMS. During the first four weeks of school, 13 referrals were written. Of the 13 referrals, one resulted in a Black student receiving OSS, two resulted in White students receiving OSS, and one referral resulted in the expulsion of a White student.

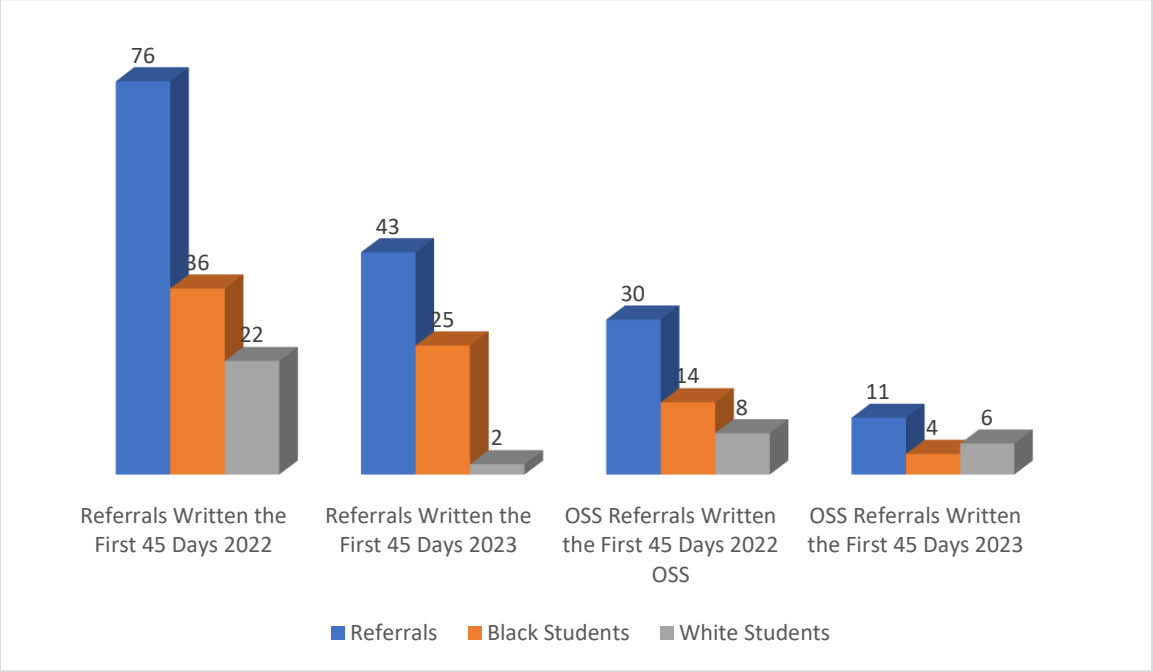
The data shows a steep decline in referrals written and OSS assigned to Black students from the previous year. The decline in referrals resulting in OSS for Black students is a direct result of teachers using RP to ask questions to learn more about the students and their circumstances, viewing students through a restorative lens, and establishing, feeding, and repairing relationships. The data also show that the referrals written are congruent with the enrollment numbers of the student population. As educators, we must create ways to repair the harm of OSS and expulsions.

During the first four weeks of 2023, there was a 65.78% reduction in total referrals written compared to 2022. There was an 88.8% reduction in referrals written for Black students in 2023 compared to 2022. Lastly, a 71.4% decrease in referrals resulted in OSS for Black students in 2023 compared to 2022.

In Figure 10, I compared the rates of referrals and referrals resulting in OSS for the first 45 days of 2022 and 2023.

Figure 10

Referrals Written the First 45 Days of the 2022 and 2023 School Years



The data above support that RP effectively reduces OSS and expulsion rates for Black students when appropriately implemented. This clear correlation between RP and improved disciplinary outcomes emphasized the need to fully implement RP throughout the school and district. Rainbolt et al. (2019) found the school significantly decreased office referrals and suspension rates after adopting restorative practices. Discipline disparities for race and gender were reduced. Teachers identified multiple barriers and facilitators to successful implementation (as cited in Zakeszeski & Rutherford, 2021). Applying RP with fidelity will create a balanced discipline environment. Doing so will ensure equitable and fair responses to behavior issues for Black students, ultimately promoting an inclusive and restorative educational environment.

