Urban Educators' Journey with Restorative Justice: Insights and Challenges

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of how restorative practice strategies impact the execution of school discipline in an urban middle school. This study included a review of data collected from interviews with middle school administrators and teachers in a large school district. A purposeful sample of four administrators and 11 teachers were interviewed. The interviews provided an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' experiences and perceptions regarding the efficacy of utilizing restorative practice strategies at their campus. The findings of this study highlight the challenges identified, such as inadequate training, lack of buy-in, and prevalent deficit ideology, and underscore the necessity for comprehensive solutions.

Introduction

Middle school is a critical time socially, emotionally, and academically for students (Borman et al., 2021). During this time, some students experience decreased academic achievement, social and emotional changes, and increased academic rigor due to the transition from elementary to middle school (Borman et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2022; Moore McBride et al., 2016). Additionally, Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2020) report a substantial increase in discipline referrals and suspensions during this time that disproportionately impacts Black and Brown students. These findings are significant since research has noted the symbiotic relationship between exclusionary discipline and academic achievement (Gregory et al., 2010). Specifically, Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) determined that middle schools become increasingly punitive between the beginning of the year and Thanksgiving. Furthermore, Black students (relative to White students) bear the brunt as discipline escalates more severely for Black students throughout the year (Darling-Hammond et al.). Finally, racial disparities in discipline escalate most in schools with a high degree of racial disparity early in the year (Darling-Hammond et al.).

Aside from an established connection between exclusionary discipline and negative academic performance, there are more risks involved. Exclusionary discipline has also been associated with increased dropout rates (McNeil et al., 2016), social and emotional distress (Grace, 2023; Jones et al., 2018), involvement with the criminal justice system (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Mallett, 2016), and adverse economic impact (Rumberger & Losen, 2016). Educational leaders are charged with doing all they can to address the needs of schools regarding discipline and ensuring student safety while maximizing the opportunity to learn. Given the disproportionality in exclusionary discipline and its impact on Black and Brown students, this study aimed to examine administrator and teacher perceptions of restorative practices (RP) as an approach to school discipline, professional learning effectiveness, and the impact of their attempt at implementation. The findings of this study will inform educational leaders and teachers of crucial considerations while implementing RP as a systemic reform.

Review of the Literature

Restorative Justice Practices: Promises and Perils

Disproportionality in out-of-school suspension and expulsion refers to the systemic tendency for Black, Latino, and other students of color, to be disciplined at higher rates compared to their peers (Bastable et al., 2022). This issue underscores broader inequities within educational systems, reflecting disparities in access to resources, cultural biases, and institutionalized discrimination (Grace & Nelson, 2019). Research consistently shows that students of color, particularly Black and Latino students, as well as those with disabilities, are disproportionately affected by exclusionary

discipline practices (Annamma et al., 2018; Losen et al., 2013; Mallett, 2016.) Such disparities not only perpetuate cycles of inequality but also have significant long-term consequences, including increased likelihood of academic disengagement, involvement with the criminal justice system, and decreased opportunities for future success (Grace & Nelson). Addressing disproportionality requires comprehensive strategies prioritizing equity, cultural competence, and alternatives to punitive measures, fostering inclusive learning environments where all students feel valued and supported.

Out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates by race in Texas reveal concerning disparities that highlight systemic inequities within the educational system. Data consistently indicate that Black and Latino students are disproportionately subjected to these disciplinary measures compared to their White peers (Tajalli & Garba, 2014; Texas Education Agency [TEA], n.d.a). According to recent reports, Black students in Texas are suspended or expelled at rates significantly higher than their representation in the student population, often reflecting deeply entrenched racial biases and discriminatory practices (Grace, 2024; TEA). Similarly, Latino students also experience disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline, exacerbating the disparities in educational outcomes and opportunities (TEA). These disparities hinder academic progress and contribute to a broader cycle of social marginalization and systemic injustice. Addressing these disparities requires comprehensive efforts to dismantle structural barriers, promote cultural competence among educators, implement restorative justice practices, and foster inclusive school environments where all students feel valued and supported, regardless of their racial or ethnic background.

Fronius et al. (2019) published a review of the research on restorative justice in the United States concerning findings on the key issues, models of restorative justice, and results of the studies conducted in the field. According to the report, restorative justice results from a social movement that uses non-punitive and relationship-centered approaches to violations. These measures are a means to divert people from traditional justice systems and to assist in rehabilitating those in the adult or juvenile justice system (Fronius et al.). Restorative

justice can be used in school settings as an alternative to exclusionary actions such as suspension and expulsion. Recently, these strategies have been utilized as prevention to create an interconnected school community and a healthy school climate (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Additionally, Morrison and Vaandering (2014) purported that restorative justice could address the imbalances of power that ultimately shape youths' perspectives on the fairness of school discipline.

The premise of RP focuses on building and repairing relationships that are damaged when students misbehave (Fronius et al., 2019; Weaver & Swank, 2020). Greenstein (2017) provided real-world examples of restorative practice; for example, if a student uses profanity toward the teacher and leaves the classroom without permission, this student has damaged the relationship by using profanity and disrespecting the teacher. According to Johnstone (2013), by viewing this situation with a restorative lens, determinations are made about the acts and root causes to understand how students made the decisions leading to these outcomes. Also, restorative justice is an approach to examining damaged relationships and how students could repair them. Researchers note that students could take ownership of repairing relationships and changing their behavior to remain in school, and this process contrasts with a three-day OSS zero-tolerance policy (Pycroft & Christen-Schneider, 2021; Zehr, 2004).

