Outcomes of a Restorative Circles Program in a High School Setting

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Objective: Restorative justice (RJ) was introduced into school systems as an alternative to ineffective zero-tolerance policies as another way of dealing with a disciplinary infractions. While school-based RJ has been gaining popularity within the United States, empirical research has been lacking. One RJ approach is Restorative Circles (RC), which provide a space for those involved in conflict to repair harm through a facilitated dialogue process. Given the minimal research, the aim of the present study was to examine student and staff experiences and outcomes after participating in an RC program. *Method:* Semistructured interviews were conducted with 35 high school students and 25 staff and administrators involved in some capacity with the RC program at their school. All participants were from a high school in a large urban center in the Southeast United States. *Results:* As part of a larger study a theoretical model was developed using grounded theory methodology. The emergent model included the following constructs: culture, barriers, internal motivation, engagement with RC, and outcomes. Only outcomes will be discussed in the current study. Both negative and positive outcomes emerged from the interview data. For negative outcomes, frustration and disappointment were key themes. For positive outcomes, ownership of the process, interrupting the school to prison pipeline, improved relationships, prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict, meaningful dialogue, and academic and social achievements were key themes. *Conclusions:* This study provides researchers and practitioners with a theoretical framework to use as a foundation to better understand how individuals experience RC.

Keywords: conflict resolution, restorative circles, at-risk youth, school-based research, adolescents

Restorative justice (RJ) has its roots in many indigenous traditions including practices of the Maori of New Zealand and Native American Tribes in the United States, ancient Celtic practices, and the traditions of the Aboriginal people of Australia and Canada (Strang, 2001). Many of these practices are based on the value of living in harmony and restoring harmony when it is disrupted (Mbambo & Skelton, 2003; Strang, 2001). In the United States, the term, in its modern sense, emerged during the 1970s and was used to refer to programs focusing on repairing the harm caused by some wrongdoing (crime) through bringing together victims, offenders, and, at times, the wider community. Howard Zehr, known as the grandfather of the contemporary RJ movement, defines RJ as "a process to involve to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, to heal and put things as right as possible" (Zehr, 2002, p. 40). The purpose of the present study is to explore the experiences of those involved in a particular school-based RJ practice as well as to describe the outcomes seen in one case study.

Within the criminal systems, RJ is viewed as a participatory model in contrast to traditional ways to deal with crime. Traditionally, the western model of justice has been hierarchical, retributive, and offender focused. The goal of the traditional western model is to punish the offender. In this model, offenders typically have passive participation in the process. In contrast, RJ has been described as focusing on increasing participation of both victims and offenders in the judicial process, repairing harm, and in holding offenders accountable for their actions (Van Ness & Heetderks Strong, 2010).

RJ has most often been applied to the criminal and juvenile justice systems, but schools have recently begun to include RJ as well. There are many restorative practices that fall under the umbrella of RJ. Schools in the United States have implemented a variety of restorative practices for a plethora of reasons including to address truancy, bullying, disciplinary issues, and interpersonal conflict (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Stinchcomb, Bazenmore, & Riestenberg, 2006). Restorative practices in schools can vary widely (i.e., conferencing, circles, mediation) but typically offer a dialogue between those who have harmed and those who have been harmed. The dialogue is intended to assist in working out restitution, holding individuals accountable, repairing the harm and their relationship if possible, and reintegrating the person causing the harm back into the community (Johnstone, 2002; Macready, 2009; Suvall, 2009; Zehr, 2002).

Restorative practices have often been implemented in response to zero-tolerance policies that were not effective. Zero-tolerance policies are rules intended punish a variety of student misbehavior (i.e., possession of weapons or drugs, fighting, or antisocial behavior) starting with the first offense. Students

caught fighting, for example, would be suspended for a predetermined period of time even for their first offense. These policies were implemented to combat the increase in school violence seen in the 1990s. Restorative practices are, in many ways, philosophically opposed to zero-tolerance policies, which aim to control student behavior by using mandated suspensions and expulsions (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). Zero-tolerance policies directly facilitate the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Heitzeg, 2009). The School-to-Prison Pipeline refers to the "growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via zero-tolerance policies, and, directly and/or indirectly, into juvenile and adult criminal justice systems" (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). Schools with higher rates of suspensions also have higher dropout rates and an increased risk of students entering the juvenile justice system (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013). Zero-tolerance policies criminalize student misbehavior by increasing the risk of students being suspended, expelled or arrested at school, thus feeding the School-to-Prison Pipeline (Heitzeg, 2009; Skiba, 2001). The ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies has been well documented in research leading to searches for alternative approaches, including RJ approaches (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Davis, Lyubansky, & Schiff, 2015; Evans & Lester, 2012).

In the United States, there is minimal research on the impact of RJ practices in school settings (Evans & Lester, 2013). The majority of the research that exists compares school discipline records and the number of detentions and suspensions before and after an RJ program to determine effectiveness. International research on restorative practices in schools demonstrates that restorative practices show promise in dealing with conflicts, resolving disputes, and improving attendance (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Morrison, 2005; Ritchie & O'Connell, 2001; Tinker, 2002).

