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Restorative Practices in 21st Century Schools:
A phenomenological Study of Circle Practice in an Urban High School

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

in
Education Leadership

by
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the ongoing journey of finding and sharing one's voice. May we all exercise our courage and confidence to evolve, both as an individual and a community member.

Epigraph

“Everything begins with dialogue. Dialogue is the initial step in the creation of value. Dialogue is the starting point and unifying force in all human relationships.”

–Daisaku Ikeda

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Restorative Justice in 21st Century Schools:

A phenomenological Study of Circle Practice in an Urban High School

by

Frances Disney

in

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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Professor Thandeka Chapman

Restorative justice (RJ) and restorative practices (RP) are an emerging field of study in the United States. With origins derived from indigenous practices, RJ was adopted by the juvenile justice system during the 1970's, and is within the last decade being applied to school settings. In examining disciplinary data and specific studies that examined high rates of suspensions and expulsions across the country, increasing attention is being placed on restorative methods of community building and discipline interventions to decrease punitive, exclusionary approaches. Although Circle practices (a specific method of RP) continue to become more widely researched and used in enhancing academics and/or addressing issues of conflict and harm, current literature indicates limited research around RJ and RP programs and the experiences of the participants. Through observations and interviews, this qualitative study

examined the responses and perceptions participants experienced when participating in a community building Circle program. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how Circles were used in a high school setting to build rapport and healthy relationships among students and staff. Findings suggest positive outcomes students experienced through the use of Circles and show the importance of building positive classroom communities among students and staff.

Keywords: Restorative justice, restorative practices, Circles, community building

Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Education researchers, practitioners, and leaders today show increased efforts to make more informed decisions in reducing suspensions and increasing attendance and achievement through creating a safe and positive school environment for all students. In reforming our approach to discipline in our current education system, restorative justice (RJ) emerges as a new philosophy and practice in the U.S. that uses a specific set of principles to respond to conflict and harm, working to ensure safe and respectful relationships and communities (Ashley & Burke, 2007). Although there is not one commonly accepted definition, certain recurring core elements can be identified from the growing literature.

In transitioning from an era of zero-tolerance, greater evidence continues to emerge in disproving the effectiveness of such punitive discipline models in promoting a productive and safe school environment (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011; Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; Skiba & Reynolds, 2006; Teske, 2011). In examining the evolution of such school discipline practices, valid correlations between ongoing trends of high student suspension and graduation rates have emerged. As a result, developing concepts of restorative discipline (RD) and restorative practices (RP) in schools continues to grow rapidly as an alternate approach to ineffective, traditional punitive methods of behavioral discipline.

This chapter will examine relevant theories and research studies regarding the framework, values, practices, and overall impact of restorative justice in schools. In assessing the evidence, claims, and limitations of the literature, this paper will determine the gaps in

knowledge and next steps in developing areas of research as it relates to building a more equitable and democratic education system for all students.

Statement of the Problem

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) recently reported an alarming national figure of 3.5 million in-school and 1.9 million single out-of-school student suspensions (CRDC, 2014). Data reported on expulsions nationally includes 130, 000 students out of 49 million students of responding schools. This however, is an ongoing narrative of our failing school system's discipline model. Since the 1970's, there have been significant increases in K-12 suspension rates for all students, and suspension rates have more than doubled for non-White students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Survey data collected by OCR over the years provides a detailed analysis of patterns and trends, including the disaggregation of data by racial and gender to reveal specific disparities and concerns. The substantial increase in suspensions that OCR has collected over time ultimately highlights the disproportionate rates toward students of color, and males in particular. As a result, these students are losing significant instructional time, which studies indicate can become a predictor of high school dropout (Balfanz, 2003; Mendez, 2003).

Studies have revealed significant after-effects of zero-tolerance policies, which are widely defined as a set of "predetermined severe and punitive consequences, regardless of the seriousness of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context" (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vazquez, 2006). These stringent zero-tolerance policies have also increased both the number and length of suspensions and expulsions, expanding over time the range of infractions to specifically include fighting (or witnessing fights), wearing hats, and even failure to complete homework (Skiba, 2013). Such zero-tolerance methods of exclusionary discipline first emerged in 1990, when the Gun Free School Zone Act (GFSZA)

was passed due to the increased apprehension of administrators regarding firearms, drugs, and other issues of violence (Simson, 2012). As a result, severe, exclusionary approaches to classroom management and school-wide discipline practices increased with the addition of campus police and students arrests (Sullivan, 2007; Wald & Losen, 2003). The presence of law enforcement personnel on campus has often created what students have reported as feeling criminalized (Schiff, 2013; The Advancement Project, 2011). Identifying experiences such as these are crucial when evaluating a school's climate and classroom learning environment, which influences students' overall education.

According to President and Founder, Ted Wachtel of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, restorative practices specifically promote the study of how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making (2012). Within the larger domain of restorative justice, certain distinctions have also surfaced regarding the separation and/or intersection of restorative discipline and practice. Restorative practices have recently emerged as a subset of RJ, which focuses on preventative measures to misbehavior, bullying, and violence by proactively building relationships and community (Wachtel, 2012). These distinctions between reactionary and preventative measures are significant elements in the expansion of RJ and have now spread into education settings as “restorative practices” and “restorative discipline.”

Purpose of the Study

In investigating the developing use of restorative practices in schools to address the concern of high suspension/expulsion rates that focus on improving school climate, this phenomenological study will explore a RJ program in its second year at a large, diverse, urban high school. In specifically examining the program's implementation of Circle practices, the

proposed research study will aim to more fully understand the specific experiences and perceptions of student and staff participants in Circles. In using a qualitative phenomenological methodology, it will provide tools for studying the complex phenomena of Circles within a certain moment in time. In using this method, I as the researcher will be able to better understand the phenomenon of Circles through the experiences of the participants and the real-life context in which it occurs (Creswell, 2007).

Research Questions

The research questions below guide the overall inquiry of this dissertation study.

1. What are the intended goals and outcomes of community building Circles within a restorative justice program?
2. What are the experiences and/or responses of students participating in Circle practices?
3. What resource needs or supports emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
4. What barriers or lessons learned emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
5. How do Circle practices embody the overall philosophy of restorative justice?

Overview of Methods

The research design that corresponds ~~the~~ most appropriately with the Circle practice phenomenon and the research questions previously mentioned, is that of a phenomenological study for qualitative inquiry. Again, the goal of the proposed study is to explore how high school students and staff participate in and perceive the ‘restorative justice’ Circle practices. In using a phenomenological approach, I will be able to document the lived-experiences of the participants in order to have a more in-depth understanding of the essence and underlying structure of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam 2014). It is in this manner that the study would then

focus on the lived-experience of the participants in the phenomena of Circle practices and how such an experience is transformed into consciousness recognition.

Lastly, given the limited amount of time allocated to the site's specific training and implementation of RJ Circles during the school year, a phenomenological study would be ideal in examining this component of the program in its natural setting to understand how the participants interpret their experiences and derive meaning from them. For this investigation, in-depth interviews will be the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2014). I will also collect data from other sources including observations, focus-groups, documents, and audio materials. A more detailed description of the methods used for this study is given in the third chapter of this document.

Significance of the Study

In addressing the achievement and school discipline gap, restorative justice (RJ) and restorative practices (RP) emerge as promising avenues in reforming the K-16 school climate and discipline system. RJ in education policy begins with a paradigm shift from punitive, exclusionary methods of discipline (commonly referred to as an era of “zero-tolerance”, beginning during the 1990s), to focus on responsibility, accountability, nurturance, and restoration (Braithwaite, 1989). This shift stems from the concept that when offenders are stigmatized by shaming, wrongdoing is more likely to reoccur, in contrast to creating a process of rehabilitation and reintegration back into the community. More significantly, data reports that underline ongoing racial discipline gaps indicate the lack of empirical research concerning interventions such as RJ in reducing such disparities (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2006). Identifying and evaluating these components of school climate and discipline

are crucial when examining our education system's influence on providing students with equitable learning conditions, which thereby impacts their futures.

Nationwide data collected by the U.S Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights continues to reveal that students of color and students with disabilities are disproportionately disciplined than those of their white counterparts. The effects of zero-tolerance discipline policies has students essentially losing vital instructional time, which can lower their performance, affecting graduation timelines and students' sense of self-worth (Schiff, 2013). RJ and RP research is continuing to develop as an effective approach for building students sense of school community membership and out of the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Schiff, 2013). In addressing the ongoing national crisis of high suspension and expulsion rates, the growing body of literature around RJ continues to reveal new areas of consideration as well as contention.

Despite the limited body of research, quantitative and qualitative evidence strongly suggests that RJ practices have the potential to effectively and inclusively encourage participation and accountability when managing discipline in school settings. A significant need for further research regarding the role, purpose, and structural process of RJ in U.S. schools is still needed in order to establish and/or reform discipline policies. Although significant findings have become apparent in several RJ programs across the United States, (as well as internationally) there are still major concerns and challenges regarding the implementation of RJ in schools. The call for further research is apparent in a majority of RJ studies, specifically involving the framework, guidelines, training, funding, and practices, as well as the examination of long-term application of RJ models. As previously established, former zero-tolerance policies dating back to the early 1990s have had significant influence over disciplinary school systems in the U.S. Zero tolerance policies have in effect perpetuated racial discipline gaps and the school-

to-prison pipeline by creating hostile learning environments that often degrade and criminalize students (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Schiff 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2007). The role of education institutions in facilitating the development of students as future citizens is apparent in RJ's developing framework and is now being explored more earnestly.

In supporting students, teachers, school leaders, and policymakers to engage in meaningful conversation regarding restorative discipline practices, areas of further inquiry can truly be recognized and addressed. Moreover, researchers also highlight limitations within studies concerning authentic research assessment and time constraints. Since restorative justice is not a one size fits all model, questions about how to assess its overall effectiveness and worth is another point of contention (Mullet, 2014). Likewise, researcher González specifically points out the lack of quantitative measures in showing the development of positive relationships between students, teachers, and administrators (Gonzalez, 2012). Lastly, a final core challenge in using a restorative discipline model is time, especially given instructional demands and expectations of schools (Armour, 2013). These areas mark additional gaps in research and the need for further development concerning the use of RJ to address the national concern of student discipline.

Positionality & Role of the Researcher

The researcher's experience as a high school teacher working with "at-risk" students, lead the researcher to the concept of "restorative justice." In finding ways to empower students to safely discover and express their voice while collectively building a positive and productive learning environment, the researcher began to implement new practices from a professional development seminar that was attended in the summer of 2010. The training was led by Dr. Ron Claassen, professor at Fresno Pacific University, who had just published a book entitled *Discipline that Restores* (BookSurge Publishing). During this time, the researcher began to

experiment with different restorative practices such as working with students to create a classroom “respect agreement” and how to approach conflict by focusing on dialogue and mediation strategies. Since then, the researcher has continued to explore these restorative approaches and have become more intrigued with the growing studies across the country and world. Now, the researcher has had an opportunity to engage in a more objective and systematic inquiry about these concepts and practices. It is due to these experiences and inquiries that the researcher chose to disclose them since they may have influenced the study and/or interpretation of the findings.

Definition of Key Terms

The following list of key terms were provided to help support orienting the reader to terms that appear in the literature review and throughout this study. The majority of the definitions cited below are from an article entitled, “Defining Restorative,” which was written by Ted Wachtel, the founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices.

- 1. Restorative justice:** A social science that studies how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision making. It consists of informal and formal approaches that respond to wrongdoing after it occurs (Wachtel, 2016).
- 2. Restorative practice (RP):** An emerging field of study that evolved from restorative justice and offers a common thread to tie together theory, research and practice in fields of education, counseling, criminal justice, and social work. RP focus on building healthy communities, increasing social capital, decreasing anti-social behavior, and repairing harm to restore relationships. It includes the use of informal and formal processes that

precede wrongdoing and proactively builds relationships and communities to prevent conflict and wrongdoing (Watchel, 2016).

3. **Zero-tolerance:** Policies that give the most severe punishment possible to every person who commits a crime or breaks a rule (Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary, 2017).
4. **Community Circles:** A versatile restorative practice used to proactively build relationships and communities through dialogue and discussions. Circle activities give participants an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in a safe space that is regulated by certain values and guidelines or agreements. The symbolism of sitting in a circle implies community, connection, inclusion, fairness, equality, and wholeness (Costello, Watchtel, & Watchtel, 2009).
5. **Democratic participation:** An educational approach that infuses the learning process with fundamental social values, based on principals of democracy (i.e.: equality, justice, voice, etc.). (IDEA, 2017).

Summary

In supporting students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers to engage in meaningful conversation regarding restorative justice and school discipline practices, there are still integral areas of inquiry to be recognized and addressed. It is apparent that the RJ framework and practices are under-researched. Despite such limitations in the RJ scope of study, significant findings continue to emerge. Even after considering the recent growth and development of RJ in schools, questions and research gaps remain regarding previous case studies mentioned and the results of longitudinal studies. Aspects related to program funding, culture, training, time, and long-term sustainability continue to be major points of concern (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Mullet, 2014; Riestenberg 2003). In all, studies around RJ so far strongly

indicate how such an approach has the potential to proactively influence current school discipline models. RJ in this way redirects a school's focus on building stronger, more meaningful relationships rather than ineffective, reactionary rules and policies.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Introduction

The proposed research is informed by the existing literature on restorative justice in school settings. This section will give relevant background information and context to the topic of study by identifying underlying factors and assumptions in regard to school discipline. Examples include: zero-tolerance policies, schools-to-prison pipeline, significant trends in disciplinary data, as well as the origins of restorative justice and its core values, culture, and common practices.

The Impact of Zero-Tolerance Policies on Student Achievement

The examination of the educational climate around school discipline in the last 20 years, specifically with zero-tolerance, shows connections to social justice issues of disciplinary inconsistencies with regard to race as well as lingering effects of those discipline models illuminated by the “school-to-prison pipeline.” According to the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008), the past 20 years of zero-tolerance implementation in schools has provided insufficient evidence-based approaches of evaluating its impact on student behavior and school climate. Decades later, evidence now shows the detrimental systemic repercussions of zero-tolerance on how students are regarded and treated. Subsequently, growing evidence shows how restorative practices in educational settings are helping to counteract the exclusionary influences of zero-tolerance policies (Schiff, 2013). The initial inquiry into restorative justice in the U.S. can be traced to a restorative justice pilot program in Minnesota’s public-school system in 1995 (Karp & Breslin, 2001). Since then, the appeal of Restorative approaches to schools has centered around a goal of productively re-

integrating students into campus communities as opposed to the traditional enforcement and exclusionary policies previously addressed that have detrimental effects on students' futures. As a result, the interest and potential in restorative justice is increasing for education leaders, practitioners, and policy makers in the U.S. as empirical research continues to evolve and show positive results in regard to school discipline.

Several studies present how the practice of zero-tolerance policies have unintentionally created degrading and hostile learning environments for students and have in effect led to an escalation in dropout rates and a phenomenon termed, the "schools-to-prisons pipeline" (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2003). The "schools-to-prisons pipeline" is often seen as an unintended outcome of school policies that target and essentially force out students of color and/or with behavioral indiscretions, special needs, and/or poor academics through suspensions, expulsions, or arrests (Ashley & Burke, 2007; Schiff, 2013). The negative outcomes associated with zero-tolerance are lasting and harmful as demonstrated in studies conducted across the country.

Recently, the Council of State Governments Justice Center (CSG) 2011 comprehensive report evaluated disciplinary referral data for 3, 900 middle and high schools, assigning three groups of students in grades 7th-12th in Texas public schools. In examining school records and data from a six-year period, the longitudinal study determined that 59.6% of students experienced some form of exclusionary discipline during 7th-12th grade, of which 31% of students with at least one suspension or expulsion repeated their grade level, and 59% of students with multiple offenses (11 or more) failed to graduate high school entirely (Fabelo et al., 2011). CSG's report also highlights that half of the 59% of students who were subject to exclusionary practices in school had subsequent contact with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011).

In Florida, a longitudinal statewide study also found a high correlation between the frequency of suspensions of ninth graders and their later academic performance such as on-time high school graduation. The study was based on data from a cohort of 181,897 students who entered the 9th grade in the year 2000, with findings which suggest that a student who was suspended even once in the 9th grade was correlated with a 20% increase in dropping out (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2013). Studies such as this continue to examine the lasting effects zero tolerance policies and practices have had on students' education and lives, which again is alarming and a deep cause for concern.

The effects of such exclusionary methods of discipline on students' self-image are also evident in specific case studies such as the Advancement Project in Philadelphia. This study reported 23 schools with the highest student arrest rates within the district and with graduation rates under 70% (The Advancement Project, 2011). Furthermore, survey data also indicated that 55% of students reported that school security officers treated them like criminals by the use of metal detectors, being physically pat-down and searched, and taken into police custody (The Advancement Project, 2011). The study also illustrates an increase in referrals to law enforcement and juvenile arrest to further highlight students' negative associations concerning their criminalization.

A national study evaluated documented patterns of discipline referrals in 364 elementary and middle schools during the 2005–2006 school year. Data was reported by school staff through daily or weekly referrals by using an online-based school information system. Descriptive and logistic regressions showed that students from African American families were 2.19 (elementary) to 3.78 (middle school) times as likely to be referred to the office for problem behavior as their White peers (Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rauch, May, & Tobin, 2011). In addition, the results

indicate that students from African American and Latino households are more likely than their White peers to be expelled or suspended for the same or similar situation (Skiba et al., 2011). These findings reflect common themes and trends in schools across the nation. Once more, there is a history of similar findings and an argument for direct efforts in policy, practice, and research to address racial disparities in school discipline systems.

As previously introduced, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights recently found a highly disproportionate suspension/expulsion rate for students of color and/or with disabilities, as well as escalated rates of arrests and referrals to law enforcement (CRDC, 2014). As a result, students in zero-tolerance settings often experience the loss of instructional time when suspended or expelled, as well as the lack of adult provision, and limited support services and resources (Schiff, 2013). Reports that underline a “racial discipline gap” also indicate the lack of empirical research concerning interventions in reducing such disparities (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen & Skiba, 2006). In previous national reports from 2010, profound gender and racial gaps were also identified. These reports collected school and district suspension data from over 9,000 middle schools by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Reports conclude that such ongoing high suspension rates are of major concern, in that students’ opportunities to learn and even their civil rights are affected (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Sullivan, E. 2007). These factors influence student performance and self-worth, which often holds students back from graduating on time and increases their potential of dropping—or being forced—out of the schooling system (Schiff, 2013).

The correlation between students’ treatment in schools and in society reflects systematic injustices regarding criminalized views of students, especially students of color (Schiff, 2013). In

interpreting the data collected regarding suspensions and expulsions in the U.S., there is a strong connection between the “schools-to-prisons pipeline” and racial discipline gaps, which RJ interventions presently are working to transform. Restorative justice is continually being further developed and implemented as an alternative approach in facilitating effective communication, healing, and the process of rebuilding positive relations for thriving prospective communities.

Several schools in the Oakland Unified School District have also begun to implement positive behavioral intervention supports (PBIS) and RJ to establish an alternative discipline model. Evidence-based disciplinary interventions such as PBIS are also contributing to a growing body of research in transforming punitive school environments and are enhancing restorative practice through a three-tier system model. In aligning restorative discipline with PBIS, schools are working to further develop alternative disciplinary models that focus on preventative measures rather than reactionary methods.

A Paradigm Shift to a Restorative Justice Framework

Deriving from various legal systems from around the world since the 1970s, RJ is a fairly novel concept and practice in the United States (Zehr, 2003). It is also evident from the literature that there is no set definition of "restorative justice" and that the focus on different programs, outcomes and principles often contributes to the vagueness of the concept. According to the Suffolk University's Centre for Restorative Justice: “Restorative justice is a broad term which encompasses a growing social movement to institutionalize peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights...” Moreover, restorative approaches “seek a balanced approach to the needs of the victim, wrongdoer and community through processes that preserve the safety and dignity of all” (Boyes-Watson, 2014). In transitioning from a zero-tolerance era of school discipline previously described, RJ is being increasingly

adopted by schools in the U.S. in order to prevent and manage conflict, violence, as well as behavior management within schools. This paradigm shift in how school systems view and manage discipline reflects the recent agenda of the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice (DOJ), which is outlined in the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, declaring its focus to establish school discipline practices that foster safe, supportive, and productive learning environments (DOJ, 2011). This focus emphasizes the importance of understanding the purpose and definition of how we establish and maintain safe and equitable learning environments for the 21st century.