Furthermore, Gregory and Clawson (2016) researched two diverse East Coast high schools and found that disciplinary referrals dropped by 21% after implementing restorative justice practices. The study also found that the suspension rate for Black and Hispanic students was statistically lower when teachers employed at least one practice compared to classrooms with no such practices. Other recent studies on restorative justice and school discipline found that reductions in discipline referrals, suspensions, and misbehavior can range from 16% to 51% (Gregory & Clawson). Ultimately, schools pursue RP to mitigate documented harm caused by exclusionary practices.

However, findings are inconclusive regarding some of the experiences with implementation that impact the outcome of the initiative. Gregory and Evans (2020) note the following as reasons why results are inconclusive:

(1) mandated top-down initiatives misaligned with values of restorative justice practices; (2) narrow approaches focused on a single restorative practice; (3) colorblind or power blind approaches to marginalizing dynamics; (4) "train and hope" approaches that offer few implementation supports; and (5) under-resourced and short-term initiatives that likely result in minimal buy-in, inconsistent practices, and teacher frustration and burnout. (p. 12)

Several studies highlight systemic implementation gaps that hurt the effectiveness of RP. For example, Stewart and Ezell (2022) assert that "ideological support for restorative justice does not directly assume ideal program implementation" (p. 19). To that end, they conducted a qualitative study with teachers, administrators, and security officers at five urban high schools in the Chicago metropolitan region to assess concerns about RP implementation. Their findings indicate that staff members interviewed suggested that the successful adoption of restorative justice hinges on the establishment of a comprehensive "restorative culture" within the school (Stewart & Ezell). However, participants cited various reasons for the lack of buy-in, including a continued belief in the efficacy of punitive disciplinary methods and the notion that educators can effectively perform their duties without forming close relationships with students (Stewart & Ezell). Many staff members also expressed a lack of knowledge on integrating restorative justice practices into their work (Stewart & Ezell).

Moreover, institutional obstacles impede the implementation of restorative justice within schools, such as limited financial resources, inconsistencies in administrative policies, and the persistent influence of racial biases (Stewart & Ezell, 2022). Finally, participants referred to student misconduct as fundamentally caused by their experiences beyond the school environment that induced mental health challenges and personal trauma, resulting in limited success in fully addressing conflict via restorative justice unless the deeper reasons behind students' behavior are appropriately engaged with (Stewart & Ezell). The authors propose that RP initiatives cultivate buy-in by addressing widespread misconceptions around restorative justice principles and directly engaging with widespread biased perceptions within disciplinary practices. Furthermore, Stewart and Ezell express that training will need to take an explicitly anti-racist framework to be effective, given the ongoing relationship between inequities in school discipline and embedded racial stereotyping of Black students.

Carter Andrews and Gutwein (2020) offer that middle school signifies a crucial transition for students, as educators often anticipate the development of academic and social skills needed for success in high school and beyond. However, this period frequently accompanies a notable surge in discipline referrals and suspensions, disproportionately affecting Black and Brown students (Carter Andrews & Gutwein). The authors argue that scholarly discourse on school discipline predominantly centers on elementary and high school levels, leaving the middle school landscape underexplored. Thus, they conducted a qualitative study with 40 middle school students through focus groups in a midwestern suburban school district.

Their findings indicate that educators may inadvertently perpetuate biases and inflict trauma on students through disciplinary actions and recommend a systematic approach to reflect on disciplinary practices. Initiating this process may entail educators addressing implicit racial biases through targeted professional development or fostering professional learning communities within the school environment (Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020). Moreover, establishing a positive rapport with students of color could diminish the reliance on detrimental stereotypes in disciplinary decision-making. Furthermore, middle schools and educators are encouraged to integrate restorative justice practices to address harm caused by misbehavior and reinforce positive relationships as well as culturally responsive positive behavior interventions and supports (CRPBIS), which underscores collaboration with families and communities, monitoring disciplinary trends across student identity markers, and providing professional development to enhance educators' awareness of their social identities and their interactions with those of their students (Carter Andrews & Gutwein).

Conceptual Framing

Khalifa et al.'s (2016) Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) serves as the conceptual framework for this study. CRSL is

considered an essential element that aids in schools' implementation of RP to address the disproportionate academic and discipline outcomes for minoritized students. Archibold (2016) concluded that using CRSL could promote educational access and equity beyond the classroom setting and set a platform for RP strategies. Using CRSL tenets, school leaders develop a sharper focus on campus-wide processes affirming that all children are valued (Archibold). The notion of cultural responsiveness in education originated from the frameworks articulated by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2018). Ladson-Billings described how teachers could address the unique learning needs of students of color. Although responsive teaching is essential, Gay pointed out that these practices alone could not fix the significant challenges faced by minoritized students; administrators must address the school climate and culture consistently with RP to benefit all stakeholders.