One of the few peer-reviewed articles on school-based RJ in the United States examined elementary, middle, and high schools replacing zero-tolerance with a variety of restorative practices for addressing drug and alcohol problems. Authors collected data from published reports by the school and interviews with key informants. Findings included reports of (a) decreases in major disciplinary issues, (b) decreases in expulsions and out of school suspensions, and (c) reduction of substance abuse (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

In the United States, the limited research on school-based RJ practices often comes from books, nonpeer-reviewed articles, or evaluation reports from organizations implementing programs throughout one city or district (Evans & Lester, 2013). Researchers from one evaluation report stated, "there is little research on school-based RJ, and even less on its implementation and efficacy in schools serving youth of color from low income communities," (Summer, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010, p. 4). Thus, there is a need to examine school-based RJ practices in particularly high-risk schools.

Restorative Circles

As previously stated, restorative practices vary widely, one restorative approach to dealing with student conflict and behavior disruptions is Restorative Circles (RC). Although there are multiple circle approaches, this paper will discuss the RC approach developed by Dominic Barter and colleagues in Brazilian favelas in the 1990s. In this process, an act of harm is identified by someone who then initiates the RC process with a facilitator. The act can be anything specifically observable that occurred and is used as a gateway into the conflict. The facilitator then invites those involved to participate in RC. This particular process involves three key participants, the *author*, the *receiver*, and the *community* (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). The conflict community often involves family members, neighbors, and witnesses, or anyone affected by the harm done (Barter, 2012). The terms *author* and *receiver* were coined by Barter as recognition of the bidirectionality of conflict and the complexity of roles. The terms *author* and *receiver* are not meant to be labels for people but terminology to understand one particular act/interaction (Wachtel, 2009).

The goals of RC are to hold a space that promotes understanding, self-responsibility and action (Barter, 2012). This process values having no gatekeepers, meaning anyone can initiate a Circle. Before the Circle meeting occurs, the facilitator conducts separate preparatory meetings (called pre-Circles) with the author(s) and receiver(s). A similar preparatory meeting is also done with the community members, sometimes collectively. The goals of the pre-Circle are to build connections, identify feelings and needs of participates as they relate to the act, explain the Circle process, and obtain consent from each individual to move forward with the process. The Circle is a facilitated dialogue in which all individuals are supported by the facilitator in understanding each other, taking responsibility for their choices, and generating actions or agreements for moving forward. The characteristic that sets RC apart from other dialogue based restorative practices is that it makes use of reflection in the dialogue processes. Participants are asked to reflect back, using their own words, what they heard the speaker saying in an effort to increase participant listening and understanding. After the Circle, post-Circles are used to check in on the agreed actions and how things have been going since the Circle (Barter, 2012).

School-based research particularly on RC is scarce. Most of the research is based on schools in Brazil. Research findings include a 98% reduction of police school visits following a schoolwide adoption of RC (Gillinson, Horne, & Baeck, 2010) and a 93% satisfaction rate by participants in a study of over 400 RC in São Paulo, Brazil. (Gillinson et al., 2010).

Most research on school-based restorative practices focuses on outcomes dealing with decreases in student problem behaviors and reductions in suspensions and expulsions. Although this information is useful when evaluating the effectiveness of programs, focusing solely on the number of fights or detentions in the school after a program has been implemented gives only a small picture of the impact of the program. Restorative programming may also impact other important factors such as the culture or climate of the school, social skills development, and student staff relationship quality. RC has unique characteristics that set it apart from other restorative approaches, including the use of reflection and not assigning labels such as victim or offender, research is crucial to better understanding this particular approach. These unique characteristics might impact additional factors that would remain unknown by only examining behavior problems and number of suspensions. Qualitative research can assist in identifying additional factors that may also be outcomes of restorative programs. This study

provides an exploratory examination of RC guided by the following questions:

1. How do students and staff experience and perceive RC?

2. What outcomes do staff and students report after the implementation of an RC program at their school?

Method

Participants

Participants included 35 high school students and 25 school staff and administrators involved in some capacity with the RC program at their school. All participants were from the same high school in a large urban center in the Southeast United States. Students ranged in their involvement in the RC program from participating in only a pre-Circle to participating in multiple Circles. Staff participants also ranged in their involvement with the program, from having basic knowledge about the program and referring students, to participating in multiple Circles and training workshops. The gender breakdown for the students was 20 female and 15 male and all students identified as African American. Participants included freshman ($n = 6$), sophomores ($n = 14$), juniors ($n = 7$), and seniors or fifth-year students ($n = 8$). The gender breakdown for teachers and staff members included 16 female and nine male. The majority of staff members identified as African American. Adult interviews included teachers ($n = 10$), administrators ($n = 6$), security staff ($n = 2$), and social workers/counselors ($n = 7$).

The RC program was introduced in the 2011–2012 school year. The goals of the RC program were to promote restorative alternatives to punitive discipline and decrease the number of student behavior referrals in the school. When conflict arises, both staff and students have the option of initiating a Circle with the goal of helping to repair the harm, restore relationships and create accountability. Once a Circle is initiated all parties involved are invited to participate by the RC program staff (e.g., facilitator). Before the Circle, the facilitator conducts pre-Circles with each person involved in the conflict. The Circle then consists of a dialogue process supported by the facilitator. The goals are for participants to understand each other, take responsibility for their choices and generate actions for moving forward together that are agreeable to all involved.