There was a 43.4% decrease in total referrals written in 2023 compared to 2022. A 30.5% reduction in Black students receiving referrals in 2023 compared to 2022. A 71.4 % decrease in

referrals resulted in OSS for Black students in 2023 compared to 2022. There was a 92% reduction in Black students receiving referrals in 2023 compared to White students in the same year. There was a 33.3% reduction of Black students receiving OSS in 2023 compared to White students in the same year. The percentages are significant findings as the study set out to reduce OSS rates for Black students by 5%.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, I report the discussions of the findings of my data collection and summarize my research findings. My research found implementing restorative practices is an effective alternative to Black students' disproportionate OSS and expulsion rates, which are qualitative findings that surfaced from analyzing teacher and student data. The data support the conclusions of the research.

Answering the Research Questions

This study asked the following research questions: How can teachers and administrators use RP to reduce OSS and expulsion rates of Black students in public schools? How can teachers use RP to strengthen or repair teacher-student relationships? How can teachers use restorative circles to limit students' behavior issues? These questions and the supporting findings follow.

How can Teachers and Administrators use Restorative Practices to Reduce OSS and Expulsion Rates of Black Students in Public Schools?

The study found that teachers can use RP to ask questions to determine the root cause of behavior instead of using high control and low support statements and actions when addressing a behavior concern with Black students. Using dress code violations as an example, Black males in PTMS wear their pants lower than other students in the school. Instead of a teacher reacting by yelling at the student, "I don't want to see your underwear," followed by a referral, the teacher can use RP and pull a student to the side. The teacher can explain:

> This is an academic environment, and seeing your pants that low is distracting for me and the students. It would mean a lot to me for you to pull your pants up in my class and in my presence, please.

The comment above is an example of high control and high support. Teachers participating in this study confirmed that their students are responding well to SIC and are complying based on the reduced referrals.

How can Teachers Use Restorative Practices to Strengthen or Repair Teacher-Student Relationships?

The study found that teachers can strengthen or repair teacher-student relationships during the research. When teachers used SIC, check-in circles, or AQ, they engaged students in restorative conversations. Ms. Brown reported that check-in circles increased the willingness of her students to talk to her, and she observed a difference in students trusting teachers more. Ms. Jones expressed that students are learning the importance of opening up to trusting their teachers and understanding that teachers are not out to get them. Ms. Hawkins stated that RP built a place of safety for her students. Ms. Jones found that RP teaches students to be honest during interventions instead of making something up due to the open dialogue RP has created between students and teachers.

Teachers also described an accountability factor that emerged for students by using RP. Students started to take responsibility for their actions. For example, Mr. Smith and a student engaged in a heated discussion, and the student became disrespectful during their conference. The student and teacher came to my office to discuss the incident. As I began to employ AQ with both the teacher and the student, the student stated to Mr. Smith. “Mr. Smith, I should not have used that tone with you because you are my teacher. I need to respect you, and I apologize.” The tone of the conversation shifted; the teacher accepted the student’s apology. I acknowledged the student for recognizing his disrespectful tone and explained the importance of respecting teachers. After our conversation, I assigned a punitive consequence due to the student’s initial

behavior of school vandalism and his subsequent behavior toward Mr. Smith after he addressed the vandalism.

Creating trusting relationships between teacher and student is valuable. Teachers who have not embraced RP may struggle with power hoarding and behave based on their emotions. Ms. Hawkins used AQ with a student she discovered using a phone during class. The teacher referenced RP facilitated the rapport between the two, influencing a calmer reaction to her redirection. A few weeks later, the same student mentioned above was reprimanded for a phone violation by a teacher not participating in the study, and the teacher blew the incident out of proportion. The administration was called to the classroom; the student was searched by administration, which led to punitive consequences.

After learning of the incident, Ms. Hawkins stated her interaction with the same student was positive and credited RP for the positive interaction during the phone violation. This is evidence that the above interaction could have had a different result had the teacher used RP rather than escalating the problem. This is an excellent example of how RP makes a positive difference, specifically when teachers approach incidents from a restorative approach rather than a zero-tolerance approach. The teachers displayed two different approaches to discipline for the same violation, one from a high-control, high-support restorative standpoint and the other from a high-control, low-support punitive standpoint.

How can Teachers Use Restorative Circles to Limit Students' Behavior Issues?

During the teacher interviews, teachers described an issue they were experiencing. Students consistently violated the dress code policy for the school/district. Teachers would use RP to address the violation; however, a few days later, the same students violated the dress code

again. Ms. Jones stated she uses RP on dress code violations rather than traditional behavior issues. The teacher stated:

> We are having these SIC, students have served ISS, we have sent them to the front office to call their parents, we as teachers have called their parents, and it is like we have done nothing. The students seem receptive at the moment, but they come in the next day with a tube top or shorts that are too short.