Khalifa et al. (2016) researched cultural responsiveness in schools. They theorized four crucial tenets for CRSL: critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and student and parent engagement in community contexts. The first tenet of CRSL is critical self-awareness, where leadership behaviors focus primarily on the intentional consciousness of practicing and displaying knowledge and contexts of cultures (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006). This tenet encompasses using discipline data to audit and measure whether campus processes and policies are equitable and inclusive (Skrla & Scheurich, 2003). This component aligns with the element of RP, where school leaders must adhere to the philosophy of RP and commit to modeling the strategies for them to be successful (Starzecki, 2022).

Also, the second strand of CRSL focuses on training teachers to be more intentional in their pedagogy to create culturally responsive classrooms. When teachers embrace multiculturalism and incorporate RP in their instruction, they create an environment where all students feel supported and empowered, helping them develop rigorous academic skills (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, the third tenet of CRSL regards schools as culturally responsive and inclusive environments. These concerns entail leaders modeling CRSL, the staff acknowledging the values of minoritized

students, and using stakeholders using school data to track gaps and to discover trends and disparities in the discipline and academic performance of students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2016). In a responsive climate, students' voices are also encouraged and valued by schools that actively practice CRSL (Khalifa et al.). This third strand aligns with the component of RP, which attests to the fact that these practices create an environment where students feel respected and treated equally and see themselves in learning (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012).

The fourth and final strand contends that CRSL engages all stakeholders, students, parents, and the community by developing positive and meaningful relationships and advocating for social issues in the school and neighborhood (Kahlifa et al., 2016). This definition aligns with RP, where this engagement creates a sense of community where minoritized students feel included and belong; moreover, they trust their teachers. Leaders must foster and promote a culturally responsive school environment emphasizing inclusivity. These issues become pertinent when the discipline process can benefit or fail particular groups of students. School districts must embody and continually establish policies and practices that address racial assumptions and beliefs and conduct diversity training. Leaders must have authentic relationships with students of color in their schools.

Culturally responsive leadership comprises:

> The ability and willingness of the leader to look beyond their own personal beliefs, values, and biases to see other people for who they are—One who is willing to relate to and learn about others and then embrace their differences as they lead and impart change. (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012, p. 183)

Culturally responsive leadership places educator-student relationships at the forefront, and without this foundation, students have a difficult time excelling in all facets of the educational process. Using the lens of CRSL for this study provides insight into understanding how the components of CRSL align and connect with RP. Culturally responsive leaders can help the staff recognize cultural differences, model behaviors, and train staff on using RP,

specifically how to address behavior equitably (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Methodology

The research team employed a case study methodology to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of how RP strategies impact the execution of school discipline. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), a qualitative case study is a research approach that facilitates the exploration of a phenomenon within its context using various data sources. A case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions or if you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2018). The present study investigates a phenomenon (implementation of restorative discipline practices) occurring in a bounded context (one Title I urban middle school) (Baxter & Jack). Furthermore, this descriptive case study aims to describe the phenomenon and the real-life context in which it occurred (Yin). The study addressed the following research questions:

R1: What are teachers' and administrators' perceptions, beliefs, and experiences at one urban middle school implementing restorative practices?
R2: What dilemmas arise when schools implement restorative practices?

Research Site and Participants

This study's population consisted of administrators and teachers from a middle school in a large southeast Texas urban district. The district's student population is about 209,040, representing 79% economically disadvantaged households based on students qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The district includes 281 campuses: 37 high schools, 2 academic alternative schools, 38 middle schools, and 160 elementary schools. The student demographic is found below in Table 1. The principal of the selected campus implemented restorative practices on this campus, which included high-risk students as defined by the Texas Education Agency. The students were not participants in the study; however, they were a means to understand perspectives and experiences regarding the impact of restorative practices on school discipline.

Table 1

Student Enrollment for the Participating Middle School

Categories	Frequency	Percent
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	397	52.2
Hispanic	338	44.4
White	14	0.02
Native American	2	0.003
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	0.003
Two or More Races	7	0.10

For this study, the researcher asked for volunteers consisting of administrators and teachers at a middle school campus implementing RP on this campus. A purposeful sample of 11 teachers and 4 administrators volunteered to participate in this study. Participant demographics are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Participants' Demographic Data

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	9	60.0
Male	6	40.0
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	8	53.3
Hispanic	2	13.3
White	4	26.7
Asian	1	6.7

Years of Experience /In-Service		
0–5	1	6.7
6–10	4	26.7
11–15	2	13.3
16–20	3	20.0
20+	5	33.3

Data Collection

After IRB approval and the collection of informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants consisting of school administrators and teachers from the selected school site. According to Baškarada (2014), interviews are guided conversations that are usually one of the most important sources of case study evidence. Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow the researcher to understand better the interviewees' perspectives (Baškarada). Yin (2018) contends that interviewing people with different perspectives is considered multiple sources and can be valuable. During the face-to-face interviews, the interviewees were asked if they had any questions about the research or the confidentiality agreement. Subsequently, the researcher conducted one 45- to 60-minute interview with each participant. The interview protocol included open-ended questions such as "Explain some of the challenges in implementing RJP?" and "Describe the professional development you have received on RP." With permission, interviews were recorded on a recording device before transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis

Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019) assert that interview transcription is a critical step in data analysis to elevate research participants' voices accurately. For this study, interview recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word dictation software. Next transcripts were cleaned for technical accuracy by the researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest that a research study's trustworthiness is critical in determining its value. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were sought to ensure trustworthiness. During the "cleaning"

stage, each transcript was carefully read while listening to the recordings to ensure transcriptions capture the participant's natural voice verbatim (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba). Next, member checking was employed to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the participant's natural voice (Lincoln & Guba). Interview transcripts were sent back to the participants to check for accuracy and clarification. Member checking helped to gain a deeper understanding of the data.