Members of a nonprofit organization ($n = 3$) facilitate the circles and run the RC program at the school. At least one facilitator is at the school each day; they have office space in the main office area. The RC program also offers facilitator training to students. At the end of the second year of the program, six students had completed the training. Four of those students participated in interviews for this study. RC program staff also provides workshops and meetings for the teachers to learn more about the program.

Procedure

Data were collected from students, staff, and administrators at the school over a 3-week period at the end of 2012–2013 academic year. Given that the purpose of the study was to understand individuals' experiences with and perceptions of RC, purposeful sampling was used to recruit and include participants that had some exposure to RC to facilitate theory development (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Consent/assent procedures. The primary researcher's university and the research approval agency for the school district approved the study. A waiver of active consent was used, given that the data collection was part of a program evaluation. Parents could decline having their children participate by sending the waiver form they had received back to the school. No letters were returned. Staff participants gave their written consent before the interview. Student participants were also given the opportunity to give their assent before the interview. All students and 90% of staff invited to participate agreed to do so. Staff declining to participate did so because of time constraints.

Interview administration. Student participants were interviewed individually ($n = 35$) in the order that their schedules permitted. Interviews took place in office space provided by the school or the school library and lasted an average of 10 min (range = 6–40 min). Teacher and staff participants were also interviewed individually ($n = 25$). Care was taken to interview a wide range of staff members (administrators, teachers, security guards, counselors and social workers). Interviews were conducted in staff offices or the school library and lasted an average of 20 min (range = 10–50 min).

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed, no participant identifying information was recorded. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached, that is until they stopped yielding new or relevant information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Measures

Student and adult participants were given semistructured interviews developed to help evaluate the RC program. The semistructured interview protocol consisted of 14 open-ended questions and had three major sections: (a) questions about conflict in general (e.g., "What do you do when you have a conflict with another student at school?"), (b) questions about the RC program (e.g., "Tell me about your circle experience"), and (c) questions about school conflict (e.g., "What should teachers do when students have conflict with each other at school"). A semistructured interview was used to allow participants and the researcher flexibility to deviate from the interview protocol.

Methodology

Principles of grounded theory methodology (GTM) were used in this study as they provide useful tools to learn about individuals' perceptions and feelings regarding a particular subject (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). GTM emphasizes understanding the "voice" of the participant and advocates creating new theory rather than testing existing theories. Methodologists have provided variations or their own interpretations of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) GTM (Charmaz, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Given the variations, this study used principles of GTM following the methodological guidance of Charmaz (2005); Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), and Miles and Huberman (1994) to analyze the interview data.

This study was part of a larger project with an aim to develop a theoretical framework that explains the experiences and perceptions of individuals with RC as well as factors that impact their

experiences, perceptions, and outcomes. Results and analysis presented in the current study will focus on the outcomes seen in the larger study. A brief overview of the substantive theory that was developed will be provided.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed into word documents. All student and adult transcripts were placed into individual word files for coding, yielding 139 single-spaced pages of student data and 125 pages of adult data. Transcripts were checked against the audio files to ensure accurate transcription and all identifying information was removed.

Interview transcripts were each individually coded and analyzed guided by Miles and Huberman's (1994) and Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) method of qualitative coding and data analysis based on GTM and some principles of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used as a starting point because it allows flexibility and provides a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following beginning steps as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used: (a) familiarize yourself with your data (e.g., check transcripts), (b) generate initial codes (e.g., code dataset in a systematic fashion), and (c) search for themes.

A team of three graduate students and one undergraduate student coded all of the transcripts individually by breaking down the data into phrases or sentences that represented the participants' main ideas (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Student and adult interview transcripts were treated separately and codes were identified for each set of transcripts. Transcripts were coded in Microsoft Word using highlighting to identify recurrent ideas or initial codes and "track changes" to insert comments with a description of the code. Each coder initially identified between 55 and 71 codes, 78% interrater agreement. Most of the same passages were highlighted among coders; the differences were often in the terminology used to describe the code. There was 80% overlap between the codes identified for students and those identified for adults. After initial coding a basic GTM approach was used, incorporating open, axial, and selective coding.

Open coding. The initial open coding method used was based on Miles and Huberman (1994) and Auerbach and Silverstein's (2003) GTMs. Open coding, or line-by-line coding helps identify initial phenomena and produces a list of categories. In searching for categories after the initial line-by-line coding a variant of in vivo coding was used to create conceptual labels to capture the categories in the transcripts using the participants own words (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The three graduate student coders discussed each of their initial codes, agreed on categories, and came to an agreement for each of the code labels used to represent the data. After open-coding, 45 categories for students and 52 for adults emerged.

Axial coding. Axial coding was then applied where categories and subcategories were rearranged and regrouped to make connections between them (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This was done by specifying and clarifying concepts that relate to categories (Creswell, 2007). One graduate student and a faculty member familiar with RC principles went through the categories and subcategories and further reorganized the data. From the axial coding process 24 categories and subcategories emerged for the students

and 30 for the adults. The emergent categories were assigned category labels.