The issue surrounding the dress code became so sensitive that students retaliated by circulating a petition to wear clothing contrary to the BSC dress code policy. As a result, I conducted an RC on October 18, 2023 (Week 8 PDSA cycle 2) with teachers and students to address the dress code policy.

Researcher Challenges with Implementation

The first challenge was getting 8th-grade teachers onboard to participate in the study. I initially secured 8 of the 12 teachers; however, one withdrew after the study's first week. Another 8th-grade teacher started the year after the study concluded, and three teachers did not respond. RP is a district initiative, and teachers must provide RP interventions before writing a referral. However, educators who perceive restorative practices as being too lenient and undermining of current behavioral accountability standards may, in turn, limit the amount of time they engage with restorative practices in their classroom (Fronius et al., 2016; Gregory & Evans, 2020, as cited in Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023). For those educators, sustainable change may be difficult to attain in their classrooms regarding behavior.

The first challenge was identifying a meeting time that works for everyone. Initially, I met with teachers 1:1, but that became time-consuming for the teachers and myself. The team decided to meet every Tuesday as a group. The group meetings were more effective than

individual meetings because teachers shared more of their opinions and ideas with their colleagues. Themes started to develop during the team meetings. For example, student dress code violations became a topic of conversation. Some teachers expected RP to eliminate misbehaviors altogether. However, throughout the study, the teachers understood that RP was a great tool but would not eliminate all misbehaviors.

Teacher Challenges Implementing Restorative Practices

Teachers stated that implementing RP added a layer of work. It takes time for teachers to practice and improve AS, AQ, SIC, and Restorative Circles/Check-Circles. I explained anything worth doing takes time. Investment in classroom climates and school cultures doesn't pay off overnight. The time you put into facilitating RP is advantageous to your climate, the students, and the number of redirections you will have to do in the future (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). It can take up to a year conducting RP for a teacher to develop a repository of AS and AQ that are restorative in nature rather than using statements that are high control and low support.

> To make lasting institutional change, we must ask whether those implementing restorative practices in public schools are doing so with a critical eye toward reversing the traditional notions of control and order that have always been an integral part of public schools. (Lustick, 2021b, p. 1276)

During these meetings, teachers identified additional challenges: setting aside time to document RP interventions. The team and I problem-solved and identified three days during their planning as the most suitable time to record interactions. When teachers conducted an RP intervention, they jotted down the AS, AQ, or SIC used and briefly described the exchange. It is essential to take the time to track the behavior and interventions.

> The more time you dedicate to creating successful students who feel heard, the easier your job will be. Chances are, if you do not dedicate the time upfront to fully resolve a conflict, offer closure, and create a plan to prevent repeated behaviors, you will end up spending more time on this same issue again in the future (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 28).

The initial effort placed in RP will determine the success of the multi-tiered approach to discipline.

Only one teacher participated in the study on one of the pods (at PTMS, the 8th-grade team consists of four-person teams called pods), making it difficult for ongoing procedures and a common voice.

I understood that it was difficult for some teachers to embrace RP. "Ultimately, restorative practices are less hierarchical and punitive, and instead focus on mutual respect, dignity accountability, and fairness; together, the facets make-way for more just and equitable classrooms and schools" (Evans & Vaandering, 2016; Gregory & Evans, 2020, as cited in Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2022, p. 2). Unfortunately, giving up punitive power for some educators is unfathomable. Therefore, requiring educators to document their multi-tiered discipline system is critical to successful implementation.

During planning, teachers referred to their notes and documented the interaction. I also offered to record the interactions for teachers experiencing challenges with setting aside the time to enter the exchanges for themselves. As a result, when those teachers saw me in the hallway, they would stop me to discuss an RP interaction, and I would document the interactions for the teacher in the spreadsheet.

Teachers expressed challenges when conducting SIC. SIC sometimes requires teachers to step into the hallway with a student to address the behaviors privately. Teachers were concerned they were leaving the class unattended. To resolve the challenge, I asked the teachers to remain in the doorway to provide supervision, speak with the students after class, or call the school's behavior interventionists to watch the class during the SIC.

During PDSA cycle 2 (Week 6), Ms. Hawkins brought a concern to my attention. The teacher asked, what should we do when students are not responding to RP interventions as previously? For example, the teacher used the AQ: "Do you understand how this makes me feel?" and the AS: "I understand you feel this way." The teacher was concerned that students were becoming less responsive to RP as the weeks progressed. I reminded the teacher as you progress through the multi-tiered responses and students continue to misbehave, that is when the administration becomes involved. RP will not eliminate all misbehaviors; punitive consequences are applied to those students.