Data analysis was performed in several steps using Dedoose coding software. Firstly, open or initial coding was used to analyze interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2021). Saldaña describes open coding as analyzing and categorizing data into distinct parts and identifying nuances of developing phenomena. In the second data analysis phase, the research team engaged in axial coding to establish the relationships between categories, including which categories emerged as most prominent and which were subcategories of others. Similar statements and sentences were clustered into themes and meanings (Saldaña). In this study, the research team sought to include a thick description of the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of the participants, which also supports trustworthiness. In the present study, the participants' perceptions are heavily supported by detailed descriptions of their experiences and detailed accounts of the meaning they attach to those experiences.

Limitations

This study took place at one middle school campus in southeast Texas. Regions throughout the state and other states across the US have their own policy mandates, climate, and culture that influence how initiatives like restorative justice practices are implemented. Therefore, the results of this study are only directly applicable to this campus. Additionally, qualitative research always runs the risk that a participant may not be entirely forthcoming in sharing their experiences and perceptions despite best efforts to assure confidentiality and a sense of safety.

Authors' Positionality

Positionality plays a critical role in qualitative research, influencing the researcher's perspective, biases, and interpretation of data. In this study, the first author brings her unique perspective as an assistant principal working in a

Title I middle school, where she navigates discipline issues on a daily basis. Her experiences provide invaluable insights into the realities faced by students and educators in underserved communities, shedding light on the nuances of disciplinary practices and their impact on marginalized student populations.

Similarly, the second author, a former principal with experience leading rural and urban Title I high school campuses, offers a wealth of experiential knowledge in education and school administration. Her insights into the complexities of school leadership and her understanding of the broader socio-cultural context in which disciplinary decisions are made enrich the research process and contribute to a more nuanced analysis of the data.

The third author has credentials in school leadership and is a former secondary science educator in both private and public high school environments. Her higher educational background in multicultural education and experiences with teaching multicultural and social justice education in higher education provides contextual knowledge in how best to prepare inservice and preservice educators to navigate potential disciplinary decisions.

To conscientiously examine our positionality and mitigate potential biases, we engaged in bracketing through journaling and memos, allowing us to acknowledge and set aside our preconceptions and personal experiences during data collection and analysis. Additionally, self-reflection played a crucial role in enhancing our awareness of how our identities and roles within the educational system may shape our interpretations of the findings. By adopting a reflexive stance and actively interrogating our positionality throughout the research process, we strive to uphold the integrity and validity of our study while honoring the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants involved.

Findings

Training and Professional Development

Several participants recalled receiving some training on RP yet others could not recall if the training was on RP or de-escalation strategies. For example, Ms. Harrison could not recall if the training she received was on RP or de-escalation

strategies and whether the training was conducted during a faculty meeting. She stated:

> I can't pinpoint, but I want to say we did a little bit on circles at the beginning of the school year. It was either part of our day off or at a faculty meeting. I think it was like the annual training we do on de-escalation.

The lack of a memorable experience is concerning because it suggests a need to clarify the objective and purpose of the training. Furthermore, Ms. Lewis, a teacher, was also unsure of the type of training because it was just "sit and get." She shared, "I'm thinking we had de-escalation training that was two hours by itself and maybe two for SEL. I can't remember because it was just sit and get." Similarly, Mr. Eckert was uncertain but stated, "The trainings were conducted either during a faculty meeting or via modules during a teacher workshop." These recollections imply that the training was not engaging or memorable. Mr. Carter and Ms. Franklin stated they received on-campus training from district personnel. Mr. Banks explained, "Training was conducted here at the school by district personnel from the SEL department." Ms. Watkins, an administrator, explained further by saying, "The SEL department focused on facilitating restorative circles, relationship building, and incorporating TEACH strategies to assist with effective classroom management." Ms. Albertson shared, "I received restorative practice training in an on-campus summer professional development session;" however, she could not recall if any of the trainers returned later to follow up or to conduct a check-up. She added: "They came in the summer, but I don't think they ever came back."

In contrast, Ms. Warren stated, "We had five trainings on both RP and de-escalation strategies, which included facilitating restorative circles, building relationships, and integrating strategies within certain subject areas." This lack of recall of the many aspects of the training was concerning. The lack of knowledge ranged from specific details to the essential purpose or type of training presented.