Additionally, previous legislation such as “Restorative Justice in Schools Act of 2013” was also introduced as an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. If passed, this act would have granted funding to provide professional development and training to school personnel concerning RJ and conflict resolution (HR 3401, 2013). Other recent school district initiatives for restorative discipline implementation include the Los Angeles Unified School District’s 2013 adoption of School Discipline Policy and School Climate Bill of Rights under the Discipline Foundation Policy (BUL-3638.0) that establishes a consistent framework around positive behavior interventions. In monitoring federal and local government proposals such as these, it is clear why policy-makers and education leaders continue to demonstrate growing interest and investment in the development and application of RJ in education settings.

In an effort to better understand the evolving RJ framework, scholars have examined core values, culture, and practices and their impacts on schools. Several studies have demonstrated significant declines in suspensions and expulsions (Armour, 2013; González, 2012; McMorris, Eggert, Beckman, Gutierrez, Gonzalez-Gaona, Abel, Young-Burns, 2011; Riestenberg, 2003; Sumner et al., 2010). For instance, the Minnesota Department of Education also implemented a

restorative justice pilot program at five school sites, which also resulted in the reduction of suspensions between 30 to 50 percent depending on the site (Riestenberg, 2003). In one school when comparing the 2001-2002 school year with the 2002-2003 school year (the intervention year), discipline referral decreased by 57%, with in-school suspensions dropping by 35%, and out of school suspensions by 77% (Riestenberg, 2003). Another case study conducted in the Minneapolis Public School District sampled 83 students warranted for school expulsion. Process evaluation survey data indicated students reporting significant positive increases in their ability to handle conflict through communication and awareness of their actions and 90 parent/guardians also expressing higher levels of communication and connection to their child's school and community resources (McMorris et al., 2011).

As previously established, our present-day school discipline model is founded on the premise that it is the duty of schools to create safe and supportive learning environments for all students while preserving their integrity (DOJ, 2011). RJ framework essentially aligns itself with this statement of purpose made by the Departments of Education and Justice. These goals in education can be traced back to the seminal work of American philosopher and educator John Dewey, who asserted that our education system essentially serves as grounds for developing students' social and civic engagement, today known as democratic participation (Dewey, 1997). In this fashion schooling systems act as a microcosm of society, reflecting how students will ideally behave and contribute to their larger community.

Restorative Values, Culture, and Practice

In providing more clarity for understanding the conceptual framework of restorative justice, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of RJ values, culture, and its overall implementation in school settings. RJ framework and implementation is essentially guided and

supported by specific values and principles that are evident in contemporary RJ in school studies (Armour, 2013; Ashley & Burke, 2007; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Macready, 2009; Solinas, 2006; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). In building a positive and safe school climate that enables restorative practices to take place, studies illustrate how school values are major indicators in supporting a fair and inclusive disciplinary process (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2006; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010).

Restorative Values. A study conducted at a small, urban school in New York City, depicts their process with their restorative program's "Fairness Committee" (Hantzopoulos, 2013). This case revealed a set of values that were implemented to help create a positive school environment suitable for RJ practices. The school's core values of "respect for humanity, diversity, truth, and intellect, and commitment to democracy, peace, and justice" set the foundation for the Fairness Committee's practice, which the author describes as "democratic and participatory practices" (Hantzopoulos, 2013). Likewise, researcher Solinas also discusses common RJ themes indicated in her case interviews from a qualitative study of 22 participants conducted in the School District of British Columbia (2006). Solinas' findings echo the Fairness Committee's values, which include: "respect, honesty, trust, humility, sharing, inclusivity, empathy, courage, forgiveness, and love" (2006). These values shared within their school community reflect mutual views of individuals and the conditions present for those who participate in a RJ school process. Moreover, Solinas notes that in order to effectively implement RJ, values that specifically support collaboration and expectation must be evident to participants (Solinas, 2006).

Two other research studies that also had comparable findings regarding thematic values of RJ were conducted in West Oakland, California, and Chicago, Illinois. A pilot restorative

study conducted at Cole Middle School in West Oakland indicated the pivotal, shared values of respect, empathy, and compromise, which aided the facilitation of restorative practices like Circle discussions (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). This RJ pilot program at Cole Middle School in West Oakland, California also calculated major declines in suspensions and expulsions during the 2006-2007 and 2008-2009 school years. Cole Middle School researchers specifically reported that 87% of suspensions dropped along with expulsions that fell to zero (Sumner et al., 2010). It was concluded that Cole Middle School's RJ practices that reflected such core values were largely positive and lend promising as a disciplinary method to help reduce suspension and expulsion rates for their school (Sumner et al., 2010).

Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority listed values of empathy, respect, honesty, acceptance, responsibility, and accountability in an RJ implementation initiative report (Ashley & Burke, 2007). These common values essentially help build school community and students' sense of inclusion and investment in a restorative process. J.D. Harvard candidate Suvall's 2009 study further illustrates this importance of RJ values concerning how RJ reinforces positive social climate within a school, rather than alienate and exclude students in the disciplinary process. Suvall's examination of Jena High School, a small rural school in Louisiana, demonstrates how the alignment of restorative values and approaches provide an opportunity to address the needs of all parties and rebuild critical rapport between the offender and school community. Suvall (2009) findings suggest that the RJ process focuses on effectively reintegrating students back into school. The result could thereby decrease the probability of subsequent occurrences and lower students' possible later entry into the juvenile system.

Relationship Building. In countering exclusionary or often extremist disciplinary actions of zero-tolerance policies, RJ shifts the focus to building supportive, positive student-teacher

relationships and caring school cultures (Hantzopoulos, 2013). As referenced earlier, Wearmouth and Berryman present a case study of the Maori tribes in New Zealand which demonstrates the importance of positive relations in the RJ process. Relationships are a significant element in how students exercise their sense of agency and esteem, enabling them to take responsibility and be held accountable for their actions within a support environment. Wearmouth and Berryman recorded two transcript interviews that illustrate both positive and negative practices that can be experienced in the classroom and by student families. Wearmouth and Berryman's study demonstrates key insights regarding the relationships between students, school, and cultural communities. The interaction between home and school in these cases were vital in how students were supported or hindered in the RJ process (Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). Once more, we see a theme resurface involving RJ as a means to develop and strengthen appropriate and healthy relationships through collective contribution and respect. In conjunction with the concept and practice of democratic participation, these practices reflect how schools are viewed as places to practice and develop democracy and social responsibility. These components again are vital in establishing positive and supportive school culture for effective RJ implementation.

Student-teacher & student-to-student relationship. Student-teacher and student-student relationships emerge as an important component of building an effective restorative culture. The role of adult modelling in serving to establish rapport and accountability is also reflected within students' interconnectedness at school (Solinas, 2007). According researcher Tom Macready (2009), RJ in the context of a school environment works to make, build, and repair relationships, which is seen as a process of "relationship learning." The author underlines how relationship learning supports how students are able to learn connection, inclusion, and social responsibility, which reflects the influence of restorative school culture. Macready's research outlines key

features of a restorative school culture, which specifically include (1) shifting emphasis from “I-It”, (2) respecting dialogue and fair process, (3) providing a supportive, collaborative structured process, and (3) a relational focus on “problems as problems” instead of as people (Macready, 2009). These components have a strong influence on how schools can establish a restorative culture that illustrates value of relationships and focus on social cooperation in our lives.

Present day educational institutions are again re-examining their role and responsibility in how to facilitate the development of students as future citizens. Concepts and practices in “moral and citizenship education” are resurfacing and becoming key components in how restorative justice manifests within our democracy (Solinas, 2007). Students understanding why and how to actively participate in their school and community, again highlights a democratic-participatory notion of education, which is also significant in instances of self and collective discipline.

Restorative Practices. Despite the limited body of empirical literature on RJ, studies name specific restorative practices that promote and reinforce RJ culture such as democratic participation. As previously introduced, in establishing and building positive school climates for RJ, the Fairness Committee’s use of an inclusive and democratic discipline model promotes the school community’s participation in a rotating reparative RJ model (Hantzopoulos, 2013). This RJ model is a concrete example of how a small urban school is establishing and utilizing democratic participation to support student voice and authentic participation. The Fairness Committee’s specific RJ process again reiterates the school values mentioned earlier, by which support the efforts to create a humanizing and dignified learning environment (Hantzopoulos, 2013). Furthermore, the Fairness Committee’s use of democratic and participatory RJ practices engaged students socially and academically (Hantzopoulos, 2013). This case example of

democratic participation again illustrates a positive shift from zero-tolerance policies to a more collaborative and community focused restorative discipline model.

Circles. Circles are another significant restorative practice. The Ed White Middle School in San Antonio, Texas, recently introduced a restorative discipline model as of 2012, which began its program with a two-day training session on the practice of RJ Circles (Armour, 2013). Ed White emphasis and utilization of Circle practices is apparent throughout different stages of the discipline process. Weekly practices involving Circle check-ins, check-ups, and check-outs as well as “Circle-It Forms” were used and demonstrated the importance of how Circle practices were implemented and structured for staff and students. The report evaluation indicated several mixed-reviews concerning students’ response to Circle practices in being bored or turned off by the routinized process. In all, the monthly observations of Circles in the report conclude that the Circle practices essentially helped Ed White teachers and students identify, communicate, and resolve conflicts promptly (Armour, 2013). Additional recommendations for the development of Circles are also evident in the report, suggesting a restorative discipline school handbook to better guide teacher-facilitators in implementing Circle practices (Armour, 2013).

Mediations and conferences. Researcher and professor Thalia González examined a restorative program implemented at North High School during 2008-2010 in Denver, Colorado. During its first two years there were 120 formal implementations of RJ practices, including mediations, conferences, and Circles (González, 2012). Since its pilot, there now have been over 830 formal restorative interventions with remarkable results. In the program’s first year, North High’s questionnaire results showed that over 72% of participants personally felt that restorative agreements were followed completely, and 85% percent of all participants felt satisfied with the outcome of the process (González, 2012). Other findings also concluded that 20% of the students

in the program lowered their average number of out of school suspensions by 81% in the second semester and 17% of students showed an 80% reduction in the number of office referrals. In the following year, 30% further improved behavior evidenced by an 88% reduction in out-of-school suspension in the second semester compared with the first. Lastly, expulsions from North High were reduced by 85% from the 2008-2009 school year and by 82% since the project started. González concludes that while quantitative data does indeed demonstrate a downward trend in suspensions and expulsions, there is not a quantitative measure to show the development of positive relationships between students, teachers, and administrators (González, 2012).

The use of agreements is also a common practice implemented in RJ. A qualitative study conducted within the Australian juvenile justice system examined observation and interview data from 32 young offenders. The study investigated the effectiveness of using agreements in restorative conferences and the degree to which agreements impacted these youths' future offences. According to this study, agreements are defined as verbal or written apologies, monetary restitution, or work performed for the victim or community (Hayes, McGee, Punter, & Cerruto, 2014). Its findings indicated a contradiction to prior quantitative research in that young people actually rarely viewed conference agreements as impactful on their future offending behavior (Hayes et al., 2014). This case shows an area for further research concerning the purpose and effectiveness of agreements in RJ due to its contradictory findings.

Social Justice Implications

The researcher's positionality as a social justice educator reflects a high interest in restorative discipline as a means to create meaningful and equitable change in our schooling system. The seminal framework of education theorists John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky also helps inform the understanding of how school systems function as grounds for developing students as

future citizens and leaders. Although it has been long debated the extent to which the education system should develop students' social and civic engagement, it is apparent that schools have an immense influence over students' perception and conduct as citizen-scholars. The impact schooling has on students' identity and community interaction leads to how restorative approaches can be used as a tool to address, heal, and resolve behavior concerns and violations in a collaborative manner (Ashley & Burke, 2007). In reflecting on data regarding the "schools-to-prisons pipeline" and racial discipline gaps, it seems clear that interventions and reformations are necessary to address these social injustices and violations of students' fundamental right to an education.

Once more, the literature on RJ studies strongly illustrates the potential in reforming and redefining harmful punitive school disciplinary methods by integrating restorative policies and practices. The significant need for further research regarding the role, purpose, and structural process of RJ in schools is still ongoing. It is in this manner that restorative discipline and justice should be pursued in establishing a more equitable, democratic education system for all students.

Leadership Implications

The impact of RJ thus far in schools echoes major implications for social justice leaders in our current 21st century education system. By re-examining present policies and practices and further developing a restorative approach regarding behavioral discipline in schools, a more inclusive and socially responsible learning environment can be attained. The limited body of knowledge (especially around longitudinal studies) of RJ in school settings again is a major point of attention, as it is still in an early adoption phase in the U.S. It is the responsibility of education leaders and policymakers to take informed action in building more equitable schools that serve all students. RJ is one avenue worth further investigation.

Summary

Restorative justice is a potentially dynamic approach to reforming discipline policy and practices for 21st century schools. In addressing the ongoing national crisis of high suspension and expulsion rates, the growing body of literature around RJ continues to reveal new areas of contention as well as consideration. As discussed in this paper, restorative discipline programs throughout the country and even abroad indicate significant declines in suspensions and expulsions, and an overall increase in positive school community, rapport, and even sense of safety (Armour, 2013; González, 2012; McMorris et al., 2011; Sumner et al., 2010; Riestenberg, 2003). These critical findings again call for 21st century education institutions to transform exclusionary discipline methods previously established by zero tolerance policies.

In effectively transitioning from an era of zero tolerance, restorative practices require a major paradigm shift in how we view discipline. As previously established, former zero-tolerance policies dating back to the early 1990s have had significant influence over disciplinary school systems in the U.S. Zero tolerance policies have in effect perpetuate racial discipline gaps and the school-to-prison pipeline by creating hostile learning environments that often criminalize students (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Schiff 2013; Skiba et al., 2011; Sullivan, 2007). The role of education institutions in facilitating the development of students as future citizens is also apparent in RJ framework. In adopting a restorative framework, studies indicate how education institutions essentially work to provide a supportive school environment for students to learn and practice social responsibility (Macready, 2009). Several studies show correlations between participants' behavior, attitude, and the implementation of restorative practices, despite certain gaps in knowledge concerning RJ.

The cited research highlights key factors that build restorative school climate and capacity, including the emphasis on democratic-participation, common school values, and the importance of building relationships (Ashley & Burke, 2007; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2006; Sumner et al., 2010; Suvall, 2009). As a result, RJ practices such as Circles and agreements often reflect and/or reinforce core values and relationship building as delineated in the research studies. Although significant findings have become apparent in several RJ programs across the United States as well as internationally, there are still major concerns and challenges regarding the implementation of RJ in schools.

Chapter Three: Methods

A Phenomenological Research Design

As presented in the previous chapter, the existing literature has informed the design decision and research questions. The significant need for further research regarding the role, purpose, and structural process of RJ in U.S. schools is ongoing. The need for further research is apparent in studies concerning RJ framework, guidelines, training, funding, experiences, and practices, as well as an examination of long-term application models. The current quantitative and qualitative evidence strongly suggests that RJ has potential in effectively and inclusively encouraging participation and accountability with transgressions by acknowledging first relationships and the harm done to the individuals, rather than solely the rules or policies broken (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001). RJ in this manner -according to certain studies- has the potential to positively impact current school discipline models and redirect our focus on building stronger, more meaningful relationships.

The purpose of this phenomenological study focused on understanding the phenomenon of Circles and how participants experience and make meaning from such a practice. As previously mentioned, the research design that corresponded most appropriately to the research questions, is that of a phenomenological study for qualitative inquiry.

Context of the Study

The context of the study took place in a school district in Southern California that serves about 132,000 students PK-12th grade and is one of the largest school districts in California. The student population is highly diverse, encompassing more than 15 ethnic groups, which including

roughly 46% Latino/Hispanic, 23.4% white, 10.2% African American, and more than 60 languages and dialects (“About Grand School Unified”, 2015).

Ocean Heights is a large, ethnically diverse neighborhood, centrally located in the San Diego metropolitan area. Ocean Heights is mainly a post-industrial community, although there is a small portion of industrial and commercial development on its the southern edge. In respect to primary and secondary education, data shows neighborhood schools scoring consistently below district schools in API scores as well as lower high school graduation rates. Ocean Heights’ violent crime rate was higher than the rate of the City of San Diego. For years 2005 and 2007, the rate was more than double that of the City’s.

Moreover, many students have immigrated and fled from war-torn countries, as reflected in the 37 district recognized languages and dialects spoken by students. The different types of languages and number of English learners who speak those languages at this site include Burmese (17), Khmer (Cambodian) (10), Lao, Somali (79), Spanish (178), Vietnamese (46), and Other (121). These figures indicate the diversity of languages reflected by 451 English learners at Mountain Top, which reflects 38 percent of the entire student body.

Recently, the school district’s “Vision 2020” includes a “Uniform Discipline Plan”, and media reports have remarked on a district-wide action toward becoming a restorative district. As earlier mentioned regarding the national epidemic of suspensions and expulsions, data also reveals how the school district proportionately disciplines, suspends, and expels students with disabilities and students of color, specifically African American and Latino youth (Arthurs, Benavides, Erickson, Klompus & Selby, 2014). Students with disabilities accounted for 11% of student population; however, this group has a 29% suspension rate. Harvard graduate researchers suggest that such a disproportionality should be closely examined in terms of the academic and

behavioral support systems for students. The effects of the district's inequitable discipline practices work to perpetuate a cycle of absenteeism, truancy, disengagement, academic failure, and dropout. Although the district continues with its zero-tolerance stands in regard to weapons, drugs, violence, it recently has made adjustments to its Zero-Tolerance Policy, which in order to maintain a safe environment for students and staff, disciplinary action may include counseling, detention, in or out-of-school suspensions, or expulsions for more serious offenses ("Uniform Discipline Plan", 2012).

Research Questions

The research questions that framed this study are:

1. What are the intended goals and outcomes of community building Circles within a restorative justice program?
2. What are the experiences and/or responses of students participating in Circle practices?
3. What resource needs or supports emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
4. What barriers or lessons learned emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
5. How do Circle practices embody the overall philosophy of restorative justice?

Sample and Population

Site Selection. The context in of this study was conducted is at a large, diverse, urban high school in Southern California. Previously, about six pilot schools in the district's area were piloting the restorative program during the 2014-2015 school year. However, Mountain Top is a unique case in that students are being trained as facilitators rather than solely participants in the program. Mountain Top High School Academy of Law is located in the Ocean Heights neighborhood of San Diego and is the specific site of focus going into its second year of their RJ program.