Mr. Smith stated that RP has improved behavior, but he had begun to "deal with academic challenges. Students turn in late work; it is sub-par when they turn it in." Mr. Smith used RC and SIC and turned those into academic discussions with students, not behavior as much due to their apathy toward schoolwork. "Restorative practices as an alternative to school disciplinary model can also lead to positive results with respect to academic outcomes with higher student engagement in education, supporting educational approaches to improve school performance" (Lodi et al., 2021, p. 14). The teacher stated that he is twisting the question to ask, "How is turning in this work preparing you for high school?" The teacher does not think the students understand the importance of goals or aspirations and displays a lack of empathy. Teachers must understand that empathy is not inherent.

> We must be intentional about cultivating empathy in our classrooms. Many students are not hardwired to understand others. Empathy must be learned and practiced. Not all students get exposure to people who are different from them, or have had opportunities to learn to interact successfully with people who are different from them. These students will fall behind on the path toward empathy, just from a lack of exposure (Maynard & Weinstein, 2029, p. 127).

Solutions to Challenges Implementing Restorative Practices

With all research, there are challenges to overcome. Below, I discuss solutions to my challenges during the study and solutions. As I mentioned earlier, RP had an indirect impact on student referrals. Historically, the referrals have targeted Black students; however, the study showed a decrease in those referrals. The indirect impact is a result of the research being conducted and the requirement of using RP and documenting the multi-tiered interventions before writing a referral.

To overcome the challenge for administration, based on this research, first training teachers on the proper use of RP so teachers understand how to apply the multi-tiered approach based on student behavior. Second, teachers must provide evidence of applying the multi-tiered support system to the student before writing a referral. Holding teachers accountable for writing referrals is the key. By requiring the above, teachers will improve their classroom management, decrease referrals by writing authentic referrals, and discourage teachers from writing unfair referrals targeting Black students. However, every administrator in the building must have the same mindset to accomplish this basic need.

Implication of Findings: Systems Approach

This research revealed the importance of using a systems approach when implementing RP. The critical issue that emerged from the findings was the need for an alternative to zero-tolerance policies that have disproportionally impacted Black students. “Given the negative consequences of punitive punishment for individual students and for the overall school climate, it is clear that schools need to reconsider their traditional responses to student behavior (Payne & Welch, 2018, p. 237). “RP means giving students the key to not only stay out of trouble but to unlock their potential to achieve” (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 180). There is a need for disciplinary consequences that are appropriate, instructive, and valuable to student development to replace harsher punishments (DeMatthews et al., 2017). In the theoretical framework, I discussed the SDW and how it provides options that are less harsh and simple but useful. The SDW describes four basic approaches to creating and maintaining social norms and behavioral boundaries (Wachtel, 2005).

The best way to help students learn from mistakes is not to get rid of them or put them in detention but to have them make it right (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Students want to do the right thing but need to be coached or taught problem-solving skills. DeMatthews (2017) goes on to say overly punitive punishment is counterproductive, reflects abuses of power, widens the racial discipline gap, and funnels students into the school-to-prison pipeline. Punishment may be quick and easy, but it is short-term. The effects of RP are long-term, but it takes effort. Educators have two choices: try to correct behavior by continuing to punish or spend time building relationships, getting to the root of the problem, and helping students repair the harm they have caused (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019).

Significance

The data show that RP can be used to manage behaviors, improve student-teacher relationships, and teach empathy to students. The most important finding demonstrates that RP works in reducing the disproportionate OSS and expulsion rates of not only Black students but all students. Less than full implementation of RP reduced the number of referrals written by teachers that perhaps would have resulted in OSS or expulsion of Black students. “After adopting restorative practices, the school had significant decreases in their incident referrals and number of students involved in referrals, and students learned new skills related to communication, empathy, relationship-building, and leadership” (Ingraham et al., 2016, as cited in Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021, p. 376). Teachers report that RP has made strides in improving their relationships with their students and learning students' names, thoughts about school, behaviors, and home dynamics more quickly. For example, Ms. Henry stated it would normally take half a year to learn what she learned about her students in the first month of school using check-in circles. Check-in circles promote positive interactions between students and promote an open space for anyone to participate. Ms. Brown stated, “The students got a kick out of me participating in the check-in circle because they got an opportunity to learn something about me during the activity.”