Selective coding. The final stage of coding was selective coding that consists of integrating and refining categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding allowed for the development of an overarching theoretical scheme to explain how each of the categories relates to each other and how they explain the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007). From selective coding, five constructs or overarching theoretical categories emerged. These five included (a) barriers, (b) initial climate/culture, (c) internal motivation, (d) level of participant engagement with RC, and (e) outcomes.

Results

The purpose of the current study was to understand how staff and students experience the RC program at their school and also what outcomes they report as a result of the RC program. As mentioned earlier, this study was part of a larger project to develop a theoretical model examining factors associated with perceptions and experiences of RC. Outline 1 shows the constructs, categories and subcategories that emerged from the data to inform the theorized model. Figure 1 shows the full model. The current study will focus on the last overarching construct, outcomes. The full model is provided (see Appendix) to show readers how the results fit into a broader theory.

The emergent full theory suggests that school and neighborhood climate/culture (e.g., high conflict) impacts both barriers (e.g., knowledge) and internal motivation (e.g., desire to engage) to influence level of participant engagement with RC, which in turn, influences outcomes (e.g., frustration. improved relationships). These outcomes then loop back to impact barriers or internal motivation. More specifically, the theoretical model asserts that there are two loops of interactions. The first involves neighborhood and school climate interacting with barriers, which influences disengagement, which, in turn, impacts negative outcomes, which create even greater barriers. The second loop involves climate interacting with internal motivation, which influences engagement, which, in turn, impacts positive outcomes, which then create even greater internal motivation.

In line with principles of GTM, the categories and subcategories discussed earlier were directly pulled from the data during coding. Coders developed the five overarching constructs during selective coding as best fitting descriptions of the categories and subcategories. Selective coding consists of developing an overarching theoretical scheme to explain a phenomenon. In this case the proposed model aims to explain how each of the categories relates to each other and how they explain the experiences of participants. The development of the theoretical framework included theorized connections (including the feedback loops and arrows seen in the model) between the constructs that need to be tested further to provide sufficient validity for further generalization.

Given space limitations, this section will focus exclusively on the overarching construct, outcomes, in the model. The goal of this manuscript is to discuss the outcomes associated with RC. The examination provides illustrative quotations for each category, and subcategory under outcomes. Quotes are identified by the participants' role (e.g., student, teacher); grade level and gender are provided for student quotes.
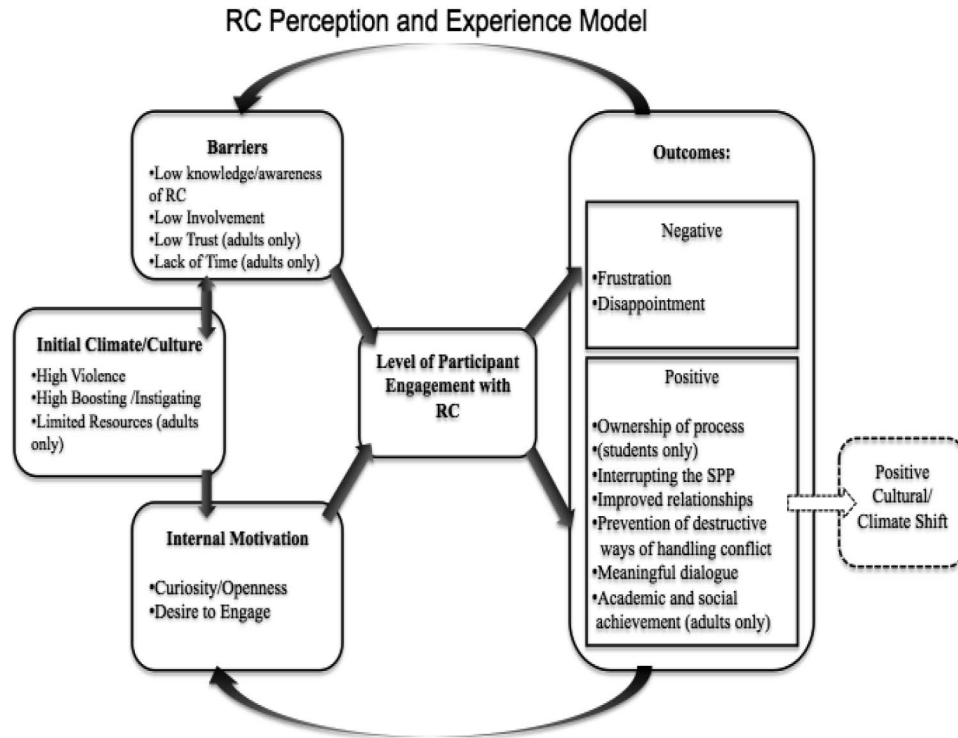
RC Perception and Experience Model

Figure 1. Conceptual framework. RC = Restorative Circles; SPP = School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Outcomes

The overarching construct of outcomes included two categories for both students and adults: (a) negative outcomes and (b) positive outcomes.

Negative outcomes. For both adults and youth, this category included two subcategories: (a) frustration particularly by lying and fighting and (b) disappointment, which included the theme of unwilling to be vulnerable. Youth had a third theme under the subcategory of disappointment: (c) not everyone important to the conflict present.