Mr. Washington's response to his perception of restorative practice training included "hitting us with just one afternoon in August is not it. We should spend a couple of days on it. That's what I really want." He suggested training was hard to

grasp because the session occurred at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the training was done virtually. He noted that the training was not substantially revisited after in-person school resumed. Mr. Washington described the virtual training as ineffective because they could not practice scenarios or strategies in person. He suggested that once school began meeting in person again, the training should have been done over with more relevancy. Only one teacher participant, Mr. King, expounded on his perception of restorative practice training by including his thoughts on district training:

> My biggest problem with professional development and training is that the people who are conducting the training are not in the classroom or are so far from the classroom that they have no idea what my day is actually like. Anyone who is going to come in and tell me how to do my job need to know what I do on a daily basis. How long has it been since they've actually taught? How long has it been since you've been in the trenches with me? It seems like they are trying to justify their training job, and they're making twice as much money as me! You make twice as much money as me, have been out to the classroom, and you're trying to tell me what's effective in a classroom. You stand before me for an hour and really don't know what I need in my classroom.

These responses highlight teacher dispositions and attitudes towards the training they received, underscored by the district's lack of adequate training. While campus leaders may perceive themselves as well-trained and committed to implementing RP, the reality on the ground may diverge significantly from their perceptions. This dissonance becomes evident in contrasting accounts, such as administrators' confidence in their training versus teachers' struggles to recall or engage with the same training. The discrepancy between administrators and teachers regarding the implementation of RP raises essential questions about communication, collaboration, and shared understanding within the school community. Moreover, differing accounts of professional development on RP point to potential gaps in support, training, and follow-up implementation efforts. Administrators may perceive that they have adequately equipped teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement RP, while

teachers may feel overwhelmed, underprepared, or uncertain about how to translate theory into practice effectively. This disparity underscores the importance of ongoing professional development, coaching, and support mechanisms to bridge the gap between policy intentions and classroom implementation.

Perception of the Effectiveness of RP

Mr. Eckert stated, "It would take three to five years for RP to take root and change the campus culture." He suggested that more than one school year would be needed to witness the impacts of RP implementation. Ms. Albertson stated, "The strategies were effective and had made a change for the better at the school." Moreover, Ms. Davis added that "the use of RP helped not only the behavior but also contributed to the instructional success of students in schools." She mentioned that she could teach more effectively since her students displayed fewer behavior issues. Mr. Carter shared thoughts about RP's effectiveness:

> Coming from an underserved community myself, I strongly feel that RP are very helpful because they reduce the number, lower the statistics of the people of my race entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Mr. Carter suggested that students of color could have more equitable circumstances when faced with consequences for misbehavior besides being suspended more than other groups. These frequent suspensions could ultimately cause low academic performance due to missing school and instruction, and even worse, involvement with law enforcement which research has shown is a precedent to juvenile than adult incarceration.

On the contrary, Mr. Washington commented that "RP were ineffective because there was a disconnect with some staff." Mr. Washington suggested that some of his colleagues were reluctant to build rapport with minoritized students, which is vital for RP to be successful.

When asked how RP looked on campus, responses varied among the participants. Ms. Harrison shared, "I can't tell you how RP looks campus-wide because I've only seen it in a couple of classrooms and only seen one administrator taking time out with the students." Ms. Harrison explained that all

teachers and administrators did not use RP consistently or with fidelity. Ms. Albertson commented, "I do not see RP in this building. I really don't. I feel like every single person has their own kind of discipline in their own way. It's definitely not campus-wide." Ms. Franklin added, "It's happening in some classrooms, and it's completely nonexistent in others." These interviewees felt RP wasn't being used on a level or scale that could be easily observed or measured, or to say confidently that it was weaved into the campus culture.

Mr. Banks, an administrator, explained that only the administrative team, not the teachers, utilized restorative practice strategies. According to Mr. Banks, "Although our teachers received training about a month ago, it looks like the administrators, not the teachers, are using RP [strategies]." He mentioned that teachers continued punitive practices and discipline referrals even after training, and administrators used RP in their offices.

Moreover, Ms. Garner discussed a situation where using what she perceived as RP strategies did not work. She shared the following:

> I have three students who would cause constant disruption during instruction, and without sending them to the Dean, I would work with them all class by giving verbal redirection, talking to them in the hallway, call their parents while in the hallway, and as soon as we re-enter the classroom, they started the cycle all over again by disrupting instruction. Some of them just don't want to be helped.

Ms. Garner perceived that some students were not receptive and refused multiple opportunities to correct their behavior because they were not accustomed to this particular type of redirection–meaning it was too nice or lenient, not the harsh treatment they expected.

Conversely, Mr. Banks shared positive experiences with RP that would not have been successful using other strategies. He provided two incidents to make the point that if he had not allowed the students to have quiet time and reflect on what had occurred, the incidents would likely not have ended as well. He stated, "The students were not trying to have any sort of conversation with me at the time, and I was only able to speak to them a few minutes later without all the hostility." Mr. Banks asserted

that he could connect and have a better experience with the students after allowing them time to calm down.

The acknowledgment from teachers and administrators that the implementation of RP was not campus-wide highlights significant challenges in achieving widespread adoption and fidelity to the initiative. This fragmentation within the school community points to underlying issues of buy-in, consistency, and shared commitment to the principles of restorative justice. Despite efforts from some individuals to embrace and implement RP, others may resist or remain indifferent, leading to uneven implementation and limited impact. Observations of a lack of buy-in, a refusal to reflect on biases, and a reliance on punitive measures by both teachers and some students underscore more profound systemic barriers to the successful integration of RP. Resistance to change, entrenched disciplinary norms, and the perpetuation of punitive ideologies contribute to a culture that undermines the core principles of restorative justice. Without collective introspection and a willingness to challenge ingrained beliefs and practices, efforts to foster a restorative school culture may encounter significant resistance and ultimately fall short of their intended goals.