Secondly, the data demonstrated that when used effectively, RP can improve trust between teachers and students, allow students to express themselves restoratively, and enable students to show respect and empathy to their peers. RP teaches students problem-solving skills and how to effectively communicate with peers and adults alike. “Decreases in discipline referrals and suspensions followed the schools’ adoption of restorative practices. The need for reactive practices decreased implementation” (Stinchcomb et al., 2006, as cited in Zakszeski &

Rutherford, 2021, p. 376). The need for reactive practices decreased during the study, proving that RP worked, and students complied with directives. Teachers also reported that the multi-tiered support system has improved their window of tolerance for student behaviors.

As I mentioned previously, RP has direct and indirect impacts. Teachers who opted out have to demonstrate they used RP before writing a referral that leads to a punitive consequence. Ms. Henry stated that she teaches students to respectfully communicate with other adults besides their teachers, peers, and parents. RP can effectively replace the zero-tolerance to discipline and teach the abovementioned skills. Teachers can use high control and high support based on the social discipline window when dealing with behaviors. Ensuring everyone is routinely implementing RP strategies is the key.

Schools must evaluate their RP program. An evaluation will provide valuable input to determine if the steps are working. “Maintain an open dialogue with school staff to successfully implement the restorative culture shift. Staff should be able to openly discuss how adult behavior affects student interactions and discuss possible effects of implicit bias. Be honest with one another” (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 23).

The research was significant for me as a practitioner because it provides evidence that RP can resolve conflict, improve teacher-student relationships, allow students to show empathy, and promote accountability for behaviors when used appropriately. Based on the data, there has been a significant reduction in referrals written by 8th-grade teachers when comparing quarter one of the 2022-2023 school year to quarter one of the 2023-2024 school year.

I attribute the decrease to RP for two reasons. First, RP has a direct and indirect impact on the way teachers handle discipline in their classrooms. The direct impact is the causal relationship between the implementation of RP by teachers using the multi-tiered approach of RP

with fidelity. These facets of RP must be present to see real change and effect. Conversely, RP was not used in Quarter 1 of the 2022-2023 school year; thus, more referrals were written in that quarter. In the second data set, Quarter 1 of the 2023-2024 school year, RP was employed, directly impacting the number of referrals written with a net decrease of 33 fewer referrals in the first Quarter of 2023. The indirect impact is that beginning in Quarter 1 of the 2023-2024 school year, teachers were now required to provide evidence of RP taken before escalating minor infractions to administration. RP then served as an indirect deterrent to immediately writing a referral for minor misbehaviors without attempting to employ restorative problem-solving before out-sourcing the problem and intending to isolate or punish the student due to the misconduct. No such deterrent existed in Quarter 1 of the 2022-2023 school year. The research provides clear evidence that when RP was implemented in the school, it decreased the accumulation of minor referrals that led to OSS and expulsions of Black students both directly and indirectly. However, several challenges were incurred during the process.

Requirement for Teachers

The second theme that emerged was requiring teachers to document their RP interventions before writing an office referral. An office referral is a referral that is submitted to administration for processing. When office referrals are written, a student has committed an egregious act, or the teacher has used the multi-tiered approach to discipline without success. However, in the past, office referrals were written for different reasons. Teachers routinely wrote office referrals for minor infractions that teachers can manage using RP. If teachers are not required to document their interventions for behaviors, inevitably, teachers will take the path of less resistance and apply exclusionary practices to students (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). Requiring documentation will remove the path of less resistance, and teachers will apply RP.

Requiring teachers to use RP will lend itself to full implementation. Based on my data, RP significantly impacted the number of referrals written, improved student-teacher relationships, improved empathy, held students accountable for their actions, and ultimately decreased the number of Black students receiving OSS during the first 45 days of school. Seven out of 31 teachers (schoolwide) participated in the study. When full implementation occurs, the number of office referrals and Black students receiving OSS and expulsions will also decrease.

Recommendations

This study examined RP as an alternative to the disproportionate OSS and expulsion rates of Black students. RP in schools has demonstrated immense potential in transforming school cultures, fostering student-teacher relationships, and holding students accountable for their actions. However, more research must take place to leverage the benefits of RP and ensure their effectiveness. I recommend targeted research evaluating RP's impact on student behavior, academic achievement, and school and classroom climate.

BSD rolled out RP in the 2022-2023 school year; however, training was inadequate to prepare teachers for a partial implementation. The district must investigate to identify effective teacher training strategies and conduct comprehensive teacher training or professional development (PD) on RP. The district must then follow up after the training to assess the impact the training has on classroom dynamics and student engagement.