Frustration (F). Students ($n = 19$) talked about feeling frustrated about their Circle experience because they believed that their peers had lied in the circle. Youth perceived lying as being associated with their peers not aligning or resonating with the values of RC and possibly not wanting to participate. For adults, frustration was something that they experienced, watching students lie in the Circle, as well as perceiving student frustration from the lying. For adults ($n = 10$), students lying in the Circle was described as a function of discomfort/distrust possibly with participants but especially with facilitators. Adults shared that they perceived students feeling uncomfortable or distrusting the facilitators because the students had not had time to build relationships with the facilitators.

(F$_a$) She should have told the truth! she was sitting right there [in Circle]. (male, 10th grade)

(F$_a$) "Y'all need to stop [lying], come on now! . . . She [the facilitator] needs you to be truthful" . . . It's hard for me to sit there [in the Circle] knowing that you know some information but you're [the students

are] not keeping it real, because you [the students] feel like this person [the facilitator] is a stranger. You [the students] feel like there are certain things you cannot tell this person. (Security)

Students and adults also felt frustrated because sometimes in Circles students just wanted to fight it out rather than talk it out. Students mentioned that even if they wanted to talk it out, sometimes the other students in the Circle just wanted to fight. Students also attributed this to their peers not resonating with the RC values and disengaging from the process. Adults talked about students wanting to fight as something that was due to the students not wanting to engage with the process. Some adults described anger and disengagement leading to negative outcomes (e.g., fighting) in circles.

(F$_b$) When I came in the circle with X, I thought everything was fine but I think X just said some things to get out of the circle so we could fight again. (male, ninth grade)

Disappointment (D). The second subcategory for negative consequences was disappointment for both students ($n = 12$) and adults ($n = 7$). Youth shared that even if they wanted to participate in the Circle, sometimes their peers did not want to. Youth discussed being disappointed when their peers were unwilling to be vulnerable in the circle or to use their words, when others did not want to "take it seriously." Youth talked about their peers "playing around" or "messing around" in the Circle.

(D$_a$) I do not really think they is helpful. I mean, I will not say it's a waste but half time people do not be paying attention; they be playing and stuff. (female, 10th grade)

For students the subcategory of disappointment also had another theme; students felt disappointed that not everyone important to the conflict was present in some Circles. Students experienced Circles that were missing key players as only addressing part of the conflict. Students seemed to be aware of the value of having everyone involved in and impacted by the conflict present to best address the conflict.

> (D$_b$) There was conflict that started between more than just the two people that were here [in the Circle], so that if they would've reached out and got the rest of the people there in that conflict, I think that would have helped the circle. (female, 12th grade)

Disengagement leads to negative outcomes, because students who do not see the process as fitting with their values and therefore do not want to engage contribute to frustration and disappointment for those students that do want to engage. A 12th-grade student summed up her disappointment of being in a Circle with a disengaged peer by saying, "have students that want to be there [in the Circle], be there." Having two disengaged students is also likely to contribute to negative outcomes because they are not interacting with the process fully.

Positive outcomes. The second category under outcomes is positive outcomes. This category includes five subcategories and five themes for youth and five subcategories and nine themes for adults. Four of the five categories overlapped for youth and adults. The five categories that emerged after axial coding for students included (a) taking ownership of process/bypassing adults, (b) interrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline, (c) improving relationships, (d) preventing destructive ways of engaging conflict, and (e) conducting meaningful dialogue. The six categories that emerged after axial coding for adults included (a) interrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline, (b) improving relationships, (c) preventing destructive ways of engaging in conflict, (d) conducting meaningful dialogue, and (e) seeing academic and social achievements.

Ownership of the process/bypassing adults (OP). The first student-only ($n = 11$) category that emerged from axial coding was ownership of the RC process. Students talked about using the Circle process as their method of dealing with conflicts because it was better than the method they used before which was physical fighting. Students also talked about using the Circle process on their own, meaning stepping into the facilitator role and facilitating a Circle without adult involvement.

> (OP$_a$) Me and my friend were playing around in class and we actually solved [a conflict using] the Circle. It was fun but it was serious too and we did it all by ourself. Cause my friend that used to be in the facilitator circle training, me and her we was just playing at first but my other friend, the girl I'll call my friend and the girl I'll call my sister, they was arguing about something or whatever. So me and X said, "let's have a circle." and then we was playing—we was playing though, and then it actually solved their problem. Now they talk. So we actually did a Circle, all by ourselves. (female, 12th grade)

Interrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline (SPP). Both students ($n = 17$) and adults ($n = 20$) spoke about a shift to less punitive methods of dealing with student conflict. Students discussed that a positive outcome of the RC program was that they were not getting suspended or "locked up." Similarly, adults explained that a positive outcome of the RC program was not having to give as many suspensions or detentions. This category

speaks to the negative consequences of zero-tolerance policies contributing to the "School-to-Prison Pipeline." Students seemed very aware of how the (punitive) methods that the school used for dealing with student conflict often resulted in them being suspended or "locked up." A ninth-grade student made the connection between him getting into fights, getting suspended and lower academic achievement: "you have a fight and your grades drop because you are missing school and your grades drop." Adults also seemed aware of how these (punitive) methods resulted in too many suspensions. Students attributed not being suspended or "charged" to the RC program. Similarly, adults stated being less reliant on punitive methods and more willing to talk things out using RC principles. This outcome could also be due to school staff having another option "or layer of intervention" for dealing with student conflicts. Instead of just suspending students, school staff is able to utilize the RC program to address the conflict.