As of last school year (2014-2015), Mountain Top had an enrollment of 1,161 students with 1,049 of students (including English learners and foster youth) on free or reduced school lunch ([San Diego Unified \(http://www.ed-data.org/school/San-Diego/San-Diego-Unified/Crawford-High\)](http://www.ed-data.org/school/San-Diego/San-Diego-Unified/Crawford-High)). These numbers suggest that roughly 90 percent of students are receiving free or reduced school lunch. The ethnic and racial breakdown of the student body is represented in Figure 1 below:

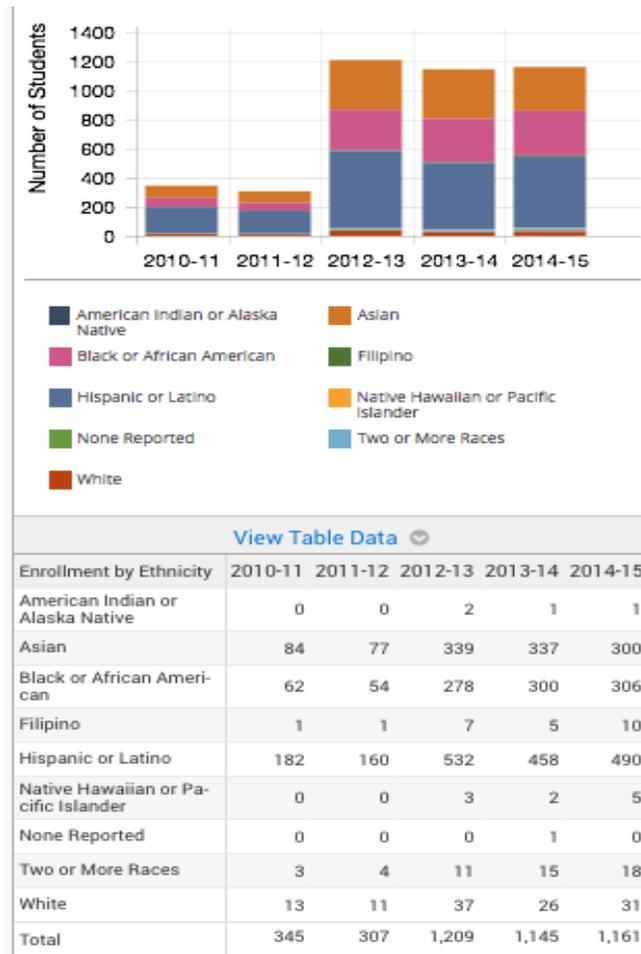


Figure 1: “Enrollment by Ethnicity” (CALPADS)

On September of 2014, the school district and local nonprofit organization, National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) created an agreement regarding the hiring of a part-time Restorative Justice Coordinator and a list of specific services and tasks to be completed for the

2014-2015 school year. Additionally, Joe Fulcher, was the Chief Student Services Officer overseeing this agreement at the time. A presentation on September 23, 2014 to the district board on the “LCAP Vision for 2020 Report” clearly stated its LCAP actions and services: “Provide opportunities and supports for middle and high schools to implement restorative justice practices and/or PBIS” and “District and school staffs set goals to decrease suspension and expulsion rates, discipline referrals, and removal from classroom incidents and implement positive alternatives (e.g., Restorative Justice, PBIS)” (San Diego Unified (<http://www.boarddocs.com/ca/sandi/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=9YPVB37FE308>)).

In partnership with NCRC, restorative practice training for selected schools was agreed upon by the Members of the Board of Education. Several intervention supports were key components in the District’s efforts toward becoming a “restorative district”, including PBIS practices and a multi-tiered approach to implementing restorative practices (J. Darling, personal communication, June 3, 2015). On June 5th, 2015, it was last reported by the school district that the students from the Mountain Top High School led an in-depth Restorative Justice workshop for 100 teachers, staff, administrators, and student-leaders on how to implement restorative practices at their respective high schools (<https://www.sandiegounified.org/newscenter/crawford-high-students-lead-restorative-practices-workshop>).

Participant Selection. The target population for this quantitative, phenomenological study consisted of high school students in their junior and senior year who participated in RJ Circles at a large, diverse, urban high school in southern California, during February through June 2016. It is important to note that the intent of a qualitative, phenomenological study is not for generalizability, but rather to have a deeper understanding of the phenomena being explored. Moreover, it is essential that participants have all experienced the phenomenon being studied

(Creswell, 2007). After approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a parental and participant consent form was sent home with participants involved in Circles at the designated site. Since a core element of the philosophy of restorative practice requires a voluntary process, a convenience sample was taken by inviting all students to participate in the study.

The sample size in this study included 15 participants; with 7 junior students, 5 senior students, and 3 adults. As previously mentioned, participant selection was a convenience or self-selecting sample, which was the most ideal sampling in being able to have an authentic representation of the targeted student population. Ages of student participants ranged from 15-18 years old. Lastly, all participants were compensated for their time with a gift card of five dollars to Starbucks. The semi-structured interviews ranged from about 30 to 45 minutes.

Participants and their parents were given a consent form with the description of the research project. Participants were asked also to sign an assent form. The initial phase of the interview process involved the invitation to participate in the research project. This invitation was scripted and approved by IRB. Participants received a copy of the consent form, which included information regarding their rights and additional welfare safeguards during their participation in the study (Appendix A & B). Lastly, in protecting the identity of the participants and ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The study protocol in protecting participants also involved all documents being saved on a password secure laptop and locked in a fire-safe. Once participants were identified and all consent/assent forms were verified, interviews were arranged scheduled via email or phone. Participant profiles were also recorded and organized according to gender, age, and ethnicity, which helped to document an accurate representation of the student class population and stream-line the data analysis that followed the data collection process.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred roughly over a seven-month period from June 2016 to January 2017. In collecting phenomenological evidence, primary data was collected from semi-structured interviews. Additional data was also taken from several observations prior to all interviews, as well as audio recordings, and other documentation with explicit permission and formal consent from all participants, and in compliance with Institutional Review Board guidelines.

Interviewing school program staff and administrators provided perspectives on the goals and outcomes in relation to the program's overall context. All electronic data was saved on the researcher's laptop computer that is password-protected and encrypted. Other forms of non-electronic data were stored securely with the researcher and locked in a fire-safe. Again, all participants were assigned a pseudonym and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts to protect each participant and minimize risks associated with participation.

Interviews. The phenomenological study design included a minimum of 15 interviews of students and staff. Interviews were arranged for face-to-face, although depending on participant schedules and time constraints, a phone option was used with two staff members. In commencing with the interviews, all participants were reminded of their consent to the study prior to the interview (Appendix A-D). Interviewees were asked to complete an information cover sheet, which was used to document and organize interviews (Appendix F). An interview protocol (Appendix E) and sample interview questions were used for student and staff participants (Appendix G-I). During the interviews, a digital recording device was used to ensure accurately recorded responses. Interview data was transcribed and coded after the interview using an online transcription service known as Rev.com. Interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes, depending on the participant's experience. Semi-structured interview techniques were used to provide an

opportunity to maintain a focused interview while still giving participants the freedom for other questions to arise from the interview. Following the interview, a gift card to Starbucks in the amount of \$5 was issued to the participant as an incentive to participants for their time.

Strengths from using interview data include the ability to focus directly on study's topics and leads to insight on perceived causal inferences and explanations. However, certain challenges were also considered, which included bias due to poorly articulated questions, inaccuracies due to recall, and reflexivity (interviewee gives interviewer what they want to hear).

Direct observations. In conducting direct observations, events in real-time and within context of the case were identified and provided insight into helping to refine the study's interview questions. Observations took place within the school classrooms and were prearranged with teachers and occurred during advisory class times during the school day. About four observations were periodically conducted throughout the study. There are a few challenges associated with direct observations. These included how time consuming they were and the researcher's reflexivity.

In observing the Circles, despite each practice having a different energy depending on the participants mood or feelings, most Circles included: (1) the preparation and physical setup (moving class desks/chairs in a circle); (2) facilitator introduction of the purpose and overview (Circle agreements); (3) an icebreaker activity; (4) engaging in discussion questions; (sequential or non-sequential); (5) closing the activity through acknowledgements or reflection. Beginning circles tended to last about 50 minutes; however, as students became more familiar with the process and started to lead, most Circles were about 25 to 30 minutes. Moreover, the initial circles tended to be more chaotic with lots of side-conversations followed by periods of silence throughout the discussion time. Facilitators would often go in either clockwise or counter-clock-

wise direction, giving each participant an opportunity to speak or pass. Most participants gave short answers of about a sentence or two, looking down at the floor, their hands, and/or the talking piece. As students continued to engaged in Circles, by the third session, the group dynamic became more open where participants were sharing more detailed responses and expressing more eye-contact with one another.

Focus Groups. The purpose of using focus groups was to explore the views, experiences, motivations, and/or beliefs of participants on their experience with Circle practices. Focus groups were conducted with senior class students who participated in the Circle practices last school year and were now acting as mentors to current junior students. Some junior class students also participated in focus group interviews, which made them feel more comfortable. Focus groups of about 2-5 students were interviewed on their perceptions and experiences of the Circle program (sample interview questions are in Appendix I). Students were asked about both their experience as participants and facilitators, although more emphasis on leading was addressed by the senior student group. During the focus group interviews, participants often shared unique insights and experiences that might have otherwise been unobservable, such as their perceptions, motivations, and feelings. By conducting a focus group with senior class students who participated in the program the previous year, a more holistic understanding of the program, its development, and its practice of Circles was gained. Lastly, focus group interviews gave participants some guidance as to what to discuss; however, still allowed for flexibility and the discovery of other thoughts or ideas not previously considered since very little was already known about the study phenomenon.

Documentation. During the collection of data, the researcher also had access to other documents regarding the program. Documents that were beneficial to the development of the

study included written directions and reflections, newsletters or articles, websites/social media, and email correspondence. In collecting and using documentation data, this process was more stable, unobtrusive, exact (documents contain names, references, details of events); however, limitations to such data were the difficulty to find and gain access, as well as bias selectivity (Yin, 2009).

Data Analysis and Procedures

Observations and documentation analysis were ongoing as to help inform and refine interview questions and focus group questions. After all interviews were conducted, the first step in phenomenological reduction is *epoche* or bracketing, in which the researcher set aside preconceived experiences to best understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Emerging themes were identified through coding observations, interview transcripts, and documents. Interview transcription were completed through an external, online vendor known as Rev.com and reviewed by re-listening to the recorded interviews and transcription. In examining how individuals experienced the topic, the researcher used the method of horizontalization of the data; treating each statement as having equal worth and thereby developing a list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements (Creswell, 2007). The researcher then constructed an overall description of how the phenomenon was experienced and what was experienced as indicated by the participants.

After organizing and listing, the next steps were to create clusters of meanings by pulling out and categorizing themes to find meaning from the transcripts. In coding the data, the researcher assigned a certain word or phrase to the text that was repetitive, emphasized, or captured a significant feeling, event, or behavior. These words/phrases were then re-analyzed and re-organized to further synthesize the data codes. Once the researcher found these initial

codes, the researcher continued in the coding process by searching for these words and phrases, clustering the codes into themes and eventually major categories.

In using this methodology, the researcher was able to better understand the phenomenon of Circles through the experiences of the participants and the real-life context in which it occurs (Creswell, 2007). This study focused on exploring the specific responses and perceptions of student and staff participants involved in Circle practices at a large, diverse, urban high school in Southern California. The significance for this study was previously established in chapter two of the literature review, which indicated how education institutions are now concentrating on alternative disciplinary models that are more preventative, rather than reactionary. Professor Mark Umbreit from the University of Minnesota states that the essential purpose of Circles is: “to create a safe, nonjudgmental place to engage in a sharing of authentic personal reactions and feelings that are owned by each individual and acknowledged by others, related to a conflict, crisis, issue, or even to a reaction...” (2008).

Participants in this qualitative study included 12 students and three staff members. Demographics illustrated in the charts below (figure 1 & 2) give a snapshot of the particular characteristics of participants as a viable study sample and provide an accurate description of the phenomenon examined. As formerly explained, participants were selected through convenience sampling and interviewed given their involvement in the program. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to have their anonymity protected. A summary of the research participants demographics is charted below:

Table 1: Student Demographics

	Participant	Gender	Grade	Ethnicity	GPA	Average # of Circle lead	Average # of Circles participated
1	Andres	Male	12	Hispanic/ Latino	3.2	12	30
2	Lon	Female	12	Chinese American	3.5	15	25
3	Lucy	Female	12	Hispanic/ Latina	3.3	10	23
4	Megan	Female	12	Hispanic/ Latina	3.1	12	23
5	Hugo	Male	11	Hispanic/ Latino	3.3	5	20
6	Ana	Female	11	Hispanic/ Latina	4.0	5	20
7	Jessica	Female	11	African American	2.8	5	20
8	Sara	Female	11	Hispanic/ Latina	3.2	5	20
9	Mabel	Female	11	Hispanic/ Latina	2.3	5	20
10	Rafa	Female	11	African American	2.8	9	20
11	Tyler	Male	11	African American	3.3	8	22
12	Lilly	Female	11	Hispanic/ Latina	3.5	5	22

Table 2: Staff Demographics

#	Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Average # of Circle lead	Average # of Circles participated
1	Joyce	Female	29	White	N/A	N/A
2	Judy	Female	31	White	300	500
3	Byran	Male	52	White	N/A	N/A

Summary

This phenomenological study examined *community building circle practices* and the lived experiences of 15 total participants in order to better understand one tier of restorative practices in schools. As previously discussed, community building Circles is one of several restorative approaches used to establishing a positive school climate and culture. Researchers suggest students' connectedness and community membership help to support students' accountability when addressing wrongdoing. Circle practices in this manner can serve as one way to build appropriate and meaningful relationships among students. Moreover, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health also stresses the importance of relationships and connectedness in school settings, stating that it makes it more plausible for students to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically (2009). The aim of this study as discussed in the previous sections, was to explore the experience of student and adult participants in the phenomenon of Circle practices at a diverse, urban high school in Southern California. The reasons for utilizing a phenomenological approach were to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of Circles and the shared experiences of several individuals participating in the program.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the findings from this qualitative study and focuses on Research Questions 2 and 4 in order to understand the experiences of the respondents in a restorative justice school program. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, the participant semi-structured interviews were guided by the following five research questions:

1. What are the intended goals and outcomes of community building Circles within a restorative justice program?
2. What are the experiences and/or responses of students participating in Circle practices?
3. What resource needs or supports emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
4. What barriers or lessons learned emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?
5. How do Circle practices embody the overall philosophy of restorative justice?

The follow chapter provides a description of the themes that surfaced during data analysis in response to these five research questions. To address these research questions, semi-structured interview questions were posed to the participants (see Appendix G-I). The responses to each interview question were recorded, transcribed, and assessed for common and/or distinct meanings. As a result, several codes emerged from the analysis of the transcribed interviews and were organized and synthesized into three main categories of themes. These themes conveyed the experiences of the participants and were evident as mediating factors, the restorative session, and outcomes of the process.

The results of the data collected and the summary analysis of the participant interviews through descriptive and in vivo coding is provided in this chapter. As previously indicated in Chapter 3: Methodology, transcribed responses were examined several times for patterns, meanings, and themes. This section of this chapter provides categorical themes taken from interview data. Three overarching themes that emerged from the codes, included: *community building as a process*, *institutional constraints*, and *real-world application*. Each of these themes are each described below along with sub-themes. Each specifically addresses the experiences/ responses of participants in Circles as well as the barriers encountered, and lessons learned.

Community Building as a Process

The first major theme that surfaced from participants' experience in Circles was the phenomenon of *community building as a process*. Participants described how their level of engagement and group cohesion and rapport developed in the Circle overtime. This theme aligns with Dr. Nancy Riestenberg's concept that "implementation [is] a process, not an event" in regard to her restorative work with Minnesota's Department of Education (2015). Both students and staff shared several components or sub-themes that highlight such a relational progression. In relation to participant responses, the six sub-themes that emerged regard to building community in Circles included: (1) Establishing guidelines/ ground rules as a community, (2) developing trust and safety, (3) building community as a "family," (4) engaging in sharing and storytelling, (5) practicing listening and perspective taking and lastly, (6) emotional release and regulation.

Establishing guidelines/ground rules as a community. When discussing the process of building community, participants mentioned the importance of establishing and practicing the Circle guidelines or ground-rules when facilitating the Circle process. These specific agreements

inform participants how to engage in Circles and support communal values that are embedded in the philosophy of restorative practices.

Responses from participants indicate how guidelines or ground-rules are reflective of restorative principles, values, and/or goals. Junior student Tyler points out three specific Circle guidelines that help to set the tone, intent, and objective for Circle practice:

Researcher: Can you describe the “ground rules” and how they influence the Circle?

Tyler (junior): Well, you can say there’s about three: it's confidentiality, respect the talking piece, and uh, speak and listen from the heart. So, you establish that like whatever is said in the Circle stays in the Circle. And um, don't talk when someone else is talking and like, be present and actively listen, so then basically everyone has that chance of being heard and respected.

Tyler pinpoints an important aim of Circles: to be “heard and respected.” It can be concluded from Tyler’s response that these guiding principles ultimately support this core premise of being recognized as a community member. Tyler draws attention to how these guidelines essentially provide “everyone” with an opportunity and space to communicate. This assertion can also be traced to the democratic participation process, in which having all voices heard and respected helps to create a safe space to take active responsibility when addressing discipline at later times (Braithwaite 1999). Lastly, these guiding agreements as described above by Tyler, echo the importance of establishing core values such as democracy, trust, confidentiality, respect, active listening, authentic sharing, and equality. Although these community values are not always clearly stated and may be inherently represented within the guidelines, the significance of values in restorative practices aligns with previous research and the degree to which such values are evident to participants (Ashley & burke, 2007; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2006).

Circle guidelines essentially work to recognize community values that support the process of building rapport and developing students’ inclusion and investment in the

practice. Furthermore, in building rapport and relationships among the participants, ground rules or guidelines for the practice must be clearly set up and followed, which essentially helps to build and reinforce over time that Circles is a safe space.

Junior student, Rafa, reveals how certain students in her Circle lacked a greater understanding and connection regarding the guidelines and aims of Circles, stating: “Well, some people got used to the Circles and started following the guidelines and understood what we were doing. Some people stayed the same and they didn't really care. They're like, ‘Why am I here? Why am I doing this? Why does it benefit me?’” Rafa’s response alludes to participants needing a certain degree of interest and investment to thoughtfully participate in Circles and effectively follow the guidelines of the practice. This also speaks to how students view their role and participation in school regarding their democratic participation.

Hugo, another junior student participant, expressed his challenge to initially understand the purpose of Circles, stating: “I never wanted to do Circles. I actually didn’t like them. I thought they were pointless...they seem like they were just forced.” In a like manner, Sara shared: “I thought it was a waste of time. I didn’t participate or would give like the same one word answers.” Both Hugo and Sara’s responses reiterate how the process of building community takes time and effort in order to build comfort, trust, and a deeper understanding around the values and purpose of Circles. As delineated above, students often struggled with understanding the purpose and/or intent of Circle practices, despite the setup of Circle guidelines. This consequentially affected their level of engagement and interest in the process.

By first establishing ground rules or guidelines for engaging in Circles, some student participants were able to identify the purpose of the practice and take ownership in the process, building rapport and trust with each other. Staff trainer Joyce recalled her observations of

students learning to follow the guidelines, which attested to students' initial resistance and acclimation period:

With the students, it was a little bit rough and I think they couldn't completely understand the point of it [Circles]. It seemed a little bit boring to them because they had not really had experiences in the classroom where they were being asked to share their perspectives So, um, that kind of transpired itself into a lot of, uh, issues with just students paying attention or being able to focus or really getting engaged in the Circle and so the first couple days of training were a little bit difficult, 'cause students were talking when they didn't have the talking piece. They just had trouble really focusing. Um, but by the third day it was just a complete transformation, um, in that students were sharing with one another, wanting to, were being silent when they didn't have the talking piece, were sharing a lot more authentically and a lot more deeply. Um, and I think that is the time, that third day of training is when I, I really started to see the benefit of it and the effectiveness of it in an educational setting.

On the other hand, staff member Bryan acknowledges that some students still had a misunderstanding of the aim of Circles. He stated:

I would like to discuss with the students why we're doing this a little bit more. What does it mean, community building? Some of these students think this is a lot of fun to share, I think some of these students, "Hey, why not? Let's just, you know, but hey, it's time away from doing classwork." That kind of attitude, and I don't want that attitude. I want it to be more, um, uh, a holistic, just more blended into why we're doing this, it's not just something extraneously imposed...[also] I would like more guidance on the prompts. Even if it's gonna be student ownership to write the questions, I want there to be guidance for the students. You develop the questions, yes, but think about it... What are you wanting to achieve here? What's the goal?

Bryan illustrates how the purpose of Circles could be more apparent to participants, specifically in building a deeper understanding of community. He mentioned how stronger connections need to be made as to what community building means and how students' creation of Circle discussion questions could better reflect such goals and understanding. As earlier mentioned by junior students, the Circle process of establishing ground-rules is intended to work toward supporting participants' engagement in Circles; however, according to Bryan, the understanding of community building could be clarified and strengthened.

Students' level of understanding and engagement in Circles could also be traced to their prior experience with how schools develop environments for learning. For instance, staff member Judy discussed her observations of students processing and adjusting to Circles:

Judy: There were a lot of bumps in the road the first couple times... like, the students had never really experienced Circles before and most of them were used to a very retributive discipline system in the schools. Like, if you do something wrong or if you talk out of turn, there's like, a point system and you get, like, points deducted for doing things wrong in class, you know, and things like that. But with the restorative Circles, it's all about, like, community, accountability, and all of us trying to be our most responsible, best selves in the moment. I saw them learning about the Circle guidelines of being respectful and being present and respecting the talking piece, um, in a way that they started to call each other out and hold each other accountable, you know... So it wasn't, like, my responsibility or the teacher's responsibility.