In the study, I conducted a restorative circle to explore the concerns of students regarding dress code violations. Dress code violations are minor infractions, like tardies and class absences. The BSD has a zero-tolerance approach to minor offenses, such as tardies, but once a student has accumulated a certain amount, the student receives OSS. RP can address these minor infractions without students receiving punitive consequences for the behavior.

> National levels have shown that there are a small number of serious infractions that are drug or weapons related the most frequent disciplinary events with which schools wrestle are minor disruptive behaviors such as tardiness, class absence, disrespect, and noncompliance. A broad policy that seeks to punish both minor and major disciplinary events equally will, almost by definition, result in the punishment of a small percentage of serious infractions, and a much larger percentage of relatively minor infractions. (Skiba, 2000, p. 6)

I will share my research findings with the principal at PTMS and the BSD and recommend a comprehensive PD on RP for all teachers in PTMS and each middle school across the district. The findings will also be shared with the district's Diversity and Inclusion Department with a recommendation to take a deeper look into the discipline policies, specifically zero-tolerance policies, to consider suspending the policy or making updates to ensure appropriate consequences are applied for behaviors. I will use the data to show the disproportionate OSS and expulsion rates of Black students over the past three years.

A longitudinal study tracking the long-term effects of RP approaches, examining their sustainability and lasting impact on school communities, will also benefit the field of RP. I will continue my focus on RP in PTMS and continue to require teachers to provide documentation of RP before writing referrals. I will provide the 8th-grade teachers with the number of referrals and referrals resulting in OSS quarterly. I will continue to provide guidance and support on RP for teachers throughout the school and extend RP to the 7th-grade teachers. Since the BSD is a RP district, I will conference with my principal to discuss implementing RP within the 6th grade. Some 6th-grade teachers are close to retirement, so pushback from veteran teachers may occur. However, I will provide credible information to substantiate complete implantation and remind

teachers of the following: The thesis of RP is that humans are happier, more cooperative, more productive, and willing to make positive changes regarding their behavior when those in position of authority do things with them, not to them (Wachtel et al., 2010, as cited in Payne & Welch, 2018).

Finally, I will recommend reviewing the student data collection entries to understand what infractions students have incurred, what patterns exist, and what actions have been taken to change the behavior (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019). This study has demonstrated that teachers can use RP to improve student-teacher relationships and manage behaviors in a restorative manner.

Conclusion

When conducting a full-scale implementation of RP at any given school, it is recommended to conduct full-scale training for staff members on the multi-tiered discipline system and require teachers to document RP interventions before writing referrals. For example, if documentation is not required, teachers will write referrals for behaviors that could have been remedied with the multi-tiered discipline system. Due to the paucity of research on RP in schools, schools that adopt the practices should be particularly attentive to full-scale implementation for students to benefit (Gregory et al., 2016, as cited by Hollands et al., 2022). This is particularly important when RP are utilized in large schools and districts.

Teachers have different perspectives, opinions, experiences, and windows of tolerance. Therefore, providing the requirement of a multi-tiered support system will decrease administrative referrals. Teachers who participated in the research wrote more referrals than the other 8th-grade teachers. However, there were two reasons for that: one, the majority of the 8th-grade teachers participated in the study, and two, those teachers who participated in the research

had a more challenging group of students. The teachers are required to exercise and document RP interventions before writing a referral. When RP did not correct their behavior, an appropriate referral was written for misconduct. It is important to note that when the non-participants wrote a referral, they were required to provide documentation of RP interventions. If the documentation was absent, the referral was logged as classroom-managed unless the administration deemed the behavior worthy of a referral after the review process.

This study found that RP reduced OSS and expulsion rates of Black students at PTMS. The data are conclusive: RP decreased the number of OSS and expulsion rates. In most instances, these rates are directly related to student(s) receiving multiple referrals for minor infractions. Some teachers may harbor biases based on their stereotyping and implicit bias; therefore, they write unwarranted referrals for deeply seated reasons. For example, "Implicit association tests demonstrated that when Black faces were primed, they were more often associated with crime objects than when White faces were primed" (Eberhardt et al., 2007, as cited in Gregory & Roberts, 2017, p. 189). What is disturbing about the priming data is that it has implications for professionals, including teachers, who exert authority and enforce rules (Gregory & Roberts, 2017). The multi-tiered discipline system required teachers to provide documentation of their interactions; fewer Black students were given OSS or expelled.