Challenges to the Implementation of RP

Five participants shared that inadequate training, lack of buy-in from staff, students, and parents, and the absence of a consistent and clear campus disciplinary process equally contribute to the challenges of implementing and practicing restorative practice. Ms. Franklin stated, "RP would be great if we were given adequate time to plan for it after training then we use it consistently." She expressed that teachers were not given ample time to incorporate RP in their planning, so they were not used consistently enough to take root as a classroom norm. Ms. Lewis pointed out, "We need to have systems for every type of scenario possible like have a system in place and then a chain of command." She added, "It's not even beneficial if teachers don't buy in and build culture in their classrooms." Ms. Lewis explained that teachers had no clear roadmap or instructions, leaving it open for interpretation. She also described that some of her colleagues did not conform to RP in their classrooms. Ms. Garner remarked that students should also receive training on RP to know how it works,

and the implementation and expectations should be practiced at the beginning and reiterated throughout the school year. Ms. Warren added, "We must build and maintain relationships with parents so they will be on board." She stressed that involving parents in the conversation would garner support for using RP.

Mr. Eckert and Mr. Washington commented on the importance of parental involvement in RP. Mr. Eckert stated, "I have a hard time with parents because some are very defensive when it comes to their kids. The conversations don't go so well." Mr. Eckhart did not describe this area as his strong suit. He expounded that getting parental support was not always easy due to hostility towards him. He commented that "some parents could possibly have negative feelings from the educational structures they had when they were in school." Mr. Eckert suggested that if parents had negative experiences when they were attending school, they were most likely biased regarding their children's school experiences. Mr. Washington expressed this idea, stating, "Many parents are hands-off rather than being vested and involved in their child's education, they often undo whatever social and emotional learning strategies I've done at school with the child." He suggested that parents' ways of addressing students' social and emotional needs at home were not aligned with the school's, nor were parents actively engaged in their children's education. Similarly, Mr. Banks, an administrator, shared:

> I feel parents do the best they can, but the majority do not partner with the school when it comes to discipline. They are expecting the teachers to raise the students, but we simply can't do it all—raise them and help with teaching them expectations.

He suggested that parents place too much responsibility on teachers to do more than educate their children.

Two participants, Mr. King and Ms. Harrison, mentioned briefly that the success of utilizing RP depends not only on buy-in from school staff but also from students. Ms. Harrison said, "Everyone must buy into it, and everyone must follow it." Mr. King added, "Teenagers will act like typical teenagers do and get back at each other unless they're taught differently and buy into the whole RP concept." Likewise, Ms. Garner agreed that "students must buy into RP

just as much as their teachers do." These responses indicated that everyone, especially students, would better understand each other and handle issues differently, perhaps better, if RP were brought in.

Two participants shared that teacher buy-in was essential for RP to be successful. Ms. Franklin saw a lack of teacher buy-in because no clear implementation pathway existed for a restorative practice program; no plan existed for monitoring its sustainability. Mr. Banks, an administrator, expressed that many of the teachers who used RP on campus were outside of their comfort zone, making it difficult for them to utilize the strategies. He stated:

> Many don't believe in going outside of being a teacher and building rapport with their students. One teacher told me that they were there to only teach language arts and math. I'm not saying that teachers have to be role models or parents for the kids, but ultimately if you want them to learn and behave, you must cross those hurdles.

He described that some teachers do not want to be required to act on discipline or anything besides presenting content and instruction–that their job is to teach only, nothing else. In all, making biased, deficit-based statements about parents can perpetuate negative stereotypes and undermine efforts to collaborate effectively with families. Educators and stakeholders must approach parent involvement with empathy, understanding, and recognition of the diverse circumstances and strengths within each family. Regarding the importance of relationships with students, building strong, positive relationships between teachers and students is fundamental to creating a conducive learning environment. When students feel valued, supported, and understood by their teachers, they are likelier to be engaged in their learning and achieve academic success. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from all stakeholders in the education system to foster a culture of collaboration, respect, and empathy.

Perception of a Weak Discipline System

Five teachers described that the campus lacked a transparent discipline process regarding misbehavior. Ms. Lewis mentioned:

Students receive mixed messages because rule violations are not addressed consistently. They make announcements on the PA for teachers to conduct dress code checks, but administrators will see students in the hallway who are out of compliance and won't say a word.

Ms. Lewis remarked that administrators failed to enforce the rules and norms they expected others to follow, which in turn sends an unclear message to students of what rule violations one will or will not be given consequences for. Mr. Carter agreed by saying "the school doesn't do anything well or consistent regarding discipline." Likewise, Ms. Davis agreed when stating:

> I don't think the kids know for certain if there are any consequences because a campus-wide discipline plan doesn't exist. I'm not sure what happens on a first, second, or third offense. I don't think there's an in-school suspension, and if a student is suspended, is the parent required to attend a meeting when the student returns?