Researcher: And about how many Circles would you say it took to get to that level?

Judy: I would say, like, you know, the- the progression happened over a series of, like, maybe five or six Circles. I think this group of students specifically was more in tune in the first place because they were at a criminal justice class. Like, they'd kind of chosen to part of this academy so... they had some interest in this... So, like, it usually, in my experience, takes a little bit longer. Like, maybe ten Circles or maybe a whole semester, you know, before, uh, a group of students is really buying in.

Staff member Judy's response highlights a recurring experience regarding the process of students becoming familiarized with the intent and process of community-building Circles. Her remarks regarding students' past views of school discipline alludes to systematic or institutionalized methods of punitive discipline, which in her experience, accounts for students' challenges in transitioning to a restorative approach of community connection and accountability. This returns back to the foundational process of community building through established Circle values and guidelines, which are approved and eventually reinforced by participants. With this in mind, Judy articulates how Circle facilitators experience a type of released responsibility, allowing the community to take ownership over the Circle. This understanding echoes Belinda Hopkins,

Director of Transforming Conflict at the National Centre for Restorative Approaches in the UK.

Dr. Hopkins' states: "The values and principles underpin the Circle experience and need to be understood and modelled by the facilitator in the first instance. However, the management of the Circle process needs to belong to the participants, which is why negotiating guidelines at an early stage is vital" (Hopkins, 2003). Power in this sense is shared among all community members (Circle participants). Hence, the importance of having a shared set of guidelines, which promote communal values, essentially ensure participants' greater support and ownership of the Circle process.

As previously indicated, a key aspect of Circles is to establish and enforce guidelines as a community. Staff member Bryan reflected on this pivotal distinction of shared power in Circles, explaining:

Well my role, I think it does redefine it as not being as much of the teacher, the head of the classroom because it's a community. You know, Circle's a community. You are equalized to a certain extent with the students. That's, again, vulnerable, but enlightening, right? So it does change my role. In the end I think it is better...when you see students sharing and it's deep and it's honest and it's like, wow. It's, it's like I'm almost honored that, that's so valuable, you know?

Bryan describes his process of transitioning from his traditional role as a type of authority figure, governing the classroom, to being democratized. His response validates this shift in responsibility since it allows him to experience a unique state of being. On one hand, Bryan expresses his concern with being "equalized" and thereby vulnerable. On the contrary, he has access to students' informative and personal sharing. Again, the role of the community in Circles becomes key in helping to regulate and govern the process. Once a Circle facilitator has effectively established the Circle guidelines, the participants gradually begin to take ownership over the space as they continue to build trust and rapport.

The role of staff and/or teachers in Circles is another salient sub-theme which will be further discussed in the next section entitled, *Institutional Constraints*.

Once more, it is discernible from these interviews that such a new or developing practice like community building Circles, takes time and consistency. It is apparent from the interview data that participants experience a period of acclimation, which as the ground rules or guidelines are established, they continued to adjust and build trust during the Circle process. For instance, Tyler stated:

Circle one is very different from Circle seven like... the first Circle, everyone is... Well, they come different walks of life and hang out with different crowds at school, but once they get to know each other more, like we do a Circle once a week, they get to know each other so they learn to respect each other and it kinda just grows...Circles, it takes time. You can't go in there one day expecting, "Oh, this is gonna be a world changing Circle." 'Cause it's not. Because you have to build trust.

Researcher: Why do you think that it takes time to build trust?

Tyler: Because you have to, like, learn who they are. You gotta get to know each other and they have to feel safe in an environment to share deep stuff about themselves and feel safe around like their peers. And you establish like ground rules...I would say the first like two Circles you could say that they're rowdy (laughs). Um, they may not always want to answer the questions so they pass the talking piece around...But, it takes time for the Circle to work. I've learned patience and understanding because everyone has a story and they come from different walks of life...So, when someone is being rude or disrespectful, you want to give them that attention by giving them the talking piece if they're talking or being disruptive. You can be like, "Oh, how 'bout you answer the question," or something. 'Cause they're kinda in a way craving that attention so you give it to them in a respectful way...

Tyler affirms how community building Circles is a gradual process of learning how to respect and trust one another, which is reinforced by the Circle's guidelines or ground rules previously expressed. Tyler shared how as a student Circle facilitator or leader that he was able to gain greater patience and understanding of his peers. Despite the challenges of other participants being rude and disrespectful, Tyler was able to redirect his peers by including them rather than

exclude them in the Circle practice. Despite participants' varying backgrounds and differences, Tyler attests to how Circles work over time to develop foundational elements such as trust and safety. It is these elements which then help to establish students' deeper relationships among one another in the classroom and will be elaborated on in the following section, *developing trust and safety*.

Developing trust and safety. A recurring pattern that is another sub-theme of community building as a process, involved how trust and safety was developed during Circles. As previously mentioned, the importance of establishing guidelines or ground rules, such as confidentiality, functions to ensure and cultivate participants' sense of assurance when sharing in the Circle.

A majority of participants report an initial resistance and reservation to Circle practices, which reflects their commencing level of trust. Thirteen out of fifteen participants specifically expressed a form of discomfort, doubt, and/or feeling vulnerable at the beginning of the program. However, as time progressed and their trust grew, their views began to change. For example, during their focus-group interview, senior students Andres and Lon recall their initial thoughts regarding their experience of sharing in Circles as participants:

Andres: The first Circles were the hardest. We've been raised up to this point, we're not used to sharing with people...we're not used to sharing our feelings...and it's like adjusting to that sort of atmosphere of wanting to share...Like I did not like them [Circles] at first, but became more comfortable with sharing and it became fun.

Lon: Privacy is definitely valued...we don't want to expose our business to others...we kind of feel intimidated when we share. What if they don't understand who I am? Things like that may make people worry...like they make kids or students like us kind of shun others. At first no one liked it [Circles]...we kinda had to get used to it, like sharing... we developed friendships.

The responses above demonstrate an initial apprehension and vulnerability when sharing personal ideas and feelings with classmates. Both students remark on aspects of their self-identity when sharing and what they felt was appropriate to communicate to others. Andres and Lon's responses emphasize a kind of preconceived notion that they do not feel they can express feelings and emotions within school settings due to an underlying sense of insecurity and/or distrust.

Another example was shared by Hugo who acknowledged his discomfort and distrust that limited his initial engagement in Circles:

It [Circles] seemed really forced. Anytime a person would say something they [senior students] would tell that person to 'shut up', but not in a friendly way... Like I thought it was going to build more trust. Afterwards, like a month or so, I would understand. But the first days I noticed they [seniors] were kind of rough on us, they looked pissed and I actually felt uncomfortable...

His response again reflects how establishing trust and safety in community building Circles is significant and gradual process. Hugo continues:

Like many people actually want to say something. Like, um, they have their own voice, but often are, like, either way too shy to say it or just not confident enough. I used to think that they just didn't want to say something, but now I know that it's because they just didn't feel comfortable before.

Sara, also a junior, similarly disclosed her apprehension when originally sharing in Circles: "It was a chance to interact with people you normally don't and I was nervous at first. Like stuttering and... I had to get use to talking out loud. Then I started enjoying it." Part of Sara's initial uneasiness was the thought of interacting with peers whom she was unacquainted with, as well as public speaking. Sara's remark regarding being able to interact with classmates she normally would not engage with again highlights the opportunity Circles provides for building positive interactions with peers, which further contributes to student relationships. Responses

such as these repeatedly emerge among participants regarding their process of developing trust, which often resulted in positive, emotional outcomes.

Staff trainer Judy further expressed how significant it was for students to feel they are in a safe space in order to fully engage in Circles:

Students like this last class that we trained this year, went into the first Circle and were asking a lot of questions about feeling safe sharing in the Circles and that they were not really sharing very deeply and a lot of kids were talking, not respecting the talking piece um, so a lot of students were responding with "No, I don't feel safe in this Circle. I don't feel like people care about what I have to say. Don't feel like people are listening." And now when we do Circles with that group of student leaders, everyone is quiet, everyone is listening and other people are sharing very deeply, very authentically, and they're reporting that they feel a lot safer than they used to.

Rafa also discussed her experience as a student Circle leader or facilitator trying to build trust and safety with her underclassmen peers:

It was the first time I led a Circle and it was really, really nerve-wracking and frustrating 'cause, um, my first group I did it with freshmans, (sic) which really didn't work out... they kept talking while other people were talking, and they didn't follow the Circle guidelines. That was nerve-wracking because I'm pouring my problems out to make them follow my lead and for them to feel connected or like unthreatened. At first it was intimidating, um...either they would pass or not say anything and just give it [the talking piece] to the next person or just answer with one word answers...

Rafa notes the initial challenges that arose when sharing and trying to model how to respond. Despite the talking piece being used as a tool to regulate the flow of conversation and support listening, there still was an acclimation period for the group to become more comfortable with the process. Similarly, Lilly, another junior student, also shared her challenges with building trust when facilitating and leading Circles: sharing her personal experiences:

In my first Circle, it was pretty tough because...the kids were kind of like goofing around and I was like, 'do you guys really want to do this right now?' They were just not taking the Circle serious so that got me really mad and like frustrated. I didn't want to do it again, but they kept telling me, "Just go, do it. Please help and it was pretty...it was okay, but it was tough in the beginning... but we kept going

to their class almost every Monday and it got different. We got closer to them and connected to them. I opened up like with my past and the girls that were like kind of in a different world, when I mentioned about my past, they got together and they just looked at me and we had a connection at the end of the Circles.

Lilly's response underscores the process of community building and becoming more comfortable with the Circle process, especially when sharing personal responses. Like Rafa, her initial resistance and discouragement with facilitating Circles made it difficult to continue; however, in Lilly's case, this feeling changed as she continued to persist and practice. A noteworthy moment was how Lilly reached a deeper understanding and connection with the underclassmen girls. In sharing her own personal background and past, her peers began to see her investment and willingness to be vulnerable, which eventually lead to establishing a "connection." The ability to make such a connection may also suggest reaching a certain level of trust and safety within the group. The experience of sharing and storytelling is one more element that surfaces and is yet another subtheme of the building community that will be discussed more in depth. Again, the process of building trust and safety emerged in participants' responses when discussing the development of community within Circles.

Experience of "closeness." Seeing Circles as an experience of "closeness", was another sub-theme specifically mentioned separately by three junior student participants. Reaching a point of experiencing an intimate, almost familial-like connection resonates with the development trust and safety in order to build rapport and the appropriate conditions for authentic sharing in Circles. As previously mentioned, the majority of participants report an initial sense of discomfort or uncertainty, which with time, transitioned to acceptance and enjoyment. For example, Ana disclosed:

I wasn't very open...I didn't like to talk to anybody. I was more like a troublemaker. So I was thinking, 'Okay, they don't care about me...I don't have to care about what they have to say.' I always (sic) told them to pass me, I don't want

to speak. I don't trust you guys. I don't know where you will take my information...

Ana's account underscores her prior apathy, disconnect, and distrust of her class, which seemed to negatively affect her self-identity, being labeled as a "troublemaker." Her detachment also reflected her inability to positively interact with her peers and develop more authentic relationships. This deposition was further illustrated in her focus group interview with Hugo, which follows:

Ana: There's people that I have probably met this year and like, got comfortable with, like, [Hugo]. Like I wouldn't really talk to him and I've been knowing him since freshman year in my math. And this year, I think, we got way closer in, Mr. N's class. (To Hugo) No offense, but I didn't know you're in my math class since freshman...

Hugo: Mr. Rashidi's class? (laughter)

Ana: Were you?

Hugo: Oh yeah, you used to sit right behind me.

Ana: Did I?

Hugo: Yes. I remember...

Ana: You were...really quiet in there. I was the loudest (laughs).
I was always getting kicked out of the class (laughs).
So, maybe that's why I don't remember because I was never in there...

Hugo: (To interviewer) It's just that for me, she was just like, like, any random person, like, in a movie, you're just seeing like an extra... I just really didn't care. No offense.

Ana: (laughs)

Hugo: (To interviewer) It's like now they just stood out...like every person I got to know them better...Like everyone has something interesting to say. And that's what the Circle, like, really brings out.

Ana and Hugo both have a profound moment as they reflect and realize that despite being acquaintances for the past 2 years of high school, they actually became closer because of their

experience in Circles. It was Circle practice that deepened their understanding of one another and essential “existence.” Ana’s initial indifference toward her classmates, specifically like Hugo, began to change as her experience in Circles helped to foster her openness and trust. In closing, Ana declared:

...now I’m like ‘Okay. Yeah, I’m going to share everything!’ I feel comfortable now...but they made it feel like a family...so I feel like I can say whatever I want and it can be freed.

Ana articulates a significant transformation in her attitude toward herself and her peers. This is especially apparent in her realization of how she's developed closer relationships that are in a sense like “family.” Her realization also recognizes her feeling of being liberated and “freed.” This experience of emotional release in Circles is another sub-theme, which will be further elaborated on regarding how it creates a bond among participants in community building.

Jessica and Rafa reported their initial skepticism with Circles, which again with time and practice, became closer; like a family:

Jessica: I was shy at first. Like I passed on a lot of questions at first...But it seemed fun and interesting, getting to know people and play games and share...and after each week it became, we became like a family. We got closer and I didn't even like certain people at first! (laughs)

Rafa: When we started the Circles I already knew my class, but I didn't know them well...they were acquaintances, and at first I didn't feel comfortable sharing my story, but as time went by I felt comfortable. That was the only time I was uncomfortable was at first.... Then we got closer because we related to each other more, we know each other at a deeper level...We actually became like a big family.

Participants Jessica and Rafa express their initial reluctance when first participating in Circles; however, as previous responses similarly indicated, they gradually adjusted to the practice as their involvement continued. Jessica and Rafa’s description of their relationships with their classmates revealed an initial superficial level of acquaintance, but as time progressed, became

more intimate. Most interestingly, Ana, Jessica, and Rafa all use the word “family” to describe their experience of closeness in Circles. Being “close” as a recurring term, suggests an emphasized feeling of safety and/or intimacy. Once more, with time and effort, students mention how they began to grow accustomed to the Circles, building their trust and sense of safety as expressed through the analogy of family.

Engaging in sharing and storytelling. Another sub-theme of community building that appeared involved how students would engage in sharing and storytelling, which lent to cultivate students’ understanding and relatability to one another.

As previously introduced, Lilly, a junior, explained her process of facilitating or leading Circles by establishing a personal connection with her peers, specially by sharing her own personal experiences. When asked about how many Circles lead up to reach such a moment, Lilly states:

Like about four or five Circles...we started kind of getting closer to them and they started liking it at the end. They started like paying attention and they started answering our questions, and every time they answer the questions, they would actually bring up something from their past...you know, I enjoy just having connections with the students that I talk to. It's probably like the best feeling ever for them to open up with you and discuss their issues. It's pretty nice. It feels good. You feel like you achieved something.

Lilly’s response again highlights how Circles are a practice or process, as opposed to a singular activity. In building rapport and group cohesion, Lilly acknowledges how it took her and the other participants about four to five Circles. Although Lilly did not elaborate on what in particular was shared, it is clear from her perspective that her sharing elicited a crucial moment in the Circle and effectuating a “connection.” Her sense of connection made her feel accomplished as she continued to build stronger bonds with her peers through sharing and storytelling.

Lilly also notes how positive feelings arose from reaching this connection with her peers, which then set a precedent for deeper, authentic sharing. She continues stating:

I shared my past with what happened with me and my stepfather... Like, "this happened, but in end I changed and I became a better student,"... So after I would go up to them and be like, "Hey, you know, you could always talk to me. Don't be scared. We could hang out at lunch. We could, I could always help you in your classes so you don't feel lonely." This one Asian kid started mentioning him about his grandpa and he started like crying and telling us that he really missed him and so I guess by me opening up with such a big thing, I think they, they started to like realize they could share more too...

Lilly explains how she shared a vital moment when disclosing a very personal, past experience with her peers. Her ability to open up and be vulnerable and share her story encouraged her fellow classmates to also reflect on major life experiences. Moments of connection or closeness as depicted above through sharing and storytelling were similarly mentioned by other student participants as well, for example:

Mabel: It [Circles] brought us all together and we know everybody's past, like, we didn't even know people that have the same things going on in their lives until they told their stories, and it's just drew us closer than ever before.

Andres: The best part about Circles is the fact that you can say things and not be judged cause when you're in a Circle with people who you've felt like that connection with, you like sharing, you look forward to sharing...

Lucy (senior): It feels nice telling people what you did during your day... and like something you would usually keep to yourself, just like getting things out...so you're not keeping everything in... You can't just keep things bottled inside. Before Circles I would always just keep to myself, like all my problems, all of my stress. And I wouldn't tell anyone about it. Not even to my parents...after Circles it made me more aware of my feelings and it made me want to share my feelings so others can relate or help me with it. I'm also more understanding of people.

As evident in the examples above, Circles provided participants with a deeper sense of connection and closeness. Sharing and storytelling about oneself becomes a very intimate and vulnerable act, but in cases such as these, positive outcomes of participants reaching a greater understanding and rapport with one another was noted. Data analysis revealed the use of

keywords such as *closeness, togetherness, and bonding* when describing the experience of such a connection in Circles. Moreover, some participants even voiced experiencing emotional responses from feeling connected, which will be further elaborated on in the following section, *emotional release and regulation*. For example, Rafa recalls:

I think it was during January or December. Before we started leading Circles, we were in the middle of training, and we were just sharing personal stories and it got quiet. The whole class was quiet and we were focused on the one person talking and you were connecting with them and trying to understand what they're going through. Like I remember that day clearly...there were points there where people were crying and laughing. It was pretty much an emotional time where we started to learn everybody's story.

In Rafa's case, she explains how Circles enabled students to share and express their personal stories, which resulted in a profound occurrence where students were bonding and building greater understanding. This particular moment again highlights how some students experience of sharing and storytelling helped them to learn more deeply about one another, strengthening their fellowship.

Emotional release and regulation. A fifth sub-theme found within participants' experience of the community building Circles was their level of expression and management of emotions. As previously described, once students felt they had established a certain level of trust and safety that was initially established by the Circle guidelines and then reinforced by participants overtime, students began to engage in more authentic sharing and expressing their emotions with their peers. Student responses often indicated a sense of emotional release and regulation, another aspect of how community cohesion and rapport was developed through Circles. This aspect of community building again shows evidence of how students specifically experienced rapport and further establish trust by expressing emotions through smiling, laughing, joking, and/or crying:

Megan: It was awkward at first, but now it gives me a smile on my face every day that we have Circles...it's a time where I could de-stress from everything that's going on with my life and just sit down and have a fun conversation with people. But there's also times where I could share my worries...I enjoy going to school now, after Circles... I get to enjoy relaxing and just letting go of everything.

Megan specifies her sense of contentment when being able to share her feelings and decompress.

Being able to participate in Circles provides her with a positive outlet that she can experience with her peers. More importantly, her perspective of school has changed. Likewise, senior student Lon and Andres discuss how Circles has influenced their relationships with her classmates and how they express their enjoyment specifically through laughter:

Lon: We've known each other since sophomore year, but those Circles brought us closer together... we learn about each other's background and what each other is going through...we joke around with each other...it's just our way of bonding...we have a good laugh and we all come out of the Circle feeling good.

Andres: Yeah, you like share something that you have in common and just laugh about it...(chuckles to self) The jokes. That's like the point where if people can joke around, that's the best part...it's kind of spontaneous... and it's just part of how we get along with each other.

This process of community building reflects ways in which participants' emotional states and outlooks were influenced based on their engagement in Circles. As students became more comfortable with the Circle process and acquainted with one another, they were able to continue to build relationships within a safe space (non-judgemental and confidential). As a result, students' responses conveyed a type of reciprocity being experienced.