> (SPP$_a$) I noticed that some fights, some arguments, some fights get talked out more, instead of just suspension, instead of just suspending somebody from school, where they get away from their education for like 5 days, they do not learn nothing for that whole 5 days. Instead of doing that [suspensions] you could do a circle and they do the circle they sign the paper, then they go to class, and they become friends again, or they leave each other alone. (female, 11th grade)

> (SPP$_a$) I'm not as quick to do a suspension [in response to a conflict], but yet try to bring both parties in to resolve, opposed to doing a quicker suspension. (Administrator)

Improved relationships (IR). Students ($n = 24$) and adults ($n = 23$) also talked about improved relationships as an outcome of Circles. Students shared that their relationships were "cool" with peers they had conflict with, after participating in a Circle. One of the goals of the RC program is to restore relationships to how they were before the conflict. In this case students and adults talked not only about restored relationships, but also actual improvements in their relationships. Most of the relationships before the conflict were already strained and neutral at best, but after the Circle, participants talked about building actual relationships with those individuals with whom they experienced a conflict. Similarly to the students, adults also spoke about both experiencing improved relationships with their students, and seeing improved relationships among their students.

> (IR$_a$) Me and this kid [were] about to fight, and I think I, uh, I got in his face. I was upset and, you know, everybody wanted to hype up the situation. It was not like that. I just wanted to get a little closer to see what he was saying. And so, uh, me and him ended up being cool after that [the Circle]. (male, 10th grade)

> (IR$_a$) I've only participated in one circle and it was arguably the most revolutionary thing I've ever seen. I mean these girls couldn't walk within 50 feet of each other without, "I can't believe she's" you know, and then, now they talk they say "hi" to each other. I mean, they literally would walk down the hall and "I'm gonna hit her, I'm gonna" you know and it was just a complete turn around [after the Circle], I think the Circle gave them an opportunity to voice their opinion and then the other heard and voiced their opinion then the- they came to this epiphany that they're actually more alike than they are different. (Counselor)

> (IR$_a$) It [the Circle] turned out positive, I was surprised cause the person that I was [in the Circle with]—the young man, I learned some

things about him that I didn't know. And, um, it kind of helped us resolve our conflict so . . . I think in the circle it allows the two people that's involved in the conflict to build a relationships but it also allows the person that's facilitating to build relationships as well and trust. And here, relationship is real big uh, building relationships. And once the kids understand that you're gonna relate to them and they can trust you then you'd be surprised what you can get from them. (Teacher)

Prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict (PDC). Another category for this construct was prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict. This subcategory had three themes: (a) new skills/tools, (b) utilizing circles, and (c) less physical fighting. The numbers in front of each quote correspond to the theme numbers above.

Youth ($n = 19$) talked about learning new ways of handling conflict because of their Circle experience. Specifically, youth mentioned learning to address conflict by talking it out rather than fighting it out. Adults ($n = 21$) discussed learning about and utilizing new tools because of RC and seeing students utilize new tools for conflicts. When adults spoke about the "tools," they were not necessarily speaking about the circle process but about specific skills from the process, such as using reflection when listening.

(PDCₐ) It's [the RC program] just really been helpful for me with my friends and things. Like, recently I had a problem with my friends and I just pulled it to the side, I was like, "why this why that, how come this going on?" (male, ninth grad)

Adults and students talked about how the fact that they were utilizing Circles was in itself an outcome of the RC program. Adults mentioned seeing their peers using Circles more to deal with student conflicts. Students spoke about going to circles when they have conflicts. Students also shared that the RC process was different than what they were used to, "they [Circles] help me, um, handle things different than what I used to."

(PDCᵦ) I feel like the administrators have embraced it [Circles]. I know that if there is an opportunity for students to go to the Circles they [administrators], kind of go in that direction . . . that's a change because, you know, sometimes the administrators, you know, they rule with an iron fist and "it's my way" and "we're gonna handle this discipline situation this way" and she's [principal] been, you know, able to kind let the circle process play out all of them [the conflicts]. (Administrator)

Students and adults also talked about less physical fighting. Adults attributed the decrease to the RC program. This theme ties in with learning new skills because students are using alternative methods to deal with conflicts, likely using newly learned RC skills.

(PDСₛ) I mean we ain't getting in conflicts [fights] since then [the Circle]. And that was 2 months ago. (male, 12th grade)

Meaningful dialogue (MD). For both students ($n = 18$) and adults ($n = 19$), another positive outcome of RC was meaningful dialogue. Under this category three subcategories emerged: (a) understanding and connecting, (b) no rumors/boosting in the Circle, and (c) getting to the actual cause of the issue. The numbers in front of each quote correspond to the theme numbers above.

Students enjoyed being able to talk to their peers and feeling understood because of the Circle. Adults noticed that RC gives students an opportunity to have a voice and to interact in a way that

is different from what they are used to. Students were seen as able to talk and listen to each other in ways that support their relationships and create conditions for feeling heard and dealing with the underlying issues of their conflict.