This response is worth noticing because it indicates teachers do not know the discipline procedures or processes used on campus.

Moreover, Ms. Warren added, "Teachers are inconsistent when writing office referrals for the smallest infractions. They will send a student to the Dean's office for having a cell phone visible but give another student a verbal warning." Ms. Warren described that teachers address discipline inequitably in their classes.

Mr. Eckert commented, "Students are constantly looking and finding loopholes and weaknesses in the discipline system." He recognized that students know how to circumvent the discipline procedures that are in place. Mr. Jones stated, "I'm curious about how discipline data is gathered and if the Deans analyze it to determine if RP are making a difference or not. What adjustments should be made?" Mr. Jones noted a lack of communication from the administration regarding the state of discipline and its current processes on campus.

However, two administrators purported that the number of office referrals for rule violations could decrease if teachers adhered to and used RP with fidelity. Ms. Warren, an administrator, remarked:

> I believe we are working towards a positive direction, but with school discipline, we are sending mixed messages when the teachers are not adhering to the rules themselves. For example, cell phones aren't to be used by students in the classroom, but certain teachers allow it.

Ms. Warren explained that the effort to improve behavior is hampered by teachers who do not adhere to campus behavior expectations. Likewise, another administrator, Mr. Banks, shared his thoughts:

> The students here are committing minor infractions, but the teachers expect there to be no infractions since we are a magnet school with high-performing and well-behaved kids. The teachers have a mindset that everyone should act the same and follow the guidelines, even the students who are not magnet, but are zoned from the neighborhood. They (the teachers) also feel that parents should know the guidelines as well. The teachers take minor infractions and treat them as level two and three violations. They don't want to get to the root of why a student talks all the time. They don't take the time to talk to them one-on-one. I feel the teachers escalate situations and are not being culturally responsive to a particular group of our kids. Why say a student is disrupting the whole class when he or she is simply tapping a pencil on the desk? Does the kid have ADHD? You never know what's going on if you don't try to build rapport with or relate to the kids.

Mr. Banks' comment suggested that teachers do not understand the concept of being culturally responsive and the purpose of utilizing RP.

The observations shared highlight a systemic issue within this particular school where there is a lack of consistency and effectiveness in addressing student behavior. When punitive measures are disproportionately relied upon, they can exacerbate inequalities and fail to address the underlying issues causing the behavior. Similarly, if restorative justice practices are not implemented effectively, it can

lead to frustration and confusion among teachers and students. Restorative justice relies on building relationships, fostering empathy, and repairing harm. Still, if there is a lack of clear expectations and support for its implementation, it may not yield the desired outcomes. Blame-shifting between teachers, administrators, and students further complicates the situation and undermines efforts to create a positive school culture. Instead of focusing on assigning blame, all stakeholders need to collaborate and take collective responsibility for finding solutions. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that prioritizes equity, clear communication, professional development, and ongoing support for teachers and administrators.

Discussion and Implications

Four themes emerged from this study, including training and professional development, perception of the effectiveness of RP, challenges to the implementation of RP, and perceptions of a weak discipline system. Previous research (Lodi et al., 2021) notes a great interest in applying restorative justice practices in schools along with the benefits and challenges of implementation. However, there is still limited evidence regarding the direct correlation between RP and student outcomes, which suggests further studies on the impact of RP in school settings. Additionally, Kim et al. (2023) emphasize mixed results regarding the effectiveness of RP in discipline. This study extends previous literature on RP at the middle school level and the issues that impact implementation and, ultimately, effectiveness.

In this study, while administrators reported several trainings on RP, teachers could recall only one training at the beginning of the year and were unclear about whether it was actually on RP. These statements were in direct contradiction to what administrators reported. All participants noted the importance of RP in theory especially for students of color. However, they agreed that the implementation was ineffective mainly due to a lack of training, understanding, buy-in, and systems. The observations regarding the lack of effective implementation of RP in the study are directly linked to culturally responsive leadership principles. Culturally responsive leadership involves recognizing and addressing students' diverse needs and experiences, particularly those

from marginalized backgrounds, such as students of color (Khalifa et al., 2016). However, the ineffective implementation highlighted a disconnect between theory and practice. This disconnect often arises due to a lack of training, understanding, and buy-in from educators and staff members. Garnett et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of assessing implementation readiness to identify potential barriers and tailor RP to fit within the context of the school district's priorities. This approach aligns with culturally responsive leadership, which emphasizes the need to understand and address the contextual needs of students and of faculty and staff through professional development. Furthermore, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as virtual training without follow-up once in-person schooling resumed, exacerbated the implementation issues. Effective implementation of RP requires culturally responsive leadership that prioritizes needs-based assessments, ongoing professional development, and a commitment to understanding and addressing the varied needs of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students. Failure to do so can inadvertently create resistance and result in ineffective implementation efforts.