Teacher participant Bryan also memorably notes an account where a student participant shared a personal incident in Circles that lead him to express his grief. He recalls:

There was a student who is quiet in my class. Passing a lot [during Circles].... But once we were talking about-- I don't know why he started sharing-- how painful it was, his brother had died and his parents, maybe he was the favored brother, sibling, and he was sharing this. And I was like blown away. I mean I, I took him outside afterwards 'cause you could see he was affected ...I was affected. It was a very ... It was intense. That was a very bonding experience between us... I...I don't

think there's a right way for a teacher to respond, you know? I mean other students were there that were too ... But I was really affected and...I didn't want to take him out 'cause he was sharing and crying, but I took him out and, um...It's not like, "Are you okay?" Part of it was, "Are you okay," but it was also like, "Wow, you've influenced me, and do you want to talk about it?" But, uh, I formed a completely different relationship with him. It's very vulnerable, right? I've seen teachers in this process break down and share some incredibly personal stuff with students...Wow, that takes guts. I don't think that's bad at all, I really don't. I think it helps, I mean I don't know, I mean you wanna have, you know I don't want to use the word hierarchical, you know, that you're the authority figure and all that... That I'm the instructor and you have to follow me. I have expectations, you have to follow the rules, right? But it's good to humanize the process. And, uh, so, so I think it's actually really valuable.

This shows another instance where the importance of establishing trust and safety, which allows for a space for emotional release. Bryan's account underscores a critical moment that provided him with the opportunity to support and further bond with his student through Circles. The student in disclosing a very profound experience with his teacher and peers, which according to Bryan had never occurred before, displayed a new level of comfort and trust. Bryan's perception and observations suggest a transformative and cathartic moment where he and his student were able to reach a more in-depth understanding of one another as individuals. Bryan's use of the phrase, "humanize the process," also demonstrates a dissonance regarding the role and attitude of teachers as "authority figures," which will be discussed in more detail next in the theme of *institutional constraints*.

A final account that reflects participants' experience of emotional release and regulation during Circles was shared by Trevor who also highlights the cathartic aspect of Circles, he stated:

I like helping people, so I felt like Circles kinda help them.... Like, opening up and not harboring so many feelings. I remember, um, one of my co-facilitators, I heard her say, "Oh, that happened to me, too."... Well, she didn't open up about it but, she, uh, said it, like a little bit out loud. Most people like don't share anything that like, uh, that scarred them in the past like that. I feel, like talking about your

problems can actually like help heal you. Like, there have been a few times where I've done Circles where people have cried, but it was more like a healing cry.

Trevor explains how his co-facilitator made a connection with another classmate who shared a past trauma and how the Circle provided a space for them to release and acknowledge their hurt. Trevor distinctly uses the phrase “a healing cry” to express how powerful Circles can be in giving students an opportunity to share and express their emotions.

Practicing listening and perspective taking. The importance of attentive listening and perspective taking in building community cohesion in Circles was a final sub-theme that arose. As previously mentioned, Circle guidelines such as “respect the talking piece” and “listen and speak from the heart” were also observed being reiterated to Circle participants to illustrate the value of respect.

Participants reported feelings of being listened to and how such an experience inevitably influenced their relationship with one another in the Circle. For instance, Hugo articulates his reaction to being heard in Circles: “I really like when I’m about to say something like everyone stays quiet and really listens. I just want them to listen.” Hugo’s participation in Circles provided him with an opportunity to feel recognized and regarded. On the other hand, Hugo also acknowledges when he was not being respectfully listened to, he continued: “I really disliked like people interrupting and talking over each other... or on their phones, not paying attention to you... uh and students passing a lot on the questions like not sharing any answers.” Instances of inattention and disregard such as these were commonly discussed by participants and reflected the importance of active listening in community building Circles:

Mabel: Something I didn’t like was when people interrupt or when they don't know how to be quiet at all. Or like having their little side conversations or being loud and interrupting the person who's talking.

Tyler: Um, like people would just passed the talking piece or were rude when someone else was talking, they were talking and not listening. It's like come on now.

Lilly: Some kids would talk when they weren't supposed to. It was pretty annoying. I'd like "be quiet," but trying not to be rude...sometimes throughout my class with Miss M, her class was full of kids that were on their phones! That was pretty annoying.

Student participants identified a few ways when active listening was not practiced: interruptions, speaking out of turn, or lack of presence by being on cell phones was also discussed. These similar sentiments illustrate students' frustrations and challenges regarding the practice of authentic listening.

As participants became more accustomed to the process of Circles and genuinely practiced the guidelines by using the talking piece and exercising active listening, students found they were more inclined to take on different viewpoints and perspectives of their peers. Staff member Bryan observed how students were able to build and practice their listening skills, declaring:

Well, the effective listening, empathy, learning how to listen, to give back feedback and facilitating further discussion, I think it's really helpful. However, I was somewhat, maybe a little bit skeptical ... Open minded but skeptical about whether these Circles would just be a, uh, let's just use crass over generalization terms. Touchy, feely, express what your feelings... ... I'm not going to say counterproductive, but boosting self-esteem maybe in some ways that might not be very focused or productive, constructive...But the empathetic listening-- it's funny, in Circle time you don't follow up with questions or anything... so it makes you a better listener I think more than anything.

Junior student Tyler shares how his peers would engage in listening:

Most people were listening, but um, some people, like, uh, I can tell that they were, uh, like... this one time, someone said, "Oh, uh, so my father died two years ago." Like, um, of course, people were like, "Oh, that's sad," but you could see it in the faces of others who lost someone close to them or had their father pass away because they, they see more like, not intrigued, but more like actively listening and you could see it on their face.

Tyler emphasizes how student participants at times would share very personal stories and as a result, some students would have authentic moments of active listening and connecting with the speaker. Tyler narrates how his peers would demonstrate a certain level of relatability and empathy as expressed by their facial expressions when listening.

The process of attentive listening often led students to take on the perspective of the speaker and better understand their point of view. For example, when asked about his experience with Circles, senior student Andres responded: “I’ve learned to pay attention to myself, like how I am feeling before I can be there for other people...It’s definitely made me kind of more aware of looking at both sides of a situation and trying to look at it from another perspective...it makes me like a little more understanding of others.” Similarly, Ana recognized:

I think the students I was surrounded [facilitated] with, I think they all went through the same problems I did as I was younger, or what I'm going through now. So, when I do speak, they'll be like, "Oh, you know what? That's true. I went through that," or they will just listen and I can just know they went through that or no.

Institutional Constraints

Participants indicated various barriers or challenges as well as lessons learned from their experience of Circle practices, which was elicited by interview questions regarding research question 4: *What barriers or lessons learned emerge from in participating in or implementing Circle practices?* In addressing this research question, the main theme that emerged was “institutional constraints,” which consisted of three sub-themes, including: (1) time and environment, (2) teacher involvement/role and teacher-student relationship, and (3) implications on learning. Certain arrangements made by the school and program were referenced by student and staff participants regarding how the process of Circles occurred and was experienced at the site.

Time and environment.

As previously highlighted in the discussion of the first theme, “Community Building as a Process,” the importance of time in order to establish a safe space during Circle practice was again touched upon by participants. These factors were often determined or influenced by the specific school site (i.e.: class schedules and physical space). The program’s duration and frequency impacted participants access to and experience of Circles, which was expressed by senior students Andres, who stated:

Having it [Circles] be like once a week I don’t think really helps us get to our goals of building community. Like maybe it could be done more than once a week or every other week... I’ve now seen better ways for the program to run and get the “bigger picture.” It takes more than once a week. So because of the little time we have, we can’t really dive deep into the questions. Sometimes we have to rush students to answer some of the questions. So time is very important.

Andres also alludes to the program’s overall objectives in relation to the limited amount of time being allotted to Circle practice. He refers to the “bigger picture” of being able to build a sense of school community through Circles, which was adversely being affected by the frequency and duration of Circles. More significantly, Andres explicitly shares how the constraints of time could restrict participants’ ability to reach a more meaningful level of understanding.

Staff member Judy also remarks on challenges with time in respect to providing support to student-facilitators, she explained:

They [students] really struggled with finding time to get feedback and even wanting it... just, like, doing the circle and then running off to their next class instead of being, like, we need to talk about what just happened. Like, how could we have done that better? What were the positive things? Like, there was plenty of opportunity and possibility for there to be kind of learning process, but I don't think that that was the culture that we built into the program. Like you are a leader but you are still a learner...so you always need that feedback... I feel like it just goes back to the time. If we all had time, we would set an hour a day bonding and getting to know each other.

Judy emphasizes how time is an inhibiting factor when providing adequate feedback to student Circle leaders. She gives instances in which time is not set aside by student facilitators, which she associated as reflection of students' culture of learning. Moreover, students lacking the ability to recognize the importance of feedback is also embedded in her response in relation to the learning process and the institution's influence on scheduling class and program time. Judy's interpretation of how students view learning, especially when facilitating Circles, highlights a rote perspective of learning. She concludes with a hypothetical speculation that if the school time was structured and allocated differently then there could be more contemplation and connection among facilitators.

This limitation of time associated with the school's schedule and logistics affected the program's implementation. This was specifically recognized by student participant Lon, who recalled:

Last year we had Circles every other week in different classes so we had a capacity limit and we couldn't extend it to everyone who wanted Circles... so we picked the freshmen classes so we can develop the culture of community building because of the amount of facilitators... I feel like they [Circles] should be a lot more and implemented more often as it can really be a positive experience for the classroom.

Lon also brings to attention the number of student and staff facilitators as another influencing factor aside from time constraints that impacted the program. This again was on account of how the program was being piloted to the particular academy at the school site, which resulted in a selective group of participants. Lon does not disclose the reasoning behind the selection of the freshmen classes; however, staff participants have expressed the need to focus on students at an earlier stage, making the transition to becoming Circle facilitators easier as juniors. In all, Lon concludes by affirming Circle practices despite her request for additional time and practice.

In shifting to the perspective of a teacher, Bryan's experience hosting Circle trainings and having his students implement Circles had a similar encounter with concerns of time and quality of the practice. Bryan shared:

My class, law class, is one semester long, which is not, to me that's too short, it should be a year long class. And I knew that a lot of my class time was gonna be taken up with this training for Circle time. So, I had some reservations about that. How am I gonna fit in all the other curriculum I want to do and then also do this [Circles] with them?... For example, there was a miscommunication and there was another history class that I was told that my students we were to go into to do the Circle. And I went with the students to go to this class to start the Circle and the teacher was in there, and he was very upset, and he was going you know, "Oh, no, no, no. I don't want you to do this with me ... I don't have time to do this. We're busy doing content right now." But I do understand that. When there's so much to cover, and it's not even feasible but you're already starting from that position, that it's probably not feasible to cover all that material, and then you superimpose on that this Circle process, there's gonna be a resistance from some teachers...So that, at least that attitude is, I'm not saying prevalent, but it's there, uh, among some staff.

As an instructor, Bryan's acknowledges his primary role is to focus on teaching to course standards in order to meet class learning goals. His response echoes previous concerns regarding the limitations of time when conducting Circles, but more so reveals a deeper tension being created by demanding school curriculum expectations. Bryan's recollection of such a pivotal interaction he and his students had with his colleague illustrates how overwhelmed and stressed teachers can be in regard to lofty teaching expectations. Instructional demands and expectations were also previously referenced in chapter one regarding the significance of the study, in which professor Marilyn Armour from the University of Texas at Austin also remarks on in her study (2013). Despite such invalidating reactions, Bryan still acknowledged the potential of such a school community practice, although he still struggles with balancing institutional demands, stating:

I see what's valuable from these Circles, I do... But what is the role of school? I mean how, in terms of how do you incorporate this into a curriculum? I really

think that should be the focus of the future of these... I see the value in terms of alternative discipline I think it's wonderful and that's the way it's going. You know, I do student services as a lawyer and I see how detentions and suspensions have been abused and how this could be a tool for like restorative practices, right? It's way more valuable than traditional disciplinary measures. But that's restorative justice and that's a component of it, right? This is the sharing, community building part, right? ...So with Circles, how do you incorporate that into the curriculum? I think that's a huge challenge. I see the skills it does, I think it's great, I see some of the benefits but I don't necessarily see a clear relationship yet with the curriculum.

Bryan's statement also indicates the need for further research regarding the merging of restorative practices like Circles and school instruction. The institutional constraints regarding time bring to light deeper aspects associated with a school's instructional expectations and teachers' perspectives and attitudes. According to certain participants, these elements have thereby affected the program's overall success. These school and program components also impact students' learning, a final institutional constraint that will be discussed further in the last sub-theme, "implications for learning." Overall, the pressure being created by the school institution was again another underlying factor that impacted the effectiveness of the program.

In accordance with time, environment and space were another influencing factor. Senior student Lucy and staff member Joyce also remark on the importance of the classroom environment where Circles were conducted. Lucy disclosed:

There was (sic) issues of space. Some classrooms have the chairs with the connecting desks so it's hard to move into a Circle. And you're not really [in a Circle], there's that desk between you guys. It's harder for students to speak up.

In creating a safe space where community building could occur, Lucy shared a foundational component of Circle practice: establishing the physical space. The purpose of setting up a Circle to facilitate this community building process reiterates its symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning is explained by adjunct professor Greenwood at the University of Minnesota, stating: "Circles are fashioned in such a way that interconnectedness, interdependence, and equality

within the community are highlighted. Participants are encouraged to share a sense of mutual responsibility for the well-being of the community and the individuals within it, and an understanding that what happens to one person affects all. In the Circle, all participants, regardless of role or status, age or experience, are considered of equal importance, with equal voice” (2005). This understanding was evident in staff member Joyce’s response:

The structure in which they [the students] were sitting was very different...the typical setup is not one in which a teacher is a participant so they're very used to seeing a teacher as, you know, the one directing everything and the one telling them what to do, but this sort of structure was more of their teacher even being on the same playing field as them.

Staff member Joyce articulates the transition students underwent when shifting their view from a teacher-centered classroom to a more egalitarian environment for sharing. Again, the physical conditions of the classroom space as well as the symbolism sitting in a circle surfaced as a final noticeable institutional barrier in regard to the subtheme of environment.

Teacher involvement/role and teacher-student relationship. The role and involvement of teachers was another relevant sub-theme that was uncovered as it connected to the overall relationship between students and teachers in Circles. As introduced earlier by staff member Bryan, the concern for time and meeting school instructional expectations was a clear focus for teachers, which influenced their willingness to participate in the program. More significantly, data suggests that the dynamics and structure of the institution strongly influenced teachers’ ability to participate when needing support and long-term sustainability. This was especially seen in regard to staff scheduling and prioritizing time for the program as it is planned, prepared, conducted, and assessed.

Teacher involvement would often affect students' response and engagement in Circles. Student participants often confirmed this sentiment. For example, Lucy and Andres, recalled their interaction with teachers in Circles. Lucy explains:

[Circles] They can be frustrating at times...like teacher participation...some teachers did not participate...[they] took that time to do other work...and the whole point is to build community, not between only students, but like the whole staff, everybody.

Andres also remarks:

Like, last year...we had to drop [a] class because like the teacher just felt like they could be doing better during that time, especially because a lot of students weren't sharing... some students like having the teacher there because they want to make a connection, but other students who kind of see the teacher as like a 'punisher' think you have to be careful about what you say...

Lucy and Andres both observed teachers' level of involvement in the program. Lucy's interpretation of teachers' lack of participation was essentially a barrier to the program's objective of building community. Andres too observed how on the one hand his peers want to establish a positive relationship with their teacher, while others demonstrated a sense of distrust or suspicion by not engaging. This perception of a teacher's role is apparent in Andres' response and sheds light on the duality of a teacher as an authoritarian. Both examples from Lucy and Andres indicate how teacher involvement presented a challenge at times to students' participation in Circles. Furthermore, Andre's account with a teacher who ended up opting out of the program mirrors staff member Bryan's prior account regarding his distressed colleague's concern for class time. In these instances, teacher involvement due to time constraints and work overload were referenced; however, Lucy and Andres perceptions underscore the unique dynamic between a teacher's involvement in Circles and its impact on their relationship with students.

Another interpretation of the impact teachers had on students in Circles was around institutionalized perceptions of knowledge. This was shared by staff member Joyce who stated:

The current way that the school system is set up has all the adults having all the wisdom and the students are the ones that need to reap all of the wisdom from the adults because the students don't have anything to give... so it's like anything when you wanna change a perspective or change a narrative that someone has, it's not something that can just happen right away, it has to be continually done...

Joyce's response echoes staff member Bryan's concern regarding the role of schools, which was shared earlier in sub-theme section, "time and environment." Both staff members begin to question the educational philosophy and approach taken by their institution, and realize a type of disconnect between restorative work like Circles and the school's actions. In all, these cases express how participants' level of investment in building rapport with teachers through Circles was often affected and reflected institutional factors associated with time, role expectations, and/or education philosophy.

In addition to teacher involvement being influenced by systemic constraints, staff member Judy further elaborates on the importance of teachers' understanding the program's values and goals, stating:

The first year, the teachers didn't really even know what they were signing up for, so there was a lot of miscommunication and just total lack of understanding of what it [Circles] was. So what would happen was students would go in and some teachers would think, like, it was just a babysitting session. Like, just do some fun activities with my students and I'll go sit in the corner and grade papers or something. So there was a real lack of support for the student facilitators the first year... The first year, we were just trying to get something accomplished and now it's kind of, like, what's the purpose of this and like, what's our long-term goal for it and how are we creating sustainability across the campus.

Judy alludes to a whole-school approach to implementing restorative practices such as Circles in order to create sustainability and large-scale effectiveness. She shares how such an approach helps to reduce instances of miscommunication and ensures stronger collaboration and

ownership. Judy's experience depicts the misconceptions regarding the initial implementation of Circles and how such misinterpretations influenced the experience of the program. Her use of the term "babysitting" gives a distinct perception certain teachers had of Circle practices. She continued to elaborate on this observation:

One challenge was how students had gone into classrooms where the teacher is not trained and they have no context or understanding of their role in it, the purpose behind it, or if they do it's very misunderstood. So it ends up being kind of a burden for the students...A lot of the students aren't feeling supported by the teachers in whose class they're, they're running the Circles for. That challenge has minimized as staff members have been getting more training and knowledge about restorative practices... The one thing that's changed is our relationship with the teachers and how we interact with them and how much information we give them. The main message now is, you know, this is that opportunity for you to build relationships with your students and learn this restorative process so that you can do it without the student leaders. If the student leaders are the catalysts, then with time, the goal is for the teacher to take it over and the students in the classroom to take it over and they've created a sustainable model for that class.

Judy's narrative again illustrates the disconnect between the program's espoused values and goals, and teachers' roles. This understanding reiterates previous comments from student participants who wanted teacher support and participation in building a positive classroom community. This was echoed by student-facilitator, Andres who shared: "Having more support on campus is the biggest change because our new principal was actually trained in restorative justice... We also had a teacher meeting to explain the process of Circles in classroom. So there was more teacher involvement this time."

Comparably, when teachers actually did participate in Circles, participants found teacher presence to be valuable. Staff member Joyce reflected on her experience with teachers in Circles, stating:

The one thing that I was really cognizant of was teachers' involvement in the Circle and participation, or lack thereof, um, and just interactions with the student ...like the way that the teacher operated their class or operated in terms of discipline, how that affected the Circle. So, for instance, teachers who sat in on

the Circles and participated as if they were one of the students and teachers who had more of a restorative perspective just outside of the Circle. So during normal class activities or class lessons, those Circles tend to go better and the students tended to buy in more than classrooms where the teacher wouldn't participate in the Circles at all...So that seemed to kinda shift the behavior even if they were in Circles.

Once more, Joyce's response reaffirms the connection between teachers' involvement in Circles and establishing a positive relationship with students. More significantly, Joyce notes how teacher-student relationships would affect student engagement, not only in Circles, but during regular class time. Her observations of teachers who participated in Circles suggested a positive effect on students' responsiveness to the practice and classroom academics. This perspective is also shared by student participant Andres, stating:

Definitely developing a teacher relationship benefits both student and teacher ...building that relationship definitely helps a student learn and helps a teacher run a classroom. All students should be doing these kinds of things [Circles] because that's what school should be. School is somewhere where you come to learn and we get to know people...it's a big place to socialize...the school system should have something like this implemented in which instead of punishing students--like two students who fight--make them like work it out instead of sending them home...Because again they have a bond...like with these Circles, you can understand the teacher more and see where they are coming from...