Based on the teacher responses from the semi-structured interviews, RP should be required for all teachers in the building. It improves student-teacher relationships, teaches how to express their concerns, process their behavior constructively, and teaches problem-solving skills and empathy. An excellent way to broaden empathy is through exposure.

> Expose your students to people and ideas that are outside their normal everyday experiences to help them connect with the wider world around them and demystify the

> different results in students who are more empathetic, compassionate, and invested in their communities. (Maynard & Weinstein, 2019, p. 128)

Ms. Jackson stated:

> Even though my homeroom did not have behavior problems, the data from the research shows marginalized groups are typically disproportionately deemed for punitive punishment in our school. Everyone in our building needs to understand RP and how zero-tolerance policies impact marginalized students; if RP can assist with the disproportionate number of referrals, OSS, and expulsions, it should be a sound solution to apply.

It is acutely evident that RP has had a significant positive impact on our students and discipline practices at PTMS. To ensure continued growth and improvement in student-teacher relationships and PTMS's educational environment, I strongly recommend making RP a requirement for all teachers in PTMS and every district across the country. Implementing RP within a whole-school approach offers significant promise for addressing discipline disparities, particularly for marginalized youth and youth of color (Kervick et al., 2019).

> It is essential to train all school members in restorative practices as well as a common and shared line among all members of the school community, also including families and external stakeholders who, in various capacities, work and / or collaborate with the school. (Lodi et al., 2021, p. 17)

Doing so will enable our teachers and administrators to consistently nurture and maintain a strong foundation of restorative values and practices for all students.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER PRE-SURVEY QUESTIONS

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am familiar with restorative practices and how it benefits students.	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable using restorative practices as an intervention in my classroom.	1	2	3	4
The use of restorative practices could benefit my students behaviorally and socially.	1	2	3	4
Training I received in the 2022-23 school year was practical and helpful.	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable using affective statements with my students.	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable using affective questions with my students.	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable using small impromptu conferences with my students.	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable using restorative circles/chats with my students.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX B: STUDENT PRE-SURVEY QUESTIONS

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am familiar with restorative practices.	1	2	3	4
I am familiar with affective statements.	1	2	3	4
I am familiar with affective questions.	1	2	3	4
I am familiar with small impromptu conferences.	1	2	3	4
I am familiar with restorative circles/chats.	1	2	3	4
I feel student-teacher relationships can improve in my school.	1	2	3	4
I am familiar with zero-tolerance policies.	1	2	3	4
I feel my school uses zero-tolerance policies unnecessarily.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX C: TEACHER POST-SURVEY QUESTIONS

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I felt fully supported in implementing restorative practices in my school.	1	2	3	4
Teachers at my school participated in restorative practices and effectively implemented restorative practices.	1	2	3	4
Restorative practices benefitted my students behaviorally and socially.	1	2	3	4
The training received was practical and helpful.	1	2	3	4
My referrals decreased after using restorative practices.	1	2	3	4
The school administrator supported this implementation fully.	1	2	3	4
The school administrator was helpful when challenges arose.	1	2	3	4
I am satisfied with restorative practice interventions in my school.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX D: STUDENT POST-SURVEY QUESTIONS

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel fully supported when restorative practices are used.	1	2	3	4
Students at my school felt restorative practices helped them communicate effectively through their problems with other students.	1	2	3	4
Restorative practices have improved my relationships with my teachers.	1	2	3	4
My voice is heard and valued because of restorative practices.	1	2	3	4
I received fewer referrals due to restorative practices.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX E: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

Focus Area	Question	Probe Example
Purpose and Goals	What is your opinion of the goals and purpose of restorative practices?	Is the goal being met? If so, can you share an example?
Implementation	Please share your knowledge of how the implementation process went. What restorative measure(s) are you most comfortable using? Affective questions, affective statements, restorative chats, or restorative circles?	Have you experienced any challenges implementing restorative practices?
Professional Development	What professional development opportunities did you receive on restorative practices outside of your training at PTMS?	Have you received feedback from the Office of Student and Family Support at the BSD on restorative practices?
Perspectives	What are your thoughts on the implementation of restorative practices in your school?	Please share any additional perspectives.
Communication	Was adequate communication provided about implementing and supporting restorative practices at your school?	What are your plans for continuous communication?
Next Steps	What other supports do you believe the BSD needs to implement restorative practices district-wide fully?	Please share any additional questions, comments, or concerns.