Other participants noted a lack of parental support and student buy-in as challenges as well. These observations are supported by the work of Vincent and colleagues (2021) who recommend that RP training materials might need to be built around trust-building strategies, student and parent engagement with RP, and an emphasis on establishing positive relationships and trust in each other as a primary or preventative discipline approach. These strategies are essential components of culturally responsive leadership, as they prioritize building trust and fostering meaningful connections among all school community members (Khalifa et al., 2018). By integrating RP training materials around trust-building strategies and emphasizing the importance of student and parent engagement, culturally responsive leaders can create environments that value and respect students and their families' diverse perspectives and experiences. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness of RP but also promotes a sense of belonging, inclusion, and empowerment within the school community (Ingraham et al., 2016).

Some participants in the study expressed viewpoints steeped in deficit ideology, framing

parents and students as inherently resistant to help or improvement. Statements like "some of them just don't want to be helped" reflect a belief system that attributes shortcomings solely to individuals, disregarding broader systemic factors and cultural contexts. This underscores the critical need for culturally responsive practices to form the foundation of any efforts to implement restorative approaches.

As Khalifa et al. (2016) highlight, deficit ideology often stems from low expectations perpetuated by teachers who may view students as lacking intelligence or capability based on their behaviors or appearances. This perspective marginalizes students' social and cultural capital, creating a cycle of inequity in which certain groups are systematically disadvantaged.

Furthermore, Khalifa et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of critical self-awareness among educators when serving marginalized students, particularly those from poor communities of color. Educators must interrogate their own values, beliefs, and dispositions toward these students to identify and challenge any biases or deficit-oriented attitudes.

Given the study's findings and the prevalence of deficit ideology in educational settings, it is imperative to create opportunities for teachers and leadership to engage in reflective practices. These opportunities should encourage educators to unpack their beliefs and assumptions about students and families while recognizing the need for a different approach to discipline—one that is rooted in cultural responsiveness, equity, and restorative justice.

By fostering critical self-awareness and challenging deficit-oriented perspectives, educators and leaders can cultivate a school culture that values the strengths and assets of all students, promotes inclusive practices, and facilitates meaningful connections between students, families, and the broader community. Moreover, statements from the leaders in this study were passive such as, "We are implementing RP, but the teachers are not." However, Khalifa et al. (2016) urge:

> Racialized suspension gaps, for example, would call for a culturally responsive leader who challenges the status quo by interrogating such exclusionary and marginalizing behaviors. Such leaders would seek to challenge and support

> teachers who fell into the familiar pattern of disproportionately punishing students of color more severely than their white classmates for the same infractions. (p. 1282)

Culturally responsive leaders need to be able to pushback on resistance to change initiatives to promote racial equity. Therefore, capacity building around critical awareness and courageous conversations is necessary.

Ultimately, this study reveals that effective implementation of restorative discipline practices with fidelity cannot occur without creating buy-in with all stakeholders, ongoing training, systems for monitoring and feedback, and intentionality on cultural responsiveness. The implications for middle schools resulting from this study are extensive and multifaceted. Firstly, prioritizing ongoing, comprehensive professional development sessions for administrators and teachers are crucial. These sessions should not be one-time events but include regular follow-ups and hands-on practice opportunities to reinforce understanding and implementation skills. Additionally, promoting clear communication and buy-in among all stakeholders is essential. Facilitating open dialogue between administrators and teachers ensures alignment in understanding the importance of RP, especially in addressing the social and emotional needs of marginalized students at the middle school level. Before implementing RP, conducting thorough implementation readiness assessments is vital. Identifying potential barriers and tailoring implementation plans to fit within the specific context and priorities of the school district can help address diverse student needs effectively. Furthermore, fostering critical self-reflection and awareness-building among educators and leadership is imperative. Providing opportunities for examining beliefs, biases, and dispositions towards marginalized students and their families fosters a culture of openness and honesty, promoting equitable interactions. Lastly, offering professional development focused on culturally responsive practices and racial equity equips educators and leaders with the necessary skills to challenge deficit ideologies and implement restorative approaches effectively. Training on recognizing implicit bias, promoting cultural competence, and fostering inclusive learning environments enhances the implementation of RP while addressing systemic inequities.

Future Research

To that end, future research should investigate the gap between administrators' reports and teachers' experiences regarding training on RP, determining the content, frequency, and delivery methods that effectively enhance educators' competencies. Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track student outcomes over multiple years in schools with and without RP to establish a direct correlation between RP and various student outcomes, including behavioral changes, academic performance, and social-emotional development. Additionally, research should explore students' perceptions and experiences with RP to understand their impact on student engagement, relationships, and sense of belonging in the school environment. Furthermore, examining the prevalence and implications of deficit ideology among educators and exploring strategies to promote critical self-awareness and reduce biases that hinder effective discipline practices is essential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the crucial need for middle schools to implement restorative discipline practices effectively. Challenges identified, such as inadequate training, lack of buy-in, and prevalent deficit ideology, highlight the necessity for comprehensive solutions. To address these challenges and foster equitable and inclusive school environments, prioritizing ongoing professional development, facilitating clear communication and buy-in, and conducting thorough implementation readiness assessments are imperative. Additionally, promoting critical self-reflection among educators and offering training on culturally responsive practices and racial equity are essential steps. By implementing these recommendations, middle schools can create environments that prioritize all students' needs, cultivate meaningful connections, and foster positive academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Effective RP implementation requires a collective commitment to cultural responsiveness, equity, and restorative justice from all stakeholders.

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