Joyce and Andres' responses support the literature regarding how restorative practices such as Circles focus on developing positive teacher-student relationships. The importance of adult involvement and modeling in the classroom helps to create rapport among students and their sense of interconnectedness at school (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2007). Andres's account attests to the social-emotional benefits of using Circles to build positive relationships with teachers and peers, especially when managing conflicts. Circles in this manner support the development of positive teacher-student relations that can impact learning.

As a result of certain teachers participating in Circles, participants observed a shift in how they viewed their role. Staff member Bryan recalls being conscious of demonstrating appropriate engagement in Circles, claiming:

I felt like I had an obligation to be thoughtful and give maybe a little bit more complete of an answer because I wanted to encourage them [the students], not to either just pass the talking piece when they got scared... I mean look, I will throw myself into this process. I wanna show you, almost like modeling, you know? You don't want to overtake the Circle [as a staff], you want, especially when the students are doing it, let them teach it the way they want to. But at times I would interject my, my suggestions as well... That was one of my biggest fears, you know, was there gonna be buy-in? And I'd say for the most part what I saw, there was...

Bryan's desire to authentically model the Circle process revealed his level of investment in the program and awareness of his influence as a teacher. Bryan also gives his account regarding how his role as a teacher shifted because of Circles, he shared:

Well my role, I think it does redefine it as not being as much of the teacher, the head of the classroom because it's a community. You are equalized to a certain extent with the students. That's, again, vulnerable, enlightening, right? So it does change the role. In the end I think it is better...when you see students sharing and it's deep and it's honest and it's like, wow. It's, it's like I'm almost honored to, that, that's so valuable, you know. You can't tell me that's not valuable information... And sometimes it got personal...like, "What did you do this weekend?" "Oh, I was stressed out about getting grades in." I was being honest, I shared that with my students. I think that's good for them though to see the teacher as a human being, that it's not this robot. (laughs) And, uh, I think it does build rapport. I really like my students, I want them to respect me, you know, but I also want them not to be afraid of me, to see me as a human being. And we always learn in teaching, I don't want them to be my friend, you know, it's a fine line... You, you got to be the teacher but I want them to see me as someone they can talk to, someone, uh, as a human.

Bryan's response indicates a dual understanding of his role as a teacher. He acknowledges maintaining the "fine line" between being seen as a friend and a teacher; however, still strives to humanize himself as an ally of students.

In reflecting about teacher's involvement, senior student Lon had a different reaction, she declared: "I also learned about Miss Ray, and um, like she's our teacher, but now she's also become our friend. Like whenever I have problems or serious trouble, I go to her for help." Unlike Bryan's view of a teacher, Lon's affirmation of Miss Ray as her "friend" who she can confide in provides a contrasting interpretation of a teacher's role when engaged in Circles. Lon's view suggests an a supportive and trust-based relationship that was established through Circle time. In both cases, Bryan and Lon express the importance of teacher involvement. Again, the importance of establishing a relational approach to restorative practices was emphasized by participants and emerged as a key element in the "teacher involvement/role and teacher-student relationship."

Implications on learning. As previously examined, the involvement and role of teachers in Circles was an important factor that participants indicated influenced their level of engagement, which also impacted students' learning in the classroom. Moreover, the implications Circle practice had on learning was also noted by participants. Staff member Bryan reflected on his observations regarding the implementation of Circles and stated:

It builds understanding, knowledge about the other person, empathy...I think that's wonderful in terms of classmates interacting...You know the skill set in the 21st century is problem solving and group work, right? I think we're in a culture where even moreso than 50 years ago that groups work together to solve problems. And, uh, this [Circles] is very good for them to learn about their peers. I think that could be a very valuable tool to foster collaboration. So I think that's a good goal. Um, maybe to also, you know, students learn that they're, you know, when you're going through adolescent angst ... (laughs) "My problems are, no one else has my problems" or "I'm alone and I'm ... Yeah, I'm definitely alone, no one understands me." And then to hear, you know, and sometimes it gets very personal in these Circles. Ah, that's liberating, you know, in some ways. "Oh, I'm not alone." Uh, that can be very helpful...

Bryan discusses how he believes Circles help exercise students' 21st century learning skills of communication, collaboration, and expression of empathy in his classroom. This view is

supported by Bryan's personal observations and the comments made by students in his classroom and indicate students' development of greater self-awareness and connectedness. These implications for learning also align with Professor Marilyn Armour, who was previously introduced. Armour stated: "in the classroom, restorative Circles are used to build community, problem solve, facilitate student and teacher connectivity...restorative justice in schools not only addresses harm but also uses processes that concurrently create a climate that promotes healthy relationships, develops social-emotional understanding and skills, increases social and human capital, and enhances teaching and learning" (2016). When providing students with the tools and space to develop such socio-emotional skills through Circles, Bryan acknowledges a shift in teaching and learning:

You know, there's a lot of movement away from AP to go more in-depth... Screw covering the entire curriculum and memorize every fact that you won't remember in 20 years. Go more in-depth like you're in an English class. Or let's go in this unit on civil rights in U.S. history. Now, let's bring in a Circle to discuss some of the more, our own personal experiences, you know. That could be a very powerful learning tool in that curriculum for history that I don't think would be accepted in the past because of the way, like you you say, the systematic understanding of what has to, what should, you know, have them learn. So that's a really, there are bigger questions that need to be addressed.

Bryan again brings up controversial questions regarding the function of school systems today and at times recognizes a disconnect from authentic, meaningful learning. From his experience, Bryan sees a transition undergoing between past rote learning approaches and 21st century education. In utilizing Circle practices in the classroom, Bryan highlights the importance of dialogue and personal reflection when learning.

Student participant Hugo similarly expressed his understanding of how Circles can influence students' learning and self-awareness in the classroom. He explained:

I am leading an international class, like they don't speak English very well. I think they just came to the country like this year... I remember that when I first came

here. I was in the fifth grade. I didn't speak any English...and like helping them is like looking at a reflection of myself. And I just want to help them in ways that my teachers couldn't help me. We wanted to make it, like, a friendly environment. Like sometimes when they talked, it's not usually like a side conversation. It's usually to help each other out... we just like to give a little patience and see what happens.

Hugo underscores how Circle practice supports students' and staff communal learning, especially with language acquisition. He points out how participants learn from and with each other in a safe and supportive space. This again echoes staff member Bryan who shared the importance of student interaction and the development of social skills such as communication, collaboration, and empathy when engaging in learning.

Ultimately, participant interviews revealed how Circles influence the classroom learning environment regarding student communication, collaboration, empathy, sense of safety, and connectedness.

Real World Applications

The final theme that surfaced from data collection regarding the responses of participants in the program was how students and staff transferred their experiences of Circles to their daily life. Participant accounts often emphasized how Circles allowed them develop and utilize interpersonal skills of authentic listening, communication, empathizing, and/or confidence building. Secondly, students also expressed a deeper awareness for the welfare of others in their larger community.

Interpersonal skills. Participants expressed how Circles provided an opportunity to practice skills such as active listening, communication, collaboration, and empathizing, which would often influence their engagement with others outside of the program. For instance, senior student Lucy shared how Circles has influenced her life apart from school, stating:

At first I did not see the point, but then realized its value and possible use in my future career as a prison counselor. I babysit sometimes too. It's my three cousins and my sister and I just sit them in a Circle and ask them how school was... Also, with my mom, it's helped me be a better listener because usually I just argue and say stuff. I want to be heard. Instead I used to like go to my bedroom and just say, "okay, like whatever, I don't care about anybody else's life." But now I ask her, like, "Oh, how was your day?" And I actually talk to her.

Lucy realizes she gained skills such as listening and verbal communication from Circles. She specifically mentions how these employable skills could transfer to her prospective career as a prison counselor. She also gives personal examples of how she uses these interpersonal skills when interacting with her cousins, sister, and mother. Lucy concluded with a realization of being able to authentically share and communicate with her family members and how that has positively influenced the meaningfulness of her relationships.

Comparably, Lon and Ana also experienced a similar outcome in regard to transferring their interpersonal skills to their home life:

Lon: I kind of just became a better listener and more considerate for what others might be going through...I kind of put that into action so when I get home I ask my mom 'how was work?' and I ask my brother, 'how was school?' Overall, for me, I became a much more outgoing person. I know in freshman and sophomore year I was really shy and I didn't really approach anyone to make friends. But now I like talking to others. I like voicing my opinion too... I became much more confident and sociable.

Ana: Before I was kind of mean to my brothers, my little brothers, you know and like after the Circles, doing all these things and asking questions, now I can go home and feel like I have to ask them how their day went or how are they feeling, or how school is going, or something. Just to see if they, they need me, you know. And it's like very important, because I feel like if I'm asking other students that are not related to me these questions and trying to help them, I should be helping my family as well.

Both participants discuss how their interpersonal skills of communication and listening developed from Circles practices. Their ability to actively listen and empathize with others, in particularly family members, demonstrated the impact Circles had on their relationships and self-

confidence. Now, Lon makes it clear that she is more social and assertive because of the program while Ana realized how she can emotionally support and care for her family more.

Similarly, Andres mentioned how Circles influenced his life in regard to his career aspirations: “Well, now I want to help people...you get this nice, warm feeling in your heart...I definitely want to help people that are like in some trouble with the law.” Andres realized how his experience in Circles has opened up new ideas for his future career path in criminal justice. He described his positive experience as a “warm feeling in your heart” to express his sentiment with Circles while Lucy, Lon, and Ana mention the strengthening of their communication skills. Their desire and ability to socially engage with others by using these skills reflects a level of empathy or relatability.

Lucy, Lon, Ana, and Andres all acknowledge how Circles have influenced their ability to understand and connect with others. Overall, their experiences reflected a sense of self-assurance and empowerment as a result of participating in the program.

A final instance where participants exercised and cultivated their interpersonal skills through Circles was reiterated by staff member Bryan. He explained:

The number one thing that's been rewarding about the Circle times is, you know, [our school] it's a very diverse place and we have new arrivals. Um, I mean really, they're new to this country, I mean within the past week, anywhere from yesterday to six months in, you know, the welcoming center. And we did a Circle for one of the classes that had new arrivals. I thought that was extremely helpful for these students to use their English, to open up, to learn...to feel more comfortable with each other, with the teachers and the facilitators as role models... You feel isolated coming here alone and seeing other students really caring about what these new students are going to say... just on so many levels these Circles were fantastic for that group.

Bryan's account remarks on how Circles also helped support an English Learners class build their self-confidence and sense of belonging during their language acquisition. He describes the

importance of how students migrating from non-English speaking countries can use Circle practices to build their social skills as noted in the previous student accounts.

Community outreach and human welfare. Students also expressed a concern for the welfare of others as a result of participating in Circles. Anna and Mabel both acknowledge the importance of community support and describe how the need for humanitarian efforts surfaced in relation to their experiences in Circles:

ANA: I brought up the theme of struggling and how like I kind of wanted to make nachos and go hand it out to homeless. And I was just thinking, "Oh, maybe we should have a field trip and take our circle to downtown. And they [students] can bring something to hand out to any homeless." Even if it's just a compliment to the homeless...

MABEL: There are people out there that are struggling or having problems with stuff and students could relate to that, and they probably could help each other out. So pretty much it's like we're helping to build up a bigger community that we already are.

Both students express a greater awareness around the importance of community welfare. Anna and Mabel use the concept of “struggling” to broach the topic of social concerns in their community. Ana specifically outlines an idea for a community service project while Mabel suggests reaching out to also include and help neighborhood members. Again, these two student responses were unique in how they were processing their experiences in Circles, which reflected their awareness of others and empathetic intentions to help their community.

Summary

Community Circles in school settings is a growing practice that is being used to cultivate positive school climates through healthy relationships and students’ sense of belongingness and connectedness. This chapter examined interview data collected from 15 participants who discussed their experience in Circle practice. The data collected revealed three main themes and

several sub-themes that were discussed according to their level of importance as they correlated to Research Questions 2 and 4, which were:

Question 2: *What are the experiences and/or responses of students participating in community building Circles?*

Question 4: *What barriers or lessons learned emerge from participating in or implementing Circle practices?*

In addressing Research Question 2 and 4, data showed three core themes of *community building as a process, institutional constraints, and real-world application*. Under each of these core themes, multiple sub-themes were evident in understanding students' experiences and responses to Circles. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, participants indicated how community Circles over time promoted the development of trust, safety, closeness, sharing and storytelling, active listening, perspective taking, and the release and regulation of emotions.

Furthermore, the institutional constraints of time/environment and teacher involvement/role as well as the impact of the teacher-student relationship, ~~also~~ suggests how student learning could be influenced. Several of these thematic elements were again supported by scholarship previously discussed in Chapter 2 and were evident in studies regarding restorative values, culture, and practices (Amour 2013; Ashley & Burke, 2007; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Macready, 2009; Solinas, 2006; Wearmouth & Berryman, 2012). In reflecting on the process of establishing restorative culture through Circles, participants also described how they gained and applied interpersonal skills to their personal and social lives.

In understanding Circles as a community building process, participants reported how significant the creation, establishment, and regulation of the ground-rules or guidelines were in setting the tone for the practice. However, some participants brought up challenges regarding the perception or clarity of program intentions or aims. Participants also emphasizing the importance

of time and consistency when developing trust, safety, and rapport among participants in Circles, which, due to certain institutional constraints, was at times a point of tension.

In specifically discussing participants' understanding of community and rapport, the experienced the feeling "closeness" was another recurring sub-theme, which was often associated with participants' willingness to share and story-tell, as well as the release and regulation of their emotions.

A final sub-theme of "community building as a process" was how participants felt that they were being authentically listened to and able to relate with another through perspective taking. Essential findings from this study attest to how Circle practice is a process of developing relationships through rapport and trust, which can lead to an increase in the development and/or practice of interpersonal skills and self-awareness.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Summary

This study explored the perceptions of 15 participants in community building Circles at a large, urban, high school in southern California. Participants specifically expressed their perceptions of the program's goals, barriers, resource needs and supports, as well as lessons learned. This final chapter of the study reviews the context of the problem, reexamines the purpose of the study, summarizes key findings as it relates to the literature review, discusses study limitations, and considers implications for practice. Lastly, this chapter ~~also~~ briefly addresses areas for future research.

Context of the Problem

Despite the well-intentions of educational leaders, students today are still facing the unforeseen outcomes associated with punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, which took force during the 1990's decade of zero-tolerance. As explored in Chapter Two, recent studies suggest the detrimental effects zero-tolerance practices have had on students and their educational achievement, which includes student criminalization, loss of instructional time, and increase in high school dropout rates (Fabelo, et al., 2011; Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Skiba & Reynolds 2006; Teske, 2011). Rather than seeing an increase in school safety and belongingness, research suggests that stringent discipline methods have created hostile learning environments and systems that exclude students. Suspends and expulsions are often linked to higher rates of future involvement with the criminal justice system. Practices such as these have further alienated students and make them vulnerable to being stigmatized, often resulting in students dropping-out, a phenomenon known as the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Schiff, 2013). More

notably, even before the era of zero-tolerance, major increases in K-12 suspensions were documented by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, dating back to the 1970's (CRDC, 2014). This data also shows significant disproportionate rates of suspension in respect to male students of color and/or students with disabilities.

In adopting educational policies and practices that support and protect students' development, especially vulnerable populations of students, restorative practices are being further investigated as an approach to increasing positive behavior and students' relationships with peers and adults. Restorative practices such as community building Circles, which were the focus of this study, is one approach to building positive school culture and climate. In all, findings suggest positive responses and outcomes of circle practices as well as a need for additional research on the aims and institutional supports for restorative practices. The study reaffirms themes from past researchers in regard to Circles being a proactive method of building positive school relationships, which becomes a foundational component for being able to effectively hold students accountable for their choices and actions when addressing harm and conflict.

Purpose of the Study in Context of the Problem

This phenomenological study provided insight into the way high school students responded to participating in community Circles. This restorative practice is mostly used to improve school climate and prosocial behaviors. As indicated in the literature, Circle practices serve to establish and build students' understanding of community as it relates to their experience of belonging, connectedness, and trust (Gonzalez, 2012; Hantzopoulos, 2013; Sumner et al., 2010). As a result of building students' connectedness, research shows that students are more likely to have greater academic outcomes and school attendance (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb,

Abbot, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004; Osterman, 2000). Additionally, Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz, co-director of the Office on Crime and Justice for Mennonite Central Committee, and EMU professor Judy H. Mullet state, “If the substrata work of community-building has not been done, the child is bankrupt and has nothing to lose by misbehaving or being confronted. The child’s motivation to change is limited” (2005, p. 34). Amstutz and Mullet use a bank account analogy to explain the significance of relationships when addressing misconduct with students. Again, the process of relationship building in restorative practices was noted in several studies that stress the importance of a relational approach to address transgressions (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hopkins, 2011; Morrison, 2010; Morrison et al., 2005; Riestenberg, 2012).

Summary of Findings

The 15 respondents that were interviewed from a restorative practice program at Mountain Top’s school site included 12 students and three staff members. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed through a two-cycle coding process to find final themes. Key findings that emerged out of this study reflect distinct themes and address the five overarching research questions. Research findings are summarized below in conjunction with each research question.

Research Question 1

The first research question examined *What are the intended goals and outcomes of community building Circles within a restorative justice program?* These goals and outcomes were evident in staff responses and described ways that students deepen their understanding of themselves and their peers throughout the program. There were three predominant responses from participants that correlated to this research question, which included: (1) building

community, (2) developing self-confidence and communication skills, and (3) promoting student leadership. These goals were recognized by the participants and indicated throughout their narratives.

Building community. As indicated by participants, “building community” was an essential goal of the program. This goal was presented by staff trainers and agreed to among student participants at the beginning of the program. The perception of building community among students in the classroom was evident in their development of relationships and connections during the Circle practice. This process was reflected in subthemes indicated in Chapter 4, which gives a rich description of how students established such a sense of community through Circles. Participants reported how they followed circle guidelines, developed trust and safety, experienced “closeness”, engaged in sharing and storytelling, exercised listening and perspective taking, and could release and regulate their emotions during the activity. Furthermore, the majority of students used the phrase, “build community” to express their understanding of the purpose of Circles. For instance, student participant Lilly explained his understanding of the programs goals, stating:

I'd say to build community and to get to know your neighbor. Like, the person sitting next to you or people in your classroom. Because let's say one day I come in with an attitude and I'm just not having a good day. If you know, like my life, not necessarily all of it but like what I'm going through you'd be less reluctant to, respond by giving me attitude back because you know what type of life I have.... Or you may even try to make me smile or something like that.

Similarly, Andres states, “Well, we wanted to unite students, get to know one another and build trust....” Both Lilly and Andres convey their interpretation of the goal of Circles using keywords and phrases that are also associated with restorative values as indicated in previous studies. For example, Lilly distinctively uses the phrase “build community” as she proceeds to explain hypothetically how students establish a greater understanding of one another through sharing.

Likewise, Andres states a collective goal to “unite students” through cultivating trust and rapport with one another.

Other outcomes that are connected to Circle practices were illustrated by staff member Joyce who said:

Circles can be used for a lot of different purposes. Circles can be used to build communities for a more proactive approach. But Circles can also be used to address harm or conflict. One thing that I find very interesting about is that the Circles that are being used for addressing harm or conflict tend to go a lot better or tend to be a little easier to work through when those students have been involved in the proactive work of community building.

Joyce brings up how Circles can also be used to address harm or conflict. She insightfully shares how Circles that have built positive, connected relationships through community building are more likely to be effective. Her response once more highlights how imperative the community building process is in restorative practices such as Circles. Once more, the restorative values mentioned in the responses of students and staff above underscore community, unity, trust, and understanding. These values again align with Chapter 2’s “Restorative Values” as well as the study’s thematic findings in Chapter 4, “community building as a process” (Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2006; Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010). The goal of community building in Circles emerges as a prevalent concept, which is evident in the findings.