(MDₐ) I feel like everyone can get their point of view across [in Circles] . . . I think that [RC] is a good program. Um, I think that is a way for people to get—to like—to understand each other so that way they are not just bickering a whole bunch of words and no one is listening, but they're actually saying something that someone is going to listen to, and then they can relay what someone wants to listen to back and then they will get to an understanding. (male, 11th grade)

Students also enjoyed talking out their conflicts directly with their peers without having an audience observing and instigating. Adults talked about the "no boosting" outcome as not having peer pressure in the Circles. Students are used to a culture of violence that includes their peers instigating fights. Adults talked about how Circles provide students with a space to talk out their conflict with no peers around to "boost" it.

(MDᵦ) You can get your point across and you do not have your friend or whatever in your ear. It's like you and that person and you can go with your mind and I guess you feel more safer when it's just y'all two to talk. Cause . . . if you were around a bunch of people . . . if you say, "okay let's leave it alone," someone else out your crew gonna be like "oh you a punk, you just left it alone" . . . and then when you up in here [the Circles] it's like there's nobody there to tell you. (female, 12th grade)

Students and adults also enjoyed the positive outcome of getting to the actual cause of the issue instead of just fighting back and forth without even knowing why they are fighting. Adults shared that often having students sign a "no contact" contract in which students agree to not get into a physical fight with each other at school often does not make sense because it do not address the actual problem. Circles can get to the root cause of the problem and therefore better assist students with their conflicts compared to the other methods the school had been using to deal with conflicts.

(MDₛ) These kids that had conflicts were coming back together to be in the same building and sometimes in the same classes, and if it [the conflict] didn't get resolved then- if issues didn't get resolved then they [the conflicts] were gonna come up again. So the idea of having like a no contact contract, that doesn't make sense. I felt like these circles were really geared to get at the bottom of the issue, that—the underlying pieces, the feelings, the conflict. I felt like it's [RC program] very empowering for kids to be able to solve their own problems, to be able to listen . . . it is a wonderful model to help kids see that there is another way to resolve conflict. (Counselor)

Academic and social achievements (AS). The last subcategory that emerged for adults ($n = 21$) only was seeing a stronger focus on academic and social achievements among their students as a positive outcome of the RC program. Adults noticed that the RC process had impacted some of their students in observable ways; students were more focused on academics, had more confidence and were better behaved. Adults liked the RC program because they were seeing changes in the students that had participated.

This subcategory included three emergent themes: (a) maturity in students, (b) better behavior in students, and (c) confidence in

students. The numbers in front of each quote correspond to the theme numbers above.

> (AS$_a$) Academically they [the students involved in the RC program] seem more focused um, all of them have gotten jobs, well quite a few of them have gotten jobs. One is actually at X, so their whole mindset has changed, it's like they're—they've come up a level, you know? And I think it's about being mature, being placed in a role and I think they're living up to their role. (Administrator)

> (AS$_b$) I know Year 1, um, the teachers were excited about how it [the RC program] helped them see differences with the behaviors of some our students, especially some of our problem students. And, you know, then they were able to see why it [the RC program] was really working. (Administrator)

> (AS$_c$) Well she [the student] just not as "*ahh*." She's a loud and boisterous individual anyway, but is not as, intimidating and, you know, confrontational as she once was, I can see that. And just have that responsibility of having the opportunity to go down and speak, you know, that puts some wind beneath her little wings, you know, made her fly a little higher and that's good to see. (Teacher)

Discussion

As restorative approaches gain traction in schools, the resulting tension between the two vastly different philosophical approaches presents a new set of challenges for school officials to navigate. Current punitive school policies emphasize zero tolerance, which sustains a climate of fear and punishment. The culture of high violence also carries an implied culture of vengeance that is common in a punitive system. Value is placed on getting back at or punishing those that have caused harm rather than understanding why the harm occurred and what can be done to repair it (Karp & Breslin, 2001). In contrast to zero-tolerance policies, restorative practices require a shift in philosophy; to see this shift the tension between retributive, authoritarian controls and restorative communitarian controls need to be balanced (Karp & Breslin, 2001).

The introduction of a restorative system at a school may create conditions for a paradigm shift to restorative values. A paradigm shift occurs when restorative methods of addressing conflict are integrated into the culture or climate, which is something that takes time (Karp & Breslin, 2001). This paradigm shift can impact engagement and the outcomes of RC because restorative practices are seen as being strengthened when the context where they function holds the same values (Barter, 2012). Because restorative and punitive systems have many opposing values, the introduction of a restorative system may feel threatening to some school teachers and staff and even to some students, even when there is dissatisfaction with the status quo. At the same time, many adults and students find the restorative alternative intuitively appealing.

Adult participants in the current study acknowledged that the punitive ways of handling conflicts and rule violations are not effective. This recognition is in line with research suggesting that zero-tolerance policies are not effective in reducing behavior referrals (Evans & Lester, 2012). This recognition or longing for a different way provides an entry position for RC and a possible initial paradigm shift, because it offers a drastically different approach for dealing with conflict. Two years into the RC program, the adults in the school seemed to be changing their view of punitive approaches. Though they already had some motivation to change the way they interacted with students prior to the RC

program, until the RC program, they did not have the structure to put that motivation into practice. Having a program that aligns with their values and provides a structure for how to put those values into practice may have been all some adults needed to shift to less punitive responses.