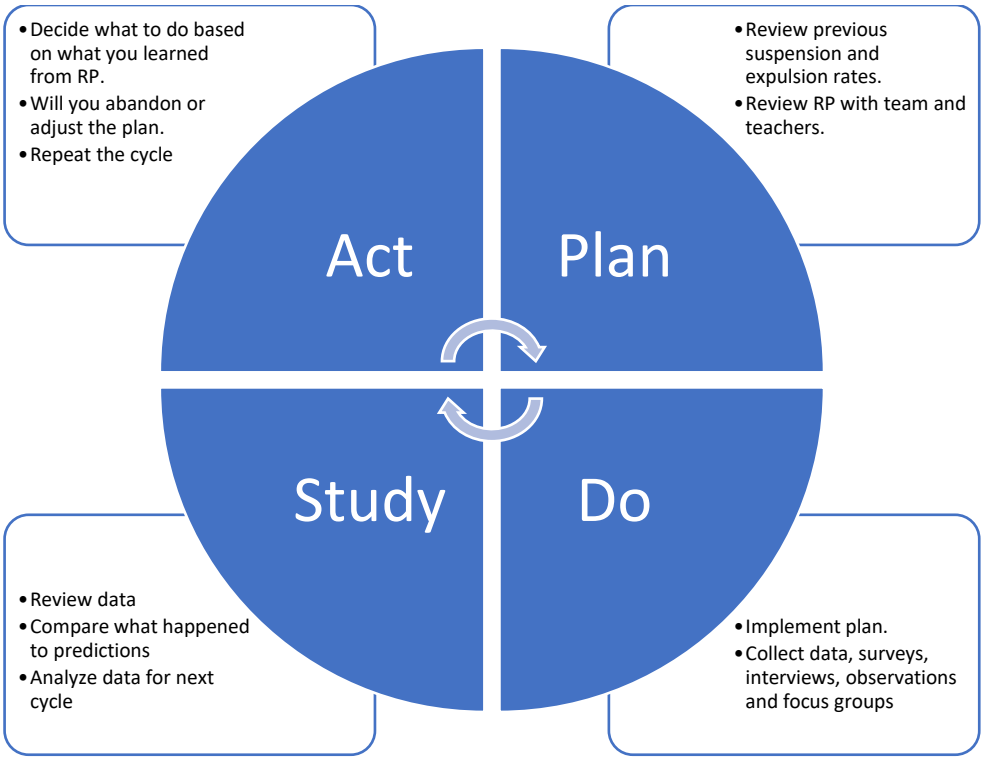
*Affective statements: Another way of expressing your feelings or describing impact, for example, acknowledging success, hard work, collaboration, or any other desirable behavior.
**Affective questions: In other words, asking students about the root cause of a challenging behavior.
***Small impromptu conversations/restorative chat: To actively engage students in expressing their feelings, thinking about the impact of their behavior, and conflict resolution.
****Restorative circle/check-in circles: These are used to check in on students during class.

APPENDIX F: RESTORATIVE PRACTICES CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Teacher_____Date_____Time_____

Subject	Comment
The teacher actively used an affective statement, an affective question, or a restorative chat 5-6 times during class.	
The teacher utilized Circles to explain the task for the day.	
The teacher utilized a restorative response when addressing student behavior.	
The teacher engaged in zero-tolerance response during initial misbehavior of student.	

APPENDIX G: PDSA CYCLE



APPENDIX H: COMMUNICATION FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS DATA COLLECTION

CRDC <CRDC@aemcorp.com> Mon, Dec 19, 2022, 4:01 PM

to me

Hello Ezra,

Thank you for contacting the CRDC Partner Support Center.

The 2020-21 CRDC has not yet been publicly available. It is currently still in the process of Privacy Protection. We are required by law to mitigate the risk of re-identification of specific individuals in the data. To accomplish this, OCR applies a blurring methodology to reduce the precision of some of the data elements. We hope the Public Use file for the 2020-21 data will be available early 2023. To stay updated on new CRDC information, please go to https://crdc.communities.ed.gov/#program. All OCR updates will be posted here.

I have attached your 2020-21 CRDC Submission Review Report (PDF) and the Zipped LEA Submissions (CSV).

Please note: The 2020-21 CRDC data are not **privacy protected at this time.** It is your, the district's, responsibility to ensure that the data are privacy protected before releasing the data to another entity or individual – including responses to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Right-to-Know Requests. Please be aware that **privacy protecting your data is required by law.** Privacy protecting the data mitigates the risk of re-identification of specific individuals in the data before the data are released. OCR will release the 2020-21 privacy protected CRDC data in 2023.