Developing self-confidence and communication skills. In addition to building community through collective group values of trust and understanding, public speaking and building self-confidence were additional outcomes that arose in relation to Research Question 1. During the senior focus-group interview, Lon stated: “Yeah, I agree [with Andres], like building community, getting to know one another, but also developing public speaking skills....” Junior student Hector also echoes Lon’s response, sharing: “I think that the purpose is for communities to give trust and confidence...and to, like, overcome fears, like, talking to or with others when

sharing.” Both students emphasize how speaking openly to others in a communal setting becomes a crucial aim. Junior student Mabel also specifically articulate the importance of exercising communication skills in Circles saying, “I think building a stronger communication and understanding of your community of peers and what they're going through also, and see why they act that way.” Mabel adds a component of communication when talking about the purpose or goal of Circles. In order to establish such relational connections and experiences, the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately becomes central. The importance of communication is also supported by the theme discussed earlier in Chapter 4, “Real World Connections”, which falls under the subtheme of “interpersonal skills.” In short, the process of building community through Circles reflected students’ level of trust, understanding, and willingness to express themselves by communicating with one another.

Staff participant Bryan also points out how Circles supported students’ self-confidence and influenced their investment in the program:

Students had an opportunity to go to those different classrooms at least three or four different times. Same classroom, same group, they got to over consecutive weeks and I noticed the difference. I noticed that the more times they did it, just the confidence of my students to lead it, control, make sure, redirect, explain ground rules, guide, icebreakers, um, uh, just their confidence got better. And what I definitely saw was, these students who participated in the Circles, not the facilitators, the other classrooms, they became more comfortable with the process. They knew what to expect and there was more buy-in. That was huge.

Bryan notes how students were able to develop their self-confidence by gradually becoming more comfortable with the routine of Circles. He explicitly acknowledges how the student-facilitators became empowered by using terms such as “lead”, “control”, and “guide” to demonstrates their level of engagement. This instance reaffirms how students progressively developed leadership and ownership as a Circle facilitators; although noting how “buy-in” was a driving element in this process.

Promoting student leadership. Circles provided leadership opportunities for students, which were apparent from interview data regarding the goals and outcomes of program. In taking on the role and responsibility of a Circle facilitator, students expressed varying responses. For instance:

Tyler: I partially wanted to do it, partially didn't want to do it. Like just taking on that role of responsibility in a way... Like, being in a leadership role and going out in different classrooms and meeting new people, I was just like, I guess. (Laughs).

Lilly: I was like excited. I was very excited. I was just thinking about me leading the circle 'cause they were picking me...It felt pretty nice. I felt like I was an influential leader which, it feels good inside. I started getting attention from kids, like younger than my age and they started also sharing their past with me...

Tyler and Lilly both demonstrated different reactions to taking on the role of a Circle facilitator. On one hand, Tyler's response conveyed a certain degree of ambivalence while Lilly declared her enthusiasm as a student-leader. Moreover, Lilly acknowledges being seen as a type of role-model or mentor for her peers, which is recognized as a positive attribute for her. Both students also seem to realize the importance of being a leader by using terms like "responsibility" and "influential." Likewise, Staff member Joyce also observed responses such as these. She recalled:

Most of the students actually who took on that role as, facilitators, a lot of them have talked about how they weren't really interested or didn't really see the purpose in doing the trainings and practicing. But when we started getting into the classroom and they started actually taking on that leadership role that's when they really started to get excited about it and really wanted to own it.

Joyce's account again proposes how students react differently to taking on a leadership role and how their mindset shifts over time. A turning point in Joyce's account was when students began to become excited and feel connected and invested through their contribution to the Circle. Furthermore, student leadership contributions and ownership were again evident in how students created Circle topics and questions, which was also described by Staff member Bryan:

The students sometimes spent a period before going out to Circles writing up their own questions so they had it preplanned, but they also would ask us, "Please, what do you think of the Circle today?" Or "Give me one thing you like about it, one thing you didn't like about the Circles today." So that can be very valuable feedback from those students to the facilitators.

Bryan observed how students actively prepared to lead Circles, which was reflected in how they understood their role and responsibilities as a facilitator. According to Bryan, the student-leaders actively created discussion questions and demonstrated a desire for feedback. By openly requesting and receiving feedback, students could then consider making adjustments to their Circle practice. Instances such as these suggest how Circles warranted moments for student-leadership and helped empowered students to take ownership in their involvement.

Staff member Bryan expands on how Circles provided students with new opportunities for leadership. He remarks on a student he observed acting as a facilitator, stating:

I had a student... but you could tell he was very, how do I say it? Uh, sarcastic or turned off about school, authority, establishment figures. Nice kid but you know, uh, pardon my French but, "Screw the system" or "Stick it to the man" ... And I didn't know if he was happy to be here and I try to make my class interesting. But then he got involved in the training for the Circles and the first time we went to another classroom and I went with, to observe him, I could not believe-... he was asked to lead the Circle and I was just blown away...He's a big guy, physically he's a big physical presence and how he commanded respect for the process, respect the talking piece, and he kept it in line, and people listened to him, and there was no extra talking. It's like "You are a born leader."

Bryan's astonishment depicts how Circles provided a space for students to experience uncommon moments of leadership and voice. As previous accounts correspondingly showed, some students were hesitant to facilitate, but once given the opportunity, flourished. In Bryan's case, this student initially expressed very oppositional tendencies in regard to school; however, when given the knowledge-base and access, demonstrate strong leadership abilities as a Circle facilitator. Likewise, Joyce shares her observations regarding the influence student-facilitators' demonstrated when leading Circles, concluding:

The way that being involved in Circles or restorative work in general as a student being a leader seems to have the most powerful impact... I've seen the most growth when students are leading those efforts... in terms of their empathy building, public speaking, and being just comfortable speaking out loud in front of their peers...one of the activities we were having them do this year was journaling their experiences and a lot was coming out in their journal entries about feeling more comfortable speaking up and facilitating the Circles.

By having student-leaders facilitating Circles, Joyce's describes how student-leaders not only had a "powerful impact" on their peers, but more importantly expanded their self-esteem. Once again, in providing students with a safe space and strong knowledge-base around restorative principles, students demonstrated personal and social growth as leaders. Joyce claims that students were more self-confident, being able to express their voice and engage with their peers through Circles.

In all, data suggests Circle Practices focused on three essential goals or outcomes: (1) building community, (2) developing self-confidence and communication skills, and (3) promoting student leadership. Evidence supporting these outcomes were apparent in the analysis of thematic data.

Research Question 2

The participants described a number of individual and shared experiences that revealed three thematic findings as discussed in Chapter 4. These findings were: (1) community building as a process, (2) institutional constraints, and (3) real world application. These three themes emerged in response to Research Question 2, *What are the experiences and/or responses of students participating in community building Circles?* Participants experiences reflect these themes and how students perceived their participation in the program.

Community building as a process. This theme was composed of vital subthemes as indicated in Chapter 4 and provided a rich description of how students established such a sense

of community over time. Students discussed how they experienced the process of cultivating relationships and expressed common reactions. Participants reported how they (1) developed trust and safety, (2) experienced “closeness”, (3) engaged in sharing and storytelling, (4) exercised listening and perspective taking, and (5) released and regulated their emotions during the activity.

Institutional constraints. Participants experienced certain barriers or challenges during the program in the three core areas of time and environment, teacher involvement/role and teacher-student relationship, and implications on learning. These areas were previously elaborated on as sub-themes of Chapter 4’s “Institutional Constraints” and most clearly appeared in response to Research Question 4, which will be address in the following section (Research Question 4). Overall, findings suggest how important it was for participants to be in a safe and supportive space, which was often influenced by the physical environment, frequency and duration of Circles, as well as the amount of time and effort staff/teachers contributed given institutional logistics. More significantly, the space and involvement/role teachers had in the program further shaped students experience of Circles and the implications on their learning.

Real world application. The last finding was derived from the final theme regarding how students applied the experience of Circles to their lives. Students discussed the opportunity to practice or transfer their democratic values and interpersonal skills to situations outside of the classroom. This was discussed in depth in Chapter 4 of “Real world applications.” There were two major findings that reflected students’ real-world application of Circles. The first involved students applying their interpersonal skills of active listening, communication, collaboration, and empathizing to their personal lives and/or future professions. The second was how certain participants expressed a deeper concern for community welfare.

Research Question 3

The thematic findings regarding institutional constraints inform Research Question 3: *What resources needs or supports emerge from participating in or implementing circle practices?* The challenges or barriers encountered in the program were strongly related to the institution's role in scheduling logistics and program structures. This was most noticeable in the institutional constraints of "time and environment" and "teacher involvement/role." Findings suggested the need for additional personnel resources and ongoing training to ensure the program's sustainability.

Research Question 4

In part, the answer to Question 3 also answers Question 4, *What barriers or lessons learned emerge from participating or implementing Circle Practices?* The second theme of "Institutional constraints" included, (1) time and environment, (2) teacher involvement/role and teacher-student relationship, and (3) implications on learning. However, an additional systemic constraint briefly mentioned by participants was building greater staff capacity.

The subtheme of "time and environment", the allocation and structure of time often impeded the Circles' duration and frequency, which influenced students' quality of experience. Secondly, the physical space used for Circles would at times inhibited the practice as well as the scheduling and availability of participants/facilitators. This was again related to the school's resources, program funding, and instructional time.

In regard to teacher involvement, the time allocated by the institution had a strong influence over teachers' participation in Circles. Participants described how challenging it was for teachers to balance their primary responsibilities as instructors while being involved in the program. Moreover, the level of engagement teachers had with students often influenced

participation and experience of Circles. Students and staff noted how their interaction and classroom relationships were affected by Circles. Lastly, misunderstandings of the program's goals and outcomes were evident among some teachers.

The "implications on learning" were also influenced by Circles. This was evident in how participants indicated ways that Circles align with 21st century skills of collaboration and communication. Findings revealed how Circles influence the classroom learning environment in regard to student communication, collaboration, empathy, sense of safety, and connectedness.

Another important, but less dominant constraint was the lack of adequate funding for personnel and program buy-in. Staff members indicate how these elements may impede the sustainability of the program, for example, Joyce states:

Funding seems to be a barrier... a teacher who is teaching full time can't also be in charge of overseeing and coordinating restorative efforts at a school because that's two jobs for one person...I think too it's just the buy-in at some of the schools and the ownership...I think one of the barriers is that if we don't ever get past that buy-in point to the point of ownership, it's not really gonna be sustainable.

Joyce highlights the need for greater adult-leadership and investment in the program, implying the need for a full-time position to run the program for long-term. The concern for the longevity of the program also converges with fellow staff member Judy's observations, which similarly points to a lack of whole-school buy-in even if funding is adequate. Judy remarks:

It's been really difficult to get adults to buy in or to fully participate and find the time...It's just they have so many other priorities in, being an educator.... But as a whole campus like, restorative concepts and practices have not been committed to and so it continues to be an uphill battle....a very easy example is the fact that there are two to five adults that work full-time on that campus currently that have gotten any sort of restorative training. So you've got a whole campus of adults that have no knowledge of restorative practices... That's the most that the campus has invested...we also have funding to train teachers and anyone...The training is free and we can also cover subs and we give out tons of resources. So from that perspective, it doesn't really seem like there is any barrier because it's all free and available.

Joyce and Judy disclose two concrete program barriers: (1) funding personnel to staff and coordinate the program and (2) school's view of the program as a core priority. With this said, understanding the specific motives and intentions of administrators or school leaders around restorative efforts would be another area for future program research.

Overall, the institutionalized structures and philosophies of the academic site often revealed points of contention with the program goals or outcomes as well as possible long-term aims associated with the program's sustainability. These constraining factors should be further considered in regard to the future of the program and its success.

Despite the stated institutional constraints, participants still found value in the program's ability to promote democratic participation and community values. Findings affirmed the important role institutions have when creating and supporting restorative culture. An important aspect of creating such a culture relies on the development of classroom relationships. Student accounts made evident how the development of relationships in Circles occurred due to multiple, ongoing interactions. Staff member Judy's observation expands on this concept: "Community can't be built upon one interaction, just like any relationship that we develop can't be done in one meeting or one conversation. A relationship, is the ultimate premise of restorative practices and of circle work. A relationship is built over time." Once more, this evidence suggests a key finding: Circle Practice is a process that focuses on the significance of relationships and their development over time.

Research Question 5

The final research question looked at *How do Circle Practices embody the overall philosophy of restorative justice?* As previously discussed, Circle practice is a foundational component found within restorative justice and is used to establish and maintain community

relationships. To review, RJ has been defined as a collective approach to resolve an offense and its implications for the future (Braithwaite, 2002). RJ focuses on viewing wrongdoing as violations of people and relationships as opposed to just rules or regulations. It is in this manner that restorative models in educational settings aim to proactively develop and enhance the classroom community and school climate by enacting democratic values and participation. The developing framework of RJ encompasses core aspects such as values, culture, and specific practices when preventing or addressing harm. Ultimately, the purpose of this study focused on a proactive restorative school measures of the implementation of a Community Building Circles.

The importance of relationships and community building was a core aspect of Circles that is heavily reflected in RJ philosophy. Moreover, Circles work to foster communication, understanding, and empathy. This understanding of Circles in RJ was distinctly paralleled by staff member Joyce, who reflected:

Well, initially when we first started it was to respond to the high levels of suspensions and expulsions within the school district...but it's kind of I think the understanding that we need these Circles because we want to address school climate... I think people are starting to realize that even if we are trying to be restorative in the way that we deal with discipline... so if a student hasn't had an experience where they feel connected to the community then what are they actually being restored to? I think that understanding starting to be very clear that if we want students to feel like they're being restored to their community when some, some harm has occurred then we need to actually build a foundation for a community to, a sense of community to be present on our campuses.

Joyces' response highlights the importance of relationships in discipline and restorative work. She argues that the foundation of community is built on relationships and how Circle practices provided a proactive measure to strengthen school climate. Furthermore, when addressing harm or conflict within a classroom, Joyce explains how RJ assumes that a student who has established positive and healthy relationships with peers and staff will be more open to repair the relationship and resolve the situation. Prior literature states (Ashley & Burke, 2007;

Hantzopoulos, 2013; Solinas, 2006) and the data again supports the premise that using of restorative practices such as Circles, helps to building positive classroom communities and provides students with methods in developing safety, trust, and connectedness. Moreover, the focus and promotion of democratic participation in Circles aligns with the Fairness Committee's case findings, these findings included core values of respect, truth, and the commitment to democracy, peace, and justice (Hantzopoulos, 2013). Their restorative school model encourages students to exercise a form of "civic duty" by discussing violations that have impacted the school community.

Another area of Circles that exemplifies restorative justice philosophy was voice. Ana, a junior student, proclaimed:

[The purpose of Circles] It's not just like overcoming the fear of public speaking, but more like the fear of using the power of your voice... Like, you know, most people are like afraid of telling somebody something or telling somebody what is going on home, because you don't want them to get in trouble...but that's the only way you can escape from something, or the only way you can get towards something, is to use your voice to speak up.

Ana stressed the importance of voice in Circles, which reiterates the concept of democratic citizenship in the classroom. The seminal work of John Dewey (1997) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) highlights the importance of social engagement as a foundation for effective learning in schools. Since schools play a key role in the socialization of students, these institutions essentially build democratic communities by educating students as future members. Ana recognizes the importance of developing her voice in school and how it relates to her own self-advocacy. Once more, schools enact the democratic values of freedom, justice, and respect by encouraging students to practice and experience such beliefs. Finally, her ability to self-advocate by exercising her voice is an empowering moment for her. She finishes with how exercising her leadership and voice made her feel: "It kind of felt good that you can have control, but not in a

negative way, in a positive way. Like you can help people, you know...like freshman don't realize the mistakes they're going to do..." Ana also touches on her role and responsibility as a student-leader in guiding others and her experience of feeling power and authority.

Staff member Judy shared another perspective on the importance of voice in Circles, stating:

The most interesting and valuable piece was the student voices. Like seeing them growing into their leadership skills and their confidence and a new knowledge base...like, a whole classroom of students find their voice in an education system where basically, the whole assumption that, you know, these are empty vessels that we're trying to fill with knowledge. And just kind of shifting that completely to where there is literally time and space provided for student leaders to ask other students, you know, their thoughts and opinions on all different types of, um, issues, personal or in the community. ... I mean, there's no way adults would know the things that those students shared if we hadn't had created the space and them being vulnerable enough to share that and then build empathy with one another... You could just see that they felt more connected and it was literally, like, a turning point in the class where the energy of the whole class shifted. And that's setting people up for a better learning environment...

Voice as depicted in the instances above also helped to promote the goal of building community and student leadership. Judy's response underscores how Circles essentially empowered students to use their voice, giving them a space and knowledge base. Most significantly, as a result of students experiencing this empowerment, Judy reveals how they demonstrated a noticeable energy of being "more connected", which can influence their overall learning environment. These findings support studies previously examined in research scholarship regarding RJ practices in the Fairness Committee (2013) and Ed White Middle School (2013).

Another aspect of voice that came up was when students chose to not speak. Judy described what happens when students are unwilling or uncomfortable to share their voice:

Sometimes it would just take so long for students to speak up and there's good reasons for that. It was frustrating to sit in some Circles over and over again where all the students would pass or not hearing from half the students in the circle. And on some level, I know what teachers were thinking: This is a waste of

time. But to me it was the opposite of a waste of time. It was showing how deeply traumatized and harmed the students were to where they literally did not feel comfortable ever talking in class.

Judy's interpretation of students' ability or willingness to share in Circles is striking. Her report specifically resonates with the theme of institutional constraints, which highlighted certain barriers that may have stifled students deeper experience of Circles. Judy viewed students' reservation to speak and share as an indicator of past instances of disconnect or hurt within the school system. This assertion gives another view of how important the learning environment is to Circles, especially in regard to students feeling comfortable and connected to expressing themselves through dialogue. In training students to facilitate Circles, the program showed how student voice is respected, honored, and encouraged. This again is in agreement with a report from the WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center that determined "an important benefit of RJ in schools is that it creates an environment in which the student voice is valued" (Wested, 2015). In brief, the role of voice surfaced as a central feature of the study that is associated with the philosophy of RJ.

Implications

Mountain Top's distinct restorative model for Circle practice focused on building positive classroom communities through a student-centered approach. This unique approach emphasized student empowerment and revealed student perceptions of Circles. The literature and the data both indicate a strong need for whole school buy-in and support. Furthermore, additional attention to the following areas is also evident: (1) how much time is sufficient in the implementation of Circles, (2) the need for ongoing professional development and trainings, (3) program funding for personnel, (4) the development of greater administrative and school community buy-in, and (5) shifting traditional school culture to a restorative approach to

misconduct. As a result, this study captured key elements of Circles and suggests implications for education leaders, teachers, and students, respectively.

Implications for educational leaders and policy makers. Findings from this study affirm three core concepts for school leaders when adopting RJ programs such as Circle Practices. These considerations include: (1) using Circles as a foundational practice for building and maintaining positive student and staff relationships, (2) adopting a whole school approach to ensure greater program fidelity, investment, sustainability, and successful outcomes, and (3) strengthening students' capacity to exercise democratic participation through their leadership and voice. In concentrating on these areas, school leaders and policy makers can effectively bring together all stakeholders in order to create more equitable learning conditions (Armour, 2013; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Riestenberg, 2003).

In regard to how administrators can address institutional constraints, school structures and funding must support a school-wide implementation of restorative practices, which ensures the program's authenticity and effectiveness. For example, the creation of a class schedule that allocates a consistent space/time for Circles would allow the greater involvement of teachers and staff. Additionally, campus-wide RJ training and ongoing professional development opportunities were also mentioned by participants in the study. In having a more holistic approach to adopting a RJ disciplinary model, a school's philosophy must also undergo a paradigm shift in discipline. This process may take from three to five years, according to some researchers (Evans & Lester, 2013; Karp & Breslin, 2001). More significantly, in working towards these issues, schools implementing Circles must build program capacity by having a full-time restorative coordinator. This staffing need was evident in responses regarding the

sustainability and outcomes of the program. Creating RJ personnel positions would help manage and coordinate restorative programs, trainings, and site-wide professional development.