The outcomes associated with the RC program provide some support for eliminating overly punitive policies. As was discussed in the introduction, zero-tolerance approaches have not garnered much research support for eliminating conflicts or violence (Evans & Lester, 2010; Evans & Lester, 2012). The current study provides support for positive outcomes including prevention of destructive ways of dealing with conflict and improved academic performance among students. These outcomes speak to the potential RC has, as an alternative to punitive measures, for dealing with school-based conflict and violence.

Recommendations for Reducing Negative Outcomes

Voluntariness. Full voluntariness is an ideal characteristic of a restorative system as it has been documented to lead to more restorative outcomes in other restorative practices (Umbreit, Coates & Vos, 2001). Voluntariness may have impacted some of the negative outcomes discussed by participants. Though participation in Circles was voluntary in theory, some students may have chosen to participate because they believed it would lead to a less severe punishment. Students may have also felt pressured by adults to participate in a Circle and may have felt that the program is imposed rather than voluntary. Individuals may also see their participation as a requirement or punishment. If students see it as a punishment then RC is no different from the punitive measures that are already part of the current culture. Circles work best when working independently of the punitive system not as part of it (Evans & Lester, 2013).

Community ownership. Restorative approaches that include more community ownership are viewed more restorative (Barter, 2011). This particular RC program was brought into the school and led by a nonprofit group outside of the school community, which may have, at least initially, interfered with community ownership. Students and adults spoke about their own and others' unwillingness to be vulnerable. Students also talked about other peers not taking the process seriously. This could be due to students feeling distrust and discomfort with their peers or possibly with the facilitators. Adults discussed both of the negative outcomes (frustration and disappointment) as possibly being due to not knowing or having a relationship with the facilitator; one administrator pointed this out when she said, "one thing I do know about our students and the community in general, really, they have to kind of respect you and know you before they even start listening." RC values having community members (as opposed to outsiders) facilitating Circles, because a level of trust and comfort is likely to already be established with someone who is a member of the community (Wachtel, 2009). RJ scholars have suggested that if participants feel intimidated they may feel less safe and less comfortable opening up and sharing their truth, including how they were impacted by what happened (Umbreit & Stacey, 1996). This is important because the willingness of participants to share their feelings has been found to impact the outcomes of other restorative practices (Umbreit & Stacey, 1996). Having trusted and respected

members of the school community facilitate the Circles may help reduce negative outcomes.

Limitations

As with much qualitative research the results are unique to the particular investigators, participants, and context of the study (Creswell, 2007). Given that all participants are from the same school and experienced the same RC program, generalization should be done with caution. Few qualitative studies have been conducted on RC; because of this, the measures used in the current study were developed by the researchers and are not validated measures. Given the lack of research on school-based RJ and particularly with RC this study hopes to provide a foundation or starting point from which further research can emerge.

Future Implications

There are many new school-based RJ programs being developed and/or adapted. The lack of research on school-based RJ is disappointing given the rise in popularity of RJ among policymakers. Empirical studies focused on understanding school-based RC are needed to better understanding key characteristics that might be common across programs or with particular populations. Longitudinal research would also be beneficial to better understand the transitions or cultural shifts that may occur over time. The lack of empirical literature, particularly RC, may be impacting the development, implementation and outcomes of RC programs in school settings. This study provides one of the first, descriptive examinations of school-based RC. This study was part of a larger project with an aim to develop a theoretical framework that explains the experiences and perceptions of individuals with RC as well as factors that impact their experiences, perceptions and outcomes. Continuing research will include additional data collection from different high schools implementing RC programs to assist in the validation of the theoretical model developed from the larger study (including the outcomes of the current study). Gathering data from multiple sites will increase the sample size and allow for rigorous testing of the model through quantitative methods. Understanding student and adult experiences and perceptions as well as outcomes can assist practitioners by providing them with a peer-reviewed study, which may facilitate the development and implementation of school-based RC programs.

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Appendix

Student and Adult Constructs, Categories, and Subcategories

1. Overarching Construct I: Barriers

    a. Low knowledge/awareness of RC

    b. Low involvement

    c. Low trust

    d. Lack of time

2. Overarching Construct II: Initial climate/culture

    a. High violence

    b. High boosting/instigating

    c. Limited resources

3. Overarching Construct III: Internal motivation

    a. Curiosity/openness

    b. Desire to engage

4. Overarching Construct IV: Level of participant engagement with RC

5. Overarching Construct V: Outcomes

    a. Negative

        i. Frustration

            1. Lying

            2. Fighting

        ii. Disappointment

        1. Unwilling to be vulnerable

        2. Not everyone important to conflict present

    b. Positive

        i. Ownership of process/bypassing adults

        ii. Interrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

        iii. Improved relationships

        iv. Prevention of destructive ways of engaging conflict

            1. New skills/tools

            2. Utilizing Circles

            3. Less physical fighting

        v. Meaningful dialogue

            1. Understanding and connecting

            2. No rumors/boosting in the circle

            3. Gets to the actual cause of the issue

        vi. Academic and social achievements

            1. Maturity in students

            2. Better behavior in students

            3. Confidence in students