In regard to determining certain school policies, Circle Practice data should continue to be recorded and compared among schools and districts when involving referrals and disciplinary actions taken since the implementation of the program. As discussed in Chapter 2, research presents how out-of-school suspensions have increased since the 1970s and of which Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than white students (CRDC, 2014). Research indicates that students who have been suspended are more likely to be held back a grade, drop out of school, and become involved with the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). RJ program interventions such as Circles are recommended in combating systemic injustices such as the “schools-to-prisons pipeline.” In concentrating on building positive relationships as groundwork for conflict resolution and alternative discipline, research shows clear benefits in utilizing RJ to decrease future offenses and reintegrate students into the classroom (Suvall, 2009). Moreover, the impact RJ can have on students by engaging them as future citizens shows strong implications of increasing the positive outcomes for students’ futures and their roles in society. Engaging students as citizen-scholars was evident in the data, in which participants mentioned how Circles supported students in developing and exercising life skills such as communication, perspective taking, self-advocacy, and leadership. Overall, the past literature states and the data supports how the adoption of Community Building Circles creates positive methods for improving school relationships, a foundational element when addressing conflicts and endorsing prosocial behaviors (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hopkins, 2011; Morrison, 2010; Morrison et al., 2005; Riestenberg, 2012).

Implications for Teachers. Teachers' use of Circles in the classroom can help to create a safe and supportive learning environment, where students feel empowered and that their voice is heard and valued. Studies indicated that teachers who cultivated positive and trusting relationships with students experience fewer behavioral incidents in the classrooms (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Hopkins, 2011; Riestenberg, 2012). Circles established a certain degree of safety, trust, understanding, and closeness. Traditional, punitive disciplinary measures generally have teachers focus on controlling and managing student behavior, which can lead to a power struggle. Circle programs on the other hand, seek to give teachers the ability to empower and support students with skills needed to self-regulate without formal disciplinary action (Tyler, 2006). As a result, by establishing a base for healthy school relationships and sense of belonging, teachers can better focus on facilitating instruction instead of regulating behavior. In all, the importance of Circles being able to build positive relationships enables students to feel safety, trust, and closeness within to their school community.

Implications for at-risk students. In participating in a school-based Circle program, students can experience a positive increase in the development of their peer and teacher relationships, interpersonal skills, and sense of voice. Consequently, these aspects also have a strong impact on student learning and academic performance. Studies suggest how RJ and RP help decrease recidivism as well as risks of possible future encounters with the law. These practices build the life skills students need to engage in democratic education and establish restorative values (respect, trust, community, and fairness) in class expectations and rules. This alignment of skills, values, and expectations supports students in understanding their role as student-citizens and leaders, which can ensure greater safety, cooperation, and self-regulation when learning.

Ultimately, Circles contribute to students' overall feeling of being empowered and heard. Circles provided safe space for students to dialogue and develop trust and understanding with peers and teachers, which was also indicated in previous studies (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Pranis, 2005). Circles can establish greater student engagement in both the classroom and school community since schools serve as a microcosm of society. The institution's responsibility to effectively prepare students to engage in larger political, socio-cultural, and economic issues becomes apparent.

Future Considerations for Research

Since Restorative Practices in the United States are still at infancy stages of development, additional research regarding the framework and uniformity of restorative methods should be considered. Future studies should continue to examine similar school programs where schools are implementing Circles and could analyze the outcomes of such practices from a critical theory lens, looking at variables such as age, race, and/or gender. Understanding the role identity factors such as these can have on one's experience of Circles would also be beneficial. Moreover, research about how Circles deters or reduces conflicts, and improves a school's climate is also an area of inquiry. Lastly, future research should also consider longitudinal, mixed methods studies to better understand how students' participation in RJ programs can influence their school careers and young adulthood.

Distinctions between restorative *justice*, *discipline*, and *practices* were also areas needing to be clearly defined. Overall, the limited empirical research, especially ongoing data collected on RJ school program is a point of attention. Other areas that still need to be explored deeper include: (1) how schools fund and sustain RJ programs, (Riestenberg, 2003); (2) administrative and community investment (Riestenberg, 2003); (3) the process of adopting a RJ school culture;

(4) managing time constraints (Armour, 2013; Karp & Breslin, 2001); (5) the standardization of RJ programs to demonstrate empirical value (Mullet, 2014); and (6) professional development and training for staff/facilitators (Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Karp & Breslin, 2001). In all, it is apparent that there is a need for further research concerning RJ framework, training, and practice as evident in several key studies previously mentioned.

Strength of the Study

This study provided a snapshot into how students experienced Circles through their distinct perspectives and the impact such a practice can have on students' self-confidence, social-interactions, and interpersonal skills. The researcher's time spent in the field and findings showcases the overall understanding of the distinctness of the program. The phenomenological approach of this study provided an in-depth and vivid understanding of how students individually experienced the phenomenon of Circles. In examining the multiple perspectives regarding the same event, this study presented possible generalizations regarding the experience of the insider. The participants in the study included students from various backgrounds and genders, which contributes toward the diversity of responses. In all, the significance of this study helps to continue to inform school leaders and districts who are interested in implementing and further developing restorative practices such as Circles to build positive school culture and stronger student pro-social behaviors.

Limitations of Study

The limitations of this study include reliability, generalizability, and reflexivity due to positionality. This investigation was limited in scope and context, and focused on the experience of a small sample of participants from one site location. With this said, generalizability to populations is not the goal of the study since the findings of the study would be difficult to apply

beyond such similar cases. Given the convenience sampling, participants who decided to enlist in the study could have had a positive bias view towards Circle practices. Moreover, it was also evident that some participants had difficulty expressing themselves at times during the interview process, which may have been related to time, memory, nervousness, language-barriers, etc. The analysis and interpretation of the data during these instances presented occasional challenges for the researcher. Lastly, the researcher often examined her own biases about the phenomenon of interest while embarking on the study and temporarily bracket or put aside assumptions in an attempt to not interfere with seeing elements of the phenomenon in the data analysis process (Merriam, 2014, p. 25).

Conclusion

As of late, schools in the U.S. have been moving away from traditional discipline methods that rely on punishment, toward adopting restorative methods as an alternative approach to school discipline. Within RP literature, there is limited information on participants' experiences and outcomes on Circle Practices. The study's purpose was to better understand students' experiences of Circles and determine key aspects of the program's implementation. This study examined a unique model of RP that implemented Circles from a relational, student-led approach. The focus was on identifying foundational values, perceptions, barriers, and needs of the program. As a result, the conclusions for this study were a result of the analysis and interpretation of the rich participant accounts of the phenomenon.

The key findings that emerged from this study include: (1) Circles involve a process of community building, (2) Circles cultivated relationships through shared values (safety, trust, closeness, etc.), (3) Circles helped participants experience different emotional-states, (4) Circles provided an entry point into exploring a restorative philosophy, and (5) evidence of the

development of interpersonal, life skills and democratic participation (listening, sharing, perspective-taking, leadership, and voice). As indicated in previous scholarship and the data, in order to further positive outcomes, it is recommended that schools make Circles a central part of their school culture through training, practice, and reflection.

In conclusion, Circle practices at this school site served to foster relationships among students and teachers. Relationships were a core aspect of participants' experience. The power of relationships reflects an innate ability to interact and connect with one another, and has led to the creation of communities and larger societies. Teaching one another how to build and maintain healthy, functioning relationships then becomes indispensable for our future. In the field of RJ, Circles continues to present a distinct and promising method of cultivating relationships, especially when navigating conflict, harm, and injustice. Perhaps through Circles and other restorative practices, school systems can continue to work toward establishing more equitable and fair learning environments that promote students' school connectedness, voice, and eventual self-actualization.

APPENDIX A: JUNIOR STUDENT ASSENT FORM

A STUDY OF CIRCLE PRACTICES IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Invitation to Participate: Greetings! My name is Frances Disney and I am a doctoral student at the University of California, San Diego and Cal State University, San Marcos. I am inviting you to participate in a research study to understand your experiences with the Circle practices at Mountain Top. You are invited to participate in this study because your parent gave permission for you to participate.

Purpose of the Study: I am doing this research study because I am interested in improving Circle practices at Mountain Top.

Procedures: If you decide to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a 30 to 45 minute interview. You will be asked to answer interview questions about your experiences of Circle practices. I will take notes during the interview, and audio record the interview. You will also be occasionally observed during Circle practices two to three times a month.

Payment: If you decide to participate in the study, you will receive a \$5 gift card to either Starbucks or Subway.

Risks: The possible risks in participating in this study may include boredom, fatigue, loss of personal time during the interview. Because you will be in the same room with other students, there is a possibility that other students may share your thoughts outside of the interview.

Safeguards: In the beginning of the interview, students will be reminded to keep what is being discussed confidential, meaning not to share with anyone outside of the room. I will use pseudonym when I report the findings of this study to protect your identity. The audio recording of the interview and the transcript will be kept in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible to me. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary or optional. You do not have to answer any questions you choose to not answer. You are free to remove your agreement and discontinue participation in the project at any time and still receive the gift card. If you decide to participate and later change your mind, you may take back your agreement and stop participation without penalty or explanation.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at fddisney@gmail.com or call (619) 583-6762. To ask about your rights as a research participant or report research-related problems, you may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at (858) 455-5050.

If you sign this paper, it means that you have read this and that you want to be in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, do not sign this paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you don't sign this paper or if you change your mind later.

Student Signature

Date

Student Name– Print

APPENDIX B: SENIOR STUDENT ASSENT FORM

A STUDY OF CIRCLE PRACTICES IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Invitation to Participate: Greetings! My name is Frances Disney and I am a doctoral student at the University of California, San Diego and Cal State University, San Marcos. I am inviting you to participate in a research study to understand your experiences with the Circle practices at Mountain Top. You are invited to participate in this study because your parent gave permission for you to participate.

Purpose of the Study: I am doing this research study because I am interested in improving Circle practices at Mountain Top.

Procedures: If you decide to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a focus group with 4-8 students and answer interview questions about your experiences of Circle practices. The focus group will approximately last for 30 to 45 minutes. I will take notes during the interview, and audio record the interview. You will also be occasionally observed during Circle practices.

Payment: If you decide to participate in the study, you will receive a \$5 gift card to either Starbucks or Subway.

Risks: The possible risks in participating in this study may include boredom, fatigue, loss of personal time during the interview. Because you will be in the same room with other students, there is a possibility that other students may share your thoughts outside of the interview.

Safeguards: In the beginning of the focus group, students will be reminded to keep what is being discussed confidential, meaning not to share with anyone outside of the room. I will use pseudonym when I report the findings of this study to protect your identity. The audio recording of the interview and the transcript will be kept in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible to me. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary or optional. You do not have to answer any questions you choose to not answer. You are free to remove your agreement and discontinue participation in the project at any time and still receive the gift card. If you decide to participate and later change your mind, you may take back your agreement and stop participation without penalty or explanation.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at fddisney@gmail.com or call (619) 583-6762. To ask about your rights as a research participant or report research-related problems, you may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at (858) 455-5050.

If you sign this paper, it means that you have read this and that you want to be in the study. If you don't want to be in the study, do not sign this paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you don't sign this paper or if you change your mind later.

Student Signature

Date

Student Name– Print

APPENDIX C: PARENT CONSENT FORM

A STUDY OF CIRCLE PRACTICES IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Invitation to Participate: Greetings! My name is Frances Disney and I am a doctoral student at the University of California, San Diego and Cal State University, San Marcos. I am conducting research on Circle practices at Mountain Top and am interested in your child's experience in the program. Your child is invited to participate in this research study on Circle practices.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students who have participated in Circle practices.

Procedures: Your child will be interviewed in a focus group of about 4-8 students with a total interview time being approximately 30-45 minutes. During the interview, your child will be asked to describe their experiences of Circle practices. With your permission, the focus group interview will be audio recorded and notes will be written during the interview. Your student will also be occasionally observed two to three times during Circle practices.

Payment: Compensation for your child's participation in this study includes a \$5 gift card to Starbucks.

Risks: The anticipated risks to your student in participating in this study may include boredom, fatigue, loss of personal time during the focus group and personal information may be subject to being breached.

Safeguards: Information provided by your child will remain confidential and their identity will not be revealed. As a participant, they will receive a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts for their protection. A list of pseudonym and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by myself, the researcher. I, the researcher, will have access to all transcripts and the digital recording of the interview will be stored on a password-protected computer. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Benefits: While the study may not have direct benefit to your child, your child's participation in this study will help better understand the impact of Circle practice on Mountain Top's school community.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Your student's participation in this project is completely voluntary. Your student can refrain from answering any question without penalty or explanation. Your student is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time and the receipt of the incentive gift card will not be jeopardized. If your student decides to participate and later changes their mind, they may withdraw consent and stop participation without penalty or explanation.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at fddisney@gmail.com or call (619) 583-

6762. To inquire about the rights of a research participant or report research-related problems, you may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at (858) 455-5050.

Signing this consent form indicates that you have read the form and give consent to your child to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of an unsigned consent form for your records. If you wish, you may also obtain a copy of the signed consent form.

Parent Signature

Date

Parent Name– Print

Child’s Name

APPENDIX D: ADULT PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

A STUDY OF CIRCLE PRACTICES IN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

Invitation to Participate: Greetings! My name is Frances Disney and I am a doctoral student at the University of California, San Diego and Cal State University, San Marcos. I am conducting research on Circle practices at Mountain Top and am interested in your experience and involvement in the program. You are invited to participate in this research study on Circle practices.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of staff and administrators who were involved in Circle practices.

Procedures: You will be interviewed individually with a total interview time of approximately 30-45 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to describe your involvement and understanding of Circle practices. With your permission, notes will be written during the interview and an audio recording will be taken to later create a transcript of the interview. You may also be occasionally observed during Circle practices.

Payment: Compensation for your participation in this study includes a \$5 gift card to either Starbucks or Subway.

Risks: The anticipated risks to you in participating in this study may include boredom, fatigue, loss of personal time during the interview.

Safeguards: Interviews will be limited to 45 minutes. Your personal information and identity will remain confidential and will not be revealed. As a participant, you will receive a pseudonym and personal identifiers will be removed from all transcripts for your protection. A list of pseudonym and real names will be kept separate in a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by myself, the primary investigator. Each interview will be recorded digitally and transcribed. I, the researcher and members of the dissertation committee will have access to all transcripts and the digital recording of the interview will be stored on a password-protected computer. All associated hard-copy documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Benefits: While there may not be direct benefits to you, your participation in this study will help better understand the impact of Circle practice on Mountain Top's school community.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You can refrain from answering any question without penalty or explanation. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time and the receipt of the incentive gift card will not be jeopardized. If you decides to participate and later change your mind, you may withdraw consent and stop participation without penalty or explanation.

Contact Information: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you can contact me at fddisney@gmail.com or call (619) 583-6762. To inquire about your rights as

a research participant or report research-related problems, you may call the Human Research Protections Program Office at (858) 455-5050.

Signing this consent form indicates that you have read the form and give consent to participate in the study. You will be given a copy of an unsigned consent form for your records. If you wish, you may also obtain a copy of the signed consent form.

Participant Signature

Participant Name— Print

Date

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Welcome and Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate. This is an interview exploring your experience in Mountain Top's Circle practices. I will review the Consent Form that you (and your parent/guardian if you are a minor) agreed to and signed [review consent form].

General Information

I need to start with gathering basic information from you. [Interviewee information sheet]

Interview

I now want to ask you questions about your experience in the restorative practice of Circles that you participated in.

[Turn on and test recording device. Proceed with interview questions]

Closure

I want to thank you for participating in this interview. [Turn off recording device]. This interview will be transcribed and save on my password-protected computer. You may also choose which \$5 gift card (Starbucks or Subway) you would like at this time.

Again, thank you for your participation in this study.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW INFORMATION SHEET

Date & Time of Interview: _____

Location: _____

Name of Interviewer: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Grade: _____

Age: _____

Position: _____

Ethnicity/Race: _____

Gender: _____

GPA: _____

Estimated # of Circles participated in at Mountain Top:

Estimated # of Circles lead in at Mountain Top:

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR
STUDENTS

Description of Circle Process:

1. What was your mindset before going into the Circle activity?
2. What were your initial thoughts about Circles and what you think would happen?
3. Describe your experiences with Circles each week? Did it change as you continued to join each week? If so, how did it change?
4. Tell me about the person/s leading the Circle activity?
5. What was it like for you to lead a Circle and how did it change over time?
6. Were you affected by who was in the Circle activity? If so, describe if you were more or less comfortable depending on who joined?
7. Tell me about the different parts of the Circle process?
8. How did it feel to speak and share in Circles?
9. How do you feel others reacted to you when sharing?
10. What do you think is the goal or purpose of Circles?
11. In what ways did you enjoy participating in Circles?/ What do you like best about Circles?
12. In what ways did you not enjoy participating in Circles?/ What do you like least about Circles?
13. In what ways could Circles be different or changed?

Reflective Questions:

14. How would you describe your overall experience in Circles?
15. Have you learned anything about yourself through this process? If so, can you explain what you have learned about yourself?
16. Have you learned anything about others through this process? If so, can you explain what you have learned about them?
17. Describe whether Circles have made a difference in your feelings about school.
18. Did Circles have an influence on your life outside of school? If so, how? If not, why not?
19. Describe a moment in Circles that stands out to you.
20. Is there anything you would like to change about Circles?
21. What, if any, limitations or barriers did you encounter or observe during Circles?
22. In what ways did the atmosphere in the school change since using Circles? (Fights? Detentions? Suspensions?)

APPENDIX H: SAMPLE OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STAFF

Description of Circle Process:

1. Describe your initial thoughts or feelings about Circle practices, and specifically being implemented at Mountain Top?
2. What was your experience when you first lead and participated in Circles?
3. Was there a difference between when you led or participated in Circles? If so, can you explain more about such differences?
4. Think back to the first sessions of Circles you were involved in. Can you describe how the process of Circles change and/or remain the same over time?
5. Tell me about a student/s who lead the Circle sessions you participated in?
6. What part of Circles do you find to be the most interesting or valuable?
7. What part of Circles do you find to be the least interesting or valuable?
8. What was the reaction of students present to you when you shared in Circles?
9. Describe a moment in Circles that stands out to you.

Reflective Questions:

10. Describe (if any) what challenges or concerns that arose for you and your role as “staff” when participating in Circles?
11. What has the process been like for you in learning and teaching about Circle practices?
12. What do you think is the goal or purpose of Circles?
13. In what ways did you enjoy using Circles in class?
14. In what ways did you not enjoy using Circles in class?
15. In what ways could Circles be changed or developed differently? (next year?)
16. What, if any, limitations or barriers did you encounter or observe during Circles?
- 17.. How would you describe your overall experience in Circles?
18. Have you learned anything about yourself through this process? If so, can you explain what you have learned about yourself?
19. Have you learned anything about others, such as students and/or fellow staff members through this process? If so, can you explain what you have learned about them?
20. Describe whether Circles have made a difference in your feelings about your job or role as a _____.
21. Did Circles have an influence on your life outside of your position? If so, how?
22. Has the school climate or atmosphere changed since using Circles? (Fights? Detentions? Suspensions?)
23. How would you, if at all, describe how Circles have changed from the previous school year?

APPENDIX I: Sample of Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Student Focus Group

1. Describe your role or involvement in Mountain Top's Circle practice program?
2. In thinking about last year as well as this year, what would you say has been the goal or purpose of Circles at Mountain Top?
3. Compared to last year, how have your thoughts or feelings about Circles grown or changed?
4. How would you describe the differences between last year's implementation of Circles to this year?
5. Describe, if any, the interactions you have had with the current juniors involved in the Circles?
6. In what ways have you enjoy participating in Circles?/ What do you like best about Circles?
7. In what ways have you not enjoy participating in Circles?/ What do you like least about Circles?
8. In thinking about the program, in what ways could Circles be different or changed?
9. What, if any, limitations or barriers did you encounter or observe during Circles?
10. In thinking about last year as well as this year, how would you describe your overall experience with Circles?
11. Have you learned anything about yourself through this process participating in Circles and restorative justice? If so, can you explain what you have learned about yourself?
12. Have you learned anything about others, such as students and staff, through this process? If so, can you explain what you have learned about them?
13. Describe whether Circles have made a difference in your feelings about school.
14. Describe a moment in Circles that stands out to you.
15. In what ways did the atmosphere in the school changed since using Circles? (Fights? Detentions? Suspensions?)
16. Have Circles influence on your life outside of school? If so, how? If not, why not?

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